

The boundaries of the Grand Cane Historic District encompass the old central business district of what was and is a small community. The line of ten masonry buildings front onto U.S. Highway 171. Eight are party wall buildings in one block and two are freestanding in the next block (see map). Contributing elements range in date from 1902, the earliest known date, to 1939, the date of the youngest building. Three of the ten are noncontributing (30%). Despite the loss of some buildings and three non-contributing elements, the small district retains sufficient integrity to convey its historic identity as the focus of commerce for the surrounding area.

Historical Background:

The area in and around what would become the village of Grand Cane was settled in the two decades prior to the Civil War. It was known as the Grand Cane Country, apparently because of a dense canebrake where the townsite is now located (according to an 1890 source). The area was sparsely populated and there was no town as such.

The village of Grand Cane came into being with the arrival of the New Orleans and Pacific Railroad (later the Texas and Pacific) in 1881. In that year Amanda Rogers Hobgood ("the Mother of Grand Cane" who owned what would become the town) donated a right-of-way and servitude to the railroad (in documents dated March 2, 1881 and October 4, 1881). Simultaneously she had the village platted in a conventional railroad town grid.

The small village's "downtown" was a roughly two block string of buildings facing the railroad corridor on its western side. A 1921 Sanborn map (the only one available for Grand Cane) shows that Main St. between Burrow and Shelby (the bulk of the present district) was completely filled in with party wall masonry buildings. The block to the north, along Main St., was a little over a half filled in. Today only the grid and the nominated district's orientation survive to provide clues about Grand Cane's railroad town history. The depot is gone and the tracks were removed in the late 1960s.

Like other towns across Louisiana, the Grand Cane CBD suffered from a number of fires through the years, with the first known one in 1892. Others followed in 1903 and 1904. In response, the village council in 1910 instituted a building code for the two blocks in question, requiring that any new buildings be constructed of brick or concrete. Despite such action, losses were sustained from fires in 1936 and 1938.

Building inventory:

Note: Despite the fact that a great deal of primary source research has been done by locals on their community, documentation on the precise dates of construction for specific buildings is limited. The principal primary sources are the previously mentioned Sanborn map for 1921 and a general view photo of the downtown taken sometime between 1904 and the Sanborn map. Other sources will be noted below as appropriate. In cases where there was no documentation, the staff gave a circa date based on the architectural evidence.

1. Platt Dentist Office, Contributing Element, 1939. This building was erected on the heels of the late 1938 fire. A February 23, 1939 newspaper article on the building notes that it "will soon be completed and open for business." Erected for Dr. W. W. Platt to house his dental office, the building is rather optimistically described as being "a modernistic replica of a Mexican adobe house." The author went on to mention the courtyard space between it and the next building, which is still extant. The small very simple one story building is constructed of concrete blocks and is finished with stucco. The only stylistic element is an arched opening marking the courtyard entrance.

2. Non-contributing element. One story historic building that has been altered significantly.

3. Non-contributing element. One story historic building that has been altered significantly.

4. Contributing element. c. 1915 one story brick commercial building with a denticular band highlighting the top and thick pilasters defining the openings. Windows and entrance appear to be historic, although they have been painted over.

5-6 Contributing elements. Although #s 5 & 6 appear at first glance to be one building, they are actually two buildings. They are c.1915 one story plain brick commercial buildings, with #5 being about twice the width of #6. Both retain much of their original wooden shopfronts. #5 has a modern metal shed roof awning.

7. Bank of Grand Cane (documented date of 1904). Contributing Element - National Register property. Diminutive one story brick Romanesque Revival bank building with an undulating facade with a great round arch window and entrance. Retains its original character on the interior; now used as the village hall.

8. Hicks and Richardson's Mercantile. Contributing element. Hicks and Richardson, a Grand Cane institution, was established in 1882; however, the present fairly wide one story brick building bears a painted date of 1902, along with the remnants of its name painted along the top. Beneath the name is a corbelled decorative treatment. At some point in the historic period the building was extended to the north a few feet, copying the original. The original building retains almost all of its wooden shopfront, which is recessed behind simple fluted cast-iron posts marking the two entrances. The northern extension has a modern opening. A functional metal canopy which appears in the previously mentioned old photo was removed earlier this year by preservationists on the advice of a structural engineer.

9. Non-contributing element. Small one story nondescript gable fronted modern building.

10. Contributing element. c.1915 simple one story brick commercial building with horizontal panels and much of its original shopfront, although the door is modern. Modern metal canopy resting on thin pipes. (slated for tax credit rehabilitation)

Integrity:

In the opinion of the SHPO, downtown Grand Cane retains enough of its historic character to merit Register listing. The thirty percent non-contributing rate is not out-of-line for a Register district in Louisiana; the three non-contributing buildings are the same scale as the historic buildings; and most of the historic buildings have a greater visual presence, most notably the bank and the Hicks-Richardson store. Admittedly the two non-contributing elements which are altered historic buildings are not visually pleasing at present. However, they retain some of their historic character and could be transformed into more attractive buildings, a project in the planning stages with local preservationists.

The more important integrity issue is the fact that what remains in Grand Cane is not the complete historic CBD due to losses of historic buildings. In terms of the main row (between Burrow and Shelby), missing is a two story brick building on the north corner which was demolished within the last couple of years. The lot remains vacant. Also, the 1921 Sanborn map shows a building on the south corner, now a vacant lot. It should be noted that the lot has been vacant since at least the late 1940s (per a photo). The greater loss has occurred in the northernmost block where only one historic building remains.

Despite these losses, downtown Grand Cane retains enough of its historic character to convey its role as a commercial center for the surrounding area. Many of the businesses that provided goods and services during the historic period are extant, including two of the community's most visually distinctive buildings, the Bank of Grand Cane and Hicks/Richardson Mercantile. Also, from a pure percentage standpoint, most of the buildings that existed in Grand Cane at the end of the historic period are still extant. For these reasons, the old downtown would be recognizable to someone from the historic period, which is the litmus test for Register eligibility under Criterion A.

The Grand Cane Historic District is locally significant in the area of commerce because it represents Grand Cane's commercial history and its role as a commercial center for the surrounding agricultural area. It continued to be a major provider of goods and services into the modern era when downtowns were supplanted by strip development. The period of significance spans from 1902, the earliest known building date, to 1945, the fifty year cutoff.

As explained in Part 7, Grand Cane was a railroad town, and, of course, its very economic existence depended upon this all important transportation system. Sanborn maps and other primary sources show that the economy was based on agriculture (cotton and produce), cattle, and timber, all of which went to market via the railroad.

The small railroad town quite naturally emerged as a center for goods and services for its own citizens (population of 378 in 1921) as well as farmers, cattlemen and sawmill employees in the general area. The nearest other town was Mansfield, the parish seat, some eight miles away. This distance prior to the mid-1920s was a particular obstacle because roads were unpaved.

A 1909 source noted of Grand Cane: "When the railroad was built in 1881, the little settlement became a flourishing business center." While this statement obviously refers to a period earlier than the present CBD, it is an apt description for the nominated area as demonstrated in various primary sources. In addition to the 1921 Sanborn map, local historians Nita Richardson and Linda Brown have uncovered numerous advertisements from period newspapers. The seven contributing buildings which survive today housed four general mercantile businesses, a bank, a barber and cleaner's (same building), and a dentist's office.

Of course, general mercantile stores stocked an amazing range of goods. A Hicks & Richardson ad boasted: "Our stock is complete in every department. Dry Goods, Hats, Shoes, Ready-Made Clothing, Drugs and Patent Medicines, Buggy and Wagon Harness, Saddles, etc. Staple and Fancy Groceries, Furniture, Buggies and Wagons in carload lots." Aiming at the ladies, the ad then enumerated in great detail items in the dress goods department, ranging from fabrics, to clothes, to jewelry, to handkerchiefs. Cook and Douglas, located in building #5, billed itself as a purveyor of general merchandise and plantation supplies. They also purchased cotton and cotton seed from area farmers, per an ad from the period.

And, of course, it goes without saying that the Bank of Grand Cane provided invaluable services. Generally speaking, banks were virtually non-existent in small towns in Louisiana prior to the turn of the century. Incorporated in 1904, the Bank of Grand Cane was the community's first and only bank, serving in this capacity until 1980.

Bibliography

Sanborn Insurance Company Map, Grand Cane, 1921.

Brown, Linda and Richardson, Nita. "A History of Grand Cane, Vol. 2," 1995, privately printed. Based upon extensive primary source research.

Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northwest Louisiana, Nashville and Chicago: The Southern Publishing Company, 1890.

Fortier, Alcee, editor. Louisiana, Comprising Sketches of Counties. Towns. Events. Institutions. and Persons. Arranged in Cyclopedic Form. Vol. 1. Atlanta: Southern Historical Association, 1909.