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Salvation stories

By Jeff Roedel

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After a brush with the wrecking ball, the historic Kress building is enjoying new life thanks to efforts by the Foundation for Historic Louisiana, and new owners Brace Godfrey and John Schneider.

At 2 p.m. on March 28, 1960, seven Southern University students walked into the Kress department store on Third Street in downtown Baton Rouge, sat down at the “whites only” lunch counter and changed the city.

Staff told them to move to the “colored” counter, and they refused. *The Morning Advocate* reported the following day that the quiet, well-dressed college students sat calmly until police arrived, arrested the seven, and charged them with disturbing the peace.

It was Baton Rouge’s first sit-in of its kind, and it sparked similar student protests the following day at Sitman’s Drug Store and at the Greyhound bus station. The Southern Sixteen, as the protesters would become known, were released on bail and returned to campus as heroes. But Southern President F.G. Clark came under pressure from state legislators, who controlled Southern’s budget. He suspended the students.

A year and a half later, the legal cases of the Baton Rouge sit-ins reached the U.S. Supreme Court where the charges were finally dropped. A city-parish committee made up of white and black Baton Rougeans was empanelled, and in 1963 negotiated a deal to desegregate a dozen downtown lunch counters.

Forty-three years later, sitting with other prospective jurors while attorneys measure their impartiality, Carolyn Bennett is distracted, and growing more nauseous by the minute. But not over the case at hand in this city-parish courtroom.

Bennett is executive director of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, for which urgent business awaits. Finally, she interrupts the proceedings and explains that a demolition permit has been issued for three downtown buildings—including the site of Baton Rouge’s first sit-in—and she’s desperately trying to

intervene before a wrecking ball destroys them.

Her pleas convince the judge and attorneys to excuse her from this civic duty to pursue another one.

It was a small but crucial victory for Bennett that fall day in 2003, Decision No. 1 of a half-dozen fortuitous decisions that eventually led to the salvation and restoration of the trio of downtown landmarks: the Kress, Knox, and Welsh-Levy buildings that intersect at the corner of Third and Main streets.



A group of Southern University students changed Baton Rouge history in 1960 when their peaceful protest challenged the concept of racially segregated lunch counters at the Kress store downtown. The group included (from left) Marvin Robinson, John Garner, Major Johns (although not part of the sit-in, he was the group’s strategist), John W. Johnson, Donald T. Moss, Janette Hoston, Kenneth L. Johnson and Jo Ann Morris.

After bolting from the courtroom that day, Bennett phoned Bob Dean, the intensely private property magnate who had recently purchased the buildings and turned his developer dial to “demolish.” She asked him to meet her as soon as possible at her office in the Old Governor’s Mansion to talk things over. Dean arrived later that day, and for more than two hours she pleaded with him not to demolish the turn-of-the-century buildings.

Dean “could have taken them down,” Bennett said. “We had no legal recourse. He is an enigma in many ways, but he is a preservationist in many ways. Those buildings are standing because of him.” Decision No. 2.

FEMA had been the last Kress tenant during the cleanup after Hurricane Andrew, and the emergency agency left in 1992 (although Dean says a portion of Welsh-Levy remained in use as recently as 2005). By the time local filmmaker John Jackson and photographer Brian Baiamonte snuck inside in 2006, they found disrepair and neglect in the damp darkness. Plants grew out of graffiti-splashed walls and crawled over dirt-stained windows. Mold grew everywhere. Random dot-matrix printouts proclaiming “Happy Birthday!” hung like obituaries for an office culture long gone. Time stood still.

“It was very surreal,” Jackson says. “The air was dead, no sound, just water dripping. You’d talk, and your words would just fall out of your mouth; sucked out.”

They recorded that spooky natural sound and took their first photographs inside the building that day. Years later Jackson and Baiamonte would find themselves part of a creative team hired to document the building’s storied history and—thanks to Bennett, Dean, and current owners Brace Godfrey and John Schneider—the Kress building’s restoration and future.

Bennett was not the only person concerned with saving Kress and its neighboring structures. Concern over Dean's plans was nearing a public outcry in June 2005 when Cyntreniks, the consulting firm Godfrey and Schneider founded, approached the developer with a plan. As a civic-minded black attorney, and then-chairman of the board of directors for the Downtown Development District, Godfrey had a keen interest in protecting and promoting the Kress building and its history. (Godfrey recently resigned from the DDD board after strict new ethics laws took effect requiring public appointees to disclose personal finances.)

"The biggest reason for me [to protect the Kress building] is the history of the Southern students, because of my history at the university and knowing some of those who were involved," Godfrey says. "We had been monitoring the controversy, and felt like we could get in there and help satisfy everyone."

Although Dean had by this time assured Bennett he wouldn't demolish the building, he was well within his rights to do so, and public concern continued to grow. Hoping to start their new consulting firm with a bang, Godfrey and Schneider offered to act as a liaison between Dean, the Historical Foundation, and city officials.

Perhaps growing tired of the saga and negative press, Dean surprised everyone when he suggested Schneider and Godfrey buy the property and redevelop it themselves.



Filmmaker John Jackson and photographer Brian Baiamonte found Kress neglected and in disarray when they first explored the space.

"That caught us flatfooted," Schneider says. But between his experience in his family's construction business and Godfrey's passion for saving the building, they made an effective team. Decision No. 3.

Claude "Buddy" Leach, a former U.S. and state representative who both Godfrey and Schneider had met working at the Legislature as college students, agreed to help finance the purchase. Decision No. 4.

Over a handshake, Cyntreniks and Dean agreed to a price: \$2.7 million. Then, days later, Hurricane Katrina made landfall, which, besides wrecking South Louisiana, the storm sent Baton Rouge land values skyward overnight. But to Dean's credit, he honored his oral agreement. Decision No. 5.

Cyntreniks acquired Kress, Knox, and Welsh-Levy that November. The firm drew up plans for a \$20 million mixed-use development to include retail, office space, apartments, condos, and a small art-house movie theater.

Bennett and others were ecstatic.

"Our heroes on white horses," she calls Godfrey and Schneider.

But Bennett's gallant knights soon found themselves in uncharted financial territory.

Downtown cranes were not such a common sight three years ago, and banks repeatedly turned down Godfrey and Schneider when they went in search of millions to fund construction.

"We didn't know what we didn't know," Schneider says. "We didn't realize what we were doing hadn't really been done in Louisiana. After we acquired the buildings, people started telling us they had looked at it, but not bought it. One was an architect, one was a developer, you know, so we thought, 'What have we gotten ourselves into?'"



Attorney Brace Godfrey helped save a piece of Baton Rouge history.

After months of searching Cyntreniks managed to interest Chase Bank, but it would take more than a year to close the deal. "It involved more attorneys than I want to think about," says Schneider, only half-kidding. Cyntreniks was able to capitalize on the state's 25% tax credit for refurbishing historic buildings, as well as a 26% GO Zone-boosted federal tax credit. Though coaxing Chase on board proved harder than Schneider and Godfrey had imagined—plus Leach had to fund the first five months of construction out of his pocket—an equally daunting challenge loomed ahead for their architects.

Cyntreniks chose Chenevert Architects to refashion the bones of the separate-but-connected buildings into a cohesive and dynamic development on the edge of Baton Rouge's fledgling Arts & Entertainment District. The problem: FEMA had merged the floors of the individual buildings together with a series of ramps and rerouted passageways that made a kid's Chutes and Ladders look like solid ground. So convoluted was the design that the first time Jackson and Baiamonte went in they got lost. "We were going around in there for about an hour and a half," Jackson recalls.

Both project manager David Santini and architect Brian Falcon say they did considerable streamlining, but they managed to retain the buildings' unique character, rather than homogenizing it with a single aesthetic.

"The Welsh-Levy building and the Knox building took on a more industrial, Victorian feel with exposed

brick walls and heavy moldings,” Falcon says. For Kress, remnant details from the first floor design were amplified throughout for a true Art Deco appearance. “One of the advantages of old construction is that you couldn’t afford buildings like this with that level of craftsmanship, because a lot of those skills are lost over time,” Santini says. The façades and cast-iron columns were salvaged and used in the new design, but none of it was easy.

“There’s always a surprise,” says Norman Chenevert.



An intimate art-house movie theater is part of the renovation.

Or several. His team discovered a hidden freight elevator, eight-foot pits and crawl spaces, and ran smack into steel beams encased in brick walls. Initial construction began in early 2007. Despite all those challenges the residential units will be finished this month.

Owners of The Little Village restaurant announced plans to occupy 3,500 square feet on the first floor of Kress at Third & Main with their new Little Village Fish House. The seafood restaurant will anchor the entire development, which includes 12,000 square feet of office space, 35,000 square feet for residential and 18,000 square feet for retail. Schneider is busy pursuing negotiations with other retail tenants, including an operator for the 75-seat art-house theater, a pharmacy, and a café, among others.

“It’s rewarding to see Brace (Godfrey)’s dream fulfilled,” says Chenevert principal Dyke Nelson. “With the building’s history and this opportunity to bring more residents and businesses downtown, it’s a big deal.”

It was Nelson who first suggested to John Jackson that he gather a team of filmmakers to tell the whole Kress story. Jackson recruited director John Haynes, playwright Jamie Wax, and researcher Bennet Rhodes, and the four began documenting each phase of reconstruction early last year.

Baiamonte, a regular 225 contributor, captured portraits of the transformation and the people interviewed for the film, from participants in the historic sit-in to elderly Baton Rougeans who remember buying hair bows, bugles, and Boy Scout uniforms at the Kress store.

“There’s so much history here that needs to be preserved,” Jackson says. “For a long time Baton Rouge didn’t appreciate its history. They tore their buildings down all in the name of progress, but then progress doesn’t come, so they put a parking lot there instead.”

Musician and actor Earl Taylor worked as a busboy at the Kress lunch counter in the late 1940s and early 1950s when segregation forced him to enter through the back door because of the color of his skin. He still recalls being mistreated by the white waiters and waitresses and says his only regret about the sit-in was

that he wasn't there to witness it himself.

"It surprised few who were aware of the resentment that had built up from prejudice and segregation for years," says Taylor, who was serving as an Army radio operator when he heard the news. "Sometimes you have to be smarter than brave, and that's what those students were. Bravery can kill you. And at the end of the day, the sit-in made us all more aware that ugliness is never right."



For years the Kress building sat vacant and rotting. Now filmmakers have documented its restoration.

The finished documentary will premiere this fall, and tentative plans are to show it regularly in the planned movie theater space.

Filmmakers approached the Kress building's story as a silent witness to history. The Art Deco design was a cut above a typical five-and-dime of the day and made a strong Depression-era architectural statement. Kress' ties to mid-century civil rights standoffs make it both an educational tool and a flashpoint for community involvement, diversity, and growth.

The building's abandonment as a retail entity in the 1980s fed our community debate over new urbanism and urged us to examine why we choose to live where and how we do. Now, its mixed-use revival mirrors successful downtown revitalization efforts.

But perhaps most comforting is it proves our city can defend itself, can learn from its past, and can do both while raising the standard for future endeavors, so long as the right people pull together.

"We've had some phenomenal losses, and this is a great save," Bennett says. "That day I learned about the destruction of the geodesic dome, it was a shock. I almost got sick, because there was nothing we could do. When it's gone, it's gone. Saving the Kress building is a huge win for the community." kressthirdmain.com