

LeJeune's Bakery occupies thirty feet along Main Street in the heart of the Bayou Teche town of Jeanerette. There is a party wall building to one side and a wide graveled driveway to the other. The one-story, simple brick building dates from a 1918 major remodeling (or rebuilding) of an earlier LeJeune's Bakery on the site. (Hence for purposes of the Register, the candidate dates from 1918.) Just as the method of making French bread has changed little over the years, so has the building.

LeJeune's has been in business in its present location since 1884, and it remains in the same family. According to family tradition, the original frame building was bricked over to create the present appearance in 1918, when there was a change of ownership within the family. The change in appearance is more dramatic than simply a brick veneer overlay, as can be seen from a surviving photo of the earlier building. Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps shed more light on the matter. They show an evolution of the bakery from two separate buildings (1906) to one by 1928. (The 1906 map shows a building labeled "bakery" fronting Main Street with a building labeled "bakehouse" behind. They were part of one continuous building by the time of the 1928 map.)

The façade of the building is capped by a decoratively shaped parapet. Behind is a low pitch metal roof pierced by various chimneys and ventilators. The date "1884" is at the middle of the parapet. Below is a panel bearing the bakery's name. The plate glass shopfront is historic, but perhaps not from 1918. The kickplates and awning have been replaced. Protruding from the façade is a more recent, but not new, sign with a light illuminated when the bread is ready. The long side elevation has a delivery bay where vehicles pulled up to load for their bread routes. Just behind, where the bake house is located, are numerous six pane windows. Behind the brick building is a low frame warehouse wing, and extending from it at a right angle, is a largely open frame garage-shed. (This rear configuration was in place during the historic period, per Sanborn maps.)

Across the front of the building is a room historically used for retail sales. (It is no longer used. Today one buys bread and ginger cakes through a side door.) Behind the sales room is a space containing a narrow hall down the middle with a room to each side. The corridor leads to the next room – the shipping and receiving room, corresponding to the delivery bay on the exterior. The shipping and receiving room opens into the large bake house. At the back of the concrete-floored bake house on the left side is the 1942 oven currently being used. To the right, faced in glazed bricks, is the older wood-fired oven patented 1907 and no longer in use. The wall above the old oven is sheathed in pressed metal as are many of the ceilings in the building.

Alterations have been minimal since the historic period, consisting almost entirely of deterioration to the rear frame sections and some cosmetic changes in the former retail space. Also, as noted above, the shopfront kickplates and awning have been replaced.

SIGNIFICANT DATES:	1918 - 1952
ARCHITECT/BUILDER:	Unknown
CRITERION:	A

LeJeune's Bakery is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A because it is a rare survivor to show someone the look of commerce in the early twentieth century – the way business was conducted in downtowns across America before the days of shopping centers, regional malls and "big box" retailers. (South Louisiana is being used as the context for evaluation for the foregoing statement, as noted below.) Within its specific locale (towns along Bayou Teche), the bakery is quite an institution, and has been as long as anyone can remember.

According to family history, it all began in 1884 when Oscar J. LeJeune opened the Old Reliable City Bakery. He delivered bread first by horse-drawn wagon. By the turn of the twentieth century he had an "automobile delivery wagon," believed to be the first motorized vehicle in Jeanerette.

Cousins O.A. LeJeune and Walter LeJeune, Sr. purchased the bakery from Oscar in 1918 and launched the remodeling/rebuilding referenced in Part 7, per family history. In 1934, Walter LeJeune, Sr. bought out O.A. LeJeune. Somewhere along the way the bakery's name was changed to LeJeune's. Walter, Sr. juggled two businesses – the bakery and sugarcane farming. His ninety-five year old widow, Dorothy LeJeune, who was interviewed for this nomination, ran the business during World War II when her husband was busy with farming and her stepsons were in the armed services. Walter Sr.'s son, Hartman, took over in the late 1950s. Today his son, Matthew, is at the helm. While best known for its French bread, the bakery historically produced all manner of pastries, cookies, cakes, etc. Today it produces French bread and ginger cakes. (The latter have been produced since at least the 1930s.)

The word “anachronism” often appears in newspaper and magazine articles about this South Louisiana institution, and it is indeed apt. Historically small towns across the region had mom-and-pop bakeries that produced fragrant, crusty French bread. But the few that survived into the 1970s fell by the wayside as big supermarkets came to town with in-house bakeries and mass-produced generic products. LeJeune’s is the only survivor.

And happily it survived a far bigger challenge: the dramatic changes that occurred in commerce in the post-WW II years. When O.A. LeJeune and Walter LeJeune, Sr. purchased the bakery and remodeled the building in 1918, mom-and-pop businesses like theirs were the face of downtown commerce. Downtowns, the centers of commerce, were compact and walkable. One went from individual store to individual store – to the bakery for bread, to the milliner for a hat, to the confectioner for candy, to the butcher for a roast. This was the pre-shopping center, pre-franchise, pre-big box retailer era. To use the word of one pundit, it was before “generica” took over commerce.

With the post-World War II suburbanization of America and the proliferation of multi-lane highways, then interstates, commerce underwent a cataclysmic shift. First came shopping centers out on the strip, then malls, then big box retailers that sold everything under one huge roof, from tires to what passed as French bread. The 1950s were twilight years for downtowns as centers of commerce lined with mom-and-pop businesses. LeJeune’s is indeed a remarkable survivor – a throwback to a previous era – embodying downtown commerce as it looked almost a century ago.

And it is a much beloved institution within the Teche region. The business has been around long enough to have attained institution status decades ago, per the recollections of various long-time customers (in their 80s) interviewed for this nomination. Lloyd Guibeteau, born in 1920, recalled three bakeries in town in his early years. He and others had fond childhood remembrances of ginger cakes in particular – what a treat they were after school! It was “mouthwatering,” he said, for children to gaze at the ginger cakes in the window. Whitie Hebert, born in 1918, said that one of the other bakeries in town closed in the Depression and the other in the 1940s. He recalled French bread being delivered to his house from LeJeune’s.

Jeanerette citizens weren’t the only lucky ones. While other towns in the region had their own bakeries in the 1930s and ‘40s, there was clearly a strong market for LeJeune’s French bread. Interviewees recall “bread routes” to St. Martinville, New Iberia, Abbeville, Franklin, Morgan City and remote Weeks Island. According to one former bread truck driver, you could “buy” a route from LeJeune’s (and provide your own vehicle) or you could be salaried. Almost anyone you talk to of a certain age in the Teche country can readily recall the arrival of the truck from LeJeune’s. Yes, they had bakeries in town, but it wasn’t LeJeune’s.

Today, LeJeune’s legendary French bread is shaped by hand in much the same manner as it was in the beginning, using decades old machinery. It is placed in the oven with a peel (paddle) that has been there as long as anyone can remember. Head baker Alvin Landry has baked bread at LeJeune’s since the early 1940s. Locals still refer to the ends of the bread as “noses,” as they have for generations. The old-fashioned paper wrapping bears a decades-old logo. To paraphrase customers who’ve known the bakery since the 1930s, “We’ve seen businesses come and go through our lifetimes, but LeJeune’s is still here.” Such longevity in the rapidly changing world of commerce is indeed quite remarkable. When asked to imagine the unimaginable, the closure of LeJeune’s, one woman declared, “The people here wouldn’t let it happen.”

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Sanborn Insurance Company maps, 1906, 1912, 1928, 1940.

Photos documenting the Old Reliable Bakery, copies in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Interviews with Mrs. Walter LeJeune, Sr., Lloyd Guibeteau, Whitie Hebert, Joyce Minvielle and “Toe” Hebert. Conducted by National Register staff, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.