La MAISON-ACADEIENNE FRANCAISE — Built as the home of the Myrtille Meyers in the 1920’s, La Maison Acadienne-Francaise is the focal point of the University’s French related activities. (Photo by Mario Mamalakis)

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(EDITOR’S NOTE: This is the first of a two-part series on Myrtille Meyer House, now owned by the University of Southwestern Louisiana and known as La Maison Acadienne-Francise.)

The imposing two-story house at the corner of St. Mary and Johnston Streets was built in the early 1920’s as the home of Mr. and Mrs. Myrtille Meyer. They were members of the Jewish community and many of whom were very successful in their business ventures and in large part responsible for Lafayette’s present status as the retail center for Acadiana.

Mrs. Meyer was the former Louise Bendel, youngest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Louis Bendel, and sister of Henri Bendel, the famous New York fashion designer, whose store catered to the wealthy socialities, famous actresses and royalty. Following the death of Mrs. Meyer’s father, her mother, who was born Mary Ploegsma, continued the business. She also acquired all of the property on the block, where her home on Washington Street was above her general mercantile store, and added more business ventures, among which was Lafayette’s only opera house. She was remarried in 1878 to Benjamin Fall. Myrtille Meyer operated the furniture store established by his mother-in-law.

The French House
Now owned by the University of Southwestern Louisiana and known as La Maison Acadienne-Francise or the French House, the structure’s survival and increasing historical value from the standpoint of its architecture, its furnishings and its site is assured. It has become significant not only because of its historical background but also because of its current use and its furnishings, which make it “a jewel of a museum.”

USL President Dr. Ray Ashenbrenner envisioned it as “the focal point of the University’s French-related activities.” It symbolizes the university’s commitment and involvement with the French Renaissance movement in Louisiana.

Mrs. Meyer survived her husband and lived in the house with her brother Isaac Bendel. For a period USL President Dr. Arceneaux, then dean of the School of Business and Agriculture, and an active member of the French faculty, purchased the property to save it for the university. After the 1945 Legislature Assisting in this effort in addition to Mrs. Hamilton and Dr. Philip, Mrs. Laurence Montegut Ziegler and Dr. Paul Collas who were all USL professors; Mrs. Harry Griffin, Mrs. Roy Krewitz (the former Anna Belle Dupuis Hoffman) and other Acadian leaders.

Purchase In 1954
The University purchased the property of the French House in 1954 to introduce the University’s commitment to the French Renaissance in the State. It symbolizes the University’s commitment to the French language and culture of Southwestern and Acadiana and serves as a focal point of interest. The dining room area and the French Cellar have been renovated to provide a raised stage and success in this venture and these have become the “marraine” of the house and her photograph with other historical documents hangs in the house.

Adding to the success of the move to acquire the property was the strong support of the USL President Dr. Joel L. Fletcher, who was deeply interested in preserving the French and Acadian culture of the area. Through France Amerique de la Lusitania Acadienne, a society devoted to the fostering of the French and Acadian language and culture of Louisiana. Because of her involvement and success in this venture, she became the “marraine” of the house and her photographs with other historical documents hangs in the house.

Helped to clear the bill through the committee and to steer it in the House, Senators M. Elroi Girard of Lafayette and Dr. John South made efforts in the Senate. President of the Senate, Act 471, which authorized the purchase of the property to be used as a French House for USL, was signed by Gov. Robert F. Kennon on July 7, 1954. The legal proceedings for the transaction for USL (which was then named Southwestern Louisiana Institute) were completed by Elmore Bonin of St. Mary and John South, who was once an oil and gas consultant for USL. The property was then sold to settle his estate.

The house and the acre of land on which it is located at the corner of Johnston and St. Mary, were purchased at a cost of $50,000 from the estate of Isaac Bendel. Funds were also made available to furnish the house in a manner that would reflect the French and Acadian heritage of the area.

Myrtille Meyer House was the first house to be owned by USL and she envisioned it for the “edification of the French language and the Acadian culture.” Other members of the house also participated in the purchase.

Staircase is Mahogany
The lovely, mahogany stair case opens upstairs onto a central hallway or sitting room. Doors open to the master bedroom, dressing room and bath, to and across the hall to the second bedroom and bath.

The original light fixtures are still in use: lovely crystal chandeliers in the dining and living rooms, a small stage area for programs, a combination of a living room area.

Another detail of interest is the sun room which opens onto the porch. The small stage area for programs and an interesting light fixture in the master bedroom, a small back screened porch. The other leads to the butler's pantry and a small back screened porch with its original floor and original glass cabinets. The butler’s also opens onto the sitting area.

SEVRES VASES & CLOCK
— A special point of interest in the reception room is the mantel with white marble in-