

The Brandt House is a small frame cottage located on the edge of Lafayette's CBD. The viewshed to the south is of modern high rise office buildings, while across the street and to the north is a mainly early twentieth century neighborhood. The architectural evidence indicates that the present c.1880 side hall, two room house began as a two room Creole cottage. The cottage as remodeled has been altered very little, although there is a long rear addition, albeit from the historic period.

It appears that as originally built the Brandt house was a two-room Creole cottage with a gallery across the front and facing south (at a 90 degree angle to its present orientation). Sometime in the 1870s or so, the house was extensively remodeled, becoming a side hall cottage, facing Madison St. The old gallery became the side hall, the roofline was totally reworked, and a new three-bay front gallery was added to what was now the front. The work was so extensive that for purposes of the National Register the house dates to circa 1880, despite its earlier provenance. The architectural clues which initially caused the owners to speculate that it was an earlier house were the sloping floor of the side hall (as would a gallery to shed water) and changes in the structural system. Then there were the two back-to-back mantels which seemed to be earlier than the style of the front gallery. Finally, the side elevations' six over six windows with the upper sash fixed in place were typical of an earlier period.

The chief stylistic feature of the remodeling was the new front gallery, done in the Italianate taste as it was typically seen in Louisiana – i.e., a galleried cottage much like one in the earlier Greek Revival style but with boldly articulated moldings, capitals, etc. Here the columns (which seem too thin for the house) are chamfered at the top and near the bottom and have a noticeably wider capital formed of multiple boards. This treatment is repeated on the pilasters defining each side of the façade. The side hall doorway features multiple layers of boldly formed molding, three-pane side lights with a wooden panel below, and a four-pane transom. The door has the typical Italianate treatment of round arch windows (here paired). The façade's two windows are of the slip head variety (i.e., the sash extends into the wall to provide access to the gallery). Taking up much of the façade's roof are two large dormers, each with a pediment and six over six window. (The attic was finished off when the house was remodeled.) The side elevations feature gable end returns and six over six windows (with the sashes fixed in place). As noted previously, one suspects that these were recycled from the original house.

The Brandt House is simply detailed on the interior. Door frames are of plain boards, with doors having four raised panels. The circa 1880 remodeling was so complete that the former front wall of the house (now the side wall of the hall) was resheathed. Now it has the cheesecloth-over-rough-board treatment typical of the period. To date, the owners have been able to determine the location of another door but no windows. (This would be an important clue because the façade of a two-room Creole cottage would typically have had a window and door for each room.)

The side hall's staircase is something of an architectural puzzle. For what is already a small house, it takes up much of the hall, being located at about the center and using two very steep flights to ascend to the finished attic. Although the staircase has been reworked over the years, one suspects that it is a recycling of a staircase found on the front gallery of the original house. While French Creoles typically did not inhabit the attic, Acadians did, accessing it from the gallery via a steep stair. One speculates that when the old front gallery was enclosed for a side hall, the owner moved the stair from the corner (where the front door now was located) to roughly the center of the hall.

As mentioned previously, the home's simple back-to-back identical mantels feature a simpler molding profile more typical of roughly the 1840s. Pilasters with simple board "capitals" rise to a fairly wide entablature with a molded section making the transition to a plain board shelf.

The house has a long one story addition which appears to date to the 1920s or '30s (given the bungalow style exposed rafter ends and the brackets supporting a shed roof over a door). It is believed to incorporate an older building on the property, although there is no visible architectural evidence to confirm this. Also from this period is a small bathroom addition made to the north side of the original house.

The only alteration worth mentioning to the original house is the loss of the central chimney. It has been rebuilt and the mantelpieces are awaiting re-installation.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: c. 1880
ARCHITECT/BUILDER : Unknown
CRITERION: C

The Brandt House is of local architectural significance because it is a rare survivor within the City of Lafayette's

greatly depleted historic building stock. As one of few buildings in Lafayette to stylistically pre-date the Queen Anne Revival, the small house is indeed quite important within its context.

Lafayette is like many a town in that it retains little to represent its early architecture – in fact, relatively little from before the bungalow era. The area was first settled by Europeans in the late 1700s, with a small village called Vermilionville (from its location on the Vermilion River) established in the early 1820s to be the seat of Lafayette Parish (the latter formed in 1823). The community was granted a charter in 1836. The antebellum economy was based on sugar, cotton and cattle, with rice emerging in the 1850s as the most important commodity.

The greatest single development in Vermilionville's history was the arrival of the Louisiana and Texas Railroad (later Southern Pacific) in 1880, providing what was then a small hamlet direct rail linkage with New Orleans to the east, and by 1883, with San Francisco to the west. In 1881 the line had been completed to Opelousas, some twenty-five miles to the north. As a railroad hub, the community was transformed, writes historian Carl Brasseaux, "from the commercial center of the small geographical area that was Lafayette Parish to the emerging commercial emporium of southwestern Louisiana." In 1884, the town's name was changed to Lafayette. The 1880-1910 period was one of great population growth, from 866 in 1880, to 2,106 in 1890, and by 1910, 6,392.

Lafayette's great twentieth century blessing (and curse, as explained below) was oil boom prosperity. In September 1901, the first successful Louisiana well was drilled by Scott Heyward and Co. in Jennings, located about 30 miles to the west of Lafayette. After this success, Heyward turned to Anse la Butte, a rural settlement near Lafayette, touching off oil-driven prosperity that reached its truly heady days beginning in the 1950s and continuing to the bust of the 1980s. During this period the City of Lafayette emerged as the center for the off-shore oil industry, with company after company setting up business there.

All of this twentieth century prosperity, of course, was detrimental to the cause of historic preservation. Much of old Lafayette was demolished or altered beyond recognition in the 1950s and '60s. As a result, today's historic patrimony is one mainly of isolated architectural landmarks. A notable exception is a small residential area called Sterling Grove that retained sufficient integrity and importance to be listed on the National Register in 1984. There are a number of other older neighborhoods, but they tend to be fragmented and are characterized by low-key bungalows and simple cottages. The downtown area in particular has suffered from new construction and the covering of old buildings.

A statistical assessment of the importance of the Brandt House is hampered by the lack of a complete historic structures survey of the city; however, the staff of the Division of Historic Preservation, based upon decades of fieldwork, is confident in its assertion that very little of nineteenth century Lafayette survives. And, in fact, the vast majority of historic structures date from the bungalow era and later. There are a handful of houses to represent the earliest styles one would have seen (the French Creole and Greek Revival) and only three known houses in the Italianate style, all as it was interpreted in Louisiana. The style first appeared in the state in New Orleans in the 1850s (where it was largely found). More often than not "country" examples are from the 1870s. Unlike typical examples of the style found in other regions of the country, where picturesque asymmetry was the rule, Louisiana examples are by far rigidly symmetrical. They closely resemble an earlier generation of Greek Revival residences. The difference is in the less chaste, more elaborate details – for example, boldly formed molding profiles and pronounced elements such as column capitals.

The Brandt House, with its thin chamfered columns, pronounced capitals and other moldings, and round arch door, is squarely within this tradition. (Chamfered columns are most closely associated in Louisiana with the French Creole tradition, although they were "picked up" again in the Italianate). And while of modest architectural character within other contexts, it is an important survivor within Lafayette, particularly given its downtown location.

Historical Note:

For National Register purposes, the house is being named for William Brandt, who purchased the property in 1859 from Charles H. Mouton, and sold it to Alfred Bonnett in 1888. Later in the same year the property was sold to Arthur Bonnett. In 1892 Bonnett sold the home to J. A. Boyer. The property is known locally as the Richard home, for the family who purchased it in the 1940s.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Lafayette Parish Conveyance Records.