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Annunciation Street site of old Schwegmann's now being converted into apartment complex

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER AUG 30, 2019 - 6:00 AM

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Swegmann Bros. Giant Super Markets on Annunciation Street; 1996 photo by Richard Campanella, "New Orleans Then and Now."

Photo provided by Richard Campanella

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This summer, a tract in the Lower Garden District bounded by Annunciation, Thalia, Melpomene and Constance streets has seen a flurry of construction. But interest in this area isn't anything new. It's been prime real estate outside the French Quarter for 250 years, with a Schwegmann's grocery as one of its better-known occupants.

Its next life will be as an apartment complex.

The property was part of a larger tract owned by the Jesuits until 1763, when they were kicked out of Louisiana. Enter Thomas Saulet, who purchased a portion of it that same year.

Here's a quick timeline:

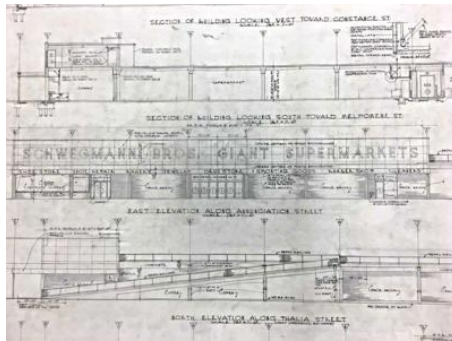
- Starting in 1807, architect and surveyor Barthélemy Lafon created plans to develop the Lower Garden District, with the street grid and the Muses streets among his lasting contributions. Another part of this plan was creating small faubourgs, which included Faubourg Saulet.
- Thomas Saulet's son Francois built a new mansion there, replacing an earlier structure, in 1832.

- The Sisters of Charity purchased the house in 1870 and operated St. Simeon's Select School there until 1912.
- According to a New Orleans Public Library story, it was used as a parochial school for St. Theresa of Avila Parish, followed by St. Luke's Private Sanitarium, a mental hospital.
- The house returned to its original family when Leona Saulet Soniat bought it, eventually establishing in 1924 the Leonce M. Soniat Memorial Mercy Hospital. When the new Mercy Hospital opened in 1953 on South Jefferson Davis Parkway, the hospital on Annunciation closed.

Enter Schwegmann Bros. Giant Super Market, which bought the house and property in 1959; the house was torn down so a grocery store could be built.

In 1960, Schwegmann's had started an expansion throughout the New Orleans area, with the location at 1319 Annunciation St. its sixth store, opening in 1962. The contractor was S. Guillot & Sons, and the architect was Edward M.Y. Tsoi. By 1995, there were 18 Schwegmann's in the New Orleans area.

This new, 36,000-square-foot building had several unique features, including parking on the roof for employees, a feature that was also part of the North Broad Street store (now a Whole Foods) that opened in 1965.



Original architectural plans for the Schwegmann's on Annunciation Street. The architect was Edward M.Y. Tsoi.

Provided photo by Tulane University
Special Collections Southwestern
Architectural Archives

The Annunciation location also had a jewelry department, one of several retail innovations that John G. Schwegmann Jr. implemented. Schwegmann, the grandson of the founders who opened the original store at Piety and Burgundy streets in 1869, is often credited with conceiving and pioneering the superstore concept.

In the 1995, Schwegmann Giant Super Markets purchased Canal Villere and the Real Superstore grocery stores. The debt it assumed and other

issues with the acquisition

put Schwegmann's into financial trouble, and the business was sold in 1997 to out-of-town investor Kohlberg & Co. The family, through its companies, kept the real estate, leasing the stores to a Kohlberg subsidiary, which went into bankruptcy. The store was closed soon after.

The Kohlberg bankruptcy caused the Schwegmann family business interests to file for bankruptcy, allowing for a third party to acquire both the building and real estate.

In 1999, Robert Fresh Market took over the Annunciation Street lease and ran a grocery store there until after Hurricane Katrina. In 2006, the third party sold the land and building to Annunciation Development Co., of which Robert Fresh Market's Marc L. Robert II is an officer.

Annunciation Development Co. and Edwards Communities Construction are now building a new, four-story apartment complex on the site.

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