

A CURIOSITY ON CARONDELET AT CANAL:

The Pickwick Turret, 1884–1948

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA, TULANE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

FORTS AND CASTLES ASIDE, turrets are usually ornamental, inspired by the same architectural muse that put follies in gardens and serpents on downspouts. But turrets have the power to catch the eye and bring distinction to buildings, and that's not trivial — particularly for institutional and commercial structures in busy, bustling cityscapes.

Canal Street in downtown New Orleans formed just such an environment, from the 1840s to the 1960s, and there, like elsewhere, architects devised strategies to draw eyes to clients' investments. Touro Row (1852), for example, had a cast-iron verandah shading the entire block between Royal and Bourbon streets. Godchaux's Department Store (1899) had a stained-glass entrance canopy and a landmark corner cupola, while the Chess, Checkers, and Whist Club (1892) had two cupolas and a line of finials. Particularly striking was the ornate dome atop the Mercier Building, which, like D.H. Holmes department store, also sported a steeply pitched Second Empire mansard roof. And just about every storehouse along Canal, from wholesalers to retailers, donned some mix of protruding signs, painted ads, jovial caricatures, or oversized baubles (hats, clocks, etc.) indicating the wares inside.

Then there was the Pickwick turret, an iconic novelty standing for over 60 years at the heart of the downtown commercial district. While later generations would associate the cylindrical feature at the corner of Carondelet and Canal streets with Fellman's or Feibleman's clothing store, it was originally designed for the exclusive Pickwick Club. "Pickwickians" were influential businessmen who, in 1857, had launched the Mistick Krewe of Comus and forever changed New Orleans Mardi Gras by introducing majestic tableau-based parades to what was previously an informal street fête. Personal associations among members went beyond Carnival and into civic, economic and social affairs, even after their later split from the Krewe of Comus.

By 1880, the Pickwickians operated their clubhouse in the upper floors of a building on Canal and Exchange Alley. Seeking a bigger space in a better location, they leased a French-owned 64-by-128-foot parcel at the prominent corner of Canal and Carondelet, within steps of three other private clubhouses: the Boston Club, the Louisiana (later Harmony) Club, and Chess, Checkers, and Whist. In May 1882, Pickwick president James G. Clark issued a call for architects to submit design proposals for the new Pickwick Club, and, after receiving 13 submissions, awarded the commission to the St. Louis firm of Hinsdale & Marble. Construction would be done by contractor H. Gally at a cost of \$132,000.

It's hard to say what won over the Pickwickians in selecting Hinsdale & Marble's Queen Anne-style proposed design for the four-story mixed-use structure. The sketch included retail space for a tenant on the Canal-facing ground floor and a main clubhouse entrance on Carondelet, leading up a grand staircase to a drawing room, dining and meeting spaces, a library, game rooms, vari-



Former Pickwick Club around 1905, by which time it housed Fellman's Store. Photo courtesy Library of Congress

ous apartments and a grand assembly hall seating 400 people on the fourth floor, all served by the latest electrical elevators and dumbwaiters. Interiors were perfectly elegant, but the most striking feature, set amid a façade of attractive late-Victorian detailing, was the corner turret.

Higher than the main roof at over four stories tall, and paired with a smaller version farther up Carondelet, the Pickwick turret was technically a bartizan, mounted on corner walls and overhanging, as one might picture on a Medieval bastion or castle. Its base was supported by a corbel of three short, closely positioned Corinthian marble columns set at grade level and adorned with winged gargoyles. The fact that this element was built first, plainly visible to pedestrians at eye level, is probably what led a *Daily Picayune* (June 16, 1883) journalist to comment on the "magnificence" of the "superb marble columns on the corners of the [club]house."

Only as construction progressed did it become apparent that these "columns" would broaden into a turret of cylindrical rooms, floor above floor, each with three curved stained-glass double-hung windows. The apex of the turret, shaped as if turned on a lathe, was topped with a copper-roofed shallow-pitched saucer (umbrella) dome. Viewed from afar, the entire feature looked something like a ceremonial fountain pen. It was delightful.

Perhaps the turret was the flair of a 25-year-old architect named Isaac J. Knapp,

who came down from New York to collaborate with Hinsdale & Marble on the project. Knapp may have been responsible for most if not all of the design, given that he was selected for the honor of laying the first brick in a ceremony on January 4, 1883.

Completed by June 1884, the Pickwick Club for the next decade symbolized the Crescent City aristocracy, just as its pearl-white turret marked the absolute heart of downtown New Orleans. An apothecary rented the retail space on Canal, and served a steady stream of customers, but only club members and guests could enter the private club entrance on Carondelet. During Mardi Gras, the Pickwick Club was the prime spot for parade-viewing, and the turret's curved windows were *the* prime spot in the Pickwick Club.

Until, that is, one night in 1894, when a small fire ignited, probably in the electrical motor room on the ground floor. The drafty elevator shaft communicated the flames upward, and "the woodwork inside," reported the *Daily Picayune* on March 16, "burned with such rapidity that the fourth floor finally gave way, and the flames shot through the roof." By dawn, "one of the most famed and fashionable [clubs] in the south, [its building] a model of architectural advance and about the most beautiful on [Canal] Street," was all but a shell upstairs, and a pile of wet ash down below.

But the turret, with its stout circular brick walls and few combustibles, stood strong.

Because the Pickwickians had leased the land at Carondelet Street, the club

was able to move to a new location, and in 1896 settled into 1028 Canal St. (a building that, incidentally, burned catastrophically in January 2016, by which time the Pickwick Club had long resettled into its current space at 115 St. Charles Ave. at the corner of Canal Street).

As for the turreted wreck on Carondelet and Canal, local architects Toledano and Reusch were hired to repair the damage and put the building back into productive use at the busy intersection. That opportunity caught the attention of an up-and-coming merchant by the name of Leon Fellman.

Fellman had arrived at New Orleans in 1864 and learned the merchant trade in one of a number of Jewish-owned downtown department stores. In the 1870s, he and his brothers set off to establish Fellman's on Canal Street, where they specialized in fine women's clothing and eventually moved into the Mercier Building (1887), the domed landmark at the corner of Canal and Dauphine streets. When the Mercier Building was remodeled in 1897 for a sole tenant — the new competing department store of Maison Blanche — Fellman looked across Canal Street and found the repaired former Pickwick Club to be ideal for his budding operation. He had the interior rearranged for retail use and reopened his enterprise by 1898.

Three years later, yet another fire destroyed the interior, but Fellman, using insurance claims, had the building repaired yet again. The remodeling included the addition of stout balconies on the façade, cleverly masking unsightly fire escapes and making for ideal viewing of Carnival parades once again.

For the next decade and a half, Fellman's thrived on this corner, specializing in fine garments. Profits earned at this flagship location went into other investments, and Fellman became something of a local real estate tycoon. He was also a mentor to young aspiring merchants within his community, among them Max and Leopold Feibleman, brothers who, after Fellman's retirement in 1918, took over the store.

Renamed Feibleman's, the company had the store remodeled and expanded in 1919. Six years later, it built a much larger modern building on Baronne and Common streets and merged with Sears-Roebuck, moving in 1931 into what everyone called "the Sears on Baronne." That left the turreted building open for other tenants, including Stein's discount clothier, a hotel, and during World War II, the United Service Organization (USO). Here, thousands of "soldiers, sailors, Marines, paratroopers, WAACs, and other service men and service women," as the Times-Picayune reported in 1943, would register upon arriving in town and use it as a home base for their needs.

Once the war was over, the aging edifice found itself inadequate for modern needs. Photographs from the era show that the once-gleaming façade had become weathered and dingy. The Gus Mayer Company, a locally founded department store which expanded throughout the South, wanted a Modern-style building to match the postwar zeitgeist, and acquired the property in 1946 for \$750,000 with plans to demolish and rebuild anew. The landmark turret's days were numbered.

The wrecking ball swung in May-June 1948, and even in its destruction, the edifice earned praise: "I've been in the wrecking business since 1936," Louis Haeuser of the National Lumber and Demolishing Company told the *New Orleans States*, "and I never saw such a well-built building. It had wonderful cypress beams. It stood there 70-odd years."

The Queen Anne landmark was replaced with a 50,000-square-foot Modernist building notable for its four-story window on Canal and its curving, streamlined negotiation of the corner at Carondelet. The Gus Mayer department store would operate here for 40 years, until a wave of closures swept through downtown New Orleans in the 1980s-1990s, claiming both Sears and the Maison Blanche, among many others.

The circa-1949 Gus Mayer building is now occupied by a CVS chain drug store, and the once-famous Carondelet turret is all but a memory.



ABOVE: Pickwick turret around 1900.
RIGHT: Turret of former Pickwick Club around 1907, during Mardi Gras.
Photos courtesy Library of Congress



RICHARD CAMPANELLA,

a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of *Cityscapes of New Orleans*, *Bourbon Street: A History*, *Bienville's Dilemma*, and other books.

He may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or [@nolacampanella](https://twitter.com/nolacampanella) on Twitter.