Top: The Bear Building at the northeast corner of South Palafox and Main Streets, ca. 1900.

Bottom: Northeast corner of South Palafox and Main Streets, ca. 1870. The Bear Building was built on the site of the two-story Market House at the end of South Palafox, seen here with a horse and cart in front. Photos from the Pensacola Historical Society Collection
404 South Palafox—The Bear/Penko Building

Cynthia Catellier

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Constructed in 1892, 404 South Palafox housed two family-owned enterprises for the next 115 years, beginning with Lewis Bear. Shortly after his arrival in Pensacola in 1876, Bear started a small grocery business next to his home on the southwest corner of Barcelona and Intendencia Streets, near present-day city hall. Initially, the industrious businessman used a two-wheeled cart to deliver groceries and provisions to Pensacola's bustling wharves. He eventually used steamships to expand his market to include small Gulf Coast towns. Once Pensacola connected to the interior of the continent by rail, Bear extended his commerce to inland cities.

Prosperity demanded suitable headquarters, so Bear purchased the Old Market House lot on the northeast corner of Main and Palafox for his new business. He demolished the old structure, which had housed a fish market on the ground floor and the city jail on the second. He adorned his new edifice with a pre-stamped sheet metal building façade ordered from Mesker Brothers Iron Works of St. Louis, Missouri.

Taking part in a nationwide building trend, Bear was able to choose design options from a catalog, creating an elaborate Victorian façade suitable for turn-of-the-century tastes. The pillars and ornamentation on the second story of 404 South Palafox may appear to be carved stone and wood, but are, in fact, galvanized sheet metal, a relatively inexpensive material rolled and stamped into large ornamental sheets. Some of the intricately and deeply embossed ornaments are executed in stamped zinc. Mesker Brothers Iron Works shipped the pieces for this building—which were designed to be installed in as little as two days—by rail directly to the savvy businessman, eliminating the cost of a wholesaler.

Although Lewis Bear died in 1895, his sons and sons-in-law continued to expand the business. In 1906 the Lewis Bear Company announced it was expanding into the sundries, drug, and patent medicines industry. By 1908 the operation had its own laboratory producing “Bowel Remedy,” “Nerve and Bone Liniment,” and other cure-alls. The family establishment also sold whiskey, coffee, tobacco, and agricultural supplies from this location for sixty-six years.

Pensacola Restaurant Supply and Equipment opened at 415 South Palafox in the 1940s. In 1958, Oscar Willenzik bought 404 South Palafox, directly across the street, to house the showroom for his family’s expanding restaurant supply business. Willenzik replaced the original “Bear Block” inscription with the moniker “Penko,” short for Pensacola Restaurant Supply and Equipment, on the roof parapets. Penko employees designed and sold commercial kitchens for restaurants, hotels, and schools from Mobile, Alabama, to Panama City, Florida. According to Penko bookkeeper Carla Willenzik, the industrious Oscar Willenzik “never missed a day” of work.

In 2004, Hurricane Ivan damaged the building, but the lovely ornamentation survived relatively unscathed due to the durability of the metal façade. Willenzik struggled to find the resources to repair the damage. However, in 2007, after serving the Gulf Coast for over sixty years, Penko finally closed shop following the death of founder Oscar Willenzik.

Quint and Rishy Studer purchased the historic building at 404 South Palafox in March 2012 and have begun renovations. The Studers also own and are renovating the original Penko building at 415 South Palafox Street. Quint Studer stated, “We believe in the present and future [of] Pensacola. Similar to the building [at 415] across the street that is being completed, the goal is to capture the dignity of the building while creating a vibrancy on the corner that makes people feel good about the community and the future.”
3 Bear Block-Penko Building, 1-2.
5 Fish market and jail information from Bear Block-Penko Building. Mesker Expert and Historic Preservationist, Darius Bryka (darius@inalliance.biz), provided positive Mesker Brothers identification on 404 S. Palafox to the author in an e-mail 22 December 2011.
10 Pensacola Journal, 24 July 1907; and Pensacola Journal, 22 September 1907.
13 Carla Willenzik, telephone interview by author, 3 March 2012, Pensacola, Florida.