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Old U.S. Mint makes a mark in the French Quarter

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER OCT 3, 2019 - 4:00 PM

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The Old U.S. Mint as it faces Esplanade Avenue, 1880-1901. The mint was still making coins at this time. The building was erected 1835 and 1838, designed by William Strickland, built by John Mitchell and Benjamin F. Fox.

Provided photo by Detroit Publishing Co courtesy Library of Congress

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Entering the Old U.S. Mint, visitors are greeted by the sights and sounds announcing that it is the New Orleans Jazz Museum.

Though this corner of Esplanade Avenue at the Mississippi River is now dedicated to music, its early years were less harmonious.

During the French and Indian War (1754-63), the city was under threat of being captured by British forces coming down the Mississippi River. France built a defense system with earthworks and a moat enclosing the area known today as the French Quarter.

Protecting it were nine bastions. Charles' Bastion was located on the end of lower Esplanade Road, where the Old U.S. Mint is.

Though Spain took over the territory in 1762, it wasn't until 1792 that a plan was approved by Spanish Gov. Francois Louis Hector, Baron de Carondelet, to build five forts linked by embankments around the city. One of the five was Fort San Carlo, which was the largest, located at the site of the old Charles' Bastion. In

1802, Spain sold the Louisiana Territory to France, which in turn sold it to the U.S. in 1803, and the fort was renamed Fort St. Charles.

Gen. James Wilkinson took possession of the territory for the U.S., and when he got to New Orleans, he found the forts in bad condition. Four were demolished, and Fort St. Charles remained as a barracks and ordnance depot until 1821, when it was torn down.

For 15 years, the area was a commons named Jackson Square. Then, on March 3, 1835, the U.S. Mint in New Orleans was created by an Act of Congress. William Strickland designed a Greek Revival building for the site bounded by Esplanade Avenue, Barracks, Decatur and North Peters streets.

It was erected between 1835 and 1838 by builders John Mitchell and Benjamin F. Fox. Strickland was also the architect for the Second Bank of the United States in Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Merchant Exchange.

In 1861, Louisiana seized the mint after it seceded from the Union; two months later became part of the Confederate States of America. It was the only mint where

Confederate and American coins were struck. It went back to U.S. possession after the city was captured and occupied in 1862.

It wasn't until 1878, however, that the mint was reopened. In "New Orleans Then and Now," Marina and Richard Campanella wrote, "After the mint closed in 1909, the building was used as a prison, veterans office and the Coast Guard station before it was surplused by the Government Services Administration in 1966, and eventually transferred to the state of Louisiana."

During its years of operation, the mint produced over 427 million gold and silver coins for the U.S.

The efforts of local preservationists kept the building from being auctioned by the Federal Government in 1966, and it was transferred to the state. However, while the state dithered on funding for its restoration, the building deteriorated.

It is the oldest surviving mint building in the U.S., and was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1973.

In 1974, a study was commissioned, followed by a restoration plan drawn up by McNaughton, Biery, Toups and Lemann Architects.

Funding finally came through, and the work took place 1978 to 1980, with the Old U.S. Mint museum reopening in 1981 as part of the Louisiana State Museum system.

The museum suffered damage in Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and was closed for two years. The Old U.S. Mint is now dedicated to the history of jazz, and is home to the Louisiana Historical Center and a performance venue.

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