

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USD/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Downtown Leesville Historic District, Vernon Parish, LA

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

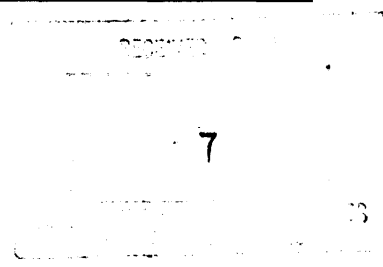
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Downtown Leesville Historic District

Other Name/Site Number:

366



2. LOCATION

Street & Number Third St. between roughly Lula and Lee Sts.

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Leesville

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana

Code: LA

County: Vernon

Code: 115

Zip Code: 71108

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: Statewide: Locally: X

Handwritten signature of Gerri Hobdy

Signature of Certifying Official/Title Gerri Hobdy, LA SHPO, Dept. of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

March 2, 2001

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
Determined eligible for the National Register
Determined not eligible for the National Register
Removed from the National Register

Other (explain):

Edson H. Beall
Signature of Keeper

4/9/01
Date of Action

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

- Private: X
Public-Local: X
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property

- Building(s):
District: X
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

- 15

Non contributing

- 5 buildings
sites
structures
objects
Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1 (courthouse)

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: commerce/trade Sub: financial institution, specialty store, department store

Current: commerce/trade Sub: financial institution, specialty store

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: no style

Materials:

Foundation: brick

Walls: brick, stucco

Roof: other: tar and gravel

Other:

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The boundaries of the Downtown Leesville Historic District encompass twenty-one masonry buildings, almost all of which are of party wall construction. All but one, the parish courthouse, are commercial buildings. The scale ranges from one to three stories. The majority of buildings are strongly articulated through decoratively shaped parapets, decorative brickwork, etc., and a few exhibit stylistic influences. However, on the whole, the term "no style" is most appropriate. Despite integrity issues such as demolished and altered buildings, the Downtown Leesville Historic District conveys enough of its historic appearance to retain its Register eligibility as the focus of commerce for Vernon Parish.

Leesville has a standard grid plan. The CBD developed in a linear fashion along Third Street across from the parish courthouse (see map). Because the town was founded before the railroad arrived, the railroad corridor does not cut through the heart of the CBD. Instead, the north-south line arcs around the CBD, with the tracks located behind the buildings on the east side of Third Street. The depot, individually listed on the Register, is located a few blocks to the south of the nominated district.

Historically commercial buildings fronted Third Street immediately across from the courthouse, two blocks to the north, and one to three blocks to the south. The blocks to the south varied depending upon the date. For example, on the 1909 Sanborn map there is little commercial development just south of the courthouse, but by 1948, there are three block faces along Third St. with one story commercial buildings. Today, the blocks to the south of the courthouse have been largely redeveloped and are not within the boundaries of the nominated district. Fortunately, the blocks north of Lula (those being nominated - see map) contained downtown's largest and most notable buildings and its commercial anchors. A handful of one story commercial establishments were also built across from the railroad depot, but only one survives.

Like other towns, Leesville's early commercial buildings were of frame construction, as shown on a 1904 Sanborn map (the first available). But by 1909 the downtown was almost entirely brick, due in large measure no doubt to a fire in 1907. Six of the district's twenty-one buildings (over one fourth) date from this first generation of brick construction (between 1904 and 1909). Another six date from between 1910 and 1922, and four from the mid-1920s to 1950 (the latter being the Register's present 50 year cutoff). Five buildings are non-contributing.

Inventory:

Buildings were dated chiefly via Sanborn Insurance Co. maps.

1. First National Bank/Opera House, 1907, contributing element. This massive three story stucco over brick commercial building stands at the corner of Lula and Third across from the courthouse. It runs for 13 bays along Third and 12 bays along Lula. Historically it housed various businesses on the ground floor (including the bank) and an opera house on part or all of the upper stories. The date 1907 and "Bank" is inscribed in the great round arch corner entrance. A round arch entrance at roughly the center of the Third Street façade bears the word "Theatre." Except for these entrances the building is decidedly plain for 1907; however, a very early photo shows that it has always been plain. The only other decorative touch is a paneled parapet. Below the parapet is "First National Bank Building" done in rusticated blocks. The building is in the final stages of being renovated for use as a courthouse annex. Alterations associated with this

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project include the replacement of the original one over one wooden windows with tinted one over one windows, the enclosure of the remaining shopfronts along Third Street, the enclosure of the central entrance, and the construction at the rear of a very shallow addition. (The entrance will now be located at the rear.)

2. Non-contributing. Altered four bay, two story historic commercial building (modern windows and completely modern shopfront, including curving awning).
3. Non-contributing. One story historic commercial building that has received a modern metal façade.
4. National Hotel Building, built between 1904 and 1909 (per Sanborn maps), contributing element. This three story corner commercial building runs for five bays along Third Street, turns the corner with a cutaway bay, and then extends for seven bays along Courthouse St. Although the windows are covered on the exterior, they survive and are visible on the interior. The otherwise plain building is capped by a paneled parapet identical to that of the First National Bank (#1 above); however, unlike the First National Bank, it has a bracketed cornice overhang. The carrara glass shopfront, which retains an appropriate configuration, is presumably from the 1930s or '40s.
5. Merchants and Farmers Bank, built between 1915 and 1922 (per Sanborn maps), contributing element. This two story building, located on a corner, is quite noticeable because of its contrasting cast concrete decorative treatment. A massive brick pier resting on a paneled cast concrete base is located at each side of the façade. The piers feature off-white cast concrete quoins that are placed in such a way to create a decorative design in the contrasting dark color brick. Above is a paneled brick entablature with a denticular cornice capped by a parapet. Panels at each end of the entablature and parapet, accented with off-white cast concrete, make the piers appear to extend the full height of the building. A 1940s photo shows the façade between the piers looking much as it does today, with the exception of four-over-one windows on the second floor that are now covered. The windows on the side elevation are covered also, but with a piece of material (presumably plywood) that is recessed within each opening – i.e. not obscuring the original fenestration pattern. The side windows also retain their original cast concrete lintels and sills.
6. Masonic Lodge Hall, built between 1915 and 1922 (per Sanborn maps), contributing element. This two-story, four-bay brick building retains its original one-over-one windows with cast concrete lintels and a continuous sill. The building is crowned by a parapet featuring a central arched design. A brick corbelled band and a concrete band highlight the parapet's shape. The parapet level also features a Masonic emblem at its center with a section of tapestry brick to each side. The shopfront is not original, although its strong angular lines suggest a 1940s date.
7. Built between 1915 and 1922 (per Sanborn maps), contributing element. One story brick commercial building with a parapet identical to that of the adjacent Masonic hall – except for the Masonic emblem. Transom covered and shopfront replaced, although it appears that the shopfront is 50 years old.

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8. Vernon Bank, built between 1904 and 1909, per Sanborn maps, contributing element. This long two story building occupies half the block face of Third Street between Courthouse St. and Texas St. and extends several bays down Texas St. Except for window replacement, the second story retains all of its original character. The articulation is irregular, consisting of windows (sometimes double windows, sometimes three separate windows and sometimes a single window) set off by pilasters with pronounced brick "capitals." The windows feature a jack arch with a keystone. The parapet level features multiple bands of tiny brick dentils. The first floor, regrettably, has received more alterations, with the most notable being the covering of the original bank shopfront with modern tilework. An old photo shows a corner Romanesque entrance (i.e., round arches springing from a column resting on a base) and two round arch windows along Third St. Because the modern tilework is built out from the main wall planes, it is hoped that the original material survives, and the owner is interested in undertaking a restoration using the Register's tax credit program. The remainder of the ground floor along Third Street retains its overall historic configuration, although the transoms are covered and the shopfronts have been modernized.
9. Non-contributing element. One story brick commercial building with a modern façade. This building is shown as two story in old photos and as late as the 1924 Sanborn map. The 1948 map shows it as one story.
10. Built between 1915 and 1922 (per Sanborn maps), contributing element. This one story brick commercial building has a strong visual presence because of its decoratively shaped parapet and elaborate brickwork designs in the Craftsman taste (i.e., geometrical motifs). Shopfront altered, although it retains a historic configuration.
11. Built between 1915 and 1922 (per Sanborn maps), contributing element. This one story brick commercial building, also reflecting the Craftsman penchant for geometrical forms, has an even stronger visual character than #10. Its decoratively shaped parapet is set off by bands of cast concrete and bricks laid vertically. Bands of concrete create other geometrical forms. For example, the transoms (each featuring six small panes of glass) are set within a pediment shaped design. Alterations include painting the transom windows and modernization of the shopfront (although the latter retains its historic configuration).
12. Contributing element. A theatre was built at this site sometime between 1922 and 1928. A circa 1940 photo shows the present building, but with a central decorative niche and some type of design to each side. (The photo is taken at an angle and from some distance; hence it is impossible to be more specific.) Today the building is completely plain across the front. At each corner is a small element, with a decorative design at the center, extending above the main roofline. The first floor, including a ticket booth, is covered in beige glazed tiles. The marquee is modern. Because the theatre's present appearance (minus the marquee) is believed to be from the 1940s, it is being counted as a contributing element.
13. Contributing element. Built sometime between 1922 and 1928, this two story brick commercial building has a decoratively shaped parapet ornamented with various cast concrete panels. The now vacant building has lost its original windows. (The openings are boarded over from the interior.) The shopfront level has been altered and the transoms covered. At one time the second floor housed the office of the Nona Mills Lumber Company, a large concern to the north of the

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CBD. The safe survives.

14. Werner Ford Dealership, contributing element. This one story brick automobile dealership, with its salesrooms and garage, was built sometime between 1915 and 1922 and survives largely unaltered on the exterior. The only attempt at ornament is a decoratively shaped parapet accented with brick bands. Most of the openings feature large showroom windows with transoms above. Alterations include new doors and the enclosure of windows in the last two bays. Some type of material has been placed on the interior of the transoms, cut to the shape of each.
15. Hotel Leesville (built between 1904 and 1909), contributing element. This large two story, stucco over brick, Italianate hotel is downtown Leesville's most distinctive commercial building. The Italianate influence can be seen in the hotel's numerous segmental arch windows, its bracketed cornice, and a rusticated treatment found on the main block. The building is composed of a two bay deep front section with a narrower, long wing behind (yielding a "T" footprint). The façade of the main block has a three-part articulation – in this case, two end pavilions with a recessed central portion. The central section is crowned by a tall curvilinear parapet pierced by a decoratively shaped oculus. Originally it featured a two-stage Doric gallery which projected over the sidewalk. Other alterations include filling in most of the second story windows on the front section and modifications to the original doorway and shopfronts. The hotel retains almost all of its original windows on the long side elevations.
16. Contributing element. Circa 1930 plain one story brick commercial building. Shopfront may not be original, but it is from at least 1949 (per a photo in a book of that date); transoms covered.
17. Contributing element. Circa 1930 plain one story brick commercial building. Shopfront replaced.
18. Non-contributing element. Historic one story commercial building that has received a modern façade.
19. Non-contributing element. Historic one story commercial building that has received a modern façade.
20. Contributing element. Lyons Building, built between 1904 and 1909. Two story brick commercial building with a corner entrance, segmental arch windows, pilasters separating the façade bays at the second story, and a multi-stage bracketed parapet. Although obscured by a metal awning, the Lyons Building retains its original cast-iron corner support column. The entrance behind is modern, but the transoms survive as does decorative tilework bearing the name "Lyons." The shopfronts also are modern, but tilework survives bearing the name "Happy Hour Café."
21. Vernon Parish Courthouse (1910; National Register), contributing element. This stucco over brick neo-classical building has two principal stories and a third story cupola. The courthouse's unusual footprint is that of a square with four small wings which project diagonally at each corner. Each elevation has a grand four-column colossal composite order pedimented portico with relief work in the tympanum. A rusticated treatment is found at each corner of the wings, and the cupola features a rich Baroque-style articulation.

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Non-contributing elements:

All of the five non-contributing buildings (24% of the total) are altered historic buildings, and hence maintain an appropriate scale and rhythm. In these cases the alterations were so severe that the buildings in question had completely or almost completely lost their historic character – generally through the application of metal facades.

Integrity of contributing elements:

Buildings were examined on a case by case basis by the state's National Register staff and a professional judgment call was made as to whether alterations were severe enough to warrant non-contributing status. In short, did the building still retain the bulk of its original appearance and/or its character defining features?

Contributing buildings with the most notable alterations are numbers 1, 4, 8 and 15. In the case of #1, despite unsympathetic alterations, the building retains the only decorative features it had when built – the 2 round arch openings bearing the date 1907 and the words “bank” and “theatre,” the paneled parapet, and the name “First National Bank Building” done in rusticated blocks. Clearly someone from the historic period would recognize the building, alterations notwithstanding. Building #4 has had its windows covered, but it still retains its distinguishing features – the paneled parapet matching building #1, its cutaway corner, and its bracketed cornice. The former Vernon Bank (#8) admittedly has had an important feature covered by modern tile – i.e., the Romanesque banking shopfront. Nonetheless, the large building retains its other distinguishing features (irregular placement of pilasters, jack arches and multiple brick dentil bands). Finally, the Hotel Leesville (#15) has lost its wooden gallery, an important feature, but it retains the remainder of its strong articulation (numerous segmental arch openings, bracketed cornice with a dentil band, distinctive curvilinear parapet, etc.).

Assessment of Integrity:

In addition to alterations to contributing buildings (as discussed above), one must also take into account loss of historic buildings. As noted previously, the nominated district is not all of downtown Leesville as it appeared at the close of the historic period (1950). In the 1920s, the line of buildings along Third began to expand south of the courthouse. By 1948 (per a Sanborn map), the commercial sector had expanded three blocks to the south (mainly on the west side, with all being one story). Today this area is largely redeveloped and consequently is not being included in this nomination. Also, historically there were two buildings just to the north of the Hotel Leesville (#15), where there is vacant land today. These buildings (both one story) were destroyed by a tornado within the last fifty years.

Even with these losses to the overall building stock, the Downtown Leesville Historic District meets the integrity litmus test for nominations being proposed for their historical significance. Because the blocks being nominated were the heart of the CBD, where the largest and most important buildings and the commercial anchors were located, the proposed district would be easily recognizable to someone who had shopped and banked there in the historic period. As explained in Part 8, the proposed district's buildings housed a good cross-section of the types of businesses and services available in the downtown in its heyday, including important institutions such as the community's three banks and its two hotels. Alterations and loss

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of historic buildings notwithstanding, one has a clear sense of being in a historic place in the nominated district.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National Register Criteria: A X B__ C__ D__

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): NA A__ B__ C__ D__ E__ F__ G__

Areas of Significance: commerce

Period(s) of Significance: c.1905-1950

Significant Dates: NA

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: unknown

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Downtown Leesville Historic District is locally significant in the area of commerce because of its important role as the center of commercial activity for Vernon Parish throughout the historic period. The period of significance spans from c.1905, the date of the earliest buildings, to 1950, the present National Register fifty year cutoff. Like downtowns across America, the Leesville CBD remained the principal place to shop until the 1960s when it was supplanted by strip development.

Vernon Parish, of which Leesville is the seat, was created in 1871. It is the state's third largest parish. Vernon's history is that of yeoman farmers, the coming of the Kansas City Southern railroad in the 1890s, a major lumber boom (long leaf pine) that lasted into the 1920s, and a second boom caused by the establishment of Camp Polk in 1941. Leesville was and is the only town of any size, and even its population was only between roughly two and three thousand during the historic period. Other communities, typically sawmill towns, had populations under 500.

Leesville, like the rest of the parish, depended upon the area's seemingly inexhaustible supply of timber for its prosperity. Two large sawmill plants were located nearby – Nona Mills, just to the north of downtown, and Gulf Lumber, two miles to the south. Of course, even the vast virgin timber stands of Vernon Parish could not feed industrial lumbering giants forever, and by the mid-1920s, the boom was over. The destruction of forests was so great that the parish, with an area of over 800,000 acres, was listed as 70 percent cutover land in 1938. Fortunately, Leesville received a much needed economic boost in 1941, when Camp Polk (now Fort Polk) was located there. During WWII Vernon and adjacent parishes were the scene of massive Army training exercises (the Louisiana Maneuvers) which eventually involved over 70,000 troops.

During the historic period Leesville was truly the only commercial center in the parish. With less than 500 inhabitants, other towns could have supported only a store or two – maybe even three. People living in sawmill towns typically had access to a lumber company-owned store. By contrast, the “big city” of Leesville offered a myriad of goods and services, housed in fine two and three story buildings. To the small farmer or sawmill worker, it must have been quite an occasion to go to the parish seat, perhaps on a Saturday to shop and spend the day. And during WWII the downtown was a favorite spot for troops stationed at Camp Polk and those in the area for the Louisiana Maneuvers (as documented in old photos).

Sanborn maps and other sources such as old photos document that the bustling parish seat of Leesville offered about anything a person needed or wanted. The buildings in the proposed district represent a good cross-section of commerce in the town, and fortunately all those housing Leesville's major commercial institutions survive. The ubiquitous general mercantile, found in various extant buildings, carried everything from clothing, to furniture, to patent medicines, to buggy harnesses. Very importantly, three bank buildings survive as do the town's two hotels (the National and the Hotel Leesville). Other surviving buildings housed drugstores, hardware and furniture stores, restaurants, barbers, an opera house, a theater, a jewelry store, confectioner shops, grocery stores, a dry goods and millinery shop, and a Ford dealership.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Maps, Leesville, 1904, 1909, 1915, 1922, 1928, 1948.

Historic photos of downtown Leesville, copies in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Vernon Parish Planning Board, *Vernon Parish Resources and Facilities*. Published in cooperation with State of Louisiana, Department of Public Works, Baton Rouge, April, 1949.

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage of Property: approx. 6 acres

UTM References: **Zone Easting Northing**
 15 475120 3445300

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundary is shown as a broken line on the attached sketch map.

Boundary Justification:

Boundaries were chosen to encompass the extent of the historic Leesville CBD. As noted in Part 7, the CBD started expanding southward from Lula in about 1910; however, this area is largely redeveloped and hence is being excluded from this submission.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: National Register staff

Address: Division of Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

Telephone: (225) 342-8160

Date: January 2001

PROPERTY OWNERS

multiple

Downtown Leesville Historic District
Vernon Parish, LA

▨ Contributing
⊠ non-contributing

--- BOUNDARY



1" = 80'

Lee St.

Texas St.

Courthouse St.

Lula St.

Third St.

