

Spanish Custom House
1300 Moss Street,
New Orleans, Louisiana

HABS No. 18-3

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Louisiana

Historic American Buildings Survey
Richard Koch, District Officer
309 Stern Building, New Orleans, Louisiana

"SPANISH CUSTOM HOUSE" (residence)
New Orleans Orleans Parish Louisiana

Owner

Mrs. Helen Pitkin Schertz
1300 Moss Street (Bayou St. John)
New Orleans

Date of Erection

Probably 1784

Architect

Unknown

Builder

Unknown

Present Condition

Good. Rear gallery has been closed in and
new wing added to rear of house.

Number of Stories

Two

Materials of Construction

First story brick, plastered, with plastered
brick columns. Second story frame, with
turned wood columns. Slate roof. Cypress
roof framing and woodwork. Plaster walls.
Wood exposed beam ceiling on first floor.
Plaster ceiling second floor. New flagstone
floors first story; wood floors second story.

Other existing Records

- Plan of the City of New Orleans and Adjacent
Plantations, by Carlos Trudeau, Dec. 24,
1798.
- N. Scott & W. P. Spratling, "Old Plantation
Houses in Louisiana", Wm. Helburn Co.,
1927, p. 150-2.
- N. C. Curtis, "New Orleans, Its Old Houses,
Shops and Public Buildings", J. B. Lippin-
cott, 1933; pp. 23 - 217.

Additional Data

Situated on the banks of Bayou St. John, this building is an excellent example of the early type of plantation house developed in Louisiana, its architecture being no doubt influenced by that of the West Indies. Though it is quite small, the original house having contained only four rooms, two on each floor, it probably has more charm than any other building of this particular type in New Orleans.

There is a two-story gallery on the front overlooking Bayou St. John, with brick plastered columns below and turned solid wood columns on the second floor. A stair at one end leads from the first to the second floor of the gallery. A study of the plan would seem to indicate that a gallery similar to the one in front extended also across the rear, and the present interior stair was then an exterior one.

One of the chief sources of charm of the house lies in the handling of the roof. Although the plan is practically square, the ridge is extended parallel to the front, giving the house an appearance of much less depth than is actually the case. The roof has an interesting double pitch, much less steep on the front and rear than at the ends.

The craftsmanship throughout the roof construction is excellent. A brick chimney, with brick hoods over the

flues, projects through the center of the ridge. A brick in the chimney, in the unfinished attic, bears the date 1784, which is probably the date of the erection of the house. 3

There are two dormer windows in the front slope of the roof of good proportion and detail, but they seem to be of a later period than the rest of the house. This detail corresponds more to the American Colonial of about 1810 than to that of New Orleans in 1784.

The plan of the house is ideally suited to the warm climate of New Orleans, being originally only one room deep so a free circulation of air was allowed throughout, making the house as cool as possible. The walls of the first floor are of brick, plastered, and those on the second are studs with weather boards. These boards are new, the original ones being probably much wider. The shutters, which are found on all the doors and windows, are also modern, replacing earlier ones of batten construction, one pair of which still remain on the door between the dining room and the stair hall. The original doors and windows are well detailed, and are fitted with interesting old wrought iron hardware.

The first floor was at one time paved with bricks about six inches square, pink and slate color. When the house was remodeled by the present owner, these bricks were removed and the floor of slate flagging installed. The mantels in the living and dining room were also re-

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moved and replaced with marble ones. The ceiling in these rooms is the exposed beam construction of the second floor.

There are two bedrooms on the second floor, in one of which is a hand-carved wooden mantel and in the other a simple white marble one with pilastre treatment above. These mantels seem to have been installed some time after the completion of the house. The wood one is an excellent example of the type found in many New Orleans houses, and shows a strong French influence. The one of marble was probably brought from France and reflects Directoire tendencies. The original mantels were no doubt simply the brick fireplaces, possibly cemented, over which these latter mantels were placed. The plaster ceilings, wood cornices, base and chair rails were added at about the same time as the mantels; these however are deductions.

The two bathrooms and the large room at the rear, quite out of character with the house, have been recently added, but do not detract unduly as they are not seen from the front.

The history of this house is rather obscure and the origin of the name "SPANISH CUSTOM HOUSE" by which it has been known for years in New Orleans, is not traceable. It was probably built about 1784 by Santiago Laurens, or his heirs, who owned the property from 1721 until 1807. That it was never owned by the Spanish Government is certain from the chain of titles, ~~which~~

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which has been traced in the notarial archives to the time of Bienville. It may have been leased by the Government though, or occupied by one of the custom officials as a residence and office. This theory is supported by the fact that the house was once owned by M. Blanc, who was undoubtedly the M. Louis Blanc whose name appears on the "PLAN OF THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS AND ADJACENT PLANTATION", by Carlos Trudeau, 24 December, 1798. Louis Blanc at that time occupied lands on the Bayou, although he did not acquire the Spanish Custom House until March 1, 1809. Blanc may have been a Spanish custom official. There are in Seville in the Archivo General de Indias several letters regarding the Custom House, dated 1785 and 1796, and some correspondence of Luis De Blanc regarding San Juan del Bayu (Bayou St. John) which might throw some light on this history. After the Spanish period, but before Blanc acquired title to this house, he was the collector of the Orleans Navigation Company, which controlled the Bayou. He resided on the Bayou and collected tolls for the company as is revealed in the following advertisement, which appeared in the Louisiana Courier of October 30, 1807.

"ORLEANS NAVIGATION COMPANY

The Orleans Navigation Company informs the public, and particularly the mariners in the Bayou St. John, that on Monday, the

2nd of November, the toll will be received by the collector, residing at the settlement of the Bayou, on every vessel whatever, coming from Lake Pontchartrain into the said Bayou by the channel which the Company have made.

The toll is fixed as follows:

1st. Every vessel of any size or description, above one ton, shall pay eighty seven cents and a half or seven eights of a dollar per ton.

2nd. Every boat or craft under one ton shall pay fifty cents. Every vessel liable to the tax shall be gauged and marked agreeably to law, on their arrival in the Bayou.

All owners of boats and canoes, not exceeding three tons, may compromise the toll of their vessels yearly, provided they will always pay six months in advance; they will apply for that purpose to Mr. Louis Blanc, appointed collector of the Company and residing at the Bayou.

No toll will be exacted of the boats of the fishermen residing at the mouth of the Bayou St. John, until further notice.

By order of the Board
John Gourjon, Treasurer"

Oct. 30, La. Courier.

SUCCESSION OF TITLE AS FOLLOWS:

Mrs. Helen Pitkin Schertz acquired this property from Mrs. Sarah B. Shatford, July 14, 1909, by act of sale passed before B. F. Daly, Notary Public.

Mrs. Shatford acquired from People's Homestead Association September 6, 1902, by act before F. C. Spitzfaden.

People's Homestead Association acquired from Mrs. E. A. Vendergriff, et al, by act before same notary same date.

Mrs. Vendergriff et al acquired by Judgment #68479, August 27, 1902, act before J. Dreyfous, N. P., July 13, 1901, from the estate of Mrs. Mary Roux, wife of James M. E. Stow, by order of C.D.C., July 29, 1901.

Mrs. Mary C. Roux Stowe acquired from the succession of Albert P. Roux, Judgment #61622, C.D.C.

Albert P. Roux acquired from the succession of Pierre Roux and his wife, Sarah Coulter, May 27, 1891.

Mrs. Pierre Roux acquired from Amanuel Roux by act of Louis Ferrand, N.P., April 2, 1835.

Amanuel Roux acquired from Pierre Roux et al, by act before Louis Ferrand, N.P., May 19, 1834.

Pierre Roux acquired from Louis Fortin by act before Narcisse Broutin, N.P., October 19, 1816 - also acts of M. deArmas, N.P., March 4, 1812 - May 28, 1814.

Louis Fortin acquired from Luis Sere' by act August 31, 1815, before Narcisse Broutin, N.P.

Louis Sere' acquired from Blanc and Fortin July 21, 1809 before same notary.

Blanc ceded rights to Fortin before same notary March 25, 1813.

Blanc and Fortin acquired from Eli Beauregard by act before P. Pedesclaux N.P., March 1, 1809.

Eli Beauregard acquired from Louis Allard by act before P. Pedesclaux September 26, 1807, Allard acting for Jacques Laurens.

Jacques Laurens evidently acquired from Mrs. (Wid.) Santiago Laurens, date unknown; the Wd. Laurens acquired from French Concession to Antonio Rivar, dated Feb. 5, 1721.

May 7, 1935

Samuel Wilson, Jr.

3/11/27

WCE