

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The St. Joseph Church-Convent of the Most Holy Sacrament Complex consists of a 1926 Spanish Colonial Revival style church, a convent/boarding school which was built in 1899 and enlarged in 1907, a landscaped yard, and a c.1940 school building which is considered a non-contributing element. This ecclesiastical complex is located at the intersection of Lavousier and Seventh Streets in downtown Gretna. It has suffered some alterations over the years, but not enough to imperil its National Register eligibility.

The present church/convent/school complex began in 1899 with the construction of the Convent of the Most Holy Sacrament/Infant Jesus College. The building was used both as a boarding school (Infant Jesus College) and a convent/residence for the Sisters of the Most Holy Sacrament who staffed the boarding school and the parish elementary school. A wing was added in 1907 which contains the chapel. The first St. Joseph Church was built in 1859, but it has been replaced more than once. The present Spanish Colonial Revival style church dates from 1926. The elaborately styled church is in front, and the larger though less elaborate convent is in the rear, an arrangement common in church and convent establishments throughout the world. An arcade runs along each side of the church, and on the west side the arcade opens onto a grassy landscaped yard with an ornamental terra cotta fountain in the center. Obviously the intended effect was that of a monastic cloister. In addition to the landscaped yard, the complex also features a line of live oak trees which form a link between the church and the convent.

The Convent/Boarding School:

Begun in 1899 and extended in 1907, the three story brick convent/boarding school appears at first glance to have been built all at once. Its interiors are large and plain with standard turn-of-the-century details--i.e., beaded wainscoting, transoms, etc. The only exception to this is the second story chapel with its stained glass lancet windows and its decoratively painted apse ceiling. For the most part, the exterior, with its segmentally arched plate glass windows and cast-iron columns, appears to have been derived from the commercial vernacular of the period. Exceptions to this include the gables with their inset round arch windows, the corbel tables, and the protruding apse of the chapel, all of which were inspired by the Romanesque Revival style. Other exceptions include the Gothic windows of the chapel and the Italianate entrance porch.

Since construction the convent/boarding school has undergone minor alterations, including the stuccoing of a small portion of the exterior brick, the installation of a few partition walls, the replacement of a few doors, the installation of an exterior fire stair, and the covering of some of the windows. In the opinion of the State Historic Preservation Office, these changes should be regarded as minor.

The Church:

Constructed in 1926, the stuccoed masonry basilican plan church has a three part entrance pavilion which is richly treated with Spanish Baroque details. These include elaborately scalloped doorways, multiple scroll volutes, Persian columns, urns, statues in niches, composite columns with decorated shafts, undulating architraves, and decoratively sculpted oeil-de-boeuf motifs. The upper part of the single rear tower features similar ornamentation. In contrast to the flamboyant exterior, the church's interior has an almost neo-classical severity. Bays are set off by flat composite unfluted pilasters and slight ribs in the otherwise plain barrel vault. The apse features a half domed ceiling.

Since construction the exterior of the church has not been altered. A few decorative embellishments were added in the interior in 1947-48 and later (for example, carved friezes depicting the Stations of the Cross). It should be noted, however, that the church's significance rests

solely upon its exterior articulation. Also, a small glass vestibule has been installed at the front entrance. This feature is easily removable.

Non-contributing Element:

The only other change in the complex has been the construction of a c.1940 stuccoed masonry school building. This has not had a major impact upon the complex as a whole. It is only two stories high and it echoes the red tile roof of the church. Moreover, it is set off to the side and hence does not interrupt the direct view between the church and the convent.

Specific dates	Church—1926; Convent--1899,1907
Builder/Architect	Church Architect: William Richard Burk Convent Architect: James McNally

Statement of Significance(in one paragraph)
Criterion C

The St. Joseph Church-Convent of the Most Holy Sacrament Complex is locally significant in the area of architecture because both singly and collectively its buildings are architectural landmarks within the context of Jefferson Parish.

Taken together, the two buildings represent Gretna's most pretentious architectural grouping. Both buildings tower over the surrounding one and two story commercial-residential area. Moreover, of the numerous institutional building groupings in Jefferson Parish, the St. Joseph Church-Convent of the Most Holy Sacrament Complex is the second most pretentious in terms of scale and architectural styling. The buildings are also interesting because they can be seen as a cross-section of the highest architectural taste in the parish during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The convent, which was begun in 1899, is loosely based upon a number of different historical styles of architecture (Romanesque, Gothic, Commercial Italianate) without being heavily indebted to any of them. By contrast, the church, which was constructed in 1926, follows the then popular Spanish Colonial Revival style, and is a very specific and studied reference to a particular period of Spanish architecture.

Beyond this, each building is architecturally significant in its own right, as follows:

The Convent:

Of the numerous turn-of-the-century buildings in the parish based upon the popular commercial vernacular, the convent is by far the finest. It has the only three story cast-iron gallery and some of the parish's most elaborate brickwork, including corbel tables, pointed arches, and an apse formed of rounded brick. It is also much larger than any other comparable building in the parish. For these reasons, the convent is a landmark within the context of Jefferson Parish's turn-of-the-century architectural heritage.

Church:

Most of Jefferson Parish's 50+ year old buildings date from roughly the same period as St. Joseph Church and would normally be classified as eclectic in style. There are nine major examples of early-twentieth century architecture in the parish, eight of which are designed in the Spanish

Colonial Revival style. All are large institutional buildings. St. Joseph Church is among the parish's finest examples of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture because it is one of only four which feature rich churrigueresque articulation. Indeed, in a revival style which was known for its effervescent flamboyance, St. Joseph Church is probably the parish's most outlandish example~ It is the only one whose facade features two types of columns as well as scalloped doorways and free-standing statues. In addition, it has the greatest degree of sculptural relief of any comparable example in the parish.

NB: For the record, the State Historic Preservation Office would like to note that the Louisiana State Review Committee for the National Register recommended that the St. Joseph Church-Convent of the Most Holy Sacrament Complex be nominated for significance at the state level in the area of architecture. A committee member felt that the church was a superior example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style within the context of Louisiana. After giving the matter careful consideration, the State Historic Preservation Office decided to leave the nomination at the local level of significance for two reasons: (1) It would be difficult to prove state significance for the church. (2) Even if the church could be proven to be of state significance, the complex as a whole is not.

Major Bibliographical References

Jefferson Parish Conveyance Records

Archives of the Sisters of the Most Holy Sacrament, Lafayette, Louisiana

Swanson, Betsy. Historic Jefferson Parish from Shore to Shore. Gretna, Pelican Publishing Company, 1975.

Baudier, Roger. St. Joseph Parish of Gretna, La. Centennial Dedication. Gretna, Rau's Ex-Cel Printery, 1958. This is a history of the parish compiled for the centennial dedication. Copy in National Register file at LA State Historic Preservation Office.