

United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

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

1. Name

historic Ave Maria Grotto (Little Jerusalem - before 1934)

and/or common

2. Location

street & number St. Bernard Abbey NA not for publication

city, town Cullman NA vicinity of congressional district 04

state Alabama code 01 county Cullman code 043

3. Classification

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| Category | Ownership | Status NA | Present Use |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district | <input type="checkbox"/> public | <input type="checkbox"/> occupied | <input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum |
| <input type="checkbox"/> building(s) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied | <input type="checkbox"/> commercial <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> park |
| <input type="checkbox"/> structure | <input type="checkbox"/> both | <input type="checkbox"/> work in progress | <input 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 type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted | <input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> being considered | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted | <input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation |
| | NA | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> military <input type="checkbox"/> other: |

4. Owner of Property

name The Benedictine Society of Alabama, A Corporation

street & number St. Bernard Abbey

city, town Cullman NA vicinity of state Alabama 35055

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Probate Record Office

street & number Cullman County Courthouse

city, town Cullman state Alabama

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title None known has this property been determined eligible? ☐ yes ☒ no

date N/A N/A federal N/A state N/A county N/A local

depository for survey records N/A

city, town N/A state N/A

7. Description

Condition

☒ excellent
☐ good
☐ fair

☐ deteriorated
☐ ruins
☐ unexposed

Check one

☒ unaltered
☐ altered

Check one

☒ original site
☒ moved date 1932

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Ave Maria Grotto is a four-acre landscaped park on the grounds of St. Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Alabama, which contains approximately 150 miniature buildings, shrines, monuments, and sculptural works designed and handbuilt in concrete by Brother Joseph Zoetl.

This site was an abandoned rock quarry that was transformed between 1932 and 1934 as a setting for the display of Br. Joseph's collection of small buildings which originally had been located on the abbey recreation ground. This earliest group of buildings, constructed between ca. 1915 and 1930, was named Little Jerusalem and was composed of recreations of the buildings of Jerusalem and Palestine during Biblical times. From 1934 to 1958 Br. Joseph continued to build a variety of structures which were added to the Grotto. However, it appears that more than 85 percent of the present works were in place by 1940 and that almost 95 percent were completed by 1950. (For further elaboration on this point, see Note on Sketch Map Legend.) Ave Maria Grotto has been open to the public since 1934 and is carefully maintained by the abbey. There are no plans to move it or close it.

The Grotto occupies a heavily wooded bluff above Eightmile Creek. One enters the park on the high side and descends a path flanked by several of the larger works. Rounding a curve one descends a flight of steps to the floor of the quarry which is the main portion of the Grotto. On the right, a low stone wall containing built-in benches borders the wooded bluff which drops down to the creek. On the left, the ground rises sharply creating a long, low hillside where the majority of the miniature buildings are assembled. At the center of this hillside is the largest creation in the park--the Ave Maria Grotto--the structure from which the entire site takes its name. The concrete shell of this grotto is 27 feet high and nearly as wide. It was constructed by local masons to Br. Joe's specifications, which included fitting the ceiling with suspended railroad spikes and chicken wire; Br. Joseph fashioned these into a mass of stalagmites by covering them with concrete embedded with bits of glass, marbles, and stones. Inside this grotto above the altar are statues of Our Lady Queen of the Universe and St. Benedict and St. Scholastica, the twin founders of the Benedictine Order.

On each side of this grotto the hillside is divided into two sections. The first contains a variety of miniature buildings modeled after existing structures in the United States, predominantly the missions of the Southwest constructed by the Franciscan fathers. The second section features Roman scenes and is composed of the structures of ancient Rome as well as numerous Catholic cathedrals and basilicas. The third section is called Scenes from the Holy Land and the last section is Little Jerusalem. These last two sections contain the earliest buildings, practically all of which were moved from the recreation ground. These are the smallest models and are patterned after the sites in Jerusalem and Palestine described in the Bible. From this point the path leads out of the quarry past additional structures to the exit.

It is impossible to adequately describe in words the scope and sophistication of this collection of structures because they vary considerably in subject matter, scale, and means of artistic expression. For this reason, numerous photographs have been included which illustrate a representative selection of the individual works as well as the overall appearance of the groupings and the environment.

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Br. Joseph's creations can be roughly divided into two categories: models of actual structures and purely original works. The first category contains structures as disparate as the stone tower in Newport, R.I. and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. However, many of these models are based on buildings that once existed but have been destroyed so long ago that their re-creation today is purely conjectural. Included in this group would be most of the Biblical structures, notably Noah's Ark, the Tower of Babel, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. A small number of buildings appear to be re-creations of a basic type of structure without reference to a specific example; typical of these would be the small scale models of vernacular buildings from Bavaria, one of which has a snow-covered roof.

The second category, the original works created by Br. Joe without reference to any known prototype, tend to be sculptural displays often taking an abstract form. These works were inspired by a variety of sources and can be subdivided into several types based on their subject content. The grottoes are free-form caves sheltering one or more traditional statues (these were often donated to Br. Joe) and are built to various scales, the largest being the Ave Maria Grotto itself. Similar to these are the wayside shrines which were inspired by the roadside shrines common in Europe. Continuing the religious theme are various abstract monuments such as that celebrating the Benedictine Order. At the end of both the Korean War and World War II, Br. Joseph created a memorial to the alumni of St. Bernard College who had lost their lives in each conflict.

Another series of monuments are of a purely secular nature designed to commemorate the citizenship of Br. Joe, the Red Cross, the state of Alabama, and those persons who donated materials to Br. Joe for use in his work. This group of structures are often sculptural free-forms heavily embellished with a great variety of small found objects. Two scenes designed specifically for children include the Temple of the Fairies and Hansel and Gretl Visit the Temple of the Fairies. Beneath the latter is a cave wherein resides a ferocious dragon with flaring wings, sheet metal tongue, and marble eyes. Finally there are the small objects of a purely decorative nature scattered throughout the Grotto such as a concrete pedestal supporting a bouquet of seashells and at least one bird and one snake.

The structures of the Grotto vary from small buildings and sites of less than a foot in any dimension to sculptures six or more feet tall. The main grotto and the Nativity Scene, located in a sandstone building, are both large enough to accommodate several people. Although it is unclear whether Br. Joe attempted to use a consistent scale for his miniature buildings, they are at least relatively scaled with one another. The buildings of Little Jerusalem are quite small (under two feet) while the cathedrals and basilicas may reach four or five feet at the top of their towers. Most of the monuments and shrines are even larger with some approaching seven or eight feet in height.

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The constant characteristic that runs through the entire collection is the employment of materials. Every creation is constructed of concrete and ornamented with a selection of found objects. A partial list of these materials used by Br. Joseph includes marbles, seashells, costume jewelry, bits of glass, bottles and cold cream jars, tiles, dinner plates, toilet tank floats, old watches, small figurines, bicycle reflectors, and rocks. Br. Joe applied these materials discretely to his replicas of actual buildings as a means of capturing the feeling of the original. However on his own designs, he applied objects with a lavish hand often completely covering the surface with embellishments. Distinctive of his work is the use of small, dimestore figurines of people and animals which he incorporated into many of his scenes. Many of the structures are provided with labels, worked in concrete, which give the name of the building and either the date the original was constructed or the date Br. Joe created his miniature.

Br. Joseph apparently had a natural talent for working concrete. Noah's Ark appears to be constructed of rough planking, the Southwest missions take on the appearance of adobe, the Tower of Babel is obviously masonry, and a tiny log cabin seems to be built of miniature logs. The abstract pieces often are composed of globs of concrete lumped together to build up the desired forms. If color was to be a part of the structure, the color was mixed in with the cement.

Br. Joe constructed his buildings at a table, creating each component individually and then assembling them at the permanent site. He worked with simple hand tools such as hammers, pliers, brushes, scissors, and flatwear.

The four-acre quarry site was landscaped by Br. Patrick O'Neill in 1932-34 when the Grotto was established. A circular path was laid out for visitors to follow and bushes, trees and grass were planted. The hillside where the main display is located was planted with a variety of small plants to keep in scale with the miniature buildings which are placed randomly over the rocky slope. A stone wall, two to three feet high, separates the walkway from the hillside display and acts as a retaining wall. The plantings are used to create a natural setting for the buildings, and in some instances, the plants are actually an integral part of the design such as in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon which is composed of landscaped terraces and even contains a pool of water at the bottom. Another small pond was created in the Little Jerusalem section to be the Pool of Bethsaida. In other places along the hillside the natural runoff has been channeled to create small streams and pools and waterfalls. The presence of real lizards, small snakes, and numerous insects living among the buildings captures the attention of very young visitors.

8. Significance

| Period | 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 type="checkbox"/> architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> education | <input type="checkbox"/> military | <input type="checkbox"/> social/ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> art | <input type="checkbox"/> engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> music | <input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899 | <input type="checkbox"/> commerce | <input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement | <input type="checkbox"/> philosophy | <input type="checkbox"/> theater |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900– | <input type="checkbox"/> communications | <input type="checkbox"/> industry | <input type="checkbox"/> politics/government | <input type="checkbox"/> transportation |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> invention | | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) |
| Folk Art Environment | | | | |
| Specific dates | 1932–34 | Builder/Architect | Brother Joseph Zoetl | |

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Ave Maria Grotto is significant not only because it embodies and clearly illustrates the distinctive characteristics of a folk art environment but also because it is an unusually sophisticated and extensive example which has been carefully preserved and continues to be well maintained. It contains at a single site the lifetime creations of an exceptionally talented vernacular artist and craftsman. Ave Maria Grotto exhibits integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

* * * * *

CRITERION C:

Because the area of significance--folk art environment--has not yet been fully recognized as a distinct cultural category, this nomination will address Criterion C through a discussion of some recurring characteristics of folk art environments in general and of Ave Maria Grotto in particular.

1. A folk art environment is constructed outdoors, usually on the grounds of the creator's home or place of work. It is designed and handbuilt by the creator.

Ave Maria Grotto is located in a park on the grounds of St. Bernard Abbey where the artist, Brother Joseph, lived and worked. The structures of the Grotto were designed by Br. Joe and built by him with the exception of the two largest: the shell (27 feet in diameter) of the main grotto and the stone shelter of the Bethlehem Nativity Scene.

2. A folk art environment often fills all available physical space. The act of creating becomes an obsession with the artist who continues to expand his environment until failing health or lack of space forces him to abandon work.

Ave Maria Grotto does not fill the available space but this is because Br. Joe had an exceptional amount of land available to him--four acres--and because he worked on a relatively small scale. However, his output of approximately 150 structures plus an unknown number of decorative objects, fences, and animals constructed over a 40-year period definitely represents a sustained obsession with his creation.

3. A folk art environment is created to satisfy the artist's own personal vision. He does not create the environment to attract money or fame (as do many fine art artists), and he has little concern with other persons' opinions of what he is doing. (In fact, if he works in his yard, he is usually quite unpopular with his neighbors.) He gives no thought to his motivation; the construction of the environment is simply an unquestioned labor of love.

Because of his position as a monk, Br. Joseph was unable to profit financially from his creations, but he also avoided publicity and personal recognition and was reluctant even to take credit for the Grotto. He began erecting grottoes and small buildings to fill his spare time and continued to do so because it provided him a sense of personal satisfaction.

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4. Folk art environments develop organically; they do not follow a predetermined formal plan to completion.

It is impossible to know if Br. Joe intended to reconstruct all of Jerusalem when he began fashioning replicas of Biblical scenes; however, his later method of randomly selecting designs indicates that his Jerusalem series probably developed without any conscious forethought. Once the sheer number of buildings made it necessary to find a permanent location for them, conscious decisions were made to landscape and establish the rock quarry as a suitable site. However, the structures that were added to the Grotto after its 1934 opening were chosen randomly and sited as they were completed. The bizarre mixture of buildings in some sections and the wide range of subjects chosen further indicate that there was no formal plan.

5. The creators of folk art environments have no formal training or education in art or architecture. They are vernacular or folk artists working with materials and ideas chosen solely for the personal pleasure they provide the creator. These artists are blissfully unaware of high art movements and philosophies.

Br. Joseph's only schooling was for the priesthood. A severe back injury prevented him from completing his studies and being ordained; instead he became a lay brother, and his official duty was to oversee the operation of the abbey power plant.

6. Folk art environments demonstrate a disregard for the traditional forms and materials of art and architecture. The materials most commonly employed are found objects--junk--which can be obtained at little or no cost to the artist, and they are usually juxtaposed in an unorthodox manner. The basic construction material is often scrap wood or concrete, both of which can be easily formed and decorated with objects. Additional materials favored by these artists include marbles, tile, bits of glass and bottles, seashells, rocks, costume jewelry, hubcaps, and dinner plates, although anything that comes to hand can be utilized.

The structures of Ave Maria Grotto are all composed of concrete. The surface ornament on the building replicas tends to be restrained and used as a means to capture the feeling of the prototype. However, the original designs of Br. Joe fully partake of the artistic urge to virtually cover the surface with embedded found objects. In addition to the materials listed above, Br. Joe made considerable use of cold cream jars, toilet tank floats, bicycle reflectors, and inexpensive figurines. The statues and plaques placed in his grottoes and shrines were donated to him.

7. Folk art environments can take any form, but the most common are towers, gardens, decorated walls or entire buildings, fences, or simply an accumulation of objects.

Ave Maria Grotto combines monuments, shrines, grottoes, miniature buildings, fences and purely decorative sculptural objects in a park setting.

8. The components of a folk art environment can be either abstract and free-form or they can be figurative. In the latter case, anatomical representations are often distorted

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much as figures are in the more traditional form of folk art painting.

Ave Maria Grotto contains sculptural works in the form of grottoes, shrines, monuments, and simply decorative pieces; these are very much within the folk art environment tradition. However, the majority of the Grotto structures are miniatures of actual buildings; it is this group that is chiefly responsible for the unique character of Ave Maria Grotto. These buildings are extraordinary miniatures that capture the essence of the originals without sacrificing the naive quality of folk art. Architectural features are rendered by a variety of found objects such as the toilet tank floats that form the twin domes of the Mobile cathedral. Unlike most folk artists, Br. Joe has an uncanny sense of scale and proportion which is evident in these buildings. His native talent becomes more apparent when one considers that he had worked predominantly from small, two-dimensional views on picture postcards and without dimensions.

9. The creators of folk art environments seldom exhibit any conscious stylistic evolution during the course of their careers as do fine art artists. Rather they find a means of expression that satisfies their own personal vision, and they tend to retain this method, merely repeating it over and over, so that their latest work is very similar to their earliest work. A shift in style can usually be attributed more to a change in materials than to a conscious decision to experiment with new ideas.

While Br. Joe created two distinct bodies of work, both were present at the start of his artistic career and constituted a response to two types of subject matter. His late buildings are more sophisticated and complex than his first, but this seems to be simply a reflection of his increased proficiency over a 40-year career rather than a conscious alteration in his intentions or working techniques.

10. Although little documentation is currently available, it appears that a great many folk art environmentalists were immigrants. Typically they began their creative life at retirement when they suddenly had much free time to fill; once they found the materials and style that suited them, they spent their remaining time adding to their environment. Work usually ceased when they had run out of space or when they died.

Br. Joe was an immigrant, having been born in Bavaria, and came to St. Bernard at the age of 14. His job of tending the boilers required his attention around the clock. Consequently he followed a different schedule than the other monks, one which provided time to fill with hobbies. His avocation of constructing Grotto structures lasted from ca. 1915 until 1958 at which time his health made further work impossible.

* * * * *

The foregoing discussion makes clear that Ave Maria Grotto embodies the distinctive characteristics of a folk art environment, and by its unique interpretation of these traits, the Grotto enhances our understanding of these artistic and cultural phenomena.

The emphasis of the Grotto on religious and patriotic themes suggests comparison with other environments having a similar focus. The Garden of Eden (Lucas, Kansas, N.R. 1977)

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treats these subjects through a depiction of specific Biblical characters (Adam and Eve) and contemporary representative figures (lawyers and doctors) while the Grotto interprets similar topics through buildings and monuments. A more interesting comparison is that between the Grotto and Holy Ghost Park (Dickeyville, Wisconsin). Both environments were created by immigrants of German nativity who spent their adult lives as clergymen in their respective churches. Father Matthias Wernerus created his park between 1926 and 1931; it contains a grotto, shrines, walls, flags, flowerpots, fences and a monument to Christopher Columbus. The Grotto and the Park are both built of similar materials employed in a common manner--even to the introduction of figurines and traditional religious statues--and both stress religion and patriotism. However the variations in scale and form between the two environments transform each into a totally original and personal statement.

One other environment that suggests comparison with the Grotto is the New England Village created by Everett Knowlton in Stonington, Maine. The common theme here is the construction of miniature buildings assembled to form an urban landscape; however, there are significant differences. The Village is composed of building types found in rural New England--mostly houses--but none are patterned after any particular structure. Their execution is a literal interpretation, like a doll's house, even to being furnished on the interior. The Grotto buildings are, in the majority of cases, based on specific historical structures; they are built of concrete regardless of the construction material of the original, and they are created in a fanciful manner using a variety of found objects that look correct from a distance but which cause the viewer to smile when close enough to identify them. The Village is a recreation on a reduced scale of the immediate world in which the artist lived. The Grotto is a rearrangement and reinterpretation of selected landmarks of western history as filtered through the imagination of an extraordinary observer.

* * * * *

A survey of the literature on folk art environments reveals that many of these were started or reached maturity during the 1920s and 30s. However, closer inspection of the genre leads this writer to believe that folk art environments are, in fact, a product of 20th century life and that the 20s and 30s marked merely the beginning of these phenomena rather than their peak or culmination. This conclusion became inescapable when it was discovered that (of the examples known to this writer) as many folk art environments were begun during the 1950s as were during the 1920s and that five examples dating since 1960 can already be identified.

An explanation for the appearance of folk art environments as a distinct art form can only be conjectural at this time; but the lack of any known body of such works prior to the 20th century indicates that they are strongly influenced by a set of conditions unique to this century. (They are obviously the stepchild of the European follies of previous centuries, but these tended to be the whims of wealthy men indulging their fantasies or were consciously contrived by nonconventional artists/architects.) Furthermore, because the U.S. apparently exhibits the highest concentration of folk art environments, these conditions would seem to be a function of a highly industrialized society.

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The most important prerequisites for the development of folk art environments appear to be 1) the introduction of forced retirement, 2) the ready availability of discarded mass-produced goods, 3) the predominance of assembly line jobs offering little creative compensation, and 4) a growing discontent with contemporary society and culture. The first two items made possible the creation of folk art environments by providing the time and the materials. The third item fostered a craving for an activity that would permit the individual the satisfaction of producing a work uniquely his own. These three conditions are undoubtedly responsible for a great outpouring of artistic activity, but most of this probably takes such conventional forms as needlework, furniture building, or even primitive painting and sculpture. But it is the fourth item, taken in conjunction with the other three, that may be primarily responsible for directing creative energies into the construction of a folk art environment.

In a world growing increasingly complex, where even the traditional securities of family and work have begun to erode, many persons find themselves adrift in unfamiliar surroundings. A folk art environment functions as an effective method of combatting the perceived impersonality, standardization and chaos of daily life through the continual creation of a unique, highly autobiographical space in which the real world ceases to have any validity. As these artists have discovered, the construction of an environment provides a means of recapturing on a small scale a sense of personal control and fulfillment; it permits the establishment of a formal order dictated solely by the individual; and it constitutes a subtle, albeit unconscious, attack on a chaotic culture by subverting its industrial artifacts to a strictly personal vision. In short, the folk art environment was, and is, an attempt to personalize and humanize one's immediate surroundings.

A comparison of traditional folk art with folk art environments illustrates the divergent aims of the respective artists and helps to isolate the impetus that distinguishes environments from other artistic endeavors. Folk artists remain within the centuries long tradition of creating individual objects, typically paintings or sculptures, that are complete within themselves and are usually of a decorative nature; these works demonstrate not a rejection of contemporary culture but rather an unlettered glorification of it. On the other hand, the environmentalists seem to undertake their artistic endeavors as a means of divorcing themselves from an unsympathetic milieu; their art work and its creation operate not merely on an aesthetic level but also on a philosophical one. In addition, the separate elements of an environment function fully only when perceived as part of the aggregate and are not meant to stand alone.

If the above cited conditions are, in fact, primarily responsible for the development of folk art environments, then it seems reasonable to predict that environments will continue to be created because all four conditions are intensifying as the century nears its end. However the recent flurry of publicity given these creations may have the effect of subverting the underlying naive character of future examples by transforming them into just another craft activity. The environmentalists of the first half of the century worked in

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a vacuum and developed their creations more or less intuitively, being unaware of similar activity taking place elsewhere. This may cease to be the case as persons undertake related constructions because the idea to do so came through the national media rather than as an innate response to undefined needs and emotions. It is impossible to guess what the future implications of this development might be for the genre. Perhaps in hindsight we will discover that the 1920s and 30s were indeed the golden age of folk art environments.

* * * * *

Folk art environments, taken as a class, are of great value because they constitute a unique artistic response to a set of conditions peculiar to the 20th century. Culturally they represent an unorganized, unconscious reaction to contemporary society, thereby achieving significance through their role as contributors to the distinct identity that defines 20th century American life.

Artistically the folk art environment is important because it is a naive, untutored creative expression that is uncorrupted by the prevailing fashions and pressures of the fine art world. Each environment is a unique, totally personal expression of a specific individual vision.

Historically folk art environments are closely related to a long line of European follies, and they expand on this tradition of building highly idiosyncratic personal spaces, but they do so on a purely intuitive level.

Architecturally some examples of environments function as vernacular alternatives to contemporary elite fantasy architecture, such as that practiced by SITE or Paolo Soleri. An even closer affinity appears to exist between certain environments and current attempts to fabricate low cost housing from trash materials, such as used tires and cardboard. However the distinguishing characteristic that separates environments from elite fantasy or trash building remains the underlying intention: both fantasy and trash structures occur as the result of highly intellectual exercises designed either to evoke fresh ways of perceiving our built environment or to evolve innovative construction methods. Folk art environments, on the other hand, just are.

But beyond all this, folk art environments are significant because they allow us to experience our world from a new perspective and because they permit us to recapture, briefly, that sense of joy and delight in our surroundings that remains the purview of childhood.

* * * * *

INTEGRITY:

Ave Maria Grotto exhibits integrity through the retention of the physical characteristics it possessed in the past. It has occupied the same location since 1932; the

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design of the site has survived with only those changes necessary to maintain a planned landscape. The setting of the Grotto remains the grounds of St. Bernard Abbey. The structures of the Grotto have been carefully preserved so that the materials and workmanship are unaltered. The Grotto is strangely timeless, being, as it is, a totally personal creation removed from the fashions and styles that are used to measure the passage of time; rather, vernacular/folk art tends to evoke a strong sense of association with the artist and his unique world view. This is most obvious at the Grotto where the visitor finds himself engulfed by the artifacts of one man's life.

RELIGIOUS OWNERSHIP CRITERION:

Ave Maria Grotto is located on the grounds of St. Bernard Abbey and is owned by the Benedictine Society of Alabama which operates it as a tourist attraction. Regardless of its ownership, the Grotto exists as a significant illustration of a folk art environment demonstrating the genre by virtue of its materials, extent, high artistic quality, variety, and craftsmanship. Its overriding religious/patriotic theme forms a distinct subcategory among folk art environments; other known examples in this group are the Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kansas, (N.R. 1977), Charley's World of Lost Art in Yuma, Arizona, and Holy Ghost Park in Dickeyville, Wisconsin.

FIFTY-YEAR CRITERION:

A folk art environment by definition comes into being over a considerable period of time without any formal plan or predesign. Also by definition, these environments usually do not exhibit any great stylistic evolution during the course of their construction; the style, theme, materials, construction process, and artistic intention remain static. The folk art environment is built up by an obsessive repetition of the original impulse and method with incomplete records of changes. For these reasons it is not possible to "date" each "building" through records or stylistic features as one would the buildings in a more typical historic district. The following paragraph is an assessment of the age of the property.

The four-acre site and layout of the Grotto as it exists today was established fifty years ago. The earliest structures (Little Jerusalem) date from the period 1915-1925. By the early 1920s, Br. Joseph had established the prototypes (the miniature buildings and the grottoes) that were the basis for all of his future work; his creative career from 1934 to 1958 was but an elaboration and extension of his earliest work. The last structure added to the Grotto by Br. Joseph was built in 1958. The idea, the choice of materials, and the working methods of Ave Maria Grotto are all over fifty years of age, only the execution of the latest components fail to meet this criterion.

Because American folk art environments appear to be 20th century phenomena and are ephemeral in nature, most are of relatively recent vintage and few early examples survive. Little Jerusalem is one of the earliest known examples of a folk art environment; only the Underground Gardens of Baldasare Forestiere in Fresno, California, (N.R. 1977) and probably the Garden of Eden (N.R. 1977) appear to predate it. Although documentation of folk art environments on a national scale is just beginning, there is sufficient data available to determine that Ave Maria Grotto is exceptionally important as a folk art

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environment and that it will continue to retain that distinction in the future. This assessment is based on its outstanding artistic quality, high level of workmanship, and varied range of expression as well as on the fact that the Grotto is one of the few early environments that has had and can expect to have adequate protection.

BROTHER JOSEPH:

Br. Joseph was born in Landshut, Bavaria, in 1878 as Michael Zoetl. His mother died while he was quite young and his stepmother decided he should become a priest. When Michael was but 14, she shipped him off to Cullman, Alabama, to study for the priesthood at St. Bernard Abbey. He had attended classes for three years when the abbot informed him he could not become a priest because of his physical disability; Br. Joe had been injured in an accident at the abbey which left him a hunchback. He gladly agreed to a life as a lay brother and spent the next several years keeping house for various Benedictine fathers in the Southeast. In 1908 he returned to St. Bernard and left there only once for a trip to Birmingham. In 1910 he was placed in charge of the boilers in the new abbey power house, a job that he kept until he retired. It was a job that required his attention around the clock yet left much free time. Br. Joe set up a worktable in the boiler room and began building hand-sized grottoes for sale in the abbey gift shop. He completed 5000 of these before he quit counting although he continued to turn them out for another twenty years. When he was not working on these little grottoes (and ashtrays), he started the structures that came to be Little Jerusalem, probably about 1915-18. These were placed on the brothers' recreation ground when completed and remained there until 1932 when they were transferred to the quarry.

His very first creation was a grotto built of rocks that held a concrete statue which Br. Joe had purchased for \$24. This grotto was dedicated in 1905. By his own account, he had built several similar ones while serving in Virginia before his final return to Cullman in 1908. Apparently his first hobby undertaken in the power house was the construction of a model train and track; the engine was attached by a string to one of the flywheels used to generate electricity so that as the wheel rotated, it pulled the train along the track. Delicate silver wires attached to the smokestack would vibrate as the train moved giving the appearance of smoke.

Br. Joseph was a small, fragile man, barely five feet tall and weighing less than 100 pounds. He worked quietly caring for the boilers and creating the structures of the Grotto. Many of his materials were donated by persons who had visited Little Jerusalem and he scrounged the rest. He avoided publicity and tended the Grotto early in the morning and late in the afternoon when he would not encounter tourists. His health failed in the late 1950s, and in October 1961 he died and was buried in the abbey cemetery.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 4

Quadrangle name Cullman

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

See continuation sheet

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state NA code county NA code

state NA code county NA code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Linda Bayer, Planner

organization Huntsville Planning Department

date 23 May 1983

street & number P. O. Box 308

telephone 205-532-7353

city or town Huntsville

state Alabama 35804

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

 national X state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature 

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date 12/14/83

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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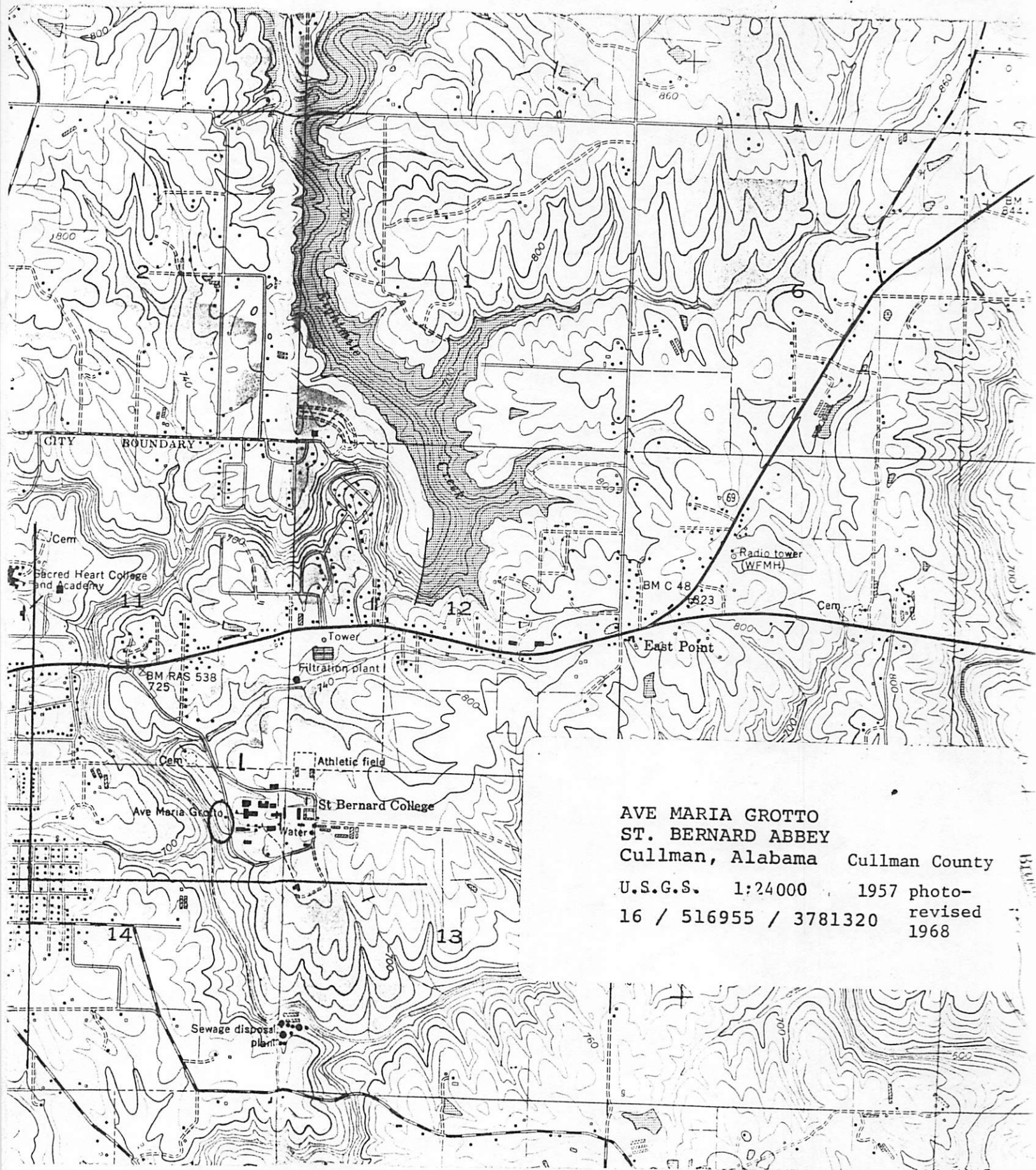
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Ave Maria Grotto is bounded on the east by the road that lies west and south of the Abbey buildings, on the north by the Grotto parking lot and the entrance building/gift shop, on the west by the 680 foot contour line, and on the south by a line that runs east-west at a point 25 feet south of the southernmost point on the paved path through the Grotto grounds.



AVE MARIA GROTTTO
ST. BERNARD ABBEY
Cullman, Alabama Cullman County
U.S.G.S. 1:24000 1957 photo-
16 / 516955 / 3781320 revised
1968

