

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Our Lady of Grace Church, Reserve, St. John the Baptist Parish, LA

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

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1277

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Our Lady of Grace Church

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number near intersection of Airline Hwy. and 3rd St. Not for publication: NA

City/Town Reserve Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: St. John the Baptist Code: 095 Zip Code: 70084

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: Locally: X

Jonathan Fricker

Signature of Certifying Official/Title Jonathan Fricker Deputy SHPO (Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism)

Oct 4, 2005

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):

Edison H. Beall
for
Signature of Keeper

11.15.05
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
1
1

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: religious institution

Sub: church

Current: religious institution

Sub: church

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: no style

Materials:

Foundation: concrete (piers)

Walls: weatherboard

Roof: asphalt

Other:

Our Lady of Grace Church (1937) is a wood frame building moved to its present location within the same community (Reserve) in 1992 to save it from demolition. For the purposes of this nomination, the term "no style" is the most appropriate. The building's setting will be described below. Thanks to a recent removal of substitute siding, the church is largely unchanged on the exterior. Our Lady is being nominated for its local historical significance (see Part 8).

The church is articulated as a gable end nave with a prominent tower on the side elevation. Because the builder chose to articulate each space very clearly on the exterior, the massing is irregular. The front gable end portion, which provides for a vestibule and choir loft above, is not as wide as the worship space behind. A similar condition exists at the rear, which has a tall protruding section (for the altar) with a small one story room to each side under a shed roof. The façade has a central double door with a window to each side. These three openings are within round arch frames. The round arch above the double doors takes the form of a fanlight. Round arch windows are also found on the front-facing sections of the worship space. Near the peak of the façade gable is a round window filled with glass. Crowning the gable is a small wooden cross. The tower is asymmetrically placed along a side elevation. It contains a single leaf door under a round arch fanlight and round arch louvered vents in the upper story. The pyramidal roof, with exposed rafter tails, is crowned by a small wooden cross. Windows along the side elevations are square head, six-over-six, filled with opalescent glass. Smaller windows provide light and ventilation in the upper portion of the vestibule and the rear section containing the altar. The original sheathing, narrow gauge clapboards, was recently revealed when substitute siding was removed.

Alterations on the exterior are minimal. They include concrete piers installed as part of the move, a concrete front stoop with metal railing, new front doors, a boarded over window, and a new window cut into the top of the rear elevation.

While the worship area remains one large vaulted space (as it was originally), the finishes are almost entirely modern. Acoustical tile was applied to the ceiling and to the walls down to the wainscot. The latter

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is formed of vertically placed beaded boards. The original altar has been completely removed (i.e., the altar rail, pulpit, etc). The space retains its original beaded board walls, although they have been treated with a textured paint. The choir loft survives at the front, filled in with plexiglass to provide for private meeting space. The vestibule, which consists of a central space with a small room to each side, has been largely modernized. The original round arch doorways leading from the worship space to the small rooms survive.

The Move:

A modern (early 1990s) building stands in the candidate's original location in Reserve. The old church was slated for demolition to make way for the new construction. It was donated to Riverlands Christian Center on condition it be removed from the property. The moving company was able to move the entire building intact, with the exception of the side tower, which was removed and cut at the mid point. The journey was some 2 to 3 miles within the same community. Originally the church faced River Road (and the Mississippi River). Today it faces the opposite direction, looking toward U.S. 61 (Airline Highway). Since the move, the land in front of the church, between the building and Airline Highway, has been redeveloped as a small subdivision. To each side of the church is a grassy lot. To the rear is a tree line. Because Our Lady of Grace is in the same community it was built to serve, it remains eligible for the National Register, despite the move. And the actual fabric of the building retains greater integrity after the move, due to the removal of substitute siding.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A X B__ C__ D__

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A X B X C__ D__ E__ F__ G__

Areas of Significance: religion; social history; ethnic heritage (black)

Period(s) of Significance: 1937-1955

Significant Dates: 1937

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: unknown

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

Our Lady of Grace Church is locally significant in the areas of religion, social history and ethnic heritage because it represents an important historical phenomenon in the history of the Catholic Church in southern Louisiana – the formation of separate churches for African-American parishioners. It meets the requirements of Criteria Consideration A (religious properties) because “it is significant under a theme in the history of religion having secular scholarly recognition.” (Please refer to bibliography for “secular scholarly recognition.”) It meets the requirements of Criteria Consideration B because it remains in the same community it was built to serve. The period of significance ends with the present fifty year cutoff (1955).

Historic Context:

In the years after the Civil War most Protestant denominations in the South approved separate congregations for African-Americans. Black Protestants were eager participants. In fact, they were typically the instigators of separate churches. To them, the church was the major institution in which they could have complete control -- a place where all positions of honor and leadership could be held by blacks. The independent black Protestant church emerged in the late nineteenth century as the epicenter of African-American worship, society and community life.

Segregation in the Catholic Church followed a different path. While not a significant player in most of the postbellum South, the Catholic Church was very much a major institution in southern Louisiana, which was governed by the huge Archdiocese of New Orleans well into the twentieth century. Here, as in other Catholic dioceses, canon law did not permit separate organizations. Another factor tending towards integrated congregations was the long-standing tradition of free people of color. Due to its generally liberal racial laws and traditions, Louisiana in the antebellum years had a large and sometimes prosperous population of free people of color. More often than not, they were of mixed race. They were overwhelmingly Catholic and generally worshiped alongside white parishioners. They continued to do so after the Civil War and did not like the idea of being “lumped in,” and separated off, with formerly enslaved people.

Another factor was the substantial financial support provided by African-American parishioners. In 1875 Canon Peter L. Benoit visited the Archdiocese. He noted, “The French clergy would not like to have them (blacks) withdrawn from their churches because they are the chief support. The . . . real French (whites) are, I am sorry to say, as stingy here as in their own country. They support the theatres and go to them well dressed. But they don’t support their churches in the same way.”

The official policy of interracial churches was set forth again in 1888 in a statement by archdiocese chancellor L. A. Chasse. “Distinct and separate churches are not advisable; experience has taught that the colored people prefer to come to mass and to the sacraments with their white brethren.” The final factor tending towards interracial churches was a chronic shortage of ordained priests.

Chasse did admit that there were problems with the black membership – that they were leaving the church. He blamed it on the lack of black Catholic schools. But there were other problems. Pews in the late nineteenth century were generally segregated – blacks could not sit where they wished. Typically they were assigned seats at the rear. Francis Janssens, appointed archbishop in 1888, and who had great concern for his black parishioners, noted other issues as well. Parishes generally did not allow blacks to participate in church

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rituals, join the choir, join the various groups or societies, or participate in the parish social life. To the church of the 1890s, full participation in this broader range of activities was thought essential to being a complete Catholic.

Janssens believed that the lack of these opportunities was driving African-Americans away from the Catholic Church toward black Protestant churches. Two other developments outside Louisiana provided impetus for the notion of exclusively black Catholic congregations. One was the founding of the Josephites, a congregation of priests whose mission was to work exclusively with African-Americans. The other occurred when Philadelphia heiress Katharine Drexel (now Saint Katharine) took holy orders and pledged her vast fortune to working for the betterment of Indians and African-Americans through the Catholic Church. The order she founded exclusively for this purpose was the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. While neither the Josephites nor Mother Katharine favored segregation per se, only by setting up segregated parishes could a diocese avail itself of their bountiful resources.

Also contributing to the idea of separate parishes was an overall rise in racial tensions in the 1890s. It was a decade characterized by the passage of segregation law after segregation law (so-called Jim Crow laws), disfranchisement, and violence. Janssens noted that relations between the races in the Church had become strained. He felt he could not provide African-Americans equal rights in mixed parishes because of growing white hostility. He had considered, and discussed, the idea of separate churches for blacks for some time. In 1895 he had the opportunity to act. That year the Vincentian Fathers built a massive new church in New Orleans several blocks from their old one. The old building was small and in bad repair but it was well located for black parishioners. Janssens convinced the Fathers to provide priests for a black congregation in the building while he obtained funds for renovation. Mother Katharine provided the needed \$5,000 and the newly restored church was named St. Katherine's in honor of Drexel's patron saint. It was dedicated on May 19, 1895. During Janssens' tenure there was also some sporadic ad hoc experimentation with black parishes in a few rural parts of the Archdiocese.

St. Katherine's was an experiment. It was also not compulsory. People of color who wished to remain in interracial parishes could do so. Clearly that there was opposition among local African-American Catholics to what was seen as a radical departure. The elite among the city's Creoles of color were particularly vocal, calling for a boycott of "the Jim Crow church." Leading the charge for the Creole of color elite was the Citizens Committee, formed to challenge segregation laws. The Citizens Committee initiated a test of Louisiana's railroad segregation law that resulted in the famed Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. To these early civil rights activists, Janssens, in establishing St. Katherine's, was putting the church's stamp of approval on Jim Crow segregation.

While St. Katherine's had enough members to survive, church records "suggest" (the word used by historians) that most blacks remained members of interracial parishes. Janssens died in 1897, and a several year lull in the transition to segregated parishes followed (apparently due to lack of interest in African-American Catholics by Janssens successor, Louis Placide Chapelle). In 1909 James Hubert Blenk was installed as archbishop. A Bavarian by birth, Blenk had been raised in the New Orleans area and had served in the Archdiocese for many years. Thus, unlike some of his predecessors, he was familiar with local conditions. At first he was cautious, founding only three all-black parishes during the first eight years of his episcopacy. But he noted that the prevailing mood among white Catholics was much less tolerant than it had been during Janssens' time. It should be stressed that the decline of the status of blacks in the Church reflected national trends as well as local.

By 1915 Blenk became convinced that, amid rising tensions, separate parishes were the only solution.

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He effectively divided the city, establishing six new black parishes. He also established segregated rural and town parishes in the outlying parts of the Archdiocese. Separate parishes were now official policy and virtually mandatory for black Catholics. For the most part the black community acquiesced. Indeed, many could see the advantages of the separate churches of the Protestant denominations. The Josephites were prominent among the new preaching clergy, though they were not the only group ministering to the black parishes.

Although the rural areas of the Archdiocese were also transformed, the major focus of Blenk's work was New Orleans. This culminated in 1919 with the construction of Corpus Christi Parish Church. When the cornerstone was laid, a procession of numerous black societies and bands marched with the priests and the archbishop. They were led by a group of aging black veterans. Even though these venerable old men had fought in the Civil War, they could never have led a parade in a mixed parish. When construction was complete and Corpus Christi opened, it is thought to have been the largest African-American congregation in the nation.

Separate parishes in southern Louisiana multiplied after 1925 and set the tone for the future. Indeed, as late as 1961 the Diocese of Lafayette (now separate from the Archdiocese of New Orleans) opened two new segregated parishes -- final evidence of a transformation that had long been complete.

Our Lady of Grace:

Prior to the candidate, Catholic African-Americans in the Reserve area worshipped at the segregated St. Peter's Church, some two or three miles away. As was typical, two or three pews at the rear of St. Peter's were reserved for African-Americans; African-Americans took communion after whites; and they were not able to participate fully in the life of the parish (as explained above). A school for local African-American children had been established in 1932 at St. Peter's by the pastor, the Most Reverend Monsignor Jean M. Eyraud. By all accounts, this was against the better wishes of many of his parishioners. Under the name of St. Catherine School, the doors opened in 1932.

According to newspaper and Catholic sources of the time, Our Lady of Grace became necessary due to "lack of accommodation" at St. Peter's. However, African-Americans interviewed for this submission indicated there were not very many blacks at St. Peter's when the church created Our Lady of Grace. No doubt Our Lady of Grace was established because it was church policy (as explained above).

Construction on the church began in 1936, with the first mass said on March 21, 1937, and the dedication held June 13, 1937. The church called upon the Josephites to establish the new parish, with Reverend Roderick Auclair serving as the first pastor. The old St. Catherine School was moved to the rear of the church and renamed Our Lady of Grace School. Under Auclair's leadership numerous organizations were established at Our Lady, including the Catholic Youth Organization, Knights of Peter Claver and the Ladies Auxiliary, the Ladies Altar Society, and the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary. African-Americans could now participate fully in the life of their church. A telling story related by African-Americans interviewed for this nomination concerned altar boys at Our Lady. In segregated parishes blacks were not allowed to be altar boys. When St. Peter's Church sent white altar boys to help at Our Lady, Father Auclair reportedly declined their services, saying essentially, "I have my own altar boys." Father Auclair remained at Our Lady until 1940.

Today, according to the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Our Lady of Grace Parish is the only historically black parish in the archdiocese outside of the city (using the current boundaries of the archdiocese -- eight civil parishes). Other black Catholic parishes have been dissolved, and any historic buildings that might have remained are believed to be all gone. (There was also a wave of new construction in the 1960s.) As noted

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previously, the present Our Lady of Grace church dates to the early 1990s. Fortunately for historians, the original church was saved to help tell the story of an important chapter in the history of the Catholic Church in southern Louisiana.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Alberts, John Bernard. "Origins of Black Catholic Parishes in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1718-1920." Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1998.

Bennett, James B. *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

Labbe, Dolores Egger. *Jim Crow Comes to Church: The Establishment of Segregated Catholic Parishes in South Louisiana*. Lafayette, Louisiana: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1971.

Interviews with Elmer Cassagne, Rita Dents, Clarence Perilloux, and Shirley Terrio. As a young man, Mr. Cassagne helped to build the church. Ms. Dents and Mr. Perilloux were African-American members of St. Peter's who transferred to Our Lady of Grace. Ms. Terrio was a young girl (7th grade) at St. Peter's when Our Lady was created.

A History of St. John the Baptist Parish. Compiled and edited by Rt. Rev. Monsignor Jean M. Eyraud and Donald J. Millet. Marrero, Louisiana: Hope Haven Press, 1939.

Various issues of *The Claverite*, 1937. A photo of the newly built Our Lady of Grace Church accompanied articles in this Catholic publication.

L'Observateur. June 12 and 19, 1937.

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
- Other (Specify Repository):

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage of Property: less than an acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	15	735560	3329220

Verbal Boundary Description: Boundaries parallel building elevations, each at a distance of 10 feet.

Boundary Justification: There are no historic boundaries to recognize for this moved building; hence discrete boundaries were chosen.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: National Register Staff, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation

Address: P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, LA 70804

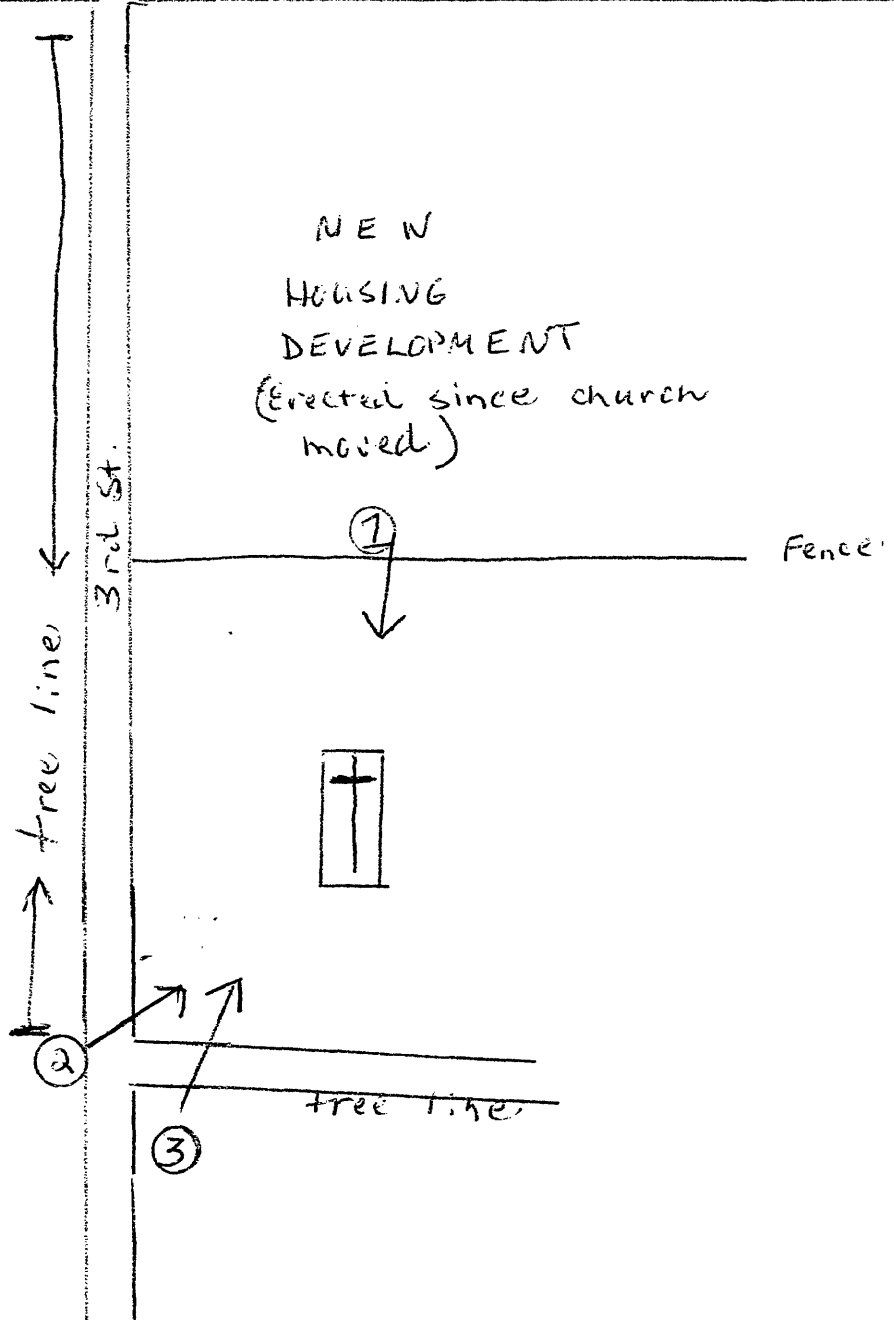
Telephone: 225-342-8160

Date: May 2005

PROPERTY OWNERS

Riverlands Christian Center
P. O. Box 2679
Reserve, LA 70084

Airline Hwy (US 61)



NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT
(erected since church moved)

Our Lady of Grace Church
Reserve,
St. John the Baptist Parish,
LA

Schematic Map
Only

NOT TO SCALE

