

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The boundaries of the Gretna Historic District encompass 737 structures and all or a part of fifty-three blocks. The district is located on flat land adjacent to the Mississippi River. It takes in the "old" town of Gretna, and consequently includes all of the buildings one would expect to find in a sizable town of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the whole, the district has a residential character, although there is a commercial sector near the river. Contributing elements run the gamut from c.1845 to 1935, with a 25% intrusion rate. Despite the intrusions and some alteration of contributing elements, the district retains its National Register eligibility.

Gretna traces its founding to 1836 when Nicolas Noel Destrehan commissioned surveyor Benjamin Buisson to draw a plan for a settlement called Mechanikham. In 1838 the St. Mary's Market Steam Ferry Company began to develop a settlement called Gretna immediately adjacent to Mechanikham. The two areas were collectively known as Gretna, although they maintained separate designations on maps as late as Norman's 1858 chart of the lower Mississippi River.

Taken together, the Mechanikham-Gretna plans consisted of a standard grid with a grand boulevard now known as Huey P. Long Avenue. The boulevard had a wide neutral ground which provided for an open commons area. Although partially built over, the neutral ground remains today as Gretna's only formal planning feature. The old Jefferson Parish Courthouse (inventory #2) occupies the second block of the neutral ground and faces the Mississippi River with a monumental Renaissance Revival facade. The first block forms a kind of axial green in front of the courthouse. The monumental effect is enhanced by a memorial triumphal arch set at the head of the green (inventory #1).

With few exceptions the district has a single story scale. Most of the buildings are set close together and fairly close to the street. Public and commercial buildings are set relatively near the river, while residences are located throughout the district.

Gretna resembles an older New Orleans neighborhood both in terms of the streetscape (previously described) and the local building types and styles. Undoubtedly this is because the town developed as part of the overall New Orleans metropolitan area.

BUILDING TYPES:

1. Creole cottages (3.42% of the overall building stock). This is a one or one-and-a-half story pitched roof house, one or two rooms wide with a hall-less plan. As in the Vieux Carre, most of Gretna's Creole cottages do not have front galleries. Instead they have frontal overhanging eaves which protrude a foot or two. On the whole, Gretna's collection of Creole cottages reflects the town's earliest development. Surviving examples are peppered throughout the river end of the district. In no place do they form a concentration.

2. Shotgun houses (53.84% of the overall building stock). This is a single story house one room wide and two or more rooms deep. The shotgun type is an example of what is termed "pre-adaptation." It is thought to have developed as a rural house which was subsequently found to be eminently applicable to urban working class housing. Shotgun house variations such as doubles and camelbacks are seen as later urban developments of the original basic type. _

Most of the shotgun houses in nearby New Orleans are doubles, while almost half (48%) of Gretna's shotgun houses are single. Also, few of Gretna's shotguns have camelbacks (partial second stories). These two factors give Gretna's collection a somewhat less urban stamp than the overall collection in New Orleans. Most Gretna shotguns have columnar porches. The only exceptions to this are the Italianate examples which have heavily bracketed eaves three or four feet wide. The district also contains a few exceptional shotgun houses with side galleries or rear extensions with galleries of their own.

Unlike the Creole cottages and bungalows, Gretna's shotgun houses run the gamut of popular architectural styles from diluted late Greek Revival, to Italianate, to Eastlake, to Colonial Revival. There is also a later generation with bungalow details.

3. Bungalows (10.82% of the overall building stock). Larger than shotgun houses, the district's bungalows are usually two rooms wide and at least three rooms deep. They also have characteristic architectural features such as splayed porch columns on block pedestals and exposed rafter ends. Most of Gretna's bungalows have full porches across the front) a few have half porches.

Although most bungalows are raised only a few feet above grade, there are a few so-called "New Orleans raised bungalows" in the district. In these houses the living area is raised a full story above grade and reached by means of exterior stairs.

Because Creole cottages, shotgun houses, and bungalows are similar in scale and size, the district's residential streetscape is cohesive and fairly well unified. On the whole, this unified character is punctuated rather than broken by the district's other elements. These other elements comprise 31.92% of the district's building stock and include commercial buildings, local landmarks, intrusions, and residences which do not fit into the previously described Creole cottage, shotgun, or bungalow categories. The district is peppered with corner commercial buildings, some of which are a full two stories high with residential space upstairs. Virtually all are of humble character. The grander commercial buildings are located in a commercial zone adjacent to the courthouse green,

Local landmarks are responsible for some of the district's architectural quality. They range from grand public edifices such as the courthouse (inventory #2) to outstandingly styled residences.

Landmarks include:

- (1) The Jefferson Memorial Arch, 1923, a Roman triumphal arch with a full parapet (inventory #1).
- (2) The flamboyant Renaissance and Baroque style Old Jefferson Parish Courthouse (now the Gretna City Hall), 1907, National Register (inventory #2).
- (3) The Texas-Pacific Railroad Station, c.1910, with its distinctive brackets and gable parapet (inventory #4).
- (4) The Southern Pacific Depot, 1906, with its Downingesque Stick Style transverse gable roof and its Italianate windows (inventory #5).
- (5) 720 Huey P. Long, c.1930, a large Mission style villa (inventory #258).
- (6) 225 Newton, c.1915, a sprawling Beaux Arts raised bungalow (inventory #370).
- (7) 600 Second Street, c.1890, a well-detailed and fairly monumental Italianate commercial building (inventory #380).
- (8) St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, 1926, a resplendent Spanish Baroque structure complete with a towering campanile, National Register (inventory #425).
- (9) 216 Lafayette St., c.1850, a center hall plan, story-and-a-half Greek Revival house (rare on the West Bank) (inventory #455).
- (10) Lee Hall, c.1910, formerly the city hall, a two story Italianate building (inventory #488).
- (11) Most Holy Sacrament College, 1899, a massive amalgam of Romanesque, Italianate, and Gothic elements, National Register (inventory #550).
- (12) David Crockett Fire Hall, 1859, an Italianate building with a striking cupola (inventory #581). National Register
- (13) Gretna Elementary School, c.1925, a Gothic school with an elegant perpendicular style entrance (inventory #727).
- (14) 919 Amelia Street, a Colonial Revival mansion with colossal fluted columns (inventory #728).

STYLES:

Except for the landmarks, most of the district's buildings are more or less conventional examples of the fashionable styles of the greater New Orleans area. Contributing elements fall into the following period categories:

1845-1879	18	2.4%
1880-1910	204	27.7%
1911-1934	331	44.9%

The first group mainly encompasses the diluted Greek Revival and Italianate styles. The second group encompasses Italianate buildings, including the so-called "New Orleans bracketed style," as well as Eastlake and Colonial Revival structures. The third group encompasses the Colonial Revival, twentieth century eclectic (Mission, etc.), and the bungalow style.

The only additional comment one could make on styles is that there is almost no Queen Anne Revival in the district. Presumably this is largely because the multi-gabled turreted style was not suited to the working-middle class house types which predominate in the area.

INTRUSIONS:

The Gretna Historic District has a 25% intrusion rate, which is about average for a Register district in Louisiana. Moreover, the intrusions are spread fairly evenly in the district. In only two places (a portion of First Street and a portion of Fifth Street) do the intrusions seriously outnumber the neighboring contributing elements. In addition, the intrusions are invariably low in scale and hence conform to the historic streetscape. Many, in fact, are badly altered older structures, and hence their intrusive effect is minimal given the district's overall cohesive quality.

ALTERATIONS TO CONTRIBUTING ELEMENTS:

The district's contributing elements still convey their identity as historic structures. Older buildings which do not are listed as intrusions. In all but a few cases the alterations are relatively minimal--i.e., replaced porch columns, aluminum siding, replaced doors, replaced windows, etc. Although these alterations have certainly impacted the affected structures they have not significantly defiled the district's overall character. This is because of the aforementioned cohesiveness, which overwhelms and fairly well obscures most of the alterations.

Specific dates c.1845-1935
Builder/Architect N/A

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)
Criterion C

The Gretna Historic District is locally significant in the area of architecture because it is the most impressive and architecturally rich grouping of older (50+ year old) structures in Jefferson Parish.

Taken as a contiguous collection of nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings, Gretna is impressive for its sheer size. With 737 buildings and a 25% intrusion rate, it is unmatched as a cultural resource in Jefferson Parish and indeed much of southern Louisiana. Excluding New Orleans, historic districts in Louisiana typically encompass 100-400 buildings. Of course, numerical comparisons of this kind do not speak to qualities of architectural refinement, but they do help delineate Gretna's importance as a historic townscape.

Beyond the issue of size, the Gretna district is significant within Jefferson Parish for the variety of architectural styles it represents. The parish contains fifteen towns, most of which developed as "urban sprawl" in the growth of the greater New Orleans metropolitan area. Some of these towns have older sections, but they contain ordinary bungalows almost exclusively. The only exceptions to this are Gretna and the much smaller McDonoghville, both of which have a significant mixture of Italianate, Eastlake, and Creole residences. But McDonoghville lacks the cohesiveness of Gretna. Moreover, Gretna contains a significant collection of architectural landmarks which enrich its overall architectural fabric. McDonoghville possesses no such landmarks, nor does it have the kind of formal Baroque planning scheme which is focused upon the courthouse and commons in Gretna.

Major Bibliographical References

Curry, Mary G. Historical Sketch of Gretna. Based upon research in numerous primary and secondary sources. Copy in Register file, LA State Historic Preservation Office.

Building by building survey of historic district conducted by National Register staff and Mary Curry Gretna Historical Society. 1984.