

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Other names/site number: n/a

Name of related multiple property listing: n/a

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing):

2. Location

Street & number: 924 W. State Street

City or town: Milwaukee State: WI County: Milwaukee

Not For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following

level(s) of significance: ☐ National ☐ Statewide ☒ Local

Applicable National Register Criteria ☒ A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D

Signature of certifying official/Title: <u>Daina Penkiunas, Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Officer</u>	Date
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	
In my opinion, the property <input type="checkbox"/> meets <input type="checkbox"/> does not meet the National Register criteria.	
Signature of commenting official:	Date
Title:	State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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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:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private: ☒
- Public – Local ☐
- Public – State ☐
- Public – Federal ☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s) ☒
- District ☐
- Site ☐
- Structure ☐
- Object ☐

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing
<u>1</u>
<u>1</u>
<u>0</u>
<u>1</u>
<u>3</u>

Noncontributing	
<u>0</u>	Buildings
<u>0</u>	Sites
<u>0</u>	Structures
<u>0</u>	Objects
<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

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6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

RELIGION/religious facility

Current Functions

RELIGION/religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY
REVIVALS

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Foundation: CONCRETE; Walls: BRICK;
Roof: CERAMIC TILE

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

St. Benedict the Moor Church was constructed in 1924 as Milwaukee's first purpose-built church for a Catholic African American congregation. The Lombard Romanesque-style church was designed by prolific architect E. Brielmeier & Sons and was part of a larger campus of buildings operated by the Capuchin Friars as part of a mission to Milwaukee's Black community. The nominated church property includes one contributing building (the church), one contributing site (the adjacent courtyard), and one contributing object (a statue). Character-defining features of the property include the interior worship space and parish hall space that convey their functions as communal meeting places; the modest architectural style of the exterior; and the spatial relationship between the church and the adjoining hospital which functioned as a community outreach program of the St. Benedict mission. The three contributing resources included in this nomination (the church, the courtyard, and the statue) are in good condition and retain integrity to its period of significance (1924-1967).

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St. Anthony Hospital is located immediately west of the church and is separated from the church by a small landscaped courtyard. St. Anthony Hospital was founded and operated as a program of St. Benedict's. The hospital was individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2017. See Section 10 (Geographical Data) for more details on the hospital and its physical relationship to St. Benedict the Moor Church, which is the subject of this nomination.

Setting

St. Benedict the Moor is located on an urban site in Milwaukee's central business district. The church is located on W. State Street, roughly mid-block between N. 9th and N. 10th Streets. The church faces south onto State Street and is raised above, and set back from, the street by a monumental staircase. The Milwaukee County jail and courthouse complex is located on the opposite side of State Street from the church. To the west of the church is the six-story former St. Anthony Hospital. A small courtyard with lawn, terraced retaining walls, security fencing, and minimal landscaping is located between the former hospital and the church. This courtyard was historically associated with the church and is included within the nominated area as a contributing site. East of the church is a large paved parking lot and three 19th-century houses. These areas and resources are not included in the nomination. North of the church is a large hospital addition that was constructed in 1974 and largely obscures the north elevation of the church. This addition was historically associated with the hospital and is not included as part of this nomination. Landscaping on the church's urban site is minimal and consists of the grass courtyard and a modest terraced planting bed on the southwest corner of the church.

Exterior

St. Benedict the Moor Church is rectangular in plan and measures approximately fifty feet by 115 feet. The building is a two-story gable-roofed structure clad in brown brick with a red tile roof. The east, north, and west elevations are fairly utilitarian in character, while the south elevation is handsomely and formally articulated as the building's primary façade.¹ The brick walls, moderately pitched roof, modest areas of patterned brickwork, and rows of repeated arches in the corbeling and wall panels give the building its Lombard Romanesque character, a phase of the Romanesque Revival architectural style that was popular in the early 20th century and was based on northern Italian medieval buildings.²

The building is raised a full story above State Street, and the main body of the church is set back from the sidewalk behind an architecturally articulated monumental staircase with brick parapet walls, concrete steps, and limestone foundations and coping. The main staircase is T-shaped in plan, with its long bar adjacent to the sidewalk. The center portion of the south elevation wall of the staircase is decorated with five narrow bays, separated by piers and containing round-headed blind arches and arched corbelling, and flanked by projecting end piers with tall, thin, recessed arched panels. The center bay of the wall contains an arched door opening that was closed over and covered with stucco at an unknown date. On either side of the central portion are plain brick

¹ The exterior description quotes extensively from the Historic Preservation Study Report prepared by Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission staff as part of the building's local historic designation process in 1997.

² Justin Miller et. al., *Milwaukee Houses of Worship, 1920-1980: Architectural and Historical Intensive Survey Report*, (Milwaukee: City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission, 2023), p. 23.

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walls whose sloping top edges follow the staircases behind. At the east (right) side, an additional set of steps projects past the main wall of the staircase to match the slope of State Street.

Halfway up the staircase, at intermediate landings at the level of the basement parish hall inside, are arched portals that extend from the east and west sides of the church. Each portal consists of an approximately two-foot deep freestanding wall containing an open round-arched doorway and capped with limestone coping. At the top of the monumental staircase, another flight of stairs leads to the main entry portal of the church. On either side of this top flight, within the spaces created by the T-shaped staircase plan, are small rectangular terraced areas with brick walls. The west (left) terrace is landscaped with flowers and a low tree. The east (right) terrace contains a life-sized white marble statue of Fr. Stephen Eckert, OFM Capuchin, a prominent early leader of St. Benedict the Moor. This statue was originally located in the courtyard west of the church and was installed in 1948 when Eckert's remains were moved from Calvary Cemetery and reinterred at St. Benedict. Eckert's remains were later relocated in 2017 to the Capuchin Cemetery in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, and the statue was moved to its current location.³ The statue is counted as a contributing resource to this nomination.

The upper main portion of the south façade is composed of a broad, slightly projecting central bay containing two arched entrance portals in its first story. Each portal consists of modern steel entry doors topped with half-round stained-glass transoms. Small inset tiles depicting symbols of the authors of the four Gospels (known in Catholic symbolism as the four Evangelists) are located above the corners of each portal. Between the portals is a tall, thin, recessed niche containing a statue of the church's namesake. The entry bay is capped with a tile roof above a band of brick corbels. Above the entry bay is a band of diminutive blind arches, surmounted by a large circular rose window. Above the circular stained-glass second story window, the attic story rises above the roof to form a richly corbelled gabled parapet. The narrow single bays flanking the projecting central bay are fenestrated with small arched one-over-one windows. Brick corbelling embellishes the raking gables, which project slightly above the tile roof to form low parapet walls. The entire south façade is capped by a delicate copper cross with a filigreed quatrefoil.

The east and west elevations of St. Benedict's are nearly identical. The east elevation consists of seven bays defined by projecting piers. The central five bays each have a pair of tall basement level windows surmounted by pairs of story-and-a-half tall round arched stained-glass windows. The basement windows are four-over-four double hung windows that were installed in the early 2000s and retain the opening size and light pattern of the originals. A pair of steel entry doors are located in the second-from-northernmost bay and are marked by a transom sign reading "St. Ben's Community Meal." The north and south end bays of the east elevation each have three tiers of windows defining the basement, first and second story levels. The basement level contains a pair of steel entry doors under a metal entry canopy roof in the south bay and a pair of four-over-four double hung windows in the north bay. The first story in both bays contains a pair of shorter four-over-four double hung windows, and the second story contains a pair of small

³ https://www.thecapuchins.org/images/uploads/pages/Sandal_prints_Spring_2019.pdf, accessed on August 10, 2025.

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round-arched double hung windows. A decorative panel of stack bond brick is located between the first and second story windows. A corbel table frieze runs along the entire east elevation and trims the eaves.

The west elevation is nearly identical, with matching double hung windows in the basement story, round arched stained-glass windows in the double height nave, and two tiers of windows in the south bay, corresponding to a staircase inside. Only five bays are visible on the west elevation, however. The northernmost two bays of the church are obscured by a three-story addition constructed in 1947 as part of the neighboring hospital. The addition is similar in style and materials to the church and contains a three-arch arcade at ground level, with three bays above, each containing a modern one-over-one double hung window. Each bay is separated by brick piers, and the addition is capped with a modest corbel table frieze and a decorative tile roof which conceals a large flat roof behind it. The connecting addition was historically associated with the neighboring St. Anthony Hospital and was included within the hospital's historic boundary when it was listed in the National Register in 2017.

The north elevation of the church is almost entirely obscured by a large addition to the hospital, with only the uppermost portion of the corbelled gable of the church visible. The large hospital addition was constructed in 1974. Like the connecting addition on the west elevation, the 1974 addition physically touches the church but was historically associated with the neighboring hospital. The 1974 addition was also included in the National Register listing for St. Anthony Hospital.

The roof of St. Benedict the Moor Church is capped by an octagonal copper-clad belfry. The belfry consists of tall, thin, round arches supported on slender Corinthian columns and capped with a shallow-pitched polygonal roof.

Interior

The interior of St. Benedict the Moor Church consists of a lower-level parish hall and the main church space on the upper level. The parish hall has been renovated several times and currently serves as the dining room for St. Benedict's daily meal program. The parish hall has a colored concrete floor, pairs of windows along the east and west walls, and exposed concrete ceiling beams with modern acoustical tile in between. An entry corridor, with similar materials, runs along the south side of the main hall space. The north end of the space originally contained a raised stage. The stage was removed in 1966 after it was damaged in a fire.⁴ The floor was dropped to the level of the main parish hall. A large commercial kitchen was installed in the former stage area.

The main church is located on the upper level of the interior. It consists of a tall nave with a sanctuary raised up two steps. An organ loft is located at the south end of the nave, and the space beneath the organ loft contains an entry vestibule flanked by a small sacristy on the east and an enclosed staircase on the west. Two similar small sacristies flank the sanctuary and are accessed by a hallway that runs along the north wall of the building. The church has movable seating

⁴ "Church Has Fire," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 14, 1966, sec. 2 p. 4.

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arranged in a U-shape around the modern wood altar and pulpit, which are in the center of the space. (The original front-facing pews were reconfigured into the U-shape around 1966 as part of a renovation following the Second Vatican Council; and the pews were later replaced with the present movable seating.) Tubular frosted glass lights with brass fittings are suspended from the ceiling and were most likely installed around 1966 as well.

Apart from its modern tile floor, the sanctuary retains all of its historic materials and finishes. It has plaster walls and a shallow elliptical-vaulted ceiling. The nave is five bays long, with an additional bay occupied by the organ loft and entry vestibule. The east and west (side) walls are similar in design and finish. Each bay in the nave contains an inset radiator at floor level. A pair of wood plaques depicting the Stations of the Cross are above, and are inset in plaster egg-and-dart frames. The Stations were carved in Tyrol, a region of present-day northern Italy and southern Austria.⁵ Above each Station of the Cross is a pair of tall round-arched stained-glass windows. Each window contains a roundel depicting a saint. The space between the windows in each pair contains two slender twisted columns with stylized Corinthian capitals. A decorative band runs along the entire perimeter of the interior, forming a spring line for the vaults above. The wall above each pair of windows forms an arched lunette; and each of the twelve lunettes contains a low-relief plaster sculpture of an Apostle.

The south (organ loft) wall contains three sets of wood entry doors, each capped with a stained-glass arched transom. The entry doors are recessed slightly and are flanked by built-in confessionals on either side. Each confessional consists of a central priest's compartment with a round raised panel topped with a latticework screen and capped with an arched pediment surmounted by a cross. The central compartment is flanked by curtained side compartments; each of these are capped with a decorative architrave of inverted scallops and rectangular raised panels. The entire confessional is capped with a wide frieze containing eight arched latticework openings and a cornice with recessed rectangular panels. The organ loft is dominated by the organ pipes, which rest on a simple wood base. A rose window is located in the south wall. The central panel of the rose window contains the "Francis Seal," a religious symbol depicting two crossed arms (one of St. Francis, one of Christ, both with stigmata wounds) at the base of the cross.⁶

The north (sanctuary) wall contains the recessed sanctuary flanked by flat niches containing three-quarters life size statues of two saints. The sanctuary arch is marked by two hanging sanctuary lamps. The side (east and west) walls of the sanctuary contain small paired round-arched stained-glass windows above the decorative band in the upper level. The west (left) wall also contains a small arched window, currently filled with clear glass, that accesses the sacristy space. The sacristies on either side of the sanctuary are functional spaces, with terrazzo floors and bases, plaster walls and ceilings, and ten-panel wood doors.

⁵ "Bless Stations of Cross," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 24, 1924, p. 13.

⁶ The Capuchin friars, who founded and still operate this church, are a religious order who fall under the broad umbrella of "Franciscan" monasticism. There are thus many references to St. Francis throughout the art of the church.

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The focal point of the entire church is the monumental carved wood altarpiece that occupies the north wall of the sanctuary. The hand carved altarpiece was produced in Tyrol (like the Stations of the Cross) and was the gift of Elizabeth Wilkinson and Margaret Van Buren.⁷ The altar is raised up three steps from the level of the sanctuary. Since it was constructed in 1924, well before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the altar's placement required the priest to turn his back to the congregation during certain parts of the Mass.⁸ The front of the altar table contains three high-relief sculptural panels separated by diminutive Corinthian columns. From west to east (left to right), the panels depict the visit of the Three Kings (with their attendants); deer drinking from an elaborate columnar fountain (a reference to Psalm 42); and Abraham, Isaac, and the angel.

The brass and onyx tabernacle sits on the altar table. Behind the tabernacle are decorative panels depicting the alpha and omega symbols. Above these are five round arched panels. The central panel has a projecting octagonal canopy with a modern cross below. The four side panels contain high-relief sculptures of four saints.

The upper arched section of the altarpiece is a dramatic depiction of the twenty-two Catholic Uganda Martyrs, all wearing rosaries around their necks and bearing palm fronds symbolic of martyrdom, accompanied by St. Benedict the Moor, recognizable by his monk's habit, his halo, and the large cross that he cradles. Above is the Virgin Mary, depicted in her traditional imagery of treading on a dragon. She is flanked by two winged angels holding lilies and by four children's faces (known as *putti*) surrounded by clouds. The altarpiece was originally brightly painted when it was created in 1924. Around 1966, within the period of significance, the paint was stripped to bare wood as part of a redecoration following the Second Vatican Council. The polychrome colors were restored in the early 2000s and depict the altarpiece's African and Middle Eastern figures realistically with Black and dark-colored skin tones.

The entire altarpiece is framed by raised panels with rosettes, stylized Corinthian columns, and an arched cornice with dentils and a border of interwoven arches. The upper wall of the sanctuary above the altarpiece contains a circular painting of the Holy Spirit depicted as a downward-facing dove.

Integrity

St. Benedict the Moor church is in good condition and retains integrity with only minimal changes to its original design, materials, and workmanship and no substantial changes to its location, setting, feeling, or association. Within the church, the original floor was replaced at an unknown date. The original pews were reconfigured in 1966 (within the period of significance) and were replaced with the current movable seating at an unknown date within the past twenty years. The church also originally contained two side altars and a communion rail; these were removed within the period of significance, around 1966, as a reflection of changes in worship spaces following the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). The changes in seating arrangement

⁷ "Dedicate Altar July 13 at St. Benedict the Moor," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 6, 1924, p. 8; "Church Here Dedicates Rare Tyrolean Altar," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 14, 1924, p. 5.

⁸ Vatican II dictated that the priest should face the congregation during the entire Mass. Other Roman Catholic churches in a variety of ways, most commonly by installing a new altar table in front of the original.

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and removal of the elaborate side altars occurred within the period of significance and directly reflect design philosophies of Vatican II that encouraged greater communal participation in the act of the worship liturgy and the removal of “extraneous” aesthetics that drew attention away from the actions of the liturgy.

In addition, the church retains the majority of its original finishes and materials, including its stained glass windows, inset confessional booths, plaster walls, vaulted ceiling, and raised sanctuary. The interior space remains highly legible as an early 20th-century Catholic church. The lower level parish hall has lost its original stage and some of its original materials. These alterations occurred after the period of significance and illustrate the ongoing social welfare programs that have been a hallmark of St. Benedict the Moor since its founding. The original use of the parish hall remains legible despite the alterations and continues to convey its function as a communal gathering space.

St. Benedict’s historically contained other buildings which were associated with mission activities. St. Anthony Hospital, located immediately west of the church at 1004 N. 10th St., was built in 1931 by the Capuchins and operated as an outreach service of St. Benedict. St. Anthony Hospital was listed in the National Register in 2017 (ref. no. 10001724).

St. Benedict School was located at the northwest corner of N. 10th St. and W. State St. The school operated out of the building beginning in 1925 and was recognized as one of only a handful of African American boarding schools in the country. The high school program ceased operation in 1964, and the grade school program ended in 1967. The building was demolished shortly afterwards as part of anticipated land clearance for the Interstate 43 freeway.

At various times between 1911 and the 1960s, St. Benedict’s also owned a total of ten houses along N. 9th and N. 10th Streets. These houses initially were used for classrooms and social services prior to the 1920s. After the Capuchins purchased the school building at the northwest corner of 10th and State in 1925, classroom instruction for the boarding school moved into the school building. Similarly, after the construction of the church in 1924, most social services were based in the parish hall. Of the ten houses, only three remain extant, and these have been significantly altered and their interiors are not believed to reflect their historic uses during the period of significance. These houses are physically separated from the contributing church building by a large paved parking lot. Furthermore, the construction dates of these three houses predate the period of significance during which St. Benedict’s achieved its significance for its African American boarding school and hospital. The three houses therefore are not included in this nomination.

Since the church historically was the heart of operations at St. Benedict, it is considered the best extant resource associated with St. Benedict’s boarding school and social services and is being nominated as such.

END OF DESCRIPTION, DO NOT DELETE

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☒ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance

ETHNIC HERITAGE/BLACK
SOCIAL HISTORY

Significant Person

n/a

Period of Significance

1924-1970

Cultural Affiliation

n/a

Significant Dates

1924; 1925; 1931; 1947; 1967

Architect/Builder

Erhard Brielmeier and Sons, architect

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is locally significant under National Register *Criterion A* for its association with the history of African Americans in Milwaukee. Established in 1908, St. Benedict the Moor worked to promote the welfare of the Black community through social service programs, medical care, and education. St Benedict the Moor is recognized as one of three primary historic African American congregations in Milwaukee; and of the three, St. Benedict Church is the oldest surviving historic structure that was built to house a Black congregation. Because of its association with the history and welfare of Milwaukee's African American community, St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is considered eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under *Criterion A* in the areas of Black Ethnic Heritage and Social History.

The significance of St. Benedict the Moor to Milwaukee's African American community is well-documented in scholarly works including *The Making of Milwaukee* by John Gurda, generally considered the standard history of Milwaukee; and *Black Milwaukee; The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* by Joe William Trotter, Jr., acknowledged as a seminal work on the history of Milwaukee's African American community. St. Benedict has also been the subject of dissertations, studies on Catholicism, and journal articles; and its social significance is

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regularly included in descriptions of the church in architectural studies and guidebooks.⁹ St. Benedict the Moor Church was granted local historic designation by the Milwaukee Common Council in 1998 at the urging of the school's alumni, further underscoring its social and historical significance to the city.

Period of Significance and Justification

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is eligible for listing in the National Register under *Criterion A* for its association with the history of Milwaukee's African American community. The period of significance is 1924, the year the building was constructed, to 1970, the year that St. Benedict began its free meal program, the first of its kind in Milwaukee and the most recent major social service program instituted at St. Benedict. The period of significance also encompasses significant dates of events that add to the significance of St. Benedict's association with the Black community: 1925, the year the boarding school program relocated to its long-time home at the corner of State and 10th; 1931, the year St. Benedict constructed its hospital to provide medical care to the community; 1947, the year the hospital was expanded; and 1967, the year the school building was demolished.¹⁰

Criteria Consideration

Under Criteria Consideration A, St. Benedict church is owned by a religious organization and is used for religious ceremonies. The property derives its primary significance from historical importance relating to a distinct racial group.

⁹ The following list represents the major scholarly works that discuss the significance of St. Benedict the Moor within the context of Milwaukee's Black community: Mary Ellen Young and Wayne Attie, *Places of Worship – Milwaukee* (citywide survey) (Milwaukee: Past-Futures, 1977); Carlen Hatala and Robin Wenger, *Central Business District Historic Resources Survey*, (Milwaukee: City of Milwaukee Department of City Development, 1986); Avella, Steven M., ed., *Milwaukee Catholicism: Essays on Church and Community*, (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus, 1991); Steven M. Avella, "African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee: St. Benedict the Moor Church and School," *Milwaukee History*, vol. 17, nos. 3 & 4, Autumn-Winter 1994; Paul Jakubovich and Carlen Hatala, *City of Steeples* (Milwaukee: City of Milwaukee Department of City Development, 1996); Kevin D. Smith, "In God We Trust: Religion, the Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999; Steven Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958*, (Marquette University Press, 2002); John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, third ed., (Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2006); Joe William, Jr. Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, second ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); John Vietoris, "A Golden Opportunity for Reaping a Harvest of Souls: A History of Ministry to African American Catholics in Milwaukee," Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 2009; Andrew Hope, *Architecture of Faith* (2017 website) <http://architectureoffaithmilwaukee.info>; Justin Miller, *Milwaukee Houses of Worship, 1920-1980* (architectural and historical intensive survey) (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for City of Milwaukee, 2023).

¹⁰ St. Benedict's school eventually included grade school and high school programs. It operated out of the former Marquette Academy building at W. State St. and N. 10th St. beginning in 1925, when St. Benedict purchased the building. The school closed in the early 1960s and the building was demolished in 1967. Saint Anthony Hospital was built by, and associated with, St. Benedict the Moor until its closure in the 1980s. Saint Anthony Hospital was individually listed in the National Register in 2017.

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Narrative Statement of Significance

The following section includes a history of St. Benedict the Moor and its outreach programs; a brief history of the African American community in Milwaukee; and a discussion of St. Benedict's significance under National Register *Criterion A*.

History of St. Benedict the Moor

The congregation of St. Benedict the Moor was established in the early 20th century by an African American Catholic lay person. The Capuchin Friars took over the administrative and financial responsibilities for the congregation several years later. Under the guidance of several charismatic pastors, St. Benedict the Moor established social welfare programs for its Black congregation and surrounding community, including Milwaukee's first integrated private hospital and one of the most significant African American boarding schools in the Midwest.

The founding of St. Benedict the Moor was inspired by the African American Catholic Congress movement, a series of five meetings of Black Catholics organized between 1889 and 1894 by Daniel Rudd, editor of the *American Catholic Tribune*, a newspaper published by and for African Americans Catholics. The African American Catholic Congress movement believed that the Catholic Church had the ability to end racial discrimination, segregation, and prejudice through the self-help and racial pride advocated for by Booker T. Washington. The first Congress, held in Washington, D.C. in 1889, was attended by African Americans from around the country, including Lincoln Valle, assistant editor of the St. Louis *Advance*.¹¹

In August of 1908, Lincoln Valle and his wife Julia came to Milwaukee from Chicago with the specific intention of converting members of Milwaukee's African American community to the Roman Catholic faith. The Valles established a mission that laid the groundwork for a stable and long-lasting ministry to Milwaukee's Black community. They were supported by Archbishop Sebastian Messmer, who helped the Valles secure a meeting place in the parish hall of Old St. Mary's Church at 844 N. Broadway. As part of his efforts, Lincoln Valle also established a short-lived newspaper, *The Catholic Truth*.

Old St. Mary's was not conveniently located to the core of Milwaukee's Black neighborhood, however. In 1908, the mission moved to a rented storefront in the 900 block of North 4th St. The following May, the Valles relocated the mission again to another rented building at 530 W. State St., and in June 1909, the site was dedicated to St. Benedict the Moor, a Black Franciscan Father who lived in Sicily in the sixteenth century. Three months later, Valle recruited the services of the School Sisters of Notre Dame to teach Sunday catechism classes to the mission's Black children.¹²

¹¹ John Victoris, "A Golden Opportunity for Reaping a Harvest of Souls: A History of the Ministry to African American Catholics in Milwaukee, 1908-1963," Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 2009, p. 86-87.

¹² Victoris, 118-121; Steven Avella, ed., *Milwaukee Catholicism: Essays on Church and Community*, (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus, 1991), p. 160; "Historic Preservation Study Report: St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church" [hereafter HPSR], City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission, Fall 1997, p. 2-3.

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The fledgling congregation continued to grow, and priests from nearby churches offered part-time or irregular service. Lincoln Valle recognized that a full-time priest would provide stability and regularity for the growing mission. Valle wrote to the head of the Capuchin order, who had supplied a part-time priest, and thanked the Capuchins for their financial and personnel support before hinting that “I am in hopes that...the Archbishop...will give us some priest to help keep the people we have gathered.”¹³

1911: Capuchin Leadership

In 1911, Archbishop Messmer formally invited the Capuchin Friars to take over the mission. This was partially a diplomatic tactic: there was a shortage of diocesan priests due to the large number of new immigrant parishes; and there was racist antipathy towards the St. Benedict mission among some white Milwaukeeans, even to the point that the city mayor asked the archbishop to shut down the mission. Messmer reasoned that a religious order like the Capuchins was less likely to be influenced by local politics. In addition, running the mission would be costly, and religious orders had the financial resources and potential to fundraise in many places, as opposed to dioceses, which were limited to fundraising within their own geographical borders.¹⁴

The Capuchins agreed to assume financial and staffing responsibility for St. Benedict. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee transferred the property deeds for the mission to the Capuchins (with a reverter clause that if the order relinquished the mission, the land would again become property of the Archdiocese). However, despite the transfer of ownership, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee still retained decision-making authority over St. Benedict due to Roman Catholic Canon Law – an issue that would come into play decades later.¹⁵

The Capuchins explored several new sites for the mission and eventually purchased a house at 1041 N. 9th St. in November 1911 and remodeled it for use as a chapel. The next year, the mission purchased an existing house to serve as a parish hall. The mission also purchased another nearby house and remodeled it to serve as a free day school led by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who had been teaching Sunday School classes at the mission. The new day school opened in September 1912 with nine African American pupils.¹⁶

Lincoln and Julia Valle still had been actively involved with the mission they founded, but several factors changed when the Capuchins took over responsibility for St. Benedict. The Valles, as lay people, gave up any ministry or decision-making roles to the Capuchin friars. The Valles had continued to live above the chapel and Lincoln received a monthly salary to do janitorial work; but in reality, since the Valles were onsite and the Capuchins lived several blocks away, the Valles’ responsibilities were far more than merely janitorial duties – although their roles and responsibilities never appear to have been clearly defined by the Capuchins. Additionally, congregation members complained about Julia Valle’s “domineering and

¹³ Valle to Wilmer, September 8, 1910, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 1, “Hosp as S. Benedictum, 1910-1926,” ACF, quoted in Vietoris, 124.

¹⁴ Vietoris, 125, 99.

¹⁵ Vietoris, 126; HPSR, 3.

¹⁶ Avella, *Milwaukee Catholicism*, 160; Vietoris, 129-130.

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interfering behavior” and Lincoln Valle faced allegations of misappropriation of mission funds. The Valles left Milwaukee – and St. Benedict’s – in June 1914.¹⁷

Fr. Eckert and Social Welfare Programs at St. Benedict

Several months earlier, in 1913, Fr. Stephen John Eckert had been appointed as St. Benedict’s first full-time pastor. Eckert had been born in Ontario, Canada, in 1869. He studied at St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee and initially worked in Philadelphia and then was assigned back to Milwaukee. Eckert was known for his deep devotion both to his congregation and the larger African American community. Eckert increased the St. Benedict congregation from 84 members in 1913 to over 400 by 1919, and his “boundless energy...his tremendous rapport with people, and his remarkable public relations skills” helped cement St. Benedict’s role in the Catholic outreach to Milwaukee’s African American community.¹⁸

Almost immediately after receiving his new assignment at St. Benedict, Eckert set about establishing social programs to address the needs of congregation members and the neighborhood community. In 1913, St. Benedict set up a daycare to assist working mothers. A parish nurse arrived in 1915, followed by a Club Room, which offered recreation activities for women and girls. Laura Duncan, a congregation member, ran an employment service for women. And in 1919, St. Benedict established a settlement house that provided safe lodgings for women.¹⁹

Under the direction of Fr. Eckert, St. Benedict also continued to expand its school. Eckert built up enrollment by going door to door and inviting Black parents to send their children to the free mission school. The school also began accepting boarding students in 1913 in response to homeless children and the difficulties faced by poor, single-parent African American households.²⁰ St. Benedict’s is considered to be the first co-educational parochial boarding school in the Midwest, a fact made even more remarkable in that its pupils were exclusively African American.²¹

By 1914, there were 36 boarding students, and St. Benedict’s School attracted regional attention when its students participated in the National Half Century Exposition and Lincoln Jubilee in Chicago in August 1914.²² Within several years, and likely because of its exposure in Chicago, the school had gained a reputation as a private boarding school for African American children and the only school of its kind in the North. There was a yearly waiting list for the school. Most of the enrolled boarders came from Milwaukee and Chicago but there were students from Minnesota, Michigan, South Dakota, Arkansas, and even California. By 1919, the school had 140 students; 92 were boarders.²³

¹⁷ Vietoris, 134-136.

¹⁸ Avella, *Milwaukee Catholicism*, 160-161; Vietoris, 140-141.

¹⁹ Vietoris, 152-153.

²⁰ Vietoris, 153; HPSR, 3.

²¹ HPSR, 3.

²² Vietoris, 328. The National Half Century Exposition and Lincoln Jubilee commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the emancipation of enslaved African Americans and celebrated Black progress since then.

²³ Avella, *Milwaukee Catholicism*, 160-161; Vietoris, 328, 153-154.

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Because of the school's popularity, Fr. Eckert relocated the boarding school to a rural location outside Racine, Wisconsin, in 1920. He hoped that "the fresh air and the agricultural regimen of the school would be more conducive to better health and solid character formation." However, Eckert had miscalculated the appeal of the rural site. Many Black families had moved to cities to escape from farms in the first place and did not want to send their children away. In addition, the students who did attend the relocated school did not adapt well and many parents withdrew their support. In 1921, Eckert moved the school back to Milwaukee.²⁴ Fr. Stephen Eckert died in 1923, likely as result of pneumonia brought on by overwork, and was succeeded by Fr. Philip Steffes, who would oversee St. Benedict's until his own death in the early 1950s.²⁵

Steffes struggled with the problem of providing for the growing Black congregation and increasing number of students on the slim finances of its congregation. By this time, the congregation had nearly outgrown its collection of repurposed buildings. Archbishop Messmer initially recommended that St. Benedict relocate to a different site on 4th and Cherry, which had been left vacant when the previous congregation built a new church in the Sherman Park neighborhood. When that building proved too derelict, Messmer recommended that St. Benedict relocate to the northern suburbs outside of the city, far from where the majority of its Black congregation lived. The Capuchin leaders immediately dismissed the option, recalling the disastrous attempt to relocate the school to a rural location a few years earlier.²⁶

St. Benedict the Moor: The Present Church

In 1922, St. Benedict resolved to stay on its current site and build a new chapel (with a hospice and school to follow as finances allowed). The Capuchins purchased several additional lots at the northeast corner of State and 10th and commissioned designs for the chapel from the Milwaukee architectural firm of E. Brielmaier & Sons. This expansion and a desire to build a new church triggered a major dispute with city officials. The City Land Commission was in the process of planning the new Civic Center, which would eventually contain the county jail, police department, courthouse, and offices. Fueled by racist concerns, they feared that "poor African Americans at the Mission" would detract from the parks and monumental public buildings of the Civic Center.²⁷

The Capuchins stood firm, however. Excavations for the new church began in June 1923, but two weeks later Archbishop Messmer informed the Capuchins that "authorities at City Hall (Mayor Hoan included) are very much opposed to your proposed building in your block" and that because Messmer "would not wish to be placed in antagonism to the City Hall and its Land Commission," he had secured the services of the city in helping the Capuchins sell their new site

²⁴ Avella, *Milwaukee Catholicism*, 161; HPSR, 3.

²⁵ Eckert was buried in the Capuchin plot at Calvary Cemetery in Milwaukee. In February 1948, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, Eckert's remains were transferred back to St. Benedict, where he was reinterred in concrete vault in the courtyard west of the church. In 2017, Eckert's remains were removed from the courtyard and relocated back to Calvary Cemetery. The statue that was installed in the courtyard in 1948 was also moved in 2017 to its current location in the terraced area at the front of the church.

²⁶ Avella, *Milwaukee Catholicism*, 162.

²⁷ Vietoris, 189; HSPR, 3.

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and that St. Benedict's would have to move elsewhere. Fr. Benno Aichinger, the Provincial of the Capuchins, responded with confusion and frustration, noting that the Archdiocese had been involved in the planning process and had given consent for the new project, which had already involved significant financial outlay. Aichinger also raised the question of whether the Archdiocese or the Capuchins had ultimate say over the property.²⁸

At the heart of the issue was Roman Catholic Canon Law, which stated that although the Capuchins owned the land, the Archdiocese retained decision-making authority. After consideration, Archbishop Messmer approved the canonical transfer of the mission to the Capuchins in 1923 (an administrative action that required approval from the Pope). Messmer's decision can be interpreted in several ways. Transferring canonical ownership to the Capuchins seemed only fair, given how much the order had already invested into the new chapel construction project. It also allowed the Archdiocese to wash their hands of financial or political involvement. Historian John Vietoris, FSC, in his detailed study of the history of St. Benedict the Moor, concluded that "The whole episode suggested that Messmer was willing to acquiesce to the racist motives of city officials in order to prevent contrary public sentiment and less than harmonious relations with City Hall."²⁹

After the issue of ownership was resolved, construction resumed on the chapel. As detailed in the Historic Preservation Study Report for St. Benedict prepared by Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission staff:

That same summer, Ernest G. Miller, president of Miller Brewing Company, fortuitously stopped at St. Benedict's rectory after noticing that construction had begun on a building near his brewery. When he found out that the money had not yet been raised for the new chapel, he pledged his financial support to build it, a pledge that would ultimately total over \$63,000. The new Chapel, of Lombard Romanesque design, was built facing West State Street and was dedicated on March 2, 1924. Later that year Miller contributed \$100,000 toward the purchase of the vacated Marquette University High School and grounds located a block away at the northwest corner of North 10th and West State Streets. St. Benedict's constructed an addition to the old Marquette building and used it for classrooms, a student dining area, and as living quarters for the Dominican nuns. The school opened in its new building in September of 1925 with 185 students. Mr. Miller died shortly afterwards, bequeathing \$200,000 to the congregation.

The Capuchins also turned their attention to health care and built a 42-bed hospital costing \$98,190 on North 10th Street next to the church. It was designed by the architectural firm of E. Brielmaier & Sons and was dedicated on May 10, 1931 under the patronage of St. Anthony of Padua. The Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception were retained to staff the health care facility. The

²⁸ Vietoris, 192-197.

²⁹ Vietoris, 198.

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building was enlarged to the south in 1945, more than doubling the building's size, and occupying the site where St. Benedict's rectory had once stood.

The purchase of the former Marquette Academy provided ample room for expansion. By the early 1930s the boarding school was averaging 220 to 260 students per year. A high school program was soon added to the existing grade school. The boarding school's reputation grew and its academic and extra-curricular programs attracted students from across the country. One student was the future mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington, who spent a year at St. Benedict's. Other students included Milwaukee Superintendent of Schools Howard Fuller and musician Lionel Hampton. Enrollment at the high school declined in the early 1950s, but had stabilized at something over 70 students by the late 1950s.³⁰

St. Benedict began to experience significant changes in the 1960s. The high school was forced to close in 1964 when the site was acquired as part of the new freeway corridor. The Capuchins sold the hospital to an independent nonprofit group in 1966. It was initially used as emergency care and drug and alcohol treatment. St. Anthony Hospital was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2017 (NR ref. #100001724) and has been repurposed into mixed use residential and medical space.³¹

St. Benedict's grade school closed in 1967, marking the end of an era. Much of the original African American congregation of St. Benedict's had dispersed to other Catholic parishes in Milwaukee as urban renewal and freeway construction destroyed the historic heart of the Black community. As noted by historian John Vietoris, FSC, "The eventual fate of St. Benedict School was similar to other Catholic African American boarding schools. While they had performed exemplary service in a racially-segregated society, changing social and racial conditions in the 1960s with its accompanying drive for racially-integrated education meant that they had served their purpose and their time had now passed."³²

By the late 1960s, church membership had dwindled significantly it appeared that St. Benedict's would shut down. However, the Capuchins began another social service in 1970: a meal program for the poor and homeless. The Loaves and Fishes program grew out of a communal meal hosted by Michael and Nettie Cullen in their home in 1966. After Michael, an Irish immigrant, was jailed in 1970 for burning draft records, St. Benedict the Moor took over the meal program, moved its location to the parish hall, and expanded the to accommodate larger numbers of people. The Loaves and Fishes program is considered the first free meal program in Milwaukee, and it eventually inspired five other similar programs in other Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran church congregations, as well as the Hunger Task Force, a nonprofit initially established in 1974 to provide free breakfast to children in Milwaukee Public Schools.³³ By 1985, St. Benedict was serving meals to between 500 and 600 people every night, largely as a result of increased need due to federal cuts to government assistance programs. The Community Meal, as it is known

³⁰ Avella, *Milwaukee Catholicism*, 162.

³¹ HPSR, 4.

³² Vietoris, 380.

³³ "More Children Joining Lines for Free Food," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Oct. 14, 1985, part 1, p. 1; Barbara McCann, "Meal Sites Handle Ever-Changing, Ever-Growing Problem," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 7, 1984, p. 7C.

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now, continues to the present day and offers free meals and medical checkups to people experiencing poverty.

In the early 1990s, St. Benedict's congregation began to grow again. By the late 1990s, the congregation was at nearly 200 members, most of them white. St. Benedict's remains deeply involved in social outreach, predominantly through its daily meal program and through prison ministry at the neighboring Milwaukee County Jail, illustrating its long commitment to providing social welfare programs to the community.³⁴

Criterion A: Ethnic Heritage and Social History

Milwaukee is the largest city in Wisconsin and is located on the southwest shore of Lake Michigan. The site of the present-day city is located on the traditional homelands of the Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee peoples.³⁵ White settlers began arriving in the area in the early nineteenth century, and in 1846 several early settlements merged to create the incorporated City of Milwaukee. In the nineteenth century, Milwaukee had three major cultural groups: Yankee settlers from New England; Irish immigrants escaping the Potato Famine; and German settlers, who were Milwaukee's largest ethnic group throughout much of its history. Other European immigrants joined these communities as well, and by 1890, 86% of all Milwaukeeans were foreign-born or first-generation children of immigrants.³⁶

In the nineteenth century, the population of Milwaukee was overwhelmingly white. In fact, by 1900, the city had a total population of 285,000 residents and fewer than 900 of these (roughly one-third of one percent) were Black. The African American community grew slightly during World War I, as war industries boomed and the government limited European immigration, and then expanded again in the 1920s as part of the broader story of the Great Migration that brought Black southerners to northern industrial cities. Neighborhood institutions were founded to support the African American community, including local chapters of the Urban League and the NAACP; the Black-owned Columbia Building and Loan Association (founded by Calvary congregation members Ardie and Wilbur Halyard); the Black-owned *Wisconsin Enterprise Blade* newspaper; and numerous small businesses. Religion also played a part in building the community and ranged from storefront churches to the "old three" established Black congregations: St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church (founded in 1869), Calvary Baptist Church (founded in 1895), and St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church (the subject of this nomination, established in 1908).³⁷

³⁴ HPSR, 4.

³⁵ Adapted from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee College of Letters and Sciences Indigenous Land Acknowledgement.

³⁶ John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 3rd ed. (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2008), 12-14, 24-25, 48-51, 60-61, 66-67, 71-73, 130, 183, 248-249.

³⁷ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 3-33, 31.

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A second wave of African American migration occurred after World War II, in what some scholars have termed Milwaukee's "late great migration."³⁸ By 1970, the Black community made up roughly 15% of the city's total population. The postwar increase in Milwaukee's African American population exacerbated already-entrenched patterns of housing segregation. Historically, most of the city's Black population had lived in the "inner core," a small area north of the central business district. Discriminatory housing practices such as redlining, restrictive covenants and blockbusting both created and maintained racial segregation that limited housing opportunities for African Americans. Housing stock within the inner core was generally of lower quality than in other parts of the city; and because housing discrimination kept Blacks confined to such a small area, by the 1960s the population density of the inner core was double that of the city average. And while local, state, and federal fair housing laws eventually banned outright racial discrimination in housing, other more subtle, race-neutral policies emerged that allowed financial lenders and real estate agents to reinforce patterns of hyper-segregation that persist in Milwaukee to the present day.³⁹ By the close of the twentieth century, racialized criminalization, employment bias, eventual unemployment, and poverty would also plague Milwaukee's Black community and dominate the city's public discourse.⁴⁰ Through the decades, however, Milwaukee's Black community has sustained a rich history of resistance to patterns and practices associated with racial inequality, bolstered by support from community, civic, and religious organizations like St. Benedict the Moor.

Criterion A Significance of St. Benedict the Moor

Churches have long been recognized as "the oldest and most stable Black institution" in Milwaukee, serving as a "focal point in the community providing spiritual strength and desperately needed social services."⁴¹ In 1910, around the time that the Capuchin Friars took over management of St. Benedict, there were 980 African Americans in Milwaukee – roughly 0.2% of the city's total population. While there were a few notable exceptions, the majority of Milwaukee's Black community worked in unskilled labor or low-paying service sector jobs where they faced competition with European immigrants. The Black community had "no political power and few resources" and faced increasing hostility, segregation, and erosion of civil rights.⁴² In response, Milwaukee's African American community formed its own social welfare agencies, lodges, and social clubs. However, most of these were short-lived and had extremely small membership, often less than twenty.⁴³

Within this context, St. Benedict the Moor is significant for its efforts to promote the welfare of Milwaukee's African American community through social welfare, medical care, and education.

³⁸ Paul Geib, "From Mississippi to Milwaukee: A Case Study of the Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970" *Journal of Negro History*, 83 (4) (1998): 229-48; and Paul Geib, "The Late Great Migration: A Case Study of Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1993).

³⁹ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 49-53; Niles Niemuth, "Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community: 1960-1980" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014), 12-17.

⁴⁰ Robert L. Smith, "African Americans," *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, accessed on June 19, 2025 from <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/african-americans/>.

⁴¹ Trotter, 31; Vietoris, 33.

⁴² Vietoris, 26; Trotter 24-27.

⁴³ Vietoris, 33.

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Social Services

The earliest outreach programs at St. Benedict the Moor focused on social services and reflect the growth of the congregation and Milwaukee's larger Black community. A sewing circle established around 1910 at St. Benedict by Julia Valles offered Black women an opportunity to sell their work for a profit without facing the racial discrimination that they might have encountered in a commercial retail store.⁴⁴ Recognizing that many of its congregation members were single parents who had to work during the day, the church opened a day nursery offering childcare in 1913. Shortly afterwards, St. Benedict also established a "Club Room" that offered recreation activities for African American women and girls.

Between 1910 and 1920, the Black population of Milwaukee more than doubled. In response, St. Benedict established an employment service that helped Black women obtain jobs. The Club Room also expanded to offer lodging and board for Black women and girls who were newly arrived in Milwaukee.⁴⁵ St. Benedict's social welfare programs helped bolster parish membership (which had grown from about fifty people in 1908 to approximately 150 families in 1935) and, more importantly, provided economic, professional, and social support for members of the African American community.⁴⁶

Beginning in the 1960s, St. Benedict began to offer new social services to reflect the changing demographics of its neighborhood. The parish hall began hosting meetings for civil rights groups and for support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. In 1970, St. Benedict established its Loaves and Fishes program, the first large-scale free meal program in Milwaukee. The program initially provided nightly meals for about 150 single men. By the mid-1980s, St. Benedict was feeding between 500 and 600 people every night.⁴⁷ Around the same time, St. Benedict also began hosting meetings of the first Milwaukee chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a support group that gained nationwide visibility as part of the gay rights movement. St. Benedict's free meal program continues to the present day; and its other social service programs, despite some being established after the period of significance for this nomination, add to the property's significance and reflect St. Benedict's long-held commitment to social welfare within its community.

Medical Care

⁴⁴ Vietoris, 134.

⁴⁵ Vietoris, 152-153.

⁴⁶ Vietoris, 120-121; 227. In 1935, the 149 Catholic families at St. Benedict the Moor represented the second largest denomination in the Black community, with 764 members, behind the Baptists (with 1,320 members) and ahead of the Methodists (596), Holiness (177), Spiritualists (98), Episcopalians (37), Seventh Day Adventists (32) and Lutherans (11). These figures come from a census undertaken by the Capuchins in 1935 who went door-to-door throughout the Black neighborhood. The religious census also recorded that 1,419 African Americans were not members of any religion. "Back to the Days of St. Paul." July 1935, The Provincial Files, Box 9, File 10, St. Benedict the Moor 1935-1937, cited in Vietoris, 227.

⁴⁷ "Capuchins Feed the Hungry," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 11, 1971, part 1, p. 17; Barbara McCann, "Meal Sites Handle Ever-Changing, Ever-Growing Problem," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 7, 1984, p. 7C.; Louise Blinkhorn, "Modern Crisis: Learning How to Cope When Your Child Says He's Gay," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 12, 1984, Life/Style section, p. 1.

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St. Benedict the Moor is also significantly associated with the history of Milwaukee's Black community because of its healthcare services. Historically, the African American community faced racial discrimination in health care in Milwaukee and nationwide. Milwaukee's Muirdale Sanitarium, a public hospital, adopted a policy in 1918 that segregated its Black and white tuberculosis patients. Most private hospitals refused service to Black patients, even during emergencies, leaving the overcrowded Milwaukee County Hospital as the only option for most African Americans.⁴⁸ In an attempt to provide better access to health care for its community, St. Benedict initially employed a parish nurse, Agnes Ryan, who tended to the medical needs of congregation members beginning in 1915.⁴⁹ This grew to an infirmary, and by the late 1920s, St. Benedict had secured funding for a purpose-built hospital.

St. Anthony Hospital was constructed just west of St. Benedict's church and was dedicated in 1931 as the first fully-integrated private hospital in the state.⁵⁰ The 31-bed hospital offered medical, surgical, and maternity facilities and was administered by the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. From the start, the hospital's mission was to offer care to all creeds and races at a time when racial discrimination limited medical care options for many African Americans.

The hospital was expanded three times, and by the 1960s the patient population was approximately thirty-five percent Black and sixty-five percent white. The hospital staff was integrated as well, offering African American doctors and nurses the opportunity to practice medicine at a time when that ability was limited elsewhere. This opportunity was illustrated directly in 1954, when Dr. John Maxwell, Sr., was elected Chief of Staff of St. Anthony Hospital, becoming the first Black chief of staff of any hospital in Wisconsin and among only a handful in the nation.⁵¹ The hospital eventually closed in the 1980s. During its more than fifty years in existence, the hospital embodied St. Benedict the Moor's goal of providing healthcare for Milwaukee's Black population. St. Anthony Hospital was individually listed in the National Register in 2017 (ref. #100001724) in the areas of Health/Medicine and Social History.

Education

In addition to its hospital and its social services programs, St. Benedict the Moor is significantly associated with the history of African Americans in Milwaukee through its school and education outreach. Religious instruction had been a vital part of St. Benedict since the founding of the mission in 1908, initially starting as Sunday catechism classes, and later expanding to a day school in 1912. Conversion to the Roman Catholic faith was only one goal. Many African Americans had migrated to Milwaukee from the rural south, and Catholic schools like St. Benedict were recognized for their ability to offer to these African Americans "the intellectual

⁴⁸ Trotter, 117-118.

⁴⁹ Vietoris, 152-153.

⁵⁰ Michael McQuillen, "Saint Anthony Hospital National Register of Historic Places Registration Form," Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service, 2017, (ref. #100001724), sec. 8, p. 1.

⁵¹ McQuillen, sec. 8, p. 1.

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skills and character traits that would enable them to cope with urban life in a white, northern society.”⁵²

In 1913, under the direction of Fr. Stephen Eckert, St. Benedict School began taking in homeless and destitute boarding students. The school gained regional attention, and by 1916 St. Benedict’s was recognized as the only coeducational African American boarding school in the North. There were 140 students with a year-long waiting list. Over half of the students were boarders who came from Milwaukee, Chicago, the Midwest, and even as far away as Arkansas and California.⁵³ St. Benedict’s boarding school program appealed as safe alternative for students whose parents often worked long hours or night shifts as cooks, porters on trains, office cleaners, or janitors. Fr. Eckert, the driving force behind St. Benedict School, admired Booker T. Washington and viewed the Tuskegee Institute as a model for education, believing that St. Benedict could produce an “upright, hard-working, and moral black populace that could end the rampant discrimination and racism against African Americans.”⁵⁴

In 1926, the boarding school expanded to include a two-year high school program offering commercial training (as opposed to a traditional college preparatory curriculum), and later expanded to a four-year high school program. The school continued to operate for several decades until declining parish membership, shifting demographics, and urban renewal led to the closure of the high school in 1964, the grade school in 1967, and the demolition of both buildings shortly afterwards.⁵⁵

During the fifty years of its existence, however, St. Benedict’s school was recognized as a significant school for African American students. St. Benedict had long been notable for organizing events that cultivated and reinforced a sense of ethnic and racial pride among its students. Prominent African Americans visited the mission. Marcus Garvey spoke to students in 1916. Students from St. Benedict met Bill “Bojangles” Robinson when he performed at the Riverside Theater; afterwards he spent time with the students explaining his career. In 1944, Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay spent a day with the students speaking about poetry and Catholicism.⁵⁶ St. Benedict’s also emphasized the study of Black history and historical figures. In the 1930s (decades before Black History Month was officially established) St. Benedict held assemblies commemorating the achievements of notable African American figures including Crispus Attucks, Marian Anderson, Ralph Metcalfe, and Benjamin Banneker.

In the early 20th century, St. Benedict was the only private school option in Milwaukee for Black students who faced racial discrimination and exclusion from other white Catholic and Lutheran parochial schools.⁵⁷ After World War II, the Milwaukee public school system practiced *de facto* segregation through a decades-old policy that required students to attend their closest

⁵² Steven M. Avella, “African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee: St. Benedict the Moor Church and School,” *Milwaukee History*, vol. 17. nos. 3 & 4, Autumn-Winter 1994, 70.

⁵³ Vietoris, 157-159.

⁵⁴ Vietoris, 216-217; Avella, “African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee,” 75.

⁵⁵ Avella, “African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee,” 83-84.

⁵⁶ Avella, “African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee,” 80-81.

⁵⁷ Vietoris, 111-113.

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neighborhood school. At the same time, most African American families had limited residential mobility due to racist policies like redlining and restrictive covenants, resulting in overcrowded (and often rundown) public schools in neighborhoods that were predominantly Black.⁵⁸ Many African American public school students were also subject to intact busing, a practice in which students and teachers from overcrowded Black schools met at the overcrowded school, boarded a bus and were shipped to a white school with a vacant classroom. Black students were not allowed to mingle with the white students, often being bussed back to the overcrowded neighborhood school for lunch and returning to the white school for the afternoon before being bussed home again at the end of day, resulting in significant loss of classroom time and social and behavioral challenges to the students.⁵⁹ In contrast, the stable environment and high educational standards of St. Benedict School offered a preferred alternative for parents who were willing to send their children to a private Catholic school.

St. Benedict School was also indirectly involved in the civil rights movement in Milwaukee. In the early 1960s, integration activists formed the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC) to fight the *de facto* segregation of the Milwaukee public school system. In 1964, MUSIC organized a series of boycotts of public schools. Several churches and community centers set up “freedom schools” as an alternative for students who participated in the boycotts.⁶⁰ Freedom schools were taught by teachers, clergy, and community members, and offered a curriculum that emphasized African American history and activism – subjects, incidentally, that St. Benedict already had been teaching for thirty years. At the first boycott in May 1964, nearly 11,000 Black and white students participated in the walkout. Archbishop William Cousins had instructed Milwaukee Catholics not to participate in the boycott. St. Benedict the Moor, along with four other Catholic parishes including St. Boniface (the home parish of civil rights leader Fr. James Groppi), openly defied the archbishop and publicly supported the boycott.⁶¹ St. Benedict also hosted a freedom school during the boycotts, further illustrating its longtime commitment to social justice causes.

African American Identity at St. Benedict

While the school focused on educating Black students, St. Benedict also fostered its congregation’s African American identity and racial pride in several ways, including through a

⁵⁸ The history of segregation in Milwaukee’s public schools, like many other cities, is complex and was only resolved through a desegregation lawsuit. *Amos et al. v. the Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*, filed on behalf of the parents of forty-one Black and white students by attorney and civil rights leader Lloyd Barbee in 1965, was settled in 1976 and resulted in an integration plan that has had mixed results in the long term. For general overviews of the Milwaukee Public Schools desegregation lawsuit, see James K. Nelsen, “Educational Segregation and Desegregation” in the Encyclopedia of Milwaukee (<https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/educational-segregation-and-desegregation/>) or the March on Milwaukee Civil Rights History Project (<https://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/>), both of which are digital humanities projects through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁹ Caroline Katie Goddard, “Lloyd A. Barbee and the Fight for Desegregation in the Milwaukee Public School System.” Master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1985, 89-90; James K. Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped Its Schools*, (Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society Press, 2015), 11, 35-36

⁶⁰ “Freedom Schools,” March on Milwaukee Civil Rights History Project, accessed on July 27, 2025 from <https://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/keyterms/freedom-schools/>.

⁶¹ “Catholic Pastors Told Not to Join in Boycott,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 15, 1965, p. 1.

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worship service known as a Storm Novena; the church's sculptural altarpiece; and the namesake of the building itself.

A novena is a traditional Catholic ritual that consists of nine days of prayer to a saint or the Blessed Virgin while seeking a favor. The "storm" novenas developed at St. Benedict evolved to include praying nine times a day with arms outstretched before the altar – the kind of "bodily participation and ecstatic behavior" more commonly seen in Protestant or Holiness Black churches.⁶² Priests and religious sisters encouraged Black children to "storm heaven" with their prayers, and students at St. Benedict attributed successes at the mission to the power of their prayers. (Historian Stephen Avella wryly observed that the ritual also was an important fundraising tool for possible benefactors, who were encouraged to donate to St. Benedict in exchange for a Storm Novena said by the children.)⁶³

In addition to the Storm Novena ritual, with its blend of Catholic piety and Protestant worship physicality, the physical environment of St. Benedict also attempted to instill a sense of pride in the African heritage of its congregation through its elaborate altarpiece. The altarpiece, installed during the construction of the church in 1924, is a dramatic, full-height assemblage of sculptural panels. Catholic altarpieces typically incorporate scenes or symbols that are specifically relevant to the congregation or the individual or concept to which the church is dedicated. St. Benedict's altarpiece is no exception. The high-relief sculptural panels depict various Biblical scenes and saints who traditionally came from North Africa or the Ancient Near East.

The main panel of the altarpiece depicts the Uganda Martyrs, a group of twenty-two Catholic converts who were killed between 1886 and 1887.⁶⁴ In 1920, four years before the construction of St. Benedict the Moor Church, the Uganda Martyrs had been declared "Blessed" by Pope Benedict XV, the first stage in the process towards Catholic sainthood. The martyrs were realistically depicted in the altarpiece with African garments and rosaries, and their strength, courage, religious zeal, conviction, and faith were intended to be an inspiring model and a source of racial pride to St. Benedict's African American congregation.

Perhaps the most visible outward sign of the congregation's Black identity was through the name of the church itself: St. Benedict the Moor. Roman Catholic congregations often choose the name of their churches or parish organizations based on specific attributes associated with saints or other holy figures. St. Benedict the Moor (1526-1589) was born in Sicily to enslaved African parents. Benedict became a member of a Franciscan religious community, eventually becoming the leader of his monastery. Benedict was declared a saint by the Catholic Church in 1807. As one of the best-known Black Catholic saints, St. Benedict the Moor is regarded as the "patron saint" of Black people and Black religious congregations. In choosing to name their church for

⁶² These worship practices are described in more detail in Avella, "African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee," 78-79; Vietoris, 82, 332-335.

⁶³ Avella, "African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee," 79.

⁶⁴ "Martyrs of Uganda," *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User Friendly Reference for Episcopalians*, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, eds., (New York: Church Publishing, 2000). In addition to the twenty-two Catholics, at least twenty-three Anglicans were killed as well.

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St. Benedict the Moor, the Capuchin Friars reminded people in Milwaukee's larger religious community of the racial identity of their congregation.

Significance Summary

The influence and impact of St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church on Milwaukee's Black community spread far beyond its physical buildings. The hospital improved medical outcomes and offered employment opportunities to Black medical professionals. The coeducational boarding school attracted African American students from around the country and nurtured strong, knowledgeable, and confident young men and women. The social service programs in the early days of the mission helped members of the Black community find economic and social support, and as community demographics and needs changed, St. Benedict developed other social outreach, most notably its daily free meal program. These social services, along with the educational and healthcare ministries, illustrate the significance of St. Benedict the Moor to the ethnic heritage and social history of Milwaukee's African American Community. As the best and most intact remaining building associated with the significant activities of the mission, St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is being nominated for listing in the National Register.

Comparative Analysis

There are four properties in Milwaukee that are listed in the National Register in the areas of Black Ethnic Heritage. St. Benedict retains equal integrity to all four NR-listed resources. In addition, three of the NR-listed resources are directly associated with the Civil Rights era, making St. Benedict the Moor distinctive because its significance also encompasses an earlier era of Milwaukee's African American community.

The **Lloyd A. Barbee House** (321 E. Meinecke Ave., NR ref. #100003940, NR-listed in 2019) was home to African American attorney Lloyd A. Barbee from 1966 to 1980. Barbee was Wisconsin's most prominent twentieth-century civil rights activist. He led a campaign to integrate Milwaukee's public schools, served 12 years in the Wisconsin State Assembly, taught at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and defended many victims of police harassment and those arrested during protest demonstrations.

Lloyd Barbee's successful efforts to integrate the schools combined direct-action protests and a long legal battle. In 1964, he formed the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC). MUSIC organized school boycotts and blocked school buses both to protest segregation and bring the public's attention to the issue. Later, some MUSIC members helped Barbee prepare an integration lawsuit filed in federal court. After 14 years of tireless work, Barbee secured a consent decree that integrated most of the Milwaukee school system.

Barbee's former residence is located 1.8 miles north of downtown Milwaukee in a neighborhood known historically as the Near North Side. The area was built up between 1870 and 1910. Middle-class African Americans began buying in this area in the 1930s and it was majority black when Barbee bought the house in 1966. Lloyd Barbee worked on the integration lawsuit in his

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home office and held MUSIC meetings in the living room. Activists from out of town, including comedian and activist Dick Gregory, slept in his guest bedroom. Little changed from its 1966-1980 appearance, the house is an important link to the fight for equal rights in Wisconsin and the most notable leader of that fight.⁶⁵ Since the time of its NRHP listing in 2019, the house has suffered a major fire and its current interior integrity is unknown.⁶⁶

The **16th Street Viaduct** (between W. Clybourn St. and W. Pierce St., NR ref. #100003908, NR-listed in 2019) is a 4,000-foot-long, steel girder, motor and pedestrian viaduct that serves as a testament to the struggle to overcome Milwaukee's racial divisions. Constructed in 1929 and consisting of 79 spans, it carries traffic over the Menomonee River Valley, a historic dividing line. In the 1960s, the vast majority of Milwaukee's African American population lived north of the viaduct. To the south were 300,000 white residents, many of Eastern European ancestry. Through the mid-1960s, discriminatory practices by landlords, real estate agents, and financial institutions had kept the south side all-white.

On the nights of August 28 and 29, 1967, the Youth Council (YC) of the Milwaukee Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People led marches across the bridge. About 200 demonstrators and their advisor, Father James Groppi, were headed to Kosciuszko Park in the heart of the south side to hold a rally for equal access to housing. They were greeted by thousands of suspicious whites, some shouting racial slurs and others bombarding them with rocks and bottles.

When the city's Common Council declined to enact an open housing ordinance, the YC kept up the protests for 200 consecutive days. A number of the later demonstrations crossed over the viaduct. The demonstrations forced city leaders to confront the issue of housing discrimination. On April 30, 1968, the Common Council passed a strong open housing ordinance.

Father Groppi and the YC were widely condemned in the 1960s. By 1988, though, attitudes had changed, and the Common Council renamed the viaduct the James A. Groppi Unity Bridge. Periodically updated to accommodate changing traffic demands, the viaduct serves as a reminder that human rights are rarely granted without a struggle.⁶⁷ Its integrity is primarily in the areas of location, feeling, and association. There have been major alterations to the appearance at street level since the period of significance.

The **Jones-Hill House** (2463 N. Palmer St., NR ref. #100004165, NR-listed in 2021) was originally built in 1906 for the twice-widowed tannery owner William Engelbert Conrad and his youngest son Clarence. The elder Conrad died in 1917 and the house passed on to his eldest child Anna Dietz; her family remained in the home until 1953. Following a short-term owner, the house was purchased in 1953 by Willie and B. Fostoria Jones, the first confirmed African American owners of the home. By the early 1950s, the Joneses had established or assisted in establishing a number of Black-owned businesses (including a jazz club, bowling alley and a

⁶⁵ "Lloyd A. Barbee House," Wisconsin Historic Preservation Database National Register of Historic Places.

⁶⁶ Information on current status of the Barbee House provided by Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission staff, August 2025.

⁶⁷ "16th Street Viaduct," Wisconsin Historic Preservation Database National Register of Historic Places.

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number of taverns) in or near W. Walnut Street, the heart of the African American neighborhood that had come to be known as Bronzeville.

Perhaps most notable among their concerns was the Hillcrest Hotel, the singular Milwaukee hotel listing in the Negro Travelers' Green Book in the 1950s and early 1960s. Although details remain scant, the House at 2463 North Palmer Street—or rather its basement, is confirmed to have functioned as a social and recreational outlet in the Black community from the mid-1950s to the late-1960s. With a separate and relatively discreet rear entrance, those “in the know,” could access the home’s lower level for libations at the bar, as well as engage in the leisure sport of gambling.

In 1967, the home was sold to Miss Eva Hill, with whom the Joneses had previously co-owned a boarding house on N. 4th Street. That home, known as the Casablanca Hotel, also included a basement bar and, in addition, a stage that was host to after-hours jazz musicians. Immediately following purchase of the North Palmer Street home, the basement bar was again host to a few after-hours parties; however, they ended within just a few years.⁶⁸

St. Matthew Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (2944 N. 9th St., NR ref. #100003909, NR-listed in 2019) was at the heart of the Milwaukee Civil Rights Movement from 1964 to 1967. Under the leadership of its pastor, Rev. B.S. Gregg, the church served as headquarters for the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC). MUSIC held its regular meetings at the church, and on three occasions the church welcomed freedom schools. The freedom schools were opened during three school boycotts organized by MUSIC. The freedom schools introduced students to black history and culture and taught nonviolent direct-action protest techniques. When its protests failed to move the school board, MUSIC pursued a federal lawsuit, winning its case in 1976.

The building on 9th Street was commissioned by Milwaukee’s First German Reformed Church; the St. Matthew congregation purchased the church in early 1958. The church’s architects, Cornelius Leenhouts and Hugh Guthrie, practiced in Milwaukee from 1900 to 1935, designing residences, apartments, commercial buildings, club headquarters, and churches.

The church has an auditorium-type sanctuary with floral stained glass windows and a large window depicting the 12-year Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem. In keeping with trends among Protestant congregations in the early 20th century, the church building on North 9th Street included classrooms, club rooms, a dining hall and kitchen, and a gymnasium. The presence of classrooms and a gymnasium allowed the church to accommodate meetings of MUSIC and other community-oriented groups as well as the freedom schools.

Nearly unchanged from its 1960s appearance, St. Matthew C.M.E. Church is one of the strongest tangible links to the most important civil rights period in the city’s history.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ “Jones-Hill House” Wisconsin Historic Preservation Database National Register of Historic Places.

⁶⁹ “St. Matthew Christian Methodist Episcopal Church” Wisconsin Historic Preservation Database National Register of Historic Places.

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Of the four NRHP-listed resources, St. Benedict the Moor church is most comparable to St. Matthew as a similar property type. St. Benedict retains equal integrity to St. Matthew. In addition, St. Benedict is also notable as being purpose-built for its African American congregation. St. Matthew's purchase of the older First German Reformed Church is more typically representative of the pattern followed by Milwaukee's Black religious congregations, which tended to either purchase older churches from existing congregations, or holding services in non-purpose-built worship spaces such as storefronts.⁷⁰ In contrast, St. Benedict was purpose-built as a church and has housed the same congregation since its construction in 1924. St. Benedict's continuous association with its physical building adds to its significance.

Similarly, St. Benedict the Moor can be compared to four other historical Black institutions in Milwaukee: two community organizations and two churches. None of these four resources are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The National **Urban League** was founded in 1910 with the purpose to improve the economic situation and social status of African Americans who lived in cities, to improve race relations in the United States, and to develop the strongest possible leadership among members of both races. The Milwaukee Urban League chapter was established in 1919 and focused on the orientation of new citizens to urban living, stabilization of the family unit, development of jobs, academic and vocational assistance, development of responsible community leadership and elimination of discrimination and segregation in employment and housing. The Urban League remains active to the present, and a large part of its work has been in the areas of vocational and guidance services, including job counseling, testing, and placement; and the development of new job opportunities for minority candidates.⁷¹

The Milwaukee branch of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** (NAACP) was organized with 80 members in 1915, six years after the establishment of the national office in New York. The NAACP is the country's oldest civil rights organization and focused on five major areas from 1920 to 1950: anti-lynching legislation, voter participation, employment, due process under the law, and education. The NAACP also remains active and today focuses on ensuring political, educational, social, and economic equality.⁷²

Both the Milwaukee NAACP and the Milwaukee Urban League are historically significant for their association with the history and welfare of Milwaukee's Black community. Unlike St. Benedict, however, both the NAACP and the Urban League have been located in a number of locations since their founding, including several buildings that are no longer extant. In comparison to these two organizations, St. Benedict can be said to have better integrity of association since the church has remained the single most visible representation of the outreach services that make St. Benedict the Moor significant.

⁷⁰ Miller, 10.

⁷¹ "Urban League Records," descriptive finding aid biography/history, Wisconsin Historical Society Library Archives.

⁷² "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Milwaukee Branch, Records, 1917-1989," descriptive finding aid biography/history, Wisconsin Historical Society Library Archives.

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St. Benedict the Moor is recognized as one of the three major historical African American religious congregations associated with Milwaukee's Black community, along with St. Mark AME Church and Calvary Baptist Church. Both of these congregations, like St. Benedict, remain active and vital in their communities. St. Benedict is the only one of the three which has remained in its historic purpose-built house of worship to the present.

St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1869 as the first and oldest historically Black religious congregation in Milwaukee. Since its founding, St. Mark's congregation has included prominent members of the African American community, and church members played a significant role in the Civil Rights movement in Milwaukee. In its early years, St. Mark AME met in several locations before building its own church in 1883 (the first purpose-built church constructed for an African American congregation anywhere in Wisconsin). As the congregation grew, St. Mark moved to two later locations before constructing its current building at 1616 W. Atkinson Avenue in 1969, the year of its centennial. None of the earlier buildings owned by or associated with St. Mark AME are extant.

Calvary Baptist Church was founded in 1895 and is Milwaukee's oldest Black Baptist congregation. Like St. Mark and St. Benedict the Moor, Calvary played an important role in providing community and social services to Milwaukee's early African American community, particularly during the period of the Great Migration. Calvary initially worshiped in several locations (all since demolished) before purchasing a former Lutheran church in 1922. Calvary remained at that location until 1970, when it built its current church at 2959 N. Teutonia Avenue.

In contrast to St. Mark and Calvary, St. Benedict the Moor is distinctive in that it was purpose-built for its African American congregation. None of St. Mark's earlier buildings are extant; and while the current building has its own significance for a later period, no resources exist at St. Mark that are associated the early history of the congregation and the initial growth of Milwaukee's Black community. Calvary's previous home is extant, and can be associated with that congregation's significant activities during the time it occupied the building. However, the fact that St. Benedict was purpose-built for its congregation and the associated social services adds to the overall significance of St. Benedict the Moor in a way that is not present at Calvary Baptist Church.

Concluding Significance Statement

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church was built in 1923 for an African American Catholic congregation. The existing church is the product of an outreach mission initially established by two Black Catholic lay people and later overseen by the Capuchin Friars. Throughout its history, St. Benedict worked to promote the welfare of the Black community through social service programs, medical care, and education. Its school program was recognized both as one of only a handful of coeducational African American boarding schools as well as for its curriculum, which instilled ethnic and racial pride in its students. St. Benedict's health care ministry led to the eventual construction of Saint Anthony Hospital, the first integrated hospital in the state. And social welfare programs have formed the core of St. Benedict's outreach since

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its founding, beginning with programs for African American women, employment assistance, and housing; and continuing in later decades with its Community Table, the first free meal program established in Milwaukee. Because of its association with the history and welfare of Milwaukee's African American community, St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is considered eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under *Criterion A* in the areas of Black Ethnic Heritage and Social History.

Land Acknowledgement (will be reviewed by the Office of the State Archaeologist)

This nomination recognizes the depth of human presence here, the ancestral homeland of American Indians for millennia. From as early as the seventeenth century, Euro-American exploration and settlement, military campaigns, and government programs, all had the effect of repeated displacement of Indians of many tribal affiliations. This continuous tribal movement resulted in Wisconsin being home to many tribes who originated from other parts of the country, generating a pattern of immigration, relocation, and formation of a new homeland. Some of these tribes remain in Wisconsin but others may not. We acknowledge that the property that is the subject of this nomination is located on land long occupied by American Indians.

Archaeological Potential (will be drafted and reviewed by the Office of the State Archaeologist)

Preservation Activities

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church was evaluated as potentially eligible for the NRHP during a thematic survey of Milwaukee's houses of worship conducted in 2023. Eligibility was re-affirmed prior to the writing of this nomination. As a partner with the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the National Park Service (NPS) participating in the Certified Local Government (CLG) program, the City of Milwaukee is required to maintain a system to survey and inventory historic properties. That entails regular surveys with updates every 20-25 years to identify properties that appear potentially eligible for the NRHP.

Acknowledgments

This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, or disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility as described above, or if you desire further information, please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20240.

The activity that is the subject of this Nomination has been financed entirely with Federal Funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, and administered by the

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Wisconsin Historical Society. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior or the Wisconsin Historical Society. Nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior or the Wisconsin Historical Society.

END OF STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE DO NOT DELETE

DRAFT

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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 # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☒ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: _____

Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory # and/or Archaeological Site Inventory #:

AHI #55952

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10. Geographical Data

Acres of Property: Less than one

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☒ NAD 1983

1. Zone:	<u>16N</u>	Easting:	<u>425045</u>	Northing:	<u>4765916</u>
2. Zone:	<u></u>	Easting:	<u></u>	Northing:	<u></u>
3. Zone:	<u></u>	Easting:	<u></u>	Northing:	<u></u>
4. Zone:	<u></u>	Easting:	<u></u>	Northing:	<u></u>

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church consists of approximately the east half of Lots 5, 6, and 7, Block 198 in the Subdivision of the North 30 acres of the West ½ of the Northwest ½ of Section 29, in Township 7 North, Range 22 East, in the City of Milwaukee, County of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin. The boundary is roughly L-shaped and can be described as follows:

Beginning at the southwest corner of the existing legal parcel, the boundary follows the lot line north for approximately 96 feet to the concrete base of the open arcaded walkway. The boundary then turns east and runs east along the edge of the concrete base to meet the west elevation of the church. The boundary then turns north and continues north along the west elevation of the church for approximately 43 feet to meet the existing parcel line dividing the church from the adjoining hospital building. The boundary then turns east and runs east along the existing parcel line for approximately 59 feet. The boundary then turns south and runs south for approximately 143 feet to meet the existing south parcel line. The boundary then turns west and runs west along the existing parcel line along the north edge of the Wisconsin Avenue sidewalk for approximately 81 feet to return to the point of origin.

Boundary Justification

The boundary was delineated to include the contributing building and object as well as the courtyard that was historically, and is currently, associated with the church. The boundary coincides with the legal parcel boundary on the south side and portions of the west and north sides. The boundary was drawn to exclude the extraneous area of the parking lot east of the church.

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The boundary was drawn to also exclude the wing connecting St. Benedict the Moor church to the NRHP-listed Saint Anthony Hospital. This wing is included within the boundary of the NRHP-listed hospital. As noted in the Saint Anthony Hospital NRHP nomination form, the interior spaces and functions of the wing were historically associated with the hospital, and the Saint Anthony Hospital NRHP boundary was delineated based on this fact as well as the clear distinction between the hospital addition and the church proper.

The boundary for the nominated St. Benedict the Moor church was also drawn to exclude a 1974 addition to the hospital that is connected to the north wall of the church. This addition is included within the boundary of the Saint Anthony Hospital NRHP listing. Although the addition is physically connected to the church, it was not historically associated with the church during the period of significance and is located on a separate legal parcel. For these reasons, the legal boundary that divides the church and the 1974 hospital addition was used to delineate the north historic boundary for St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church.

END OF GEOGRAPHIC DATA DO NOT DELETE

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11. Form Prepared By

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Additional Documentation

Figure Log

Figure 1. USGS map of St. Benedict the Moor Roman Church

Figure 2. Sketch map of nominated area

Figure 3. Sketch map of nominated area of St. Benedict the Moor church in relation to NRHP-listed Saint Anthony Hospital

Figure 4. Photo key

Figure 5. St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church, plan of lower level parish hall

Figure 6. St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church, plan of upper level church

Figure 7. St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church, elevation of south elevation

Figure 8. St. Benedict the Moor, undated historic photo of interior (pre-1966)

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church
Name of Property

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin
County and State

Figure 1. USGS map of St. Benedict the Moor Roman Church



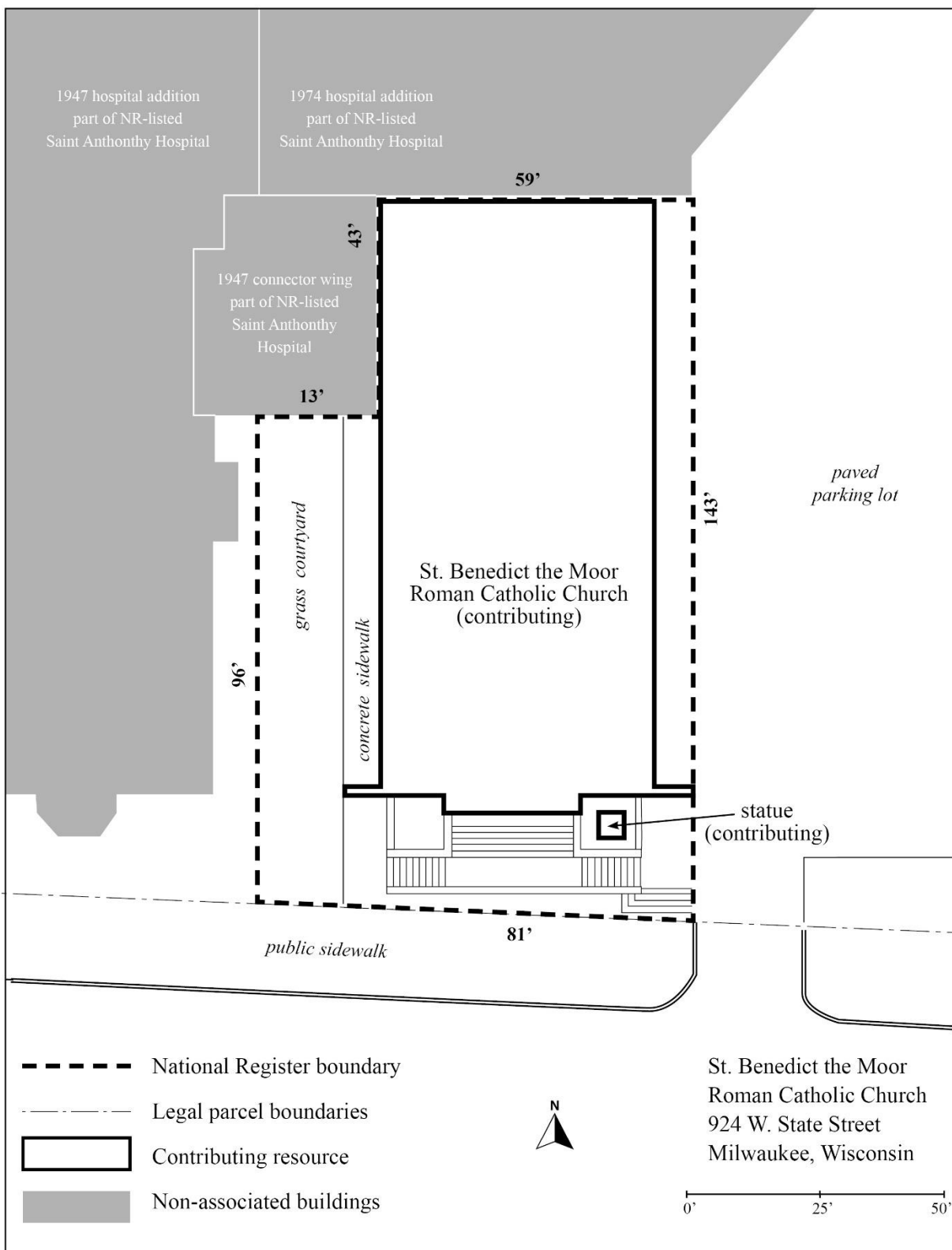
St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

Figure 2. Sketch map of nominated area



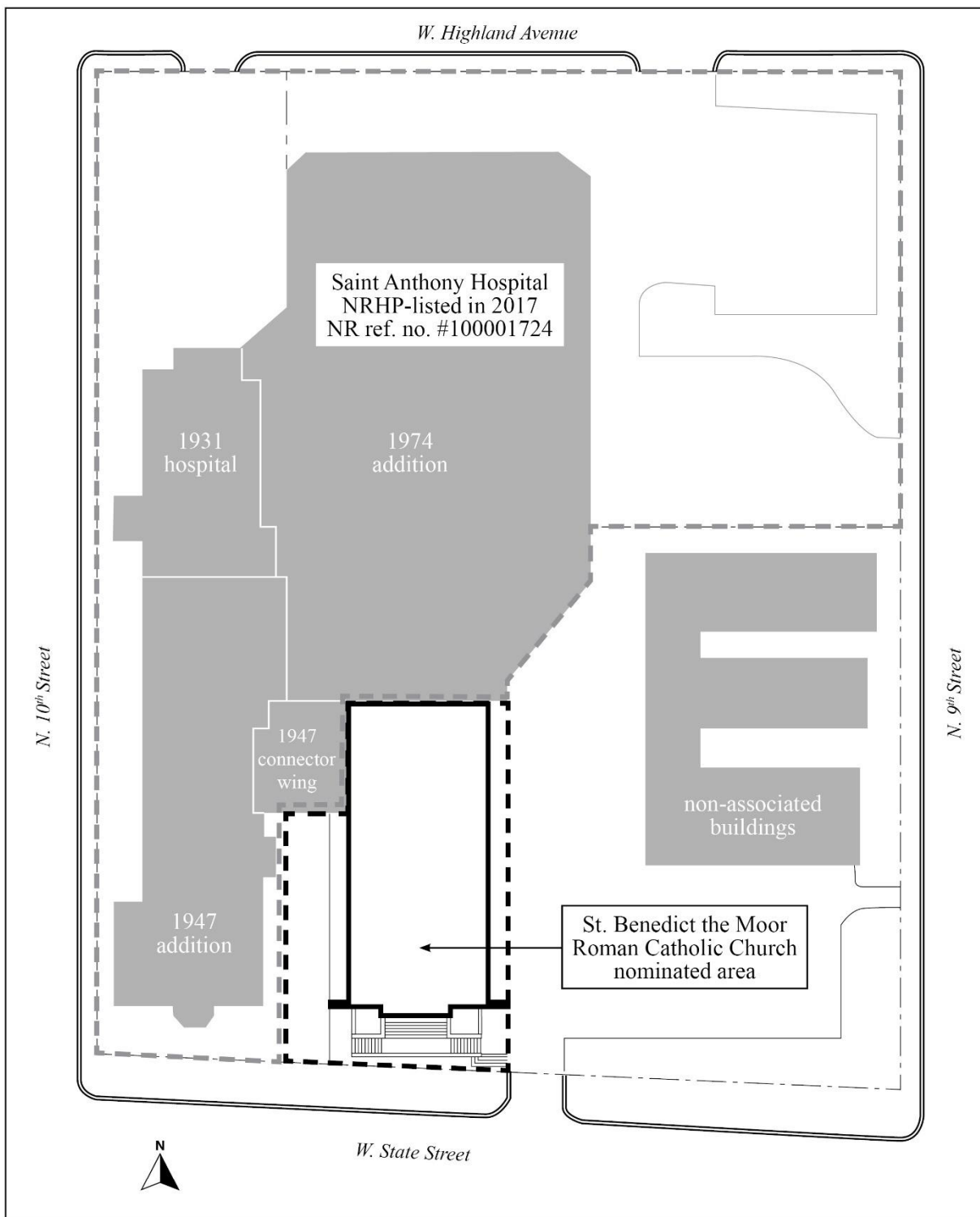
St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

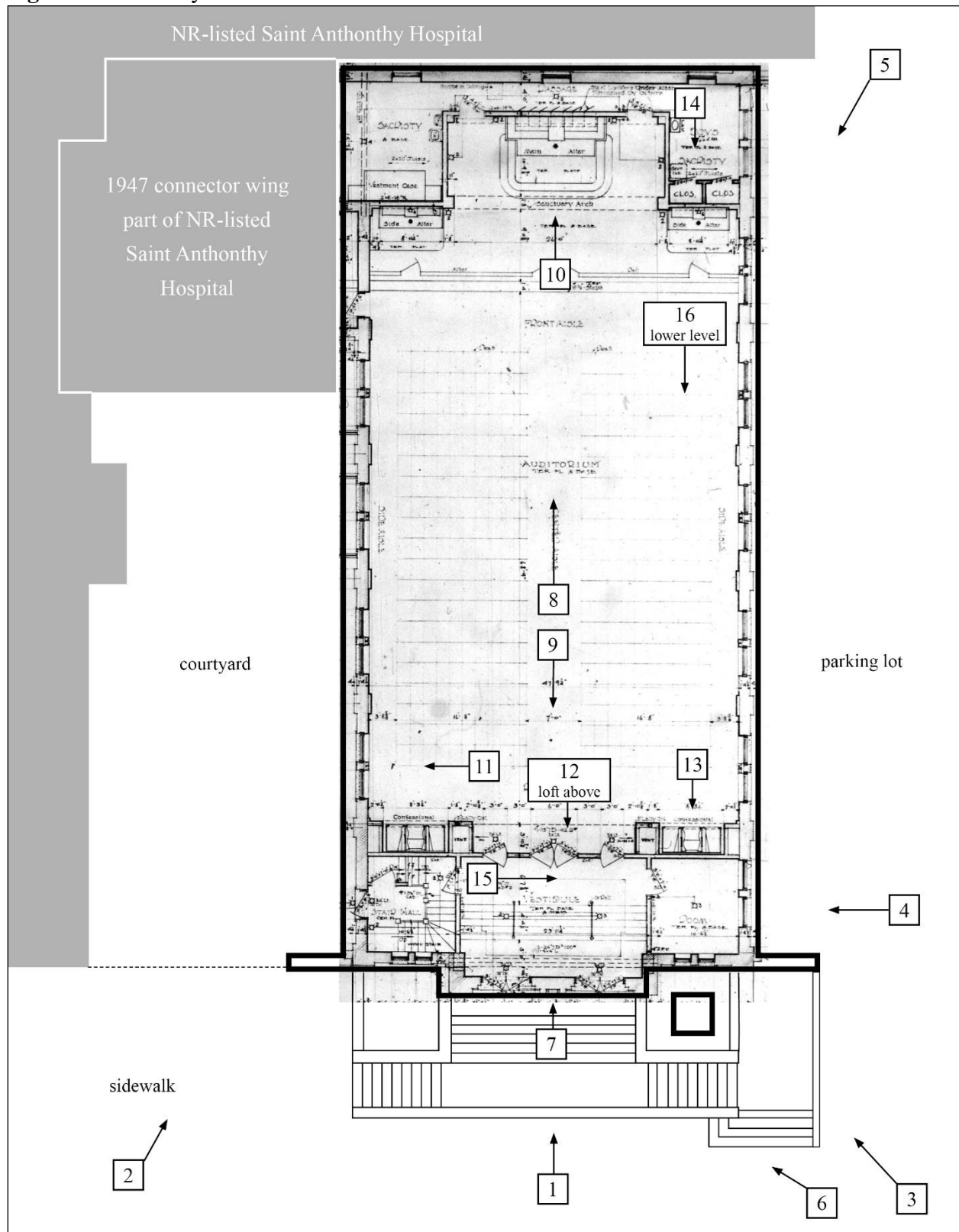
Figure 3. Sketch map of nominated area of St. Benedict the Moor church in relation to NRHP-listed Saint Anthony Hospital



St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin
County and State

Figure 4. Photo key



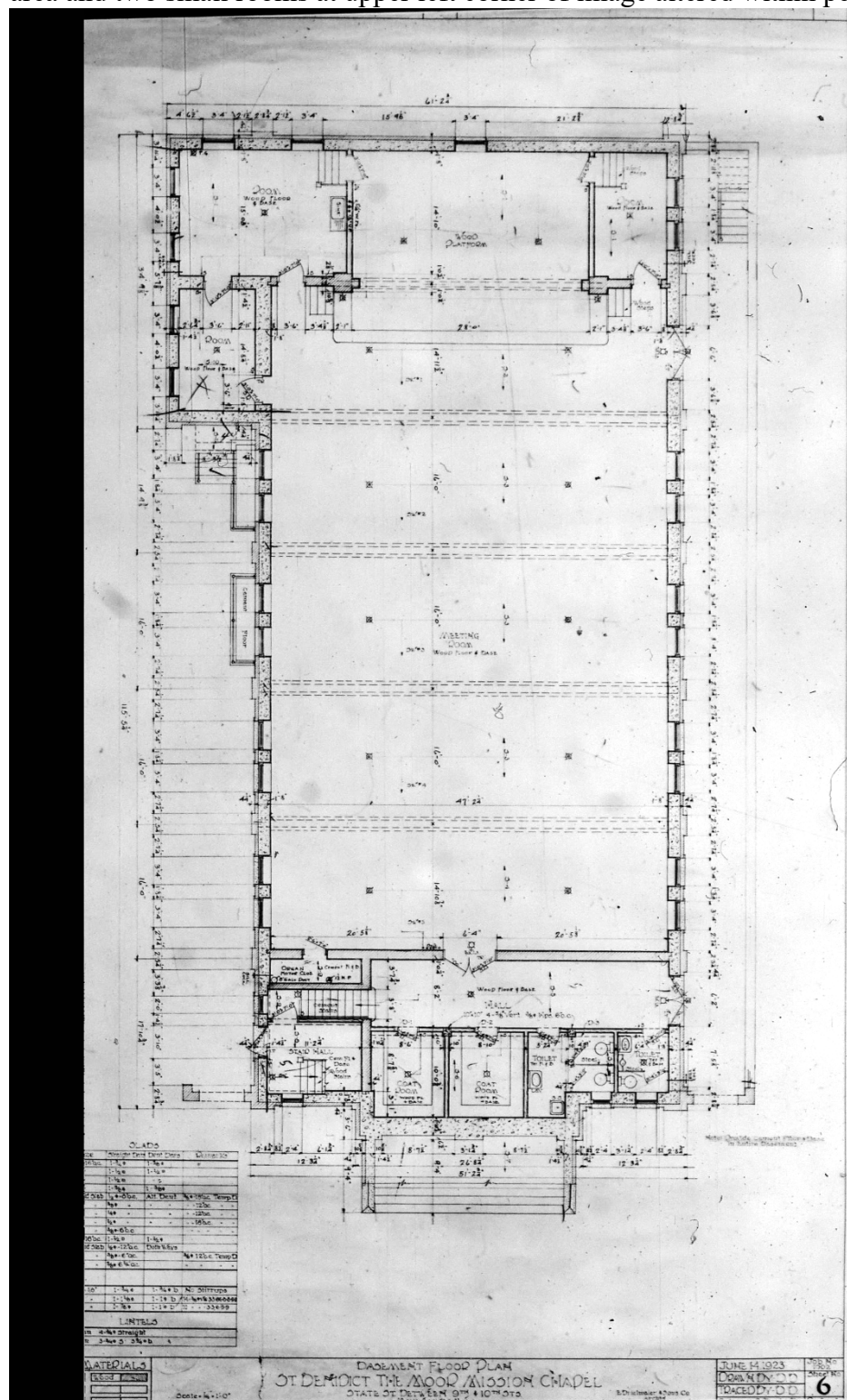
St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

Figure 5. St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church, plan of lower level parish hall. (Stage area and two small rooms at upper left corner of image altered within period of significance.)



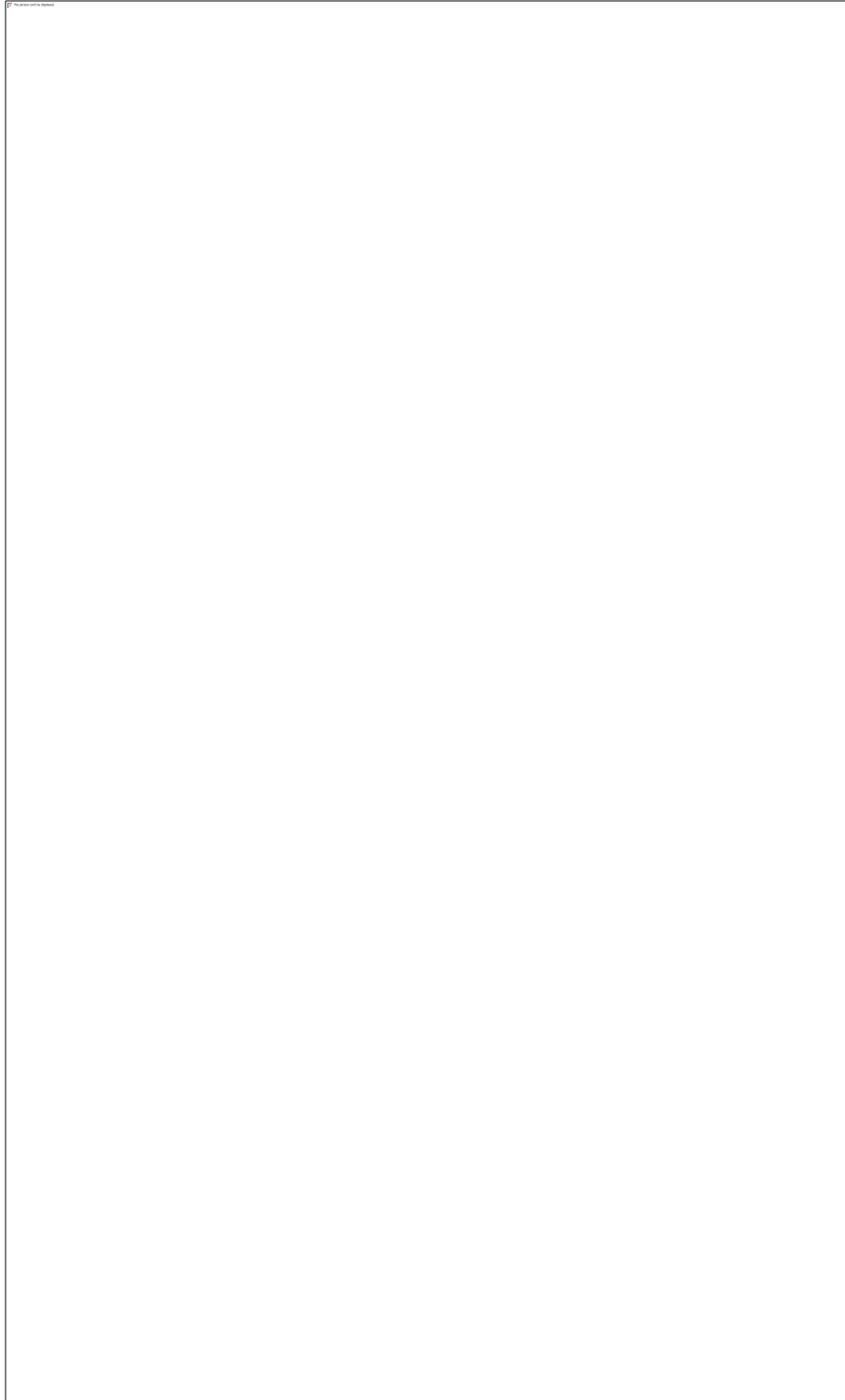
St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

Figure 6. St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church, plan of upper level church. (Sacristy and vestibule at upper left of image altered during period of significance.)



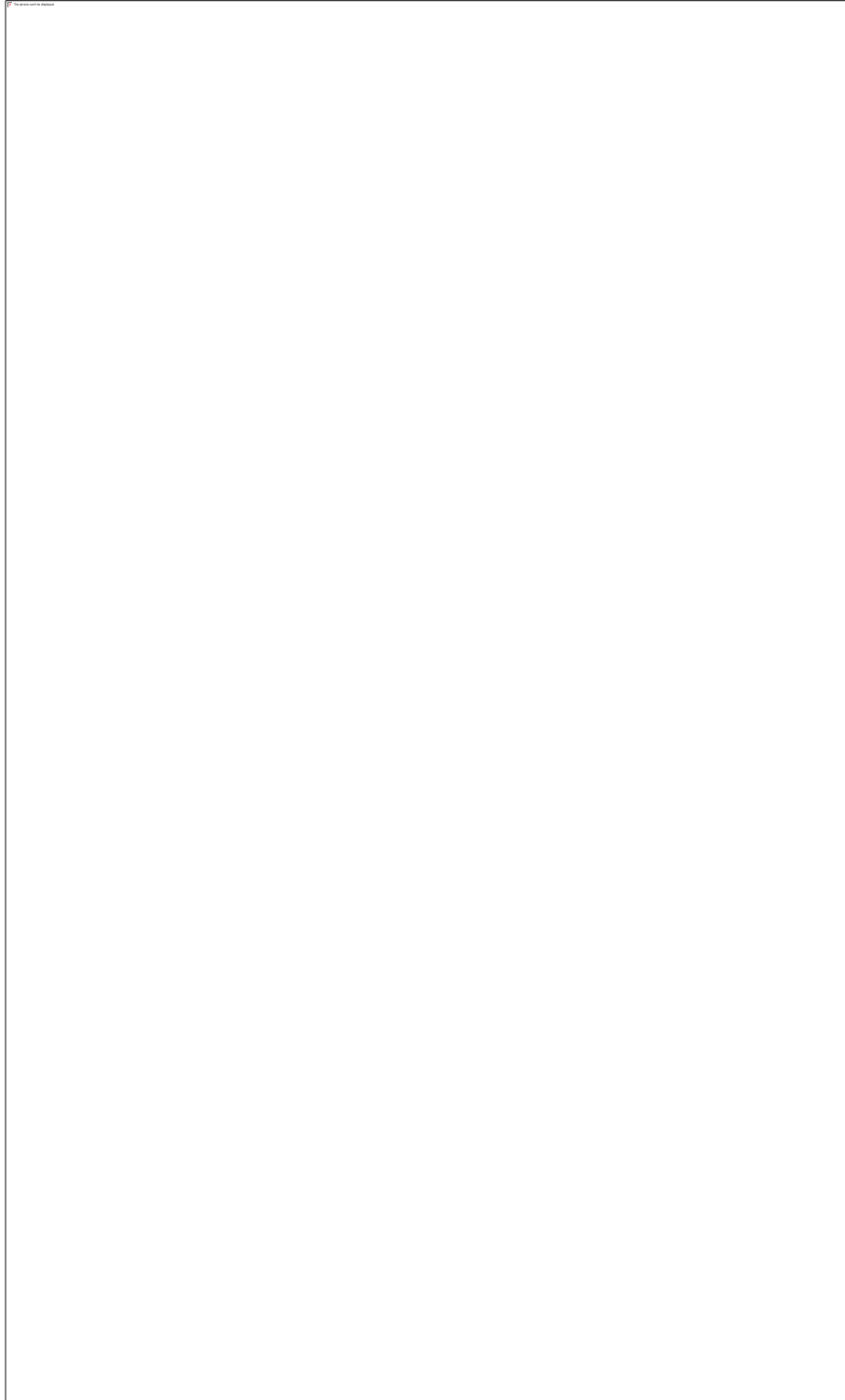
St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Name of Property

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Figure 7. St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church, elevation of south elevation (original plan; right gate and stairs not built as shown)



St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

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Figure 8. St. Benedict the Moor, undated historic photo of interior (side altars, altar rail, and lights removed around 1966, within period of significance)



END OF FIGURES SECTION DO NOT DELETE

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church
Name of Property

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin
County and State

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once in the photograph log. The photograph order must correspond with the photograph log.

Photo Log

Name of Property:	St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church		
City or Vicinity:	Milwaukee		
County:	Milwaukee County	State:	WI
Photographer:	Justin Miller, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Cultural Resource Management		
Date photographed:	July 17 and July 23, 2025		

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 16. South (primary) façade, looking north.
- 2 of 16. Southwest corner, looking northeast; non-associated hospital wing visible at rear of courtyard.
- 3 of 16. Southeast corner, looking northwest; non-associated Saint Anthony Hospital visible to left of church.
- 4 of 16. East elevation, looking west.
- 5 of 16. East and north (rear) elevations, looking southwest.
- 6 of 16. South (primary) façade, detail of monumental stair and contributing statue, looking northwest.
- 7 of 16. South (primary) façade, detail of entry portal statuette, evangelist tiles, and address plate.
- 8 of 16. Church interior, looking north towards sanctuary.
- 9 of 16. Church interior, looking south towards organ loft and entry vestibule.
- 10 of 16. Church interior, detail of sanctuary with altarpiece.
- 11 of 16. Church interior, representative detail of stained glass windows in nave.
- 12 of 16. Church interior, detail of rose window in organ loft.
- 13 of 16. Church interior, detail of confessional booth.
- 14 of 16. Church interior, detail of northeast sacristy.
- 15 of 16. Church interior, entry vestibule, looking east; exterior doors at right.
- 16 of 16. Parish hall interior, looking southwest.

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church
Name of Property

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin
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Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
Tier 2 – 120 hours
Tier 3 – 230 hours
Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church
Name of Property

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin
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Property Owner

Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name/title	Friar Mark Costello, Provincial Minister	date	Sept. 10, 2025
organization	Capuchin Franciscan Province of St. Joseph	phone	313-579-2100
street & number	1820 Mt. Elliott St.	zip code	58207
city or town	Detroit	state	MI

If there are other interested parties that should be noticed, please provide in the tables below

name/title	Tim Askin	date	July 25, 2025
organization	Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission	phone	414-286-5712
street & number	841 N. Broadway, Room B-1	zip code	53202
city or town	Milwaukee	state	WI

name/title		date	
organization		phone	
street & number		zip code	
city or town		state	WI

name/title		date	
organization		phone	
street & number		zip code	
city or town		state	WI