

## GULFPORT VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITAL CAMPUS, GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI

### Mississippi Landmark Significance Report

prepared by  
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#### ML log #:

1. Date considered by committee: June 10, 2010
2. Name of property: Gulfport VA Hospital (now Centennial Park)
3. County: Harrison
4. Address of property: 730 Beach Boulevard
5. Owner of property: City of Gulfport
6. National Register Status: Formal Determination of Eligibility (June 6, 1980), not listed



**Summary:** Developed from a site originally set aside as the Mississippi Centennial Exposition, the Gulfport Veterans Administration Medical Center was established in 1922. Seven buildings, laid out on a campus plan complete with central quad, were completed by 1923, and later building programs brought the number of structures on the south campus to approximately 30 by the time the Keeper of the National Register made a Determination of Eligibility in 1980. After that determination, major alterations occurred in the early 1990s, including the covering of the original stucco on most buildings with synthetic stucco, or Dryvet; the replacement of all original windows on almost all buildings; interior gutting of all but a few buildings; and the demolition of the historic staff housing on the property (see Map 3 for site plan of the property in the 1970s).

Hurricane Katrina took further toll on the historic fabric of the campus, causing the collapse of a fairly new structure at the front of campus and washing through all the buildings up to about four feet inside. Cleanup work by the Veterans Administration before abandoning the site and turning the property over to the City of Gulfport involved the demolition of support structures such as the old power plant and garages to the rear of the campus. In addition, the VA repaired the original red tile roofs in kind, and replaced the modern plate-glass windows with aluminum and wood sash more in keeping with the original multi-light sash that had been removed in the 1990s alterations.

The remaining buildings still comprise the important historic campus, with the landscape plan mostly intact including the large central quad and asymmetrical curving drives to the outer residence buildings. The City of Gulfport, having now taken ownership of the property from the Veterans Administration, passed a resolution in a May 4, 2010 meeting requesting that the property south of the railroad tracks (21.10 acres) be designated a Mississippi Landmark.

The ten remaining buildings are included in this district nomination (shown on the Map 2):

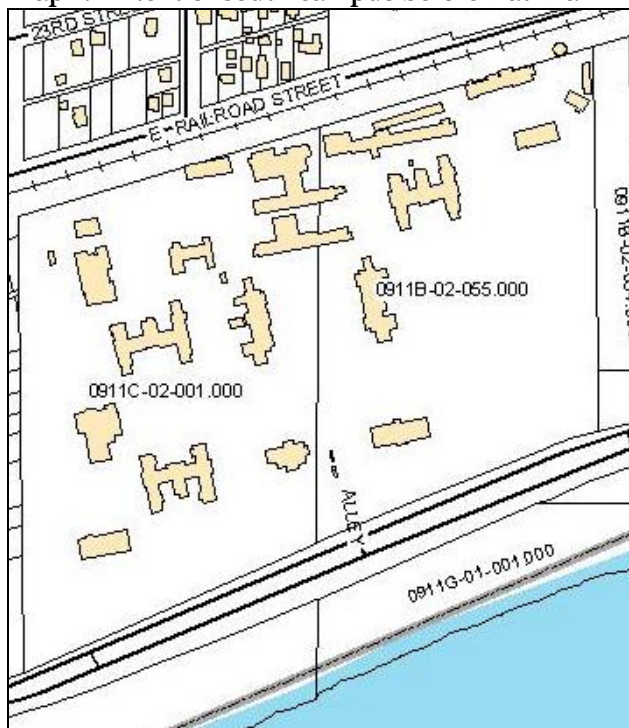
**History:** In 1916, the Senate of the State of Mississippi enacted Bill No. 265 providing for a centennial exposition to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the admission of Mississippi into the Union as a state. The exposition was to be held in 1917 and 1918 for a period of 120 days at Gulfport. Small parcels of land had been acquired along the Gulf by the City of Gulfport and the Mississippi Centennial Exposition Company to be used as the site for the exposition.

Due to the exigencies of World War I, the centennial exposition never took place, although many of the temporary buildings had already been constructed. Given its waterfront location and available buildings and land, the site was useful to the military, however, and the Navy Department leased the property during the war as a training camp.

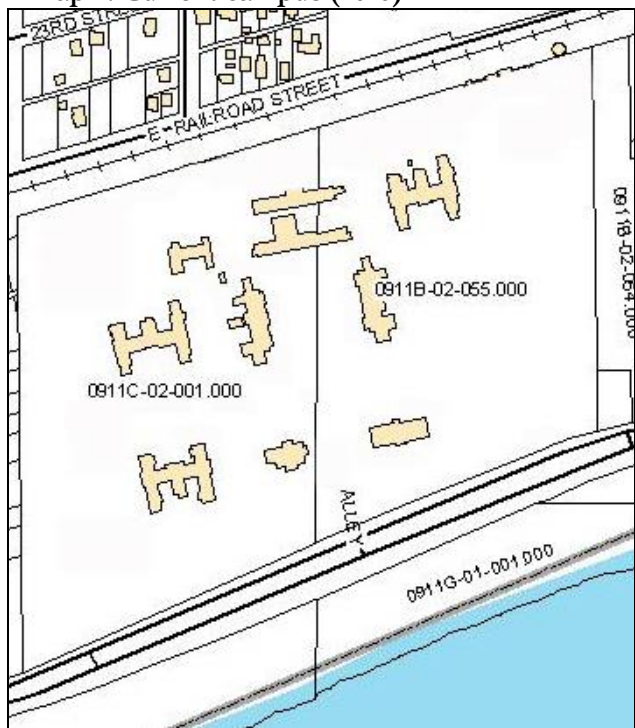
At the close of the war, the Public Health Service of the Treasury Department assumed the lease. The temporary exposition buildings (normally exposition buildings were built of light wood frames, chicken wire, and plaster) were remodeled, and the Veterans Bureau opened the hospital for neuropsychiatric patients on July 16, 1921. By Executive Order No. 3669 dated April 29, 1922, the hospital was transferred from the Public Health Service to the Veterans Bureau, and the 147 acres south and north of the railroad tracks was formally conveyed on July 11, 1922.

Demolition of the exposition buildings began very soon thereafter, and by 1923, seven new buildings opened for the treatment of patients. Designed by staff architects, the campus buildings featured the red tile roofs and shaped parapets of the Spanish Colonial Revival style, along with long screened porches facing the Gulf to catch the cool breezes. In 1928, six houses for medical staff were completed, joining one original house built in 1917 for the exposition (these houses were all demolished c.1990). A large building program in 1931 added another ward building (Ward G), a recreation building that later became the chapel, and the administration building at the front of the campus. The infirmary building took its place near the back of the campus in 1937; and the last significant structure and the most prominent when driving on Highway 90, the hospital building, was constructed at the end of World War II.

**Map 1: Extent of south campus before Katrina**



**Map 2: Current campus (2010)**



**Historic Significance:** The Gulfport VA Hospital campus is significant historically as one of only two veterans hospitals in Mississippi built during the early decades of the Veterans Administration. Part of a nationwide building program begun after the massive deployment of troops in World War I, the Gulfport hospital demonstrates the federal government's effort to institute long-term treatment for large numbers of disable soldiers, an approach unknown after previous wars. Unfortunately, several buildings original to the hospital campus were demolished in the cleanup efforts after Katrina, but as noted by Paul Lusignan of the National Park

Service (c.2009), the remaining buildings still “convey a sense of the modern treatment programs initiated by the government during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, including the separation of care by patient disease/treatment (general medical, surgical, neuro-psychiatric, tuberculosis), safe modern construction, and standardized functional plans and campus layouts.”

**Architectural Significance:** While the remaining buildings have been altered, especially on the interiors, as a group, they still retain their original Spanish Colonial Revival style and the hospital campus landscape is intact, including the open quad, walkways, and drives.

**Resource Description:** The south campus is comprised of ten remaining buildings, as shown on the map above and on the attached map:

- Building 1 (1923)—Main Medical Building
- Building 2 (1923)—Kitchen and dining hall
- Building 3 (1923)—Ward B
- Building 4 (1923)—Ward C
- Building 5 (1923)—Ward D
- Building 41 (1937)—Infirmary
- Building 57 (1946)—Hospital Building
- Building 62 (1931)—Ward G
- Building 63 (1931)—Chapel
- Building 64 (1931)—Administration Building

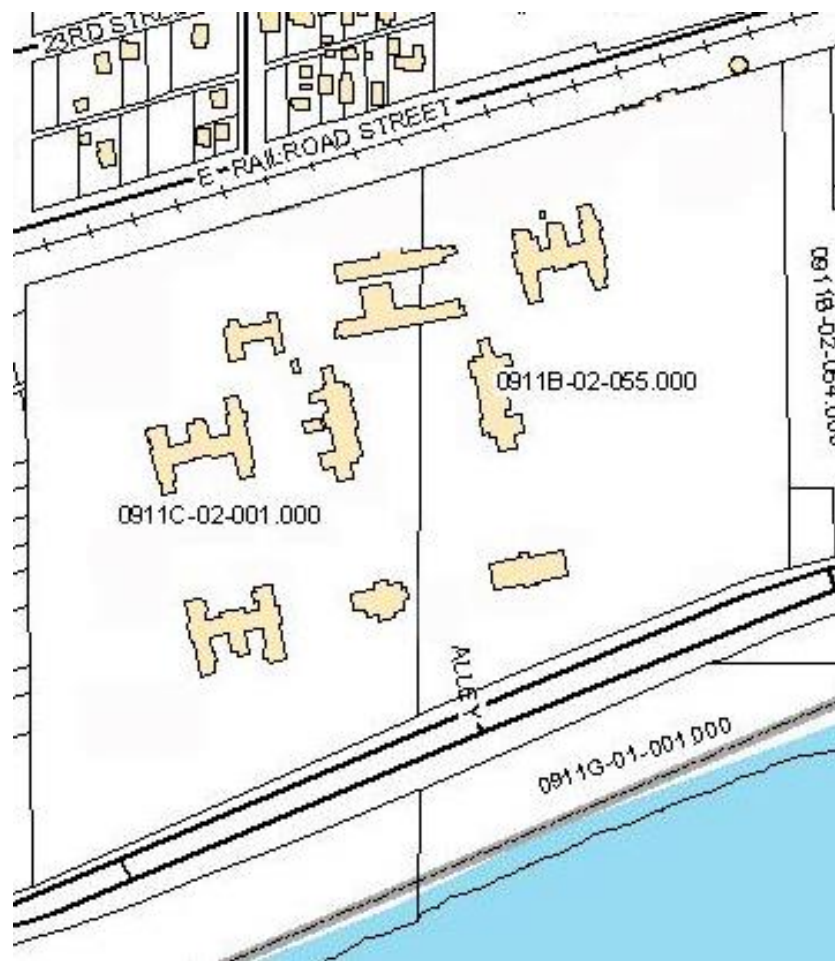
All buildings retain their original Spanish Colonial Revival character, seen in their red tile roofs, shaped parapets, highlights of colored terra cotta on primary facades, and large porches. Dryvet now covers the exterior walls, over the original stucco, new windows have taken the place of older replacements, and the interiors have been gutted (most had been gutted in the c.1990 renovations that took place on the campus, while a few did retain their original interior walls until Katrina and its aftermath).

**Integrity:** The Gulfport VA campus is best viewed as a group or district, and as such, it has a relatively high degree of integrity. When analyzed as individual buildings, integrity is lower, especially given the gutted interiors.

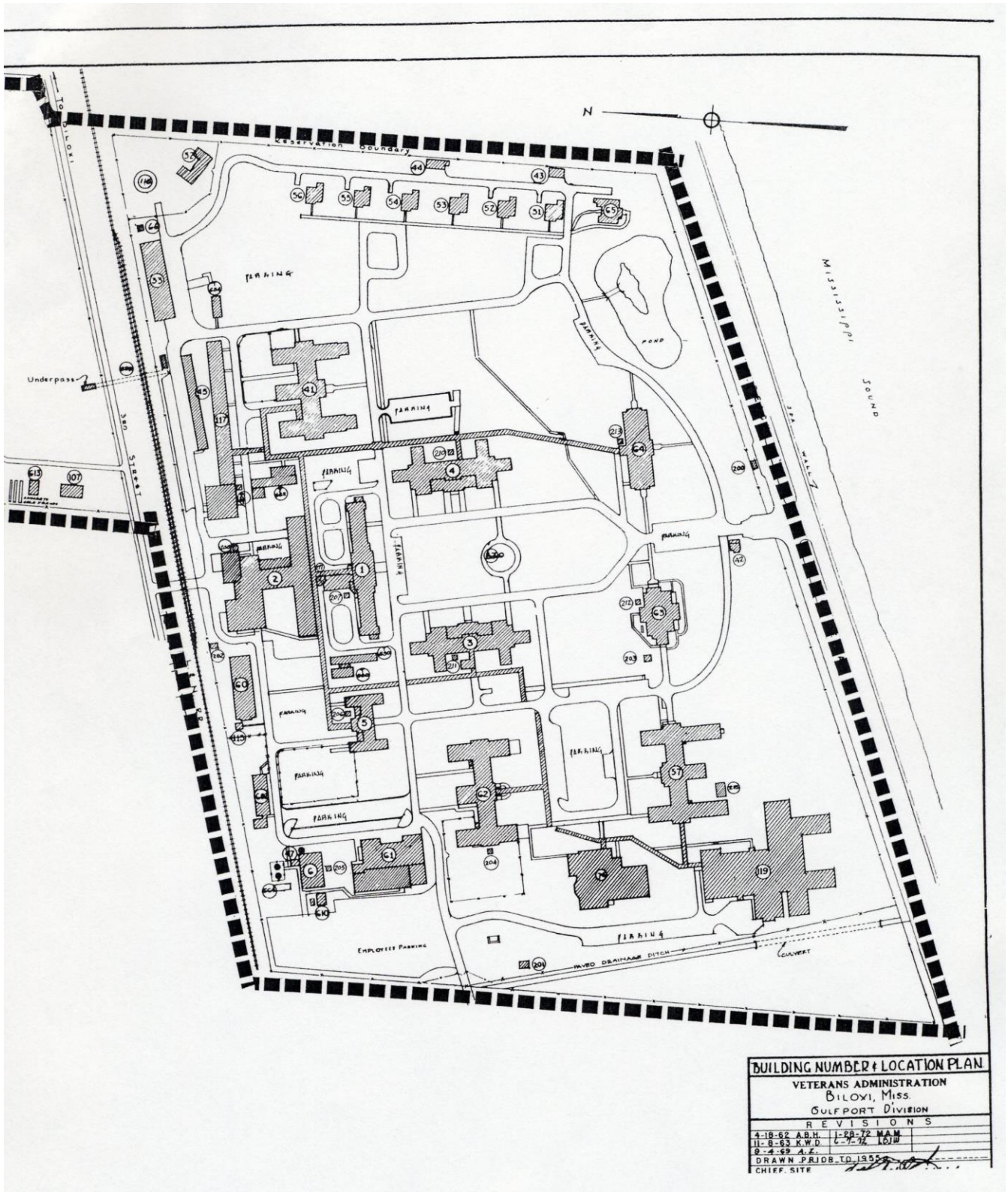
**Designation Intent/Property Description:** The intent of this Mississippi Landmark designation is to protect the southern parcels of the Gulfport VA Hospital campus as a district. Since the interiors of each building have been gutted at least once and sometimes twice, only a few interior features should be considered in any review. An original interior parlor and mantle remain in the administration building (#64), and the few other original or historic features should be retained in any interior remodeling. On the exteriors, the Dryvet covering—not a high-quality material—will eventually break down and need to be replaced; when that occurs, care should be taken to repair the original stucco that is still underneath instead of covering the buildings with another non-historic or synthetic material. While the current windows are closer to the original window patterns than the earlier plate-glass replacements, when these reach the end of their useful life, careful review of historic photos should take place to ensure a better match with the historic profiles.

Original landscape elements, including planned open spaces such as the quad, the pattern of walkways and drives, and the natural setting of mature live oaks should also be preserved in any re-use plan.

**Property/Designation Description:** The designation comprises the former Gulfport Veterans Administration Hospital property south of the railroad tracks, just to the west of the Mississippi City neighborhood, technically two parcels known as 0911C02-001.000 and 0911B-02-055.000, as shown on the map below.







Map 3: Site plan of Gulfport VA Hospital, base map pre-1955, revised 1972