

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Proud Pilotheuses

The Lower Ninth Ward was devastated in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina pummeled the City of New Orleans. Nowhere in the city was this destruction greater than in this area between the Industrial Canal and the Saint Bernard Parish boundary, especially the portion from Claiborne Avenue back. This was in great part due to the storm surge created in the Mr. GO (Mississippi River Gulf Outlet), the name for the deep-draft shipping channel built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1950s. Storm surge waters not only flooded Lower Ninth Ward homes, but smashed or knocked down many off their very foundations. The Doullut steamboat houses were a welcome exception, and two of the most striking edifices in the New Orleans area.

These impressive structures sit proudly on either side of Egania Street at numbers 400 and 503. 400 Egania, originally closer to the river, was the first of the two to be built in 1905 by Steamboat Captain Milton P. Doullut as his personal residence. When the levee was moved back from the Mississippi, so was the house. The second twin dwelling was built in 1913 for his Milton's son Paul (born in New Orleans, November 5, 1881), also a river pilot. This was not so unusual since Milton P. Doullut's wife was also a captain and is said to have been the first woman to hold a Mississippi riverboat pilot's license.

Nautical themes and steamboat details dominate the Milton P. Doullut home. The upper story, which replicates a riverboat pilothouse, was originally designed to serve as Captain Doullut's bedroom. But the breezy room with its panoramic 360-degree view proved a little too chilly for everyday comfort. It is indeed a miracle that these magnificent Gothic/Victorian "steamboat houses" both remain intact after the utter force of Hurricane Katrina and its particularly vicious assault on the immediate neighborhood. Perhaps their salvation was being wisely situated on high ground close to the river.

Giant Cypress balls of varying sizes, strung in a double garland like an elegant necklace, surround the second level porches of the homes. A commanding double stairs ascends to a stately front entrance door opening on to a gallery that wraps around the entire upper level. Between full-length windows are elongated stained glass portholes at the corners, and (instead of brick chimneys) there are metal smokestacks akin to a steamboat's stacks flanking the pilothouse level. The structure features molded metal walls, which a newspaper article (over a century ago) explained were painted "sea green" and intended to prevent dampness. □□Steamboat House Number 2 at 503 Eganias has ceilings painted a beautiful sky blue, designed to fool wasps from affixing their nests above.

In 1977 both houses were designated historic landmarks by the New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission. The houses have two significant design influences, the first being the elaborately ornate steamboats prevalent in that period. The galleries are like deep "steamboat decks" that encircle the houses. The inner hallways are narrow, while the pilothouses provide breathtaking views up and down the river. A great deal of tin was used in the building construction, and the woodwork is reminiscent of Mississippi riverboats. The second big design influence was the Japanese exhibit at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis (Louisiana Purchase Exposition). This accounts for the pagoda-styled concave roofs at both the second levels and above the pilothouses, as well as the glazed tile covering the Ionic columns. The World's Fair opened a year late, missing the one-hundredth anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase in 1903.

A few years back, Don Gagnon, owner of the Milton P. Doullut home, Doullut's descendant and a river pilot to boot, welcomed host Kevin O'Connor of the long-running PBS series "This Old House" for a tour of the gorgeous Gothic mansion. Sitting like a proud peacock amongst lesser design offerings, this gem and its twin have achieved international fame and have appeared in numerous European architectural publications.

What is more, these beautiful houses have (as one would imagine) many of the classic characteristics of other Louisiana plantation homes. Although these two steamboat houses are no longer identical - years of wear, different owners and hurricane force winds have brought about considerable changes - they are still worth a visit downriver to see two of the most remarkable architectural citadels still standing tall against the forces of nature.

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