

Located in Baton Rouge, Southern University is one of the state's two publicly funded African-American colleges. Standing on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River on the far west side of the campus, the university's historic district consists of a few mostly early twentieth century buildings encompassing approximately seven acres. Within the boundaries are seven buildings, six of which (86%) are contributing elements. These include two classroom buildings, a machine shop, a combination laundry/residence hall, an auditorium, and a galleried cottage now known as the Southern University Archives Building. (Original names and name changes for the other buildings will be discussed in the inventory below.) The Archives Building (listed on the National Register in 1981) is of frame construction and was built c. 1870. The five 1920s structures are of brick. Despite some alterations to the buildings and the loss of other early campus components which once stood in the area, the district retains enough integrity to justify its nomination to the Register.

METHODOLOGY

The possibility of nominating a portion of Southern University to the National Register as a historic district was presented to the Division of Historic Preservation in the late summer of 1998, when the Corps of Engineers and Southern officials both expressed interest in such a project. (The Corps' involvement was triggered by a request to stabilize the bluff upon which the university's historic buildings stand.) Shortly thereafter, an on-site evaluation by a staff member convinced the Division that a nomination was appropriate. Field work began in January 1999 after final approval was received from the university. The district's easily accessible location near downtown Baton Rouge made the completion of this task convenient. Two additional visits were made to the site by National Register staff, who spent this time taking photographs, evaluating contributing elements and intrusions, and considering boundary issues. The opinion of the federal reviewer in Washington, D.C. was also solicited regarding the boundary question. While this process moved forward, a consulting firm worked to complete a draft environmental review study and draft National Register nomination for the Corps. These documents were forwarded to the Division and serve as major sources for this narrative (see bibliography).

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The buildings comprising the Southern University Historic District are situated on a broad bluff overlooking the eastern bank of the Mississippi River in the northwest section of East Baton Rouge Parish known as Scotlandville. A separate, almost rural community when Southern arrived, Scotlandville has since been annexed by the City of Baton Rouge. The bluff has been the focus of university life since the institution's relocation from New Orleans in 1914. Because the river makes a ninety degree turn from north to west opposite the site, the view from the bluff is spectacular.

The bluff is separated from the rest of the campus by Netterville Drive, which provides the district's only north-to-south automobile route. Two other streets also serve the area. Harding Boulevard intersects Netterville beyond the district's southern boundary, while Swan Avenue meets Netterville near the district's mid-point (see attached map). Four of the historic buildings are located northwest of Swan Avenue. They stand in a line which runs roughly west to east and face a large graveled parking area where other early buildings once stood. The bluff lies immediately to the west. The other historic structures (auditorium and Archives Building) are south of the previously mentioned four. These face Netterville and stand between that street and the bluff. The presence of mature trees throughout the area, as well as view sheds along Netterville Drive, help to visually unite the district.

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

All of the district's brick buildings were designed by the New Orleans architectural firm of Favrot & Livaudais. Although their exteriors repeat a number of common, low-key decorative features (some of classical derivation) which help to tie the complex together visually, these structures should be classified as having "no style" for the purposes of this nomination. The older (c. 1870) galleried cottage (Southern University Archives Building) is a restrained example of the transition between the Greek Revival and Italianate styles.

CONTRIBUTING AND NON-CONTRIBUTING ELEMENTS

Of the seven buildings comprising the historic district, six are categorized as contributing elements because they are over fifty years of age and retain enough historic integrity to be recognized by former Southern University students, administrators and faculty should they return to the campus today. The seventh building, constructed 1965-1967, is classified as non-contributing.

INVENTORY

- 1) Laundry/Riverside Hall (contributing) 1922, c. 1930. This brick structure was built in 1922 as a one-story laundry. Some time before 1937 the building was renamed Riverside Hall. At that time it was lengthened on its western end and a second story was added for use as a dormitory. A new parapet (similar to that on the Machine Shop) was also added. That parapet is stepped, has brick coping, and features five simple brick panels on its facade. The building also has string courses composed of bricks laid in soldier courses. First floor transoms and one window have been infilled with wood and several rear windows have received brick infill. Furthermore, the facade door appears to have been changed and the canopy above this entrance seems to be a later addition. Like the buildings described below, this structure currently serves the university's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program.
- 2) Industrial Building for Girls (contributing) 1920. Later known as the Home Economics Building and McNair Hall, this two-story masonry building features a very slightly projecting central section (suggestive of a pavilion) with an entrance ornamented in a restrained manner. The decoration includes three pairs of simple cast concrete pilasters, with each pair framing a central double door or the single windows which flank it. Each pilaster terminates in a bracket instead of a capital, and each pair of brackets supports its own simply molded cornice. Other features found on the building include a stepped parapet with brick coping, a cornice composed of horizontal brick bands, and two string courses comprised of bricks laid in soldier courses. One string course is found below the first floor windows, the other above the second floor openings. Wooden panels fill the spaces between large first and second floor windows. A similar window treatment is found on the side elevations. Although the central windows on one side have been converted into doors and a metal staircase to the second level has been added, the building's facade is virtually unaltered. The building currently houses the Naval ROTC program.
- 3) Machine Shop (contributing) 1921. This small one-story brick building repeats the stepped parapet and string courses found on the Industrial Building for Girls. It also features simple decorative brick panels (similar to those on the Laundry/Riverside Hall) between the windows and the parapet. In the late 1950s a fire occurred; a photograph of the fire leads one to believe the damage was confined to the interior and the roof. In addition, the front door has been changed and a small metal shed has been attached at the rear. The structure now houses supplies for the ROTC program.
- 4) Industrial Building for Boys (contributing) 1921, c. 1940. Also known as the Mechanical Arts Building and the Industrial Arts Building, this two-story brick structure was originally identical to the previously described Industrial Building for Girls. The building was more than doubled in size c. 1940 when it was extended to each side, following the detailing of the original. These extensions are slightly set back from the original center block, and stair halls at the end of each extension are set back even further. Nevertheless, the building reads as a single mass. The structure currently houses the Army ROTC program.
- 5) Martin L. Harvey Auditorium (contributing) 1928. Resembling a monumental one-story structure but actually two stories in height, the brick auditorium building is composed of two masses--a moderately sized rectangular front block attached to a much larger and slightly higher rear mass. The latter exhibits the molded brick cornice, string courses, and stepped parapet found on the other Favrot & Livaudais-designed buildings. However, in this case the middle section of the parapet is pointed like a low pediment rather than flat, and the parapet's coping is made of tile.

An identical parapet surmounts the front mass, which otherwise displays decorative features not seen on the companion buildings. These include a contrasting molded cast concrete cornice, three arched entrances with double doors surmounted by fanlights (all encompassed within cast concrete surrounds), two brick panels featuring diamond shaped motifs, two oculus-like elements, and a cast concrete belt course. Alterations include the infill with brick of all second story and most first story windows, the construction of a two-story brick mechanical wing on one side, and the addition of smaller one-story service wings at the rear.

- 6) President's House (non-contributing) 1965-1967. This structure is a two-story, slab-on-grade, brick ranch house with a tower-like element and a carport at one end.
- 7) Southern University Archives Building (contributing, National Register) c. 1870. Possibly an overseer's house, this building was already on the site when Southern University moved to Scotlandville in 1914. An example of the transition between the Greek Revival and Italianate styles, the five bay frame cottage features shoulder molded door and window surrounds, posts with simply molded capitals, and a full entablature highlighted by paired Italianate brackets above each capital. Originally the house was three rooms wide, one room deep, and had a gallery across the front. However, it had four bedrooms, an attached kitchen and bath, and two large galleries (one in the rear as well as the front) by the time Southern acquired it. The university remodeled the building for concurrent use as the president's home and office, a girl's dormitory, and an infirmary. In addition, workers enclosed the rear porch to serve as a dining hall. The house originally faced the Mississippi River, but c. 1925 it was moved approximately 100 yards to the south of its original bluff location and rotated 180 degrees to face Netteterville Drive. It also served as a faculty cottage and university placement office before housing the university's archives. It is now used as a general storage facility.

ASSESSMENT OF INTEGRITY

Despite the changes to the early campus in terms of lost structures (see Part 8), the Southern University Historic District meets the litmus test for historical nominations because, with six of the school's earliest buildings surviving on their original bluff-side setting, former members of the university community could identify the site if they were to visit Southern today. The survival of the two industrial education buildings is particularly important because they embody the early educational philosophy of the university (see part 8). And it is of critical importance that Southern's surviving historic buildings are those from the early years which were built right on the bluff. This is a particularly distinctive setting for a university and one that figured prominently in college life (see Part 8). Except for a modern president's home (which is buffered by trees), the original bluff-side heart of old Southern has received no new construction.

In terms of alterations to the remaining buildings, each of the 1920s structures was evaluated by the National Register staff and a judgment call was made on contributing/non-contributing status based upon the severity of the alterations. In each case, the alterations did not overwhelm the structure's surviving historic character and/or were made during the historic period. The most prevalent modifications to the contributing elements are (in two cases) sympathetic historic additions to the structures and the infill of windows with brick or board. Although this infill is particularly widespread at the auditorium, the building retains those features which distinguish it from others on campus (those that define its character): its distinctive shape and its handsome round arch doors with fanlights above.

Significant Dates: 1914 - 1949
Architect: Favrot and Livaudais
Builder: Connors, Brandt and Bell

The Southern University Historic District is significant at the state level in the areas of education and ethnic heritage because its six buildings and bluff-side setting help tell the story of the early growth

and development of one of only two African-American public institutions of higher learning in Louisiana. The district also illustrates an important late-nineteenth/early twentieth century approach to the education of African-Americans. The period of significance ranges from 1914, the year Southern opened at its Scotlandville (now part of Baton Rouge) location, through 1949, the fifty year cutoff.

As African-Americans struggled to find their place in post-Reconstruction American society, one of their primary concerns was education. By shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, two distinctly different approaches to black instruction (one espoused by Booker T. Washington, the other by W. E. B. Dubois) had developed. Although both philosophies stressed the role of education in helping blacks to achieve the full rights of citizenship, they differed drastically in the type of education they proposed blacks should receive.

Although Washington did not invent the philosophy he came to support, he is known as its best advocate and practitioner. He believed that African-Americans would eventually be allowed to exercise their rights once white society learned to respect rather than fear them. Thus, he taught that African-Americans should focus upon obtaining self respect and economic independence rather than civil rights and social equality. The best way to achieve the former, he taught, was by practicing Christian principles, developing a healthy work ethic, and acquiring skills in the agricultural and industrial (or mechanical) arts. Washington developed a program implementing these ideas at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute after he assumed leadership of that newly established school in 1881. The institution would become the nation's leading example of his "industrial" approach. After the educator articulated his beliefs (called by some a philosophy of racial accommodation) during his "Atlanta Compromise" speech of 1895, he became the African-American community's best known and most respected leader. As more and more black schools adopted Washington's methods, they collectively came to be known as the "Tuskegee machine" by opponents of the industrial philosophy.

W. E. B. Dubois at first shared Washington's belief that African-Americans should receive an industrial education. However, he experienced a change of heart around 1903 – a change which seems to have stemmed from his anger over continuing racial injustice in America. He soon came to believe that Washington's philosophy of accommodation had resulted in the loss of black voting rights; the legalization of the black man's status as an "inferior" citizen; and the loss of financial support for institutions which sought to provide blacks with a more advanced, classical education. According to Yale historian Robert A. Gibson, Dubois ". . . stressed the necessity for liberal arts training because he believed that black leadership should come from college-trained backgrounds. . . . [His] philosophy of the 'Talented Tenth' was that a college-educated elite would chart, through their knowledge, the way for economic and cultural elevation for the black masses."

Louisiana's Southern University was established at almost the same time that Washington began building Tuskegee Institute. In 1879 P. B. S. Pinchback, T. T. Allain, and Henry Demas sponsored a movement in the Louisiana State Constitutional Convention to establish, in the City of New Orleans, a school "for the education of persons of color." This institution (which would eventually consist of classroom facilities in the city and a farm on the west bank of the Mississippi River in adjacent Jefferson Parish) was chartered as Southern University in January 1880 by the state's General Assembly. Despite inadequate financial support, during its 32 years in New Orleans Southern achieved a maximum yearly enrollment of almost 900 students. These were spread among elementary, high school, and college level courses. By the end of its tenure in the city, the curriculum showed the influence of both Washington's and Dubois' ideas and was broader than that taught in many African-American institutions. As historian Charles Vincent has pointed out, the school offered ". . . a wide range 'classical curriculum' of literary training . . ." as well as teacher training and vocational and industrial classes. In addition, Southern served as the state's agricultural and mechanical college for black students from 1891 onward.

Despite Southern's success in its New Orleans location, a campaign to remove the school from that city began around 1910. At first African-American educators (led by future Southern president Joseph S. Clark) asked for the creation of a second institution, to be located at a site more convenient to a majority of the state's black residents. However, this request backfired by giving white politicians a tool to banish the university from the city. As Vincent states, "Perhaps one of the strongest reasons for . . .

[Southern's] removal was its prominent location in a 'good' section of New Orleans, fairly close to Tulane University." When Governor J. Y. Sanders refused to support a new school, favoring instead the removal of Southern to a new, more rural site, the educators fell in line behind this proposal. Two years later, on July 9, 1912, then Governor Luther E. Hall signed legislative act number 118 authorizing the move. However, a court case seeking to halt the relocation delayed its implementation for a year. Uncertain of the future, officials at the New Orleans campus ceased to offer classes after the June 1913 commencement ceremony.

By September of that year the court had ruled in favor of relocation, and the Louisiana State Board of Education hired Joseph S. Clark to serve as president of the school. Clark was the institution's first African-American leader. As Vincent has explained:

. . . [Clark's] first task was to find qualified personnel to work at an institution that existed in name only; secondly, he had to construct a curriculum to complement the functions of a land grant college and suitable to the development of teachers and other workers in rural Louisiana; thirdly, he had to win the good will and sentiment favorable toward the idea of black higher education; and lastly, he had to encourage parents to send their children to enroll. But for now, a site for the University was the most pressing problem.

Approximately twenty-six sites across Louisiana were considered for the school, but each time Clark and the board expressed a preference for a particular place local citizens protested. The school's supposed negative impact upon adjacent property values was often touted as the reason for this opposition. However, some adversaries were more blunt, stating unequivocally their opposition to the higher education of blacks in general. Finally Clark recommended, and State Superintendent of Education T. H. Harris approved, a site at Scotlandville in East Baton Rouge Parish. Although the small community was served by the Mississippi River as well as two railroad lines, it was far enough from the city of Baton Rouge to meet the desires of many whites that the school be located in an isolated rural area. Accordingly, the board of education purchased a site on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River just west of Scotlandville.

When Clark and his few faculty members arrived at Scotlandville, they found twelve dilapidated plantation cabins, a barn, a tool house, and one better residence (possibly a former overseer's house) on the site. Faced with a March 9, 1914 opening date, they hurried to erect temporary buildings, sometimes using materials salvaged from the poorest of the cabins. Still usable cabins were assigned to university personnel with families. Officials also remodeled the better residence to serve concurrently as the president's home and office, a dormitory for girls, and a dining hall. Moveable supplies and furniture were shipped to the bluff from the old building in New Orleans. Although the construction projects were not complete, officials enrolled seventy students on March 9th.

The move from New Orleans to rural East Baton Rouge Parish cost Southern the progress it had made in developing a curriculum balanced between the "industrial courses for all" philosophy of Booker T. Washington and the "liberal arts education for the elite" approach preferred by W. E. B. Dubois. As one local editorial writer assured the public, "Only the very elementary studies in reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic will be taught." Other articles and editorials made it imminently clear that the new school would offer only agricultural and mechanical courses designed to give black workers the skills needed to grow crops and maintain farm equipment successfully. The curriculum implemented by President Clark reflected this attitude. Courses for men included agriculture, blacksmithing, woodworking, and printing, while those for women focused upon cooking, sewing, sanitation and home economics. An "Academic Department" provided training for future teachers, but the instruction primarily stressed the teaching of industrial and domestic science skills.

With the school's opening deadline met, President Clark began lobbying for more and better facilities. Although construction funds were always in short supply, two temporary frame dormitories were constructed. In the meantime, New Orleans architects Favrot and Livaudais produced plans for several permanent buildings intended to meet the institution's most pressing needs. These structures shared

common materials and architectural elements (such as parapets) designed to give the campus on the bluff a unified appearance. The first to be erected was the three story Academic Building (1917), which housed classrooms for elementary and high school courses as well as a post office. (This building, located on the bluff, was destroyed by fire a few years ago.) It was followed by the Industrial Building for Girls in 1920. The next year the Industrial Building for Boys and an accompanying Machine Shop joined the campus group. As pointed out in Part 7, the two industrial classroom buildings were identical in appearance. A one-story laundry joined the ensemble in 1922. (It would be remodeled and enlarged as a dormitory c. 1930.) However, the completion of the above facilities did not satisfy the growing university's need for space. Thus, the construction program continued with a series of small frame buildings (all demolished) which included an infirmary (1923); and (both 1925) a guest house/faculty cottage and stenography bureau/faculty cottage. Also erected c.1925 was a large, two-story president's residence whose appearance suggested the Craftsman style. (This building was replaced by the current president's home in the 1960s.)

Increasing the physical plant was not President Clark's only concern during this period. Recognizing blacks' needs for better education, he began working to upgrade Southern's curriculum soon after the school's opening. By 1920 he had both lengthened the teachers' curriculum and added courses at the junior college level. By 1921, the school's catalog proclaimed that it would offer a ". . . full college course to duly accredited applicants and will expand from a two-year to a four-year college course as the demand for the advanced work is made." Responding to its growing academic needs, in 1928 the university constructed a two-story brick science building, a large auditorium, two additional dormitories, and a large dining hall. (Of these, only the auditorium survives. The science building was adjacent to the auditorium. The two dorms and dining hall were on the east side of Netterville Drive.)

Under the leadership of President Joseph S. Clark, Southern gradually grew from a small industrial school into a leading institution of higher learning for African-Americans. By 1938 (the year of Clark's retirement), the University had achieved status as the fourth largest college (public or private) for African-Americans in the United States and offered a curriculum containing a wide range of liberal arts courses at the undergraduate level. In addition, it ranked as the largest land-grant college for African-Americans in total enrollment and the second largest in college enrollment. In achieving this success, the institution overcame prejudice against the very concept of higher education for African-Americans as well as repeated years of inadequate funding. Under second president Felton G. Clark (son of Joseph S.), who served from 1938-1958, the school continued its physical and academic growth, offering its first graduate level course in 1958. Southern was and is one of only two publicly funded African-American schools of higher learning in Louisiana. (The other school, Grambling University, was founded in 1901 but retains no historic buildings.)

Despite the growth in the physical plant which took place as the school's program offerings and reputation increased, the bluff remained the undoubted geographic and emotional focus of university life during the historic period. Student groups met beneath the cover provided by the bluff's numerous trees. Concerts, performances, speaking appearances sponsored by the University Lyceum committee, and religious services at which attendance was required were all held in the bluff-side auditorium. For many years it was a university tradition that the graduating class pose on the auditorium's steps before beginning an outdoor commencement ceremony. The latter was held on the bluff until 1951. The elevated site of the campus, with its spectacular riverside view, and the ensemble of university buildings designed in complementary fashion, must have strongly and positively reinforced student and faculty identification with, and pride in, the institution and community.

As the enrollment and physical facilities grew, the campus expanded eastward and the bluff ceased to be the physical center of university life. Fire and/or demolition have removed several of the early buildings which once formed the old core of the school. However, the two industrial buildings and machine shop (which illustrate the institution's early role as one of Booker T. Washington's "industrial" schools), as well as the laundry/dormitory, auditorium, and galleried cottage known as the Archives Building, survive to illustrate Southern's early years in Baton Rouge and are still used by the university.

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