

The Cabildo; Jackson Square
New Orleans, Louisiana

HABS No. 18-4

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District No. 18

Historic American Buildings Survey
Richard Koch, District Officer
614 Audubon Building, New Orleans, Louisiana

The CABILDO

The present name of this building is derived from the governmental body for which it was built, the Illustrious Cabildo. At the time of its construction, during the Spanish Rule of Louisiana, it was referred to as the Casa Capitular. After the Louisiana Purchase, the building became the City Hall of New Orleans.

The Cabildo is located on the corner of Chartres Street and St. Peter Street. Its municipal address is 711 Chartres Street, New Orleans, Parish of Orleans, Louisiana.

The State of Louisiana is presently the owner of the Cabildo. The building is part of the Louisiana State Museum, and houses various exhibits.

The Cabildo building was erected between the years 1795 and 1799 to house the meetings of the local Spanish government. In light of the far-reaching events which took place there at the beginning of the 19th century, the building is one of the most important historical structures in the United States, and the most significant surviving monument of the Spanish rule in Louisiana. The Cabildo was designed in a Neo-classical style commonly used for Spanish governmental buildings of the 18th century.

PART ONE: PHYSICAL HISTORY

Date of Erection:

The Cabildo was constructed between the years 1795 and 1799. According to the minutes of the Cabildo meeting of January 16, 1795, an offer to rebuild a structure on the site of the original Casa Capitular and the separate Corps de Carde structure which were destroyed in the fire of 1788 was made by a wealthy philanthropist by the name of Don Andres Almonester y Rojas. The Cabildo realizing that it had no funds in its treasury to build such a structure, accepted his offer. The minutes of the Cabildo meeting of December 4, 1795, indicate that construction had begun by that date, and by May 10, 1799, the building had been sufficiently completed to allow the Cabildo to hold their meeting there, as indicated by a note in the minutes of that meeting.

Architect:

The architect of the Cabildo building was a Frenchman by the name of Don Cilberto Cuillemard. As he was already engaged in the designs of the new Cathedral and Presbytere adjacent to it, both of which were replacing structures damaged in the fire of 1788, he was assigned the task of designing the new Cabildo building, which was to occupy the site to the left of the Cathedral. For the sake of symmetry, Guillemard designed the new Cabildo in the same style as the Presbytere. Cuillemard is connected with the design of the Cabildo by a petition presented to the Cabildo in the last days of the Spanish rule, on May 14, 1802, requesting that he be given a certificate to show that he had been responsible for the design and supervision of the building's construction.

Builder:

The man responsible for the funding of the Cabildo building designed by Guillemard was the local philanthropist Don Andres Almonester y Rojas. Born in Spain in 1725, Almonester came to the colony around the year 1769, and became wealthy through real estate. He was generous with his good fortune, and made possible the construction of the new Cathedral to replace the one destroyed in the fire of 1788, the Charity Hospital, and a home for lepers.

The agreement between the Cabildo and Almonester provided for the construction of the building following the same design which was to be employed in the construction of the Presbytere. When the building was completed, the Cabildo agreed to have it assessed, and its value would then be repaid to Almonester in terms which would not deplete the funds available in the treasury or interfere with the payment of regular expenses.

Almonester died suddenly on April 25, 1798. Guillemard was appointed to carry out the remaining construction of the building. This he did, and by December 10, 1798 appraisal of the structure was begun. Full payment of the construction cost to the widow of Almonester was not made until August of 1803, shortly before the colony was retroceded to France.

Very little is known of the sources of building materials or of the actual construction of the building. It is known that surviving portions of the walls of the fire damaged Corps de Garde building were incorporated into the Cabildo. Benjamin Latrobe, in his Impressions Respecting New Orleans, wrote in 1819 that "the foundations are laid about six inches below the natural surface; that is, the turf is shaved off, and logs being then laid level along this shallow trench, very solid piers and thick walls of brick are immediately built upon the logs...The SE corner of the Principal (Cabildo), however, has not settled as much as the rest of the front...That corner that has not settled was built upon an old wall..."

Concerning other aspects of the construction of the building, the wrought-iron balconies on the windows of the upper gallery and the windows of the Sala Capitular, or Council Room, were the work of a local resident, Marcelino Hernandez, and plaster corbels which adorned the interior doors of the gallery were the work of a sculptor named Le Prevost.

Plans and Construction:

There are no extant drawings by Guillemard for the Cabildo. There are several depictions of the building as it appeared after its completion. These include a small sketch found on the map of the city drawn by the City Surveyor Jacques Tardieu in 1815, and two lithographs executed in 1845, one by Thomas Williams, and another by Jules Lion, a copy of which can be viewed in the Historic New Orleans Collection, located at 533 Royal Street, New Orleans. A fine architectural-type drawing of the front facade was executed by Benjamin Latrobe in 1819 during his visit to the city. This drawing provides one of the best views of the building prior to the addition of the mansard roof in 1847.

Alterations and Additions:

Numerous alterations have been executed on the Cabildo over the years. The most significant of these is the dormered mansard roof constructed in 1847

to replace the original flat roof, which leaked severely. Louis Surgi, the City Surveyor and designer of the mansard addition, was no doubt inspired by the plan of the Baroness Pontalba, the daughter of Don Andres Almonester y Rojas, to improve her property along both sides of the Place d'Armes which she had inherited from her father. The city was divided into three municipalities at this time, and the First Municipality Council, rivals of the Second Municipality which was erecting the Greek Revival hall designed by James Gallier, were pleased at the opportunity to improve their own part of the city. They were so enthusiastic about Surgi's design for the mansard roof that they urged the owners of the Cabildo's twin, the Presbytere, to erect an identical roof on that building, thus effecting a dramatic change on the impressive area surrounding the Place d'Armes without upsetting its attractive symmetry.

Within the next few years, several other changes were made to the Cabildo. A contract in the Acts of J. C. Cuvillier, on file in the Notarial Archives for Orleans Parish, Room B-4 of the Civil Courts Building, dated June 2, 1851 specifies for the entrance hall to be paved with marble; Louis Surgi was to be responsible for this work. An entry in the Account Ledger for the Surveyor's Office for the years 1850-1852, dated March 26, 1851, refers to the payment of \$1760.⁰⁰ for a "gateway of iron positioned at the entrance of the Municipal Hall, and for the painting of the same, and the repair of the plaster." These impressive gates, still in use today, were designed by Louis Pilie, Surveyor of the First Municipality, and were executed by the Pelanne Brothers. Records of the also indicate that the building was finished with a coat of brown stucco scored to resemble stone.

Minor interior alterations have also been executed. The Sala Capitular was to be enlarged, according to a resolution passed by the City Council on April 9, 1836. Several years earlier, the City Council approved numerous interior renovations in preparation for the visit of General Lafayette, at the cost of \$15,000. These alterations were primarily of a cosmetic nature. It was at this time that the original 18th century mantel was removed from the Sala Capitular, as it was considered to be too unattractive for so distinguished a guest. The present mantel in that room is a reproduction of an 18th century mantel, installed during the renovation which occurred in the late 1960's.

This renovation was carried out between the years 1966 and 1969. Repairs to the building had been made in 1964, but were severely damaged by Hurricane Betsy in September of 1965. The new work was begun in 1966 by the firms of Maxwell and LeBreton and Koch and Wilson. A brief account of this renovation can be found in the book by Leonard Huber and Sam Wilson entitled The Cabildo on Jackson Square. This renovation included the restoration of the portion of the building occupying the old site of the Corps de Garde to resemble what the interior of this structure must have looked like in the year 1751. This restoration was drawn from records and from remains of the building discovered in the walls of the Cabildo. In addition, the original floor of bricks laid on their sides was revealed, and the original plan of the fenestration along St. Peter Street was restored. Another restoration was carried out in what was known as the Lamplighter's Room, located on the ground floor at the corner of Chartres Street and Pirate Alley. A floor of eight inch square bricks was discovered, and this floor was simulated using ceramic tiles of the same size. Additional doorways were created in other portions of the ground floor to benefit movement. The gallery and other rooms on the second floor were also restored. In the Sala Capitular, a plaster ceiling was replaced by one with exposed beams to match the original one. In the Mayor's Office, a mantel was installed

based on conjecture, to match what may have existed, and the mantels in the Mayor's Parlor and the small ante-chamber were taken from the Presbytere. Throughout the building, old floors of plank and peg construction were torn up and restored using conventional wood screws concealed by dowels to resemble the pegs used in the original.

On the third story, the lath and plaster was removed; it was replaced in two of the rooms, but in two other rooms the flatboat timbers used in the construction of the mansard were left revealed. The roof beams in the mansard were also left exposed to show the mortise and tenon construction used there.

Historical Information:

The new Cabildo designed by Guillemard was scarcely three years old when it became the setting for a series of events that would have world-wide repercussions. On November 30, 1803, the official ceremony marking the retrocession of the colony of Louisiana from Spain to France took place in the Cabildo. Twenty days later, the French sold the colony to the United States. This transfer, known as the Louisiana Purchase, cost the American government fifteen million dollars, but gained for the young republic a dramatic increase in territory and resources, and opened the continent to exploration which would eventually extend the borders of the country westward to the Pacific Ocean. The Louisiana Purchase also gave the United States a city which was to become one of the great ports of the world. This was New Orleans, the gateway to an inland waterway system that included the Mississippi, Missouri and Ohio Rivers. Accounts of the events which took place at the Cabildo at that time can be found in the journals of Pierre-Clement de Laussat, the French prefect who participated in the ceremonies.

From late 1803 until 1836, the building served as the Hotel de Ville, or City Hall of New Orleans. Accounts of the events which occurred during this time can be found in the New Orleans City Council Minutes and Resolutions, on file in the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library.

In 1836, the Cabildo became the Municipal Hall for the First Municipality. In that year the city charter was revoked by the state due to tumultuous behavior on the part of the citizens, particularly the Creoles and the Americans. The new charter divided the city into three municipalities, each with its own council, but with a single mayor. The office of the mayor remained in the Cabildo at this time. Accounts of the events which occurred in the building during the years 1836 to 1852 can be found in the records of the First Municipality Council, on file in the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library.

It was during this unusual civic arrangement that the First Municipality Council approved the addition of a mansard roof to the Cabildo in 1847. It is possible that the First Municipality did not wish to be outclassed by the Americans of the Second Municipality, who were in the process of erecting the Greek Revival structure designed by James Gallier. Shortly after the Americans had completed their municipal hall, and the Creoles had constructed their mansard roof on the Cabildo, events took a sudden turn. The city was re-united in 1852, and the newly restored city government, in 1853, chose to move its quarters from the old Cabildo building into the new Greek Revival building in the American sector of the city. The Cabildo had been relieved of its principal function.

After this event, the building housed a variety of uses. The State Supreme Court was located there until early in the 20th century, and part of the building was used by the police as a headquarters. In the second half of the 19th century the building also became the target of armed attacks on several occasions. The first of these incidences occurred in 1858, when a large vigilante committee seized the building. Their presence, they claimed, was to ensure a peaceful election in the race between P.G.T. Beauregard and Gerard Smith. During the Reconstruction era, the Cabildo was the scene of three uprisings seeking to oust the regime of the Occupation government, or carpetbaggers. Two of these attacks were unsuccessful, due to the intervention of Federal troops on behalf of the carpetbaggers and

their armed force, the Metropolitan Police. The Metropolitan Police, whose quarters were in the Cabildo, were particularly disliked, and in 1877, an attack succeeded in ousting them, as well as the entire carpetbagger regime. Home rule government was re-established, and the oppressive era of Reconstruction came to a close. The events of this period are documented by material on file in the New Orleans Public Library.

The Cabildo continued to house the State Supreme Court, as well as the Third District Police Station until 1911. Since that year, it has housed part of the collection of the Louisiana State Museum.

PART TWO: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Exterior Description:

The Cabildo is three stories tall, including the dormered mansard roof added in 1847. The building is designed in a Classical style which was commonly used in the 18th century for Spanish government buildings; strong similarities in design can be seen between it and the Casa Reale built in 1871 at Antequera, Mexico. The Cabildo displays elements of Roman architecture, particularly the columns of the Tuscan order, the round-arched openings, and the sculptural figures in the tympanum.

In general, the building is rectangular in massing, approximately 107 feet long on its primary facade facing Chartres Street, and approximately 100 feet long on its facade facing St. Peter Street. The structure is one of a complex of buildings erected around a central courtyard. These buildings have been modified through the years, and some of them no longer exist. Today, three buildings survive: the structure which housed the arsenal, designed by James Dakin and built in 1839, located adjacent to the Cabildo on St. Peter Street; the structure which served as a jail, located adjacent to the Cabildo on Pirate Alley, and the Cabildo itself.

The Cabildo was designed by Guillemard as a two story structure, constructed of brick and stucco, with a flat tiled roof typical of Spanish construction. The mansard roof is constructed of flatboat timbers covered with slate. The primary facade is nine bays across, and consists of an open arcade on the ground floor created by round arched openings and massive piers, and an enclosed gallery of the same type of opening on the upper floor. The arches on both levels are enframed by molding, and feature keystones. A section of the front facade consisting of the three central bays projects forward slightly on both levels. The piers of this section feature engaged columns of the Tuscan order on the ground floor, and engaged columns of the Ionic order on the upper floor. In addition, the remaining piers of the upper floor feature Ionic pilasters, and paired Ionic pilasters appear on the corner piers of both the ground and upper floors. Above the piers and Tuscan columns of the ground floor is a proper, unbroken Tuscan entablature. Likewise, above the Ionic columns and pilasters of the upper floor is a proper Ionic entablature. Both of these entablatures extend along the St. Peter Street and Pirate Alley facades of the building. The projecting section of the front facade is surmounted by a pediment, whose raking course is enriched with a dentil course. Within the tympanum is a high-relief sculpture of American emblems executed in 1821 by Pietro Cardelli.

Overall, the main facade of the Cabildo is symmetrically composed of a projecting central section, three bays wide, with a pediment, flanked on either side by less articulated sections also three bays wide. The facade has a strong visual rhythm established by the repetition of round-arched openings. Finally, with the exception of the relief provided by the open arcade, the front facade is, for the most part, rather flat and its detail restrained.

Within the open arcade of the ground floor, the pavement consists of flagstones. Five large, round-arched openings appear on the inside wall of the arcade. The central opening is distinguished from the others as the entrance by a heavy enframing created by pilasters with bands of molding running between them above the arch. This opening features exquisite heavy wrought iron gates executed in 1851.

The St. Peter Street facade is eight bays across. The facade is finished in stucco scored to resemble stone, and does not feature columns or pilasters

of any order. The openings of the first bay from the Chartres Street corner are similar to the round-arched openings on the front facade. The next five bays are of particular interest. On the ground floor, five segmentally arched casement windows set in full length round arched recesses reconstruct the rhythm of the fenestration of the old Corps de Garde structure which occupied the site before the Cabildo was constructed. Although the Corps de Garde building was virtually destroyed in the fire of 1788, a portion of the St. Peter Street wall survived, and provided a basis for Guillemard's design of this facade. This five-bay fenestration is evident in the design of the Sala Capitular, directly above, where five square-headed casement windows are visible.

The Pirate Alley facade of the building features the two entablatures seen on the other two street facades but no other enrichment. Various types of openings appear on this facade. The first three openings on both levels are identical to corresponding openings on the St. Peter Street facade. A fourth bay on the ground floor is occupied by a full length round arched opening, containing a gate leading into the courtyard. The remainder of the facade is featureless except for square-headed and round-arched recesses in the wall suggesting openings.

The mansard roof which replaced the original flat tile roof, is double pitched, and finished in brown slate. The steeper pitched lower section features eighteen dormers: nine across the Chartres Street facade, six across the St. Peter Street facade and three above the first three openings of the Pirate Alley facade. These large dormers contain segmentally arched casement windows. Crowning the entire structure, centered behind and above the pediment, is an octagonal wooden cupola set within a square, balustraded base. The sides of the cupola are louvered, and this culminating feature is capped with a bell-shaped roof and spire.

Interior Description:

One enters the Cabildo through the great arched opening placed in the center of the interior wall of the arcade. From the entrance hall, doorways leading right and left provide access to the various rooms of the ground floor. Directly ahead is a large three-quarter turn stair which leads up to the second and third floors. The stair is built of stone and is presently carpeted.

On the ground floor, the doorway to the left leads to a large room, which is the space occupied by the old Corps de Garde building during the Spanish rule. This room has been restored to the appearance of the interior of the Corps de Garde in 1751. The original brick floors have been exposed, and the windows along St. Peter Street have been restored to segmentally arched casement type.

On the right side of the entrance hall is the Lamplighter's Room, today used as the point where members of the public pay admittance fees. The original floor in this room have been simulated using ceramic tiles, and the roof beams and casement windows are original.

Access to the second floor is provided by way of a small stair at the rear of the Lamplighter's Room. At the top of this stair are located the Mayor's Office, the Mayor's Parlor and a small ante-chamber. Ceiling beams in these rooms are original.

On the opposite side of the building from these rooms, overlooking St. Peter Street, is the Sala Capitular. This room is five bays long and two bays

wide. This is the five-bay fenestration which was laid out by Guillemard using the ruins of the Corps de Garde as a guide. In the center of the inside wall of the Sala Capitular is a large fireplace with an elaborate mantel, installed as part of the restoration of the 1960's to replace the one removed in 1825. This room, as well as all of the rooms on this floor were restored to their appearance at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. The ceiling features exposed roof beams installed to match the original ones in the Mayor's Office. The long room adjacent to the Sala Capitular was originally two smaller rooms, but for exhibit purposes it was altered.

The final significant space on the second floor is the large gallery which runs across the Chartres Street facade of the building, above the open arcade. Eleven round arched openings with large casement windows enclose the gallery. Along the inside wall of the gallery are nine openings leading into the various rooms of the second floor. The central opening is a round arched one similar to the main entrance of the building in the ground floor. The remaining openings are square-headed, with enframements consisting of corbels supporting a pediment enriched with egg-and-dart molding.

When the mansard roof was added in 1847, the central staircase was extended upward to the new floor. The walls of the mansard were constructed of flatboat timbers, originally covered with cypress lath and plaster. In the restoration of the late 1960's, the plaster was removed and the flatboat timbers left exposed. The large pegs used in the construction of the roof are visible, as are the beams of the high ceiling.

Site:

The Cabildo occupies a site on the corner of Chartres Street and St. Peter Street, adjacent to the St. Louis Cathedral. The site of the Cabildo was reserved for the use of the government from the earliest days of the settlement of New Orleans. Together with the Cathedral and the Presbytere, these three buildings face onto a large public square known as Jackson Square (formerly the Place d'Armes). The Cabildo is part of a complex of buildings which includes the Upper and Lower Pantalba Buildings, located along Jackson Square facing each other. This layout of a large square surrounded on three sides by buildings and open on the fourth to the river creates an impressive and attractive urban space, enhanced by the symmetry of the Cabildo and the Presbytere which flank the Cathedral, and the two identical Pantalba buildings.

Bayard T. Whitmore
Architectural Historian
Historic District Landmarks
Commission

PART THREE: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Architectural drawings:

There are no extant drawings by the architect, Don Gilberto Guillemard, for the construction of the Cabildo.

Early drawings:

A number of early drawings exist. These include a sketch of the Cabildo on a map of the city done in 1815 by Jacques Tanesse; two lithographs, one by Thomas Williams and one by Jules Lion, both done in 1845; and a drawing by Benjamin Latrobe executed in 1819. Copies of these drawings are on file in the Historic New Orleans Collection, 533 Royal Street.

Bibliography:

Primary sources

Records of the Deliberations of the Cabildo
Account Ledger of Surveyor's Office of the First Municipality, 1850-52.
Journal of the Deliberations of the Council of the First Municipality

These are on file in the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library, Main Branch, 219 Loyola Avenue, New Orleans.

Contract for paving of the entrance hall of the Cabildo, dated June 2, 1851.

This contract is in the works of J. C. Cu villier, located in the Notarial Archives for Orleans Parish, Room B-4, Civil Courts Building, 421 Loyola Avenue, New Orleans.

Secondary Sources

Huber, Leonard. New Orleans: A Pictorial History. New York: Crown Publishers, 1971.

Huber, Leonard and Sam Wilson. The Cabildo on Jackson Square. Cretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 1973. (Comprehensive bibliography).

Sources Not Yet Investigated:

Spanish Judicial Records in the Louisiana State Museum.

Various newspapers on file in the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library, Main Branch, 219 Loyola Avenue, New Orleans.

New Orleans City Council Minutes and Resolutions, on file in the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library, Main Branch, 219 Loyola Avenue, New Orleans.

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ADDENDUM TO

The Cabildo (City Hall, Casa Capitular)
711 Chartres Street
New Orleans
Orleans Parish
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-18-4

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

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