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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Xavier University Main Building, Convent and Library, Orleans Parish, LA

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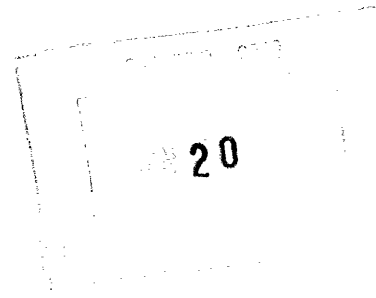
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Xavier University Main Building, Convent and Library

Other Name/Site Number:



2. LOCATION

Street & Number 1 Drexel Drive

Not for publication: NA

City/Town New Orleans

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: Orleans Code: 071

Zip Code: 70125

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: Statewide: X Locally:

Jonathan Fricker Deputy SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

January 16, 2004 Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
Determined eligible for the National Register
Determined not eligible for the National Register
Removed from the National Register
Other (explain):

Edson H. Beall
Signature of Keeper

3/3/04
Date of Action

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private: X
Public-Local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property
Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing
3
3

Non contributing
buildings
sites
structures
objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: education                      Sub: college  
Current: education                      Sub: college

**7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification: Late Gothic Revival  
Materials:

Foundation: brick  
Walls: limestone, brick  
Roof: other: tar and gravel; asphalt; metal  
Other:

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## **Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The Xavier University nomination includes a three-story main building (1932), a two-and-a-half story convent connected to it via an arcade (1932), and a two-story free-standing library (1937). The campus faces a wide drainage canal that bisects Washington Avenue in a crowded, low-scale, mainly mid-twentieth century commercial/residential area in west New Orleans. (The street immediately in front is now called Drexel Drive.) To the rear and sides of this, the original (three building) campus, are modern university buildings (fairly thickly set), although there is a generous lawn behind the main building. All three buildings feature fairly modest Gothic styling, the convent and main building in Indiana limestone, the library in blond brick. The only notable exterior alteration is a large addition to the rear of the convent, but it is sympathetic. As is typical with historic institutional buildings, the interiors have been modernized over the years, most notably lowered ceilings (below the tops of windows).

Behind the main building is a large grassy lawn in the manner of an academic quad (see attached sketch map). The space is defined on one side by the long rear corner wing of the main building. The "quad" is defined on the opposite side by the convent, which also extends a long way back. The space is largely open at the rear (although there is new construction visible behind it). Strangely, the main building's wing extends back at a slightly outward thrusting angle, creating a non-rectangular "quad." The library fronts onto Drexel Drive adjacent to the main building/convent complex.

### Main Building (Administration/Classrooms)

Aside from the previously mentioned corner wing, this is a standard symmetrical academic building of its era. The main block features a central entrance with a modest lobby and double-loaded corridors running from end to end of the building. A monumental flight of steps leads to the building's entrance, which is actually set at a level between the first and second story. The door opens into a small lobby with short runs of steps leading to the first and second floors. Standard period classroom interiors feature dark wood doors, window and door surrounds and baseboards. There are transoms over the doors and additional transoms set high in classroom walls. These, in combination with large blocks of windows, provided cross-ventilation in the days before air conditioning. The previously mentioned corner wing contains classrooms and an auditorium.

The main building's more or less flat roof is behind a low-key crenelated parapet. Façade bays are marked by broad, rather shallow buttresses that rise three-quarters of the building's height. The central entrance bay is flanked by narrower bays to set it off. Together, these three bays rise slightly above the building mass culminating in a central stone cross set on a very low gable. This three-part main entrance composition also features superimposed buttresses, bays that protrude slightly, a pair of narrow niches with tracery tops, a rich multi-shafted main entrance lancet with paneling above (emblazoning the university's name), and a massive low pointed arch marking the top story of the entrance bay. Because of its elevation and massive approach stair (previously noted), the entrance bay is articulated as a two-story affair despite its position at the center of a three-story façade.

Constructed of solid limestone, the walls of the main building are heavily textured. The limestone blocks are squared off and more-or-less coursed, but they are laid up with a rock face.

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This "rocky" character has a visual presence as strong as the building's Gothic architectural elements. It is even stronger in the rear where there are few details – i.e., mainly just openings and stone walls.

The outer (northwest) elevation of the wing also features bays set off by broad shallow buttresses. Bas relief panels above short buttresses mark the entrance. At the outside rear corner of the wing is a stair tower that protrudes above the building mass. There is also a tower-like projection that makes the transition from the main block to the wing. This features an entrance with a great lancet doorway and panels and groups of windows above, ultimately surmounted by a massive hood mold.

As previously mentioned, the rear elevation is almost unadorned. Its focus is a central polygonal balcony on the second story. The balcony is set on a bartisan base under a broad lancet with an open vestibule behind. It serves as an elevated speaker's platform to address students assembled in the rear quad.

The ancient-looking wooden doors of the main building are particularly handsome. Recurring motifs include tracery panels (some fairly elaborate) and over-sized decorative hinges. There are also various exterior light fixtures with Gothic detailing.

### The Convent

This very narrow and deep two-and-one-half story building has a more domestic feeling than the main building. The exterior, which is relatively unadorned, features the same rock-face limestone treatment as the main building, but without the buttresses. The front of the building (small and not as wide as the rear and almost articulated as a separate block) contains a chapel on the ground story, and on the upper story back-to-back spaces labeled on the original plans as "porch" and "community room." It is hard to tell from an old photo whether the upper story "porch" with its many windows was glazed in or screened. (Today it is the former.) The larger rear portion of the convent contains a long hallway with dormitory rooms and communal bathrooms to each side.

The front portion of the convent is articulated with a one-story turret-like projection (facing the main building), lancet and square head windows and forty-five degree Gothic gables. The rear portion of the building is more low-key with square-head windows, a hip roof and wall dormers.

The convent chapel is well styled and survives virtually unaltered. It features a paneled double frame Gothic ceiling with a slight pitch and rows of round-head stain glass windows. The chapel retains its distinctive medieval inspired sconces.

The convent is connected to the main building via a short arcade which originally was open. The arches have since been glazed in.

In the mid-1950s the convent received a large two story addition at the rear (see sketch map). The addition copies the stonework and modest Gothic styling of the main building and convent, complete with a crenelated parapet.

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### The Library

Now the music school, this blond brick-faced building is centered upon a great square keep-like tower that rises to three stories with a gently crenelated parapet top. The overall building mass is two stories and takes the form of steeply pitched wings that spring from the tower (one to each side and one in the rear). The rear wing housed the stacks. The two wings that spring from the sides of the tower are of unequal size. The one to the northwest is larger, higher and more ornamented than the one opposite, with a crenelated parapet of its own. This wing's principal story (the second) once housed the library's general reading room. The story below contains a narrow corridor with offices to each side. The less ornamented southernmost side wing contained a decorative arts museum on the ground floor (with items donated by the Drexel family – see part 8) and a secondary reading room above.

Aside from steep gables and crenelations, the library also features noteworthy Gothic architectural elements such as bands of casement windows (admittedly some with round heads), a row of bosses surmounting the great second story window of the tower façade, and the main entrance which takes the form of a heavy lancet flanked by buttresses. The old library contains two noteworthy interiors -- the first and second story lobbies -- both set in the tower. Both are squarish rooms with majestic sets of lancet openings giving access to adjacent spaces. The lobby on the second story also features a plaster cornice with pressed stylized leaf panels. Access to the second story is provided by a marble-trimmed staircase set in its own hall and lit by a distinctive hanging Gothic lamp with a crown-like top. Apparently there were once other hanging lamps of this kind in the library but this is the only one remaining. The only exterior alteration is the placement of fire escapes to the ends of the side wings.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National Register Criteria: A\_X B\_ C\_ D\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A\_X B\_ C\_ D\_ E\_ F\_ G\_

Areas of Significance: education; ethnic heritage (black)

Period(s) of Significance: 1932-1953

Significant Dates: 1932, 1937

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: Architects: Wogan and Bernard, New Orleans Contractor: George Glover and Company, New Orleans

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## **State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

Xavier University is of statewide significance in the areas of education and African-American heritage. During the historic period (1932-53), the university provided a quality education to thousands of African-Americans, principally from New Orleans and elsewhere in Louisiana. Scholars generally regard private institutions of higher learning to have been the very best available to African-Americans. Xavier was one of three in Louisiana. (The other major private university was Dillard University, which opened in New Orleans in 1935. A much smaller school, Leland College, was operated by the Baptists near Baton Rouge. Chronically plagued with financial problems, it closed in 1960. Both Dillard and Leland are listed on the Register for their educational significance.) The period of significance spans from 1932, when the school opened, to 1953, the current Register fifty year cutoff.

As first and foremost a liberal arts school, Xavier embodied W. E. B. DuBois' "talented tenth" philosophy of African-American higher education, which had triumphed by the time the "new Xavier" opened in 1932. (The school began in 1915 at another location in the city.) Xavier's other academic strength, pharmacology, had emerged by the 1940s. In short, Xavier University during the historic period played a critical role in educating what at the time would have been considered a black elite. While various Xavier graduates during the historic period sought advanced degrees, the majority entered the New Orleans professional community, often as educators, and increasingly in the 1940s, as pharmacists.

Xavier University holds the distinction of being the first and only historically black Catholic university in North America, and incidentally, the only one that can claim a foundress who would later be canonized. It all began when a Philadelphia millionaire's daughter, Katharine Drexel, entered the Sisters of Mercy convent in Pittsburgh in 1889. Her strong Catholic family had been shattered with the death of her mother in 1883 and her father in 1885, the latter leaving an estate of 15 ½ million dollars. Francis Drexel's will earmarked one-and-a-half million to specified charities, with the remaining fourteen million to be left in a trust fund, the income of which was to be divided equally among his three daughters.

Hand in hand with her parents' deep religious faith was a demonstrated commitment to helping those less fortunate. Katharine surpassed their notable charity, spending the rest of her life giving away her inheritance, either by way of request or causes she had targeted. Her specific mission, and that of the order she founded, was to minister to Indians and blacks. (Her initial interest was the Indian cause, but her work very soon embraced blacks.) This was first done from the comforts of her Philadelphia mansion, but after much tortuous soul-searching, she followed the advice of her spiritual mentor, Bishop James O'Conner, becoming a novitiate in 1889 and founding a new order in 1891, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People (SBS), headquartered in Pennsylvania. By the end of 1891 there were 28 Sisters in the new order. Among the earliest of the SBS missions was St. Catherine's School for Indians in Santa Fe, New Mexico and St. Michael's School in Arizona (Navajos).

Detailing the work of the SBS is a book in itself. These remarkable woman worked in harsh conditions in the American West and often inhospitable prejudice-driven environments in the South. At the time of Mother Katharine's death in 1955 (at the age of 97), there were 501 Sisters working



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from 51 convents, conducting 49 elementary schools, 12 high schools, and Xavier University. October 1, 2000 was a day of great rejoicing for Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and Xavier graduates the world over. On that day His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, declared their beloved foundress a saint.

The largest part of SBS work was in Louisiana, where the Sisters established or assisted dozens of Catholic schools for African-Americans, mainly in New Orleans and Acadiana. Needless to say, Xavier was their most ambitious project. Although Mother Katharine had given money to African-American causes in the city as early as the 1890s, it was not until 1915 that she sent her first Sisters there. The occasion was the opening of Xavier University in the former Southern University building on Magazine Street. (The legislature moved African-American Southern to a site above Baton Rouge in 1912, due largely to pressure from locals who did not want the institution in their neighborhood. Despite the name, Southern did not offer a four year college program until the 1920s.) Having faced similar situations, Mother Katharine acted in typical fashion by using an agent to purchase the property and did not make SBS involvement known initially.

Although styled a "university," Xavier in the beginning taught only grades 7-12. In 1917, a two-year "normal" course was added. (This course of study enabled graduates to become teachers.) And in 1925, Xavier established a College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, making it the first Catholic college for blacks in North America. In 1927, they added a College of Pharmacy (the first and only program in pharmacy available for blacks in Louisiana during the historic period).

As the institution continued to grow, it became clear that the high school department and college would have to be separated. Mother Katherine by now was all too familiar with the roadblocks she would encounter in attempting to buy new property. Long petitions prevented her from buying two different parcels of land in the city. Finally, in 1929 she outsmarted everyone by buying the present campus, which was then an unzoned largely industrial area. In short, there were no neighbors to object. For reasons not known, the first facility erected was a stadium (1930). On October 1932, Catholic dignitaries from around the country dedicated the campus' huge main building with its attached convent wing. In quiet attendance was Mother Katharine, age 74. Indiana limestone and "English Gothic" (the latter label used in SBS records) were her choices. The architects were Wogan and Bernard of New Orleans. They would also design the library, added in 1937. As SBS historian Sister Lynch observes: "The well-equipped buildings of Indiana limestone caused much comment for they surpassed any institution for the Colored in New Orleans." The "old" Xavier campus was given over entirely to the high school program, soon to become known as Xavier Prep.

The "new unit" (as the Sisters called it) was first and foremost a liberal arts institution (as was Dillard University, which opened some three years later across town). The statement of "aim and purpose" was the same as that of "old" Xavier: "The aim of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in conducting Xavier is to offer to young men and women of the colored race an opportunity of receiving a thorough, liberal education, an education which will develop all the faculties of soul and body and find expression in clear thinking and right acting."

The first faculty consisted of eleven Sisters, two Josephite priests, and thirty-two lay people, of whom thirteen were black. In 1933, the enrollment was 287 in the College of Arts and Sciences, 40 in the College of Pharmacy, 59 in evening classes, 7 graduate students and 3 registered as "special

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students," for a total of 396. In 1934, a Social Service School was added to the curriculum. By 1936, enrollment had soared to 855 (more than doubling in three years). Enrollment in 1950-51, toward the close of the historic period for this nomination, was 1,030 (213 of whom were veterans). Of the 1,030 total, 65% were Catholic.

Xavier's liberal arts emphasis is evident not only in its curriculum (as can be seen in old catalogs, including an interdisciplinary Negro History Department) but in the many arts-based extracurricular activities. Particularly legendary are the Grand Operas produced by the Music Department, beginning in the 1930s. Under the longtime direction of Sister Elise Sisson, a former member of the Metropolitan Opera, the Xavier University Opera produced singers with notable careers both at home and abroad. Other student programs held on campus (in the auditorium of the Main Bldg.) included oratorical contests, plays and recitals. Among the various student organizations over the years were the Classical Club, Le Cirque Francais, the Glee Club, the Negro History Club, the 3 Arts Club, and an orchestra, band and a cappella choir. (The choir, which traveled around the country giving performances, made its television debut on November 25, 1950.) Less one think the students were totally serious, there were also clubs such as Chess and Checkers, and Xavier had an extensive athletic program, including football, track and field, basketball and tennis. Finally, there were also various Catholic organizations to join, with perhaps the most interesting being the Catholic Convert Club.

During the historic period for this nomination (1932-1953), Xavier's educational impact was greatest in Louisiana, particularly New Orleans. It was easy to reach the campus from all over the city via two streetcar lines. Of the 1,030 students enrolled in 1950-51, almost half (497) were from New Orleans, with another 132 from elsewhere in Louisiana. The remaining students were distributed among 20-some states, with the largest numbers coming from other southern states. There were 14 foreign students. (There were no permanent dorms on the campus until the mid-1950s. Out-of-state students boarded with friends or family or lived in one of the small cottages in and around campus. Barrack-style World War II surplus buildings provided dormitory space for men in the late 1940s and early '50s.)

Most Xavier graduates during the historic period went on to professional positions in education and pharmacology. Of the little over 1,000 graduates as of 1950, 623 were educators and 145 were pharmacists. And not surprisingly for the period, some 229 Xavier graduates gave their occupation in 1950 as housewives. Smaller programs represented included 28 graduates practicing medicine and 36 in social work.

The decision of Mother Katharine to take on her Sisters' most daunting project, the establishment of a Catholic black university, was clearly a pivotal one in the state's African-American educational history. And while its geographical reach during the historic period was heavily weighted toward Louisiana, particularly New Orleans, its impact in its home state was incalculable – in tangible and not so tangible ways. Yes, Xavier and Dillard (the two major black private schools) provided thousands of black professionals a quality education. But they also spoke volumes symbolically. Armed with high academic ideals and standards, Xavier dedicated its huge Indiana limestone main building in 1932 -- at a time when black children in Louisiana were all too often in separate but decidedly unequal one or two room schools. There were few high schools for blacks. The state's only four-year public institution, Southern University, was all too often hampered by inadequate funding. (State-supported Grambling, in northern Louisiana, became a four year college in 1940. It

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awarded its first college degree, in elementary education, in 1944.) In New Orleans, it had been only 30 years ago that the school board had denied public education to blacks past the fifth grade. There was only one public high school for the city's huge black population, and it was a hand-me-down white school. In the very decade of Xavier's founding and growth, the chief item on black leaders' education agenda was the need for a vocational school (which materialized in 1942 in the form of Booker T. Washington High School). Within this context, Xavier, with its high academic ideals and liberal arts curriculum, dedicated a new campus and thrived. Likewise, Dillard University, with a strong commitment to the arts, was built. Louisiana had two black universities that equaled, and in some cases surpassed, those available to whites.

Xavier today continues a tradition of excellence. While it maintains a strong commitment to a liberal arts core curriculum, the university (with a student body of about 4,000) is particularly noted for its science programs. The College of Pharmacy, since its inception in 1927, has produced nearly 25% of all African-American pharmacists practicing in the United States. For the past nine years, Xavier has ranked first in the nation in the number of blacks placed into medical school. The university currently ranks 20<sup>th</sup> among 1,041 institutions awarding bachelors degrees in chemistry. The current president, Dr. Norman Francis, has led Xavier since 1968.

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## 9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Duffy, Sister Consuela Marie., SBS. *Katharine Drexel: A Biography.*

Fricker, Donna. "A Saint Among Us: Mother Katharine in Louisiana." *Preservation in Print*, September 2000.

Lynch, Sister Patricia, SBS. *Sharing the Bread and Sacrifice: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, 1891-1991.*

Lynch, Sister Patricia, SBS. Interview with Donna Fricker, LA Division of Historic Preservation, November 13, 2003. Sister Lynch is the official Xavier historian in addition to having written the official history of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

Xavier University Catalogs, various years in late 1930s, early '40s. Courtesy Xavier University Archives.

Reports of the President, Xavier University, various years between 1936 and 1950. Courtesy Xavier University Archives.

Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Corporation Minutes. Xavier University Archives.

Sullivan, Lester. "A Capsule History of Xavier University." Typescript prepared by Xavier University Archivist. Copy in National Register file, LA Division of Historic Preservation.

Historic photos showing work in progress and completed buildings. Xavier University Archives.

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)

Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

Designated a National Historic Landmark.

Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State Agency

Federal Agency

Local Government

University (Xavier Archives Dept.)

Other (Specify Repository):

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreeage of Property: approx. 4 acres

UTM References:     **Zone Easting Northing**  
                          15   779160 3318360

Verbal Boundary Description: See attached sketch map.

Boundary Justification: Boundaries were chosen to encompass the original buildings at Xavier while excluding less than fifty year old buildings on the modern campus. The boundaries also recognize the rear lawn (or quad) of the main building.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: National Register staff

Address: Division of Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

Telephone: (225) 342-8160

Date: November 2003

**PROPERTY OWNERS**

Xavier University

Xavier University Main  
Bldg, Convent & Library

New Orleans  
Orleans Parish, LA


1" = 80'

A = library (former)

B = main bldg

C = Convent

 convent addition

 boundary

