

---

# LITERATURE REVIEW AND LAND USE HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX PROPERTY, ELM GROVE, WISCONSIN

---



University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Cultural Resource Management

---

*Cover image: Overview Photograph of the School Sisters of Notre Dame Visitation Complex, 13105 Watertown Plank Road  
Elm Grove, Wisconsin*

LITERATURE REVIEW AND LAND USE HISTORY OF  
THE SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME,  
VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX PROPERTY, ELM  
GROVE, WISCONSIN

**By:**

Patricia B. Richards

**Report Prepared For:**

MANDEL GROUP  
330 East Kilbourn Avenue  
Suite 600 South  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Cultural Resource Management

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

*Archaeological Research Laboratory Report of Investigations No. 590*

*UWM-CRM Project 2020-0139*

*Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

*March 2021*

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

This report details the results of the Cultural Resource Management program (Department of Anthropology) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) conducted cultural resources investigations of the School Sisters of Notre Dame Visitation Convent Complex Property, Elm Grove, Wisconsin. These investigations were designed to produce a literature review and land use history of the property.

UWM CRM's investigations in support of this project consist of a review all cultural resource properties within the project area and within one mile of the project area. UWM CRM conducted this work in August and September of 2020. The following recommendations are a result of that work.

1. The location of Convent Knoll burial site (BWK-0261) is coincident with the eastern boundary of the Convent Visitation Complex and may extend westward onto the existing property. As this property is a burial site (BWK-0261), additional testing prior to ground disturbing activities would determine if any of the site is extant. As per Wis. Stats. § 157.70, the Wisconsin Historical Society may require archaeological monitoring in the area of the site boundaries during any ground disturbing activities.
2. The School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery (BWK-0096) is clearly marked and records consulted to date suggest that the boundaries present are the historic boundaries as well. The cemetery was established in 1856 and is noted on deeds as the 'Nun's cemetery'. The cemetery has been used since before the founding of the convent until the present day and contains the graves of over 2700 sisters. This cemetery should be carefully managed and preserved.

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Introduction.....	1
Project Location.....	1
<b>Cultural Resources</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Project Location Historic Aerial Maps</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Convent Knoll (BWK-0261).....	22
School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery (BWK-0096).....	22
<b>References</b> .....	<b>24</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Project Location.....	2
Figure 2. Aerial View of Project Area.....	3
Figure 3. Aerial View of Cultural Resources Within and Adjacent to Project Area – Architecture.....	5
Figure 4. Aerial View of NRHP Properties Within the Project Area – Architecture.....	6
Figure 5. Cultural Resources Within One Mile of the Project Area – Archaeology.....	7
Figure 6. Aerial View of Cultural Resources Within and Adjacent to Project Area – Archeology.....	8
Figure 7. : Detail Aerial View of 47WK-0327 (Burial Site BWK-0216) – Convent Knoll Site.....	9
Figure 8. Detail Aerial View of BWK-0250 (St Mary’s Parish Cemetery) and BWK-0096 (School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery).....	10
Figure 9. Visitation Historical Sketches and Timeline Archived at Mount Mary College.....	11
Figure 10. Visitation Chronicle at Mount Mary College.....	12
Figure 11. 1941 Aerial Photograph.....	13
Figure 12. 1950 Aerial Photograph.....	14
Figure 13. 1963 Aerial Photograph.....	15
Figure 14. 1970 Aerial Photograph.....	16
Figure 15. 1980 Aerial Photograph.....	17
Figure 16. 1990 Aerial Photograph.....	18
Figure 17. 2000 Aerial Photograph.....	19
Figure 18. 2010 Aerial Photograph.....	20
Figure 19. 2017 Aerial Photograph.....	21
Figure 20. 47WK-0327 and agricultural complex.....	23

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Cultural Resources – Architecture.....	7
Table 2. Cultural Resources – Archaeology.....	7

## **Introduction**

The Cultural Resource Management program (Department of Anthropology) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) conducted cultural resources investigations of the School Sisters of Notre Dame Visitation Convent Complex Property, Elm Grove, Wisconsin. These investigations were designed to produce a thorough literature review and land use history of the property. This research would not have been possible without the help of archivist Michele Levandowski, School Sisters of Notre Dame North American Archives. I would like to thank her for her invaluable help and flexibility during a pandemic.

The property is a 30-acre parcel along the south side of Watertown Plank Road in the Village of Elm Grove, Wisconsin. Owned by the School Sisters of Notre Dame and known historically as the Visitation Convent Complex, the property currently serves as a retirement home and health care center operated by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. The buildings of the facility are a significant component of the Village of Elm Grove. The property is comprised of a total of twelve buildings, that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places for the distinctive architectural features that express the German heritage of the founders. The Histories of the Village of Elm Grove, Wisconsin and the Convent are linked and the Convent serves as a visual representation of the German heritage of the founders of both.

The results of the archaeological literature review and land use history indicate that there is at least one resource within the project area that may be subject Wis. Stats. § 157.70, which requires that all marked or unmarked burial sites in Wisconsin, regardless of their age or who is interred in them are protected.

## **Project Location**

The School Sisters of Notre Dame Visitation Convent Complex Property, T7N R20E Section 25, is located at 13105 Watertown Plank Road, in the Village of Elm Grove, Waukesha County, Wisconsin, (Figure 1). Figure 2 provides an aerial view of the Project Area.

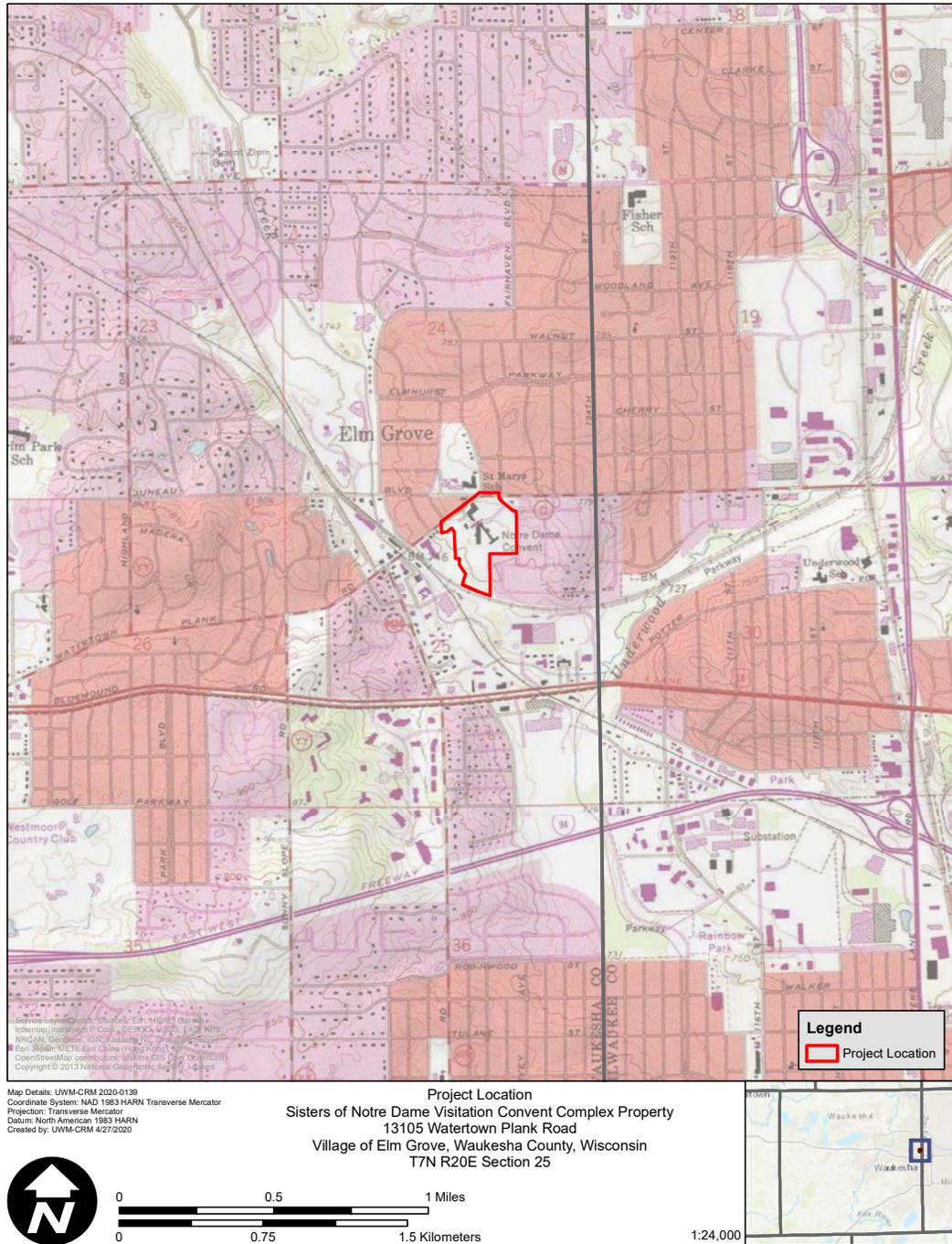


Figure 1: Project Location



Figure 2: Aerial View of Project Area

## Cultural Resources

The Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory (AHI) files list fifteen properties within or adjacent to the project area. Adjacent sites include St Mary's Catholic Church, St Mary's Rectory (no longer extant), property 7901 (no longer extant), and the Ramstack Tavern (Verbrick's Tavern).

The Visitation Convent Complex consists of twelve buildings, two structures, two objects, and one site, (17 total). Of these, seven buildings, two objects, one structure, and one site are considered to be contributing elements to the significance of the property (11 total). Most of the extant buildings were constructed as free-standing, individual buildings, however, they are all now interconnected by hallways and passageways. These resources are listed in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 3. Figure 4 illustrates the contributing and noncontributing resources on the property.

Table 1: Cultural Resources – Architecture

AHI Number	Historic Name	Current Name	Address	Date Built	Designer	Style/Form	Demo	NRHP Name	State Lis	NRHP List	Survey Year	Evaluation
7892	SAINT MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH	Old St. Mary's Church	13100 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1921	Mark F. Pfaller	Romanesque Revival					2007	Determined Eligible
7899	St. Mary's Church Rectory		13120 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1886		Queen Anne	Not Extant				1979	Potentially Eligible
7900	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - NOTRE DAME HALL	NOTRE DAME HEALTH CARE CENTER/School Sisters of Notre Dame	13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1899	Eugene Liebert	German Renaissance Revival		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	1979	NRHP Listed
7901		MICRO-RECORDS SERVICE INC	13130 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1880		Gabled Ell	Not Extant				1993	Unevaluated
7902	RAMSTACK TAVERN	VERBRICK'S INN	13225 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1881		Commercial Vernacular					1993	Unevaluated
170661	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - BOILER HOUSE	BOILER HOUSE	13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1920	Backes & Pfaller	Prairie School		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170663	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - WEST WING HOLY FAMILY INFIRMARY	CAROLINE HALL	13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1955	Brust & Brust	Contemporary		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170664	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - EAST WING HOLY FAMILY INFIRMARY	THERESA HALL	13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1959	Herbst, Jacoby & Herbst	Contemporary		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170682	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - OUR LADY OF LOURDES GROTTO		13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1926		NA (unknown or not a building)		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170701	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - FIDELIS HALL	FIDELIS HALL	13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1967		Contemporary		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170702	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - HOLY FAMILY CHAPEL	NOTRE DAME OF ELM GROVE CHAPEL	13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1975	Herbst, Jacoby & Jacoby	Contemporary		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170721	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - CEMETERY GATE		13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1920		NA (unknown or not a building)		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170722	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - CEMETERY		13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1853		NA (unknown or not a building)		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170741	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - GARAGE #1		13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1965		Astylistic Utilitarian Building		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed
170742	VISITATION CONVENT COMPLEX - GARAGE #2		13105 WATERTOWN PLANK RD	1968		Astylistic Utilitarian Building		Visitation Convent Complex	2/18/11	5/25/11	2010	NRHP Listed

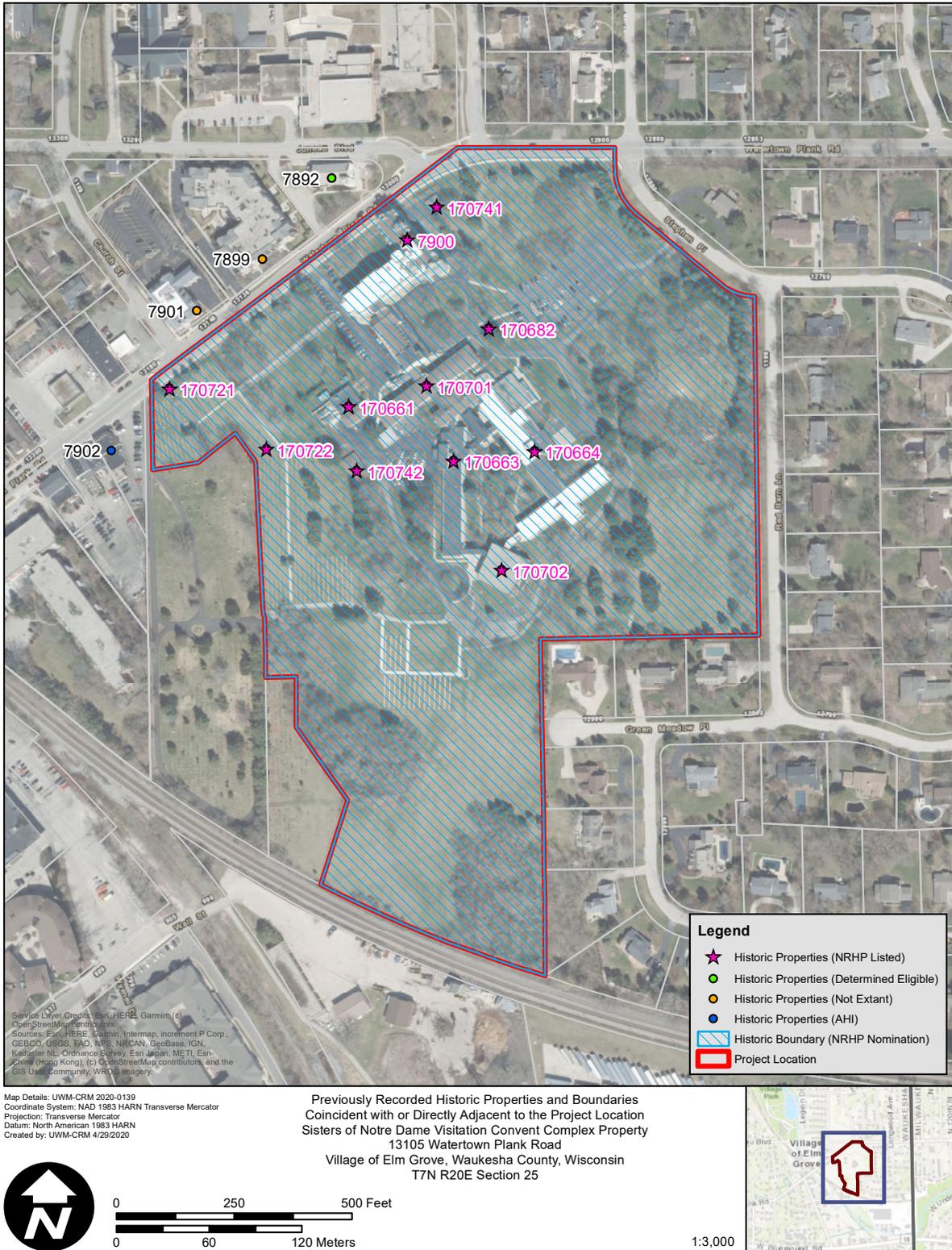


Figure 3: Aerial View of Cultural Resources Within and Adjacent to Project Area – Architecture

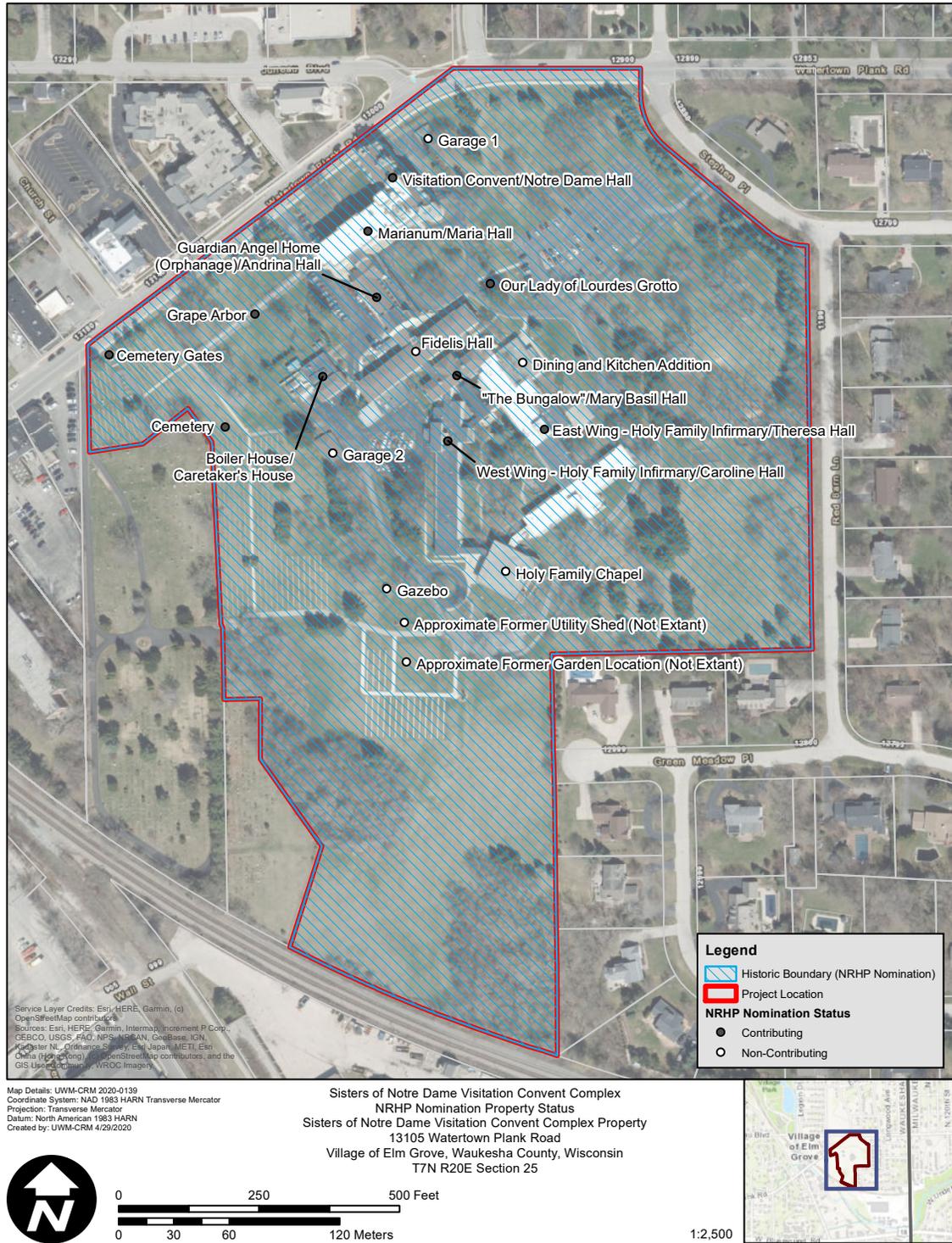


Figure 4: Aerial View of NRHP Properties Within the Project Area – Architecture

The Wisconsin Archaeological Site Inventory (ASI) files list seven properties within one mile of the project area. Five of these are located off the Visitation Convent Complex, two are located at least partially on the grounds of the complex. These sites are listed in Table 2 and illustrated in Figures 5 and 6. Figures 7 and 8 provide detailed location information of 47WK-0327 (Burial Site BWK-0216) – Convent Knoll Site, and BWK-0250 (St Mary’s Parish Cemetery) and BWK-0096 (School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery).

Table 2: Cultural Resources – Archaeology

ASI Number	County	Smithsonian Code	Burial Code	Site Name	Site Type	Culture	NRHP Status	Burial Catalogue Status
99712	Milwaukee	MI-0576		UC-SG7-CJP-1	Isolated Finds	Oneota	Unevaluated	N/A
17680	Waukesha		BWK-0077	Zion Evangelical Methodist Church Cemetery	Cemetery/Burial	Historic Euro-American	Unevaluated	Not Catalogued
17699	Waukesha		BWK-0096	School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery	Cemetery/Burial	Historic Euro-American, Historic Indian	Unevaluated	Not Catalogued
26817	Waukesha		BWK-0250	St. Mary’s Parish Cemetery	Cemetery/Burial	Historic Euro-American	Unevaluated	Catalogued
20039	Waukesha	WK-0012	BWK-0262	Cushing Burials	Cemetery/Burial	Unknown Prehistoric	Unevaluated	Not Catalogued
20372	Waukesha	WK-0321		Zinke	Campsite/Village	Unknown Prehistoric	Unevaluated	N/A
20380	Waukesha	WK-0327	BWK-0261	Convent Knoll	Cemetery/Burial	Other, Early Woodland	Unevaluated	Not Catalogued

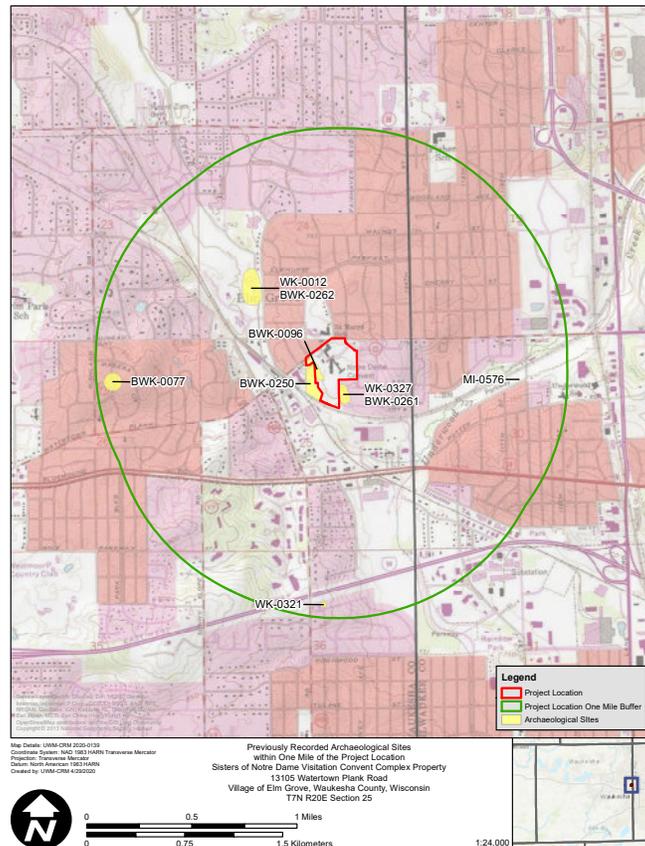


Figure 5: Cultural Resources Within One Mile of the Project Area – Archaeology

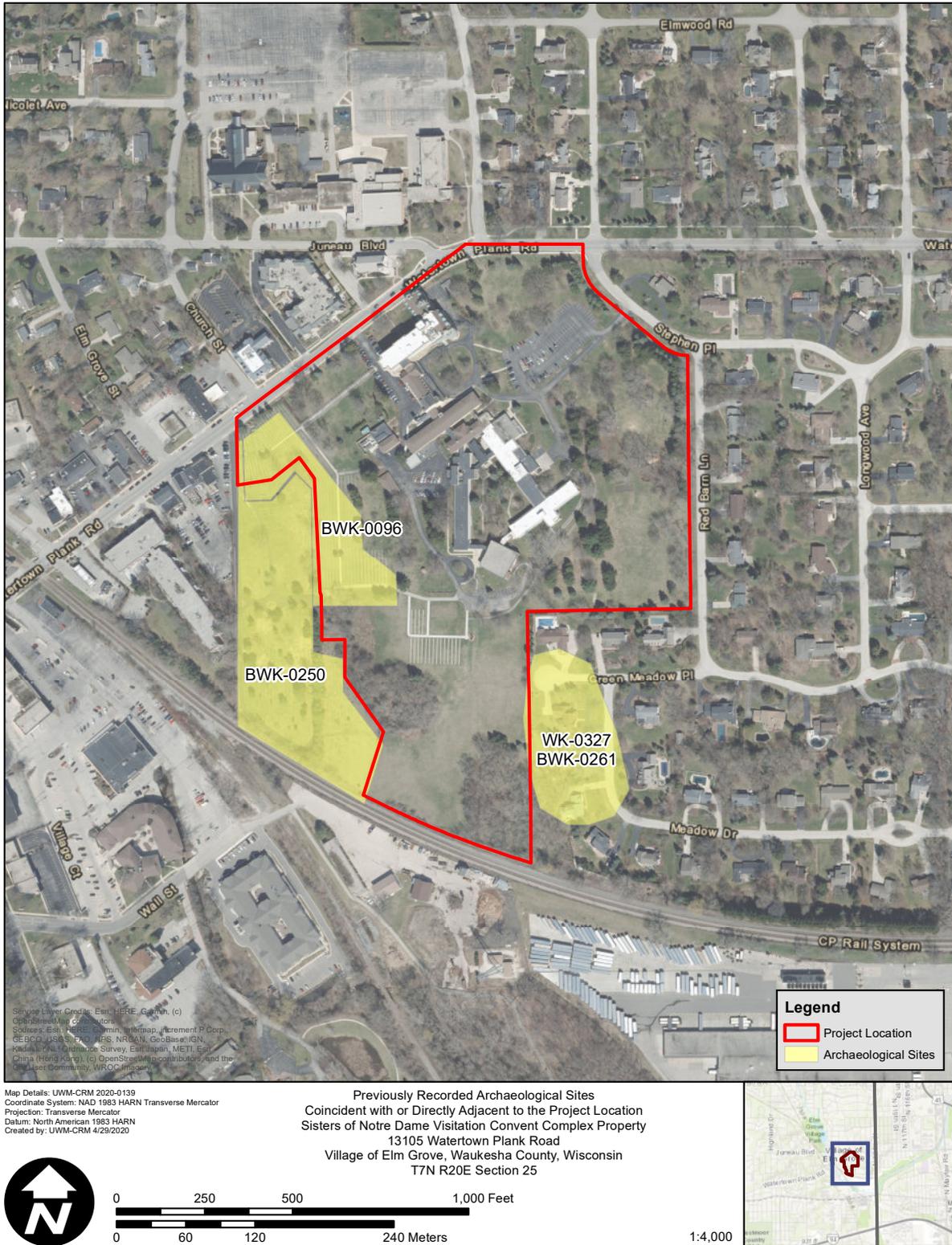


Figure 6: Aerial View of Cultural Resources Within and Adjacent to Project Area – Archeology



Figure 7: Detail Aerial View of 47WK-0327 (Burial Site BWK-0216) – Convent Knoll Site

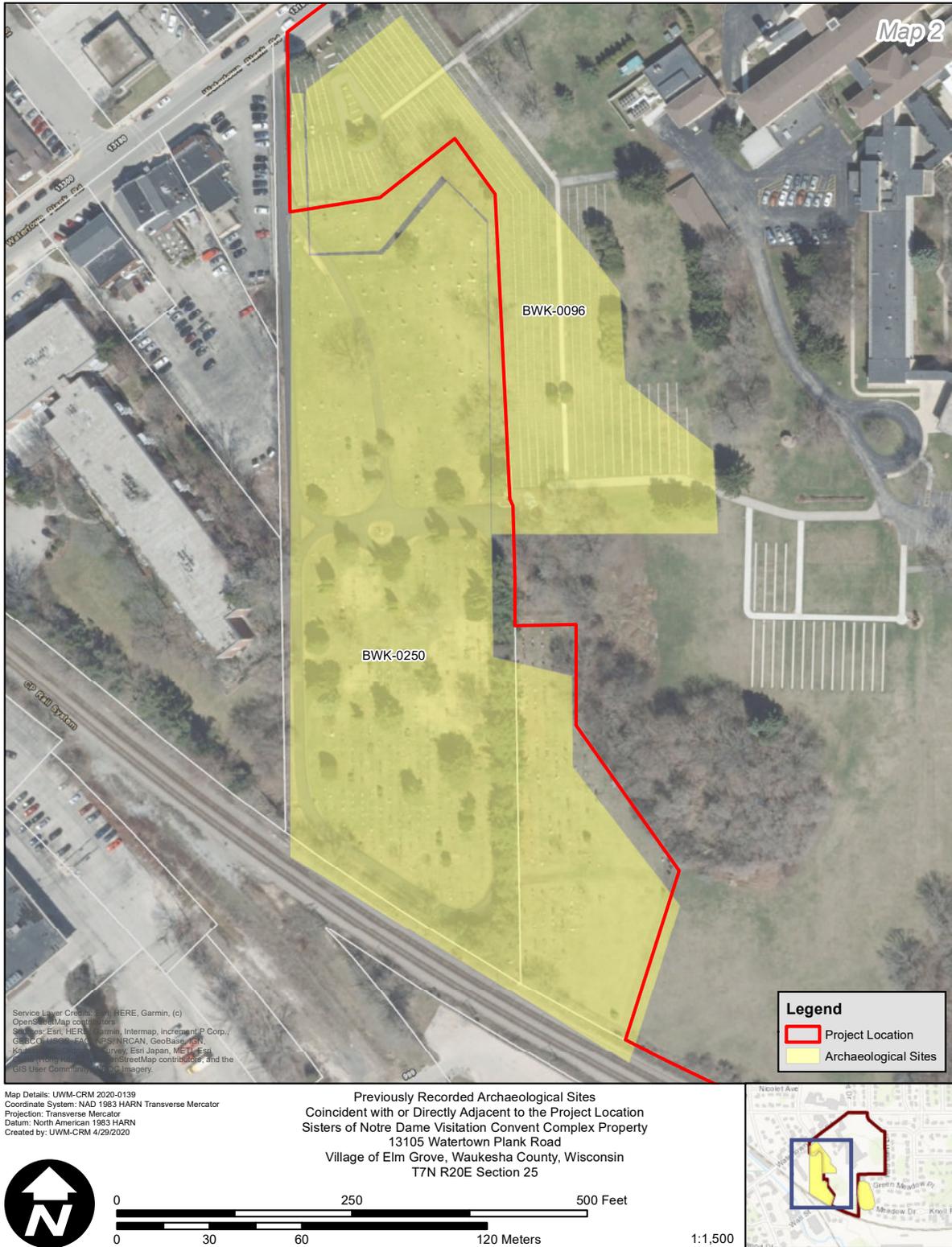


Figure 8: Detail Aerial View of BWK-0250 (St Mary’s Parish Cemetery) and BWK-0096 (School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery)

The School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery (BWK-0096) and its entrance gates are contributing elements to the National Register of Historic Places listing of the School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Complex under the function of funerary. The location of the cemetery is illustrated in Figures 4 and 6. According to the National Register nomination, the historic entrance to the cemetery consisting of an iron gate and a pair of pillars along Watertown Plank Road, is not used. Notable people buried in the cemetery include George Betholz (Betzolt) the original property owner, Mother Caroline Griess who established the orphanage and convent in 1858 and Father Abbelen, who was an early chaplain.

The Chronicle, Visitation Convent, Elm Grove, on file at the SSNDA, is an in-house log of the Visitation Convent’s daily business and events. The files have various dated entries between the 1880s and 1920s. These files were consulted for additional information regarding the cemetery. The records confirm that, as mentioned in the National Register Nomination, the earliest grave dates to 1853, prior to the actual ownership and occupation of the site by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. This individual, Sister Alexia Pettmesser was buried there on February 18, 1853 (Figure 9).

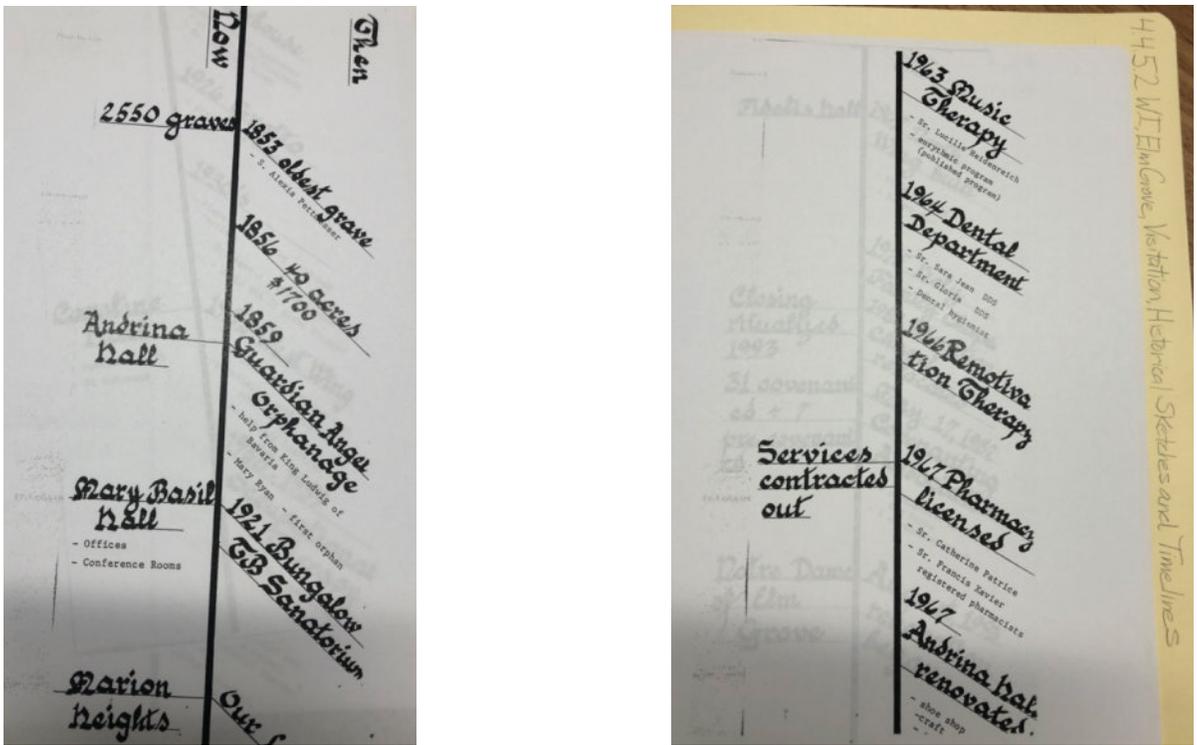


Figure 9: Visitation Historical Sketches and Timeline Archived at Mount Mary College, Bergstrom Hall.

The other item of interest related to the cemetery suggests that until 1891 children from the orphanage may have been buried in the Cemetery. A note for June 9 – 11, 1891 (Figure 10) notes that children were exhumed and buried in a single grave “near the grave of the aspirant Mary Ochs.” There is no more mention of children’s burials associated with this cemetery after 1891.

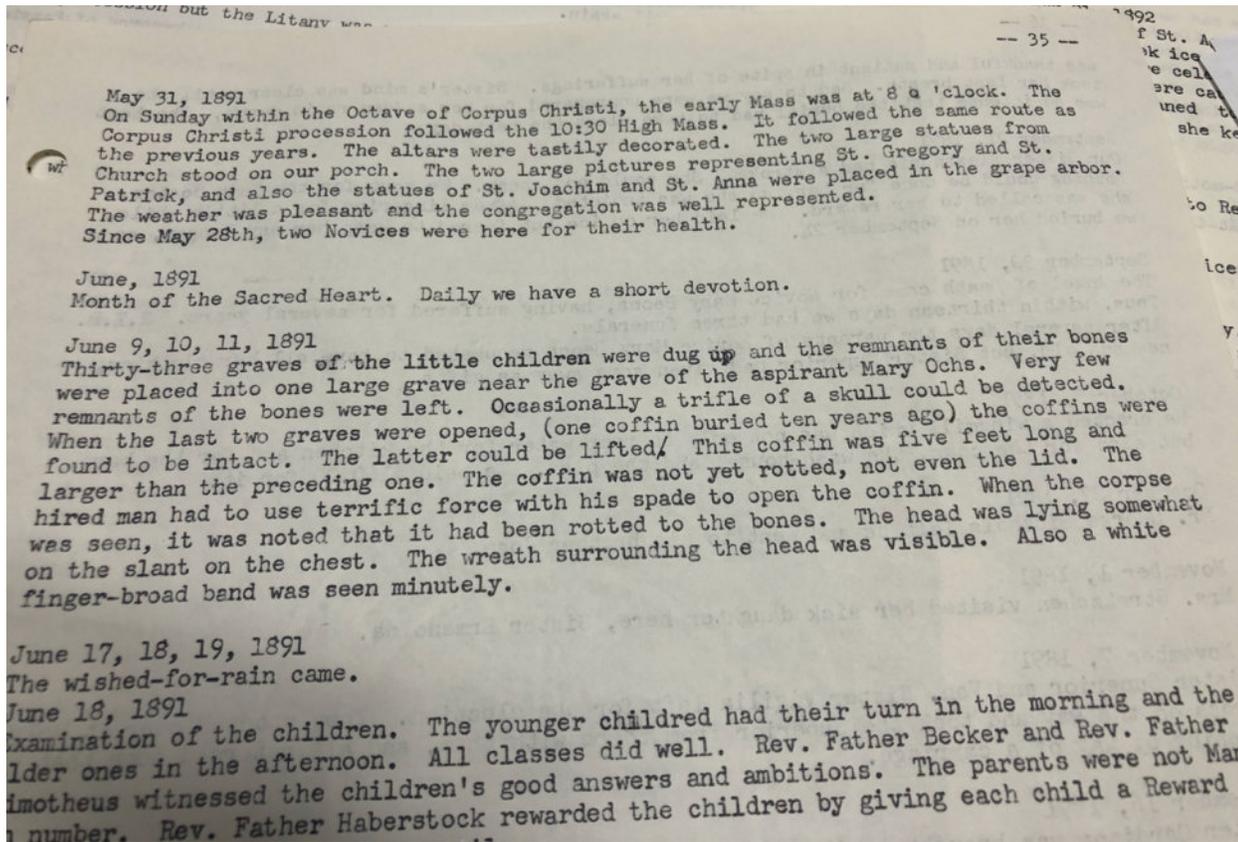


Figure 10: Visitation Chronicle at Mount Mary College, Bergstrom Hall.

## Project Location Historic Aerial Maps

The modern School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent property has been overlain on a series of historic aerial photographs dating from 1941 to 2017. These photographs serve to illustrate the changing use of the property. In the earliest photo, the orchards and the agricultural complex in the Northeast portion of the property are clearly visible. The barn is no longer extant in the 1980 photograph and the area around the property is more intensively developed. These photographs are presented in Figures 11 – 19.



Figure 11: 1941 Aerial Photograph





Figure 13: 1963 Aerial Photograph



Figure 14: 1970 Aerial Photograph



Figure 15: 1980 Aerial Photograph



Map Details: UWM-CRM 2020-0139  
Coordinate System: NAD 1983 HARN Transverse Mercator  
Projection: Transverse Mercator  
Datum: North American 1983 HARN  
Created by: UWM-CRM 4/29/2020

Project Location with 1990 Aerial Overlay  
Sisters of Notre Dame Visitation Convent Complex Property  
13105 Watertown Plank Road  
Village of Elm Grove, Waukesha County, Wisconsin  
T7N R20E Section 25



1:3,000



Figure 16: 1990 Aerial Photograph



Map Details: UWM-CRM 2020-0139  
Coordinate System: NAD 1983 HARN Transverse Mercator  
Projection: Transverse Mercator  
Datum: North American 1983 HARN  
Created by: UWM-CRM 4/29/2020

Project Location with 1990 Aerial Overlay  
Sisters of Notre Dame Visitation Convent Complex Property  
13105 Watertown Plank Road  
Village of Elm Grove, Waukesha County, Wisconsin  
T7N R20E Section 25



1:3,000



Figure 17: 2000 Aerial Photograph



Map Details: UWM-CRM 2020-0139  
 Coordinate System: NAD 1983 HARN Transverse Mercator  
 Projection: Transverse Mercator  
 Datum: North American 1983 HARN  
 Created by: UWM-CRM 4/29/2020

Project Location with 2010 Aerial Overlay  
 Sisters of Notre Dame Visitation Convent Complex Property  
 13105 Watertown Plank Road  
 Village of Elm Grove, Waukesha County, Wisconsin  
 T7N R20E Section 25



1:3,000



Figure 18: 2010 Aerial Photograph



Service Layer Credits: Esri, HERE, Garmin, (c) OpenStreetMap contributors  
Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermix, Inc., Swire, GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), (c) OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community  
NCS, USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), WROCC Imagery

Map Details: UWM-CRM 2020-0139  
Coordinate System: NAD 1983 HARN Transverse Mercator  
Projection: Transverse Mercator  
Datum: North American 1983 HARN  
Created by: UWM-CRM 4/29/2020

Project Location with 2017 Aerial Overlay  
Sisters of Notre Dame Visitation Convent Complex Property  
13105 Watertown Plank Road  
Village of Elm Grove, Waukesha County, Wisconsin  
T7N R20E Section 25



1:3,000



Figure 19: 2017 Aerial Photograph

## **Recommendations**

Sensitive areas:

### **Convent Knoll (47WK-0327)**

This site consists of a Red Ochre cemetery that dates to approximately 2900 years ago. During the course of construction at a new subdivision in the Village of Elm Grove, Wisconsin, in June 1978, human skeletal remains, a copper celt, and a large quartzite "ceremonial blade" were recovered. Salvage excavations uncovered three intact burial pits. Two pits contained flexed and semi-flexed burials accompanied by mortuary goods. A third pit contained the disordered remains of six adult males, unaccompanied by mortuary items. All six died violently. Additional evidence of violence was noted in the first burial pit-- the adult male buried there had been scalped, and a projectile point was lodged in his body. A fourth pit was noted, but no human remains were recovered.

The location of this site is coincident with the eastern boundary of the Convent Visitation Complex and may extend westward onto the existing property (see Figure 7). As this property is a burial site (BWK-0261) additional testing prior to ground disturbing activities would determine if any of the site is extant. As per Wis. Stats. § 157.70, the Wisconsin Historical Society may require archaeological monitoring in the area of the site boundaries during any ground disturbing activities.

### **School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery (BWK-0096)**

The School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent Cemetery (BWK-0096) is clearly marked and records consulted to date suggest that the boundaries present are the historic boundaries as well. The cemetery was established in 1856 and is noted on deeds as the 'Nun's cemetery'. The cemetery has been used since founding until the present day and contains the graves of over 2700 sisters. This cemetery should be carefully managed and preserved.

Area of interest:

According to the Convent Visitation Complex National Register Nomination, photographs indicate that a small red barn on a fieldstone foundation was first located east of Andrina Hall and behind the original two-story convent and orphanage building. A much larger red barn (1889; remodeled in 1914), as well as a chicken coop, smaller barn and two silos to the east of the complex. Although no specific dates are known, the convent parcel included a working farm, including an orchard and vegetable garden. Aside from what was needed at the Elm Grove facility, the produce, as well as poultry and dairy products, were sent to the Motherhouse in Milwaukee.

While the large barn appears on aerial photos from 1941 to 1970, it is likely that the large barn was razed after 1970 (Figure 20). While no surface indications of this agricultural complex are present, subsurface deposits may be present and these remnants should be noted if disturbed during construction.

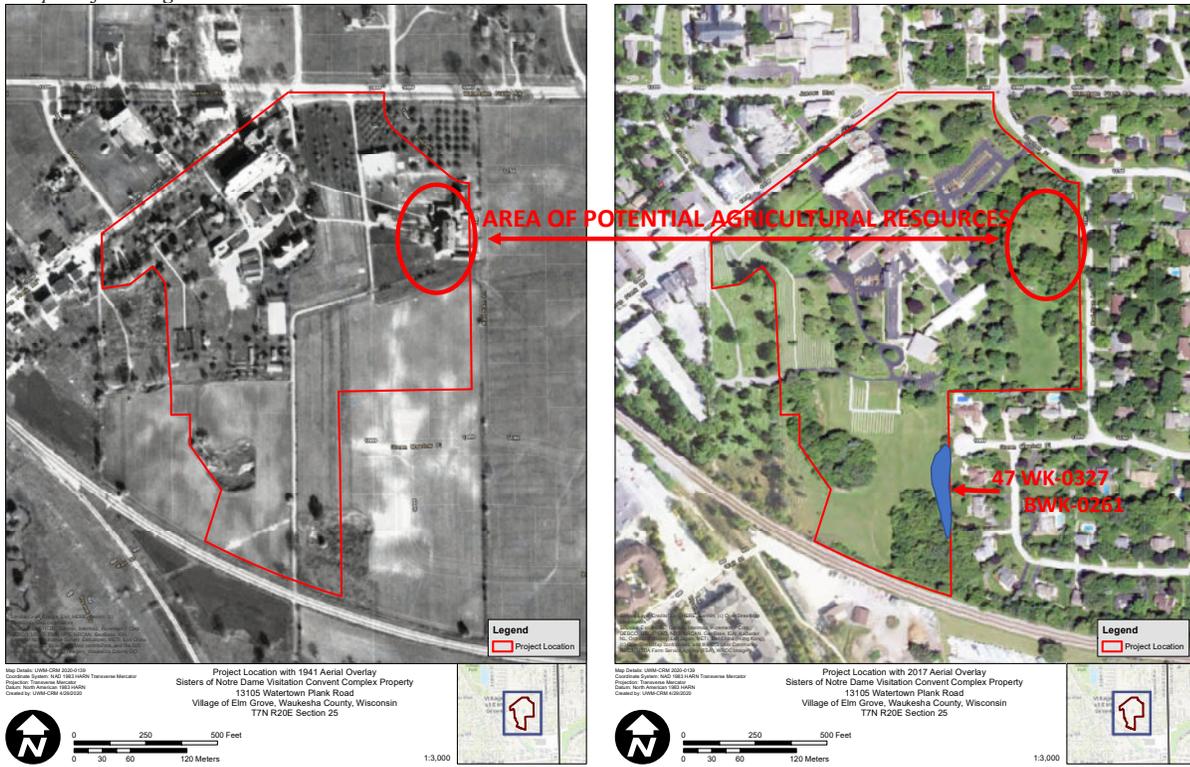


Figure 20: 47WK-0327 and agricultural complex discussed in text

## REFERENCES UTILIZED

Abbelen, Rev. P.M.

1893. Hopewell Archaeology: Venerable Mother M. Caroline Friess: A Sketch of her Life and Character. St. Louis, MO: B. Herder

Atlas of Waukesha County, Wisconsin. Madison, WI.- Harrison & Warner  
1973

Chronicle, Visitation Convent, Elm Grove, WI. On file at the SSNDA. The Chronicle is an in-house log of the Visitation Convent's daily business and events. Various dates between the 1880s and 1920s.

"Notre Dame of Elm Grove Tour." Typewritten handout prepared by SSND staff and included in Visitor's Folder (rev. 2010). Available in the Heritage Room, SSND Elm Grove Campus, Elm Grove, WI.

"Old St. Mary's Church." Determination of Eligibility (DOE) form. Prepared by Carol Lohry Cartwright, November 2007. Copy on file in the Historic Preservation Division, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

Plat Book of Waukesha County, Wisconsin. Minneapolis: C.M. Foote, 1891.

School Sisters of Notre Dame Archives (SSNDA). Housed at Mount Mary College, WI. Various materials, such as plans, letters, maps, etc.

Geraghty, Kathleen

2004 School Sisters of Notre Dame and "Crazy" King Ludwig of Bavaria.' Perspective 4/1

Heming, Harry Hooper

1896 History of the Catholic Church in Wisconsin. Milwaukee, WI: Catholic Historical Publishing Company

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, *Visitation Convent Complex*, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2011

Overstreet, David F.

1980 The Convent Knoll Site (47WK-327): A Red Ochre Cemetery in Waukesha County, Wisconsin, The Wisconsin Archeologist, Vol 61, No.1

Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory (AHI). Maintained by the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

Wisconsin Archaeological Site Inventory (ASI). Maintained by the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.