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: Bethel Burying Ground
Other names/site number: _Bethel Burial Ground, Bethel Church Burial Ground, Bethel
Colored Burial Ground, Queen Street Burial Ground
Name of related multiple property listing:
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing
2. Location
Street & number: _405-425 Queen Street
City or town: Philadelphia State: PA County: Philadelphia
Not For Publication: Vicinity: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:
nationalstatewidelocal
Applicable National Register Criteria:
_X_A _X_BC _X_D
Signature of certifying official/Title: Date
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government
State of Federal agency/bureau of Tribal Government

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ne of Property	County and State
In my opinion, the property meets does r	not meet the National Register criteria
Signature of commenting official:	Date
Title:	State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government
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 5. Classification	Date of Action
Ownership of Property (Check as many boyes as apply.)	
(Check as many boxes as apply.) Private:	
Public – Local x	
Public – State	
Public – Federal	
Category of Property	
(Check only one box.)	
Building(s)	
District	
Site	

Name of Property County and State Structure Object **Number of Resources within Property** (Do not include previously listed resources in the count) Noncontributing Contributing buildings 1 sites structures objects Total Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register _____ 6. Function or Use **Historic Functions** (Enter categories from instructions.)fr **Current Functions** (Enter categories from instructions.)

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7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

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Narrative Description

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Materials: (enter categories from instructions.) Principal exterior materials of the property:

(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

The Bethel Burying Ground lies under the Weccacoe Playground in the Southwark National Register Historic District of Philadelphia. The playground is bounded by Queen Street to the south, Lawrence (formerly Cobb) Street to the west, Catherine Street to the north, and Leithgow (formerly Weccacoe) Street to the east. It occupies just over three-quarters (0.78) of an acre and is surrounded by a tall iron fence and concrete sidewalks. The burial ground lies below the playground's southwest corner and, at 0.28 of an acre, accounts for roughly one-third of the playground's substrate. Only on its western side does the burial ground extend beyond the playground, continuing under the adjacent sidewalk to a point at or near the east curb line of Lawrence Street. Along its southern boundary, the burial ground aligns with the current iron fence line along Queen Street. The burial ground's northern and eastern borders are essentially those of the original 1810 parcel (see below) and were confirmed in the course of recent archaeological investigations. Nothing in the playground's current design or appearance indicates that an historic burial ground lies beneath.

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Narrative Description

As originally laid out, Bethel Burying Ground occupied a rectangular lot on the north side of Queen Street in Southwark, a sparsely developed district on the city's southern fringe. The deed through which trustees of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a.k.a. Bethel Church, obtained the parcel records it as measuring "one hundred and twenty one feet two inches and one third of an inch" along Queen Street "and extending in depth northward one hundred and three feet or thereabouts" – dimensions seemingly inverted on some early maps (Fig. 1 – Paxton map detail). Given the prevalence and dread of bodysnatching at this time, the site was probably fenced off at an early date. However, the first documented reference to such a fence appears in an 1873 agreement obligating a lessee of land to enclose it. By this time, burials had ceased for nearly a decade.²

Subdivision and construction proceeded rapidly in this semi-rural neighborhood. In 1839, Weccacoe Street bisected the eastern half of the block on which the cemetery stood, providing new frontage for rowhouses. A year or two later, Cobb Street passed along the graveyard's western flank. The resulting blocks – now three instead of one – boasted houses on nearly every side by the end of the decade (Figs. 2 & 3, Sidney & Smedley maps). Further infill created continuous rows in the years leading up to the Civil War. Perhaps in response to this urbanization, brick walls on stone footings were built around the burial ground at mid century. However, heavy use of the site for its intended purpose may also have prompted this construction. Estimates based on combined data from bills of mortality and death certificates put the number of dead arriving at Bethel Burying Ground between 1810 and 1830 at 1,716. There is little reason to suspect a sharp drop-off in this rate over the next few decades, meaning that, by the time interments ceased in the mid to late 1860s, somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 burials had probably occurred at the site. Key to achieving this density was the deposition of large amounts of fill between the years 1842 and ca. 1864. The result raised low-lying parts of the graveyard as much as five feet, permitting new graves to be stacked upon older ones.

We know little about the ways Bethel Burying Ground's landscape was organized and adorned. Many churchyards of the period featured a central pathway with graves arranged in grid formation to either side, but even if such a pattern had obtained at the Queen Street site, it was

¹ City Deed Book IC 28, pp. 471-473, Matthew Waring and wife to Bethel Church, 28 April 1810, recorded 23 March 1814.

² Douglas Mooney and Kimberly Morrell, "Phase IB Archaeological Investigations of the Mother Bethel Burying Ground, 1810 – Circa 1864, ER No. 2013-1516-101-A," a report prepared under the auspices of the URS Corporation for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, 11 October 2013, pp. 1.1, 2.2, 2.10, 4.5; Terry Buckalew, "Weccacoe: Burying Ground, Garden, Park, and Playground – A Historical Sketch and Timeline from 1800 – 2012 (TMs 2012, available online at[???]), 1-8.

 $^{^3}$ Archeological investigation puts the construction date between 1842 and 1864; see Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 4.1, 4.3.

⁴ Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 2.9 - 2.10, 4.3.

likely obscured or obliterated by subsequent layers of fill and more haphazard modes of burial.⁵ Recent archeology suggests that inexpensive wooden coffins were the standard containers for Bethel's dead, not all of whom belonged to the church but most of whom were poor. Some signs of greater expenditure have turned up: decorative metal screw caps on a coffin and part of a marble headstone belonging to one Amelia Brown. Mounds and modest monuments commonly marked the graves of the "lower sort" (and Quakers) in other parts of the city, and there is good reason to suspect their presence here at one time. At the Queen Street site, though, subsequent uses and transformations have made it difficult to tell what practices prevailed and what evidence of those practices remains.⁶

Post-Civil War observers bemoaned the site's growing disorder and illegibility. In the summer of 1872, less than three years after church trustees began leasing the property to sugar refiner Barnabas Bartol, noted A.M.E. Bishop Benjamin Tanner described "A most shameful spectacle – old hogsheads, and barrels and lumber of every conceivable shape. Not a gravestone unbroken, not a grave to be seen...." Bartol terminated his lease prematurely the following year, agreeing to fence the property in the bargain. In March of 1889, a columnist for the *Philadelphia Tribune* added a new reproach: "The grounds now furnish a playground for the boys of the neighborhood, who romp over the graves of the dead with the freedom they would exercise on a baseball ground." By then, however, plans were underway for more orderly public uses.

The conversion of Bethel Burying Ground into a small park named Weccacoe Square took several years to accomplish. District Surveyor Thomas Daly's February, 1889 plan of the property (Fig. 4) showed only its dimensions and new moniker but, after the City of Philadelphia took title in December of that year, efforts to make the grounds "ready for Promenaders" moved forward. By 1895, short paths from Queen and Cobb Streets converged on a central *rond-point*, likely adorned with shrubs or flowers (Fig. 5).

The City's desire to establish a park in this area was part of a larger agenda. Like many dense, aging neighborhoods in Eastern cities, this section of Southwark had become home to a burgeoning immigrant population consisting largely of Jews. Brining light, air, and exercise into "the slum" was a mantra of Progressive-era reformers and small parks were a means to that end. Ironically, or perhaps predictably, some of the targets of reform were also its victims. As early as 1895, the City Parks Association embarked on plans to expand Weccacoe Square to the edges of the block – a move that would displace dozens of families whose houses lay in the way.

⁵ See, for instance, Jean K. Wolf, *Lives of the Silent Stones in Christ Church Burial Ground: 50 Family Profiles* (Philadelphia: Christ Church Preservation Trust, 2003), 2, 5.

⁶ Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 4.4, 4.5.

⁷ See Tanner's *Christian Recorder* article of 3 August 1872, quoted in Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 2.10; Buckalew, 8-9.

 $^{^{\}rm 8}$ As quoted in Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 2.13.

⁹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20 August 1890, quoted in Buckalew, 11; see also pp. 9-10, and Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB." 2.13.

¹⁰ Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), ch. 2 (esp. pp. 80-85), 196, 199. Creators of such parks considered ethnic segregation highly undesirable – assimilation was the aim.

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The eastern flank fell first; by 1901 the park stretched to Weccacoe Street. Residents to the north were less compliant and had to be forcibly evicted before the corresponding push to Catherine Street could succeed. The large parcel created by this campaign was soon radically transformed. With the City's backing, supporters of the Garden School Movement divided much of the site into small garden plots, tended by local 6th and 7th graders. This project, which ran from 1904 to 1905 under the auspices of the Public Education Association, did not extend to the southern third of the park. Here, the playground function resurfaced in the form of "a softball field, basketball nets, a ring-toss area, and a punching bag." ¹¹

The physical changes that followed the Garden School experiment were mundane by comparison. The Philadelphia Playground Association and various City agencies oversaw Weccacoe Square's refitting for park and playground purposes – a merry-go-round in the northwest corner by 1912, see-saws and similar equipment by 1915. A major renovation in 1924 brought with it more lasting adjustments: a comprehensive re-grading that lowered the park's surface by roughly one foot; a classicizing Shelter Building designed by City Architect, John Molitor; and, in all likelihood, the iron fence that surrounds the property today. This was the first of four remodeling drives separated by generation-length intervals. The others, occurring in 1954, 1979, and the early 2000s, brought new equipment (including a spray pool), various athletic courts, more trees, and additions to the Shelter Building that made it into today's Recreation Building. Built on deep concrete footings, that structure is one of the few amenities that may have done real harm to the burial ground below.¹²

¹¹ Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 2.13, 2.18 (quotation); Buckalew, 11-13.

¹² Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 2.18, 2.26. Itemizing those changes likely to have done most harm to the burial ground, the authors mention "the construction and gradual expansion of the recreation building, the installation of public utility lines, the creation and subsequent removal of the 1950s-era spray pool, and the planting of trees" (2.26); Bucklew, 14-16.

Name of Property County and State 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 Х 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 Х 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 Х 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

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United States Department of the Interior National Park Service / National Register of Historic Places Registration Form NPS Form 10-900 OMB No. 1024-0018 Name of Property **Areas of Significance** (Enter categories from instructions.) <u>Archaeology / Historic – Non Aboriginal</u> Ethnic Heritage / African American _Social History_ **Period of Significance** _1810 - 1864_ **Significant Dates** _1810_ **Significant Person** (Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.) Allen, Richard (1760 – 1831; buried elsewhere) Champion, James (1766 – 1813) Laws, Stephen (1754 – 1814) Tapisco, Jacob (1770 – 1820) Worthington, Caesar (1764 - 1826)Murray, Simon (1800 – 1840) Heppard, Richard (? - 1841)Cox, Joseph (1789 – 1843) Williams, Richard (1770 – 1844) Ganges, Levi (1758 – 1846) Burton, Belfast (1774 – 1849) Beck, Ignatius (1774 – 1849)

Cultural Affiliation _African Amnerican_ Architect/Builder

County and State

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

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Bethel Burying Ground is the oldest religiously affiliated African-American burial ground in Philadelphia. It is associated with a National Historic Landmark, Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, and holds the remains of generations who labored to establish the city's and the nation's free Black community in the late 18^{th} and 19^{th} centuries. The site further represents the culmination of a decades-long effort by that community to secure a burial space of its own – a matter of paramount importance to a populace whose dead were frequently targeted by vandals and body snatchers. Recent archival research has yielded a basic outline of the site's history. Archeological investigations have identified perimeter walls, fill layers, grave shafts, and coffin materials. Despite their preliminary nature, these findings demonstrate that the Bethel Burying Ground is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A, B, and D for its national and local significance relating to ethnic heritage (African American), historical archaeology, and social history, with a period significance extending from 1810 to 1864.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

In colonial American cities and towns, Blacks were generally denied the right to interment in graveyards overseen by white churches. Instead, their remains were consigned to ragtag public lots known as potter's fields or in the grounds of almshouses. These spaces were the province of outsiders, and in them African Americans were laid to rest alongside the indigent poor, convicted criminals, the mentally ill, persons who belonged to no organized church, foreigners, and other non-resident "strangers." As the final resting place of the socially marginal, these public grounds were typically untended, unregulated, and overcrowded. Deceased persons whose families could not afford the price of a coffin or gravestone were frequently interred without them. In Philadelphia, the major repositories of such remains were the almshouse burial ground and Southeast (now Washington) Square, the city's primary potter's field. This was an embattled site, frequently targeted by vandals and body snatchers hired by local physicians to obtain cadavers for dissection. In the closing decades of the 18th century, leaders of the city's African-American community deemed "their" portion of Southeast Square worthy of both physical and legal protection, and sought, unsuccessfully, to have these rights recognized by municipal authorities. 13

¹³ Billy G. Smith, "Death and Life in a Colonial Immigrant City: A Demographic Analysis of Philadelphia," *Journal of Economic History* 37, no. 4 (December 1977): 867-868, 873-874; J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 1609-1884 (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884), 3: 2355; Steven Robert

These efforts followed accepted channels of political action and involved the submission of successive petitions – written pleas to government officials who had jurisdiction over a piece of ground many African-Americans had come to view as sacred. The requests made in these documents are among the earliest civil and political assertions of independence and self-determination by the members of this community. Even the language of the petitions echoes the republican rhetoric of the age, citing "the right of citizens to petition their government." For Blacks, this was a statement of belonging, both to the new nation and to the city that served briefly as its capital. If the petitioners had succeeded, they would have established an official Black graveyard in the midst of "the Athens of America," a space overseen in accordance with the customs of their community. Like the emergence of Philadelphia's new "African" churches and nondenominational Free African Society, the creation of such a space would have validated the notion that people of African descent were by that time no longer strangers but a permanent part of Philadelphia's and the nation's social and historical fabric. 14

Following the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, Southeast Square was closed to burial. The city's first Black-owned burial grounds were created soon afterward on land next to Bethel African Methodist Episcopal and St. Thomas African Episcopal Churches. Bethel Church, located at 6th and Minster (now Addison) Streets, witnessed rapid growth in its membership, as did Philadelphia's Black population more generally. Annual bills of mortality published in local papers show that the remains of at least 285 individuals had been buried in Bethel's small churchyard by early 1810. As space there ran out, the church's noted founder, Reverend Richard Allen, and fellow trustees paid the substantial sum of \$1,600.00 for a lot fronting Queen Street between 4th and 5th Streets. This parcel became the first privately owned Black burial ground in the city to be physically detached from a church.¹⁵

Owned until 1889 by the Bethel A.M.E. Church, now known as Mother Bethel, the burial ground operated between 1810 and ca. 1864. Archives have so far yielded little information about the property's appearance and management. Minutes kept by the Union Benevolent Sons of Bethel (1826 - 1844), a burial assistance charity established Richard Allen, have survived in fragmentary form. They record the conventional data of mutual aid society operation: membership, the election of officers, the collection of dues, and fines levied for minor offenses at church. Collectively, however, they demonstrate Reverend

Wilf, "Anatomy and Punishment in Late Eighteenth-Century New York," *Journal of Social History* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 509-514; Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 2.2, B.1 – B.3.

¹⁴ On the significance of these efforts to Philadelphia's Black community in the Early National era, see W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996 [originally published 1899]), 19-22, 415; Leslie J. Pollard, "Black Beneficial Societies and the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored Persons: A Research Note," *Phylon* 41, no. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1980): 230. ¹⁵ Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 2.2; Buckalew, 2-4.

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Allen's conviction that providing proper Christian burial for even the poorest members of his community was a fundamental obligation of his church.¹⁶

In the absence of the church's burial records, public death certificates represents the best source for identifying individuals interred at Bethel Burying Ground. These records, too, are incomplete and, had they survived intact, would not have captured every death in the city, much less in its poorest communities. Using these materials, historian Terry Buckalew has counted 2,383 interments at the Queen Street site between 1810 and 1864. But study of another record group, the city's annual bills of mortality, suggests figure could be significantly too low. Combining the two data sets and extrapolating from the years 1827 – 1830 (the last years in which these figures may be cross-referenced) it appears that somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 bodies were inhumed at the site during its period of active use. Regardless of the precise tally, the burial ground had evidently reached maximum capacity by the late 1860s.¹⁷

On January 1, 1869 the Church trustees entered a 10 year lease agreement with Barnabas H. Bartol, a sugar refiner, for the lot to be used as storage for wagons and drays provided "that the remains of the dead who are interred in the said lot of ground are to be allowed to remain there undisturbed." Bartol asked to be released from the agreement in 1873, and the church's trustees consented in return for a cash payment and the promise that Bartol would erect a good fence around the property. By this time, the site had become unkempt, and its condition did not improve. A decade later, the Philadelphia Board of Health began issuing nuisance complaints. 18

The subsequent transformation of Bethel Burying Ground, first into Weccacoe Square (1890), then into Weccacoe School Garden (1904), and finally into Weccacoe Playground (1910), has been recounted above and need not be rehearsed here. From the perspective of burial ground preservation, educational and recreational use of the site has been a mixed blessing. While these adaptations appear to have left most of the burial ground (or at least the burials themselves) undisturbed, tree planting campaigns and the construction of amenities such as a shelter (1924, with later additions) and a spray pool (1954) have undoubtedly taken a toll. The discovery of the burial ground in the early $21^{\rm st}$ century offers an opportunity to halt further damage and begin the overdue work of commemoration and interpretation.

¹⁶ Mooney and Morrell, "Phase IB," 2.8; Buckalew, 2.

¹⁷ Buckalew, 2.8-2.10.

¹⁸ Buckalew, 8-9.

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Name of Property		County and State	

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Name of Property

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County and State
Bethel Burying Ground

Philadelphia Pennsylvania

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e of Property Previous documentation on	file (NPS):	County and State
	on of individual listing (36 CFR 6	7) has been requested
previously listed in the		
	eligible by the National Register	
designated a National H		
	merican Buildings Survey #	
	merican Engineering Record #	
recorded by Historic Ar	merican Landscape Survey #	
Primary location of addition	nal data:	
State Historic Preservat	ion Office	
Other State agency		
Federal agency		
Local government		
University		
Other		
Name of repository:		
10. Geographical Data		
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Use either the UTM system o	r latitude/longitude coordinates	
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2. Latitude:	Longitude:	
3. Latitude:	Longitude:	

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onal Park Service / National Register of Historic Places Registration Form Form 10-900 OMB No. 1024-0018	
date:	County and State
Additional Documentation	
Submit the following items with the completed form:	
• Maps: A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute serie location.	es) indicating the property's
• Sketch map for historic districts and properties having larg resources. Key all photographs to this map.	ge acreage or numerous
• Additional items: (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO fo	or any additional items.)
Photographs	
Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each imate (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) of to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the nat photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and deevery photograph.	or larger. Key all photographer number must correspond to me of the photographer,
Photo Log	
Name of Property:	
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Name of Property		County and State
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Photographer:		
Date Photographed:		
Description of Photograph(s camera:) and number, include description	n of view indicating direction of
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OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior

NPS Form 10-900

National Park Service / National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications 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.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.