

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT HISTORIC DISTRICT LANDMARKS COMMISSION

THE MAISON BLANCHE BUILDING  
901-921 Canal Street

Architectural Rating: Blue  
Construction Date: 1906-09  
Architects: Stone Brothers, Architects

Nomination Information:

Date: May 25, 1978  
Nominated by: Diane Manget  
Seconded by: Michael Duplantier & Imre Hegedus  
Recommended by: Staff

Site Description

Square 94, Undesignated Lot  
2nd M.D., 6th A.D.  
Zoning: CBD-3

Lot Size: 161'9"2'' X 160'6" X 47'1"3'' X 159'11"6''  
X 81' X 107'11"6'' X 127'10"6'' X 212'6"

Current Use: Department store on first five (5) floors  
Offices on upper eight(8) floors.

History of Property:

Current Owner: City Stores Company  
Date of Acquisition: March 14, 1975  
Purchase Price: Act of Deposit

The nomination of this building was based upon its architectural significance, the fact that it was designed by a noted architectural firm, and for its importance to the cultural, political, economic and social history of New Orleans. Each of the four area of criteria used in determining landmark qualification, and outlined in City Ordinance #6699 MCS, will be examined on an individual basis in order to provide information upon which a final decision will be made 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 Maison Blanche Ltd. in four separate transactions between July of 1905 and July of 1906.<sup>1</sup> The lots involved form the corner of Canal and Dauphine Streets and extend back through the square with a frontage of 81 feet on Iberville Street. Maison Blanche had been in operation at 901 Canal since the store's founding in 1897.<sup>2</sup> The original store was housed in an elaborately detailed five (5) story Second Empire style structure owned by the Mercier Family. Evidently, by 1905 this location had become overcrowded and a new and larger store was required. On November 2, 1906, Maison Blanche Ltd. secured a mortgage with the Germania Trust and Savings Bank for \$1,500,000 in gold bonds towards the construction of the new store to rise on the site of the original.<sup>3</sup> The new Maison Blanche store and office building was evidently one part of a major development planned for this square. A hotel and a theatre were also proposed.<sup>4</sup>

Maison Blanche contracted with the architectural firm of Stone Brothers, Architects for the design of the new store and office building. The plans for the building were published in the April 1906 issue of the locally published periodical Architectural Art and its Allies.<sup>5</sup> The plans called for a 15 story plus basement structure. The store would occupy the first five (5) floors, holding office space to be leased out to various tenants. The exterior finish was to be of white marble for the first 5 floors and white enamelled terracotta for the upper 10 floors.<sup>6</sup>

Between the publication of these plans and the signing of the mortgage for construction, the design of the building was slightly modified. The height was reduced to 13 stories and the white marble proposed for the lower floors was eliminated in favor of the white enamelled terra-cotta. When the new store opened in 1909, the ground floor featured an arcade along the Canal Street front which was flanked on either side by display windows featuring the store's latest merchandise. This arcade has since been enclosed to form part of the first floor of Maison Blanche. At the Burgundy Street side of the Canal facade was a large neo-Baroque entrance way which led to the elevator lobby of the office building. This entrance detailing was removed when the ground floor was remodeled to its present appearance. The upper floors of the Maison Blanche Building have undergone no serious modification since the store opened in 1909. The 2nd and 3rd floors are the most prominent in terms of decoration. Giant order Ionic columns extend the height of these two floors and support a proper Ionic cornice with triglyphs and metopes. The elaborately detailed columns, divided by horizontal decorative banding, resemble the columnar treatment of certain pavillions of the Palais du Louvre in Paris, largely built in the 17th and early 18th centuries. The Louvre would have been an appropriate design source for this building, whose exterior reflects the design philosophy of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. It is also possible that the architects were familiar with the entrance portico of McKim, Mead and White's University Club in New York, which featured columns with similar horizontal banding. The University Club was, between 1900 and 1906, illustrated at least twice by The Architectural Record, the most prestigious American architectural journal of the time. The use of mass-produced terra-cotta decorative elements enabled such extraordinary detailing to be executed on a large scale at a price considerably lower than that for cut stone. The fourth floor is surrounded by a very heavy decorative frieze of lion's heads with garlands hung between them. The windows are grouped in threes, with heavy piers rising vertically up the facade separating it into six equally wide bays on the Canal Street facade. Another garlanded frieze separates the 10th and 11th floors. The upper 3 floors are dominated by a substantial entablature which features lion's heads aligned with each of the broad vertical piers which create the groups of 3 window bays across the entire facade. The final cornice is richly detailed with modillion brackets and numerous courses of decorative molding.

The main mass of the building, the first 5 floors, serves as a base for the upper 8 office floors. The office floors are arranged in a V-shaped plan, with the open end of the V facing Dauphine Street. Such a plan allowed as much natural light as possible to enter each of the offices. The terra-cotta decoration found on the Canal Street facade continues along the V shaped court of the office block. Only the Burgundy and Iberville Street facades of the upper floors are undecorated. A six story wing extends out of the main block of the building towards Iberville Street. The street facade of this wing is faced in dark red brick with terra cotta trim. It is not of the same high quality as the main structure, and has been seriously altered by the construction of an enclosed above-street walkway bridging Iberville Street.

The Maison Blanche Building is an outstanding example of an early 20th century commercial building designed in an essentially French Renaissance manner. The fine terra cotta exterior details, manufactured by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company of New York, represent the largest extant use of that material in New Orleans.

#### Architect

Stone Brothers, Architects, headed by Sam and Guy Stone, were among New Orleans' most active architectural firms in the first half of this century. In addition to the Maison Blanche Building, Stone Bros. were responsible for the following buildings in the CBD: the entrance portico and tower of the Confederate Memorial Hall, added in 1908, renovations to the recently demolished St. Charles Hotel, the Fairchild Company Building, built in 1904 and now the home of the Contemporary Arts Center, and the Masonic Temple Building, erected in 1926. The firm was also responsible for the renovation of the French Market for the Works Progress Administration in the early 1930's.

Historic Personages

Isidore Newman, the founder of Maison Blanche, was one of this city's most prominent businessmen and philanthropists at the turn of the century. Originally in partnership with his son-in-law, S.J. Schwartz, in the store known as Schwartz-Isaac's, Newman left that firm and founded Maison Blanche in 1897. Newman was also responsible for the creation of the fund which endowed the Isidore Newman Manual Training School, now Newman School, one of the city's finest private educational institutions. Newman resided in the superb Richardsonian Romanesque style house at 3607 St. Charles designed by Sully and Toledano and needlessly demolished in 1972.<sup>7</sup>

Cultural, Political, Economic and Social History

The name Maison Blanche has been an important part of this city's business history since its founding in 1897. The construction of the present Canal Street store attests to the rapid growth of the store, and to its continuing prestige as a major retail department store. Maison Blanche continued to expand throughout the 20th century, and presently has four large branch stores in the greater New Orleans area. Through its continued growth and expansion, Maison Blanche has maintained its position as one of the city's foremost retailers, a fact that is clearly expressed in the design of the Maison Blanche Building.<sup>8</sup>

Footnotes

1. Conveyance Office Book 199, Folio 740 Book - 207 Folio 11, Book 202 Folio 742.
2. The Times Picayune, December 23, 1979 - Section 2, Page 4
3. Act before Meloney C. Soniat, N.P. November 2, 1906.
4. Architectural Art and its Allies, Volume 1, No. 10 - April 1906 Page 9
5. Ibid. Unnumbered pages of illustrations.
6. Ibid. Page 9
7. The Times Picayune, December 23, 1979 - Section 2, Page 4
8. Ibid.