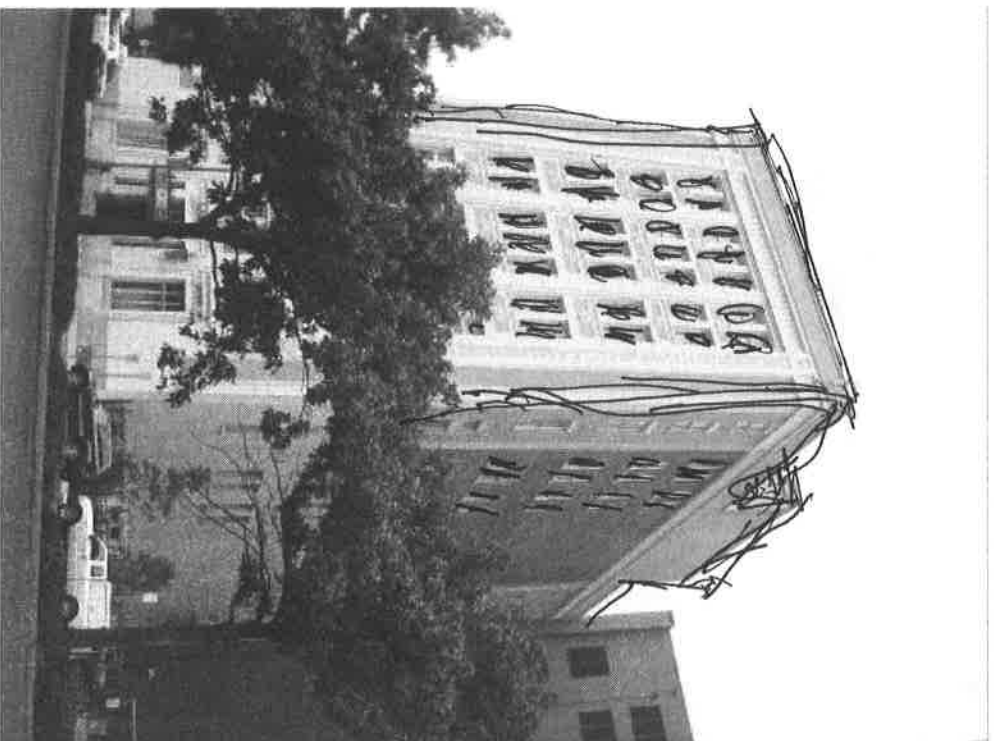


# **Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission**

## **Landmark Designation Report December 5, 2008**



**The Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph Company  
820 Poydras Street**

**The Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph Company  
820 Poydras Street**

**Landmark Designation Report  
December 5, 2008**

**Architectural Rating:**  
**Construction Date:**  
**Architect:**

Blue  
1917  
P. Thornton Maye of Atlanta  
Sam Stone of Stone Brothers New Orleans

**Site Description:** Square 232, Lots 15, 16, 17 Poydras  
**Municipal District:** 1  
**Assessment District:** 1  
**Zoning:** CBD -1  
**Owner:** Drury Inns, Inc.  
PO Box 910  
Cape Girardeau, MO 63072  
**Date Nominated:** 1996

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural and historical significance. City Ordinance No. 6699 MCS defines a Landmark or Landmark site as: A building(s) (landmark) and/or its lot of record or any part thereof or vacant sites (landmark site), wheresoever located in the Central Business District of the City of New Orleans subject to the jurisdiction of the Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission, of particular historic, architectural, or cultural significance, which said landmark and/or landmark site meets at least one of the following criteria: 1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community; or 2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history; or 3) Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship; or 4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

## History of the Property

Designed in part by notable New Orleans architect Sam Stone, the 1917 building was the fourth building designed and built for the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph Company. Due to the unforeseen demand for the telephone, the company quickly outgrew the three previous buildings. The previous building was engineered to serve New Orleans as a local exchange and a division general office for “all time” and was completely outgrown in only a few years. (see figure 1).

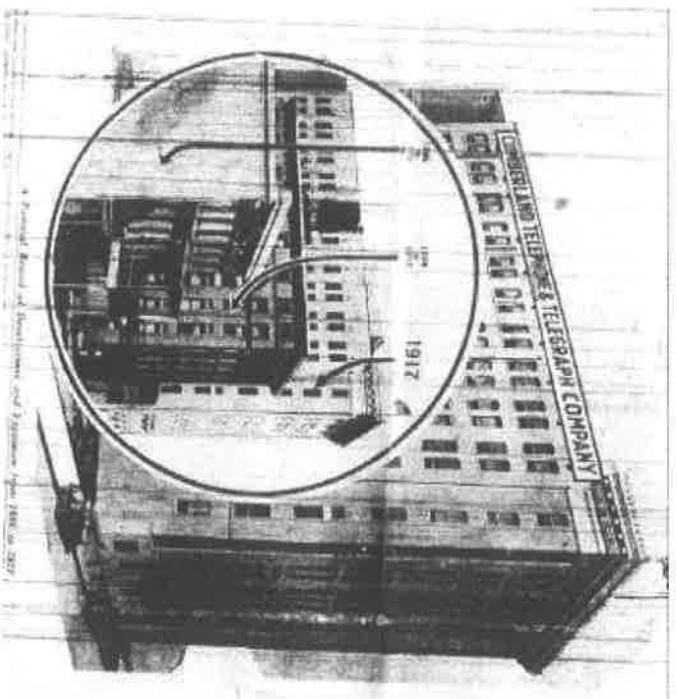


Figure 1: 1917 newspaper photograph illustrating the four buildings of the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph company that represent the rapid growth of the telephone technology, and the company that outgrew three buildings.

The 1917 building remained the home of the local telephone company which became BellSouth Telecommunications, Inc. until they closed their offices in the building in 1983. 820 Poydras Street is the only remaining Cumberland telephone exchange located on Poydras Street.

The detailed terra cotta building currently sits among large office towers and surface parking lots. In 1996, BellSouth attempted to demolish the building to make room for a three-story building that would give elevated housing to huge diesel generators. Preservationists waged an aggressive campaign against the demolition and the City Planning Commission voted against the demolition resulting in BellSouth withdrawing its demolition request. In late 1997, BellSouth sold the property to Drury Inns for \$2.675 million. Drury Inn & Suites Hotel renovated the building into a 156 room hotel that utilized many of the features of the original 1917 building including high ceilings, large windows, dark cherry wood and marble floors, ornamental staircases and brass light fixtures created from a 1920s design that flank the front doors. The hotel opened for business in 2000 and remains a hotel operated by Drury Inn & Suites today.

**Criteria 1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community**

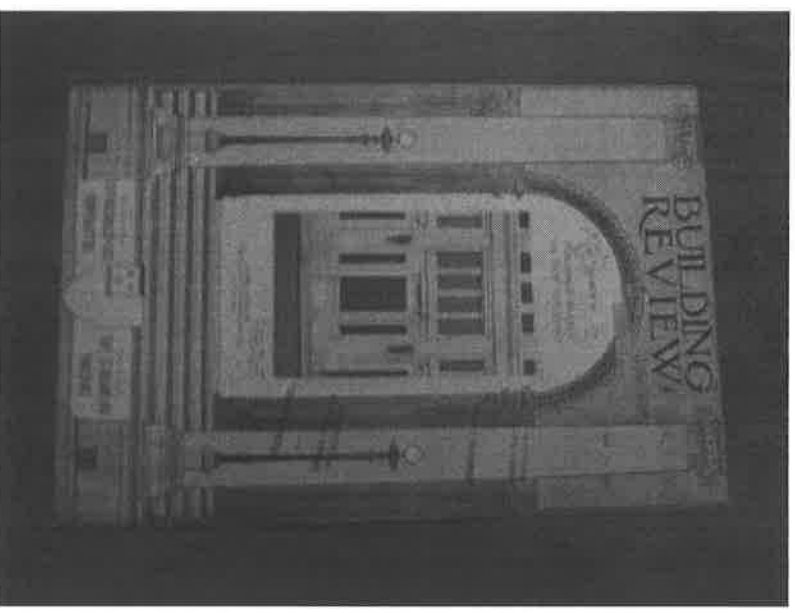
The Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph building represents the development of communication technology and the telephone industry in New Orleans. The first telephone ever used in New Orleans was in 1876. By 1917, the New Orleans exchange had over 87,000 miles in copper wire for telephone use. The telephone company employed 600 females (for the switchboards) and 400 males. The operators were handling up to 1700 long distance messages every 24 hours and the telephone company outgrew successive buildings to meet the demands of the city.

Locating the building on Poydras Street was critical for the telephone industry. The building served as the wire center where all of the telephones served could be reached with the shortest length of cable or wire. The intention for the new building was to house the most state of the art equipment that the American Bell and Western Electric engineers could devise. Most contemporary exchange buildings had each cable enter the building through UG ducts. However, the Cumberland building boasted cables that were carried in from the streets on racks in an underground subway that was large enough to drive a double "team" of horses through and which would accommodate the cable requirements for at least twenty five years. The new switchboard was noted for improving and speeding telephone service to meet the large demands of the city.

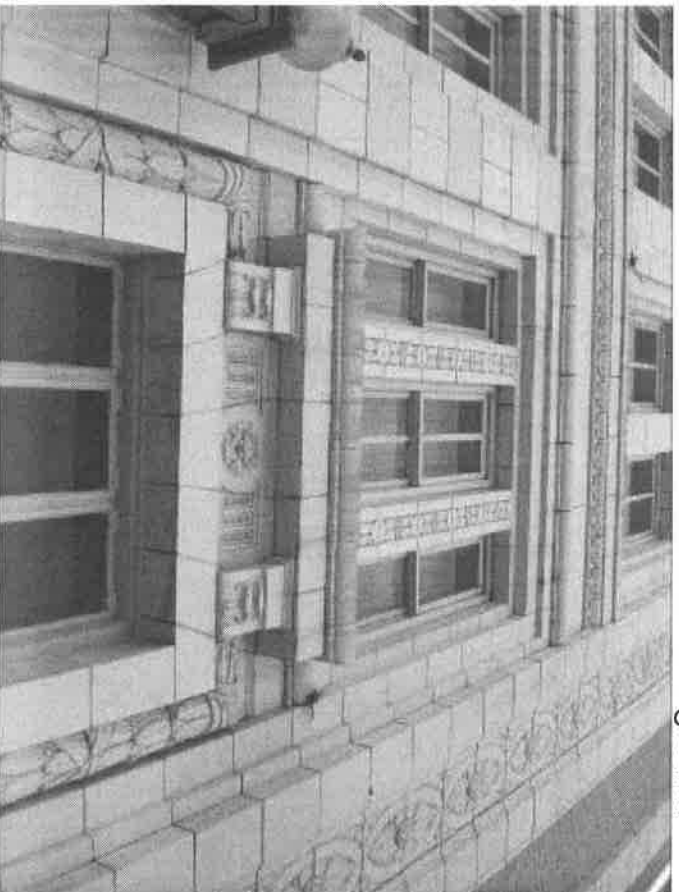
**Criteria 3. Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship**

The Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph building is significant for its elaborately ornamented, full length terra cotta facade. Upon the building's completion, *A Times Picayune* article noted that the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph Company fully appreciated the generous patronage of city residents and in return gave the city an architectural treasure. The terra cotta entrance was featured on the cover of *Building Review* on March 28 1918, a local New Orleans weekly periodical featuring information for contractors and architects on the newest materials, methods and processes of the trade (see figure 2). The issue featured terra cotta material of which this was a prime example.

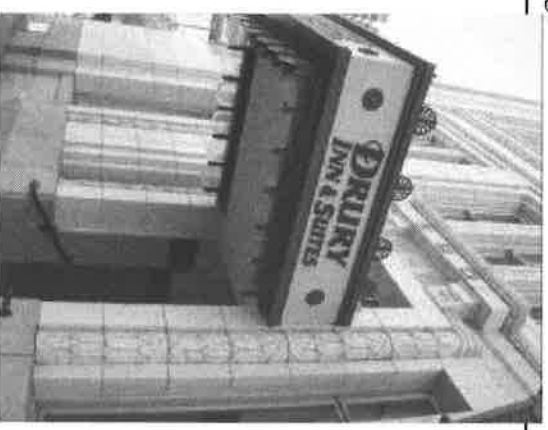
The eight story, three bay, yellow pressed brick (with red brick on side elevation), commercial building has a decorative ivory terra cotta façade and a granite stone base. It is one of the last World War I era terra cotta structures in New Orleans. The ground



**Figure 2:** Cover of *Building Review*, March 28, 1918, featuring the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph building.



**Figure 3 above:** Main entrance on Poydras Street. 11/12/08



**Figure 4 left:** Details of ornate terra cotta façade. 11/12/08

floor front façade has a recessed main entrance flanked by side lights with transoms and a flat metal marquis extending over the sidewalk. The large side windows have three light transoms over three long windows. The three ground floor bays are surrounded by decorative terra cotta elements (see figure 2 -6). The entrance is flanked by two brass light fixtures (see figure 5). The front façade upper story windows are double hung, two over two wood windows, with the fourth floor windows having two light transoms. The terra cotta front façade is highly decorative with bands of medallions between the floors and a decorative cornice (see figure 5). The side elevation windows are double hung, three over three wood windows set into segmental arch openings with the fourth floor having three light transoms windows (see figures 7 & 8). The terra cotta cornice wraps around to the side of the building, and the rear corner of the building is edged with terra cotta trim. The Baronne Street side of building has a light court inserted in the side of the elevation (see figure 7). The rear elevation has segmental arched window openings but is partially obscured by a stair way exit.

The construction of the building utilized the most modern technology and material of the time. It was built with a waterproof basement which was unique for New Orleans. In case of flooding, each floor was designed to be self draining to the exterior of the building so that the water would be able to get out on the separate floors without flooding other floors. The building was noted for having hurricane proof glass and an elaborate fire



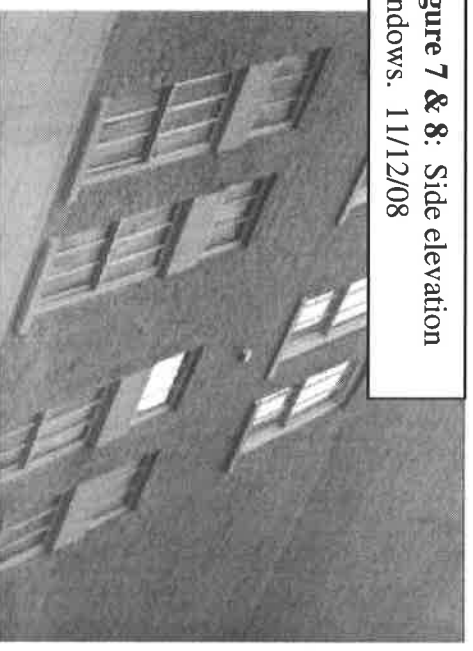
**Figure 5:** Brass light fixture flanking the main entrance.  
11/12/08



**Figure 6:** Decorative bands of medallions between the floors on the Poydras Street façade. 11/12/08



**Figure 7 & 8:** Side elevation windows. 11/12/08



escape system. Concrete bridges led from each floor of the main building to a detached brick fire escape structure with a winding stairway.

The interior was noted for its high quality of detail. The main floors were laid in marble. The employees were provided showers and a lounging and reading room complete with a white oak floor with inlaid borders of Tennessee black walnut.

The building is significant for its ornate terra cotta façade as well as its innovative uses of modern technology for 1917 that included new fireproofing, innovative fire escape methods, hurricane and flood proofing and a basement.

**Criteria 4: Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.**

The architects P. Thornton Marye of Atlanta and Sam Stone of the Stone Brothers firm of New Orleans designed the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph building. Stone Brothers Architects was a prominent firm in New Orleans and Sam Stone was well known for his technical expertise and accomplishments. Some of his other notable works include the Orpheum Theater, the Maritime (Hennen) Building (the first skyscraper in New Orleans), the Maison Blanche Building, the Sea Lion Pool of the Audubon Zoo, the natatorium and bath houses of Audubon Park (demolished), the Masonic Temple, the renovation of the French Market, the basement of the St. Charles Hotel (the first basement in New Orleans), and many other structures.

Stone's career began in the 1890s with the architectural firm of Thomas Sully. Upon Sully's death, Sam Stone and Co. came into being. He was later joined by his sons, and became Stone Brothers. Recognized as, one of the premier architects in the city, a New Orleans Magazine article of 1973 states, "there were surely none who could rival Stone's impact on the public consciousness of this city. " In addition to his architectural career, Stone was very active in the political life of New Orleans – he was appointed Commissioner of Public Property and then Commissioner of Public Safety; he was president of the State Board of Architectural Examiners, and was a member of the Board of Appeals of the Building Code. He was also a very prominent Mason, President of the Audubon Park Commission and one of the founders of Audubon Zoo. The Cumberland is significant as it is the work of the noted master architect Sam Stone.

**Staff Recommendation**

The staff recommends that the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph building be designated as a landmark as it fulfills three of the four criteria required to establish significance. The theater is significant as it exemplifies the broad cultural and social history of New Orleans, embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship and is representative of the notable work of a master architect whose individual ability has been recognized.



Report prepared by:  
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