

The Mather House (built c. 1811 and expanded ten or twenty years later) is a one story frame cottage in the French Creole style. It faces the River Road (LA Hwy. 44) on the east bank of the Mississippi River in upper St. James Parish. Although somewhat altered and deteriorated, the house retains its National Register eligibility.

Architectural evidence shows the Mather House to have been constructed in two stages. The earliest portion (located on the downriver side of the dwelling) consists of two front rooms (*salle* and *chambre*), one rear *cabinet* and a second rear space which may or may not have been enclosed. The attic above this portion of the home features a Norman-like truss with Roman numerals incised in its framing members. (The truss is being referred to as "Norman-like" because its construction, although similar, is more simple than that of the typical Norman truss.) Historic documents indicate a house was on the site in 1811. Although it cannot be specifically confirmed, it is quite possible that the older portion of the Mather House is that building. The residence's later portion (built on the home's upriver side) contains three spaces: a third front room, which was added beside the *salle*; a gallery extension located in front of the new room; and an additional *cabinet* built behind the new space. The rear central space may have been opened at this time. The roof truss above the addition is more simple than that of the older portion, and its numbering system consists of crude axe marks representing numbers. As part of the work for the addition, the home's original chimney was removed. Two new chimneys were built, one in the downriver room of the original structure and one in the new upriver room. (Both chimneys were placed on inside walls.) Because the Norman-like truss was in the way of the new downriver chimney, it was cut and new members were added on both sides of the chimney to support it.

French Creole features found in the home include:

1. a Class III umbrella roof (see attachment);
2. French joinery in the form of the roof truss systems mentioned above and steep angle braces that reach from sill to plate;
3. *bousillage* walls with pegged construction;
4. a Creole floorplan (as described above);
5. exposed unbeaded ceiling beams found on the older portion of the gallery ceiling and exposed beaded ceiling beams found throughout the interior, as well as on the gallery ceiling's newer portion; and
6. one original French door (the other two French doors are later replacements).

Other features of interest found in the Mather House include the sheathing of one attic gable with shingles (those in the other gable were lost during Hurricane Betsy in 1965) and simple cornices ornamenting interior rooms.

The Mather House has experienced a number of alterations since assuming its final configuration in the 1820s or 1830s. Although many of the changes cannot be specifically dated, they can generally be identified as either historic or modern. Historic period alterations include the replacement of two sets of original eight-pane French doors with later French doors containing three panes each (as mentioned above, one original set survives), the addition of screen doors to the facade, the replacement of damaged *bousillage* wall sections with brick-between-post construction, the closing of one rear cabinet door, the conversion of the second cabinet's rear door into a window, and the loss of the original gallery columns. (A surviving pilaster on the gallery indicates that at one time the gallery had Greek Revival columns.) In addition, scars of a historic era wing (now removed) are visible on the rear elevation. The home's mantels have a traditional French Creole look but they are twentieth century.

Modern era alterations include the installation of linoleum and carpet over original wooden floors, the covering of original plaster walls with wall board (the carpet and wallboard have been removed in all but one room), the installation of a handicap ramp on one side of the gallery, and the replacement of older gallery steps with two sets of concrete steps with metal railings. At some point, a steep stair connecting the *loggia* to the attic was removed. Other modern alterations resulted from damage caused by Hurricane Betsy in 1965. These include the addition of a vertical board wainscot to the front gallery wall and the previously mentioned replacement of the damaged gable end. As mentioned above, the latter resulted in the loss of the gable's historic shingle sheathing, which was replaced with weatherboard. A second window was added to the replaced gable at this time.

Despite these alterations and general deterioration of the currently vacant home, the Mather House retains virtually all the important features which define its French Creole character. As an old and rare example of this building

tradition in St. James Parish, the home is an excellent candidate for National Register listing.

Non-Contributing Element

An old wooden garage with a metal roof also stands on the site. Because it does not contribute to the architectural significance of the house, it is being counted as a non-contributing element. NOTE: The building shown on the right side of the photograph recording the non-contributing garage is outside the boundaries of the nomination.

SIGNIFICANT DATE: c, 1811, c. 1830
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Unknown
CRITERION: C

The Mather House is locally significant in the area of architecture because it is among a limited number of French Creole residences in St. James Parish, which once had many more examples. It is also among the oldest Creole homes in the parish and displays rare surviving construction techniques.

The 1858 Persac map of the Mississippi River shows approximately 111 St. James Parish plantations identified by the names of their owners. In addition, the map depicts a large number of unnamed agricultural tracts. Because the Creoles were the dominant group to settle and develop the area before the Civil War, it is fair to assume that many of the houses on these plantations would have been in the Creole style. Thus, one can legitimately estimate that St. James Parish had a minimum of perhaps 150 Creole style houses in 1858. However, the historic survey of the parish indicates that only about 31 Creole houses remain. Eighteen of these date from after 1870, leaving only thirteen to represent the parish's earlier Creole tradition. Indeed, with the c. 1811 construction date of the dwelling's original portion, the Mather House is one of the three or four oldest Creole homes in the parish. Concerning rare construction techniques, the home is one of only eight Creole dwellings in St. James Parish which use *bousillage* infill in their walls. Its French joinery (roof trusses and steep angle braces) and Creole floorplan are also rare and significant. Although the home has experienced alterations, these important features remain, as do other elements which establish the home's Creole identity.

Historical Note

The early history of the Mather House is not completely clear. The property on which it stands was part of a plantation purchased by Charles Breaux in 1795, but one cannot be certain that the house existed at that time. Breaux died in 1811 and his heirs sold the property. The document recording the sale makes clear that a house then existed and, as mentioned above, the architectural evidence indicates that the original portion of the current house could be the building referred to in 1811. The house changed hands several times over the years until 1925, when it was purchased from three members of the Tureaud family by Gordon Mather. Mather's son, Gordon M. Mather, currently owns the property and plans an extensive restoration of the building.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Division of Historic Preservation, Historic Structures Survey of St. James Parish, LA.

"Plantations on the Mississippi River from Natchez to New Orleans, 1858.; map by Adrien Persac; reprinted, Pelican Publishing Co., Inc., 1967.

Robert C. Judice, M.D. to Donna Fricker, October 25, 2000; copy in National Register file.

Site visit by National Register staff.