

Summary Paragraph

The former Ruston USO stands in the locally designated historic district of the North Louisiana town of Ruston. It occupies one side of a party-wall commercial building that has always contained two stores. A restrained example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style, the USO is surrounded by other commercial buildings that fit the style of an early 20th century historic downtown. One story in height, the masonry building was constructed in the 1920's and converted to a USO in 1943. The building has experienced some alterations through the years but recently underwent a historic restoration to recreate the original feel and look of the building. Thus, its National Register integrity and eligibility remain intact. The building is currently owned by Kevin Hawkins, who operates Hawkins Photography Studio in that location.

Narrative Description

There is no pictorial evidence available to confirm the building's appearance as constructed. However, it most likely looked much as it did in 1949, the year of the only known historic photograph of the exterior. Although this image shows only the upper portion of the building, it provides important detail. The building was narrow and rectangular, and it is about 2000 square feet in total size. It had a flat roof behind a parapet. The building was a restrained version of the Spanish Colonial Revival style with stucco walls above the two store fronts, a curved and sculpted parapet surmounted by brick coping, and a narrow central spirelet. The façade above the storefronts also featured two long, horizontal panels and what looks like a rounded belt course. There was a streamlined band just above the awnings covering the storefronts. The original appearance of the two storefronts is unknown. Architectural evidence suggests that both were altered in the 1930's, with each assuming a different geometric shape. The shape of the USO storefront was angled inward from the sidewalk on both sides of the door. The original door appearance of this storefront is unknown. The second storefront and entrance area stood at different angles to the sidewalk. Both storefronts featured large plate glass display windows. The shapes of the 1930's storefronts remain in place today.

Before Mr. Hawkins purchased his half of the building, it functioned as a shoe store for many years. During that time, an aluminum façade was placed on the front of the building. It was very cheap and flimsy and covered all the original design and materials of the building. At some point, an artificial stone-like material was placed upon the storefront wall of the building's other half. This material remains in place. The original awning had been removed, and at some point, a neon sign had been installed for the shoe store. There was an addition to the rear of the building that served as a storage space, and was located behind the original mezzanine windows.

The interior of the building during the USO period consisted of tile floors over concrete. There were high ceilings with tiles attached, and paneling on the walls. There was exposed brick on the south wall upon which a sign saying "Welcome Soldiers" had been painted. Near the rear of the building was a small bar that can be seen in historic interior photographs. This bar was removed during the years the property was used as a shoe store. There was also a mezzanine with original windows above it, and these windows are still intact, and remain their original size and shape. On the interior, after the USO period, a drop ceiling was installed which hid the original design and high ceilings. Shelving was added on the north and south interior side walls that were used to hold shoes, but dramatically narrowed the building interior.

As previously mentioned, when Kevin Hawkins purchased the property located at 212 N Trenton St., Suite #1, it had changed over the years. Since 2001, Mr. Hawkins has made several changes to restore the property to the look of the days when it was a USO. On the exterior, the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation (DHP)'s Main Street Program was involved in rehabilitating the exterior to an appropriate appearance. Research of old photos and surrounding buildings led to a facade grant from the state to rehab the exterior. The original facade was restored as much as possible, along with keeping the storefront shape and display windows the same shape and style of the 1930's design. All the exterior changes make the building one of the most authentic restorations in the downtown area of Ruston, Louisiana. As a result of this restoration project, Kevin Hawkins received an award from Louisiana Main Street for *Outstanding Historical Restoration*.

The following items were addressed in the renovation/rehabilitation of the building. The aluminum paneling was removed and exposed the original stucco facade. During the restoration, the facade was reconstructed to closely duplicate the original look. There was a "spire" detail that could not be duplicated, but the arched top of the building was reconstructed to match historic photographs. The rounded belt course could not be duplicated, so it was replaced with a squared belt course. The building also had an awning that had been removed. An awning was installed with the same size and shape as the one shown in the historic photos. A decorative stucco detail was exposed just above the awning, and was preserved and capped with copper. Gooseneck lights were added to the façade to light the signage for the business.

The windows on the front were replaced because of safety issues, but the original shape and size were duplicated. The tile floor in the entrance was very slippery, and again, there was a safety concern, so the original tile was layered on top with 12x12 inch slate tiles. The use of high-quality materials on the exterior was recommended by Louisiana Main Street under the facade grant, and every effort was made to use the finest historical materials. The walls of the storefront were covered with a glass tile that needed to be replaced. The glass tile was removed and granite was used to replace it. The ceiling of the entrance was badly damaged over time and needed to be replaced. High-quality pine bead board was used for ceiling material. False beams were added to cover the seams in the bead board and to house lighting for safety concerns. The front door was glass and created an unsafe condition. To address this safety issue, a solid wood door with an oval glass insert was installed in place of the glass door. All of the exterior updates were approved by Louisiana Main Street and the Division of Historic Preservation.

Through all the restoration process, Mr. Hawkins has restored the look of the building to the USO days as much as possible, while still having a usable commercial building. Every effort was taken to preserve and restore the interior to the look and design of the original construction. The first changes that were made were the removal of the drop ceiling and uncovering of the one brick wall. A large amount of shelving was used during the shoe store days that was not present during the time of the USO. After removing the shelving and drop ceiling, the building again had its original open feel with 17-foot ceilings. The ceilings are the original wood ceilings and have been left intact. One of the biggest discoveries of the restoration was discovered on the interior brick wall. In the process of exposing the brick wall, a painting was discovered that says, "Welcome Soldiers." This is evidence that this brick wall was exposed during the USO days. The brick wall was covered at some point during the USO days with paneling that can be seen in the historic photographs. This "Welcome Soldiers" painting is now exposed after being covered up for many years. This painting adds to the historical nature of the building and preserves the look and feel of the USO days. The carpet was removed and replaced with wood planks for the entry and photograph viewing area of the new business occupying the space. Again, the use of historic materials for flooring kept the historic look to the building. The original tile floor was not removed and was left exposed for the majority of the building. The original wall paneling original to the USO period was retained in the work area of the photography studio. This paneling can be seen in the photos from the USO period. All the walls that could be painted were painted with a color that reflected the original colors. A storage room was constructed on a small mezzanine in the rear of the building, by adding some sheetrock walls on two sides. This mezzanine can also be seen in the USO photos. Although enclosed, the mezzanine has not been altered in size or shape from the original. In what is now the work area of the studio, there was a small bar used to serve food and drinks that had been removed during the shoe store years. The original windows in the rear of the building are still intact, and retain their original size and shape. There is a rear office in the building. There is no evidence if this space existed before or after the USO days, but every effort was made to retain the same look of the interior look of the rest of the building, with wood floors and exposed brick walls.

There is no doubt that the former Ruston USO headquarters has experienced alterations and adaptations since the end of World War II. However, its National Register integrity remains intact. On the exterior, the identifying curved and sculpted parapet, upper stucco wall, streamlined band above the replicated awning, and the distinctive angled storefront remain. The rear addition is not visible from the street. Although the interior is now subdivided, the new wall panels do not extend to the ceiling. Thus, the sense of the headquarters as an open space remains. Additionally, some of the paneling present during the USO period has been uncovered. Finally, and most importantly, the award-winning restoration of 1997 has exposed and preserved the "Welcome Soldiers" wall sign that clearly reflects the building's historic use. Thus, on both its exterior and interior, the building would be easily recognizable today by eyewitnesses from the period. Thus, with its appearance continuing to reflect its former role as the headquarters of the Ruston USO, the building is a legitimate candidate for National Register listing.

Area of Significance: Military
Significant Dates: 1943-1945
Criterion: A

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance begins in 1943, when the Ruston USO opened in the candidate, and ends in 1945 with the end of World War II and closure of the USO.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary) NA

The former Ruston USO is locally significant under Criterion A in the area of military history because it is the only building surviving in the town to illustrate the USO and that organization's, and Ruston's, contribution to the winning of World War II. USOs, in effect, served as a "home away from home" for thousands of soldiers and sailors while providing needed reassurance that the country supported them and appreciated their sacrifice. The period of significance for the Ruston USO spans from 1943, the year it opened in the candidate building, through 1945 and the end of World War II.

In the spring of 1943, Louisiana Tech in Ruston was accepted as a site for a Naval College Training program called the V-12 Program, with a minimum of 600 trainees, to begin about July 1. The V-12 was a program to get more naval officers trained in a time when there was a shortage of officers. The school was to provide buildings and facilities for teaching, housing, meals and medical services. The men of the V-12 Program were mostly single, however as the program expanded it included married men whose wives joined them in Ruston if apartments could be found.

Chartered in February 1941, the United Services Organization (USO) actually represented the pooling of resources of six organizations: the Young Men's Christian Association, Young Women's Christian Association, National Catholic Community Services, National Jewish Welfare Board, Salvation Army, and National Travelers Aid Association. The stated purpose of the organization was "to serve the religious, spiritual, welfare, and educational needs" of soldiers stationed at bases around the country. Located in an adjacent community, they provided a much needed off-duty "home" for troops. As Eisenhower noted at the time, USO's boosted morale by convincing the armed forces that the country was behind them. Facilities ran the gamut from buildings constructed by the government specifically to be USO's, to a USO Club located in a given building (like the one in Ruston), to mobile units.

In 2008, local museum personnel interviewed two long-time Ruston residents concerning their memories of the Ruston USO, and both provided information on how the program was run. A USO club had been in existence in Ruston before the V-12 Program began. It had been located in various buildings in the community and finally found a permanent home at 210 North Trenton (212, Suite # 1 today). (As mentioned in Part 7, this building contained two spaces, only one of which was used by the USO.) At first, the club was managed by trained personnel from the National USO. However, shortly after the V-12 Program began at Louisiana Tech, the National USO withdrew their trained personnel and proposed to extend Ruston a grant-in-aid to continue the operation of a center. From 1942 to 1945 Ruston's USO served thousands of men, both single and married, and their wives. Mrs. Carolyn Lewis Locke worked at the USO as a secretary/bookkeeper and remembers it well. According to Mrs. Locke, there were ping pong tables and meals served on a regular basis, and a dress shop was housed next door to the Ruston USO. She said that she made \$100 per month working there. Mrs. Joy Campbell married a highly decorated World War II pilot, and during the war, she was in Ruston and remembers the USO well and the Naval Officers going through the V-12 Program. According to Mrs. Campbell, the young men training in Ruston were "the cream of the crop of the nation because they had to qualify to be in the V-12 program, and it was a program that was set up to allow them to meet the requirements of Officers Candidate School so they could finish their requirements there at Tech and go to OCS."

The USO staff provided entertainment, picnics, and outings for the wives. For the men in the V-12 Program and the thousands of servicemen on maneuvers in the area, the club provided entertainment such as ping pong, a piano, checkers, reading, picture puzzles, letter writing materials, soft drinks and food. Newspaper articles tell of a USO door count of 1000 men on a Sunday night visiting the club. Another tells of 385 men visiting the club for what was probably their last outing for several months. The club also served the military police that were on guard at Camp Ruston, a POW camp located nearby.

By mid 1945 the USO in Ruston was winding down and the V-12 Program at Louisiana Tech would close in October. The USO building had opened its doors to literally thousands of men and women providing entertainment and comfort. So with the end of World War II and the V-12 Program, the USO in Ruston came to an end.

Today, the candidate is the only surviving building whose direct association with the USO can be confirmed. In fact, locals do not know where any of the previous USO headquarters were located. The property at 212 North Trenton Street Suite #1 is the only one with any photographic evidence as to a location of a USO in Ruston, Louisiana. Although the buildings that were used during the V-12 program at Louisiana Tech survive, these were associated with the training of the men for wartime duties rather than their entertainment and emotional support.

Throughout its time of existence, the Ruston USO served a vital role in north Louisiana and to the war effort as a whole. It opened doors to literally thousands of men and women, providing entertainment and comfort. Making our troops feel at home gave the soldiers a true understanding that the people back home supported them. The boosting of troop morale served as a critical role of the Ruston and other USOs, and they impacted lives all over the nation. And the

local people who staffed and volunteered were able to show their sense of pride and patriotism to the community and the visiting soldiers.

APPENDIX

Excerpts from Interviews with Carolyn Lewis Locke and Joy Campbell
Lincoln Parish Museum
July 15, 2008

Excerpt from Carolyn Lewis Locke Interview

"It was two buildings when the USO was there. They were owned by Mr. Norris who was at one time the mayor of Ruston. His daughter, Sarah Alice Norris, who is still living and works in El Dorado, had a dress shop in one side and Mrs. Hays worked there with her and the USO was in the other side.

And I remember when two ladies came to Ruston to work in the USO and that was during, oh what was it, the V-12, the program at Tech, the 40 day wonders was going on. I remember they used the USO and they hired me to be a secretary. I remember I made 100 dollars a month. I thought that was pretty good.

Two ladies who first came here to operate it, then one left and another one stayed. And then another one came later on and as far as I know they were the only ones. And I left then. And I don't remember when it closed.

We had forms of entertainment there. I think we had a pool table or a ping pong table, something like that. And it was used as headquarters for the men in service. There was a group stationed here, I remember Sgt. Stillman who was there and a Sgt. Thompson. Those are two of the ones that I remember were head of some unit here. But the V-12 program, I believe it was at Tech".

Excerpt from Joy Campbell Interview

"One of the best things that happened at Tech, I think, was the V-12 because we were a school where all the men had gone to service. And they brought 600 men in there, Naval and Marine.

.....V-12 Tech had contracted with the Navy and we became a military school, according to their rules and the young men were the cream of the crop of the nation because they had to qualify to be in the V-12 program and it was a program that was set up to allow them to meet the requirements for Officers Candidate School so they could finish their requirements there at Tech and go to OCS".

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