Palafox Street: Pensacola, Florida

Summary

Among the handful of streets in the U.S. to shape and be shaped by 250 years of British, Spanish, and American influence is Palafox Street, the gateway to Pensacola, Florida, and the city's main stage for holiday and seasonal celebrations that draw up to 50,000 people at a time.

DESIGNATED AREA

Eight blocks of Palafox Street between Wright Street and Main Street.
PLANNING EXCELLENCE

Aligned with expansive sidewalks, two capacious plazas, a median, and buildings that juxtapose Spanish Colonial wrought iron and cast iron facades with the Chicago School's large, plate-glass windows, Palafox brings together period details with both colonial- and progressive-era architecture.

Prompting creation of a preservation plan that would "help write many of the heretofore unknown details of Pensacola's colorful history," as a city advisory committee wrote in 1966, was the discovery in the early 1960s of colonial-era foundations along Palafox and elsewhere in Pensacola. To help implement the preservation plan, a historic preservation board with an architectural review committee was formed in 1967.

The city also established the Pensacola Downtown Improvement Board in 1972 to support and improve economic activity for businesses located along the street. The board, composed of five members who own businesses on Palafox or live in Pensacola, has helped with beautifying the street and enhancing building property values. Also to help draw more customers and improve the downtown business activity, Palafox was converted to two-way traffic in 2009.

Wide sidewalks, colorful Crepe Myrtle trees, and balconies extending from building facades protect pedestrians from the hot Florida sun and provide a comfortable distance from motor
vehicles in the right-of-way. Two public spaces anchor the street: the Spanish-designed Plaza Ferdinand, which is on Palafox between Government and Zaragoza Streets, and the Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza. This plaza, located on Palafox where it intersects with Garden and Wright Streets, hosts one of the country's most celebrated weekly farmers markets.

The story of Palafox Street doesn't stop here. The city's 2010 comprehensive plan calls for extending the vibrant and pedestrian-friendly ambiance of Palafox along the street's southernmost blocks as well. By redeveloping the vacant lots and parking areas there, the vibrancy of Palafox will extend to the city's recently revitalized waterfront.

Established in 1781, the Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel has maintained a significant presence on Palafox for more than 230 years. Photo courtesy Cynthia Catellier.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS, FEATURES

Historic Character

- Originally named George Street after King George III, Palafox retains original grid design laid out by British engineer Elias Durnford in 1764
- Pensacola was capital of West Florida during periods of British, Spanish, and American occupation with Palafox Street serving as city's central business and cultural artery (1760s)
• Spanish Surveyor General Vicente Sebastian Pintado renamed street Calle de Palafox after Jose Robeldeo de Palafox, 1st Duke of Saragossa (1812)
• Pintado modified Palafox British plan according to orders from the Council of Indies and Spanish colonial town planning concepts; set aside Plaza Ferdinand as public space (1812)
• Palafox Street was Pensacola's main commercial hub after Civil War; city became one of the largest export centers of yellow pine and red snapper for the Gulf Coast (1880)
• Eighty percent of the buildings along Palafox Street built during the Progressive era by optimistic businessmen wanting to erect edifices that stand the test of time (1890-1920)

Planning and Preservation Accomplishments

• City discontinued street car service, removing tracks and installing green space in North Palafox's median between Garden and Wright Streets (1932)
• Palafox Street extends through both Pensacola Historic District (added to National Register of Historic Places 1970) and the North Hill Historic District (added to National Register 1983)
• Pensacola Community Redevelopment Agency created in 1980; charged with preserving and improving Palafox's historic architecture, maintaining landscaping and sidewalks
• Crepe Myrtle trees along Palafox help Pensacola gain designation as a Tree City USA (1990)
• City's 2010 comprehensive plan calls for stronger historic preservation measures; also focuses on Palafox's economic development and connection to waterfront
• City and county join together in 2013 to place removable bollards at all entrances to the Palafox entertainment district

Significant Architecture

• American National Bank (226 South Palafox, 1910) designed by architect J.E.R. Carpenter; the Sullivanesque skyscraper remained Pensacola's tallest building until 1974
• U.S. Customs House and Post Office (223 South Palafox, 1887) is a renaissance revival structure connected to the Escambia County governmental complex
• Saenger Theater (118 South Palafox, 1925) designed by New Orleans architect Emile Weil; $15 million renovation (2007-09) preserves its Spanish Baroque architecture
• Masonic Temple (2 South Palafox, 1897) constructed for a hardware store; Romanesque Revival building retains its Masonic symbol on the roof facade
• Andrew Jackson Monument (Plaza Ferdinand VII, 1935) designed by Eduardo Anievas; the bronze and granite bust signifies Jackson's brief tenure as Florida's first American governor
• King Plaza features Dr. King bust sculpted by Atlanta artist Ayokunle Odeleye (1992)
Seven-story Blount Building (corner Palafox and West Garden streets, 1907) designed in the Chicago School style; built for local attorney William Alexander Blount

Many of Palafox’s uniquely designed structures feature ornate cast-iron balconies that serve as shade for pedestrians. Photo courtesy Cynthia Catellier.

Events and Celebrations

- New Year's Eve Pelican Drop occurs in Plaza Ferdinand and draws crowds of more than 50,000; a 14-foot-tall pelican statue descends a 100-foot platform at midnight
- Annual Mardi Gras Parade attracts 6,000 participants, more than 200 floats
- Investors to spend $1 million to convert vacant Palafox parcel into courtyard for food trucks
- Downtown Improvement Board manages Palafox special events involving street closure, portable restrooms, additional police and EMTs, and event cleanup