

The National Register Nomination lists all known dates for each building. I have not listed them here - They probably should be ???

AVE MARIA GROTTO
LMJ 11/28/86

AVE MARIA GROTTO
(LITTLE JERUSALEM BEFORE 1934)
ST. BERNARD ABBEY
nr. CULLMAN, ALABAMA
BROTHER JOSEPH ZOETTL, O. S. B. 1878-1961

1878 Brother Joseph Zoettl, O. S. B. born in Landshutt, Bavaria. Baptised Michael Zoettl, in St. Martin's Church, Landshutt.

1892 At the age of 14, sent there by his stepmother, Zoettl enrolled as a student at Saint Bernard Abbey, the first and only Benedictine monastery in Alabama.

1897 Zoettl became a brother in the Benedictine Order. Because of an injury at the abbey which left him a hunchback, he was only able to be a lay priest. In 1910 he was placed in charge of the Abbey's boiler house. This required 24 hour attention, but left him with a lot of free time. Apparently his first hobby construction was a model train and track set constructed in the Power house. The engine was attached by a string to one of the fly wheels used to generate electricity so that the wheel rotated pulling the train along the track. At a work table, he built hand sized grottoes and ash trays for sale at the gift shop, and had made over 5,000 when he quit counting some 20 years before he stopped making them.

In a room adjacent to the furnaces, he developed his hobby of building shrines, using rejected pieces of building material such as tile, pipe, glass and brick. The first were erected on the monastery recreation grounds and were intended for the enjoyment of his fellow monks. They were moved when they began to attract too many visitors.

Buildings were constructed at at a table and then assembled at their permanent site. He used simple hand tools including hammers, pliers, brushes scissors and flatware. The main material was concrete which he ornamented with marbles, seashells, costume jewelry, chinaware, pottery, bits of glass, bottles, bicycle reflectors and tiles, Small dimensional figurines of animals and people were included. Colors were mixed in with the concrete.

c1915-30 The original buildings were known as 'Little Jerusalem', being composed of re-creations of buildings from Jerusalem and Palestine during biblical times. They were mostly under two feet. Later cathedrals and basilicas reach four and five feet at the tips of their towers and some stretch to eight feet.

1932-34 A new site was prepared for the buildings of Little Jerusalem. The abandoned Old Rock quarry was landscaped by Br. Patrick O'Neill. The Grotto itself is 27 feet high, 27 feet wide and 27 feet deep. It is decorated with scenes from the Holy Land. A circular path was laid out for visitors to follow, and bushes trees and grasses were planted. The Grotto occupies a heavily wooded bluff above Eightmile Creek. It was constructed to Brother Joe's specifications. Railroad spikes and chicken wire were suspended from the ceiling which Br. Joe later turned into stalagmites. Sections of the Grotto contain buildings modeled after existing structures in the United States, predominantly missions constructed by the Franciscan Fathers as well as structures representing ancient Rome. These sections contain the earliest buildings and were moved from the recreation ground.

Altogether, the site consists of a four acre landscaped Park with approximately 125/150 miniature buildings and shrines, monuments and sculpted works, designed and built by Brother Joseph Zoetl over a period of almost 50 years.

1934 May 17th. Ave Maria Grotto was opened to the public and dedicated on the site of a former stone quarry.

Constructions include real buildings, as well as purely conjectural structures such as the Hanging Garden of Babylon, Noah's ark; and the Tower of Babel. A further category of objects includes buildings without known prototypes caves and wayside shrines similar to roadside shrines in Europe. Secular monuments include the Red Cross. Scenes designed specially for children include Hansel and Gretel and the Temple of the Fairies.

Specific sites include: Bethlehem; St. Peter's Shrine; Monserrat Abbey, Spain; Castle Trausnitz and St. Martin's Church, Landshutt, Bavaria; Statue of Liberty; Red Cross Tower; St. Bernard College Buildings; Cathedral of Mobile, Alabama; Missions including San Juan Capistrano, Carmel, Santa Barbara and Mission Dolores; The Round Tower, Rhode Island; The Alamo; St. Peter's Basilica; Rome Monte Cassino Benedictine Abbey, Rome; St. Scholastica of Subiaco; St. Anselm's; Pantheon; Rotunda of St. Stephen; The Colosseum; St. Paul's Outside the Walls; St. Agnes; St. Lawrence; St. Domitilla; The Vestal Temple; Tomb of St. Petronilla; St. Sixtus Chapel; The Leaning Tower of Pisa; The Statue of St. Francis Cabrini. The National Register nomination form lists all buildings and dates of construction where known.

1958. Brother Joseph built his last model, the Basilica Church in Lourdes.

c. 1958 Br. Joe stopped work on the grotto due to ill health.

1984 19th January. Ave Maria Grotto was listed on the National Register, representing Alabama's first nomination of a folk art environment to the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination was prepared by Linda Bayer.

1961 Brother Zoetl died.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BAYER, Linda. "Ave Maria Grotto nominated". The Preservation Report, Vol. XI, No. 3. Alabama Historical Commission, Nov, Dec. 1983.

COLLINS, George, et al.

Fantastic Architecture: Personal and Eccentric Visions. Harry N. Abrams, 1980.

Aloysius Plaisance, OSB, Ph.D. An Illustrated Self Guide of the Ave Maria Grotto, featuring a Picture of the Monk Builder.

"Ave Maria Grotto is listed on the National Register. SPACES: Notes on America's Folk Art Environments.

CONTACTS

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Contact monks at the Abbey: Brother Augustine Campion, Director of Grotto Operations, St. Bernard Abbey, Cullman AL 35055. Also, Brother Lawrence Bouchea (helped Bayer with nomination).

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questions.

How many monuments are there 125 or 150 or??

What is the acreage covered? over three? four?