

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

SAINT ALPHONSUS CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: SAINT ALPHONSUS CHURCH

Other Name/Site Number: Saint Alphonsus Art & Cultural Center

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 2045 Constance Street

Not for publication: ___

City/Town: New Orleans

Vicinity: ___

State: LA County: Orleans Parish

Code: 071

Zip Code: 70130

3. 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

Noncontributing

1 buildings

___ sites

___ structures

___ objects

1 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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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.

Signature of Certifying Official

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

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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 Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: RELIGION Sub: Religious Facility
Current: RECREATION & CULTURE Sub: Auditorium
SOCIAL Meeting Hall

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Late Victorian: Renaissance Revival

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Brick
Walls: Brick
Roof: Pitched Slate
Other: Stucco (entrance porch), Cast Iron (cross)

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form **Page 4****Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

St. Alphonsus (constructed 1855-57) is situated on Constance Street, between St. Andrew and Josephine streets, Fourth District, one square from a major street car line. Exceedingly spacious (72 by 154 feet) and elegant in design, it is capable of seating 2,500 persons. The late Sam Wilson, one of the foremost authorities on New Orleans architecture, wrote the following:

St. Alphonsus is an impressive example of nineteenth century Italianate architecture. The church is entered from the front by three doorways one in each of the side towers, and the principal one in the center of the entrance porch. This entrance porch is the only significant change since the church was built, and probably dates from 1891-95. The two square side towers were intended to be capped by ornate baroque finials containing clocks, but these were never built. In the center of the facade is a large arched window, flanked by niches containing statues of the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. This level of the facade is ornamented with a series of pilasters, the cast-iron Corinthian capitals of which have unfortunately been removed. These pilasters support the main entablature of the building, ornamented with brick dentils and crowned by a masonry cornice with modillions. Above this in the center is a frontispiece with a niche containing a statue of St. Alphonsus, flanked by double pilasters and topped by a curved pediment and a large cross. Each of the two bell towers has a circular headed, louvered opening, flanked by doubled pilasters on each face. These pilasters have also lost their Corinthian capitals.

The side elevations each have six circular-head windows, flanked by colossal Doric pilasters with stone or cast-iron caps and bases. The entablature is continued from the front down each side and across the rear of the building and its semicircular apse. A brick gable terminates the rear wall above the apse.

Across the front of the church, within the entrance doors, is the narthex, with a handsome wooden staircase at each end rising to the balcony and choir loft which extends around three sides of the nave of the church. The balcony is supported on fluted columns, and the paneled balcony front contains bas-relief Stations-of-the-Cross. The balconies extend across the windows and across the colossal engaged Corinthian columns that flank the windows. A fine Corinthian entablature surmounts these columns and the two free-standing columns that flank the apsidal sanctuary. Attached to the column to the left of the high altar is a handsome pulpit with a circular canopy, topped by a crown of anthemions and a statue of Christ.

The sanctuary behind the altar rail is raised a step and then three more steps at the columns. The main altar is raised an additional three steps. The communion rail, which extends entirely across the nave, is composed of a series of panels in relief open-work containing various Christian symbols. The main altar is an impressive composition with Corinthian columns and a raised, curved pediment topped by a cross. A large painting of St. Alphonsus above the altar was brought from Italy in 1873. The altar itself was made by [Boucher] of Chicago and installed in the church in 1868.

Flanking the main altar are matching side altars. The lower part of the one on the right has been altered and opened to accommodate the 1930s shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. Against the side walls, facing each other just inside the communion rail are two additional side altars, probably late

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nineteenth-century additions.

The body of the church has a broad center aisle and two side aisles beneath the balcony. The pews are original, with handsomely designed pew ends. Near the entrance end of the church are finely executed confessionals, the woodwork of which, as well as that throughout the church, is of superior craftsmanship.

The coved plaster ceilings of the church are divided into a series of panels in which are paintings by the local Italian-born artist, Dominique Canova. [Some] of these have been damaged by water from roof leaks and falling plaster. In an elliptical arched recess above the center of the balcony is a handsome organ case.

The stained-glass windows of the church were designed and manufactured by F.X. Zettler of the Royal Bavarian Institute in Munich, Germany, and arrived here in 1890. Those on the right side of the nave represent scenes from the life of Christ, portraying, from the rear:

1. The Nativity
2. The Adoration of the Magi
3. Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple
4. The Agony in the Garden
5. (lower right) Crowning with Thorns
6. (lower left) The Crucifixion
7. (upper right) The Resurrection
8. (upper left) The Ascension

On the left side of the nave, from the rear are scenes from the life of Mary:

1. The Presentation of Mary in the Temple
2. The Annunciation
3. The Espousal of Mary and Joseph
4. The Visitation of Mary to her Cousin Elizabeth
5. (upper left) The Birth of Mary
6. (lower left) The Death of Mary
7. (lower right) The Death of St. Joseph
8. (upper right) Crowning of Mary in Heaven

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The stained-glass windows above the center entrance depict the Baptism of Christ.¹

Beginning in 1911, ceramic mosaic tile floors were laid in the aisles and vestibules, but the sanctuary was not tiled until 1932. Electric light fixtures were installed in 1910. As part of this ecclesiastical complex originally there were also the Mission House, or rectory, of the Redemptorist Fathers; St. Alphonsus Boys' School; St. Alphonsus Girls' School; St. Katherine's College; and the Convent for the Sisters of Mercy, who served as teachers. With declining population and population shifts to the suburbs resulting in reduced demands for the schools, many of these buildings have been converted to low income housing for the elderly and infirm. The landmark designation refers to only the church building. Today, the church has been converted to a non-sectarian neighborhood cultural center.

¹ Wilson, Samuel. *St. Alphonsus of New Orleans*. Page proof 1994. Church Archives. Pp. 16-18.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

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

Nationally: X Statewide: ___ Locally: ___

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A ___ B ___ C X D ___

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A X B ___ C ___ D ___ E ___ F ___ G ___

NHL Criteria:

4

NHL Criteria Exceptions:

1

NHL Theme(s) [1987]:

- XVI. Architecture
 - G. Renaissance Revival
- XXVI. Decorative & Folk Art

NHL Theme(s) [1994]:

- III. Expressing Cultural Values
 - 2. Visual & Performing Arts
 - 5. Architecture, Landscape Architecture, & Urban Design

Areas of Significance:

Architecture
Art

Period(s) of Significance:

1855–1895

Significant Dates:

1855, 1857, 1890

Significant Person(s):

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect/Builder:

Louis L. Long, Architect
Thomas and Daniel Mulligan, Builders

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form **Page 8****State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

St. Alphonsus is a very important example of 19th century brick masonry work in excellent state of repair. In addition, the interior is unique. It is one of the few surviving intact polychromed ecclesiastical interiors prior to 1870. (Polychromed interiors refers to the art of combining many different colors in paintings, statues, and other art works used in decorating the church interior.) The frescoes represent one of the few examples of Italian fresco work from that period in the country. There are also 1890s stained glass windows which were designed and manufactured in Munich by F.X. Zettler of the Royal Bavarian Institute and are intact in their original locations. St. Alphonsus was one of three churches, all built within a two-block area, that were the center of religious and community life for its ethnic group—immigrants of French, German, and Irish origin.

Prior to the 1870s, mural painting in America was usually executed by Italian or German immigrants, as in Constantino Brumidi's dome at the Capitol in Washington (1859), and the work of a Nazarene painter in the German Redemptorist Church of St. Mary's in Pittsburgh (1853). There are also rare painted walls in Richard Upjohn's Bowdoin College Chapel in Maine (1845-55). The flowering of mural painting in this country is best represented by H.H. Richardson's Trinity Church in Boston (1874-77), where the wall frescoes and glass by John LaFarge are an integral part of the entire interior scheme. These early collaborative efforts were most often churches, for example, New York's St. Thomas Church (1877-78), where the architect, Richard Upjohn, worked with LaFarge and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who were responsible for the interior decorative design.

This American Renaissance grew out of several forces at work in the last half of the 19th Century. Along with a new attempt to integrate the Arts with Architecture, there was a new patronage class, as well as international expositions where a vast array of art and decorative materials could be seen.

The Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 exposed the American public to a barrage of different styles and philosophies. So-called mid-century Rococo and Renaissance Revival furniture was seen along with objects inspired by the English Reform movement, which advocated a return to handcraftsmanship, honest construction, and a rectilinearity without excess of ornamentation. The works and writings of people such as William Morris, Bruce Talbert, E.W. Godwin, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Christopher Dresser eventually "fostered a period of concern about interior design, a period during which people talked about, wrote about, and spent vast sums in cultivating their taste." The Aesthetic movement encompassed everything from painting to book covers, promoting "art furniture," art pottery, "art glass." Thrown into this veritable medley were exhibitions of Oriental art. From the time of the London International Exposition of 1862, when Japanese displays were seen for the first time, exotica of all kinds became increasingly popular. The American Centennial celebration also

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focused attention on the American cultural heritage, and from the mid-1870s onwards, there was an increasing interest in studying, preserving, collecting, and reproducing designs from the American past.¹

What had been commissioned prior to the 1870s has not yet been researched in depth by a number of scholars (see footnote #3), but these rare early works are now enjoying some recognition.

Professor Emeriti Jessie Poesch at Newcomb College, Tulane University, has commented on St. Alphonsus Church:

[St. Alphonsus] was built by the Redemptorist Fathers, an Italian order founded in 1732, which included many Germans and Austrians among its members. The Redemptorists came to New Orleans in the mid-1840s to serve the spiritual needs of the many immigrants, especially Germans, who were settling in this riverfront upriver neighborhood of New Orleans in increasing numbers throughout the 1840s and especially in the 1850s. With the equally large influx of Irish immigrants following the potato famines of the 1840s, and especially after 1847, Archbishop Blanc recruited Father John B. Duffy, C.S.S.R., a Redemptorist of Irish descent, to serve the Irish community, new to the city and country and needing a spiritual center where English was spoken. Duffy launched an effort, traditionally by going from door-to-door and persuading the poor but faithful parishioners to make contributions of money, and also what we now call "sweat equity," to build a church for them.

The architect chosen was Louis L. Long of Baltimore, a choice prompted because Father Duffy, who served his novitiate in Baltimore, had admired the church of St. Ignatius designed by Long in that city. Baltimore, and Maryland, was like New Orleans, and Louisiana, in that both were Catholic enclaves in a United States then largely dominated by Protestants. The aesthetic choice was for the Italianate taste at a time when the majority of churches, both in New Orleans and in the nation, were being built either in the still-prevailing Greek taste or the increasingly popular Gothic taste. Though not articulated, the choice suggests the affinity with Rome. The builders are believed to have been Thomas and Daniel Mulligan, apparently of Irish origin.

Externally the structure is of brick, with much fine detailing. On July 26, 1855, the Protestant architect Thomas K. Wharton remarked in his diary about the construction then underway: "[It will be] one of the finest churches in the city—best lake brick—cement mortar—iron bases to pilaster—Piers projecting nine inches from main walls—workmanship very superior and the design, so far, solid massive and finely proportioned."²

The unusually excellent quality of the brick structure was well suited for the soft subsoil of southern Louisiana. The Church showed the architect's knowledge of Ancient Roman buildings by using inverted arches built into the wall that added to the building's stability. It was also remarkably rich in construction and pattern. Architectural historians have stated

¹ The Brooklyn Museum. Exhibition Catalogue. *The American Renaissance*. Richard Guy Wilson and Diane Pilgrim, editors. Philadelphia. Falcon Press. 1979, pp. 112-13.

² Poesch, Jessie, Professor, History of Art Emerita, Tulane University. Letter in support of Landmark Designation, November 22, 1994. NHL file: St. Alphonsus Church, National Park Service, Washington, DC.

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there are very few comparable brick church buildings as sophisticated as St. Alphonsus, and those would be in cities also established by Catholic settlers such as Mobile, Charleston, Louisville, and Baltimore. The only church that would be comparable is the German church, St. Mary's, just across Constance Street, which is a National Historic Landmark.

One of the local newspapers, *The New Orleans Daily Crescent* for October 21, 1856, reported:

St. Alphonsus church on Constance Street between St. Andrew and Josephine, is under construction. A large and handsome edifice of Roman architecture, with two towers, it is being roofed over and will be finished by Easter. The total cost will be \$100,000.

On July 28, 1857, *The Daily Picayune* announced the blessing of St. Alphonsus—the following Sunday being the feast of St. Alphonsus. It had been over two years in building and was blessed by the Most Reverend Archbishop with all possible pomp and splendor. In September, the church was consecrated and the new church was lighted with gas for the first time. Shortly thereafter, the Civil War broke out and New Orleans became an occupied city. With the end of the war, the elaborate decorative program for the church interior proceeded.

One of the few scholars in America concerned with polychromed church interiors is Kathleen Curran of Trinity College, Hartford. She has written:

The development of polychromy in [19th-century] America... was primarily English in inspiration, looking to such major figures as John Ruskin, William Butterfield, Owen Jones, Augustus Pugin, and G.E. Street. Its introduction here is commonly attributed to Jacob Wrey Mould's All Soul's Unitarian Church in New York of 1853-55. New evidence shows, however, that some of the earliest efforts—and perhaps the earliest single attempt—at full-scale interior polychromy were Germanic in conception and execution. The responsible architects were Richard Upjohn and Leopold Eidlitz. The relevant buildings, Upjohn's Bowdoin College Chapel, Brunswick, Maine; Blesch and Eidlitz' St. George's Episcopal Church, New York; and Upjohn's Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, inaugurated the Romanesque Revival in this country in the mid-1840s. All three underwent extensive interior painting in the period 1852 to 1869.³

Both Upjohn and Eidlitz were influenced by German fresco painters and in turn began the ascendancy of the Romanesque Revival style in America with painted interiors, culminating in Richardson's Trinity Church (1874-77) in Boston, a National Historic Landmark.

The Italian painters at work in New Orleans on St. Alphonsus were mostly immigrants who knew of current developments in Europe and thus were able to attain a high level of this pictorial art. The glory of the church to this day are its frescoes and stained glass windows.

Notable is the elaborately frescoed ceiling, still intact, but with minor damage from a roof leak. In the center the Ascension of Christ, the Apotheosis of St. Alphonsus, and the Assumption of the Virgin, are depicted. A contemporary newspaper article in the *New Orleans Times* of September 9, 1866, noted the relationship of the Christ figure to the one in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, and that of the figure of the Madonna to the inspiration of

³ Curran, Kathleen, Trinity College, Hartford. *New Thoughts on the Introduction of Polychromy in America*. A paper delivered at the Society of Architectural Historians Annual Meeting, April 1991, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

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Michelangelo. Surrounding these are five panels representing the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, each with identifying emblem, and an image of the Holy Family. Alongside are further medallion portraits of Christ and the twelve apostles. Richly patterned ornamental borders surround these various images. The newspaper account reported, "...the whole bears the impress of master hands that framed the panels in all the gorgeousness of the Roman guild." The frescoes cost over \$15,000.

These frescoes were carried out by Dominique Canova, an Italian-born artist, believed to be a relative of the great sculptor, active in New Orleans c. 1838-1868, and two assistants, Rossi (Jean Baptiste, active in New Orleans 1859-68) and Perachi (possibly Achille Perelli, b. Italy 1822, in New Orleans from 1850, d. 1891). Canova was responsible for a series of remarkable interior frescoes done in and around New Orleans of which only a few still survive, and the ensemble in St. Alphonsus is one of the most elaborate.

The obvious contemporary of Canova is Constantino Brumidi who came to this country in 1852 (Canova came more than a decade earlier) and who worked for twenty-five years decorating the U.S. Capitol....

The Redemptorists and their parishioners continued to enhance and embellish St. Alphonsus. A painting behind and above the altar, depicting St. Alphonsus adoring Christ, was installed in 1871, the work of a German-born artist living in Rome. The richly carved altars were executed in Chicago. An organ from Germany was placed in the loft. Six wooden statues made in Munich and costing \$1,350, arrived in 1884 and were installed in several places in the church.⁴

The stained glass windows are excellent examples of the Munich style. There were a number of German and immigrant-German studios producing glass in the "Nazarene" style of the Catholic-revival of liturgical art in the early 19th century. Among the best known were the Tyrolese Art Glass Company, Mayer, Zettler, Van Treeck, and Frei and Von Gerichter. Some of the glass at St. Alphonsus was made by F.X. Zettler of Munich and the Mayer

⁴ Poesch, Jessie, *ibid.*

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Studio, and some excellent American-made glass is in the narthex doors. The agent for the St. Alphonsus glass was Messrs. Benzingers, who had a local New Orleans representative, Mr. Kamp.

The influence of continental studios increased in America during the last quarter of the century, keeping pace with the growth and economic strength of Roman Catholic immigration. The continental glass came from huge workshops, sophisticated ovens, and well trained craftspeople. Enamel colors or traditional neutral paint were [invariably] fired under ideal conditions. The structural integrity of the window was insured by employment of standard sizes and types of glass segment, lead came, and support structure of iron frame and saddle bars. Also, the patron could rely on the window designers' complete familiarity with Roman Catholic pictorial traditions, such as depictions of the Sacraments, the Mysteries of the Rosary, or favorite saints of ethnic popularity. The earliest American installations appear to have been the result of gifts by European patrons to support "missionary" activities in the New World.⁵

The work of the F.X. Zettler Studio was much prized and a number of awards were granted to the firm during the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia.

The stained glass windows at St. Alphonsus Church have always been considered to be one of its most important artistic treasures. The first of these to be placed in the church were the two round-headed ones in the upper wall of the apse, flanking the high altar. The *Annals* for February 26, 1889, record their installation:

Today the scaffolding—needed for the purpose of putting up two stained-glass windows in the sanctuary—was taken away. The pictures give universal satisfaction. Messrs. Benzingers had them made at Munich, Bavaria. One window represents the Sacred Heart of Our Lord, the other our Lady of Lourdes. Each costs \$200. Some people say that the pictures are too small—others would wish the borders to be a little darker. As soon as the parties who subscribed for the memorial windows in the body of the Church will have paid up—then only will the stained-glass memorial windows be ordered.

Apparently the subscribers for the memorial windows did pay promptly, for the windows for the body of the church were ordered and arrived on October 30, 1890.

Today 10 boxes containing the stained glass for as many windows in St. Alphonsus church, and 6 boxes containing the iron frames were stored up in one of the school rooms. The steamer Hudson of Cromwell line brought them from N. York City for a consideration of \$60.20; drayage up here 8.00 dollars. The old str. Knickerbocker of the same line will bring next week—two more

⁵ Raguin, Virginia. College of the Holy Cross, Worcester. Bavarian and Austrian Imported Glass During the 19th Century. Paper delivered at the International Seminar on Nineteenth Century Stained Glass. Joint Meeting of SAH and the Census of Stained Glass Windows in America. April 1994, Philadelphia.

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boxes with glass. The total weight of the 16 boxes at hand now is: 8,000 pounds.

On November 10, Mr. Kamp, agent for Benzinger Brothers, began the installation of the windows and a week later, two more boxes of glass arrived. The *Annals* record that by December 1890, "the beautiful windows of St. Alphonsus are now permanently fixed. Mr. Kamp did erect the job, finished and well done. The parishioners of St. Mary's Church grew so jealous that in less than 3 days parties were found willing to pay for 6 stain-glass windows."⁶

The last church service held in the building was in July 1979. Thereafter, as neighborhoods shifted and suburbs expanded, the church fell into neglect. In the late 1980s, a local preservation group formed the "Friends of St. Alphonsus" and they have repaired the roof, restored the stained glass, and stabilized the frescoes. The church is now used as an active cultural center; the excellent acoustics enhance the concerts held in the nave. St. Alphonsus is once again a lively center of neighborhood life.

⁶ Wilson, Samuel, Jr. St. Alphonsus of New Orleans. Page Proof of the forthcoming publication of the Friends of St. Alphonsus, 1994. Pp. 11-12.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**PRIMARY SOURCES:**

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_____. St. Alphonsus of New Orleans. Page proof of forthcoming publication of the Friends of St. Alphonsus, 1994.

OTHER SOURCES:

Daily City Item (New Orleans), June 1877-92.

Daily Crescent (New Orleans), March 1848–November 1869.

Daily Item (New Orleans), 1893–May 1902.

Daily Picayune (New Orleans), 1887–April 1914.

Daily States (New Orleans), January 1880–March 1918.

New Orleans States, March 1918–September 1958.

New Orleans Times, September 1863–December 1881.

New Orleans Times-Democrat, December 1881–May 1914.

Times-Picayune (New Orleans), May 1914–1956.

Visitor's Guide to New Orleans, New Orleans: J.C. Waldo Co., 1876.

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: #

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Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State Agency
 Federal Agency
 Local Government
 University
 Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: Approximately .11 acres

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing
 A 15 782510 3314530

Verbal Boundary Description:

This lot is within the Square 136 bounded by Josephine Street, Constance Street, St. Andrew Street, and an alley. This land has traditionally been part of the Redemptorist enclave.

Begin 144 feet, 6 inches from the corner of Constance and St. Andrew streets and proceed southwest along Constance Street 103 feet; turn 89°54'15" northwest and proceed for 130 feet; then turn southwest 90° and proceed for 25 feet; then turn northwest 89°54'15" and proceed for 30 feet; then turn 89°54'15" and proceed for 140 feet; then turn 90° and proceed southeast for 16 feet; then turn 90° and proceed southeast 70 feet back to starting point of boundary.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the church structure, known as St. Alphonsus, that has traditionally and historically been a part of the Redemptorist enclave and maintains historic integrity.

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Jessie Poesch, Professor Emerita
Tulane University
New Orleans, Louisiana

Name/Title: Mr. Charles Tonnetti
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Date: May 12, 1995

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS SURVEY

National Park Service/Washington Office

May 10, 1996