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Not-so-neutral design lets Swiss chalet-style home stand out in New Orleans

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER JUL 26, 2019 - 7:00 AM

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The Bullitt-Longenecker house, built 1868 to 1869, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1981. The facade was donated to the Preservation Resource Center in 1995. This photo was taken in 1968 by Betty Swanson.

Photo by Betty Swanson/ courtesy of Tulane University Special Collections Southeastern Architectural Archives

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In a city full of shotguns, Creole cottages, Greek Revival and Eastlake-style abodes, American town houses and California bungalows, a Swiss villa on Carondelet Street stands out for its unique style and history.

Designed by well-known architect Edward Gottheil and built between 1868 and 1869, the house has seen great change. It was uprooted from its original St. Charles Avenue location in about 1883 — that site eventually became the Columns Hotel — and was carved up into apartments in the 1920s to '40s, before being renovated and listed in 1981 on the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, it's one of only three chalet-type homes in New Orleans, according to the National Register Database.

The house is of frame construction, raised on 8-foot brick pillars. Its most noticeable feature is the façade, with the deep overhang of its roof and gingerbread “drapery,” which trims the roof

and windows. It is five bays wide with the entrance in the center, leading to a broad center hall.

The National Register Database says it is the only house in New Orleans that exhibits direct European influence.

According to the Daily Picayune in 1868: "The plan as we understand, was brought from Europe by Mr. Gottheil, our Commissioner to the Paris Exposition, who is giving his personal supervision to the construction." A year earlier, Gottheil had been appointed chief commissioner from Louisiana to the International Exposition of Paris.

Gottheil's client for the Swiss-style home was Cuthbert Bullitt, businessman, collector of customs at New Orleans under President Abraham Lincoln, and "a connoisseur of beautiful things," according to a New Orleans States article from 1924.

Bullitt was notorious, having scandalized New Orleans society with his elopement in 1829 with Eliza White, daughter of Col. Maunsel White, a politician, merchant and planter, and for supporting the Union in the Civil War.

Bullitt chose the Swiss villa design, possibly because it stood out from the other homes, and had it built facing St. Charles Avenue between Gen. Taylor and Peniston streets.

In 1881, the house was purchased by Frederick Ford Hansell and was called “Hansell’s Cottage.” Two years later, Simon Hershheim, a cigar manufacturer, bought the house, then moved it to its current location on Carondelet, bounded by Amelia and Foucher streets.

In its place, Hershheim built a mansion where the Columns Hotel is now located. That house was designed by Thomas Sully during his Italianate phase in New Orleans, and according to the National Database, it remains true to the design despite the alterations through the years.

In 1884, Hershheim sold the Swiss villa to John G. Parham, and subsequent owners have included Ferdinand Marks, who bought it 1887, and J.C. Murphy, who owned the house in 1924, according to a States-Item article.

Current owner Henry Folse said Murphy owned it the longest, including during the Depression and World War II, when he thinks the house

was divided into apartments, with Folse noting doorbells in weird locations.

He conjectured that the main floor was divided into three apartments, two or three apartments in the basement, with one unit at the top floor.

In 1975, the Swiss villa — some call a Swiss chalet — was purchased by Geoffrey Longenecker, the son of Tulane University President Herbert Longenecker. Folse said Longenecker started renovations. In 1980, Drs. Lynn and Harold Neitzschman Jr. became the owners, continued the renovations and had the house listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1981.

Folse and his wife, Joan, bought the house in 1995, the same year of a façade donation to the Preservation Resource Center. In this type of the donation, the owners relinquish the right to change the façade of a building without permission from the organization to which the easement is given.

According to the National Register Database, “most of the chalet type houses nationwide have disappeared. There are only three

examples in New Orleans, of which the Bullitt-Longenecker House is the largest and most elaborate.”

The other two are on St. Charles Avenue (formerly owned by musician and composer Terence Blanchard) and in the Garden District, owned by actress Sandra Bullock.



The Bullitt-Longenecker House, constructed in 1868 to 1869, was built in a Swiss chalet (or villa) style.

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Folse became attracted to his house as a child, when his mother, who was a teacher at Live Oak Elementary School, took Carondelet Street as an alternative car route because, “she

considered traffic on St. Charles Avenue as too much even then,” he said. Looking out the window, “I became aware of the unique look.”

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