

Touro's Will

Ill-Fated Almshouse Would Have Been a Gothic Landmark in Today's Bywater

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, August 12, 2016

For every historical landmark we proudly retain in New Orleans, others have disappeared, and we can only ponder how these lost legacies might function in our cityscape today. Imagine, for example, heading down Chartres Street in Bywater and coming upon a colossal Gothic complex seemingly part cathedral, part fortress and part castle.

In fact, it began with a very different intention: as an almshouse, a shelter for elders and what were then called the “honest poor.” The project was the brainchild of Judah Touro (1775-1854), the famed Rhode Island-born merchant of Sephardic Jewish origins who amassed a fortune in New Orleans through shipping and real estate.



Touro's Alms House as it appeared around 1865 from the corner of Royal and Piety. Photograph by W.D. McPherson, Marshall Dunham Photograph Album, LSU Library.

Touro, who despite his wealth lived humbly, endeared himself to New Orleanians through his generous support of education, orphanages, health care and houses of worship. Touro's philanthropy continued after his death at age 78 in 1854, as he bequeathed his \$1 million estate (\$27 million today) to various causes.

Item #20 of his 60 bequests allocated \$80,000 “for the purpose of establishing an ‘Alms House’ (for) the prevention of mendicity.” Touro, who would die only twelve days after penning his will, further stipulated that control of the institution would eventually pass to “the Mayor of the City of New Orleans.” In effect, Touro had, through his private gift, planted the seeds for public-sector social welfare in an era when most such work was funded by civil society and organized religion.

The state incorporated the “Touro Alms House” in March 1855, after which the executors acquired land in the Third District courtesy a donation from Touro's old friend Rezin Davis Shepherd, who forty years earlier had helped Touro recover from a grievous injury suffered during the Battle of New Orleans. The parcel spanned 318 feet from Piety to Desire Street and 556 feet from Levee Street (now Crescent Park) back to halfway between 3300 Chartres and Royal, the former not yet having been cleared through.

The executors then offered \$500 for the best architectural design accommodating “400 to 450 pensioners” while costing no more than the bequeathed moneys, which had grown to \$125,000. “When completed,” predicted the *Picayune* upon perusing the thirteen submissions, “the Touro Almshouse will be one of the most noteworthy edifices of our city—a monument to the pure character, the genuine love of mankind and the true philanthropy of its immortal founder.”

The winner, announced January 1859, was William Alfred Freret Jr., a recent graduate of engineering studies in England and son of a former New Orleans mayor. Freret conceived a huge three-story masonry compound

featuring two crenellated four-story towers and ornately fenestrated walls topped with parapets and pinnacles. It was majestic, quite English, and emphatically Gothic.

Freret left no explanation of his stylistic rationale, but two factors were likely at play. For one, he probably aspired to bring dignity to the indigent residents through architectural grandeur, and Gothic did this well. Relatedly, this was an era when architects shifted their muse from the buildings of classical antiquity to those of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The former gave rise to the Greek Revival architecture of the early 1800s, and the latter brought forth the Italianate, Romanesque (Norman) and Gothic styles of the mid- to late-1800s. In New Orleans, Italianate proved popular for residences, whereas designers of commercial and institutional buildings leaned more toward Romanesque and other styles. Gothic never really caught on locally, but there were some notable specimens, with their signature trait being the ogive, or pointed arch above doors and windows. Two of the earliest Gothic edifices in New Orleans, St. Patrick's Church on Camp Street (1840) and the U.S. Maritime Hospital in Algiers (1848), both exemplified the appeal of this style for buildings of religious, health, and, in the case of Touro's Alms House, charitable uses.

With William Freret's blueprints in hand and the riverfront site cleared, local builders Samuel Jamison and James McIntosh got to work on the almshouse in spring 1859. But they would be frustrated by constant delays and soaring costs, to \$206,000, an overrun that would call for more generosity on the part of co-benefactor Shepherd.

What stalled the work was a mounting crisis of unprecedented proportions, culminating with the dissolution of the Union and outbreak of the Civil War. New Orleans was now the largest city in the Confederate States of America, and even as its port was blockaded, the city's largest private construction project persevered. By April 1862, the Touro Alms House was all but complete.

Later that month, Captain David Farragut's Union fleet charged the Confederate bastions at the mouth of the Mississippi. After a ferocious nocturnal naval battle, the warships broke through and sailed unmolested to take the Queen City of the South.

En route, Union sailors would have seen scores of plantations houses, sugar mills and warehouses. But the first truly salient landmark would have been the Touro Alms House. In the distance they would have seen plumes of smoke wafting skyward, the handiwork of rebels determined to deprive the enemy of spoils by igniting wharves and cargo. Union troops landed shortly thereafter and entered the undefended city. Days later, Maj. Gen. Butler wrote to President Abraham Lincoln, "New Orleans...is at your command."

So too was the Touro Alms House, which made for a perfect federal base. Union troops occupied it immediately and proceeded to fill the interior with gun racks, provisional bunks and a kitchen.

In August, Butler declared the Alms House to be an official "mustered headquarters for native guards," according to a later congressional investigation. This included the 1st Louisiana Native Guard, a federal fighting force of escaped slaves and free men of color. Within a few months, 1800 African-American men enlisted at the Alms House and mustered into twenty companies, whereupon some would see action at Port Hudson in 1863 and elsewhere. Among them were Captain Andre Cailloux, one of the first black Union officers killed in Civil War combat, and Captain P.B.S. Pinchback, who would later become the nation's first African-American governor. In January 1864, the Alms House was used as a recruiting depot for the Corps d'Afrique.

By this time, Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, making the conflict a war of liberation as well as a rebellion suppression. Although the executive order pointedly excluded federally occupied territories such as New Orleans, thousands of enslaved people nonetheless read the tea leaves of history and emancipated themselves.

Having nowhere else to go, they gravitated to union encampments for food and shelter, including Camp Parapet in Jefferson Parish and probably the Touro Alms House as well. To wit, a December 1862 article in the *Daily Delta* mentioned African American women and children at the Alms House, suggesting that black civilians as well as soldiers experienced their first moments of freedom here.

After the Confederate surrender in April 1865, New Orleans remained occupied even as many troops were sent home. Union officials no longer needed the Alms House, and aimed to vacate after September 1, 1865.

It was an ill-fated deadline by a matter of hours. On the last afternoon of their occupancy, troops were baking beans in the oven they had installed three years earlier. Because the architect Freret had not designed this particular room to be a kitchen, there was no chimney, so the troops connected their oven to a flue originally intended for ventilation. Unbeknownst to them, every time they cooked, sparks had been rising up an air duct replete with fissures and combustibles. They just didn't ignite.

At 10:40 p.m. on September 1, 1865, they ignited.

Flames burst from atop the Piety Street wall, straight above the oven. Alarms were sounded; the 53 remaining troops evacuated and formed a bucket brigade, while horse-drawn steam pumps were summoned. But coal sparks ignited tar on the roof, and the flames spread. To make matters worse, someone cried "Powder!"—erroneously, it turned out—and fear of an explosion sent firefighters scrambling, which allowed the blaze to get out of control. "During the conflagration," stated writers of a government investigation, "men...were heard to say that 'the baked beans had fired the building.'"

By dawn, Judah Touro's Gothic gift was a belated war casualty. The ruins stood until 1867, when the city cleared the bricks for the right-of-way of what is now 3300 Chartres.



Ruins of Touro's Alms House appear in the distant left of this 1867 detail taken from Holy Angels Convent in present-day Bywater. Courtesy Tulane Southeastern Architectural Archive.

Touro's "castle" was gone, but his gift endured. Remaining funds were supplemented by claims filed against the federal government, as well as by Mayor Joseph Shakespeare's "gamblers' fund" raised through steep licensing fees on betting houses. A new alms house was built in 1895 on present-day Daneel between Joseph and Nashville, and like the original, it too was Gothic. In 1901 control of the fund shifted to a city commission and the alms house was renamed Touro-Shakespeare. In 1927 the uptown site was sold and subdivided for residences, and a new home was established in 1933 at 2650 General Meyer Avenue in Algiers. Though that building has been empty since 2005, the Touro-Shakespeare Home remains under city control today—just as Judah Touro stipulated.

As for the 1862 almshouse, its footprint has become obscured by bank erosion, levee realignment and riverfront changes, all of which have subsumed old Levee (North Peters) Street. Had it survived, Touro's Alms House would be a major Bywater landmark today, looking something like the Old Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge—another castle-like Gothic building of the 1850s involving architect William Freret.

Next time you climb Crescent Park's "rusty rainbow" pedestrian bridge, look toward the lake, the river, and Desire Street: these four acres were all within Touro's Alms House. Gothic arches would have surrounded you, and elegant pinnacles would have towered over your head.

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The Touro Alms House occupied the lower half of the area seen in this photo, which is now Bywater's Crescent Park between Piety and Desire streets. Photo by Richard Campanella.