

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

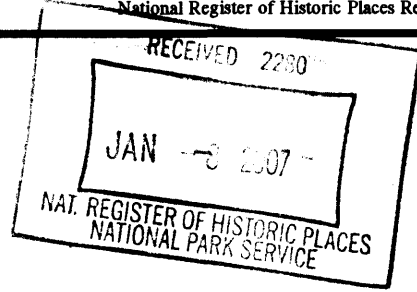
OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form



1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Muller's Department Store

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number 700 Ryan St.

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Lake Charles

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: Calcasieu Code: 019

Zip Code: 70601

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

Signature of Certifying Official/Title Jonathan Fricker Louisiana Deputy SHPO Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

January 4, 2007 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

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 2

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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):

Handwritten signature: Daniel J. Viana

Handwritten date: 2/15/07

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

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

Category of Property

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

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

- 1

Non contributing

- buildings
sites
structures
objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 3

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: commerce Sub: department store
Current: vacant Sub:

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: no style

Materials:

Foundation: concrete
Walls: brick
Roof: other: flexible plastic membrane
Other:

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 4

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Muller's Department Store is a three-story brick commercial building built in 1913 and enlarged at the rear in 1949. It is located on a prominent corner in downtown Lake Charles. Although the building has a pronounced character, the term "no style" is most appropriate. Thanks to a soon-to-be completed rehabilitation project, the exterior looks much as it did after the 1949 work. The owner is applying for the Register federal tax credit.

The Original Building

Constructed in 1913, Muller's Department Store is a massive 45,000 square foot block with a window display shopfront stretching across the 100 foot façade and all the way down the 123 foot side elevation. Like many a commercial building, Muller's was significantly "modernized" in the 1960s/'70s, including unsightly metal panels over the windows, panels over the shopfront transoms, large modern panels added to the fixed awning, etc. (See "before" photo.) All of this has been removed as part of the above referenced project.

The second and third floors of Muller's are divided into bays by massive two-story piers surmounted by a belt course and an entablature strip. The bays are taken up largely with groupings of one-over-one sash windows. Each bay also contains a series of belt courses to accent the brickwork between the second and third story windows. The bays are set off prominently by strips of blond brick accenting the piers and windows and contrasting with the reddish brown brick body of the building. As originally built, Muller's was capped by a stepped parapet in front and small elements at the corners and along the side elevation which gave the impression of continuing the piers (see early photo). These decorative elements of the parapet were removed in the 1949 remodeling (see below).

The central entrance opens into a huge 19 1/2 foot high shopping hall with a single story mezzanine at the rear. But like the exterior, the original interior had been drastically modified. Various sheetrock and wood partitions walls had been built, celotex dropped ceilings had been installed in the shopping hall, and the steel columns had been encased in sheetrock. All of these modifications have been removed.

The first floor shopping area is a hypostyle hall with two rows of round stripped-down Doric steel columns supporting structural beams formed of reinforced concrete. The beams are finished off as entablatures with boldly formed wood moldings. Along the party wall side is a metal catwalk. The mezzanine and the second and third floors feature plainer concrete posts supporting structural beams without decorative molding. All of the ceilings are finished off with narrow gauge beaded board. Work is in progress to subdivide (partially) the ground floor for offices and the upper floors for apartments. This work will be described below in the alterations section.

The display shopfront is divided into bays following the pattern of the previously mentioned piers. While the original large plate glass windows have been removed, the rear walls of the display windows and ceilings survive. The rear walls are richly articulated with wood paneling stained to resemble mahogany and frosted glass. The ceilings are coffered.

The 1949 Remodeling

In 1949, a large addition was made to the rear of the building, increasing its size by approximately

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 5

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

one-third. To make the addition complementary, the brick was matched to the original and the upper and lower brick belt courses were extended. The side elevation shopfront was extended to the rear. However, the addition, as built, had no windows and hence no piers, no contrasting blond brickwork, etc. The second major change made in 1949 was the removal of the parapet (making the original building match the addition). On the interior, sets of escalators bearing the brand name of Pelle Motor Stair were installed. These distinctive Modernistic "motor stairs" feature blue moving handrails with silver bands.

Alterations:

- (1) The exterior finishes and windows of the shopfront level are modern.
- (2) As noted previously, the stepped parapet has been removed from the original portion.
- (3) The shopping hall is being partially subdivided, following the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. The open character remains at the front and along one side. The steel columns, ceiling, entablatures, and cat walk will remain visible. Although it will not be functional, the escalator will remain in place. The upper floors, presumably used for storage, are being completely subdivided for apartments. The two story configuration of a few of the third floor apartments has created a small rooftop addition. The addition is set back several yards from both facades of the building. It is visible from the street only at a distance. (The rooftop addition has been approved for the tax credit by the National Park Service.)
- (4) As part of the in-progress rehabilitation project, windows have been added to the 1949 rear addition (to make the space viable for apartments).

Assessment of Integrity

Muller's underwent quite a transformation with the removal of the unsightly metal panels and other materials. As constructed in 1913, the building's chief character-defining elements were the system of piers and windows, the contrasting decorative brickwork and the parapet. The only one of these that does not survive is the parapet. The present owner planned to replicate the parapet, but this work item was denied for the tax credit by the National Park Service. The rationale was that the building would be restored to an appearance it never had. It never existed with both the parapet and the 1949 addition.

Regardless of the parapet, Muller's retains all the rest of its original exterior character. Perhaps the most important character-defining feature was the system of windows and piers – the building was mainly windows. Fortunately, the windows survived almost completely unscathed beneath the metal panels. And the handsome and extensive shopfront window treatment contributes greatly to the building's identity as a department store.

INFORMATION COMMON TO PHOTOS

Photographer: Donna Fricker
Location of negatives: LA SHPO
Date taken: October 2006

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 6

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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: 1913-1956

Significant Dates: 1913, 1949

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: unknown

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 7

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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

Muller's Department Store is locally significant in the area of commerce in two respects: (1) It played a very prominent role in the commercial life of the city. The phrase "commercial institution" comes readily to mind. (2) It is one of few historic buildings remaining to represent the commercial history of Lake Charles, which once boasted a large and splendid downtown. The department store is of particular interest because its founder and a key player in its early history was a woman, Julie Muller Marx. The period of significance spans from 1913 to 1956, the latter being the current National Register fifty year cutoff. (Muller's remained a commercial institution in downtown Lake Charles past the present 50 year cutoff.)

The mercantile establishment which opened in its new three story, 45,000 square foot home in 1913 was founded in 1882 by a young widow, Julie Muller. In 1870, at the age of sixteen, Julie Kaufman left her home in France to join her brother in Labadieville, Louisiana. She soon married, only to lose her husband in the yellow fever epidemic of 1878. Her brother was also deceased and she was left to care for herself and two small children. Her first mercantile endeavor was in New Orleans, where she opened a millinery shop. Soon she moved to Lake Charles, where in 1882 she established a mercantile business in a small one story frame building with commercial space in the front and living quarters at the rear. A 1921 history of the company published in the Lake Charles *American Press* shows a photo of the original Muller's and indicates that the mercantile space was 18 by 20 feet. By the late 1880s the one story frame building had been replaced by a two story frame building. In 1893 Julie Muller married Simon Marx, and in 1894, Muller's advanced yet another step by moving into a two story brick building, which was expanded at least twice before the present building was constructed in 1913. The company had incorporated in 1909 with Julie Muller Marx listed as president and her son, J. M. Muller, as manager. (Mr. Marx, Julie's second husband, had died in 1901.)

There is no doubt that the owners as well as the public considered the construction of the present building in 1913 to be the pinnacle of the firm's career. This is borne out in newspaper accounts celebrating the milestone as well as retrospectives written in the 1920s and '30s, also in the local paper. The newspaper coverage also testifies to the special place of Muller's in Lake Charles' commercial history.

In two articles covering together about one-and-a-half pages, *The American Press* bragged effusively about its hometown success story. A quite large rendering of the building, which was then almost ready for occupancy, led the coverage. An article beneath entitled "Store Most Conveniently Arranged for Shoppers" boasted: "The new building is one of the finest of its kind to be found anywhere in Louisiana, and in few cities of this size in the South with equipment so thorough and so in keeping with modern ideas of mercantile management. There is nothing that is modern and convenient needed in the store that has been left out in its design and construction." Much was made of its department store status, clearly something new in the city and of great interest. The physical character and amenities of the building and its departments were described in some detail, including a separate two column listing bearing the title "Where the Various Departments Will Be Found." Much was made of a ladies' restroom to be "furnished as a parlor." "Here ladies can meet and rest or await attention to business matters as they may desire. Writing facilities will be provided in this room; a maid will at all times be in attendance here." It was also of great import to the reporter that the owners had traveled to large department stores throughout the country as they formulated plans for a new Muller's. The importance of Muller's as a department store was echoed in a 1921 article on the company in which an employee spoke of the days before departments—when "a salesman waited on a customer without regard to departments" – when there were no specialists for different types of

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 8

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

merchandise.

The May 1913 coverage of the new Muller's also contained a long history of the company. Particular tribute was paid to Julie Muller Marx, who "laid the foundation for this magnificent business in the little one story frame building on Ryan Street." "Her energy, good taste and perseverance made the business a success from the start, and her cooperation and the benefit of her business experience form one of the chief factors that have been instrumental in bringing about the erection of the new home, which is shortly to throw open its doors to its large following in Southeast Texas and Southwest Louisiana."

The company matriarch apparently remained active until her death in 1924 at the age of 70. A lengthy article in the May 5, 1921 issue of *The American Press* covers a banquet given in Mrs. Marx's honor by the Muller Employees Welfare Association. Various tributes were paid to "her many fine qualities of womanhood, for her great devotion as a mother and for the wonderful business abilities she possesses." Speakers emphasized that the business she founded "has long been a boast of Lake Charles and Southwest Louisiana, both in point of size and the number of employees the store carries on its payroll." The only year for which employment figures are available is 1939, when the number was 103. By this time Adolph Marx, a son by the second marriage, was managing the business.

By the late 1940s business was good enough to warrant a major expansion of the building toward the rear, as detailed in Part 7. A 1950 photo shows quite a crowd of people lined up to attend the grand opening of the expanded Muller's. One imagines customers being quite amazed by the blue and silver "motor stairs." Adolph Marx remained at the helm in the 1960s, and the store remained in business until 1986, over one hundred years after the family enterprise was founded by a young widow.

By the time Muller's closed, downtown Lake Charles regrettably had suffered serious losses of integrity. Muller's itself had been modernized, but fortunately it was largely a matter of covering up rather than removing, as explained in Part 7. It is against the serious loss of integrity experienced by downtown Lake Charles that Muller's takes on additional commercial significance as one of a limited number of recognizably historic buildings remaining. The enormity of the loss can be documented in the city's historical development, old photos, and Sanborn maps. Lake Charles experienced a huge lumber boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The population grew significantly and building proceeded at a furious pace. Given the prosperity and the size of the city, one would expect a large and impressive CBD, and such was the case. Sanborn maps show some one hundred business houses in the 1920s, and old photos show a truly grand downtown with an urban character. Sadly, although the city retains a significant and large collection of historic residences, its downtown has been largely destroyed, due principally to a relentless campaign of demolition and modernization waged in the prosperous 1950s, '60s and '70s. The relatively few survivors share the space with altered historic buildings, new construction and gaping holes where historic buildings once stood.

Fortunately, there is now renewed interest and activity in the downtown, and the city administration and civic and business leaders are committed to preserving what remains. Several buildings have had their modern facades removed in the last few years. Because of this work, there are now about 20-25 recognizably historic buildings in the downtown (20-25% of what was there in the 1920s). Clearly the most important of these in terms of size and prominent location is Muller's. Because generations of Lake Charles natives have such fond memories of Muller's, it is perhaps appropriate that this onetime commercial institution be the centerpiece of downtown restoration activity.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 9

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

"The Muller Department Store Building Almost Ready" and "Business That Typifies Lake Charles Growth and Progress," *The American Press*, May 2, 1913.

"Muller Employes' [sic] Welfare Assn. Tender Banquet to Store's Founder," *The American Press*, May 5, 1921.

"Muller's Will Celebrate 57 Years in the City," *The American Press*, May 2, 1939.

Photos of Muller's, one showing its original appearance and one taken in 1950.

Historic photos of downtown Lake Charles.

Sanborn Insurance Company maps, Lake Charles, 1925.

Note: Copies of the newspaper articles and the old photos are in the National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

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):

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Muller's Department Store, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, LA

Page 10

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage of Property: less than an acre

UTM References: **Zone Easting Northing**
 15 479200 3344200

Verbal Boundary Description: Legal property description: Beginning at the northeast corner of the intersection of Ryan and Division Streets; thence running north on the east side of Ryan Street a distance of 100 feet; then go east a distance of 201.8 feet; thence south a distance of 100 feet; thence west a distance of 201.8 feet to the point of commencement.

Boundary Justification: Boundaries follow property lines of the parcel of land historically associated with the candidate.

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: October 2006

PROPERTY OWNERS

Roger K. Landry
Manager, Mullers Building Associates, LP
5 Piedmont Center, Suite 435
Atlanta, GA 30305