

HISTORIC RESOURCES WITHIN MUNICIPAL LIMITS

OF FAIRHOPE, AL.
(Multiple Resource)

Owner: Ben Barnhill
328 Fairhope Avenue
Fairhope, Al. 36532

Historic name: Bank of Fairhope
Common name: Press Register Building

Location: 396 Fairhope Avenue

Verbal boundary description:

Plan of Subdivision of Land, The Fairhope Single-Tax Corporation, 1911 plat, portion Lot 5, Block 12, Division 1. Begin at a point 34.8 feet west of the southwest corner of Section Street and Fairhope Avenue, run thence 27 feet west to a point, thence south 105.5 feet to a point, thence east 27 feet and thence north 105.5 feet to the point of beginning.

Acreage: Less than one

UTM: A-16/413/330/3376/880

Date of Construction: 1927

Architect/Builder: William March/M. Dyson
and Company

Statement of Significance

Period of Significance: 1927-1938

Criterion C-Architecture:

The Press Register Building is significant as one of the finest commercial buildings in Fairhope and as a good local interpretation of the Neo-Classical style of architecture. In addition, it is one of a very few buildings in town designed by an architect.

Criterion C-Commerce:

The Press Register Building is significant for its role as Bank of Fairhope from 1927-1938. This was the only bank in Baldwin County to weather the Depression without closing. In addition, its role in commerce and providing loans to farmers and families materially improved Fairhope's prospects.

Integrity:

The Press Register Building retains its integrity of design and location. The exterior integrity is excellent. The lettering "Press Register" replaces "Bank of Fairhope" and the exterior clock is non-historic. All other exterior features are original and unaltered.

First floor integrity is good though dropped ceilings, carpet and paneled partition cover the original walls and ceiling. The vault serves as a lounge and retains its arched doorway. Second floor integrity is good and the floor plan original. Original doors with transoms and hardware are throughout. Ceilings have been dropped and there

is new carpet. The front casement windows have interior, aluminum storm windows, hardly noticeable from outside. Though the stairs are carpeted, the second floor newel post is original.

Description:

Exterior. The Press Register Building is located on the south side of Fairhope Avenue between North Section and North Church Streets. The Fairhope Pharmacy, an aluminum clad 1916 structure, sits on the east side of the Press Register Building (and the corner with Section Street) and Fairhope Fabrics is on the west side. The Press Register Building itself is a Neo-Classical Revival two story structure with a three-bay facade. The walls are stuccoed clay tile, drawn off to resemble blocks and the roof is flat. A pair of two story Tuscan columns are distyle in antis. There is a full entablature above with dentil work and cornice and a parapet with escutcheon above this. The entrance consists of double wood and glass doors with a multi-light transom and concrete surround with escutcheon top center. A large round clock above this is non-historic. To either side of the entrance is a plate glass window with multi-light transoms. A single door on the east side leads upstairs. The second floor of the facade is broken by six pairs of narrow, single pane casement windows with stone sills.

Interior. The first floor is a large, open work space with paneled partitions at the rear half creating private office space. There is an arched entrance to the SW rear hallway. The vault, in the rear, is now used as a lounge. The interior ceilings are dropped. The stucco walls are drawn off to resemble blocks and there are engaged square columns along the side walls.

The stairway runs up the east side and has its own entrance. This leads to a suite of three rooms and two restrooms. The basic plan includes a large front room, hall with restrooms on the west side and then two rear rooms. Wood doors with crinkle glass windows, pressed glass knobs and transoms, are throughout. Walls are stucco with baseboard and chair rails. Ceilings are dropped, floors carpeted and modern office furnishings are located throughout.

Historical Summary:

Fairhope's first two decades were a struggle for survival amid the pine forests of Baldwin County. Lacking traditional agricultural opportunities, the community very quickly grew to depend on vacationers for its livelihood. By 1915 Fairhope had established a firm foothold on the Eastern Shore; the community had incorporated in 1908 and by 1912 there were over 500 people living there permanently. The commercial district consisted of frame buildings on dusty streets. A grocery, hardware store and general store were among the earliest businesses. Yet as late as 1916 Fairhope had no bank. In an effort to correct this, a group of citizens, including founder E. B. Gaston, approached a bank in Robertsdale in 1917 and requested assistance in organizing a financial institution for Fairhope. The Robertsdale bankers freely offered their help and the Bank of Fairhope was chartered August 8, 1917. Fairhope's new bank opened with a capital stock of \$10,000 and occupied a small building on South Section Street. Over \$5,000 was deposited the first business day. As the bank and Fairhope grew, plans were drawn up for a new bank building. The prominent local contractors M. Dyson & Company (the Gaston Bld., 1924 and the Bloxham Bld., 1932)

began construction in 1926 on a design by Mobile architect William March. On January 20, 1927 the Courier noted, "Good progress on new bank building. The two big pillars extending the height of the two stories are in place and give an idea of how attractive architecturally the front is to be."

Like so many other commercial buildings in town, the walls were constructed with hollow clay tile provided by the local firm of Clay Products Company. By March the new bank building was complete. The Courier noted that the "whole community takes a just pride." (Courier, 3/31/27). The Bank of Fairhope celebrated its tenth anniversary by moving into the building. Optimism was quickly dimmed by the Crash of '29 however. Fairhope felt the strain as people moved in from more impoverished areas seeking opportunity. In addition, the opening of the causeway into Mobile in 1927 diverted tourist traffic from Florida to the north. The Florida Land Boom, during the late 1920s convinced many Fairhoppers that the Single-Tax experiment was working to their advantage by foiling such unbridled speculation in their area. Despite hard times, the Bank of Fairhope weathered the Depression without closing. It was the only bank out of seven in Baldwin County to do this. With the return of a more stable financial environment, the Bank of Fairhope flourished. In 1959 it moved into a larger building and in 1962 merged with another bank. The splendid building on Fairhope Avenue served as a loan office from 1959 to 1971 when the Mobile Press Register opened its Baldwin County office in the building. They continue to occupy the first floor while the second is used as a real estate office.

