

Muller's Department Store is a three-story brick commercial building built in 1913 and enlarged at the rear in 1949. It is located on a prominent corner in downtown Lake Charles. Although the building has a pronounced character, the term "no style" is most appropriate. Thanks to a soon-to-be completed rehabilitation project, the exterior looks much as it did after the 1949 work. The owner is applying for the Register federal tax credit.

### The Original Building

Constructed in 1913, Muller's Department Store is a massive 45,000 square foot block with a window display shopfront stretching across the 100 foot façade and all the way down the 123 foot side elevation. Like many a commercial building, Muller's was significantly "modernized" in the 1960s/'70s, including unsightly metal panels over the windows, panels over the shopfront transoms, large modern panels added to the fixed awning, etc. (See "before" photo.) All of this has been removed as part of the above referenced project.

The second and third floors of Muller's are divided into bays by massive two-story piers surmounted by a belt course and an entablature strip. The bays are taken up largely with groupings of one-over-one sash windows. Each bay also contains a series of belt courses to accent the brickwork between the second and third story windows. The bays are set off prominently by strips of blond brick accenting the piers and windows and contrasting with the reddish brown brick body of the building. As originally built, Muller's was capped by a stepped parapet in front and small elements at the corners and along the side elevation which gave the impression of continuing the piers (see early photo). These decorative elements of the parapet were removed in the 1949 remodeling (see below).

The central entrance opens into a huge 19 1/2 foot high shopping hall with a single story mezzanine at the rear. But like the exterior, the original interior had been drastically modified. Various sheetrock and wood partitions walls had been built, celotex dropped ceilings had been installed in the shopping hall, and the steel columns had been encased in sheetrock. All of these modifications have been removed.

The first floor shopping area is a hypostyle hall with two rows of round stripped-down Doric steel columns supporting structural beams formed of reinforced concrete. The beams are finished off as entablatures with boldly formed wood moldings. Along the party wall side is a metal catwalk. The mezzanine and the second and third floors feature plainer concrete posts supporting structural beams without decorative molding. All of the ceilings are finished off with narrow gauge beaded board. Work is in progress to subdivide (partially) the ground floor for offices and the upper floors for apartments. This work will be described below in the alterations section.

The display shopfront is divided into bays following the pattern of the previously mentioned piers. While the original large plate glass windows have been removed, the rear walls of the display windows and ceilings survive. The rear walls are richly articulated with wood paneling stained to resemble mahogany and frosted glass. The ceilings are coffered.

### The 1949 Remodeling

In 1949, a large addition was made to the rear of the building, increasing its size by approximately one-third. To make the addition complementary, the brick was matched to the original and the upper and lower brick belt courses were extended. The side elevation shopfront was extended to the rear. However, the addition, as built, had no windows and hence no piers, no contrasting blond brickwork, etc. The second major change made in 1949 was the removal of the parapet (making the original building match the addition). On the interior, sets of escalators bearing the brand name of Pelle Motor Stair were installed. These distinctive Modernistic "motor stairs" feature blue moving handrails with silver bands.

### Alterations:

(1) The exterior finishes and windows of the shopfront level are modern.

(2) As noted previously, the stepped parapet has been removed from the original portion.

(3) The shopping hall is being partially subdivided, following the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. The open character remains at the front and along one side. The steel columns, ceiling, entablatures, and cat walk will remain visible. Although it will not be functional, the escalator will remain in place. The upper floors, presumably used for storage, are being completely subdivided for apartments. The two-story configuration of a few of the third floor apartments has created a small rooftop addition. The addition is set back several yards from both facades of the building. It is visible from the street only at a distance. (The rooftop addition has been approved for the tax credit by

the National Park Service.)

(4) As part of the in-progress rehabilitation project, windows have been added to the 1949 rear addition (to make the space viable for apartments).

#### Assessment of Integrity

Muller's underwent quite a transformation with the removal of the unsightly metal panels and other materials. As constructed in 1913, the building's chief character-defining elements were the system of piers and windows, the contrasting decorative brickwork and the parapet. The only one of these that does not survive is the parapet. The present owner planned to replicate the parapet, but this work item was denied for the tax credit by the National Park Service. The rationale was that the building would be restored to an appearance it never had. It never existed with both the parapet and the 1949 addition.

Regardless of the parapet, Muller's retains all the rest of its original exterior character. Perhaps the most important character-defining feature was the system of windows and piers – the building was mainly windows. Fortunately, the windows survived almost completely unscathed beneath the metal panels. And the handsome and extensive shopfront window treatment contributes greatly to the building's identity as a department store.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1913, 1949  
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Unknown  
CRITERION: A

Muller's Department Store is locally significant in the area of commerce in two respects: (1) It played a very prominent role in the commercial life of the city. The phrase "commercial institution" comes readily to mind. (2) It is one of few historic buildings remaining to represent the commercial history of Lake Charles, which once boasted a large and splendid downtown. The department store is of particular interest because its founder and a key player in its early history was a woman, Julie Muller Marx. The period of significance spans from 1913 to 1956, the latter being the current National Register fifty year cutoff. (Muller's remained a commercial institution in downtown Lake Charles past the present 50 year cutoff.)

The mercantile establishment which opened in its new three story, 45,000 square foot home in 1913 was founded in 1882 by a young widow, Julie Muller. In 1870, at the age of sixteen, Julie Kaufman left her home in France to join her brother in Labadieville, Louisiana. She soon married, only to lose her husband in the yellow fever epidemic of 1878. Her brother was also deceased and she was left to care for herself and two small children. Her first mercantile endeavor was in New Orleans, where she opened a millinery shop. Soon she moved to Lake Charles, where in 1882 she established a mercantile business in a small one story frame building with commercial space in the front and living quarters at the rear. A 1921 history of the company published in the Lake Charles *American Press* shows a photo of the original Muller's and indicates that the mercantile space was 18 by 20 feet. By the late 1880s the one story frame building had been replaced by a two story frame building. In 1893 Julie Muller married Simon Marx, and in 1894, Muller's advanced yet another step by moving into a two story brick building, which was expanded at least twice before the present building was constructed in 1913. The company had incorporated in 1909 with Julie Muller Marx listed as president and her son, J. M. Muller, as manager. (Mr. Marx, Julie's second husband, had died in 1901.)

There is no doubt that the owners as well as the public considered the construction of the present building in 1913 to be the pinnacle of the firm's career. This is borne out in newspaper accounts celebrating the milestone as well as retrospectives written in the 1920s and '30s, also in the local paper. The newspaper coverage also testifies to the special place of Muller's in Lake Charles' commercial history.

In two articles covering together about one-and-a-half pages, *The American Press* bragged effusively about its hometown success story. A quite large rendering of the building, which was then almost ready for occupancy, led the coverage. An article beneath entitled "Store Most Conveniently Arranged for Shoppers" boasted: "The new building is one of the finest of its kind to be found anywhere in Louisiana, and in few cities of this size in the South with equipment so thorough and so in keeping with modern ideas of mercantile management. There is nothing that is modern and convenient needed in the store that has been left out in its design and construction." Much was made of its department store status, clearly something new in the city and of great interest. The physical character and amenities of the building

and its departments were described in some detail, including a separate two column listing bearing the title “Where the Various Departments Will Be Found.” Much was made of a ladies’ restroom to be “furnished as a parlor.” “Here ladies can meet and rest or await attention to business matters as they may desire. Writing facilities will be provided in this room; a maid will at all times be in attendance here.” It was also of great import to the reporter that the owners had traveled to large department stores throughout the country as they formulated plans for a new Muller’s. The importance of Muller’s as a department store was echoed in a 1921 article on the company in which an employee spoke of the days before departments—when “a salesman waited on a customer without regard to departments” – when there were no specialists for different types of merchandise.

The May 1913 coverage of the new Muller’s also contained a long history of the company. Particular tribute was paid to Julie Muller Marx, who “laid the foundation for this magnificent business in the little one story frame building on Ryan Street.” “Her energy, good taste and perseverance made the business a success from the start, and her cooperation and the benefit of her business experience form one of the chief factors that have been instrumental in bringing about the erection of the new home, which is shortly to throw open its doors to its large following in Southeast Texas and Southwest Louisiana.”

The company matriarch apparently remained active until her death in 1924 at the age of 70. A lengthy article in the May 5, 1921 issue of *The American Press* covers a banquet given in Mrs. Marx’s honor by the Muller Employees Welfare Association. Various tributes were paid to “her many fine qualities of womanhood, for her great devotion as a mother and for the wonderful business abilities she possesses.” Speakers emphasized that the business she founded “has long been a boast of Lake Charles and Southwest Louisiana, both in point of size and the number of employees the store carries on its payroll.” The only year for which employment figures are available is 1939, when the number was 103. By this time Adolph Marx, a son by the second marriage, was managing the business.

By the late 1940s business was good enough to warrant a major expansion of the building toward the rear, as detailed in Part 7. A 1950 photo shows quite a crowd of people lined up to attend the grand opening of the expanded Muller’s. One imagines customers being quite amazed by the blue and silver “motor stairs.” Adolph Marx remained at the helm in the 1960s, and the store remained in business until 1986, over one hundred years after the family enterprise was founded by a young widow.

By the time Muller’s closed, downtown Lake Charles regrettably had suffered serious losses of integrity. Muller’s itself had been modernized, but fortunately it was largely a matter of covering up rather than removing, as explained in Part 7. It is against the serious loss of integrity experienced by downtown Lake Charles that Muller’s takes on additional commercial significance as one of a limited number of recognizably historic buildings remaining. The enormity of the loss can be documented in the city’s historical development, old photos, and Sanborn maps. Lake Charles experienced a huge lumber boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The population grew significantly and building proceeded at a furious pace. Given the prosperity and the size of the city, one would expect a large and impressive CBD, and such was the case. Sanborn maps show some one hundred business houses in the 1920s, and old photos show a truly grand downtown with an urban character. Sadly, although the city retains a significant and large collection of historic residences, its downtown has been largely destroyed, due principally to a relentless campaign of demolition and modernization waged in the prosperous 1950s, ’60s and ’70s. The relatively few survivors share the space with altered historic buildings, new construction and gaping holes where historic buildings once stood.

Fortunately, there is now renewed interest and activity in the downtown, and the city administration and civic and business leaders are committed to preserving what remains. Several buildings have had their modern facades removed in the last few years. Because of this work, there are now about 20-25 recognizably historic buildings in the downtown (20-25% of what was there in the 1920s). Clearly the most important of these in terms of size and prominent location is Muller’s. Because generations of Lake Charles natives have such fond memories of Muller’s, it is perhaps appropriate that this onetime commercial institution be the centerpiece of downtown restoration activity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “The Muller Department Store Building Almost Ready” and “Business That Typifies Lake Charles Growth and Progress,” *The American Press*, May 2, 1913.
- “Muller Employes’ [sic] Welfare Assn. Tender Banquet to Store’s Founder,” *The American Press*, May 5, 1921.
- “Muller’s Will Celebrate 57 Years in the City,” *The American Press*, May 2, 1939.

Photos of Muller's, one showing its original appearance and one taken in 1950.

Historic photos of downtown Lake Charles.

Sanborn Insurance Company maps, Lake Charles, 1925.

Note: Copies of the newspaper articles and the old photos are in the National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

### **Muller's Department Store Additional Documentation/Boundary Increase**

Add: 619 Ryan St., Lake Charles, LA 70112

#### Summary:

This proposal is an addendum to the National Register nomination for Muller's Department Store in Lake Charles. The latter passed the State Review Committee for the National Register at its November 9, 2006 meeting and was listed on the Register February 15, 2007. The candidate, at 619 Ryan, is historically inter-related to Muller's. As explained below, it functioned as part of Muller's Department Store from 1943 up to and past the present Register fifty year cutoff.

Muller's was listed at the local level under Criterion A (in the area of commerce). 619 Ryan relates specifically to Muller's role as a commercial institution in Lake Charles and vicinity. Very importantly, it illustrates the constant refrain in Muller's history — expansion.

#### Background:

Founded by a young widow in 1882, Muller's went through various expansions before moving into a new three story, 45,000 square foot building in 1913. By 1939, the company had 103 employees. In February 1943, the company, wishing to expand further, acquired 619 Ryan, which shared a party wall. Built circa 1930 (per Sanborn maps and the architectural evidence), 619 Ryan housed Berdon-Campbell Furniture. In commenting on the purchase to the local newspaper, general manager Adolph Marx indicated that Muller's wished "to enlarge its services to its customers especially in household furnishings and that the addition of Berdon-Campbell will make it possible to expand the household furnishings department and to add other departments." Muller's final expansion came in 1949 with a large addition at the rear of the 1913 building. The department store closed in 1986.

To summarize, during the historic period for this addendum (1943-1956), 619 Ryan was part of Muller's Department Store. Various openings were cut in the party wall to facilitate the two buildings functioning as one commercial entity. (The openings are now filled in.)

Had the Division of Historic Preservation known of this historic inter-relationship at an earlier date, the two buildings would have been presented in one nomination as Muller's Department Store. Critical factors were the "slipcovering" of both buildings, the covering of interior walls on the main Muller's Building (which hid the filled-in openings cut between the two buildings), and different timetables for removal of the slipcovering. Two or three years ago the owner of the main Muller's Building approached the SHPO about a combination National Register – Tax Credit project. The SHPO advised that the modern materials would first have to be removed. This was done and the owner has now received Part II tax credit approval. The State Review Committee considered the Register nomination, as noted above, at its November 9, 2006 meeting.

In September 2006 the owner of 619 Ryan made contact with the SHPO with a request for National Register listing and tax credit. The building was still slip-covered (in the same material as the main Muller's building). The owner told staff that 619 Ryan was historically part of Muller's. Staff replied that primary documentation would be needed, which has been supplied. Staff then advised that the slip-covering would have to be removed before proceeding further. The removal occurred too late to adjust the Muller's nomination preparatory to the November 9 State Review Committee meeting. In consultation with Dan Vivian, National Register staff at NPS in Washington, the state's National Register

Coordinator decided to pursue an addendum to the Muller's listing.

#### Building Description:

619 Ryan is a wide three story masonry building sheathed in off-white glazed terra cotta. Decorative bands are located above the second floor windows and between groupings of windows. Easily the building's most character-defining feature (in fact, something the Louisiana SHPO has never seen before) is a system of large show windows spanning the second story façade. Draped to resemble actual windows of a home (see historic photo), they showcased suites of furniture. Fortunately the windows survive behind the recently removed modern materials. SHPO staff has seen that they survive via a hole in modern covering on the interior. They are boarded over on the exterior. They are on a wall plane behind a modern awning that has not yet been removed. The modern awning has almost the character of a marquee. Above the show windows, at the third floor façade, are a series of typical one-over-one wooden windows.

Crowning the parapet, at the center, was a relatively small shaped tablet with a roundel at the middle. The tablet was knocked off when the building was slip-covered. The roundel was found on the roof and the owner is safekeeping it.

It is difficult to be certain about the ground level façade from the historic photograph. At present it is completely modern in character, and as noted above, an obtrusive modern awning is yet to be removed.

The interior of 619 Ryan is taken up almost entirely (at the first and second floors) by a mezzanine. The mezzanine retains its original balustrade composed of decoratively turned balusters and a wooden balustrade. The functional third floor presumably served as storage and office space.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lake Charles *American Press*, February 1, 1943.

Early photo of Berdon-Campbell Store, copy in National Register file, LA Division of Historic Preservation.