

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Magnolia Plantation House (c.1855) is a frame, two-story, Greek Revival residence set in a fifty acre park of live oaks. It is located amid cane fields approximately four miles south of the town of Thibodaux. Despite several changes, the house retains its National Register eligibility.

The scale of the house is very large, with fourteen foot ceilings and a central hall fourteen feet wide. In addition, most of the major rooms are twenty-five feet square. On the ground story there are two rooms on the north side of the hall which connect by means of massive sliding doors. South of the hall are four rooms which terminate in a single story rear wing.

The five-bay facade features a two-story gallery with heavy Doric posts upstairs and down. The gallery terminates with a heavy entablature and a denticular cornice. The sides and rear of the house are trimmed with Greek Revival details, but they are not articulated with monumental galleries. However, there are small single story porches on the south and rear sides of the house.

The stair hall is separated from the central hall by an elliptical arch resting upon cast plaster consoles. The stair hall terminates in a 180 degree curving wall similar to an apse. The thickly proportioned staircase follows the curve of the rear wall in a graceful ascent. Instead of a single newel, the stair terminates in a 360 degree curving balustrade. The most interesting aspect of the stair hall is its rear exit where both the door and the door frame are steamed to exactly conform to the curve of the rear wall.

The interior cornices are heavy and richly molded. Most of the original mantels survive. On the ground story the three original mantels are of white marble in the Rococo Revival style. The two other mantels on the ground floor date from the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth centuries. On the upper story the mantels are of wood and feature a relatively simple aedicule style. Most of the major ground story rooms feature Rococo Revival ceiling medallions.

Other noteworthy details include:

1. the six panel doors;
2. the transoms above the doors;
3. the cast-iron balustrades on the front gallery;
4. the six over nine floor-length windows on the lower front gallery;
5. the remaining windows, most of which are six over six;
6. the exterior window frames, many of which feature pediment shaped tops;
7. the rear porch, the upper portion of which has a clapboard area with transoms cut in; and
8. the movable louver shutters.

Since construction, the following changes have been made in the house:

1. Sometime before about 1900, two of the ground floor mantels were replaced, as previously mentioned.
2. A small service building was moved up to the rear porch and joined by means of a shed roof.
3. The large room in the aforementioned rear wing has been subdivided into a kitchen, a bathroom, and a closet,
4. The lower front gallery has been screened in.
5. Much of the exterior has been aluminum sided.

## Assessment of Integrity

Despite these changes, Magnolia retains its obvious identity as a substantial Greek Revival plantation house. In the opinion of the State Historic Preservation Office, this identity is well established by the aforementioned historic features. In any case, most of the changes should be regarded as minor. The only major change has been the installation of the aluminum siding. Although the siding is pervasive, it is of similar character to the original clapboarding. Moreover, it is hardly recognizable to the casual observer.

### Outbuildings

To the rear of the house are three historic dependencies. These include:

- (1) an antebellum wash house with a new roof and a small tin-sided addition;
- (2) a c.1900 privy; and
- (3) a c.1900 board and batten cabin which was moved from elsewhere on the plantation to its present location c.1930.

These buildings are listed as contributing elements because they contribute to one's appreciation of Magnolia as a plantation house. They illustrate the fact that houses like Magnolia invariably had numerous dependencies, though many have lost them.

Specific dates                    c.1855  
Builder/Architect                Builder: Thomas Ellis

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)  
Criterion C

Magnolia Plantation House is locally significant in the area of architecture as probably the finest example among the few surviving Greek Revival residences in Terrebonne Parish.

Terrebonne Parish developed during the first half of the nineteenth century as a center for the growing and refining of sugar. Like most of Louisiana's sugar parishes, the parish's economy boomed in the thirty years or so prior to the Civil War. As a result, during this period a large number of Greek Revival plantation houses were built which represented something of an architectural "flowering" for the parish.

The importance of Magnolia within this context can be illustrated by examining the census schedules of 1860. On the eve of the Civil War, there were forty-four large slaveholdings (i.e., fifty or more slaves) in the parish. Of these, the average size per slaveholding was 115.2 and only six involved individuals who did not reside in the parish. In addition, there were undoubtedly numerous slaveholdings of less than 50. Given the above, it is clear that there must have been numerous Greek Revival plantation houses and cottages in Terrebonne Parish on the eve of the Civil War (probably at least sixty). However, as far as the State Historic Preservation Office can determine, there are only six remaining examples. Consequently Magnolia is of special importance in the architectural heritage of the parish.

In addition, of the six which do survive, Magnolia is probably the finest. It is one of only two which possess a two story front gallery. Moreover, it has high style features seldom found on plantation houses. These include: (1) the cast-iron balustrades; (2) the Rococo Revival marble mantels; (3) the highly unusual curving rear wall of the stair hall with its steam fitted door and frame; and (4) the elliptical arch in the central hall with its cast plaster consoles.

Historical Note:

It is commonly held that Magnolia was built in 1834; however, the architectural evidence suggests c.1855. Magnolia was built for Thomas Ellis and remained in his hands until 1874, when he sold it to Captain John Jackson Shaffer, C.S.A. Captain Shaffer's descendants still occupy the home.

Major Bibliographical References

Louisiana Historic Standing Structures Survey, Terrebonne Parish.

Menn, Joseph K. The Large Slaveholders of Louisiana - 1860. Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1964.

Stahls, Paul F., Jr. Plantation Homes of the Lafourche Country. Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1976.