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United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

SEP 17 1991

Ala. Historical Commission

NATIONAL REGISTER

Ala. Historical Commission

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Convent and Academy of the Visitation
other names/site number Visitation Monastery

2. Location

street & number 2300 Springhill Avenue
city, town Mobile
state Alabama code AL county Mobile code 097 zip code 36607

3. Classification

Table with 3 columns: Ownership of Property, Category of Property, and Number of Resources within Property. Includes checkboxes for private/public ownership and building/district/site/structure/object categories.

Name of related multiple property listing: Historic Roman Catholic Properties in Mobile, AL, 1848-1928

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this 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 meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of certifying official: Alabama Historical Commission (State Historic Preservation Office) Date: 5-21-91

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of commenting or other official Date

5. 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:)

Signature of the Keeper: Patrick W. Andrews Date of Action: 4/24/92

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Religion/religious structure
Religion/church school
Religion/church-related residence

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Religion/religious structure
Religion/church-related residence

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

French Renaissance
Richardsonian Romanesque

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick
walls Brick
Stone
roof Slate
other _____

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Convent of the Visitation lies on ten acres of land in the mid-town area of Mobile. Much of the complex is screened from busy Springhill Avenue by a twelve foot high brick wall. The main entrance gates are just east of the wall, and a brick driveway leads to the Chapel and curves east around the Priest's House. A narrow black top lane, east of the main gates, runs along the east side of the Priest's House and around to the rear of the property. A low brick wall runs along the east shoulder of this lane as far as the Priest's House. Between this wall and the east property line is a small garden amid a large grassy expanse. The west half of the complex is dominated by the four cloister buildings, in a quadrangle, with outbuildings to the rear along the wall. The Chapel and Priest's House are to the east. Large oaks, pecans and magnolias shade the surrounding yards. Overall the complex consists of three contributing buildings (constructed from 1854-1899), the original wall (1885) and the nun's cemetery (see site plan). Despite fire, storm and several building phases, the Convent of the Visitation is a remarkably intact 19th century religious complex.

The first nuns of the Visitation Order in Mobile (1833) took shelter in a one story frame cottage until more permanent quarters could be erected. Bishop Portier's nephew, Claude Beroujon, designed the first Convent. Beroujon was a capable architect whose other efforts included Mobile's Cathedral and buildings at Spring Hill College. For the Convent, Beroujon's primary design consideration was for a cloister, in keeping with the order's rules. Beroujon's effort was destroyed by a tornado in 1840. No illustrations of it survive. The buildings were reconstructed, only to be destroyed by fire in 1854. With an outpouring of community support and sympathy, reconstruction began yet again. This third complex consisted of four, two story hip roofed brick buildings surrounding a cloister. A simple chapel was constructed immediately to the east. A portion of this construction phase remains at the northeast corner of the quadrangle. The eastern five bays of the north quadrangle building, consisting of the nun's kitchen and day quarters, may be distinguished from the slightly later five western bays by the square headed windows. The windows in the west half of the building are segmentally arched. Facing onto the cloister, the first story of the entire ten bays of the north building is shaded by an arcaded passage of semi-circular arches on square brick piers. The second story has a gallery with plain balustrades and square posts, both facing the cloister and at the rear (or north) elevation.

 See continuation sheet

MAY 23 1991

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 3 Page 1 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

Building 1: Convent

The main building associated with the Convent of the Visitation is a complex amalgamation of additions and wings surrounding a cloistered courtyard that evolved over time, 1854-1900. The building was altered throughout the history of the Convent to accommodate the changing needs of the Convent, creating its present shape. Although each wing may have a specific function, such as chapel, dormitory, or kitchen, the entire building evolved to serve the spiritual and temporal needs of the Sisters of the Visitation. Because the Sisters of the Visitation live under religious vows of seclusion from the world, the Convent necessitated a building that would internally link all of the various parts of the Convent without having to go out of doors. Because the additions were erected over time, each represent different architectural styles popular during the period.

Building 2: Laundry

The laundry, tool shed, and hen house are located in a long, narrow building located at the rear of the property. This secondary building is not physically connected to the main Convent, although it is located within the confines of the wall.

Building 3: Priest house

The Priest's house is the only main building not connected to the Convent. Located within the walls, the Priest's house is independent and not internally connected to the Convent.

Site 1: Cemetery

The Cemetery is located to the north east of the complex, within the walls.

Object 1: Wall with gate.

Surrounding the entire complex, and separating the cloistered Convent from public chapel and priest's house, there is a high brick wall with an entrance gate.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Mar 23 1991

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

The second oldest remaining buildings are located on the east side of the quadrangle. This east side consists of two buildings, both built about 1860. The northern of these two east buildings, which serves as the nun's dormitory, is nearly invisible from outside the cloister due to the abutting 1894 Chapel and 1896 annex. In scale and massing it is the same as the north building, being two stories with an arcaded passage and second story balcony on the cloister. Double hung sash windows and doors alternate beneath the arches. To the south of this building, and entirely visible from the driveway is the main entrance building, a rare three story French Renaissance style structure (c. 1864). This is a stuccoed brick building, 9x3 bays with a gable roof to the sides. The central three bays slightly project with an arched doorway framed by paneled pilasters and triangular pediment with bas-relief cartouched and paneled double leaf door. The windows to either side and center above have pedimented lintels. All corners have quoins.

The south building of the quadrangle was originally constructed from 1867-70 to match the north building. In 1885 Mobile architect James Henry Hutchisson added a third story, three story iron work porch on the south facade and a cupola in 1888. Today this building serves as a women's and men's retreat. It is a three and one half story brick structure, 15 bays long, with a hip roof with cross gable and clock tower above. The south elevation, which faces the south courtyard (there is an iron gazebo here) and wall beyond, presents a typical 19th century institutional appearance with alternating round top windows and doors, most of which have their original shutters. The whole is covered with three tiered iron balcony. A central brick pediment features closed dentil return and round light. The cupola is square with a column at each corner, domed top and clock within. The north elevation of this building features an arcaded passageway on the cloister.

The west building (1900), which completed the quadrangle, was demolished in 1953 after the school closed. This was where most of the students lived and studied. It was an imposing three story brick building with a hip roof. The first story arcaded walkway was preserved, keeping the cloister intact.

One of the Convent's most unusual features, the brick wall, was added by James Henry Hutchisson during the 1880s. The brick wall runs along Springhill Avenue to the present gates, then due north along the west side of the main drive, abutting the three story French Renaissance building. The wall continues from the middle of the Chapel apse, running around the west side of the Priest's

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

MAY 23 1991

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 7 Page 2 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

House, then due north, then west across the rear of the complex and along the west border back to Springhill Avenue. The rear wall encompasses several outbuildings. At center rear is a two story brick building, which served and serves as the laundry. This 1880s building features a gable roof oriented north-south and corbeled eaves.

On either side of the laundry are elongated one story gable roof buildings with open bays between brick columns. These originally served as hen houses, and are now used for tool sheds. Tucked in the northeast corner of the compound is a square nun's cemetery, containing simple white crosses.

The largest building of the complex, and the one most clearly visible from the gates, is the Chapel. The Chapel's nave abutts the nun's dormitory (east building of the quadrangle), and the transepts are aligned north to south with the apse on the east elevation. The Chapel was constructed in 1894, replacing a much simpler earlier one. B.M. Harrod and Paul Andry or New Orleans were the architects. The building is the highest style Richardsonian Romanesque structure in the city. Indeed, other than the more eclectic Priest's House adjacent, the Chapel is the only surviving example of this style of architecture in Mobile. This 2½ story Chapel is built of rusticated stone with a stone water table and regularly spaced iron grills. The cross gable roof is covered in slate with ceramic cresting and there is an octagonal arcaded cupola atop. The entrance, which is in the south transept, consists of double wooden doors set in a massive Romanesque arch. There is a stained glass lunette above. There are narrow stained glass windows first and second story, either side of the entrance. The facade features a raked cornice, accented by heavy dentils that terminate in winged gargoyles at the bottom angle. In the apex of the gable is a smaller triangle formed by a horizontal dentil course. Within this triangle is carved a Templar's Cross whose curved edges repeat the line of the circle in which it is inscribed, and which is further embellished by vines and arabesques carved in low relief. In a panel below all of this is a carved dedication, "Sacratissimo Cordi Jesu" and the date. At the peak of the gable is a stone cross. The rounded apse bays are delineated by slender full height Romanesque columns with flowered capitals. First floor windows are square top, second round top with connecting arched lintels. There is a one story apsidiole on the southeast corner of the apse and transept and another at the southwest corner of the nave and transept. An octagonal tower stands on the north side of the apse. This tower features an open arcaded top and pyramidal roof with ceramic finial. The north transept features smooth stone

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

MAY 23 1991

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

along the second story and a few bays of the first. Only the north end of the first story is of rusticated stone, like the rest of the building. The smooth areas may indicate infill shortly after the building's construction.

Though the nave of the Chapel abutts the east building of the quadrangle, further access was provided by construction of the East Annex in 1896. This connected the north end of the east building with the north end of the north transept.

The annex is a two story stuccoed brick building with paired multi-sided tower bays. A small courtyard is formed by the Annex, East building and the nave and transept of the Chapel.

To the East of the Chapel stands the Priest's House, built about 1899 to shelter visiting clerics. It now serves as a gift shop. Stylistically the Priest's House is a hybrid of Romanesque and Gothic elements. It is a one story, 5x2 bay brick building with a battered stone water table with spaced iron vents, and stone belt course. There is a high hip slate roof with ceramic cresting. The east two bays project with a hip roof. The entrance is inset adjacent. It consists of double wood doors with a stained glass lunette, transom, and stone Romanesque arch. A stone wall dormer is centered above. It features a pair of 1/1 round top windows divided by a column. The dormer is parapeted with a cross atop. Windows in the Priest's House are 1/1 with square tops. The west end of the building is rounded. A dentil band runs along the top and there are two interior chimneys. There is a rear ell with a hip roof and eyebrow louvered vents on its east and west elevations.

The last feature worthy of note is the main gate, built at the same time as the Chapel. The gate consists of a pair of rusticated stone shelters with ceramic tile roofs and paired supporting braces. The brick drive dates from 1894 as well.

EXTERIOR INTEGRITY

The exterior integrity if the Convent of the Visitation is of such a high degree as to be truly exceptional. The most significant change was the demolition of the three story school in 1953. Although demolished, the first story arched walkway survives and continues to link all of the buildings and continues to define the quadrangle. All of the existing buildings are virtually unchanged.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

MAY 23 1991

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 4 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

Interior Description

The buildings of the Convent present an impressive array of mid to late 19th century interior spaces. The Priest's House, constructed in 1899, features a classic central hall plan with two rooms to either side. Walls are plastered with beaded board wainscoting. The ceilings are coved and all interior doors feature transoms. The fireplaces in the west and east front rooms are tile with a fleur-de-lis motif and wooden mantels.

The 1894 Chapel features an impressive interior, specially oriented for the cloistered order. The public entrance and seating is in the south transept, while the nun's seating is in the nave, which abuts the east building of the cloister. The Chapel interior includes round top stained glass windows with dividing Romanesque columns, an entablature around the room with dentil work and egg and dart band, plaster relief over the windows and niches with dentil bands and flowered motifs. Paired round top lights above along east and west sides. Decorated, exposed ceiling beams with brackets at the walls. Large round stained glass skylight over the altar. The marble altar was broken up after Vatican II. The nun's choir, in the nave, includes wooden seating, and paneled wainscoting with beaded board and egg and dart molding around the top. The nun's choir is separated from the altar by plate glass in wood frames. A curving wooden stair in the apse leads up to the tower. The only interior changes are carpet on the chancel and the glass divider.

The Chapel is also joined to the cloister by the East Annex, built in 1896. The two, two story octagonal tower bays are the distinguishing feature of this building. Walls are beaded board, hardwood floors and arched doorways are throughout. Some of the ceilings have been dropped. The staircase includes a newel post and balustrading.

The cloister is entered through the three story French Renaissance building on the east side. This 1864 building includes hardwood floors, eared architrave door and window surrounds, grained two panel doors, screened sitting spaces with paneled fronts and a curved stairway leading to the second story. The south end of this building serves as a conference room and has a fireplace on the west wall. The second and third floors consist of halls with rooms to either side. There are no doors but rather curtains.

The three story south building has a parlor on the first floor with an arched screen wall at the north end and fluted, square free standing Ionic columns. There is a fireplace on the east wall. A wide three story staircase dominates the center of the building. Walls are both plastered and beaded board. The second and third floors feature halls with rooms off either side. The attic features queen post trusswork and a wooden ladder leads up to the clock.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

MAY 23 1991

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 5 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

The two story north and east buildings of the cloister have hardwood floors, eared architrave surrounds (indicative of their 1850s date) and frequent changes in floor level. The assembly rooms and refectory at the northeast corner have iron columns supporting the ceiling. The west half of the north building contains the kitchens for the candy making operation.

Interior Integrity

The Convent of the Visitation is remarkably intact on the interior. Though there have been subtle changes over time, the overall effect is one of the most impressive intact 19th century interiors in the City of Mobile. There is nothing else like it on a similar scale in the State.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

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nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1855-1899

Significant Dates

1855
1864
1899

Cultural Affiliation
NA

Significant Person

NA

Architect/Builder

Harrod, B.M. and Andry, Paul
Hutchisson, James Henry

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Criterion C: Architecture

The Convent and Academy of the Visitation is significant under National Register Criterion C as the finest historic religious complex in the state. Constructed between 1855 and 1899 the complex includes Mobile's only surviving Romanesque Revival structures, a rare three story French Renaissance building, an arcaded cloister and ironwork on the south building. The site is surrounded by the original brick wall.

* * * * *

Bishop Michael Portier (Bishop of Mobile 1829-1859) was concerned about the lack of school for young women in the diocese. In an effort to correct this situation, Portier invited Mother Madeline Augustine D'Arreger, a religious of the Visitation Order in Georgetown, D.C., to come to Mobile and establish a convent and school. In 1833 Mother Madeline and three nuns made the long voyage south and were met by Portier. No permanent facility was available so the sisters were allowed use of a five room frame house on the western fringe of the city. One room served as a bedroom for the nuns, one as a bedroom for the students, one as a chapel, one for classes and one for assembly. This cottage was adjacent to a tract of land acquired by the Bishop for the Order. With the nuns arrival, the Order of the Visitation had it second house in the United States.

While the nuns pursued their religious and educational duties, construction of the Convent and Academy began. Claude Beroujon, who would design the Mobile Cathedral, served as architect. This early effort was destroyed by a tornado in 1840. The buildings were reconstructed, only to be destroyed by fire in 1854. By this time the convent had grown and there were over one hundred students enrolled in the academy. With significant community support, the complex was rebuilt in 1855. A portion of this construction phase remains at the north end of the cloister.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

MOI 2 S 100

Elizabeth Gould. From Fort to Port: An Architectural History of Mobile. University of Alabama Press. 1988.

Robert Gamble. The Alabama Catalog. The University of Alabama Press. 1987

Lights and Shadows: The Story of the Convent, Academy and Retreat House of the Visitation Monastery. 1983.

Visitation Monastery Celebrates 150 Years. Supplement of the Catholic Week, January 28, 1983.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- 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
- Other

Specify repository:

Mobile Historic Development Comm

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property Approximately 11 acres

UTM References

A 16 | 395220 | 33916140
 Zone Easting Northing

C 16 | 395420 | 33915830

B 16 | 395060 | 33916040
 Zone Easting Northing

D 16 | 395140 | 3395950

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description Begin at a point on the north side of Springhill Avenue, 250' west of the northwest corner of Springhill Avenue and Woodlands Avenue. Proceed thence along the north side of Springhill Avenue 750' to a point, thence in a northeasterly direction 775' to the rear lot lines along Dubroca Street, thence in a southeasterly direction along these rear lot lines 550' to a point on the rear lot lines on Woodlands Avenue, thence in a southwesterly direction 850' to the point of beginning.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundaries conform to the present legal dimensions of the lot.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title John Sledge/Architectural Historian; Steven Kay/AHC Reviewer

organization Mobile Historic Development Comm. date October 1, 1990

street & number P.O. Box 1827 telephone (205)438-7281

city or town Mobile state Alabama zip code 36633

MAY 23 1991

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 1 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

As the Convent and Academy grew, new buildings were erected. About 1860 the three story French Renaissance building on the west and south corner of the cloister was erected. In 1867 the south building was added, with an extension, a third story, iron work porch (1870) and cupola (1888) by Mobile architect James Hutchisson.

In 1894 the Romanesque Chapel was begun by Harrod and Andry of New Orleans. This was a rare stone building for the coast. In 1900 the three story school building along the west side of the cloister was constructed.

The early 1900s saw the academy as a vigorous institution, with students from across the south and even Latin America. With the decrease in the number of nuns during subsequent decades, it was decided to close the high school in 1948 and the grammar school followed in 1952. The west school building (1900) was razed in 1953, but the arcaded walkway was left. The Convent initiated closed retreats in 1956 and began making its famous heavenly hash candy in 1957.

Today the nuns, some twenty in number, continue their contemplative mission. A small cemetery at the northeast corner contains the graves of their predecessors.

Criteria Consideration A

National Register Criteria Consideration - A applies to the Convent and Academy of the Visitation because of its exceptional range of architectural expressions and integrity. Mobile's only surviving example of the Richardsonian Romanesque, the arcaded cloister, ironwork, original walls and gates are all significant features of this intact religious complex.

Criteria Consideration D

National Register Criteria Consideration - D applies to this property because of the nun's cemetery at the northeast corner of the wall. This cemetery, though an unremarkable collection of plain white crosses, is significant as an integral part of the complex.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

MAY 23 1991

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number photo-
graphs Page 1 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

1. Convent & Academy of the Visitation
2300 Springhill Ave.
2. Mobile, Mobile County, Alabama
3. John Sledge, photographer
4. June 1990
5. MHDC Negative File MB-183,184,189,299

Photo # Description (Roll/Frame #)

1. Entrance gates. Camera facing S. (184/13)
2. Priests' house. Camera facing NE. (183/12)
3. Same. Chapel in background. Camera facing W. (183/9)
4. Same. Interior. Camera facing S. Central Hall (183/16)
5. Same. Camera facing W. West front room (183/14)
6. Same. Camera facing NW. Mantel (183/15)
7. General view from gate. Camera facing N. chapel center. Southeast bld. left & Priests' house right (183/22)
8. Chapel. Camera facing N. Facade (183/21)
9. Same. Camera facing NW. (183/25)
10. Same. Camera facing W. (183/27)
11. General view. Camera facing N. (299/55)
12. Chapel interior. Camera facing S. Entrance (299/4)
13. Chapel confessional. Camera facing W (299/6)
14. Chapel belfry staircase. Camera facing S. (299/2)
15. SE bld. Camera facing NW. Facade (299/32)
16. Interior SE bld. Camera facing stairway (299/22)
17. Rear view. Camera facing SW. East annex center (189/22)
18. Rear view. Camera facing S. Chapel left, cloister right (183/30)
19. Rear wall & laundry. Camera facing S. (183/34)
20. Nuns' cemetery, NE. corner inside walls. Camera facing NE. (189/21)
21. South courtyard. Camera facing S. (184/11)
22. South Bld. facade. Camera facing N. (184/2)
23. General view from South courtyard. South Bld. left, rear of SE. bld center and gazebo right. Camera facing NE. (184/6)
24. South bld. Camera facing NE. (184/3)
25. Ironwork detail, south bld. (184/8)
26. Rear south bld. in cloister. Camera facing S. (189/8)
27. Cloister. Camera facing N. North Bld (189/12)
28. Cloister. West wall. Camera facing W. (189/6)
29. Cloister. Camera facing N from S bld. (189/32)
30. Cloister. Camera facing E. E. bld. (189/3)

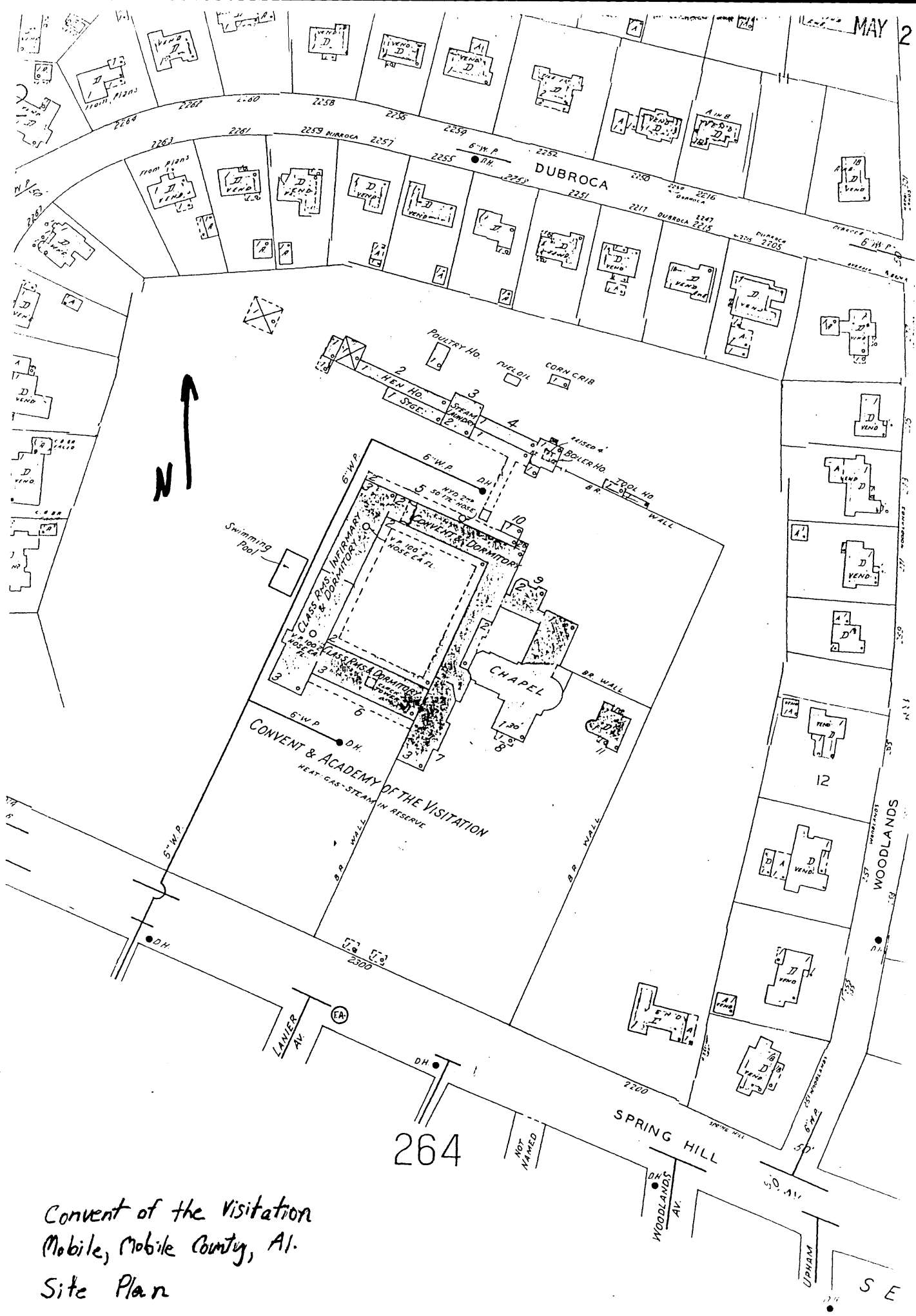
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

MAY 23 1991

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number photo-
graphs Page 2 Convent and Academy of the Visitation

31. Same. Camera facing N. Balcony. East Bld (189/28)
32. Interior. SE. bld. Camera facing S. (189/1)
33. Same. Camera facing N. (189/2)
34. Interior, E. bld. Camera facing N. (189/17)
35. Same. 2nd floor SE. bld. Camera facing N. (189/27)
36. Interior, E. annex. Stairway. Camera facing S. (189/19)
37. Interior, Nuns' Chapel. Camera facing E. (189/18)
38. Interior, S bld. Camera facing W. (189/30)
39. Interior. S bld staircase. Camera facing S. (189/29)
40. Interior. Rectory. Camera facing NW. E. Bld. (189/25)

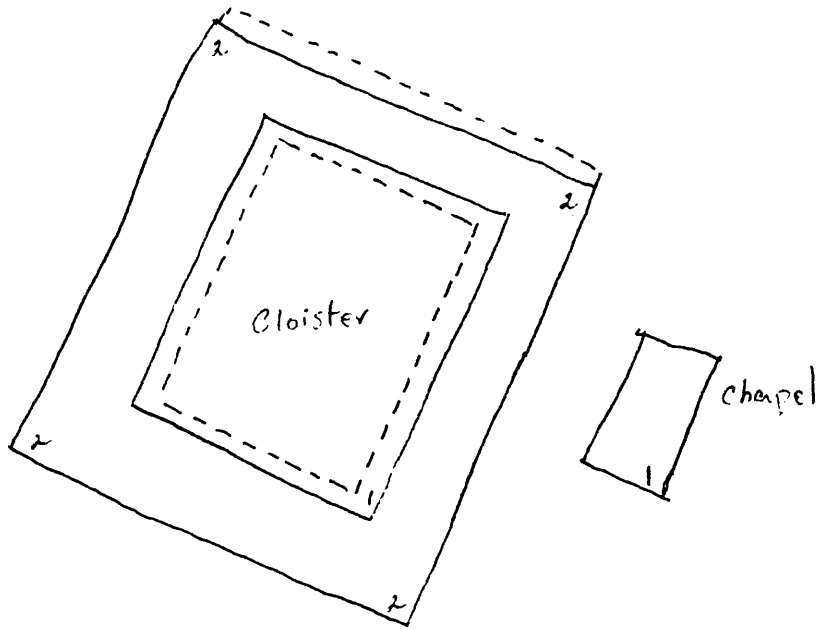


Convent of the Visitation
 Mobile, Mobile County, Al.
 Site Plan

Convent of the Visitation
1st Phase - 1855

MAY 23 1991

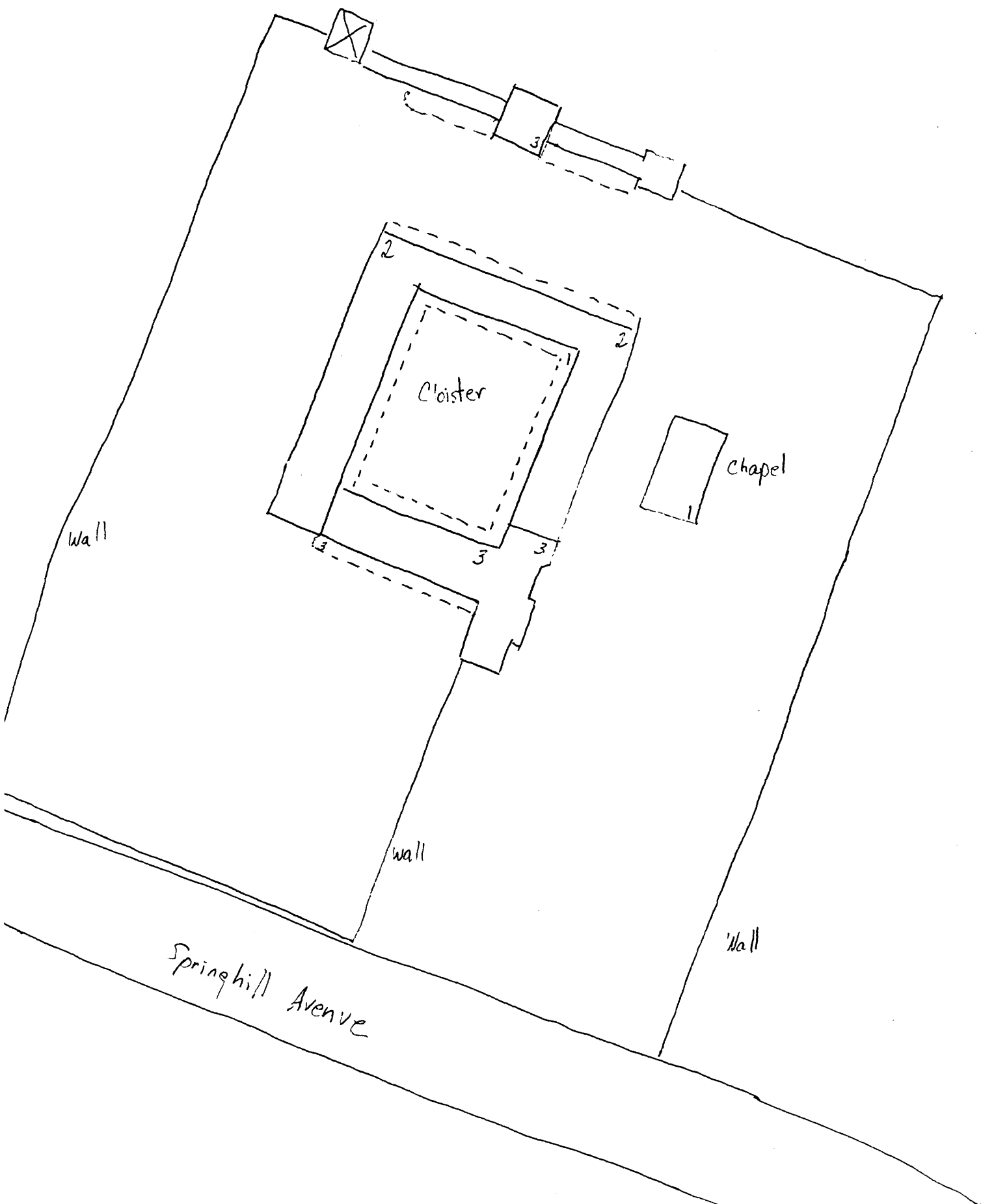
N



Springhill Ave.

Convent of the Visitation
2nd Phase 1885

MAY 23 1991
N ↑



Convent of the Visitation
3rd Phase 1900

MAY 23 1921

