

New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission
Landmark Designation Report

938 Valence Street
Benny's Bar

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Landmark Designation Report

Construction Date: 1870
Architect: Unknown
Site Description: Square # 235 in the 6th District, Lot # 1 measuring 30' front on Valence Street by 120' front on Camp Street, b.p.l.
Municipal District: 6
Assessment District: 14
Zoning: RD-3
Owner: Gena McKenzie
938 Valence Street
New Orleans, LA 70115
Date Nominated: November 9, 1999

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural and historical significance. City Ordinance No. 5992 MCS defines a Landmark or Landmark site as: an unimproved parcel of ground (landmark site) or such parcel with improvements or such improvements without grounds (landmark), wheresoever located in the city, subject to the jurisdiction of the historic district landmarks commission, of particular historic, architectural, or cultural significance, which parcel plus its improvements, if any:

- (1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community;
- (2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history;
- (3) Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or of 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

Located between Upperline Street and Napoleon Avenue, the area known as Faubourg West Bouigny was subdivided in 1834 by real estate investor Louis Bouigny. Faubourg West Bouigny, along with Faubourg East Bouigny (Napoleon Avenue to General Taylor Street) comprised a large part of Jefferson City, an independent municipality separate from the City of New Orleans during the mid-nineteenth century. Jefferson City was incorporated in 1850, and was a small town whose economy was based upon light manufacturing and port commerce. Industry, butchers, tanneries and lye manufacturers located near the wharf, and the city center formed at the intersection of Magazine Street and Napoleon Avenue. The area was inhabited largely by immigrants, free people of color, and remained more pastoral than its upriver neighbor, the City of Lafayette. With the New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad, Faubourg Bouigny transformed slowly to a suburb of New Orleans. Jefferson City was annexed to the City of New Orleans in 1870.

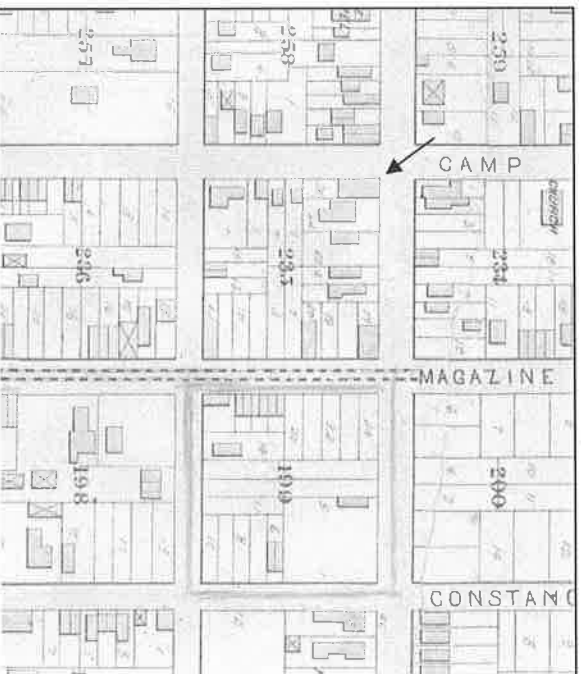


Figure 1. 1883 Robinson Atlas

Square number 235 bounded by Camp, Valence, Bordeaux and Magazine Streets is located in Faubourg West Bouigny. By 1854, the lots at the corner of Camp and Valence Street were still vacant. In 1870, Catharine O'Brian purchased Lot # 1 forming the corner of Camp and Valence Streets for \$500 and constructed a Creole cottage. Less than a year later, she sold the lot and building to Jane O'Brian for \$1500. The 1883 Robinson Atlas (survey work done during the late 1870's) shows the frame creole cottage. Adjacent to it is a creole cottage with a porch set back from the street, now known as 932-34 Valence Street.

Jane O'Brian kept the property until 1884 when she sold it to David Wolf. The 1895 Sanborn map shows the Creole Cottage, labeled as a store and saloon. The property eventually was bought by Thomas Callaghan in 1899, the heirs of whom would own the property over the next 100 years. Thomas Callaghan operated a grocery on the premises since 1890 and passed away in 1901, leaving the property to his father of County Cork, Ireland and his brothers and sister living in New Orleans. A detailed inventory of the store's contents provides a snapshot of what a typical New Orleans nineteenth century corner store held. The inventory included items such as 100

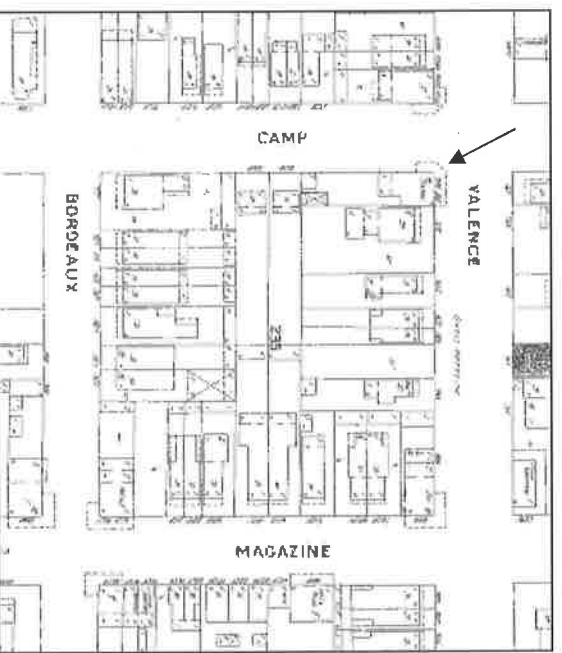


Figure 2. 1895 Robinson Atlas *SANBORN MAP*

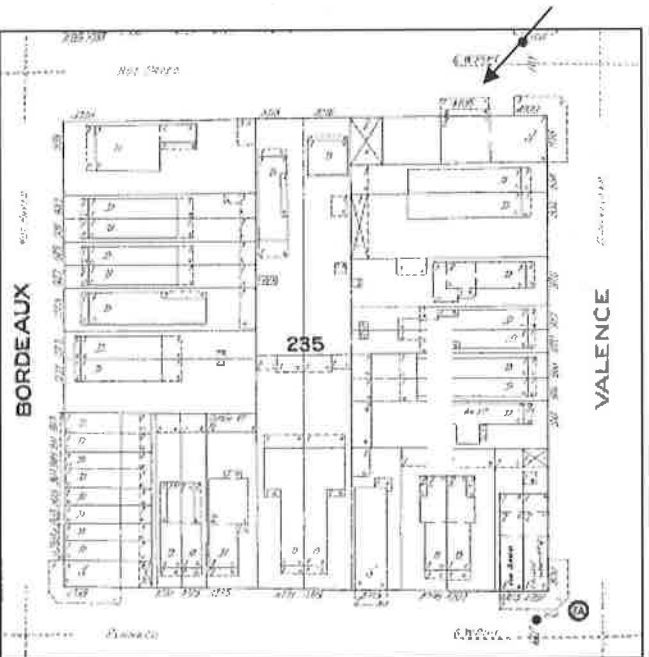


Figure 3. 1909 Sanborn Map

pounds of rice, 20 cans of corn, 42 cans of okra, 1 barrel of whisky, 6 bottles of Hi Hi, jams, pickles, bitters, beer, scrub brushes, salt and starch. Also included was a Manhattan table, counters, shelving, and one horse with cart. The contents of the store were valued at \$392.00, and the property was valued at \$1800.00. Over the next decade, the Callaghan heirs erected a two story addition at the rear that shows up on the 1909 Sanborn map.

The building continued as a corner store house and saloon, known as Callaghan's up until the 1970's. Thomas Callaghan's niece, Besie Burch ran the corner store and was a fixture in the community. Her nephew Jack operated the store and bar until 1970. when Benny Jones, a bar operator, began leasing the space.

In 1984, following the closure of Tipitina's, Cyril Neville, a resident of West Bouigny and one of the Neville Brothers, asked Benny Jones if he and other local musicians could play at the bar to preserve the local music scene:

"The main thing was to have something in our own neighborhood" says Neville, who lives a half a block down the street from Benny's. "A place to grow musically, culturally, spiritually. It gave us a chance to capture and preserve our culture. Benny's was our laboratory where we go to fine tune our stuff, to create little monsters.¹

The bar remained a stomping ground for New Orleans local R&B scene, cultivating talent and entertaining thousands. As the years progressed, and neighborhood dynamics shifted, the bar came under scrutiny for noise, drug and parking issues. Benny's was shut down in 1992 after a drug bust. It reopened briefly in 1993, but was permanently closed in 1994. The iconic awning and sign were removed from the building during this period.

After hosting two subsequent bars, the building was shuttered. In 2000, the property was eventually purchased by Benny's Uptown LLC. A renovation was begun, only to be thwarted when the building collapsed, leaning on the adjacent building at 932-34 Valence Street, which was also under renovation at the time. The two story portion of the building was removed and replaced with a ~~one-story~~ addition. The building was renovated into a single family residence and remains so today.

remains sighted and

¹ Rose, Christopher, "Musician's Dream Lives on at Corner Uptown Bar," Times Picayune 25 January, 1987: G 7B.

Significance of the property

(1) Exemplifies or reflects the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community and (2) Is identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history.

The Neville Brothers

The significance of Benny's is intricately tied to one of New Orleans' most famous musical families, the Nevilles. Raised on Valence Street, the Neville's musical history began in the mid 1950's when Art Neville, the eldest, launched a solo career while still in high school. The Meters formed in 1965 with Art Neville as vocalist and keyboardist. The Meters achieved limited commercial success but have been critically acclaimed in the decades since. They broke up in 1977. Art Neville then joined his three brothers Aaron, Charles and Cyril forming the Neville Brothers. Their debut album was released in 1978. The Neville Brothers achieved greater commercial success and recognition, cementing the Neville family as New Orleans musical royalty. Along the way, each of the brothers continued to form bands and pursue individual musical interests. In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, the Neville Brothers were scattered about, and did not return home to play until 2008 when they performed during their traditional closing spot at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

Benny's Bar

In 1984, Cyril Neville visualized a haven for local musicians to jam and create authentic New Orleans music. He asked Benny Jones, the operator of a sleepy bar at the corner of Valence and Camp Street, known as Benny's to allow musicians to play there in the evenings. The bar, just down the street from where the Neville's grew up, was the perfect location:

Cyril Neville dreams about conga rhythms and Mardi Gras Indian chants, "lkoi!ko!" and a trumpet playing fool in a bobbing second line. It happens on one of those narrow, cratered streets uptown. Now that would be heaven. But the dream a little grandiose and a bit impractical, so, for now, Benny's Bar will have to suffice. Benny's is a ramshackle tavern amid those narrow and cratered streets. The bar is home to the dream-the way music used to be in New Orleans, spirited and on the street, unencumbered by modern contrivances like musicians unions and amusement taxes. That's pretty much the way it is now at the late night volunteer jam at Benny's, home to the uptown rhythm renaissance.²

Neville created the group "Endangered Species" with musicians from the neighborhood that frequented the bar. Benny's began to host other local musicians such as the Uptown Allstars (another Cyril Neville Band), Walter Wolfman Washington, Charmaine Neville, Deacon John Blues ~~the~~ review and JD and the Jammers. The small corner bar, best described as a dive, held about fifty patrons, and remained open late night. Though there was no cover charge, a Kentwood water jug was passed around for donations.³

²Rose, Christopher, "Musician's Dream Lives on at Corner Uptown Bar," *Times Picayune* 25 January, 1987: G 7B.

³ Nicolosi, Michelle, "Benny's Lives for the Music," *Times Picayune* 24 June, 1988: Lagniappe 7.

Benny's is a real grassroots club: you can really capture the essence of what New Orleans rhythm and blues is all about at that club," said Mark Boudousquie, guitarist for another local band, Multiple Places. "It is an anything goes kind of place. And it's just about the only place you can go late night."⁴

Benny's soon started to attract a wide range of patrons from neighborhood residents, college students, musicians and celebrities. In 1988, Benny's was listed in an article "Celebrity Haunts" among the places to go in New Orleans to stargaze. Patrons of the bar included Bruce Springstein, Mick Jagger and Dennis Quaid.⁵

Man, you don't know who the hell's going to come in here," says J.D. Hill, leader of the Jammers and member of the Uptown Allstars. "You just go to Benny's--ain't nobody going to bother you. They don't give a damn who you are."⁶

Benny's grew in popularity and notoriety over the course of the 1980's and early 1990's. Its original mission of providing a welcoming and open venue for local New Orleans musicians had been achieved.

For Cyril, Endangered Species and the Uptown Allstars, the music centers around Benny's Bar. Cyril looks down, trying to come up with a way to express his attachment to the corner establishment. "It's like..." he suddenly looks up and when he does, he's beaming. "It's like my Apollo, man. Valence Street is my 125th Street. I feel the same way about this little neighborhood that I think the Harlemites feel about Harlem and the Jamaicans feel about Trenchtown. When I'm introducing the Uptown All Stars at Benny's I say not only welcome to our music, but to our culture, because this is a cultural phenomenon in the making."⁷

Over the decade that Benny's Bar was in operation, it had an indelible impact on the music scene in New Orleans, the musicians that played there, and those that went there to experience authentic, original, uninhibited local music.

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

938 Valence Street is a four bay, frame, Creole cottage set directly on the corner property lines. The building is clad in wood weatherboards. The Valence Street elevation includes four, full height openings, each with a pair of French doors. The four pairs of French doors include night blinds, common during the nineteenth century for commercial buildings. Night blinds are small, removable panels within the French door that could be installed at night to provide security and removed during the day to allow light. The Camp Street elevation of the original cottage also includes four bays including two full height openings and two six over six windows. There is a single window at each gable end. The building

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Atkinson, Mary Lou. "Celebrity Haunts," *Times Picayune* 15 August, 1988: F-3

⁶ Rose, Christopher, "Musician's Dream Lives on at Corner Uptown Bar," *Times Picayune* 25 January, 1987: G 7B.

⁷ Karp, Jerry, "Cyril Neville: Out to Change the Way the World Perceives New Orleans Music" http://rocketwords.com/ws_neville.shtml 28 July, 2011.

once included a two-story rear addition. During the 2000 renovation, following the building collapse, the two-story rear addition was removed and a new, one-story rear addition constructed. This portion of the building includes four, wood, 6/6 windows.

While prolific in the Vieux Carré and downtown Faubourgs, Creole cottages are not as common Uptown. 938 Valence Street represents an intact Creole cottage that also played an important role as a corner store house, a product of nineteenth century New Orleans vernacular design. Corner store houses developed during the nineteenth century as mixed use buildings that provided commercial space at the ground floor corner with a residence for the shop keeper in the rear or above. Corner store houses began as conversions of residential types for use as mixed use buildings, but evolved over time as their own type, designed specifically to accommodate a mixed use program. Typical features include champhered entries, wrap around overhangs, large storefront windows, signage and paired entry doors. Residential portions on the first floor, unlike the commercial portions, were typically raised a few feet above grade and were accessed by a separate entry. The buildings wrap around overhang, though missing today, may one day be restored, returning this building to an iconic New Orleans corner store house.

Conclusion

The Staff recommends that 938 Valence Street be designated a landmark as it meets several of the criteria required for consideration as a local landmark.