

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Main Building, Vassar College (Vassar Female College)

and or common

2. Location

street & number Vassar College not for publication

city, town Poughkeepsie vicinity of

state New York code county Dutchess 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 type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Vassar College

street & number Raymond Avenue

city, town Poughkeepsie vicinity of state New York

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Dutchess County Court House

street & number

city, town Poughkeepsie state New York

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title National Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1973 federal state county local

depository for survey records 1100 L Street, NW

city, town Washington state DC

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input 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

"Old Main" was the original Vassar College building and was planned in 1857-1858 by its benefactor, Matthew Vassar and his Board of Trustees. The building was to be large enough to house four hundred students and the faculty with their families and to contain lecture rooms, laboratories, and administrative offices. It was to include room for a library of 10,000 volumes and a chapel for daily and Sunday worship. The large structure was to serve all purposes except for astronomy classes.

Matthew Vassar sought the advice of Milo P. Jewett, a clergyman who had been interested in the education of women, and they arrived at the selection of architect Thomas Tefft, whose drawings for the school are at Vassar. Tefft's untimely death meant that Vassar thereafter engaged James Renwick, Jr., of New York City.

Renwick drew up his own plans for the building and a Poughkeepsie contractor, William Harloe, proposed to build the college for \$178,200. Groundbreaking took place on May 1, 1861, and the building started to rise on the bluff two miles east of the Hudson River.

Rosalie Thorne MacKenna has written on James Renwick as an exponent of the Second Empire Style in the United States and she specifically describes his design of Vassar College, as shown in an 1850 watercolor as a:

long four story red brick building "with a mansard roof and a three part pavilion with a double flight of turning stairs leading to a large arched door in the second floor, then called, in continental fashion, the first or principal floor. "High windows" were placed "between paired red brick pilasters on the three upper stories" and "an ornate curved French type dormer window stood in the center of the surmounting dome."

Renwick's design was meant to articulate a "hierarchy of functions" observed MacKenna. The central pavilion of the building would house the "chief social and administrative activities" of the college. In its entrance vestibule would be the President's and the Lady Principal's apartments, and the college parlors. (The Lady Principal would be responsible for the social and domestic life of the young women students: she would see to the welfare of the students in loco parentis.) The end pavilions would contain the professors' apartments--two on each floor. The connecting links would house the students in suites of four rooms. Wide corridors (conceived by Vassar himself) would enable the students to take their exercise indoors in inclement weather.

The agreement between the firm of Renwick Jr., Auchmuty, and Sands and Vassar Female College was formalized on June 10, 1861. The document containing the agreement (Vassar College Special Collections) mentions that the firm will be responsible for the construction of a gate house or gate lodge as well as grounds, roads, walks, and the planting of trees and shrubbery. The Renwick firm charged \$5400 plus travelling expenses to and from New York for its services. In the

8. Significance

Period	National 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 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 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 type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input 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 1861-1865 **Builder/Architect** James Renwick, Jr.

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Matthew Vassar, founded and endowed one of the first colleges for the education of women in the United States offering the same education available to men at Yale and Harvard. Conceived and built during the Civil War years, this "female seminary" along with Old City Hall in Boston, Massachusetts (1862), are the first monumental examples of the Second Empire style thought to be so appropriate for secular public buildings at mid-century. Many of these large structures were built during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant. A style sometimes called "General Grant," it went out of vogue with the financial panic of 1873 when the post-Civil War boom came to an end.

In his zeal to build an educational institution "more lasting than the pyramids," Matthew Vassar, the "squire from Poughkeepsie," carefully thought out and selected the site before seeking the advice of an architect. Elizabeth Daniels, Vassar College Historian, has briefly outlined its conception:

When Vassar made a grand tour of England and Europe in 1845 with his wife and Secretary, he saw Guy's Hospital in London, named for an ancestor of his, Sir Thomas Guy. He recorded in his diary that from that moment he began to dream of founding an institution that would perpetuate the Vassar name and use the fortune that he had accumulated in the brewery business and other enterprises in Poughkeepsie to benefit society. He journeyed to the continent after his visit to England and in France was extremely impressed with the architecture of the Tuileries and the Hotel de Ville, which he visited in September, 1845. (In the Vassar archives, Vassar's pencilled notations are on colored lithographs of views of Paris and indicate that he went several times from September 12 to October 1, 1845 to study the Tuileries. "Similar to Vassar College," he wrote on the top of a view of the Tuileries.) As Rosalie Thorne MacKenna has observed in her comprehensive theses studying the architecture of Main Building and the landscaping of Vassar College, 1860-1870, a portrait of Matthew Vassar by Charles Loring Elliott painted in 1861, shows Vassar standing on a balcony beyond which rises the college building in much the same fashion as the Tuileries in Franz X. Winterhalter's portrait of Napoleon III, painted between 1852 and 1859.

For ten years after his return to Poughkeepsie from Europe, Vassar sifted and pondered ideas respecting the execution of his dream. Once friends, relatives, and outsiders got wind of his thinking, he was offered much conflicting advice amidst many competing claims. Although self-educated himself, he had developed the greatest respect for formal education. His niece, Lydia Booth, ran a

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contract it was specified that Renwick's role would be "to visit the site for the purpose of inspecting, supervising, suggesting and deciding, and in the performance of his duties." "At least as often as once a fortnight, during the building and planting season, for four years" he would visit the campus.

The building was completed and ready for the opening of the college in the fall of 1865. Four hundred feet to its rear had been built a boiler and gas house which were to furnish it, as well as other buildings as they were built, with steam heat. In the opinion of Keene Richards, a former general manager of the college, Vassar College was perhaps the first institution in the world to be heated from a plant installed in a separate building. Other technical innovations were sliding iron doors installed between wings as a precaution against fires, with fire walls extended up above the roof. Furthermore, twenty miles of water-pipe travelled up and down the corridors of the building to provide water, -- the water being pumped from springs in Mill Cove Pond (Vassar Lake) to tanks at the top of the building. "Sewerage" was to be emptied from the building through a large pipe extending 400 feet behind the building and subsequently filtered through a drain field.¹

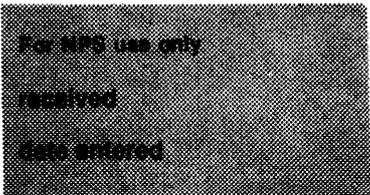
The actual dimensions of the building are 500 feet in length and the transverse wings are 164 feet. The material is dull red brick pointed with black mortar. The door and window trim, as well as the water-tables are of blue free-stone. The center pavilion and the wings are five stories high and the connecting structures are four stories high. The central block from foundation to the top of the dome is 92 feet, all the partition walls are of brick. The interior corridors are 12 feet wide and 585 feet long and may be divided quickly in five parts by iron fire doors. The mansard roof is covered with purple and green slates in the Second Empire fashion.

In 1872, with James S. Post serving as architect, an extension was added to the dining room and kitchen in the rear of the building. By October 1873 the telegraph line of Western Union was admitted to use in the building, wires being passed through the north corridor of the first floor into a central office where an operator was in charge. (Samuel F. B. Morse was a charter trustee of Vassar College and a near neighbor.) In 1876 an elevator was installed and in 1880 telephone service was begun. New plumbing was put in the south end of the building in 1888.

A major alteration in Main (no longer called the College) occurred when the Frederick Ferris Thompson Annex was added to the front of the building in 1893 with Francis R. Allen as the architect. This addition was known affectionately as "Uncle Fred's Nose" and the remodelled porte-cochere, as "the soap palace," because of all the marble. The annex was deemed necessary to solve crowding in the library which was housed in the front of the building. The turning stairs to the principal floor were a casualty of the remodelling and have never been restored.

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The original gas lights were replaced by electric lights in 1911-12.

On February 12, 1918 a large part of the rear wing of the building was destroyed by a fire originating in the kitchen, with damage estimated at \$165,000. As part of the reconstruction, a two-storied dining room, designed by Allen & Collens, architects, was erected and called "Underwood Hall" after Jennie Underwood, a deceased member of the Class of 1880, which raised the money for the remodelling...

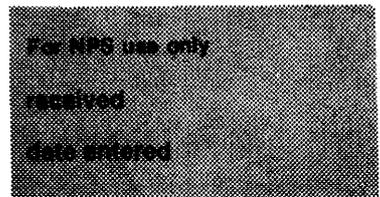
More recently, Main Building was remodelled substantially and the facade was restored to its original design (excepting the stairs). The firm of Goldstone and Dearborn were the architects and Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, [Mrs. John D. ...] '31, donated the funds to start the work. Included were the rearrangement and enlargement of administrative quarters. (Main at first, as has been said, housed the whole college community--that is excepting the residence of Maria Mitchell, Professor of Astronomy, who with her father lived as well as taught in the Observatory.) Successively, as other dormitories were built to house students, Main came to be reserved for freshmen and juniors, and finally seniors. During this 1959 remodelling "Uncle Fred's Nose" was demolished by the Campbell Building Co. of Poughkeepsie as part of the restoration process by which Main was restored to its original design.²

In 1977, the College Center, was appended to Main Building. It was designed by Jean Paul Carlhian of the Boston firm of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott and won the American Institute of Architects honor award in 1977. Carlhian carefully used glass to retain the visual impact of the old brick walls and is extremely sympathetic with the original college building.

On the interior the principal public spaces--the parlors and the president's office--are on the second floor which was originally entered directly from a double exterior stairway. These rooms have been well-maintained and are essentially intact, and the organization of dormitory rooms in suites is also virtually unchanged. One peculiar feature is the wide corridors on the wings... These are directly lit by windows making them airy and frequently flooded with sunlight, however this configuration necessitated a series of inside dormitory rooms ... which depend upon interior windows onto the hall for light and fresh air.³

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seminary for girls in Poughkeepsie called the Cottage Hill Seminary, and she encouraged her Uncle Matt to ponder the needs for women's education. Other advisors such as Milo P. Jewett, a clergyman who purchased Lydia Booth's school from Vassar after she died, reenforced and elaborated Vassar's explorations. By 1855 Vassar was apparently sufficiently convinced in his thinking that he employed Thomas Tefft, a young architect in Boston, to draw up plans for a monumental building that would accommodate the first endowed college for women in the United States.⁴

With Tefft's untimely death of a fever in Italy in 1859, James Renwick of the firm of Renwick, Auchmuty and Sands was hired as building architect. Renwick was already established as leading practitioner at mid-century. Only two mansarded buildings by Renwick had been designed: Charity Hospital (1858) on Blackwell's Island in New York and the Corcoran Gallery (1859), now the Renwick Gallery in Washington, DC. Both of these buildings were modest compared to Matthew Vassar's commission for a college at Poughkeepsie. Renwick had already designed in the earlier Gothic mode: the Anglican Grace Church in New York (1843-1846), the Catholic St. Patrick's Cathedral, also in New York (1859-1879), and, in the Romanesque style, the Smithsonian Castle in 1855. Henry Russell Hitchcock in discussing Renwick wrote:

For such things as the Smithsonian and his churches Renwick had plenty of visual documents on which to lean, either archaeological treatises on the buildings of the medieval past or illustrations of contemporary foreign work. But for Vassar College, very evidently, he was dependent for his inspiration on rather generalized lithographic or engraved views of the Tuileries. Nor could he, at this relatively early date, borrow much from published illustrations of contemporary English work in the new international Second Empire mode. The particular plastic vitality of the Americanized Second Empire is already notable in this early example, however, even though the rather crude articulation of the red brick walls is remote from anything French of any period from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth. Later buildings by Renwick in the same mode are richer and closer to Parisian standards, but their architectonic vitality is considerably less.⁵

Not many Second-Empire grand scale buildings are extant for several reasons: they were very expensive showpieces and perhaps too often identified with corrupt government in the decade after the civil war. In addition to Boston, there is the Albany Capitol, Philadelphia's City Hall, and the recently restored State, War and Navy Building in Washington, DC. The vast granite piles that served as United States Post Offices are now rare and both Chicago's and San Francisco's Municipal complexes are gone. As Hitchcock notes, it is fascinating that the style of building that was to be most representative of its era found its most significant expression, not in its public building, but in the new tall buildings rising in Chicago and New York at the end of the century.

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Aside from the Vassar Main Building's importance as an architectural landmark, there were a few changes to the building that reflected the taste of the time:

The words "Vassar Female College" were originally engraved on marble slabs on the front of the building above the entrance. In February, 1867, following an act of the New York State legislature which, at the request of the trustees, removed the word "Female" from the name of the college, the trustees voted to have taken down from the front of Main Building the center slab on which was engraved this word. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of Godey's Lady's Book had carried the day in her one-person campaign against the use of "Female" on the grounds that it was vulgar, its use having been debased by Charles Darwin and the evolutionists.⁶

In commenting on 19th century architectural theory, the main building also carefully carried out the 19th century romantic tradition of color that melds a building to the landscape that surrounds it:

Andrew Jackson Downing, a Newburgh landscape architect who had designed Springside, Matthew Vassar's country villa in Poughkeepsie, and who probably would have been employed to design the grounds of Vassar College had he survived, is known to have made a plea for balanced colors. Calvert Vaux, his sometime associate, whose book Villas and Cottages (1857) was owned and read by Vassar, wrote that if a red brick building were set among green trees the eye would be refreshed when looking from one to the other and "the balance" would "then at once be rapidly and agreeably reestablished." "Every rural building requires four tints to make it a pleasant object in the way of color." Thus the main building of Vassar Female College, living up to Downing's and Vaux's principles, was to have red brick against evergreen trees, dark pearl trim, a purple and green roof, and bluestone keystones and string courses. (In 1868 Frederick Lewis Olmsted and Vaux visited Poughkeepsie at the invitation of the trustees and thereafter presented a plan for the improvement of the grounds.) (It is interesting that in Mudd Chemistry Buildings, built adjacent to Main Building and inaugurated in September, 1984, the Downing and Vaux principles are still respected.)⁷

The Second Empire style as it was expressed in the United States was "home grown," deriving its prestige from Paris rather than imitating a Greek temple or a Gothic church. The demand for very large buildings helped establish this new style and Old Main at Vassar is one of the earliest and most successful expressions of this mode in America.

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Footnotes

¹Daniels, Elizabeth A. Main Building. Historian's Report Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York 1985. pp. 2-3.

²Ibid., p. 5.

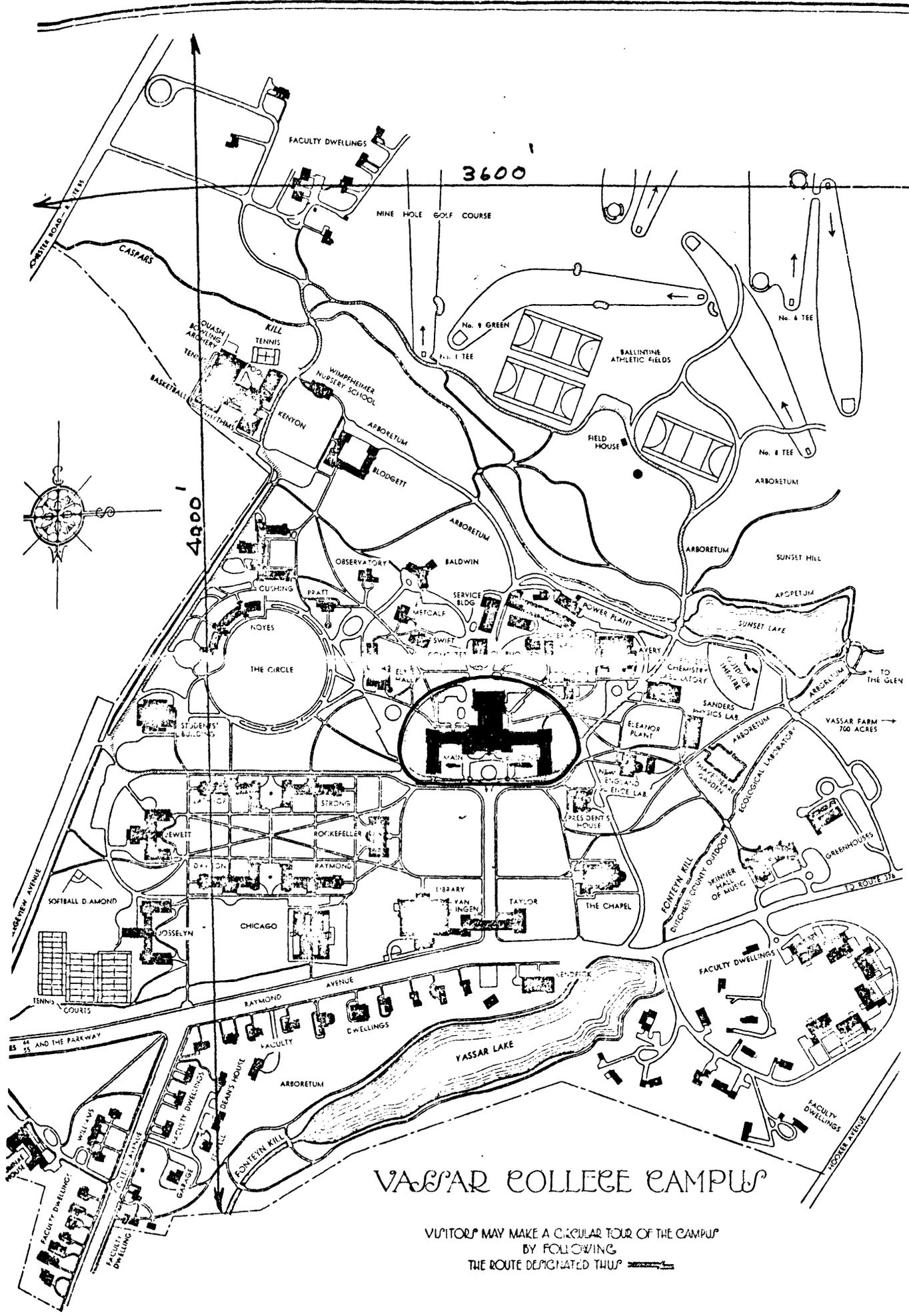
³National Register Form, "Main Building, Vassar College." National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, 1100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC.

⁴Daniels, op. cit., p. 1.

⁵Hitchcock, Henry Russell. Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Baltimore, Maryland, 1958, Penguin Books, p. 167.

⁶Daniels, op. cit., p. 3.

⁷Ibid., p. 3.



VASSAR COLLEGE CAMPUS

VISITORS MAY MAKE A CIRCULAR TOUR OF THE CAMPUS
 BY FOLLOWING
 THE ROUTE DESIGNATED THUS