

Summary Paragraph

The Tallulah Coca-Cola Bottling Plant in Madison Parish is a brick industrial building built c.1930 and almost doubled in size c.1940. It is mainly single story, with a partial second story set at the building's front. Designed in a generally classical style, the building is set along one side of a triangular block near the west bank of Brushy Bayou and on the edge of downtown Tallulah (see attached site plan). Almost all of the bottling equipment is gone, as would be expected. However, the exterior retains a high degree of architectural and historical integrity.

Narrative Description

Biedenharn Realty Company purchased the land for construction of the plant in 1929. A former employee who worked there in the 1930s notes in typescript reminiscences that the facility was built "in the late 1920s or early 1930s." It is definitely in place by the time of a 1938 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map. A date of circa 1930 will be used for this nomination.

The Tallulah Coca-Cola Bottling Plant exhibits the following features within the Classical Revival tradition: a door surround with an entablature, pulvinated frieze, and keystone; Roman anthemion leaves in the bas relief bottle panels; and a strong modillion cornice. These will be discussed in more detail below.

The building has a poured concrete foundation and exterior walls of structural brick laid up in common bond. Walls are finished with a textured raked brick veneer in deep red. Internal partitions are mainly of wood frame with tongue-and-groove plank surfaces. Steel columns support the partial second story.

The building fronts onto East Green Street with a two story mass. This is the preferred public view – the facade. The main entrance is on the left hand side of the facade. It is a double door with a molded panel overhead ensconced within a limestone molded frame. This in turn is surmounted by an entablature with a pulvinated frieze and a slender keystone feature. To the right of the entrance are two large and prominent shop-front display windows. The two windows played a key role in the public relations aspect of the bottling operation. They were not conventional commercial windows highlighting merchandise in a stationery display. Instead, they invited the public to peer into the building, observe the on-going bottling process and note the thoroughly sanitary conditions therein.

Immediately above the display windows is a massive cast-stone three-part bas relief tablet. Its wide central panel features the word "Coca-Cola" rendered in the swirling trademark company lettering. Flanking this are two smaller panels, each featuring a bas relief Coca-Cola bottle, with its distinctive patented shape, set upon a Roman anthemion leaf. Three evenly spaced multi-pane steel industrial type windows pierce the façade's upper story. The second story is capped with a strongly scaled wooden modillion cornice. The roof is a shallow hip with copper sheathing and corners and ridge marked with half-round tiles. Atop the asphalt shingle roof is a narrow chimney used to ventilate heat sources necessary in the bottling process.

The plant's front two story portion has essentially an "L" shape. It is one room deep on the east elevation and two rooms deep on the west elevation (see Photo 4). Set in the inside corner of the "L" is a modest elevator shaft that registers as an upper story blank brick wall on the east elevation (see Photo 4). Historically, the upper story housed containers of the secret formula Coca-Cola syrup that fed by gravity to the large open bottling space below (as observed through the display windows). Behind the two story portion of the building are two original single story sections of unequal height (Photo 7) and with more-or-less flat roofs with tar and gravel surfaces.

The side elevations of the front two story section are pierced with multi-pane windows and feature the modillion cornice treatment of the facade. The western side elevation immediately behind the two story section (Photo 7) features more-or-less evenly spaced steel industrial windows (lighting the rear portion of the bottling area). Beyond this is a significantly lower section with a pair of massive garage-type doors that open to a truck loading dock. Between the two sections is a gap. At one time the gap was covered with a flat wooden roof but this has long since rotted away. The eastern side elevation of the original building is covered at ground level by the c. 1940 addition (the latter described below). The rear elevation of the second story portion is sheathed in clapboards and pierced by multi-pane windows. The rear elevation of the original one story portion is an almost solid brick wall, pierced by one multi-pane window.

Circa 1940 Addition:

Sometime between 1938 and 1944 (per Sanborn maps) the plant almost doubled its footprint with a long, single story addition on the east elevation. This provided for a new and very large covered loading dock running parallel to the original building's side. This enhanced truck service addition features a long raised concrete interior platform for loading

and receiving and a garage-type doorway at each end (one on the building's front elevation and one on the rear). Also at the front (to the right of the garage door) is a multi-pane window identical to those found on the original two story portion. This window provides light for a small room located at that end of the loading dock. Part of the rear of the addition terminates at an angle to follow the lines of the triangular shaped lot. This section is pierced by three industrial windows with pivoting upper sashes. The long side elevation of the addition is pierced by evenly spaced windows of the same type.

The addition was attached seamlessly -- there is no line in the exterior brickwork. Moreover, its raked bricks, openings and industrial-type windows echo those of the original building.

Interior (Original Building):

The main entrance doorway opens to a modest foyer with tongue-and-groove wooden walls. To the west (right hand side) is the capacious bottling area. Roughly behind the foyer is the elevator shaft housing a freight elevator with tracks and an overhead electric lift motor. Its historic function was to convey containers of the secret syrup to the second story to feed down to the bottling floor below. The elevator and mechanism are intact but no longer thought to be operable. A wooden stair, located near the lobby, ascends to the syrup floor. It is set parallel to the building's façade. Some remnants of the supports for the syrup containers survive on the second story. On the first story, behind the bottling area, is a small office with tongue-and-groove plank walls and ceiling.

Alterations:

In 1962 the bottling operation ceased and the building was converted for a Coca-Cola distribution warehouse. At that time almost all of the bottling machinery was removed. Other alterations include the previously mentioned loss of the roof covering over the building recess on the west elevation and the replacement of the first story display window glass and muntins. It should be noted that the display window openings, themselves, remain the same size. Finally, a wire mesh has been fitted over the display windows to provide against vandalism.

Assessment of Integrity:

These changes have not significantly altered the plant's outward appearance or the style and feeling of its interiors. There is no doubt that the building would be clearly and plainly recognizable to someone from the historic period. Moreover, the building's Coca-Cola iconography is an even more telling reminder and conveyor of its historic role. Thus, the Tallulah Coca-Cola Bottling Plant is an excellent candidate for National Register listing.

Significant Dates: 1930-1962

Architect: Unknown

Criterion: A

Summary:

Tallulah's Coca-Cola Bottling Plant (circa 1930) is significant under Criterion A: Event, in the area of Industry because it is a graphic reminder of a development which revolutionized Coca-Cola, among the most recognized American institutions in the world. The building was part of the famous Biedenharn dynasty of Coca-Cola bottlers, with plants in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas. In fact, the Tallulah facility was operated by none other than Joe Biedenharn, the first person to bottle Coca-Cola. The seven Biedenharn brothers and their large extended clan were certainly one of the nation's first families of Coca-Cola bottling.

Local significance has been chosen because the building, along with two other extant plants, represents the huge Biedenharn presence in northern Louisiana. The Biedenharn franchise territories in the region were northeastern Louisiana and Shreveport. The latter was the state's second largest city (at least until the mid-1950s), and Monroe was the only other city of any size in northern Louisiana. Clearly the Biedenharns provided bottled Coca-Cola to more north Louisianians during the historic period than any other bottler. Finally, the Tallulah plant is significant, because like its counterparts across small town America, it was a local commercial institution highly regarded at the time.

The period of significance spans from circa 1930, when the plant was built, until its closure in 1962.

Narrative Statement of Significance (provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance)

Bottling Coca-Cola:

Atlanta pharmacist John Pemberton invented Coca-Cola (a combination of a syrup of his concoction and carbonated water) in 1886. It was first sold at a local pharmacy on May 8 of that year. In the early years the beverage was limited to soda fountains, where it was sold as a health tonic and refreshing drink during the warm months.

In 1894, drugstore and candy store owner Joseph Biedenharn of Vicksburg, Mississippi was the first to put Coca-Cola in bottles (and is recognized as such by The Coca Cola Company of Atlanta). He attempted to interest Asa Candler, president of The Coca-Cola Company, in the idea, but without success. In 1899 two Chattanooga attorneys approached Candler about the potential of bottling. Contemptuous of the whole idea, Candler gave them the exclusive rights to bottle Coca-Cola, reputedly for one dollar. Soon the customer would no longer have to seek out the beverage at a soda fountain. Coca-Cola could now be sold and enjoyed any and everywhere – as expressed in the advertising tag line, “Always within an arm’s length of desire.” As Joe Biedenharn recalled in a later interview: “I believed then, and I still believe in bringing the product to the customer. I wanted to bring Coca-Cola to the country people outside the limits of the fountain.” Notes Philip Mooney, long-time archivist for The Coca Cola Company, it was bottling that developed the market.

Seeking to distinguish themselves from the many competitors, Coca-Cola in 1916 adopted the curvaceous bottle shape still in use today – one that enables Coca-Cola to be the most recognizable product in the world – simply by the shape of a bottle (per Coca-Cola historians).

The Chattanooga-based consortium that held the exclusive bottling rights did not have the capital to expand. What emerged was a system whereby independent bottlers were granted exclusive territorial franchises and contracts to bottle and sell Coca-Cola. By 1920 there were about 1,000 bottling plants. The parent Coca-Cola Company controlled the all-secret syrup making, selling it to bottlers.

Sometimes Coca-Cola bottling plants looked much like any other commercial building in town, with only painted signs identifying their use. Others, like that in Tallulah, had Coca-Cola iconography as part of their design.

Coca-Cola bottlers were the retailers – the face of Coca-Cola in a given community. They bottled and delivered the finished product along defined routes. In the early days bottling was slow and labor-intensive, via foot-powered machines, one bottle at a time, yielding 50 to 100 bottles per hour. Bottles were washed crudely by hand. By the 1910s the operation was largely automated. The all important product delivery was first by horse or mule drawn wagons. By the late 1910s most bottlers had converted to trucks. Each plant had route salesmen, typically dressed in snappy uniforms emblazoned with the trademark Coca-Cola script.

The 1920s was a decade of growth in the bottling business. By the end of the decade, sales of bottled Coca-Cola had exceeded fountain sales. The revolution in distribution and marketing was complete.

The Biedenharn Dynasty:

The status of the Biedenharn family is recognized in histories of the Coca-Cola company. Quoting Mark Pendergrast’s definitive history of Coca-Cola: “The Biedenharn brothers, all seven of them, created a Coca-Cola bottling dynasty.” E. J. Kahan, in his book *The Big Drink*, observes that Coca-Cola bottlers can be graded like olives and proceeds to go through the gradations. Then he writes: “Then there are colossi, like the Bellingraths of Alabama—not to mention Arkansas and Delaware—and the Biedenharns, a clan so tentacular that it can no longer be geographically pinpointed.”

It should come as no surprise that family patriarch Joe Biedenharn was chosen to appear on the cover of *The Coca Cola Bottler* special issue in 1944 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of bottling. (*The Coca Cola Bottler* is the official organ of the Coca Cola Bottlers Association.) The issue includes an article honoring Biedenharn written by Wilbur G. Kurtz, Jr. Kurtz concludes in the first paragraph that Joe Biedenharn’s 1894 bottling experiment “laid the cornerstone for a business enterprise that today, fifty years after, in the midst of war, is spreading to the four corners of the earth.” A bottling magazine based in Chattanooga also honored Biedenharn, known fondly in the industry as “Uncle Joe,” in 1944. The author observes: “The Coca-Cola industry this summer stops to honor Joseph A. Biedenharn, 78, who was the first to bottle Coca-Cola – because he wanted to make the drink available in the country as well as in town.”

The Biedenharns’ first expansion from their Vicksburg-based franchise was to Monroe, Louisiana in 1912. On March 1 of that year they purchased the Ouachita Valley Bottling Works. In 1913, Joe Biedenharn bought out his brothers’ interests in the Monroe franchise, and the company became the Ouachita Coca-Cola Bottling Company. (Each franchise was a separate corporate entity, and the brothers continued to share ownership of the other franchises.) Joe Biedenharn moved to Monroe, where he would live until his death in 1952. The franchise territory headquartered in Monroe included “practically all” (the words of a former employee) of northeastern Louisiana, extending to the Mississippi

state line on the east and to the Arkansas state line on the north. The secret formula syrup was shipped to Monroe from New Orleans by barge.

Following closely on the heels of the Monroe expansion was the purchase on December 31, 1912 of Star Bottling Works in Shreveport, Louisiana, some 100 miles to the west of Monroe. The exact extent of the Shreveport territory franchise is not known, but suffice it to say that the city alone was a lucrative market.

The seven Biedenharn brothers continued to expand their Coca-Cola bottling empire, now beyond Louisiana into Arkansas and Texas. By 1944, per a letter from M. S. Biedenharn, Joe Biedenharn's son, to The Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta, the family owned plants in the following cities: Vicksburg, Mississippi; Monroe, Louisiana; Tallulah, Louisiana; Shreveport, Louisiana; Texarkana, Arkansas; Wichita Falls, Texas; San Antonio, Texas; Temple, Texas; and Uvalde, Texas. The plants were operated by the seven brothers and their children.

The Tallulah Plant:

By the late 1920s business must have been booming in the Northeast Louisiana bottling franchise territory. In 1929 the Biedenharns (through Biedenharn Realty) purchased land in downtown Tallulah, some sixty miles to the east of Monroe, and built the candidate soon thereafter. It was the sole subsidiary of the Ouachita Coca-Cola Bottling Company during the historic period for this nomination. Former employee Jim Smith, who worked there beginning in the 1930s, notes in written recollections that the plant became known as "gold-plated" because it cost \$25,000. The facility ceased production in 1962 and became a warehouse. Today it is owned by the City of Tallulah.

Research to date has uncovered three other plants in the United States that are very similar to that at Tallulah. Apparently there began to be an interest in plant standardization in the mid-1920s. In November 1927 the subject was considered at an informal bottlers meeting in New Orleans. Soon the Standardized Committee of Bottlers of Coca-Cola had developed four designs. One can only assume that the model used in Tallulah was one of these, but this is not known for certain.

Extant Biedenharn Bottling Plants in Louisiana:

Biedenharn bottling plants survive in all three Louisiana cities where they existed during the historic period for this nomination: Shreveport, Monroe, and Tallulah. However, the original early twentieth century plant in Shreveport is no longer extant. (It is documented in historic photos.) The extant plant in that city, at 305 Stoner Avenue, appears to date to the 1940s. The plant in Monroe was built in 1918. Both the Monroe and Shreveport buildings are generic buildings with applied Coca-Cola lettering, in contrast to the Tallulah plant, with its bas relief Coca-Cola iconography.

Commercial Institution:

Coca-Cola bottling plants, with their retinue of delivery trucks, were once institutions in their respective communities – particularly in small towns. And their owners were typically among the commercial elite of their communities. E. J. Kahn, in his book *The Big Drink*, titles them "the most important businessman in town." They were the face of Coca-Cola in town after town.

Coca-Cola bottlers have been researched extensively in Georgia, the home of Coca-Cola. Quoting from Mike Cheatham's *Your Friendly Neighbor: The Story of Georgia's Coca-Cola Bottling Families*:

This dedicated and influential body of bottlers not only brought the beverage "within an arm's length of desire" for Georgians, but associated the Coca-Cola business with Main Streets all over the state. . . . Millions of Americans have good memories of their "friendly, hometown neighbor who bottles Coca-Cola" (as the tag line for advertising once ran). They remember the bottling plant on their hometown Main streets.

Cheatham also writes of what became something of an institution for Coca-Cola bottling plants – the school trip to watch the beverage being bottled. After watching the spinning bottles being filled and capped, students were given a sample right off the bottling line, along with a Coca-Cola emblazoned ruler, pencil and tablet. This marketing tactic began in 1909 and continues with modifications today.

The Coca-Cola Company, on its website, includes a collection of "Coca-Cola Stories," some of which relate to the role of the bottling plant in a given community. One person's recollections would stand for many: "When I was growing up in Wichita, Kansas, the most fun thing to do was go to the local bottling plant and watch them make and bottle Coke. As a

young child, this was big stuff and I will always remember it.” Another individual reminisces about the school field trip: “Since my childhood days, Coca-Cola products are the only beverages I buy.”

The above reminiscences and documented material for Georgia would hold equally true for the small town of Tallulah. A Coca-Cola bottling plant coming to the community must have been a major event. One older citizen interviewed for this nomination remembers clearly the school trips to watch Coca-Cola being bottled. Another person remembers what an event it was in the late 1950s, as a small child, to stand in front of the big plate glass windows and watch the bottles swirl around. The beverage that began so modestly in 1886 was now truly only an arm’s length from desire in Tallulah.

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www.thecoca-colacompany.com/heritage