

The Varnado Store is a two-story brick commercial building located on a corner of the courthouse square in the Washington Parish seat of Franklinton. Attempts to date the store have been difficult because of the absence of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for the community dating to before 1922. Based upon the building's appearance (especially its intact turn-of-the-century shopfront), a date of c. 1900 has been chosen for this nomination. The restrained Italianate style building looks much as it did after a November 1925 remodeling.

A historic photograph taken before the November 1925 work shows that, as constructed, the store featured a second-level gallery which wrapped around the building on three sides. It is impossible to tell from the image whether the members supporting the gallery's floor and roof were round or square, but a second-story balustrade with turned members is visible. (A copy of the photo is included with this nomination.) The gallery was removed during the November 1925 renovation and was replaced by a simple metal awning.

Despite loss of the gallery, most original features of the building survive. These include the following:

1. the building's rectangular shape and floorplan (open commercial space on the first floor, small offices flanking a hallway leading to a large rear room on the second),
2. Italianate arched windows piercing the upper level on three sides, both levels on the rear, and the rear corner of each of the lower floor's side elevations,
3. a Tudor arch surmounting the rear door,
4. the parapet wall and accompanying cornice, which features a patterned brick motif, and,
5. as mentioned, the building's original shopfront and first floor commercial interior. These will be described separately.

The wooden shopfront features two large display spaces which flank a set of recessed glazed double doors. The latter are outlined by molding featuring the egg and dart motif. Decorative cast iron columns (one per window) featuring shaped bases and capitals define the places where each window angles inward toward the doors. On one side of the facade, a thick brick pier denotes the building's corner, but the display window's glazing continues down the side elevation for perhaps three feet. This is not true of the facade's other side, where the shopfront terminates in another thick brick pier. Paired rectangular panels fill the shallow space between the storefront's window sills and the building's foundation. Those within the storefront's angled portion feature simple decorative panels; those beneath the storefront's front facing windows are filled by screening. This screening appears in the previously mentioned early photo. A series of transom windows surmounts the entire storefront ensemble.

The store's interior consists of one large room with concrete floors, plaster walls, and a beaded board ceiling. A series of wooden posts running down the center of the room provides support for the floor above. Wooden shelving units rise approximately two-thirds of the distance from floor to ceiling on both side walls. Wooden counters, some featuring a decorative beaded board motif, parallel the shelves. One rear corner of the sales room contains a small office, separated from the rest of the space by low counters. The second rear corner contains a small screened area, whose former use is unknown. It is divided from the sales space by a counter paralleling the rear wall. The shopfront's display windows are separated from the sales room by glazed screens.

In addition to the loss of the gallery and addition of the metal awning, other changes took place in 1925. These included the removal of an interior stair and its replacement with an exterior stair on one side of the building, the conversion of the upper story window to which the exterior staircase leads into a door, the construction of a short hallway connecting the new door to the central hall, the addition of small men's and women's restrooms on the second floor, and the conversion of a door opening onto the front portion of the gallery into a window. Changes of unknown date are the installation of burglar bars on the first floor's side and rear windows and the replacement of the 1925 awning with one with a different shape and appearance. (The 1925 awning was straight, while the present one curves.)

All in all, the Varnado Store looks almost exactly as it did after the 1925 remodeling; hence it retains the characteristics which contribute to its architectural significance. Primary among these are the historic shopfront and sales room, both of which survive in almost pristine condition. Although the current awning hides the storefront's transoms when the building is viewed from afar, they are uncovered and are clearly visible when one stands beneath the awning. The loss of the exterior second-level gallery occurred long before the historic period ended. As a rare and well-preserved historic commercial building with period shopfront and interior -- the Varnado Store is an excellent candidate for National Register listing.

SIGNIFICANT DATE: c. 1900, 1925
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Unknown
CRITERION: C

The Varnado Store is locally significant in the area of architecture because it is a rare and well preserved historic commercial building with period shopfront and interior.

Franklinton is an old community which has experienced distinct periods of growth. The first began in 1819 with the creation of Washington Parish and the temporary designation of a rural spot five miles from Franklinton's current location as parish seat. That same year, John W. Bickham donated to the parish government 30 acres of land at what would become Franklinton's permanent location. A year later, the Louisiana legislature designated the location as the parish seat and in 1821 gave the community its name. However, it appears that parish officials did not relocate the courthouse until a July 4, 1826 election made the town's designation as Washington Parish's seat permanent. A post office was established in 1829, and a brick courthouse had been completed by 1830. The town received a charter in 1861 but apparently its municipal government remained largely inactive. Another charter was issued in 1888. At that time the town's corporate limits encompassed one square mile of land with the courthouse at its center. From this time forward, city fathers actively governed the town. Significant growth occurred when the railroad arrived in 1907. A promotional booklet published c. 1908 shows the town's original street grid partly surrounded by a new grid of lots and squares more than three times the size of the old. And, from a population of 236 in 1900, the community had grown to 814 inhabitants (an increase of over 300%) by 1910. However, this phenomenal growth did not continue, and today Franklinton is a small parish seat/commercial center serving a largely agricultural countryside.

Despite its age and previous prosperity, Franklinton has very few historic buildings of architectural significance. Because Washington Parish has not been officially surveyed, the National Register staff conducted a walking survey of the central business district where period commercial buildings would historically have been located. This survey found the CBD to contain several modern buildings, a few parking lots where historic buildings once stood, and a series of undistinguished vernacular structures dating from c. 1900 to the mid-1940s. Virtually all of the latter have been severely changed, featuring alterations such as modernized shopfronts and panels of modern materials (especially metal) covering historic fabric. The Varnado Store, a Romanesque Revival bank, and a 1949 commercial structure (late but still within the historic period) are the only buildings which still convey their historic character, and of these, the Varnado Store is the only one with an original, intact shopfront. It is also exceedingly rare in the ever-changing world of commerce to find an intact c. 1900 interior. Thus, the store is a rare and important example of a once common building type in Franklinton and is a strong candidate for National Register listing.

Historical Note

The Varnado Store operated under three different owners from its construction until the 1920s, when it was purchased by the Varnado family. They remained in business for approximately sixty years, keeping the store open until 1986. The building now serves as a museum for the Washington Area Museum Foundation, which has already accomplished much toward its restoration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Franklinton *Era Leader*, November 12, 1925.

Pre-1925 and c. 1943 photographs of the Varnado Store; copies in National Register file.

Site visit by National Register staff.

Walking survey of downtown Franklinton by National Register staff.