

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC San Xavier del Bac Mission

AND/OR COMMON  
Same

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

West of Interstate 19

\_\_NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Tucson

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

VICINITY OF

Pima

STATE

Arizona

CODE

COUNTY

CODE

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL
			<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY
			<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
			<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
			<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
			<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME Bishop of Tucson  
(current: Most Rev. Manuel D. Moreno)

STREET & NUMBER

Chancery Office, 192 South Stone Avenue, Box 31

CITY, TOWN

Tucson

\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

Arizona

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Catholic Indian Bureau

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Washington

STATE

D. C.

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings

DATE

1961

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR

SURVEY RECORDS Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

CITY, TOWN

Washington

STATE

D. C.

## 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED    DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

---

### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The mission church of San Xavier del Bac is a synthesis of Baroque design and the desert materials from which it was built by Papago laborers supervised by Spanish-American master craftsmen. The church is built in the form of a Latin cross. The transept crossing has a large circular dome carried on an octagonal drum with triangular squinches accommodating the octagon of the drum to the square of the crossing. Above each of the squinches is a quatrefoil window cut into the drum allowing light into the dome area. The large dome is some 53 feet above the crossing. The nave, each arm of the transept, and the apse are covered by shallower domes, oval in spirit, but actually having straight sides with circular ends. The entire structure is built of burned adobe bricks (ladrillos) set in lime mortar. (See the picture of the church after the 1887 earthquake.)

The main walls and vaulted surfaces of the structure are plain, but the window openings are painted in an imitation of molded surrounds. The walls of the transepts and chancel are decorated with complex polychrome sculpture, the climax of which is the carved and painted reredos in wood, gesso, paint, and gilt. This altar piece is architectural with rusticated columns, entablatures, and arches dividing its space into two levels of three vertical panels. This extraordinarily active work provides the background for a statue of the Virgin on the upper level and St. Xavier below, probably the same form purchased by Father Espinosa in 1763, the reality of this vested figure making the whole of the sculpture appear that much more unreal.

The exterior of the church, which is in striking contrast to the painted and sculptured interior, has a massive and simple dignity. The wall planes are white painted stucco, the only ornament other than the portal being a simple balustrade around the base of each belfry and a curved and voluted parapet topping the main body of the church. Framing the intricate portal are two huge octagonal towers, the left topped by a small dome and lantern, the right incomplete. Legend says that a workman fell from the right tower and it was never completed. Flying buttresses spring from the four square corner piers and terminate against the towers in huge flaring scrolls.

Anticipating the architectural and decorative qualities of the reredos above the main altar, the portal is formed of a neutral red-orange brick, carved, molded, and painted. It is divided horizontally and vertically by segmented columns and entablatures (which are repeated in a more complex way in the reredos) and culminates in a massive reverse curve pediment with huge scrolls repeating the scrolls at the corners of the facade near the choir loft window balconies. The huge central wooden doors are topped by an arch, the second story window by a shell motif, and a wooden balcony projects over the doors.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1783

BUILDER/ARCHITECT unknown

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Mission San Xavier del Bac has served the Papago Indians since it was founded in 1700 by the Jesuit Eusebio Francisco Kino. Bac was then "beyond the rim of Christendom" and formed the extreme northern thrust of Nueva Espana. The present church is the third, perhaps the fourth, on the site; begun in 1783, it was completed in 1797. Since that time it has continued to serve the Papagos under the flags of imperial Spain, revolutionary Mexico, and the young and expanding United States. It has survived heat, storm, earthquake, the neglect of church and state, and the attack of hostile Indians. It continues to stand serene and untroubled against the timeless backdrop of the desert, a strange visitor from another world, completely at home in its alien environment, the most spectacularly lovely gift of colonial Spain to the United States.

## HISTORY

The Jesuit missionary, explorer, and cartographer Eusebio Francisco Kino (c. 1645-1711) was born at Segno, Italy, in the Tyrolean Alps. He entered the Jesuit order at Freiburg in 1665 and received his education in Upper Germany, showing great talent for mathematics. Determined to become a missionary, he hoped to join other members of his order in China, but chance assigned him to Mexico, where he landed in 1681. The rest of his long and useful life was spent in pushing back the frontiers of New Spain. After a futile attempt to colonize Baja California, he was assigned to Pimeria Alta, the upper Piman lands of northern Sonora and southern Arizona. Making his headquarters at Mission Dolores in Sonora, Father Kino spent a quarter of a century exploring and founding missions. During his many expeditions, he stood on the shores of the South Sea (the Pacific) in 1695; he proved that California was not an island but a peninsula; he opened a cattle trail around the Gulf of California to supply the Baja California missions; and he discovered and named the ruins at Casa Grande. In the thousands of miles he traveled, he reached as far north as the junction of the Gila and Colorado Rivers.

## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Bernard L. Fontana, "Biography of a Desert Church: the Story of Mission San Xavier del Bac," The Smoke Signal, (1961), pp. 2-24.
- Robert C. Goss, "The Problem of Erecting the Main Dome and Roof Vaults of the Church of San Xavier del Bac," Kiva, 37 (1972), pp. 117-127.
- William Pierson, American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neo-Classical Styles. (New York, 1970).

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY approx. 14 acres  
 UTM REFERENCES

A	1,2	49,95,6,0	3,5 5,2 2,0,0	B	1,2	49,9 5,9,0	3,5 5,1 9,6,0
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
c	1,2	49,9 2,8,0	3,5 5,1 9,5,0	D	1,2	49,9 2,6,0	3,5 5,2 2,0,0
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

See continuation sheet

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE  
 Marilyn Larew, Historian

ORGANIZATION	DATE
Historic Sites Survey Division, National Park Service	February 1978
STREET & NUMBER	TELEPHONE
1100 L Street, N. W.	523-5464
CITY OR TOWN	STATE
Washington	D. C.

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL \_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_ LOCAL \_\_\_

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

9/10/83

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

(NATIONAL HISTORIC  
 LANDMARKS)

(NATIONAL HISTORIC  
 LANDMARKS)

(NATIONAL HISTORIC  
 LANDMARKS)  
 LAREW, MARILYN

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INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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San Xavier del Bac Mission

**CONTINUATION SHEET**

ITEM NUMBER 7

PAGE 2

The whole of the design and decoration, with the exception of some minor interior painting, is European in intent, but the execution shows the distance in time and space between Bac and metropolitan Spain--or even Mexico City.

Directly to the east of the main doors of the church is a smaller pair of wooden doors, classically framed, which lead to the convento. Inside the doors, to the right is a small room used as the church office. To the left are two small rooms, the first a sales room, the second a small museum. Straight ahead is another pair of wooden doors leading to the cloister and garden. The convento, a U-shaped structure built on the east wall of the church, was formerly the school and convent, but now houses the parish priests in small rooms sheltered by a porch with arched openings which faces on the small garden, a tiny green spot with shrubs and trees and a new fountain, the base of which is a copy of the quatrefoil windows in the main dome drum.

Behind the church to the north are a dormitory, and, across a yard, an L-shaped garage and utility shed. These structures do not contribute to the significance of the landmark.

Immediately to the west of the church lies a small plain mortuary chapel also of white plastered adobe. Small niches, framed by carved surrounds which end in scrolls matching those on the church, flank the entry. A classical cornice with corner finials and a three bell campanile centered over the door cap this elegant little building, once used for the laying out of the dead prior to the funerals in the church. The chapel and grounds, formerly the cemetery, now a cactus garden, are walled separately.

Three hundred feet east of the church is Grotto Hill, a small hillock which takes its name from the replica of the Grotto of Lourdes which Bishop Granjon had built on the north side. The road in front of the church goes up to Grotto Hill, turns left through gate posts surmounted by lions, passes by the Lourdes Grotto, and continues around the hill. A white cross crowns the hill.

Across the road from the church to the south is an open space, at present used for parking. This is the site of the original Papago village. (See the 1849 sketch.)

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

San Xavier del Bac Mission

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 2

Kino had an unusual understanding of Indian psychology. Of the heroic padres who dedicated their lives to the expansion of Christianity on the northern frontier of New Spain, he was perhaps the most beloved by the Indians. The Papagos even today make an annual pilgrimage to the Mission Dolores at Magdalena, Sonora, where Father Kino lies buried, to celebrate the feast of Kino's patron--and theirs--St. Francis Xavier.

Kino first visited the Papago village of Bac--the place where the water emerges--in 1692. This rancharia, which he named San Xavier, then had about 800 inhabitants. These Papago people, a Piman speaking group, were semi-sedentary farmers and gatherers, living along the Santa Cruz River while they tended their irrigated crops of corn, beans, and squash. To these traditional crops the Spanish added wheat and more varieties of beans. During the hottest summer months they migrated to the mountain camps where they gathered mesquite beans and hunted wild game. In 1697 Kino revolutionized the Papago economy by introducing cattle and horses at Bac. By this time some of the children of Bac had been baptized, and the people had built a house for the permanent priest who had been promised them. Finally in April 1700, Kino returned to Bac and began the foundations for the first church of San Xavier del Bac. He wished himself to be the resident priest at Bac, and he eventually obtained his superiors' permission, but he could find no priest to relieve him at Dolores, so he was never able to take up his new post. He died in 1711 and was buried at Mission Dolores.

The cattle and horses at Bac attracted the attention of the Apaches, the traditional plunderers of the farmer Indians of the southwest, and Bac was subject to regular raids, but the Spanish provided no protection for the converts. They could not even provide regular pastors for the church. In 1701 Father Francisco Gonzalvo became the first in a long line of resident priests at Bac. His career there was typical--he stayed only one year, and the mission was more often than not without a resident.

By 1737 the vestments and ornaments given to the mission by the King of Spain, and housed either in the Kino church or another, were in bad shape. Things went from bad to worse. During the Pima Rebellion of 1751, the resident priest, Father Franz Bauer, had to flee south for his life, returning only in 1754 after

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San Xavier del Bac Mission

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 3

the Pima had been suppressed. It is probable that what remained of Kino's church was destroyed in the revolt, for Father Alonso Espinosa who arrived at the mission in 1756 constructed a new church, probably the second there. It was described in 1772 as being "of medium capacity, adorned with two side chapels with paintings in gilded frames." This church was just west of the present church; its foundations were discovered in 1958 by Bernard L. Fontana and William Robinson of the University of Arizona. Father Espinosa also ordered "a head and hands of San Xavier with a body frame resembling the statue in Vera Cruz" from Mexico City in 1763, probably the same statue that stands in cassock and surplice above the main altar in the present church. The village had around 220 inhabitants then.

Shortly thereafter Charles III expelled the Jesuits from the Spanish empire (1767), and the Franciscan order took over the operation of the Spanish frontier missions. At Bac the first Franciscan was Father Francisco Hermenegildo Garces, who arrived June 29, 1768. Garces was more interested in exploration than in residency. During this period Apache depredations were especially severe, and Garces had to rebuild some of his buildings at the mission.

It was during the residency of Father Juan Bautista Velderrain that construction began on the present church, probably in 1783. He borrowed 7,000 pesos from Don Antonio Herreros, secured by the future crops of the mission, and began work. Who designed the building is unknown. The structure is avowedly European and, unlike some of the New Mexico churches, untouched by Indian design except possibly in some of the interior decorations. One noted architectural historian sees in it the hand of a master workman, or even an architect, but no names can be established with certainty. Local folk wisdom credits the Gaona brothers of Caborca, Mexico, with the design, but this is uncertain, since it is based on the resemblance between the San Xavier church and the Mission Nuestra Senora de la Purissima Concepcion del Caborca, which they are supposed to have designed and built at the same time. The evidence for the Gaona brothers having built either church is not convincing, and the Caborca church was not contemporary with San Xavier.

The materials used in the building are the traditional adobe bricks of the southwest, and Indian labor must have been used in construction, but the laying up of the vaults was almost certainly beyond the scope of the local Indian craftsmen and must have been done by imported laborers. Most of the interior decoration and the design and carving of the reredos was also beyond the local Indians. Father Velderrain died before the construction was completed. The church was completed in 1797 under the direction of Father Juan Bautista Llorenz.

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INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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San Xavier del Bac Mission

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 4

After the completion of the church, the Spanish mission system--and the empire itself--declined rapidly. The Mexican revolution began in 1810, and in 1821 Mexico declared herself a republic. The new republic demanded that the Spanish priests swear allegiance to the new country. Most of the padres refused because of the anticlericalism of the new regime. Since Pimeria Alta was so far away from Mexico City, it was 1828 before the last Spanish priest, Father Rafael Diaz, was removed from Bac.

After Diaz's departure, Bac was left for a long period without a resident priest, and in 1841, with the secularization of the missions, it became a part of Magdalena parish. The buildings began to decay, and the Indians at the village took the moveable furnishings into their homes to protect them.

Various Americans passing that way after 1846 visited Bac. Philip St. George Cooke and the Mormon Battalion built a wagon road of sorts through to California, and after the discovery of gold in California in 1848, hordes of gold seekers took that way and passed by the old mission. Among them was H. M. T. Powell, who has left us a pencil sketch of the church and village done in October 1848.

After the Mexican War (1846-1848) Bac was south of the Gila River boundary marked out for the Mexican cession by the Treaty of Guadaloupe Hidalgo and so it remained in Mexico. All this was changed in 1853 by the Gadsden Purchase. In 1859 the Catholic Church placed the Gadsden purchase area in the Santa Fe diocese under Bishop Lamy, and the church roof was repaired, protecting it from the certain destruction common to exposed adobe brick.

Not until 1864 did the Bishop manage to provide a pastor for the flock at Bac, Father Carolus Evasius Messea, a Jesuit. By this time the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs had taken notice of the Papago people at Bac. On and off again there was an agent resident there, the first being M. O. Davidson in 1864. Father Messea stayed at Bac only from January to August of 1864, but in that time he founded the first public school in Arizona and saw it close after a few months because of a lack of funds and because the Indians would not attend.



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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

San Xavier del Bac Mission

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 5

During the Civil War the Apaches were particularly active and again there was no permanent resident at Bac, but the Tuscon clergy visited San Xavier regularly.

In 1873 a school was established at Bac by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondolet; they used the convento extending east from the church, which had been repaired by the U. S. government. The following year Bac was established as a reservation for the Papagos, but the headquarters was soon moved to the Gila reservation. The school at Bac closed the same day.

In 1887 a severe earthquake shook the area and damaged the church facade and the cemetery wall. In 1890 the San Xavier Reservation got a Government Farmer resident, and the school was reopened under the Sisters of St. Joseph. In 1895 the government spent \$1,000 to repair the church, and some rooms were added to the convento around the turn of the century for the use of the school.

In 1906 D.H. Holmes inspected the church for the Traders' National Protective Association of Tucson and recommended that the main dome, which was found to be cracking, be sheathed in copper. At this point Bishop Henry Granjon began a renovation and building project at the mission. He had the church and the mortuary chapel repaired, built a wall along the front of the convento, and placed a small arch at its east end. A similar arch, Bishop Granjon's Gate, he placed at the north end of the courtyard. He had the church plastered and painted and generally saved the structure from destruction. He also placed a replica of the Grotto of Lourdes on the north side of the hill just east of the convento (subsequently called Grotto Hill).

It was not until 1913, however, that he succeeded in staffing the church permanently. That year the Franciscan Province of Santa Barbara of Oakland, California, sent a native Tusconian, Father Ferdinand Ortiz to Bac.

The mission has thrived under the California Franciscans. In 1947 a new school for the Papago children was constructed west of the church and in 1949 Father Celestine Chinn and architect Eleazar D. Herreras began a repair and restoration project that resulted in new floors in the church, repaired roof and walls, and repairs to outside walls and to the convento. The priests now live in the convento.

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INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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San Xavier del Bac Mission

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 6

The mission of San Xavier del Bac is the most spectacular remnant of the Spanish mission system in United States territory. It is almost miraculous that this church has survived the vicissitudes of time. So many others, built of the same desert materials, have melted before the onslaughts of time, weather, and vandalism. What saved it was the dedication of the Papago people and the interest of others captured by its improbable beauty. The mission is a functioning parish church, but it is open to visitors during daylight hours.

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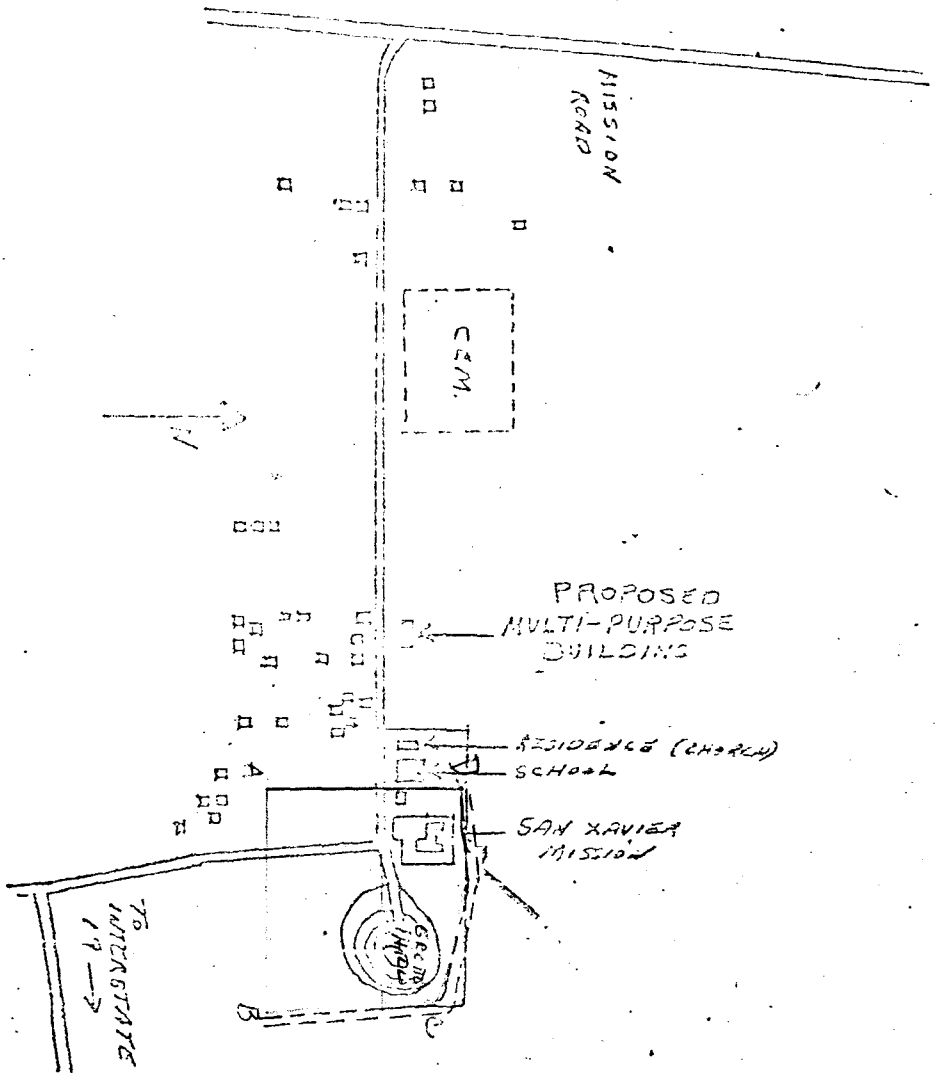
San Xavier del Bac Mission

**CONTINUATION SHEET**

ITEM NUMBER 10 PAGE 1

The landmark boundary for San Xavier del Bac includes the church and convento complex (of which the dormitory and garage do not contribute to the significance of the landmark), the mortuary chapel and garden, Grotto Hill, and the plaza in front of the church which is the site of the original village. (See map B)

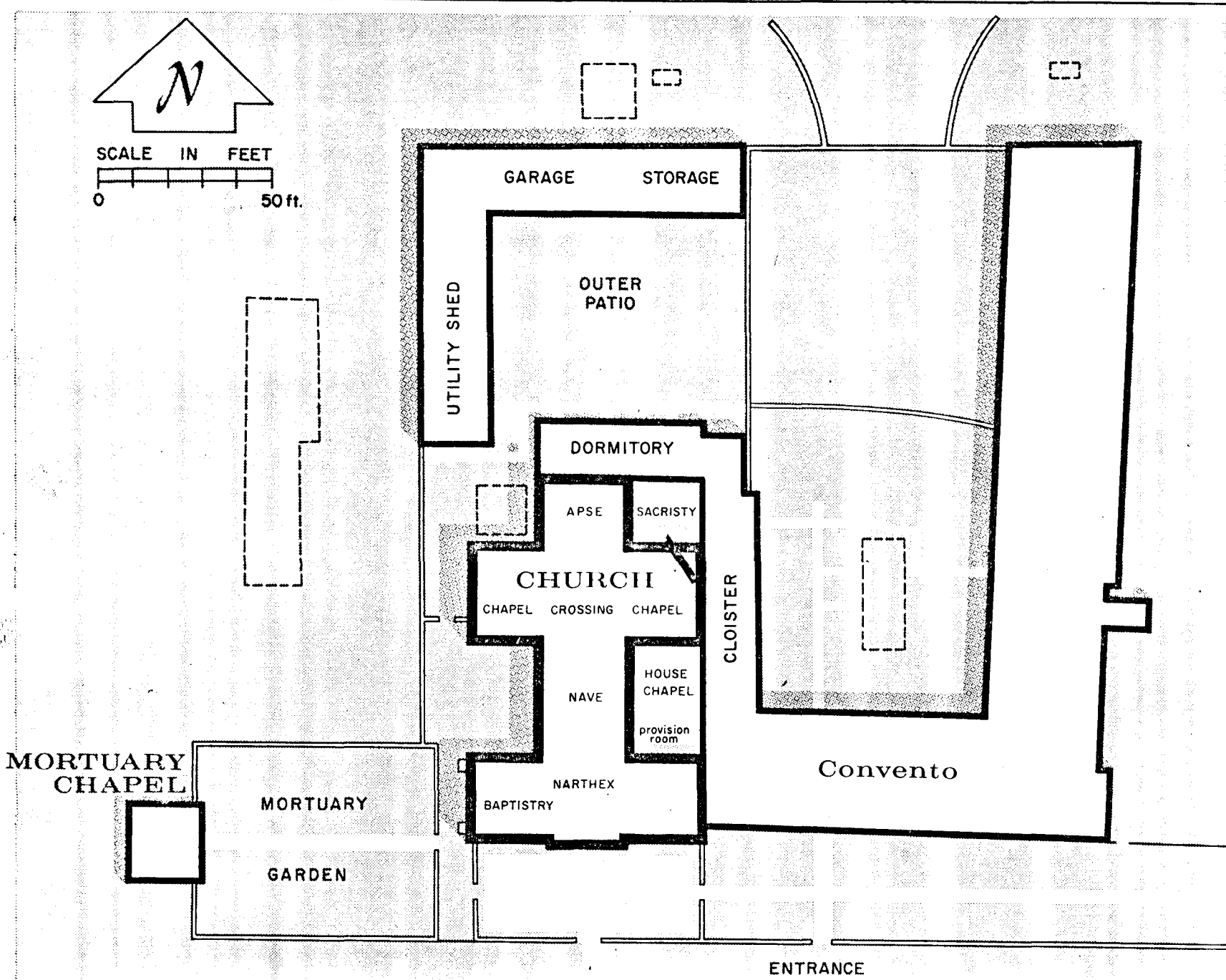
Starting at a point 275 feet south of the south edge of the county road running east and west in front of the church and 225 feet west of the west edge of the continuation of the above road which runs north and south (A), proceed due east approximately 1000 feet to the west edge of the dirt road which goes around the north side of Grotto Hill (B); follow the west edge of said road north approximately 500 feet to the point where the road curves west (C); follow the (now) south edge of the road generally west for approximately 1000 feet to a point (D); proceed from that point directly south for approximately 500 feet to point of origin.



(NOT TO SCALE)

San Xavier del Bac

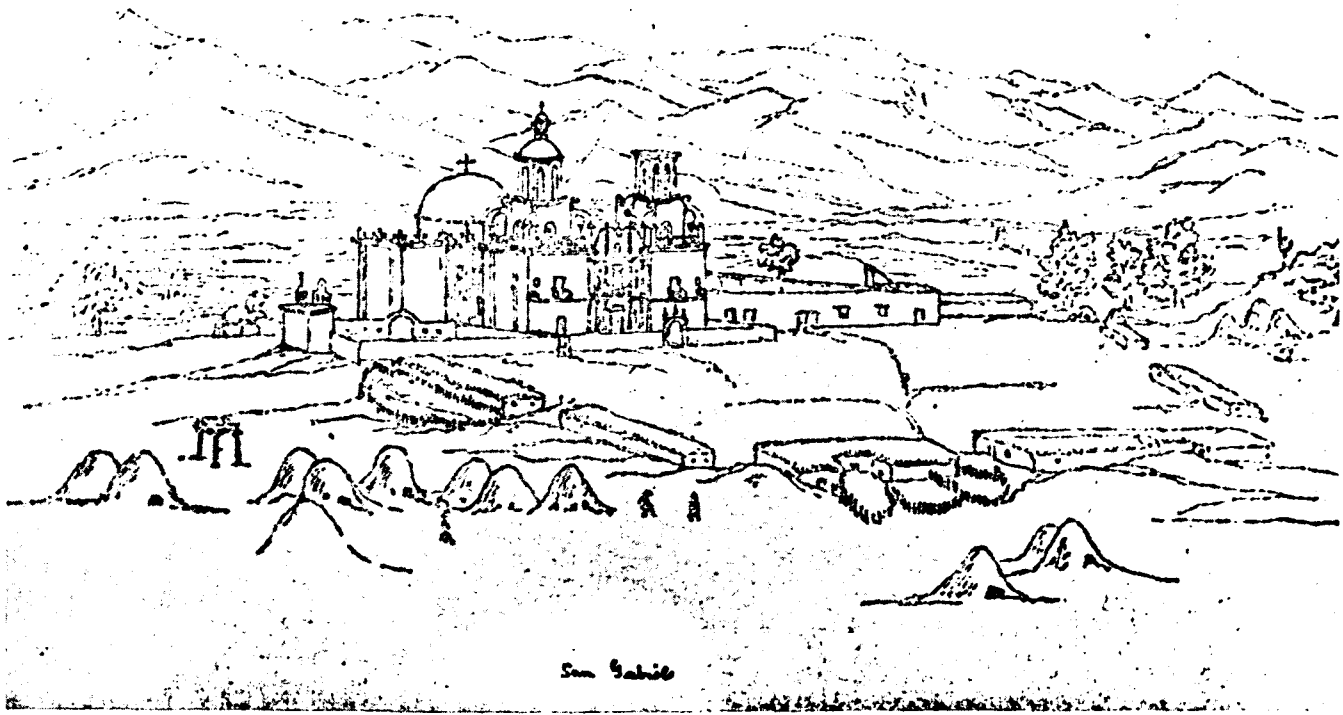
MAP B



The ground plan of San Xavier del Bac as of January, 1913. Revised plan, 1926. The building was destroyed after 1900 but which since have fallen into ruins or been removed.

From Bernardo Fontana, "Biography of a Desert Church: The Story of Mission San Xavier del Bac." The Smoke Signal, Spring, 1916.

Plan of SAN XAVIER DEL BAC



*Mission San Xavier del Bac drawn by H. M. T. Powell (1931: facing 144) when he saw it on October 9, 1849.*

From: Bernard Fontana, "Biography of a Desert Church: The Story of Mission San Xavier del Bac." The Smoke Signal, Spring, 1961