

THE WILLIAM NEWTON MERCER HOUSE - THE BOSTON CLUB
824 Canal Street

Architectural Rating: Purple
Construction Date: 1844
Architect: James Gallier, Sr., original house
Benjamin Morgan Harrod, additions for Boston Club

Nomination Information

Date: May 25, 1978
Nominated by: Laurence Eustis
Seconded by: Andre Rubenstein, Diane Manget, Imre Hegedus
Recommended by: Staff

Site Description: Square #226, Lot #40
1st M.D., 5th A.D.
Lot Size: 63' 11" 2''' x 204' 1" 5''' x 63' 11" 2''' x 202' 5" 7'''
Current Use - Social Club

History of Property

Current Owners: The Boston Club
Date of Acquisition: January 31, 1905
Purchase Price: \$225,000

The nomination of this property was based upon its reflection of the cultural, political, economic and social history of the city, its architectural significance, and the fact that it represents the work of a noted architect. Each of the four areas of criteria used in determining landmark qualification and outlined in City Ordinance No. 6699 MGS, will be examined on an individual basis in order to provide information upon which a final decision will be made on whether or not to designate the property.

Architectural Significance

According to records in the Office of Conveyance, the land on which this building stands was acquired by Dr. William Newton Mercer on May 12, 1841. On May 21, 1844, Dr. Mercer signed a building contract with the architect and builder James Gallier, Sr., for the erection of a house on his Canal Street property. The house was to be three stories tall, of masonry construction and would cost \$18,700.00. The contract spells out the materials to be used and the manner of their use on the exterior of the house. The first two feet eight inches of the Canal Street facade were to be of granite, with the rest of the first floor faced in Missouri marble, including the outermost frame of the entrance. The sills and cornices of the second and third floor windows on the Canal Street facade were also to be of Missouri marble. The cornice atop the Canal Street facade was also to be executed in marble. A wrought iron balcony railing, thirty-two feet in length, was to be installed at the second floor. The vacant lot adjoining the house was to feature a wrought iron fence on top of a granite base, with iron gates hung on granite posts.

Generally speaking, the contract describes the finished facade, but there appear to be some modifications in terms of some specific details. The third story balconies are not called for in the contract, but are surely original, with the same railing designs as found on the second floor. The floors of these third floor balconies are single slabs of stone tied into the masonry of the facade wall, an unusual and expensive treatment. The three small rectangular windows in the frieze which light the attic were not required by the contract, but are surely original and in keeping with the style of the house. The only surviving elevation drawing for the Mercer house is one executed by Gallier in 1841 and shows a much less elaborate facade than that called for by the contract. This drawing shows no decorative cornices above the upper floor windows and has a full width balcony at the third floor. This drawing probably represents an early study for the house which was modified later by Gallier.

Gallier's design for Dr. Mercer's house represents the very dignified look of an expensive Greek Revival style townhouse. In terms of specific elements of the facade, only the columned entrance enframements and the cornice are Greek in character. The pediments above the second floor windows and the individual balconies on brackets on the third floor, although not Greek in derivation, are derived from classical architectural forms. It is interesting to note that the only reference to Greek architectural elements in the building contract is to the Grecian architraves around the doors of the first and second floor rooms.

According to Adrien Persac's 1870 drawings of buildings on Canal Street, the Mercer house facade is unchanged to this day, however, it also points out that some significant additions were made to the structure after 1870. The first such addition is the large three story semi-octagonal bay on the Carondelet side of the building. This bay does not appear on the 1876 Sanborn Insurance Map, but is present on the 1883 Robinson Atlas of the City of New Orleans. On the basis of real estate assessment records, it is likely that this bay was added between 1881 and 1883, when the assessed value of the structure rose from \$60,000 to \$70,000. Such an increase would suggest some improvements to the property. While there is no indication as to who designed and built this bay, it indicates a desire on the part of the builder to match the appearance of Gallier's facade. The bay does not clash with the original structure, as its cornice is adapted from the Canal facade. To further unite the bay to the Gallier building, the wrought iron balcony railing was extended around to the side of the house and around the bay. In 1884, the Boston Club, then the lessee of the building, engaged the architect Benjamin Morgan Harrod to design extensive additions to the rear of the former Mercer house. Harrod's work, visible to the rear of the bay, included an extension of the main structure to be 75 feet long and three stories high, according to Times-Democrat of July 17, 1884 in an article discussing the Club's history and its new home. Harrod's work cost \$30,000, according to the paper, due in part to the fine woods used on the interiors. The exteriors of Harrod's additions are quite plain, the only decorative element being the wooden balcony railings and columns which are of a type usually found on Queen Anne style houses of the 1880's.

Architect

James Gallier, Sr., architect of the W. N. Mercer house, was born in Ravensdale, Ireland in 1798. He arrived in New York in 1833 and moved to New Orleans in 1834. Gallier's London training must have stood him in good stead, for in 1835 he was chosen to design the St. Charles Hotel, which was finished in 1837 and destroyed by fire in 1851. The hotel established Gallier as a major architect in New Orleans. In collaboration with Charles Dakin, Gallier designed the Merchants Exchange, which faced Royal and Exchange, in 1835-36. In 1839 Gallier was called upon to complete St. Patrick's Church after James Dakin was dismissed due to structural problems with his design. Unquestionably Gallier's greatest work is Gallier Hall, built in stages from 1845 until 1853. Gallier was forced to retire in 1849, his failing eyesight preventing him from playing an active role in the preparation of designs. Gallier died on October 3, 1866 when the steamer Evening Star sank in the Atlantic Ocean during a storm.

Benjamin Morgan Harrod, architect for the additions made by the Boston Club in 1884, was an 1856 graduate of Harvard College. Harrod practiced engineering and architecture, serving with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi Valley Commission. As an architect, Harrod was responsible for the design of several fire stations in New Orleans in the 1880's, including 1043 Magazine, 830 Julia and 1528 Tchoupitoulas. As a partner with Paul Andry in the firm of Harrod and Andry he designed Gibson Hall of Tulane University in 1884, as well as the Physics and Chemistry Laboratories, now the History Building and the Richardson Building respectively.

Historic Personages

William Newton Mercer, the first occupant and owner of the structure in question, was a native of Maryland. After the War of 1812 in which he served as an Army surgeon, Mercer moved to Natchez and later to New Orleans.

According to his obituary, Dr. Mercer was noted for his philanthropic acts, among these was the donation of a large lot of ground in 1853 for the construction of St. Anna's Asylum, still in operation at 1823 Prytania.

Cultural, Political, Economic and Social History

Founded in 1841, the Boston Club is New Orleans' oldest and most prestigious private mens club. The Club took its name from the popular 19th century card game called Boston. Over the years, the Club's membership has included many of this city's most important business and professional figures. The Boston Club first occupied the former Mercer house on July 16, 1884 under a lease agreement with Mercer's heirs. The Club purchased the property in 1905. It is interesting to note that the Pickwick Club occupied this building from 1881 through 1883.