

HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL

THE ADVOCATE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

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May 9th, 2024

Sarah Carroll, Chair
Kate Lemos McHale, Director of Research
Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007

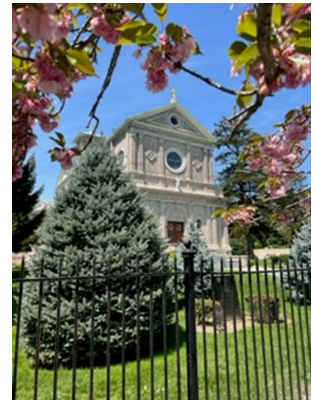
Re: Request for Evaluation of Visitation Academy, 8902 Ridge Blvd., Brooklyn as an Individual Landmark

Dear Chair Carroll and Director Lemos McHale,

The Historic Districts Council is proud to be working with advocates in Bay Ridge on their effort to secure Individual Landmark designation for Visitation Academy, at 8902 Ridge Boulevard. We offer this statement of significance as part of the Individual Landmark RFE for Visitation Academy:



Bay Ridge's Visitation Academy sits on 7.5 acres and features a [complex](#) of Renaissance Revival buildings. The focal point of the assemblage is classically ornamented church, constructed in cream colored brick with limestone details, including the cornices, pilaster capitals, and window surrounds. The chapel [features](#) circular windows on its upper stories, triangular gables, a square tower with an arcaded belfry and decorative cruciform brickwork on its south façade. The entire complex is surrounded by a 20-foot stone and concrete wall. The site functions as a cohesive campus, and should be designated as such, so that the landmarked site includes both the buildings and the grounds.



Founded in 1855, and established in Downtown Brooklyn in 1856, Visitation moved to Clinton Hill in 1885 before arriving in Bay Ridge in 1903, and completing its current campus in 1913. Visitation's path reflects the development of Brooklyn itself, and as a site, it is worthy of landmark status not only for its architectural gems, but also for the borough-wide history it represents, and for its status as an early, recurring and enduring example of adaptive reuse.





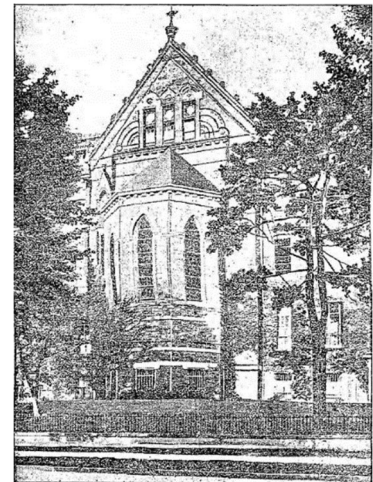
Reverend Evan Malbone Johnson

Visitation Academy was founded [in 1855 by John Loughlin](#), the first Catholic bishop of Brooklyn, who established the school in 1856 [in a mansion in Downtown Brooklyn at the corner of Johnson and Pearl Streets](#), (now the City Tech campus).

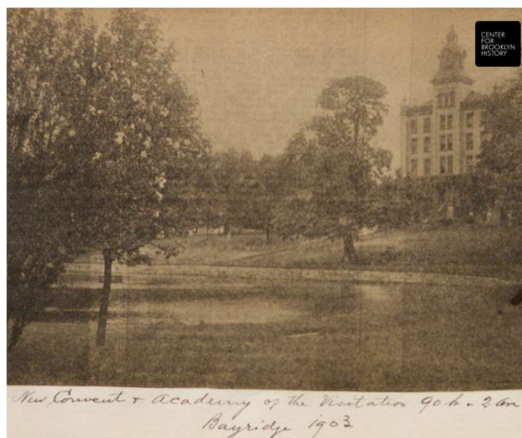
That mansion had been home to [Reverend Evan Malbone Johnson](#), who sold the property expressly for use by Visitation. Johnson, a prominent figure in the early development of Downtown Brooklyn, founded St. John's Episcopal Church (now in Park Slope), and was instrumental in the opening of Myrtle Avenue through what was then farmland. Reverend Johnson's son, who shared his name, [fought at Gettysburg, and served as Comptroller of Brooklyn from 1868-1871](#).

From its inception in Downtown Brooklyn, Visitation Academy was run under the auspices of the Sisters of Charity. [In an early example of adaptive reuse](#), the Sisters retrofitted the Johnson mansion to convert it into a school, and built a wall around the property, a feature shared by each of the school's subsequent iterations, including its current home in Bay Ridge. In 1856, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle [reported](#) that Visitation's curriculum included everything from algebra to needlework.

In 1885, [citing the commercial growth of Downtown Brooklyn](#), Visitation Academy moved to Clinton and Willoughby Avenues in Clinton Hill, where the Sisters once again employed adaptive reuse to "remodel" an "old fashioned double house...with winding verandas" into a convent and academy. The Brooklyn Daily eagle [reported](#) that - then as now - Visitation's immediate neighbors on Clinton Avenue took issue with the sisters' construction plans: "some of the aristocratic residents of Clinton Avenue took exception to the erection of a brick wall," the paper noted, "but the occupant of the adjoining property, a non-Catholic, and others of the immediate neighborhood championed the cause of the convent and its people and all went well." The sisters became so well regarded in the community that the owner of the property immediately north of the convent on Clinton Avenue bequeathed that lot to Visitation.



Visitation Academy on Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn Eagle, September 9, 1900



But, as Visitation's campus grew in Clinton Hill, so too did the neighborhood itself. As had previously been the case in Downtown Brooklyn, population growth and architectural development led to increased traffic around the convent, and what had been a relatively tranquil setting became more intentionally urbanized. The Eagle [noted](#) that the development of Clinton Hill constituted "a consequent disturbance of the quiet which is essential to an institution of this kind." Accordingly, in 1903, the sisters sold their property in Clinton Hill and decamped to their current campus in Bay Ridge, then a tranquil respite with a view of the water.

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The beauty and tranquility of Bay Ridge had inspired other restive facilities before Visitation Academy arrived. In fact, as the sisters had done in their two previous homes, they adapted a structure that was already on-site in Bay Ridge in order to turn it into a convent. The site they rehab-ed was in fact a rehab facility, known as the [Inebriate Home of Kings County](#). Founded in 1867, the Inebriate Home of Kings County offered accommodation to up to 300 people, and included a chapel on-site.

When the sisters converted the property to suit Visitation's needs, they were able to offer enrollment to [both day and boarding students](#), and the grounds [featured](#) a still-extant pond, along with rowboats. In September 1903, when the academy began its first school year in Bay Ridge, 400 people attended the opening reception. Ten years

later, in 1913, Visitation completed its current facilities. Today, the 7.5 acre campus includes the pond and boathouse, sports fields, playgrounds and a small forest.

Visitation's movement progressively south throughout Brooklyn, from Downtown to Bay Ridge, reflects the growth of the borough, and the need of the Order to find contemplative space in the ever-expanding city. Visitation's consistent effort to employ adaptive reuse at each of these sites reflects [the Order's spirit](#) of "gentleness and humility." This unique site, and the history and spirit it reflects, is worth preserving.

