

## Historic funeral home to be reborn as a bookstore

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The exterior of the old Bultman Funeral Home on St. Charles Avenue. The building is being converted into a Border's book store.

**By Greg Thomas**

*Real estate writer*

Borders has leased the former Bultman Funeral Home on St. Charles Avenue with plans to gut the iconic structure and convert it into a 24,000-square-foot bookstore.

The store, expected to open in November 2008, will be the first national bookstore chain in Orleans Parish since BookStar closed its 12,000-square-foot French Quarter store in 2003.

The retail project, which promises to revitalize a deteriorating yet high-profile Garden District intersection, already has the support of neighborhood groups and preservationists.

But independent bookstores are girding for a battle much like the one that unfolded in "You've Got Mail," the 1998 movie starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. In the movie, Hanks plays a chain bookstore magnate who drives out of business the small independent store owned by Ryan's character.

"It's a deliberate, predatory move against independent bookstores," said Tom Lowenburgh, owner of Octavia Books. "They're a 500-pound gorilla, and it's not an accident" that Borders is situating itself between Octavia and the Garden District Book Shop, another well-established local store, he said.

Commonly known as the House of Bultman, the site Borders is leasing operated as a funeral home under some version of the Bultman family name for more than 120 years. It hosted services for many historical figures ranging from Confederate President Jefferson Davis to 1950s actress Jayne

Mansfield. In recent years, funerals for oil tycoon Patrick Taylor and poet and painter Stan Rice, the husband of author Anne Rice, were held there.

But the funeral home was closed in August 2006, when the Alderwoods Group Inc. of Toronto put it up for sale along with several other local funeral homes.



William Ryan, left, of Ryan Companies, and Lewis Stirling III, of Stirling Properties, sit in the main foyer area of the historic Bultman Funeral Home on St. Charles Avenue.

It was acquired by a group of developers including Lewis Stirling of Stirling Properties and William Ryan of the Ryan Family Trust. Stirling is managing the property and signed a long-term lease with Borders on Wednesday. Stirling said chain book sellers have been trying to crack the Garden District/Uptown market for 20 years. The neighborhood's large professional class and proximity to universities make it appealing for such retailers, he said.

### **Same outside, new inside**

Borders will leave the exterior of the sprawling, mansionlike Bultman building largely intact, although some demolition will occur in the rear to make way for elevators to the second story. Parking is planned to increase from 38 to 60 spaces, exceeding code requirements. The building's interior will be reinforced with concrete and steel to support the heavy weight of books and the elevators.

Borders already has a store on Veterans Memorial Boulevard in Metairie. The St. Charles Avenue store will reflect its surroundings, offering recordings of local musicians and showcasing Louisiana books and authors. It also will include a cafe with outdoor seating along St. Charles Avenue.

The St. Charles Avenue deal has been brewing for more than a year and has enjoyed strong support from Borders President and Chief Executive Officer George Jones, who owns a second home in the French Quarter, said Borders spokeswoman Anne Roman.

This won't be the first time Borders has renovated an old building to make way for a new store, said John Sappington, Borders real estate director.

Though Borders normally builds stores from the ground up, the chain has done many adaptive reuse projects, including several historic buildings in Washington, D.C.; Austin, Texas; and Boston.

Has the company ever put one in a funeral home?

"No, but we do have one in a old church in California," Sappington said.

### **Hoping to co-exist**

Donna Allen, owner of the Maple Street Book Store, said she has been hearing rumors about Borders moving in for some time.

"I've been keeping my fingers crossed that the deal wouldn't go through," she said. "How do (independent bookstores) compete? More personal service. We know our customers by name and we know what they're interested in," Allen said. "And our employees read."

But Stirling thinks independent book sellers won't suffer from Borders' presence.

"Our ZIP code analysis shows that (New Orleanians) are going to Metairie and the West Bank to shop Barnes & Noble and Borders," Stirling said.

Britton Trice, owner of the Garden District Book Shop, thinks he'll be able to weather Borders' arrival.

"We welcome the competition. People will always go and check it out (when Borders opens), but I believe in the loyalty of our customers. I have customers that were children of customers" after 20 years of operation.

"We'll all get through this with excellent customer service, excellent book knowledge and knowing our customers," Trice said.

Trice, who also is president of the New Orleans Gulf South Book Sellers Association, said the independents can help one another -- and have in the past -- with joint advertising campaigns. Local stores might work together again as they adjust to the new competition from Borders, he said.

### **Little red tape for store**

Despite its longtime presence on St. Charles, Bultman comes under the purview of the Historic District Landmarks Commission but has no architectural historical landmark status that prevents its demolition.

Converting the site to a Borders requires no variances or approvals for the project, but Stirling said he knew that saving the building -- at least its exterior -- was a sure-fire way to garner support, particularly on a St. Charles corner that was rapidly deteriorating. His strategy seems to be working.

Walter Gallas, a local representative of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, supports the deal.

"The trust's position is that we're delighted a building (that) for so long a time stood on that corner and completed the historic streetscape is going to be retained," Gallas said. "There's so many examples

on St. Charles, from the 1960s and 1970s, where we lost a lot of old buildings for unfortunate development."

Getting the building restored and in commerce is critical because it's located in a commercial corridor that seems to be in decline, Gallas said.

"Once you lose a corner in a historic neighborhood, it works like a cancer works, spreading along side streets and into the (historic) district," Gallas said.

### **Boost for intersection**

Laura Shields, 2007 president of the Garden District Association, met with the development team as early as January.

"We really are pleased to see an economic infusion at the site. It's a gateway for new development," Shields said.

The other three corners of St. Charles and Louisiana avenues contain a recently reopened Rite Aid, a closed bakery, and a shuttered, collapsing gas station.

The one thing that the Garden District Association would not have put up with was demolition of the Bultman site, something the owners could have applied for because the building has no historical protections.

"We would not have been in favor (of a project) that didn't maintain the historical significance of that site," Shields said.