

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Mansfield Historic District is an early twentieth century commercial area which includes buildings on two sides of a courthouse square and the courthouse square itself. The district contains nine historic brick buildings ranging in date from c.1905 to c.1935. There are also two intrusions, which makes for an overall acceptable intrusion rate of 18%.

Mansfield was chosen as parish seat when DeSoto Parish was created in 1843. It served as a commercial center for the processing and shipping of cotton, but by the early twentieth century lumber was becoming a very important element in the town's economy. The period from c.1905 to c.1925 is regarded as a lumber boom in the area. Though little direct evidence of it remains today, one can see it in Sanborn Insurance Company maps. For example, the 1909 Sanborn map for Mansfield shows the Frost-Johnson Lumber Company, described as having an average of five million board feet of lumber on hand. In the 1920s the timber played out and the lumber boom subsided. The 1928 Sanborn map for Mansfield shows the McCammond Lumber Company labeled "not in operation - buildings being dismantled."

It was during the twenty or so years of the lumber boom that most of the present district was built, as the south and east sides of the courthouse square developed with brick, party wall commercial buildings. This was fairly typical of rural town centers in Louisiana at the turn-of-the-century when older frame commercial buildings were being replaced with new brick commercial buildings.

The other two sides of the courthouse square never developed in the same manner as the district. Historically, the north side featured garages, a jail and a lumber shed. Today, it has a jail and non-historic commercial buildings. The west side historically remained individual frame buildings. Today, two remain, but they share the space with too many intrusions.

In 1911 the noted New Orleans architectural firm of Favrot and Livaudais was hired to design a new parish courthouse (National Register). This impressive Beaux Arts pile forms not only a centerpiece for the town, but an anchor for the present district. Its principal elevation on Texas Street faces a range of commercial buildings with an overall two story scale and mainly neo-classical details. The district's other commercial row, Adams Street, contains two retardataire examples of the Italianate style, both of which date from between 1905 and 1914. They are interesting because they show how long a style which peaked in the 1870s persisted in the rural areas.

The courthouse square contributes much to the district's cohesiveness and character. It is a green landscaped space with mature oaks and a rectangular mound on which stands the courthouse. This mound adds to the monumentality of the district's anchor because when you reach the first story of the courthouse, you are already a full story above street level.

As was previously mentioned, most of the Mansfield district was built during the town's lumber boom years, as were most of the other older buildings in the downtown. But remodeling, demolitions, redevelopment, and suburbanization have taken their toll with the result that the present district is the only remaining cohesive commercial architectural grouping. The remainder of the Mansfield Central Business District has an intrusion rate of over 50%. In addition, there are many instances of badly altered historic elements and several vacant lots where commercial buildings once stood.

Inventory

Where possible, the buildings were dated using Sanborn Insurance Company maps.

1. Contributing element. Built between 1922 and 28, this two story neoclassical building features pilasters, ornamental jack arches, an almost full entablature and a crowning parapet. Replaced shopfront, replaced window panes, and covered transom.

2. Contributing element. At one time this site contained a single story brick building which was part of an impressive three part architectural grouping along with buildings #3 and #4. However, in c.1935 the present Mission/Modernistic theatre was built with Baroque shaped windows, stylized bartizans, and pantile roof trim.

3. Contributing element - c.1925. This two story commercial building features a piano nobile with paneled pilasters, a heavy entablature, and a rooftop balustrade. Crowning the center is a shaped parapet. Replaced shopfront and covered transom.

4. Contributing element - c.1925. This single story brick commercial building echoes the shape of #3. As previously mentioned, it was once part of a continuous architectural grouping with #2 and #3. Replaced shopfront and covered transom.

5. Contributing element. This single story red brick commercial building was built between 1922 and 1928. It features a denticular cornice and various decorative shapes rendered in contrasting off-white brick. Replaced shopfront and covered transom.

6. Intrusion - c.1950. Single story stuccoed commercial building.

7. Contributing element. This single story Italianate brick commercial building was built between 1905 and 1909. Its paneled parapet is fairly plain, but it retains its original decorative cast-iron shopfront complete with paneled wooden kickplates. Original awning replaced.

8. Contributing element. - c.1920. This single story brick commercial building features a stepped parapet with an inset panel. Shopfront replaced; aluminum awning.

9. Contributing element. This two story Italianate commercial building was built between 1910 and 1914. It features shallow arched windows with corbelled hood molds, a paneled parapet, and a denticular cornice. Replaced shopfront and addition of box-like wooden device which forms an awning for about a third of the building.

10. Intrusion - c.1970. Single story speckled brick commercial building.

11. Contributing element. DeSoto Parish Courthouse (1911 - National Register). Two story brick Beaux Arts courthouse resting on an English basement. Features a projecting main block and lower flanking wings. The building's most striking feature is the piano nobile of the main block with its three massive arched openings with coupled Ionic columns in between.

Contributing Elements

The district is significant as a cohesive early twentieth century commercial townscape. Thus, any building in the district which dates from this period (i.e., 1900-1935) and still conveys its historic style is listed as a contributing element.

Intrusions

There are only two intrusions in the district, which makes for an intrusion rate of 18%, well within the normally acceptable range. Indeed, some listed districts in Louisiana have an intrusion rate in excess of 30%. Moreover, the two intrusions in the Mansfield district are small and single story; thus their visual impact is minimal. Integrity of Contributing Elements

Most of the district's commercial buildings have replaced shopfronts and modern fixed awnings. In most cases these features follow the same lines as their predecessors and hence have made minimal visual difference. Moreover, these kinds of alterations are very typical of historic commercial buildings across the state. Very few retain their original shopfronts and fixed awnings. The only alteration which is a cause for concern is the box-like wooden device which forms the awning over approximately a third of the shopfront of building #9. Though regrettable, this feature is easily reversible and has not significantly obscured the building's Italianate stylistic features.

Significant dates c.1900-c.1935
Architect/Builder courthouse - Favrot & Livaudais
Criterion C

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Mansfield Historic District is locally significant in the area of architecture as a rare and superior early twentieth century commercial sector within the context of DeSoto Parish.

DeSoto Parish is known for its antebellum Greek Revival residential architecture, but its commercial building stock was largely rebuilt between about 1900 and 1935. This coincides with the shift from frame to brick commercial buildings which was a statewide phenomenon during these years. It was also a period of significant growth and prosperity in the parish because of the previously mentioned lumber boom. What must have once been a locally impressive collection of commercial buildings is now much depleted, particularly in the rest of downtown Mansfield, as noted in item 7. The nominated district is one of only three historic commercial environments in the parish, and of these, it is by far the finest. It features two fairly monumental (for DeSoto Parish) neo-classical buildings and two locally rare examples of the Italianate style. Moreover, the district contains the Beaux Arts courthouse, which is the grandest building of any period in the parish as well as being a very rare example of the work of a high style practitioner.

Major Bibliographical References

Windshield survey of central business districts in DeSoto Parish, National Register staff, Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office.

Sanborn Insurance Company maps, Mansfield, 1885, 1892, 1899, 1904, 1909, 1914, 1921, and 1928.