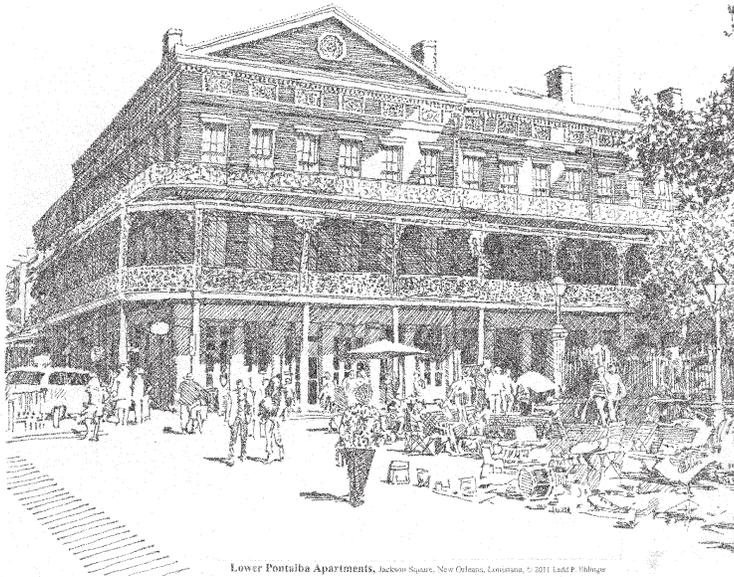




ARCHITECTURE

EHLINGER & ASSOCIATES

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Lower Pontalba Apartments, Jackson Square, New Orleans, Louisiana, © 2011 Ladd P. Ehlinger

Lower Pontalba Apartments, Jackson Square

The Lower Pontalba Apartments is the subject of this issue's limited edition print of a sketch by Ladd P. Ehlinger. This building and its twin flank Jackson Square in the heart of the Vieux Carre (French Quarter) in New Orleans. The Pontalba Buildings are named Upper and Lower with respect to the flow of the Mississippi that they frame along with the square. These buildings have an ambiance very similar to that of Place des Vosges in Paris (See E&A Newsletter 3rd Qtr. 2001), and the Palais Royale, and the apartment of the main square in Madrid. The Pontalba Buildings frame the Cathedral and Jackson Square.

They were originally row houses over shops below with a common facade of red brick with light colored stone accents, and occupy the entire block from the St. Louis Cathedral, Cabildo & Presbytere to the river. They have porticos of cast iron, the delicately designed details of which were done by the Baroness de Pontalba herself. These galleries began the vogue of cast iron galleries in New Orleans. The style is an agglomeration of Greek Revival, Renaissance, and Micaela's taste.

The design of the Pontalba Buildings is credited to James Gallier, Sr., whose preliminary drawings were

actually attached to the building contract with Builder Samuel Stewart. But the Baroness de Pontalba fired him, and then hired Henry Howard, who executed the final plans and took credit for the design in his autobiographical sketch, yet he too was fired by the Baroness, who seems to have modified what Gallier and Howard did to her own preferences and aesthetics. She was a very strong willed woman who put on men's pantaloons to climb the ladders and scaffolds of the construction during the period 1849-1851.

Micaela Leonarda Antonia Almonester, Baroness de Pontalba, was born November 6, 1795 in New Orleans and died April 20, 1874 in Paris. She was the only surviving child of her Spanish father, Andres Almonester y Rojas, and when he died in 1798, inherited a considerable fortune as the sole heir. Andres Almonester was a city Councilman and very astute businessman who acquired the properties flanking the Place d'Arms main square in front of the cathedral, later renamed by the Baroness as Jackson Square. Micaela was only 2-1/2 years old when he died, so her mother controlled the estate until she was married to her French cousin, Xavier Célestin Delfau de Pontalba, at age 15. Micaela was then whisked off to France.

Micaela's husband was a weak, effeminate man, yet she bore him five children, three of whom survived into adulthood. Her father-in-law, the Baron de Pontalba continuously schemed to

divest Micaela of her fortune because he felt the agreed upon dowry was too small. She resisted his avariciousness strenuously over many years. She made numerous attempts to obtain a legal separation (a type of divorce) to no avail, as French law had a "Master and Head of Household" status for the husbands at the time, to the detriment of the wives as the husbands made all decisions with no wifely input, even on the wife's separate property..

Life became so acrimonious for Micaela, especially with her father-in-law, the Baron, that in a fit of rage over her refusal to turn over her fortune to him on October 19, 1834, using a pair of dueling pistols he shot her four times in the chest at point blank range, with one of the shots also passing through her upraised hand. Her hand was permanently damaged and scarred. Later that day, the Baron turned his pistols on himself and succeeded in committing suicide. Micaela survived this attack with a mutilated left breast and two fingers of her left hand. She subsequently obtained her legal separation, and the title Baroness.

She then commissioned the noted French architect, Louis Visconti, to design her a mansion on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris which she used to entertain lavishly, hosting many parties and balls. This mansion is known today as the Hôtel de Pontalba and serves as the official residence of the U.S. Ambassador to France.

In 1848, Micaela and two of her sons departed Paris for New Orleans because of the outbreak of the revolution. She immersed herself in her native city that she hadn't seen in years, and observed that many of her properties had deteriorated to the point of disrepair, especially those fronting on Place d'Arms. She demolished them, and began the row house project. She negotiated with the city and obtained a twenty year tax break, permission to build the galleries over the sidewalks, and converted Place d'Arms from a

military parade ground to a beautiful garden, enclosed by a cast iron fence. She supervised the construction from horseback. The rest is history. Shortly after their completion, she entertained singer Jenny Lind in her row house there, and in 1851, left for Paris with her two sons, never to return.

The Pontalba heirs in Paris let the property deteriorate, and sold the buildings to the state and the city in the 1930s. The row houses were then converted into apartments, the entire buildings renovated, and rented to the public.

Micaela is the subject of Thea Musgraves opera, *Pontalba, a Louisiana Legacy* which is based upon Dr. Christina Vella's biography, *Intimate Enemies: The Two Worlds of the Baroness Pontalba*. There have been many novels written about this extraordinary woman who persevered and endured when others would have failed.

ADA 2010 Revisions

Recently, the American's With Disabilities Act (ADA) received an official update on its Design Guidelines. For the most part, the revisions are well received in the design and construction industry, as the revisions primarily deal with clearing vagaries between specific dimensions, and what constitute acceptable tolerances.

For example, prior to the revisions, an accessible toilet had to be located 18" from a wall, but there was no indication as to what an allowable tolerance was, so any variation, 1" or 1/16", could be unreasonably argued as a "violation".

The new version specifies a range of acceptability in such instances. The toilet in the above example is now considered within tolerance if between 16"-18". Most other design considerations have been treated to this affect, as well: light switches, guard rails, drinking fountain, grab bars... to name a few.

The new ADA also introduces accessibility considerations for children, which was previously ignored in favor of a one-size-fits-all regulatory glove that simply didn't work in facilities designed for used by children.

The new ADA now allows for an entirely different set of dimensions when the facility or area in use is being used primarily by children. Unfortunately, some of these considerations are to be implemented *in addition* to the standard accessibility requirements, but many can be considered substitutive.

For example, if a stairway is to be used primarily by children, then a *second set* of handrails should be installed at a lower height, but the first set must also be there, at standard adult height.

However, if a restroom is to be used primarily by children, then only one accessible toilet is required under the new requirements, and it may be designed to age appropriate dimensions.

Before the revisions, an adult sized accessible toilet was required, regardless of the inability of children to use it. This was primarily a concern in smaller facilities, where no more than one toilet would be required, except for the ADA required toilet being unusable by younger children due to its height; so to be "legal" and functional, a second toilet was added for actual use.

For the most part, however, the ADA 2010 revisions are a welcome set of corrections to a litany of ill-planned, well-meaning regulations, and they are revisions that should help ease unwanted litigation and wasteful officiating over minor and meaningless infractions.

As with all things, there are exceptions to prove the rule, as with one costly and specious change in the ADA that is now being termed "Poolmageddon". The requirements for public pools and spas have been changed, requiring spas to be accessible, and for pools over 300 feet in perimeter to have two means of accessible entrance, instead of one. Facilities with public pools across the nation have been scrambling to figure out how to upgrade, and how to pay for the upgrades, with many of them refusing to open out of fear of litigation.

While the government has extended the deadline for the pool requirements until the end of May, it is likely another extension will be required, simply because there are not enough pool lifts in existence, nor can enough be made, to meet the requirement in time for all of the pools in question.

Liberty Learning Foundation

Ehlinger & Associates is proud to be a supporter of the Liberty Learning Foundation, a non-profit, non-partisan educational group which focuses on teaching students the fundamentals of being a citizen.



Liberty Learning provides free educational materials to classrooms across the country. It is geared towards educating and inspiring youth in the 3rd-5th grade range on the foundations of American Civics and History, upon which the three fundamental pillars of being a citizen are built: character, financial literacy, and career.

Character development focuses on learning the nature of liberty and freedom, how they empower us, and the personal and social responsibilities that they require of us as citizens.

Financial literacy focuses on a basic understanding of financial management and responsibility, and how achieving this helps empowers you as an individual and a citizen.

Choosing a career where one is passionate and devoted is an important part of becoming an empowered citizen, and Liberty Learning's goal in this respect is to help bridge the gap between what is learned in school, and how it is applied and affects their career choice and development path.

I would like to personally encourage our readers to get involved in this program. If you would like to find out more on how to donate or volunteer, please visit: www.libertylearning.org

I know many of our readers are involved in the education system both directly and indirectly; so please take the time to visit the site and convince schools you are involved with to apply for their free educational package. The program is designed to fit in with many of the required civics lessons in the 3rd-5th grade range, so you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

- R. Perrin Ehlinger, AIA