

David Baird, co-owner of Le Citron Bistro, was unaware until this summer that his property is the oldest structure above Canal Street.

PHOTO BY CHEERY STEBBE

N.O. developer unearths Uptown gem

By Deon Roberts
Staff Writer

DAVID BAIRD DIDN'T know what he bought last July when he became owner of a mud-colored, one-story building near the dusty Tchoupitoulas Street corridor.

He knew the building was old with its Creole cottage design, exposed brick walls and wide ceiling boards.

But it wasn't until this summer that city historians told Baird his property at 1539 Religious St. dates to 1810, which makes it the oldest surviving structure above Canal Street.

"It's almost like getting a picture, flipping it over and seeing that you have the Constitution of the United States signed by Thomas Jefferson," Baird said.

On Aug. 10, the city's Historic District Landmarks Commission declared the property a landmark. HDLC historian Eleanor Burke, who researched the building's history, said the structure is significant for Uptown where no other buildings from prior to 1830 exist.

"It says a lot that it's still standing," she said.

Baird has converted the building into Le Citron

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Bistro, a Creole/Italian food restaurant that opened July 1 after a \$250,000 renovation. The chef is Jeannette Gerarve, who worked for about nine years on the Delta Queen riverboat, he said.

The building is just outside the Central Business District in the Lower Garden District. The area has been "extremely economically depressed," Baird said, but is undergoing major redevelopment. Six blocks away, the former St. Thomas housing site is being transformed by new residences and a Wal-Mart Supercenter. Across the street is where the Phase IV expansion of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center is scheduled to take place. One block over is the upscale Saulet apartment complex.

"That market is red hot," said Larry G. Schedler, a metro area broker who specializes in large apartment complexes. "That is one of the hottest areas in metro New Orleans right now — that whole Uptown/Warehouse District corridor there. It's been proven over and over again that this is a very desirable place for people to live. If the food is as good as the location sounds, I think their place

will be a big success."

Baird said he has experience in opening businesses in areas other developers shy away from. In 1988, he opened Warehouse Café at 636 Tchoupitoulas St., which he moved in 1991 to 1179 Annunciation St., where it operated until 1995.

Then Baird decided to return to serve in the U.S. Coast Guard, from which he retired in 2002.

He discovered 1539 Religious St. when a "for sale" sign caught his eye while he was driving past the building.

"It wouldn't have been something that the average person would have been interested in by looking at it," he said. "I was very interested in real estate in this area because I've always believed that the Convention Center was going to move toward this direction. When I heard that the St. Thomas project was going to happen, it really got me very interested in developing and looking at this area."

Baird paid \$194,000 for the property. His partner in Le Citron Bistro is Wayne Gusman, brother of New Orleans City Councilman Marlin Gusman.

Bank One helped finance the project through a federal program that can grant loans of up to \$250,000. Baird was able to get the full

amount, said Jonathan Matessino, assistant vice president for business banking in Bank One's New Orleans office.

It took a full year working 100 hours a week to renovate the building. Baird said about \$250,000 has been spent to upgrade the property, with the bulk of the money going into repairing bricks as old as the building itself.

"In terms of what was required to be done at the time, it was substantial work," he said.

Another smaller building, once attached to the main structure, now serves as the restaurant's kitchen on the quarter-acre site.

No one knows why the structure was built 194 years ago. At one time, the property was part of the Jean Baptiste de Marigny plantation, according to Burke's research. The area was also known as Faubourg de la Course.

The building has been used for just about everything from apartments to a church to a

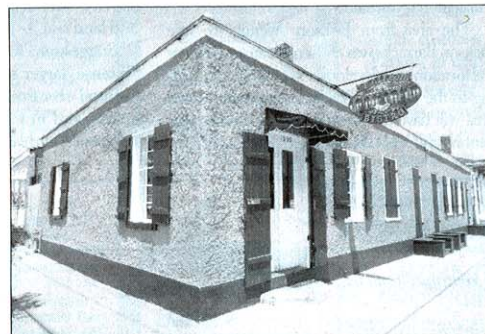


PHOTO BY CHEERY STEBBE

Historians recently discovered the property at 1539 Religious St., now Le Citron Bistro, dates to 1810.

grocery store and a wood shop, Baird said. In the 1980s it was Indulgence Restaurant, which left the property in 1988, he said. Until now, the building was uninhabited.

As to why it took so long for the city to recognize the historical significance of the building, Burke said the answer might be found in the look of the building.

"This building, because of its very modest appearance as a Creole cottage, never quite grabbed the attention of historians," she said. •