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 How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an 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. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name  Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto

other names/site number __________________________

2. Location

street & number  36 Amity Street

[ ] not for publication

city or town  Staten Island

[ ] vicinity

state  New York  code  NY  county  Richmond  code  085  zip code  10305

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] 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 as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [X] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [ ] nationally [ ] statewide [X] locally. ([ ] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation  Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([ ] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title  Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

[ ] entered in the National Register

[ ] see continuation sheet

[ ] determined eligible for the National Register

[ ] see continuation sheet

[ ] determined not eligible for the National Register

[ ] removed from the National Register

[ ] other (explain)

Signature of the Keeper  date of action
5. Classification

<table>
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<th>Ownership of Property</th>
<th>Category of Property</th>
<th>Number of Resources within Property</th>
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<td>[x] district</td>
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<td>[ ] public-local</td>
<td>[ ] site</td>
<td>Noncontributing: buildings 1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>[ ] structure</td>
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Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(enter categories from instructions)

Religion: shrine
Social: meeting hall
Culture: festival grounds

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Religion: shrine
Social: meeting hall
Culture: festival grounds

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Italian American grotto

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete
walls concrete, stones, shells,
glass marbles, aluminum
roof asphalt
other

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)
7. Description

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto is located in a residential neighborhood on a lot that runs from Amity Street to Virginia Avenue, in the Rosebank section of northeast Staten Island, Richmond County, New York. Construction of the distinctive concrete and stone folk art structure was begun in 1937 and work continues on it and the surrounding setting to the present day. This traditional cultural property is significant as an intact example of Italian-American religious design in New York City. The grotto is the primary focal point of the property owned by The Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel of Rosebank for Mutual Aid. Also located on the grounds is a contributing frame meeting hall (c. 1920), several small ancillary structures, and numerous objects and landscape features including small shrines, memorials, a fountain, a brick path, and mature maple trees (see attached sketch map). The property consists of one contributing structure (the grotto), one contributing building (the meeting hall), and one contributing site (encompassing landscape features and ancillary structures and objects).

A chain link fence surrounds the property on all sides. The formal approach to the grotto (#1 on sketch map) is on Amity Street through a pair of square ashlar posts crowned with hexagonal-shaped concrete planters embedded with pebbles. A small concrete sign with “Mount Carmel” spelled out in pebbles is mounted on the chain link fence directly to the left of the entrance. The walk leading to the grotto is inlaid with brick in a herringbone pattern with stone edging. The walk is lit at night by floodlights on tall poles and strings of white lights hung between the poles and the grotto. Trimmed shrubs alternating with cast concrete planters, painted white, line the walk.

Mount Carmel Society Meeting Hall (#2 on map), built c. 1920, is located in the northwest corner of the lot (west of the brick walk), facing Amity Street. This one-story, rectangular-plan, frame building with raised basement has a parged foundation, aluminum siding, and an asphalt-shingled roof. The hall is gable roofed with a hipped roof section with dormer at the front (north end). The north façade is three bays wide with a center entrance and concrete steps leading up to a tall stoop. Other entrances are located at the recessed northeast corner and at the east elevation (leading to the social club in the basement). Fenestration is regular with one-over-one double-hung sash.

The interior plan consists of a large, open meeting hall at the first floor with a bathroom and small apartment in the rear. Of special note in the southwest corner of the main meeting room is a restored statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel which had been severely damaged in a fire at a local church. Another meeting room is in the basement with a bar and kitchen. The walls in the two halls have been finished in c. 1950s wood paneling. Mount Carmel Hall continues to be used for social gatherings and meetings of the men’s club and the women’s auxiliary (established after World War II). The club cellar was once used as a private cantina while the upper-floor hall is the setting for special functions and rites of passage.
The grassy area east of the walk features religious statuary and objects of various dates. The first of these is a war memorial (#3 on map) located in the center of a square planting bed with rosebushes. The memorial, installed c. 1946, appears to be constructed of various recycled pieces including a partial fluted stone column, an open-tiered square section of concrete with scalloped edges and statuary, and a cross at the top. The memorial lists the names of society members who died in combat. The next feature is a concrete planter encrusted with pebbles. A statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is situated in the middle of this “organic shrine” and is framed by an arch with a string of blue lights (#4 on map). It is surrounded by three small statues of kneeling children. South of this is the tombstone-like memorial to Vito Russo consisting of a brass plaque mounted on a granite stone (#5 on map). The stone is flanked by statues of the Sacred Heart and the Virgin Mary while the area in front is a flowerbed defined by a concrete edge. Behind the Vito Russo memorial is a concrete block path, perpendicular to the main walk, that leads to an exuberant shrine with a statue of St. Anthony of Padua placed in the niche (#6 on map). Built c. 1938, this shrine is brick in the back with a concrete front encrusted with pebbles, seashells, and glass marbles. Nearby are a large peony bush and a concrete planter decorated with pebbles and a Virgin Mary statue. Set at an angle to the main walk is a 1950s pebble-faced concrete marker with planters at the base, lettering done with pebbles (God; Our Lady of Mount Carmel Bless All), and a scalloped top (#7 on map). (It is interesting to note that the two “S” letters in the word Bless are set backwards in the concrete. One of the society members said that this was the result of a grandson helping his grandfather with the lettering.)

On the grassy strip between the main walk and the meeting hall are a pebble-encrusted concrete planter and shrine. The planter rises up in two tiers and is crowned by a statue of St. Joseph. The shrine, installed in the 1960s, is set at an angle to the walk and is U-shaped in plan with a padded kneeler, a series of pointed arch niches, numerous statues, planters, and a large Roman cross at the top (#9 on map). At the end of the walk, directly in front of the center bay of the grotto is a two-tiered concrete fountain ornamented with pebbles and scalloped edges.

The approximately thirty-foot high grotto (#1 on map) is laid out in a serpentine fashion, with the central chapel adjoined by two flanking wings stretching in either direction terminating in a chapel at the west end and an apse at the east end. The grotto structure is built of a combination of concrete, stone blocks, and brick. The stone blocks of the grotto resemble the Belgian blocks once used for street paving in New York City. These can be seen in the center chapel and the walls flanking it. Most of the wall surfaces are decorated with smooth round stones, as well as shells, colorful bicycle reflectors, and glass marbles inlaid into cement in various shapes that include crosses, triangles, ovals, stars, and diamonds. In addition, a host of religious statues and framed prints are found in alcoves and crevices, and on shelves. Some of the religious figures and scenes displayed at the grotto include the Virgin Mary, the Pieta, St. Jude, St. John the Baptist, St. Gerard, St. Alphonse, St. Anne, St. Michael, St. Anthony, the Holy Family Nativity
Scene, St. Lucy, St. Theresa, St. Barbara, St. Francis of Assisi, and others. The walls also contain built-in cement flowerpots where succulents grow.

The central chamber is horseshoe-shaped with a smooth plaster ceiling. This chamber houses an altar, a padded kneeler, and an arched niche where a statue of the Virgin Mary stands. There are numerous other niches where other statuary, crosses and candles are found. Rising from the grotto are a series of towers, some topped by crosses, housing religious statues. In addition, crown-like protrusions ornament the top of the central and west chamber, and the east wing alcove. A tall pyramidal-roofed belltower is located above the central chamber.

Behind the grotto to the south is a picnic pavilion (#10 on map), cinder block garage (built c. 1930s; #11 on map), food concession booths (#12 on map), and walk-in coolers used during the annual feast days. With the exception of the garage, most of these sheds date from post World War II to the present. The ancillary structures represent the ongoing use of this traditional cultural property.

Located just east of the various picnic pavilions and food concession booths is a row of maple trees which provide shade to the lawn area. Vehicular access to the property is from Virginia Avenue where a single stone post with stone-encrusted cement planter at the top marks the entrance to the asphalt drive and parking lot. East of the driveway is a concrete performance stage (c. 1960; #13 on map). The grassy area at the southeast corner of the property was acquired by the society within the last 20 years to accommodate additional parking for the annual festival. Light posts can be found along the east edge of the grounds.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto

Richmond County, New York

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.)

[X] A Property 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.

[X] C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics 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 boxes that apply.)

[X] 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 of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance:
(Enter categories from instructions)

Art

Ethnic Heritage

Religion

Social History

Period of Significance:
1937-present

Significant Dates:
1937-38

Significant Person:

Cultural Affiliation:
Italian American

Architect/Builder:
Russo, Vito; and other members of the

Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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 Building Survey

[ ] recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary location of additional data:
[ ] State Historic Preservation Office

[ ] Other State agency

[ ] Federal Agency

[ ] Local Government

[ ] University

[ ] Other repository: ____________________________

# # #
8. Statement of Significance

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Rosebank, Staten Island, New York is culturally and architecturally significant as an example of Italian American vernacular-religious architecture in the United States. As a vernacular structure built over time, the Grotto is a tangible expression of Staten Island's Italian American community. Its role in sustaining this community's traditions is reflected in its setting, design and use – both as a pilgrimage for Catholics throughout New York City and as a prominent presence in the daily life of the Rosebank, Staten Island community. Though its present appearance largely reflects work completed in 1937-38, the grotto and its setting are considered a work in progress by the members of the society. It continues to be used as the setting for religious practices, the annual festival, and as a social gathering place. The grotto clearly reflects the values and practices of this traditional group. This traditional cultural property meets Criterion A for its association with the ethnic, social, and religious history of the local Italian American community. It is significant under Criterion C as an intact example of religious folk art design. The grotto was designed and built by the voluntary labor of the lay religious society's members and is a testament to the collaborative enterprise that defines this Italian American mutual aid association. The Rosebank grotto is a well preserved example of a religious structure created by lay Italian immigrants that was not initiated nor maintained by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. Privately constructed and maintained religious structures were prevalent in the New York metropolitan area in the first half of the twentieth century, and continue today, in modified form, with the creation of smaller yard shrines in front of private homes. The Rosebank shrine represents a continuation of a deep-seated tradition of religious activity surrounding natural and man-made grottos in Christian Europe and in particular Italy. The grotto's stone-studded ornamentation and rough surface reflects the aesthetics of southern Italian vernacular architecture. This aesthetic is also evident in the setting with its ancillary structures and objects. The additional use of sea shells and bicycle reflectors demonstrate an appreciation for frugality and an awareness of the spiritual power of objects long associated with water and light. In addition, the society's meeting hall (c. 1920) is one of the few freestanding buildings in New York City that survives as the original meeting hall for a turn-of-the-century Italian immigrant mutual aid society. The contributing hall served as a workshop for the creation of the grotto and continues to be used as a social gathering place for society members and the community.

In October of 1937, a group of Italian immigrant men began constructing the Rosebank grotto. As members of the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, they built the structure on property owned by the voluntary association.

Italian immigrants began arriving in Rosebank in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but the majority settled sometime between 1900 and 1915 (Thompson 1972, 12). Present-day Rosebank families trace their roots primarily to towns in Italy's Apulia, Calabria, and Campania regions, as
well as to Sicilians fleeing xenophobic hysteria and violence in New Orleans (Mangione and Moreale 1992, 200-13). In the early part of the twentieth century, immigrant men worked as laborers either in construction, on the railroad, as longshoremen on the nearby docks, or, like the vast majority, in some form of agricultural work (Thompson 1972, 27). It wasn't until the 1930s that Italian immigrants and their American-born children were employed in civil service jobs (Ibid., 43), with a number working on W.P.A. projects and as sanitation workers. Italians operated local factories such as the now defunct DeJonge paper mill and the Sun Chemical dye plant, known locally as the "Color Works."

Contemporary Rosebank's narrow streets are lined with single detached homes and one-family rowhouses, contributing to the area's particular "hometown" feeling. Of special note are the many well-maintained gardens surrounding the residences. Children and grandchildren of immigrants still live in the houses purchased by progenitors before World War II. People who visit the grotto from other parts of the city, especially Italian Americans, are struck by the area's ethnic continuity.

To help themselves meet the challenge of living in the United States, Italian immigrants formed mutual aid societies which offered such benefits as unemployment and burial insurance. These voluntary associations were responsible for introducing and organizing religious processions and street feasts in honor of the Virgin Mary and patron saints of Italian towns. On Staten Island, immigrants from Contorsi and Auletta, neighboring towns in the province of Salerno in Campania, celebrated two separate feasts in honor of St. Donato. The Contorsi community in Thompkinsville held their festivities on August 7th and the Rosebank Aulettesi followed with their own celebration ten days later.

While the public adoration of St. Donato on the island ceased in the late 1950s, the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel continues to celebrate its spiritual patroness with a procession and outdoor feast. Today the lay organization maintains the upkeep of the elaborate shrine and celebrates the Madonna's July 16 feast with an annual procession through neighborhood streets and festa activities staged on society grounds. Devotees visit the shrine daily and during the two weekend-long festivities to pray before the statues of the Virgin Mary and the Roman Catholic saints housed at the grotto. A weakened paese, or town, affiliation was supplanted in Rosebank by a national Italian identity presumably because no one Italian group predominated in the area and/or as a result of bigotry experienced at the hands of other ethnic groups in local positions of power, primarily Germans and the Irish. Whatever the reasons, the figure of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was well suited to bridging divisive regionalism because of her popularity throughout southern Italy (Orsi 1985).

The Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was founded in 1903 as a self-help organization open to all Italians, irrespective of their town or regional affiliation. (While membership is now available to any Roman Catholic regardless of his or her ethnicity, the organization remains a
predominately Italian one.) Society members originally met in the basement of St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church (171 St. Mary's Avenue, corner of Thompsons Avenue) which had been established in 1902 as Staten Island's first Italian "national" or "ethnic" parish. It was under the tenure (1903-14) of the society's first president Andrew J. Palma (and father of former Borough President Joseph A. Palma) that the organization purchased land and erected a meeting hall (Staten Island Advance, July 5, 1940). (The hall was listed as 16 Amity Place in newspaper articles before World War II and was subsequently changed to the present-day 36 Amity Street.)

In a 1939 Staten Island Advance article, Vito Russo, the society's second president, explained at length the purpose and origins of the mutual-aid society. Although offered in pure journalese, and taken in part from the society's 1903 certificate of incorporation, Russo's quoted words are an indication of how the immigrant organization was perceived at the time:

This organization was banded together under the guidance of a benevolent and religious spirit. Its function was to aid the people in sickness and distress, to promote a spirit of good fellowship and fraternity, a social and religious environment. This society existed along the lines of a father and son relationship. Many of the members today are the sons of that little group of Italian immigrants who 36 years ago symbolized the Americanism of the Italo-American of today. (July 13, 1939)

The society's hall historically functioned as a male-only social club where men gathered after work free from the responsibilities and restraints of the domestic space. The society hall was a home away from home where men cooked their own meals without the help or presence of women. (The women's auxiliary was established after World War II and today, its approximately 40 members numerically dominate their male counterparts by 2 to 1.) The hall's semi-submerged basement was the center of social activity for the organization's male membership. The cellar, borrowed out of the earth with brawn and pick, functioned as a private cantina where members collectively pressed their own wine and enjoyed it as part of Saturday night gatherings of good talk and laughter. The club cellar also served as a workshop where members cast stone-encrusted pieces for the grotto. In addition, the hall's upper floor has been a place where society members and neighbors celebrated rites of passage and annual holidays.

Today, the property surrounding the grotto offers a tranquil setting for pilgrims during the course of the year, a refuge from frenetic urban life. The grounds are used by the association’s two-week festival in July honoring Our Lady of Mount Carmel and by community groups who rent the grounds for barbecues and picnics.

Each July 16th, the society celebrates the feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel with an annual procession through neighborhood streets. The procession consists of society members sporting ceremonial sashes, a religious standard depicting Our Lady of Mount Carmel, a marching brass band playing religious hymns as well as Italian and American popular songs, and neighborhood residents and devotees of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The procession departs from the grotto
and makes its way to St. Mary's Church. After the panegyric mass, the procession moves through Rosebank and comes to an end at the grotto.

The society also stages a festa on the property during the two weekends around the July 16th holiday. During this time booths are erected on the grounds that offer feast goers an assortment of food and games of chance and skill. There is nightly entertainment with local bands performing Italian and American popular music from the raised stage located on the property. The Rosebank festa differs significantly from other Italian American religious events in New York City because it does not take place in the streets but on private property. As a result, feast goers are not channeled down a narrow and crowded street lined with booths but meander on the property. Children are able to run freely on the grassy area. The overall atmosphere is significantly less dense and cacophonous than other street feasts in the city.

Vito Russo is credited with being the driving force behind the construction of the grotto and is intimately identified with the site. Vito Louis Russo was born on November 6, 1885 in the town of Sala Consilina, in the province of Salerno. (Sala Consilina is approximately 20 kilometers south of Pola, the Campanian town from which immigrants transported their devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel to East Harlem, Manhattan.) Orphaned at an early age, Vito and his younger brother Giovanni immigrated to the United States with their step-parents and lived for awhile in Manhattan's Lower East Side until settling in Rosebank in March 1895. Vito and Giovanni married the American-born sisters Theresa and Lilly Cavallo, respectively. Vito and Theresa married around 1909, the year their first son, Michael, was born. The couple had seven children, two girls and five boys, the majority of whom were born at 6 Smith Street. After serving as president of the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel for 25 years, Russo was "unanimously" elected "president-for-life" in 1939, a position he held until his death on February 22, 1954.

It is believed that the grotto was related to the death of Vito's youngest son, five-year-old Vito Jr., who died in 1935 of pneumonia, and that Russo's creative undertaking aided and complemented his grieving for the loss of his namesake. Russo's model for the Staten Island grotto was based on a bricolage assemblage of Italian folk art and architectural forms, namely, natural and man-made grottos, churches and other religious structures, and domestic altars.

From pre-Christian times to the present, the grotto has been a major locus of religious activity in the West. Hermits and monks (as well as bandits) sought refuge from society in caves and their subterranean temples in time became major pilgrimage sites. The cult of Our Lady of Mount Carmel has its origins in the first quarter of the thirteenth century when a monastic order established itself in a cavernous monastery carved into the sides of Mount Carmel, a holy site located in Palestine (McGough 1967, 113-14; de la Madre de Dios and Steggink 1967, 114-180).
It has been noted that the historical appeal of the grotto is attributed to its liminal position between the mundane world and the mysterious and often forbidding underground (Miller 1982, 11). The mountain's gaping hole is not only a passage way to the nether regions, but also a source from which the supernatural spring forth. Jesus was originally believed to have been born not in a manger but a grotto, and Easter celebrates his resurrection from a cavernous tomb. It is at the grotto entrance where the divine, often in the form of the Virgin Mary, is made manifest. Religious iconography has historically situated the niche as "the place of the epiphany of God" (Burckhardt 1967, 75).

"Religious replication is a critical aspect of Catholic culture" that attempts to tap the powers of these sacred sites. This element of Catholicism is witnessed in the numerous reproductions of the Lourdes grotto undertaken in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (McDannell 1995, 132-162). After Bernadette Soubirous was canonized in December 1933, there was a proliferation of grotto construction on church grounds in the United States, especially parishes with large Italian congregations: Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Mount Vernon, erected 1947; St. Margaret's Shrine in Bridgeport, Connecticut, begun in 1941; and, King of Peace Church in Philadelphia, erected in 1943 (Schiavo 1949, 802-6, 546-57, 927-31).

The importance of the grotto as a key cultural symbol cannot be underestimated. In America, Italian immigrants Baldassare Forestiere and Umberto Gabello tunnelled sprawling subterranean dwellings in Fresno, California and Julesberg, Colorado, respectively (Di Stasi 1989, 21; Mangione and Morreale 1992, 230).

The southern Italian landscape, especially the area surrounding Naples, is rich in natural caves formed out of volcanic residue and artificial grottos carved from the rock's surface (Miller 1982, 22-23). In an account of his journey through southern Italy in the early part of the twentieth century, the English traveler Norman Douglas sardonically entitled a chapter of his book, "Cave-Worship," to emphasize the importance of grottos in southern Italian vernacular Catholicism (Douglas 1983, 23-30, see also Scotti 1959, 221-226). The grotto is a pervasive motif in oral and written narratives explaining the origins of popular Italian religious cults: where saints once found sanctuary (St. Angelo, St. Rocco); where a statue of the Virgin Mary was uncovered by a shepherd (Our Lady of the Snows in Sanza); where the bones of St. Rosalia were miraculously discovered on the outskirts of Palermo; or, where St. Michael the Archangel appeared in Manfredonia. (St. Michael is Sala Consilina's spiritual patron.) It is quite possible Russo also saw cave-like structures here in the United States, such as the miniature grotto of Fatima in Harlem's Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church during one of his pilgrimages to the Manhattan feast (Orsi 1985) or even the impressive "Lourdes of America" that was under construction in the late 1930s at the Italian parish of St. Lucy's Church in the Bronx (Bianco 1980, 158-60).
Another source of inspiration was a domestic shrine to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Russo created out of paper, cardboard, and aluminum foil in a second floor room of his Smith Street home before building the grotto. In 1974, Vito's eldest son, Michael, was quoted in the Staten Island Advance saying that his father used photographs of Italian churches to create miniature "cathedrals" in the room as a domestic shrine (July 17, 1974). Russo’s indoor chapel was already up by 1935 before his son Vito Jr.'s death. The Staten Island grotto is a composite of grottos and architectural forms worked out by Russo and fellow society members who were involved in the shrine's construction. The collaborative effort of society members, along with the assistance of unaffiliated neighborhood men, played a significant role in the grotto's construction.

The headline for a May 7, 1938 Staten Island Advance article on the grotto reads, "Shrine Built in Spare Time of Members is Dedicated." It goes on to report that the grotto, which was begun in October of the previous year, was "built by the 46 members of the Mount Carmel Society . . . during their spare time after working hours." Four men were featured in that article: the masonry work was attributed to Umberto Summa (sometimes written Somma) of 191 St. Mary's Avenue and Angelo Madrazzo of 182 St. Mary's Avenue; Russo is given credit for the grotto's stone decorations; and, Vincent Lupoli of 294 St. Mary's Avenue painted figures on the apse's walls and vault (which no longer exist).

According to this article that one hundred sacks of cement were used in the initial masonry work. The stone blocks used in the central chapel were gathered by society members who worked on W.P.A. jobs throughout the city. The brick foundation of the two flanking alcoves and the three towers atop the central apse were made at some undetermined later date. The smooth stones that cover the shrine's surface were collected by Russo, Chirelli, and other society members who, employed by the sanitation department, would stop along their work routes to pick up the stones and carry them back to the society grounds in bushel baskets. The stone-studded grotto was assembled from sections cast in hand-crafted molds. The stones were pressed into sandbox forms into which cement was poured. When the cement hardened, the wooden frames were dismantled and the stone-encrusted sections were removed and secured in place with cement, wire, and/or metal rods.

The grotto's stone-studded ornamentation and rough surface reflects the aesthetics of southern Italian vernacular architecture (Sciotta 1989, 190-193; "Stucco and Stones" 1981.). This aesthetic is also evident many of the smaller structures and objects on the grounds including planters and shrines.

Two interrelated decorative elements, water and light, enhance the grotto's semiotic message of sacredness. Since antiquity, natural and man-made grottos in Europe have been linked to the calming and salutary effects of the primal force of liquid life. Recycled shells and smooth, round stones collected from the city's shores emerge from the Rosebank grotto's surface to echo Western aesthetic and spiritual precepts that imagine the seashell as the birth canal of female
deities and the architectural containers of religious statues. Springs of curative waters miraculously surging to the earth’s surface, accompanying Marian apparitions, find their counterpart in the fountain that bubbles before the main chapel, where the statues of the Madonna is housed.

The brilliance of divine light and blinding revelation reverberates in the presence of decorative elements popular in religious vernacular structures. In addition to shells and stones, the grotto is inlaid with bicycle reflectors, translucent plastic flowers, and glass marbles. An aureole of aluminum foil emanates from oval religious prints set in cement. A multicolored stained-glass lampshade crowns an alcove roof containing a statue of St. Ann and the Christ Child. The grotto is softly illuminated by votive candles left by visitors. Electric lights outline, frame, and accentuate the religious statues and architecture. The shrine’s decorative stonework, especially above the main chapel, is reminiscent of traditional lighting that once arched across city streets and outlined church facades for religious feasts in Italian American communities.

Since July 1938, when an estimated 200 people attended the grotto’s inauguration, the Rosebank shrine has been growing. The present day shrine is the result of close to sixty years of work and it is still not considered complete. Contemporary society members are planning an arch they say was originally conceived by Vito Russo. The hall and the property have also been added to and repaired in the course of the past six decades. Society members are increasingly concerned about the grotto’s future. The Society’s updated bylaws (1984) state that one of the main purposes of the organization is the “preservation of our shrine, a memorial to the Blessed Mother.”

The Rosebank grotto is a well preserved example of a religious structure created by lay Italian immigrants that was not initiated nor maintained by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. Privately constructed and maintained religious buildings were prevalent in the New York metropolitan area in the first half of the twentieth century, and continue today, in modified form, with the creation of smaller yard shrines in front of private homes (Sciorra 1989, 185-198; Sciorra 1998, 57-64; Tomasi 1975, 96; White and Willensky 1978, 358-359). These buildings are not conceived as contesting the authority of local parishes, but are created as a form of devotion that combines artistry and spirituality in a unified whole.

The grotto embodies a series of architectural chronotypes, i.e., temporal and spatial elements fused into an emotionally charged and value-laden artistic whole (Bakhtin 1988: 84-85, 243). Three interrelated time/space coordinates are superimposed on the contemporary topography of Staten Island: a primal, nonhistoric site; nineteenth-century Italy; and pre-World War II, Italian American New York City. The calendrical festival and accompanying procession, with its cycled mix of sacred and secular components, further expand the threshold through which these and other monuments and places emerge onto the Rosebank landscape.
The perception of the grotto as a timeless fantasyscape was articulated best by a woman commenting to her husband and daughter one afternoon in late June 1991: “It looks ancient, like a jeweled city” (Sciorra 1993, 220). This fairy-tale architecture, with its turrets, crownlike roof, and stone surface sprouting verdure, most often evokes an imagined Italy of old.

Visitors point to the shrine’s meticulous handicraft and “peasant” rusticity as evidence of a love of labor proudly proclaimed as an ethnic marker. This “Old World” craftsmanship at the service of religious devotion is aesthetically appreciated and highly valued, albeit believed to be out-of-sync with contemporary American society. The revered image of conjoined artistry and spirituality is inextricably linked to an overpowering nostalgia for “the old neighborhood,” inhabited by immigrant parents and a vibrant Italian community life. For Italian American devotees of Our Lady of Mount Carmel who once attended the annual feast in the now predominately Latino East Harlem, the Rosebank grotto constitutes a key site in a constellation of alternative feasts to the Madonna that includes Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Hammonton, New Jersey.

Pilgrims from all over the New York City metropolis, and as far away as Canada and Italy, travel to Rosebank to kneel quietly before the Virgin Mary or stand before the host of statues scattered across alcoves and ledges. The supplicants leave written prayers tucked in the grotto’s crevices and beneath statuary, and, during feast time, leave an incandescent grove of candles emanating from the central chapel. These texts reveal the simple truth that prayer’s communicative function is believed to be amplified at this special site in Rosebank. In the history of the grotto, people seeking solace from the divine have walked on their knees up the brick-patterned walkway to the statue of the Virgin Mary.

The shrine is augmented and transformed through the ongoing placement of ceremonial offerings such as candles and flowers. People donate their families’ old and paint-chipped religious figures to the grotto instead of destroying them. During the winter months, the religious figures are wrapped in plastic for safekeeping and stored in the apse behind a removable Plexiglas door or in the basement of the society hall.

The grotto has been a source of tension between the local Roman Catholic clergy and society members since its creation. While the conflict is infused with particular contemporary details, it has its roots in the historic implementation of and opposition to the Catholic church’s hegemony over the lay religion practiced in southern Italy and the United States, in particular Staten Island. The Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel’s involvement in the continuous search for meaning and its evolving self-representation vis-à-vis its sacred environment places its members and sympathetic neighborhood residents in conflict with local representatives of the Church.

The tension between the church and the society has its roots in the broader context of popular religion in the *Mezzogiorno*, or southern Italy. Richard Gambino has pointed out the
"inescapable truth" that there has existed a "... historic bitter animosity between the Church and the people of the Mezzogiorno, an antipathy which is far from resolved in today's relations between the Catholic Church in America and Italian-Americans (Gambino 1975: 229). While deeply religious, southern Italian agricultural workers at the time of immigration had little reverence for the church as an institution. In the Mezzogiorno, priests often came from landowning families and the priesthood was a means of solidifying mutual class interests (Gambino 1975: 229-30). Transferred to a southern paese, a priest often aligned himself with the local landowning aristocracy which mercilessly exploited the contadini, or peasants (Vecoli 1969: 229). As a result, there existed among southern Italian agricultural laborers a popular anticlericalism, which was often expressed in "attitudes of familiar contempt" (Gambino 1975: 229). Regular attendance at Sunday mass was not a primary concern for the contadini. "The parish priest appeared to be regarded as a functionary who performed the necessary rites of baptism, marriages, and funerals" (Gambino 1975: 229). Though official obligations were ignored, southern Italians considered themselves good Catholics.

When the Italian immigrants arrived in the United States, they were confronted with an Irish-dominated Catholic church that viewed their religious traditions as an unhealthy mix of pre-Christian beliefs and practices. In response to ecclesiastical prejudice, Italian immigrants petitioned for their own churches, where their religious customs would be understood. As Silvano Tomasi points out in his history of Italian parishes in New York City, Italian priests and their poor parishioners had very different agendas for establishing separate ethnic parishes. The former were "more concerned with ecclesiastical politics, their equality in the diocesan structure, and freedom of action" (Tomasi 1975: 122), while the latter sought official sanction of their worldview and a familiar institutional home that would provide sanctuary from the daily bewilderment, toil, and injustices of the New World.

The construction of the Rosebank grotto created a new arena for friction between the parishioners and the clergy. On May 6, 1938, Monsignor Cataggio sent his Irish assistant pastor, Andrew J. Farricker, to bless the society's recent architectural wonder. The Staten Island Advance reporter covering the event saw fit to quote part of Father Farricker's message, delivered to the estimated two hundred people attending the grotto's dedication: "'This shrine is here for your use - to come here whenever you want to,' said Father Farricker, 'but it does not take the place of the church. This cannot fill the needs of the church for you. Always remember that the Mother of God is second in your hearts and that Jesus, her son, is first in worship'" (May 7, 1938). Very similar sentiments about the Madonna and the grotto as an alternative site for worship would be voiced during the 1980s by Cataggio's successor.

Antagonism between the society and the local clergy deepened under the parish leadership of Monsignor John Villani (1958-83) and after the death of Vito Russo in 1954. A central part of the society's annual celebration is the procession through the streets on July 16. Marchers parade from the society grounds to St. Joseph's Church to attend a high mass in honor of Our Lady of
Mount Carmel, and then return to the grotto. Until the late 1950s, the society marched not with a religious statue, as is common in other Italian American processions in New York, but with the society banner. In 1959, when the old wooden church was about to be replaced by the present-day brick building, the pastor offered to return a life-size figure of the Madonna that the society had originally donated to the parish.

In the early 1960s the society began using the statue in their procession against Monsignor Villani’s wishes. The Monsignor subsequently decided that the church would not return the statue to the society.

According to society members, the current pastor promised to return the statue soon after coming to Rosebank in 1983. Then he reversed himself, declaring the archdiocese would not permit the society to parade the religious statue. Heated debates ensued, regarding money collected at the grotto and during the procession, a portion of which the society in turn gave to the church in the form of ever-increasing “donations” for the July 16 panegyric mass. The pastor soon resurrected a century-old argument first used by the Irish American clergy, which characterized lay organizers as unsavory characters who profited from the feast at the expense of the Roman Catholic church (Vecoli 1969: 234-35). Each year, during the society-sponsored high mass, the pastor publicly vilified and maligned the association from the pulpit, attacking parishioners for placing Mary above Jesus and accused association members of not attending weekly mass.

Utilization of the grotto as an alternative site for worship sets the stage for discussion and interpretation of religious belief that directly challenges official orthodoxy and authoritative discourse. By the late 1980s, the conflict had escalated to the point where the pastor refused to speak or work with members of his own parish, i.e., representatives of the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. To add insult to injury, the pastor started a procession and outdoor bazaar in honor of the church’s patron, St. Joseph, in 1988. While the stated motive for the recently invented tradition was to raise money for the parochial school, many believe it was a deliberate attempt to “show up” the Mount Carmel festa and establish the church-sponsored event as the “real feast of Rosebank.” It is ironic that the celebration is not held on or near the canonized carpenter’s March 19 feast day, but in May to honor St. Joseph the Worker, the spiritual patron of those who labored on the grotto, and in a month traditionally associated with the Madonna.

The members of the society ended their historic affiliation with St. Joseph’s Church in the summer of 1989 by sponsoring a high mass in honor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel at the predominantly Irish St. Mary’s Church (1124 Bay Street), where they were welcomed and made to feel “at home.” This action demonstrates that while religious tensions between Irish Americans and Italian Americans may have abated, intraethnic animosity in spiritual matters continues. A number of Rosebank residents, including society members, are deeply saddened by the fissure, given the intimate association once enjoyed by the society and St. Joseph’s Church.
Folklorists, social historians, and cultural critics have examined the ways in which vernacular culture, and in particular popular religion, contests the official ideology of the dominant culture (Cirese 1982; Limon 1983; Lombardi-Satriani 1975; Thompson 1991; Williams 1988: 120-27; Yoder 1974). While the grotto does not directly "contest the social order through the direct symbolic statement of opposing values," it does offer "critical alternatives to those imposed from without and from above the social structure" (Limon 1986: 222). The members of the Society of Mount Carmel do not seek to break from the Roman Catholic church, nor did they set out to purposely challenge their spiritual leaders. They do request full participation in their church, based on their clergy's acceptance of their religious beliefs and behavior inherited from past ecclesiastical teachings. They are searching for a more democratic involvement with their church, instead of the antiquated authoritarianism that exists in their parish. Instead of being driven away, they want their voice to be heard on matters concerning a living religion, as practiced in the church as well as the streets. Rosebank's Italian Catholics join a chorus of diverse believers who envision a viable spirituality firmly rooted within the matrix of community life.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto retains a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. The grotto enshrines the community values of creativity and craftsmanship, religious conviction and ethnic tradition, and family and neighborhood. The traditional cultural significance of the grotto is derived from the role it plays in the local Italian American community's historically rooted beliefs, customs, and practices. The Mount Carmel Grotto is an extraordinary, vivid example of Italian American vernacular religious art, built and maintained by a private religious society. Such popular religious expressions are a distinctive and important feature of Italian American communities, serving as vital centers, on the boundaries of official church structures, for Italian religious experience and expression.
9. BIBLIOGRAPHY


Sciorra, Joseph. "Yard Shrines of Italian New York." *Culturefront* 7.3 (Fall 1998), 57-64.


"Stucco and Stones: The Look of Italy in Dobbs Ferry." (slide program) developed by Dobbs Ferry Historical Society, 1981.


Staten Island Advance articles:


"4-Day Fete Ends Tonight in Rosebank." July 18, 1960, 1.
Acreage of Property  less than one acre  

UTM References  
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)  

1  | 1 | 1 | 8 | | | 5 | 1 | 7 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 5 | | | | | | | | | 4 | 4 | 9 | 5 | 9 | 0 | 0 | | | 3  | 1 | 1 | 8 | | | | | | | | |  | 4  | 1 | 1 | 8 | | | | | | | | | 
Zone  Easting  Northing  Zone  Easting  Northing  

Verbal Boundary Description  
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)  

Boundary Justification  
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)  

11. Form Prepared By  (See continuation sheet)  
name/title  Contact: Kathleen A. Howe  
organization  NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation  date  August 10, 2000  
street & number  Peebles Island, P.O. Box 189  telephone  518-237-8643, ext. 3266  
city or town  Waterford  state  NY  zip code  12188-0189  

Additional Documentation  
Submit the following items with the completed form:  

Continuation Sheets  
Maps  
A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location  
A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.  

Photographs  
Representative black and white photographs of the property.  

Additional items  
(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)  

Property Owner  (Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO)  
name  Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel of Rosebank, Staten Island for Mutual Aid  
street & number  36 Amity Street  telephone  718-727-0909 

city or town  Staten Island  state  NY  zip code  10305  

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. 470 et seq.)  

Estimated Burden Statement: public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 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 Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20503  

10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description
The boundary of this nomination is outlined on the accompanying tax map.

Boundary Justification
The boundary includes the entire parcel associated with the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel of Rosebank, Staten Island, New York.
National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 11 Page 1

11. Form prepared by:

Dr. Joseph Sciorra
John D. Calandra Italian American Institute
Queens College
25 West 43rd Street
New York, New York 10036

(212) 642-2035
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
36 Amity Street
Staten Island, Richmond County, New York

Tax map, Richmond County. 1993.
Scale: ¾" = 100'
Nomination boundary shown by dark line.
PHOTO CONTINUATION SHEET

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
36 Amity Street
Staten Island, Richmond County, New York
Photographer: Kathleen A. Howe (unless noted otherwise below)
Date of photos: June 1, 2000
Location of negatives: NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Field Services Bureau
Peebles Island
P.O. Box 189
Waterford, NY 12188-0189

2. Center and east end of grotto. Facing south. (Photo by Dr. Joseph Sciorra, 1992; neg. on file at John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, 25 West 43rd St., New York, NY 10036)
3. Center and east end of grotto. Facing southeast.
4. East end of grotto. Facing east. (Photo by Dr. Joseph Sciorra, 1992; neg. on file at John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, 25 West 43rd St., New York, NY 10036)
5. Center chapel of grotto. Facing south. (Photo by Dr. Joseph Sciorra, 1992; neg. on file at John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, 25 West 43rd St., New York, NY 10036)
6. Center chapel of grotto. Facing south. (Photo by Dr. Joseph Sciorra, 1992; neg. on file at John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, 25 West 43rd St., New York, NY 10036)
7. Center chapel and west end of grotto. Facing southwest.
8. West end of grotto. Meeting hall in background. Facing west. (Photo by Dr. Joseph Sciorra, 1992; neg. on file at John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, 25 West 43rd St., New York, NY 10036)
15. View of the back of the grotto. Looking northeast.
17. Shrines and planters on east side of walk. Facing east.
20. Our Lady of Mount Carmel Statue in niche of first floor, meeting hall. Looking southwest.
22. Drive at Virginia Avenue entrance. Note stone post with planter and stage. Looking southeast.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond County, NY
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond County, N.Y.

4
Staten Island, Richmond Co.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel, N.Y.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond County, N.Y.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond County, N.Y.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond Co., N.Y.
13 N.Y.
Staten Island, Richmond Co.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel

14
Staten Island, Richmond Co.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel

13
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond Co., N.Y.
15

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond Co., N.Y.
16
Our Lady of Mount Carmel
Staten Island, Richmond Co., N.Y.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond Co., N.Y.

19
Our Lady of Mount Carmel
Grotto
Staten Island, Richmond Co., NY.
21
May 23, 2000

Ruth L. Pierpont
Director
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau
Peebles Island, P.O. Box 189
Waterford, NY 12188-0189

Re: Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto
36 Amity Street, Staten Island, New York

Dear Ms. Pierpont:

I write on behalf of Chairman Jennifer J. Raab in response to your request for comment on the eligibility of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Staten Island for the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

Mary Beth Betts, the Commission's Director of Research, has reviewed the materials submitted by the Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau and recommended that Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto appears to meet the criteria for inclusion on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

Sincerely yours,

Ronda Wist

cc: Jennifer J. Raab, Chairman
Mary Beth Betts, LPC
May 10, 2000

Hon. Bernadette Castro
Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Agency Building #1
Empire State Plaza
Albany, New York 12238

Dear Commissioner Castro:

The members of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Society are in total support of our grotto being nominated for landmark status. We would like to know that our grotto will be preserved over the years. The artistic achievement of the shrine is a rare form of artwork that should be able to be enjoyed by future generations. Many immigrants worked for many years to finish our shrine and we are very proud of it. Any help that you can give us in reaching this status would be enormously appreciated. Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Vito Russo
President
Honorable Bernadette Castro  
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation  
Agency Building #1  
Empire State Plaza  
Albany, New York 12238  

Dear Commissioner Castro:

It has come to my attention that the John D. Calandra Italian Institute of Queens College has nominated Our Lady of Mount Carmel Shrine in Rosebank, Staten Island, for landmark status on the National Registry of Significant Buildings.

The Rosebank Grotto is a well-preserved example of a religious building created by lay Italian immigrants that was not initiated nor maintained by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is my understanding that a vote will be taken in June on the Rosebank Grotto and I would urge an affirmative outcome.

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

John J. Marchi

JJM:imp
May 23, 2000

Hon. Bernadette Castro, Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Agency Building #1
Empire State Plaza
Albany, NY 12238

Dear Commissioner Castro:

I am very pleased to write this letter in support of the nomination by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Shrine in Rosebank, Staten Island for landmark status on the national registry of significant buildings.

This shrine/grotto was built by voluntary labor of the lay religious society’s members and is a testament to the collaborative enterprise that defined this Italian immigrant mutual aid association. The Rosebank grotto is a well-preserved example of a religious building created by lay Italian immigrants and the stone-studded ornamentation and rough surface reflects the aesthetics of southern Italian vernacular architecture.

I am proud to have the Mt. Carmel Society and Shrine in my district and can attest to their outstanding work in preserving this important landmark for Staten Island. Please give every consideration to giving this landmark status.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Vincent J. Gentile
State Senator
Hon. Bernadette Castro, Commissioner  
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation  
Agency Building #1  
Empire State Plaza  
Albany NY 12238

12 March 2000

Dear Commissioner Castro,

I am writing to endorse the nomination of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Rosebank, Staten Island, for designation as a national landmark. I do so with great enthusiasm. I know of the grotto and the remarkable narrative of its history and creation, due in large part to the sustained interpretive and documentary work of Joseph Sciorra. Dr. Sciorra has put the shrine not only map of preservationists and enthusiasts of urban vernacular landscapes. He has, perhaps more significantly, placed it in the context of lay Catholicism and how, especially in the late 1930s, Catholic voluntary societies assumed a pivotal role in sustaining religious communities and interpreting their faith in concrete, material practices such as shrines, pilgrimage sites, and grottoes.

The are several specific reasons why the grotto built by the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Rosebank should be designated as a national landmark. Dr. Sciorra’s excellent narrative history of the site makes these reasons clear. One concerns the iconography used on the grotto and the ways in which metaphorically potent materials—such as seashells and bicycle reflectors—make its spiritual authority apparent. Another concerns the fact that unlike many material markers of ethnic heritage, this grotto has a known and well documented history: we know who made it, their precise Italian regional roots, their occupations in New York upon arrival. A third reason touches on the ways in which the grotto serves as a pivot point for generational continuity in the neighborhood and parish. Still other reasons come readily to mind: it is a center of feasting for local residents; it is the great material artifact of men’s social life; it provides a focus for cultural activities that step outside the temporal and spatial parameters that limit everyday life.
The grotto is, quite simply, the supreme example of Italian-American cultural life in material form. It makes a persuasive case for the material culture of vernacular Catholicism. *There is nothing else like it.* It therefore warrants designation, interpretation, and protection.

I heartily support the nomination presented by Joseph Sciorra of the Calendra Italian American Institute. The Grotto of Our Lady of Mount Carmel most clearly and surely warrants designation as a national landmark.

Sincerely,

Robert Blair St. George
Associate Professor of History and Folklore
May 30, 2000

Hon. Bernadette Castro
Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation
Agency Building # 1
Empire State Plaza
Albany, New York 12238

Dear Commissioner Castro:

I am writing in support of the nomination of the Grotto of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Rosebank, Staten Island, for national landmark designation. I am the author of The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950 (Yale University Press) and one of my areas of research and teaching specialization is urban religions in the United States.

We are in the centennial period of the great immigration from southern Europe, 1880-1924, and it is appropriate at this moment to consider how we might best preserve the historical and religious creations of the first generations of migrants. The Mt. Carmel grotto in Rosebank is an extraordinary, vivid example of Italian American vernacular religious art, built and maintained by a private religious society. Such popular religious expressions were once a distinctive and important feature of Italian American communities, serving as vital centers, outside the official structures of the church, for Italian religious experience and expression. But transformations in the urban landscape have eliminated most of these sites now. The Rosebank grotto is therefore a precious historical resource.

I always use slides of the grotto in my classes here at Indiana University in urban religious history and religious culture. (When I taught in New York City, I simply brought my students out to Staten Island!) It is crucial that students and scholars of immigrant history and immigrant religion be able to see how Italian migrants built and rebuilt their environments, using materials found in their new homes (but that evoked their lives in southern Italy) and combining innovative and traditional architectural techniques. Students looking at the grotto are offered an enactment in stone of Italian American understandings of family, community, and the sacred, and of the interaction of the three, and a powerful expression of the unique quality of immigrant cultural creativity.
The grotto shows how immigrants worked on their worlds, in stone and imagination, making their way from one culture to another, one continent to another, building a meaningful environment for themselves and their children on the difficult terrain of the early 20th century American city. An earlier generation of historians, exemplified by Harvard’s Oscar Handlin, used to think of immigrants as victims, uprooted and disoriented. Newer histories affirm that immigrants were makers of their worlds. Walking through the Staten Island grotto, contemporary and future Americans will be able to understand exactly what it meant for immigrants to make their worlds—to stand inside the grotto is to stand inside immigrant history, and therefore American history.

I do hope that you will designate the Rosebank grotto an historical landmark.

If there is any other support I may give this process, please do not hesitate to call on me.

Sincerely yours,

Robert Orsi
Professor and Chair

Cc: Joseph Sciorra, Calandra Italian American Institute
May 20, 2000

Hon. Bernadette Castro
Commissioner
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Agency Building #1
Empire State Plaza
Albany, NY 12238

Dear Commissioner Castro:

I write in support of issuing landmark status for the grotto of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Rosebank, Staten Island. The grotto is a major example of vernacular religious architecture as practiced by Italian Americans. Reflecting long-established European religious traditions, and reflects an original aesthetic associated with immigrant life. One of the things that makes the grotto exceptional is the fact that it was built and has been maintained by voluntary labor among lay immigrants who were members of the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and was not the project of the Roman Catholic Church.

Moreover, the meeting hall built by the Society of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, constructed just before World War I, is a rare example of an extant mutual aid society meeting place.

As a professor of Italian American Studies, I can testify to the unique importance of the grotto and meeting hall as an artifact of a once vibrant immigrant life in New York, and I urge you to support its designation as a landmark.

Yours sincerely,

Philip V. Cannistraro
Distinguished Professor of Italian American Studies
The Honorable Bernadette Castro
Commissioner
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation
Agency Building #1
Empire State Plaza
Albany, New York 12238

May 29, 2000

Dear Commissioner Castro:

On behalf of City Lore and the Municipal Art Society — co-sponsors of Place Matters — I am pleased to support the listing of the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Grotto on the National Register of Historic Places.

Place Matters is an initiative to identify, celebrate and protect places throughout New York City that tell its history and anchor the traditions of New York’s many communities. The Grotto is an especially compelling example of a “place that matters.” As a vernacular structure built over time, the Grotto is a tangible expression of Staten Island’s Italian American community. Its role in sustaining this community’s traditions is reflected in its setting, design and use — both as a pilgrimage site for Catholics throughout New York City and as a prominent presence in the daily life of the Rosebank, Staten Island community.

I am pleased to give Place Matters’ endorsement to the nomination of this site of significant cultural and historical value to New York City.

Sincerely,

Laura Hansen
Co-Director