

The Carnahan Store (c. 1905) is a single story frame general mercantile store located in the small rural community of Cloutierville. The building features manufactured wooden decorative elements which should be viewed within the context of the latter day commercial Italianate taste. The store is very well preserved, both on the exterior and interior.

The building is set directly on Louisiana Highway 495, which is the village's Main Street. Route 495 runs along a natural ridge which forms part of the lower Cane River system. Because the store is set on the slope of the ridge, the property falls away to the rear -- so much so that the rear elevation is raised a full story above grade on wooden posts.

Virtually all of the decorative exterior woodwork is confined to the facade. Flanking the central double door entrance is a pair of rectangular bay windows used for display, each of which features a bracketed cornice and paneled kickplate. The entrance is protected by the store's gabled roof which projects forward to form a porch covering. This projecting roof is currently supported by a large pair of angle braces which are rather crudely toe-nailed in place. These do not appear to be original. However, the present owner, whose earliest recollections of the store are from the 1930s, indicates that the angle braces may have been there as long as he can remember. The evidence is very strong that the porch roof never had columns. Most likely, it was originally supported by cantilevering it into the main roof structure. The corners of the porch were originally marked by a pair of scroll sawn brackets, one of which is missing. The store's facade is sheathed in flush boards with a bevel cut. Other noteworthy features of the facade are the paneled shutters which close over both the front and sides of the bay windows and the gable vergeboards accented with dentils.

The sales area is large and deep with counters encompassing the sides and rear. Most of the counters have inward sloping fronts, decorative panels inset with diagonally placed beaded board, and Italianate brackets below the counter top. The remaining counters are constructed in the form of display cases. The side and rear walls are almost completely covered with storage shelves. This built-in shelving, which reaches most of the way to the ceiling, culminates in a bracketed cornice. Access to the upper shelves is provided by a pair of moveable ladders set on tracks. Above the shelves are low transom windows designed to provide for light and ventilation. The sales space is bisected by a range of three chamfered support columns, each culminating in a set of four decoratively cut brackets. The ceiling of the sales area is sheathed in narrow gauge beaded board. Near the front of the space is a narrow brick chimney which once serviced a cast-iron stove.

Behind the sales area is a rear porch which encompasses the entire width of the building. The south end of the porch is enclosed for a small room which was evidently the manager's office. The architectural evidence is very clear that this area of the porch was always enclosed.

Aside from the previously mentioned alterations, the following changes have occurred:

(1) Between 1905 and about 1940, a lean-to was added to roughly the front half of the north elevation. Evidently it was built in at least two stages. The present owner indicates that the lean-to, in its present figuration, has been there as long as he can remember.

(2) Originally the front of the building almost certainly would have had a raised wooden porch floor to coincide with the entrance porch roof. This area currently features a concrete slab and concrete steps. Here again, the present owner indicates that he cannot remember an earlier appearance.

Significant dates	N/A
Architect/Builder	unknown

Criterion A

The Carnahan Store is of local significance in the area of commerce within the context of the cotton-growing parishes of northern Louisiana. It stands as one of a limited number of surviving rural mercantile stores in the region. General mercantile emporiums such as the Carnahan Store played a vital role in the system of cotton production and plantation agriculture during the post-bellum years through the 1930s.

With the end of the Civil War and the loss of slave labor, planters were forced to find other means to get crops planted and harvested. In the cotton growing parishes of Louisiana the plantation system shifted to a practice known as share-cropping in which a landless farmer worked a portion of the planter's land for a share of the crop, generally one-third. Of course, the cotton cash crop would not come in until late in the year. In the meantime, the farmer and his family needed food and other provisions. Banks where he might have borrowed money were virtually unknown in rural Louisiana during the period. So a common pattern emerged in which the sharecropper would pledge his crop to a country mercantile store in return for a line of credit that would enable him to buy what he wanted. Under this system, known as crop-lien, share-croppers often found that when the cotton was finally in, their store purchases exceeded the value of their share of the crop. The result was mounting debt leading to virtually peonage.

Stores such as Carnahan provided a wide variety of goods, ranging from manufactured clothes to foodstuffs to tools to patent medicines -- in short, everything the rural householder could want. In addition to share-croppers, small farmers who did own their own land patronized rural mercantile stores. And as historian William Ivy Hair has noted, they too often became "enmeshed in the crop-lien cycle of debt."

The Carnahan Store, which was constructed c.1905 by a local merchant named H. C. Cohen, served rural southern Natchitoches Parish. It was sold to the Carnahan family in the 1920s and continued in business until 1987. The present owner, Lawrence Carnahan, Jr., who has recollections of the store from as early as the 1930s, recalls that here the credit system was managed through the use of coupon books. When a crop was pledged, the farmer was issued coupons worth varying denominations of money. He would then spend these in the store as though they were cash.

Rural mercantile stores such as Carnahan declined after the 1930s because of several factors. One was the decline and ultimate demise of the crop-lien system. Another was the loss of rural population in the cotton parishes due to the advent of the mechanical cotton picker. A third was the increasing number of automobiles in rural areas which enabled farmers to drive to town to purchase needed goods and services. Of the many hundreds of rural stores that once existed throughout northern Louisiana, perhaps fifty survive. Most of these are closed and face an uncertain future. Taken among this group of surviving rural mercantile stores, the Carnahan Store is particularly important because it is so remarkably well preserved, with the interior being particularly impressive in this regard.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Historic structures surveys of northern Louisiana combined with SHPO staff knowledge.

Interview with Lawrence Carnahan, Jr., the current owner.