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Lighthouse on Camp Street a beacon for the curious

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER AUG 1, 2019 - 7:45 AM

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Lighthouse building: A photograph circa 1920 of the Lighthouse for the Blind building on 743 Camp St. near Julia Street. An early model automobile is parked curbside. The lighthouse design was based on the one in Milneburg.

Right: The building in 2019 is available for special events.

Left: Photo courtesy Historic New Orleans Collection The Franck-Bertacci Collection right: Sue Strachan | Staff photo

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As Camp Street winds its way through New Orleans following the Mississippi River, there's plenty of interesting architecture to see, but one building stands out: The Lighthouse at 743 Camp St., between Julia and Girod streets.

Today, it is used as an event rental for pop-up shops and art shows ("Malarky: A Visionary Art Pop-Up Show," on view Aug. 2 to 11), and most recently, as Essence Festival's Wellness House.

But it was created for a far different purpose, and its design, mimicking a real lighthouse, carried a symbolic message.

In 1924, Simon James Shwartz, CEO of Maison Blanche Department Store on Canal Street, wanted to create a workshop for the blind.

Ned Hemard, who writes a weekly history column for the New Orleans Bar Association, cites a story in *The Times-Picayune* dated Nov. 16, 1924, which said that Shwartz "conceived the idea of the workshop for the blind on Camp Street: that now faces the world in surprising architecture of a literal lighthouse, unequivocally indicating its foundation and purpose of leading its beneficiaries from darkness to light."

The novelty architecture was a fad of the day. Other novelty buildings were the Brown Derby, a derby-shaped restaurant on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles (built in the 1920s and torn down in 1980); the Big Duck in Flanders, N.Y., which was constructed in 1931 for a duck farmer to sell his products; and the Wigwam Hotels, built in the 1930s and '40s, shaped like tepees. Three of the hotels remain -- in Kentucky, Arizona and California. The Big Duck and the hotels are on the National Register of Historic Places.

The architect of the lighthouse was Emile Weil, who also designed the Saenger Theatre. Oscar Gwin Jr. was in charge of construction. The lighthouse portion of the building was modeled after the Milneburg lighthouse, located on the UNO campus where Pontchartrain Beach amusement park was located.

There are plans to renovate the Milneburg Lighthouse, but in 2017 it was on the Louisiana Landmarks Society list as a historic site threatened by demolition, neglect or bureaucracy.

Inside the downtown building, Lighthouse clients learned job skills by making brooms. These brooms played an important part in two major events.

Hemard said the brooms were used by women supporters of the “clean sweep with Morrison” movement during the 1946 mayor's race. DeLesseps “Chep” Story Morrison won the election.

The other occasion was one Judge J. Skelly Wright recounted in the book “Unlikely Heroes,” by Jack Bass. Wright watched black blind people and white blind people being guided into separate entrances at the Lighthouse to do their jobs. “The blind couldn’t segregate themselves. They couldn’t see,” he said. “There was an effect on me.”

In 1951, Skelly was part of a three-judge federal panel that ordered Louisiana State University to admit black law students.

In 1948, Lighthouse President Edwin T. Colton moved the organization to another building on Camp Street, before going to 123 State St., where it is today.

The Lighthouse building became the headquarters for Fletcher Equipment and Supplies, a construction and road-building firm. Family member Mrs. Fletcher Maumus sold the building in 1994 to Martha Robbins and two partners, who founded Lighthouse Glass.

Robbins remembers that when they moved in it was like a walk back in time, as vintage office equipment and knick-knacks, such as ashtrays, were still there.

Renovations made it one of the largest glass studios in the South. Post Hurricane Katrina, Robbins scaled back operations, but the three glass ovens are still there. The building is just over 10,000 square feet, but the lighthouse area is empty because it is hard to access: One must climb a ladder from the first floor, through a trap door, to the second floor, where a staircase starts.

And, the rotating light still works.

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Clarification: In an earlier version of the story, it may not have been clear that the Milneburg Lighthouse was on the Louisiana Landmarks Society list.

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