

SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK HEADQUARTERS
MISSION 66 HISTORIC DISTRICT
(Entrance Road and Visitor Center Parking)
Saguaro National Park
Rincon Mountain District
Tucson
Pima County
Arizona

HALS AZ-31
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BLACK AND WHITE FILM PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
Interior Regions 6, 7, and 8
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1 Denver Federal Center, Building 50
Lakewood, CO 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK HEADQUARTERS MISSION 66 HISTORIC DISTRICT (Entrance Road and Visitor Center Parking)

HALS No. AZ-31

Location: The Saguaro National Park Headquarters Mission 66 Historic District encompasses most of the current (2024) park headquarters area at Saguaro National Park in the Rincon Mountain District, Tucson, Pima County, Arizona.

The district encompasses the area between points 32.181401, -110.737931; to 32.180403, -110.735038; to 32.1787898, -110.735690; to 32.178124, -110.736933; and 32.178722, -110.737939. These coordinates were obtained on March 26, 2025, using Google Earth (WGS84). There are no restrictions on the release of this locational data to the public.

Significance: The Mission 66 Headquarters Historic District at Saguaro National Park is significant for its connection to the Mission 66 era of outdoor recreation, conservation, education and architecture, as a good example of pre-Mission 66 and Mission 66 modernist design.

The Mission 66 Program created significant changes in the landscapes of the parks, modified the planning and design process, created new internal working groups, and responded to evolutions in the field of landscape architecture. Mission 66 landscape development was directed by landscape architect Thomas Vint and Director Conrad Wirth. The principles of Mission 66 were simple in practice: new construction was to lay lightly on the land to assure the buildings, site features, and road alignments were designed to minimize cuts and fills and to allow final grading to blend with the natural topography. Native plant materials were to be used to repair construction scarring; and the removal of trees was to be minimized. These principles are evident in the design of the Saguaro National Park Mission 66 Headquarters District.¹

Description: Saguaro National Park Mission 66 Headquarters Historic District encompasses 16.34 acres and includes all Mission 66 era buildings and features constructed in the park's modern headquarters area. This includes the facility building and utility yard screening wall, visitor center, visitor center wildlife watering hole, loop road directional sign, superintendent's residence, one purpose-built residence building, two converted residence buildings, water tank and pump house, service roads,

¹ Ethan Carr, Elaine Jackson-Retondo, Len Warner, and Rodd L. Wheaton. "National Park Service Mission 66 Era Resources," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2015)

entrance road and entrance road wall and sign, all constructed between 1953 and 1967.

The headquarters area is located between Old Spanish Trail to the north and west, and Escalante Road to the south. The park access road is a two-way road that runs east-west through the headquarters area and ties into Old Spanish Trail at its west end and the park's visitor loop road at its east end.

The headquarters area is an open, relatively flat, desert area. There are two minor dry washes that run through the area, one at the east end of the area and the other at the west end. Views of the surrounding area from the headquarters area include the Santa Catalina Mountains to the north, and the Rincon Mountains to the east. Visible to the south are rolling hills with park infrastructure. To the west private property dominates the landscape, with the Tucson Mountains in the far distance.

The first structure to be built in the headquarters area was the park entrance road. It was constructed in January 1952 to enable construction equipment access to the area. The road (also known as Route 010, Cactus Forest Drive) is approximately 900' long and approximately 24' wide. The road starts at Old Spanish Trail at the west where it intersects with the Cactus Forest Loop, the park's tour road, at the east. Near the west terminus of the road is the visitor center parking area. At the west end of the entrance road is the park entrance wall and entrance sign. The entrance wall is constructed of masonry quarry-face random ashlar stone with raked joints, capped with 2"-thick cut sandstone slabs. The wall is approximately 18" wide; the height of the wall is stepped and varies between approximately 1' to over 2' high. The wall is bisected by the entrance road. The north portion of the wall is approximately 131' long. The south portion of the wall is constructed in the same fashion as the north section and is approximately 52' long. As part of the wall, a large concrete sign is located next to the entrance road. The sign once read "Saguaro National Monument" with a large arrow. This sign was replaced in 1994 and new lettering, "Saguaro National Park" was added. Adjacent to the sign is a column, 3'-0" wide, 4'-8" tall, and 2'-6" thick, constructed in the same fashion as the wall. This column has the NPS arrowhead bolted to its south side facing Old Spanish Trail.

To the east, along the Loop Road, just beyond its intersection with the entrance road, is a Mission 66 directional road sign. This sign is constructed in the same way as the entrance sign, with a base constructed of masonry quarry-face random ashlar stone with raked joints, capped with 2"-thick cut sandstone slabs. In one direction the sign directs traffic to the one-way Loop Road, and in the opposite direction, to the picnic area.

The Visitor Center, Building 20, is a one-story, irregular rectangular building with a low profile created by a nearly flat gabled roof with widely overhanging eaves.

The roof ridge runs parallel with the south façade. It is constructed of half-height concrete pumice block with raked horizontal joints and vertical board and batten wall sections, contrasting to the strong horizontality. The entire building is painted beige. Begun in 1953, the original west wing consisted of two restrooms backed by an office space with an east Lobby space. The building was doubled in length in 1958-1959 with the construction of an Exhibit Room and additional offices. The Visitor Center was completed in 1959; at that time the new wing was home to park administration staff. The building has a window wall that stretches almost the length of the building on its north side. The building's entrance is along the south side of the building facing the entrance road and the visitor parking lot.

The Wildlife Watering Hole, constructed of stone and concrete, is approximately 8' x 10' in size and was constructed at about the same time as the visitor center. The watering hole is located on the north side of the visitor center where it is visible to the public from inside the building. The pond has gone through an unknown number of rehabilitation cycles but remains in the same location since its construction.

The original concrete entry sign with lettering and arrow was removed shortly after 1994 when Saguaro National Monument was designated a national park. At the time the wording on the entrance sign was changed to match the new designation.

History: President Hoover established Saguaro National Monument (March 1, 1933) with Executive Proclamation 2031. Congress designated Saguaro a National Park in 1994.

The historical narrative and following source references are quoted from two sources: *Cultural Landscapes Inventory*, by Judy Berryman, Cayle Cheever, and Chris Baker, NPS Cultural Landscapes Program, September 8, 2008, on file at the NPS Data Store (U.S. National Park Service); and, *Determination of Eligibility (DOE) for Mission 66 Headquarters Historic District, Rincon Mountain District (RMD), Saguaro National Park*, prepared by Ronald Beckwith, Archeologist, Saguaro National Park, Tucson, Arizona. (Date of Arizona SHPO concurrence, July 19, 2022. On file at Saguaro National Park). Where appropriate this section has been edited to conform to Historic American Landscapes Survey conventions and standards.

Background

The dense stand of saguaro cacti east of Tucson that eventually became Saguaro National Monument, and later designated Saguaro National Park, was the focus of preservation efforts as early as 1920 when the Natural History Society of the University of Arizona pursued the purchase of some of the land upon which the

cacti thrived. They were unable to realize their goal. Nine years later, Homer Shantz, president of the University of Arizona, tried to interest the National Park Service in acquiring the property to protect the unique biotic community. The National Park Service was not particularly responsive, so he took matters into his own hands and had a representative (John Harrison) purchase rights to all land within saguaro except those upon which homestead requirements were being met. Through this arrangement, the university gained control over 480 acres (mostly in sections 10 and 15 of Township 14 south, range 16 east). This was just the beginning. Shantz envisioned a 9 square mile tract ranging from desert floor to the top of one of the mountains.² Shantz's preservation efforts were aided by President Hoover when, on August 2, 1932, he promulgated an executive order that withdrew four and a half sections in the heart of the saguaro forest from homesteading and assigned them to the state for the benefit of the university.

Also in 1932, Frank Hitchcock, the influential publisher of the *Arizona Citizen*, began pursuing the establishment of a national monument to protect an area of saguaro and associated plant life. Yellowstone Superintendent Roger Toll visited southern Arizona in February to assess the suitability of different monument sites. In his report Toll states that the ideal location would be the saguaro cactus located 16 miles east of Tucson.³ However, he also stated that the area was controlled by both the University of Arizona and private citizens and should only be acquired if the government could purchase the land. The funding was not forthcoming. Clearly, this was a setback for monument proponents. Hitchcock decided on another approach. Shantz, and eventually National Forest Supervisor Fred Winn, drafted a monument proclamation. Hitchcock traveled to Washington, DC, and using his influence with the Republican Party, gained the ear of the secretary of agriculture and President Hoover. Shortly before he left office, the president established⁴. The new monument roughly encompassed the current Rincon Mountain District of Saguaro National Park and included state, private, former national forest, and university land within its boundaries.

The land making up the area containing the dense stands of saguaro cactus (west side of the monument) was held by the University of Arizona and private entities/individuals. The National Park Service asked the university to donate their land to the federal government, but the school finances were severely strained by the depression and the board of regents refused to donate the land. Instead, they asked that they be reimbursed \$56,000.00 for their initial investment. There were,

² A. Berle Clemensen. "Cattle, Copper, and Cactus: The History of Saguaro National Monument, Arizona." (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1987).

³ Roger Toll. "Report to Mr. H. R. Tillotson, Regional Director National Park Service, Region Three, Santa Fe, New Mexico." (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saguaro National Park, Tucson, Arizona, 1932).

⁴ Clemensen, 1987

however, no federal funds available to pay for the land. The university and National Park Service were at an impasse. By 1935, there was a legitimate concern that the park service would never acquire the specific resource the monument had been created to preserve. Negotiations and political maneuvering continued for almost two decades. Finally, in 1951, the university officials had selected public domain land of comparable value that they were willing to exchange for land inside monument boundaries. It took another 8 years before the exchange was finalized and all the university (and state) land came under federal ownership.⁵

The National Park Service was also able to purchase title to four tracts of private land within monument boundaries in the 1950s. In 1961, Tucson Mountain Park was added to the monument. The final private inholdings in the western portion of the Rincon Mountain District were either purchased or excluded from the monument in the 1970s. Adjustments to the boundaries of the monument were made in 1976, 1991, and 1999. Much of the monument was designated wilderness in 1976. The monument became Saguaro National Park on October 14, 1994.

Mission 66

Mission 66 was a large-scale effort by the NPS to upgrade the nation's parks in the period following World War II. Contributing to the growth in the number of visitors after World War II was the post-war economic boom and the ability of more and more Americans to purchase personal automobiles. Indeed, the number of automobiles doubled between 1945 and 1955 to 60 million⁶. This new mobility enabled Americans to visit the national parks, particularly those of the west which had often been the realm of the railroads who provided access and services to a limited number of visitors. In response, the NPS needed new facilities to accommodate the crowds, and it needed those facilities to be designed in a way that could be built quickly and would protect the parks from resource damage. The Mission 66 period itself consists of three periods of development.

The first of three periods of the Mission 66 era represent immediate post-World War II park development from 1945 to 1955 and the park system's experimentation with the Modern Movement style, or "Park Service Modern" Style. The National Park Service architects began the shift to the Modern Movement style and its use of cost-efficient materials and systems. These projects established a precedent for the evolution in planning and design concepts, now referred to by the National Park Service as the pre-Mission 66 phase of the Mission 66 era that became integral parts of the subsequent Mission 66 program.

⁵ Clemensen, 1987

⁶ Ethan Carr. "Mission 66, Modernism, and the National Park Dilemma." (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).

NPS Director Conrad L. Wirth first instituted the idea of modernizing the parks through a massive, multi-year redevelopment program after the centralization of NPS planning into the Eastern and Western Offices of Planning and Design in Philadelphia and San Francisco in 1954. By 1956 the concept had been passed into law and funded by Congress, and the 10-year Mission 66 program was launched.

The Mission 66 program resulted in a distinctive new type of NPS architecture that reflected new concepts for Park Service designs such as the use of inexpensive materials and labor-saving techniques. Later dubbed, “Park Service Modern,” this style brought the design ethic of the “modern” architecture movement to the national parks.

The Mission 66 program did not conclude with the celebration of the National Park Service’s fiftieth anniversary in 1966 as intended. At the end of the Mission 66 program, a long list of projects remained incomplete, and new parks were planned, designed, and constructed. As a result, “Parkscape USA” (1967-73) became the third and final phase of Mission 66.

Headquarters District Construction History⁷

The monument’s original entrance road and “headquarters” area was 0.4 miles south along Old Spanish Trail. The original adobe headquarters building and entrance road, constructed by the CCC, were removed and the road was closed in the 1960s (exact dates unknown). In 1952, Saguaro National Monument began construction of the current park visitor center/headquarters complex near what is today the intersection of Old Spanish Trail and Freeman Road. The current park visitor center and most of the headquarters’ complex, including visitor parking and service roads were constructed between 1952 and 1968. These buildings and structures are consistent in construction technique and style of Mission 66 and span all three distinct periods of the era.

The first structure to be built in the new headquarters area was the new entrance road. The road was constructed in January 1952 to enable construction equipment to access the construction area. Building 19, the new Superintendent’s Quarters (later converted into the Administration Annex offices) followed in mid-January 1952. This was quickly followed by the visitor center (Building 20) in 1953, and later expanded in 1958, and the entrance road wall in 1954. Plans for the Utility Building and yard (Building 29) are dated May 1953. The Wildlife Watering Hole was also constructed at about the same time as the visitor center. The Visitor Center (Building 20) was completed in 1958; at that time the new wing was home

⁷ Ronald Beckwith. “Determination of Eligibility (DOE) for Mission 66 Headquarters Historic District, Rincon Mountain District (RMD), Saguaro National Park.” (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saguaro National Park, Tucson, Arizona, 2024).

to park administration staff. Construction of the residential area, Buildings 14, 15, and 16, and the extension of the service road to these structures was completed in 1967-68. Dates for the directional sign on the loop road are uncertain, but the design elements are consistent with the Mission 66 park entrance sign. The water distribution system (Building 5) and sewage disposal system for the residential area were constructed between 1963 and 1964. Other structures in the headquarters area not related to the Historic District were constructed post 1990.

Sources: Allaback, Sarah. *Mission 66 Visitor Centers: The History of a Building Type*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000.

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Wheaton, Rodd. "Saguaro National Monument East Visitor Center, Saguaro National Monument Rincon Mountain Visitor Center." National Register of Historic Places Registration Form. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2008. On file at Saguaro National Park, Arizona.

Historians: This report was prepared by historical architect Kim Hyatt, Glacier National Park, (retired), March 26, 2025. Additional historical research and background documentation was provided by archeologist Ronald Beckwith, Saguaro National Park. Editing support was provided by Jeffery Conn (Saguaro National Park), Wesley Wills (NPS). Large format photography was taken by Kim Hyatt in December 2023 and March 2025.

Project

Information: This project was started in 2023 as mitigation for a proposed 2025 undertaking to rehabilitate the entrance road and parking areas at the Saguaro National Park Rincon Mountain District Headquarters Mission 66 Historic District.

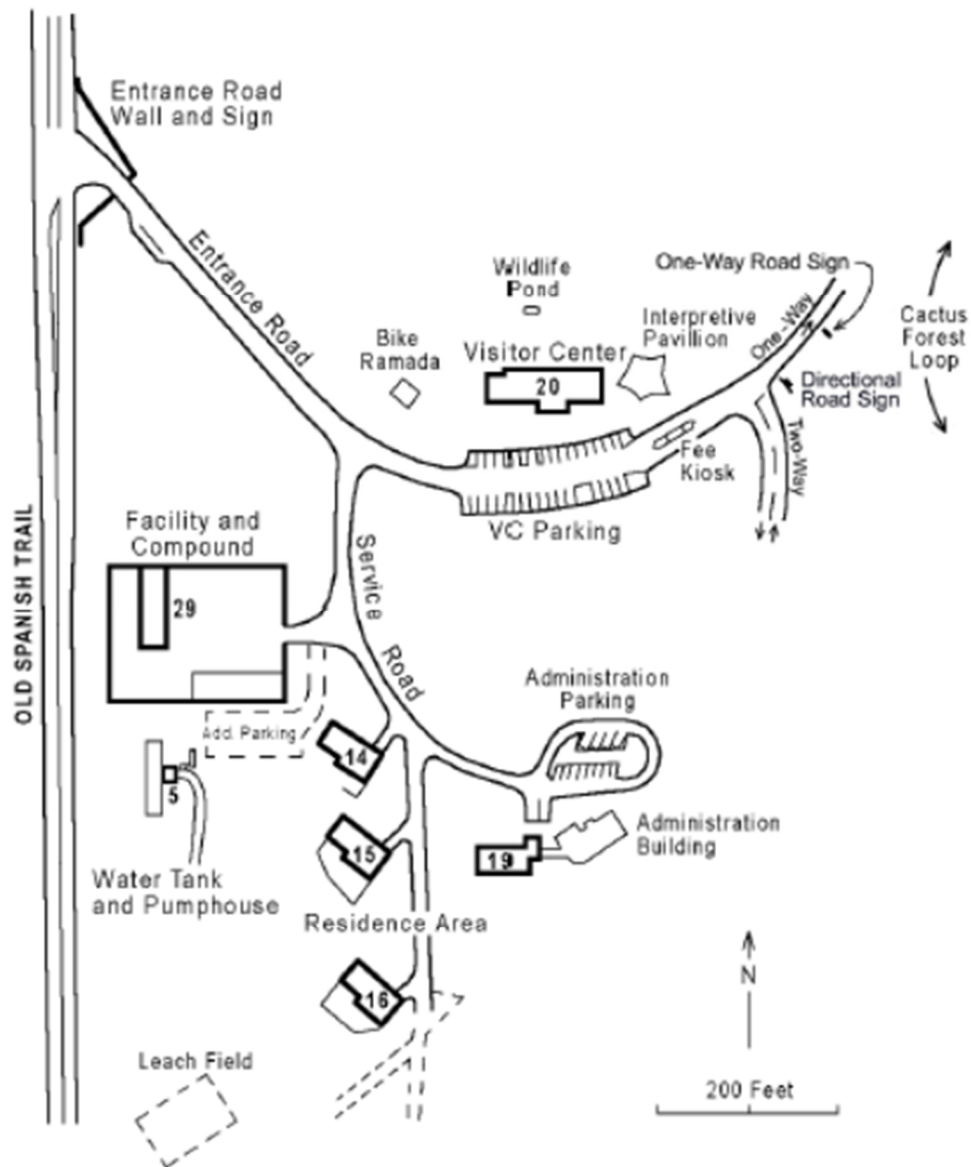


Figure 1. Schematic map of the proposed Saguaro National Park Mission 66 Headquarters Historic District. Numbers refer to Building numbers used in this document and in park documents and Master Plan drawings. (Beckwith 2024)



Figure 2. Photograph showing the original Mission 66 structures constructed at the headquarters area. Photo is dated between 1953 and 1957 prior to the eastern wing of the visitor center (at left) being added in 1958. Superintendent's Residence (Building 19) is at upper center, entrance road and wall at lower right. Old Spanish Trail is shown at bottom right. View is to the southeast. (Beckwith 2024)

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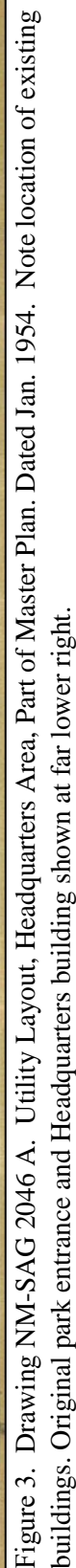


Figure 3. Drawing NM-SAG 2046 A. Utility Layout, Headquarters Area, Part of Master Plan. Dated Jan. 1954. Note location of existing buildings. Original park entrance and Headquarters building shown at far lower right.

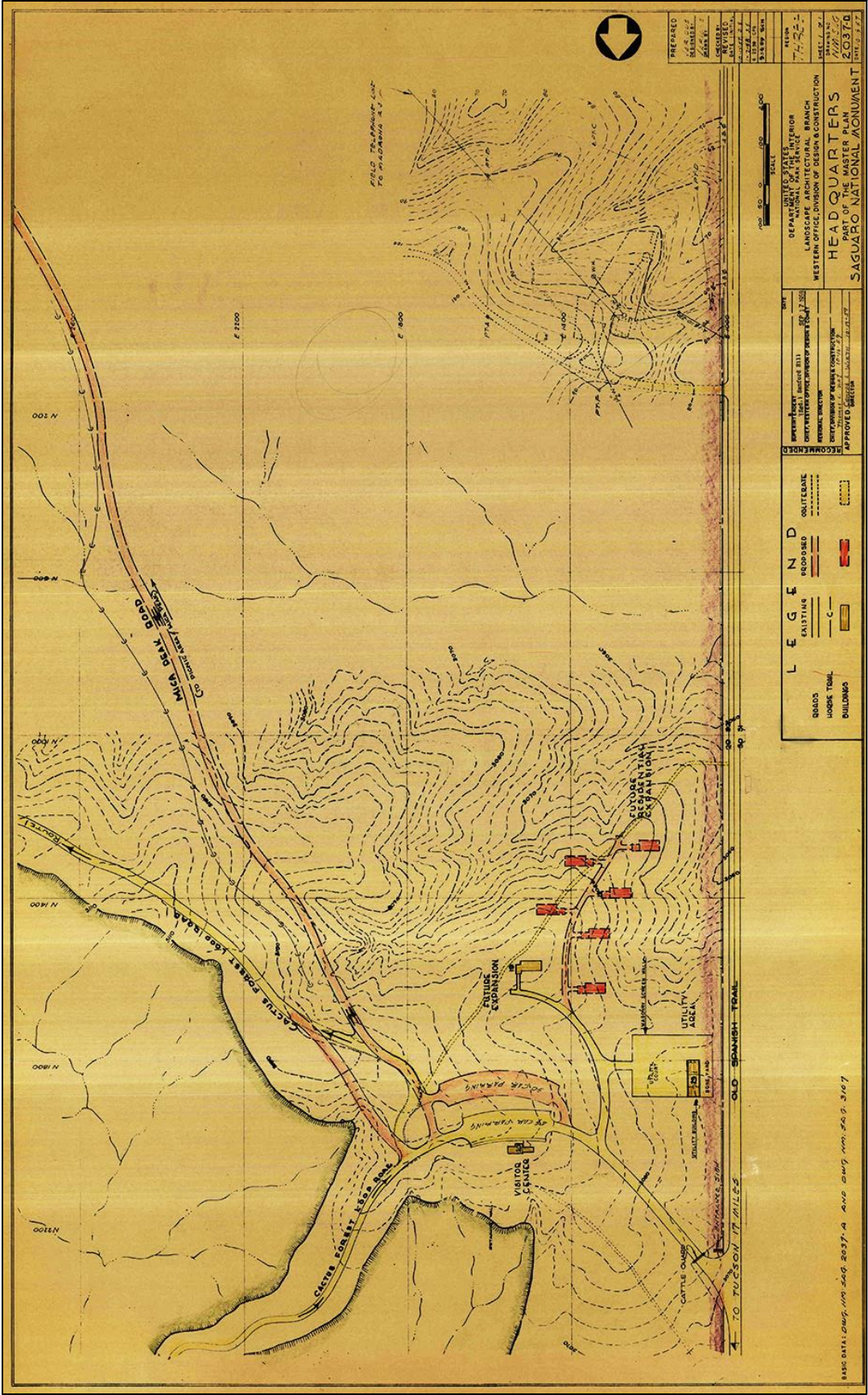


Figure 4. Drawing NM-SAG 2037-D, Sheet 1 of 1. Headquarters Area, Part of Master Plan, Dated Oct. 1957. Showing location of existing and planned buildings.



Figure 5. Drawing NM-SAG 2037-E, Page 5- 1. Headquarters Area with Utilities, Part of Master Plan. Dated Dec. 1963. Showing location of existing buildings.



Figure 6. Entrance sign plan and elevations. Drawing NM-SAG 2102-A, Sheet 1 of 1. Entrance Signs Dated Feb. 1954.

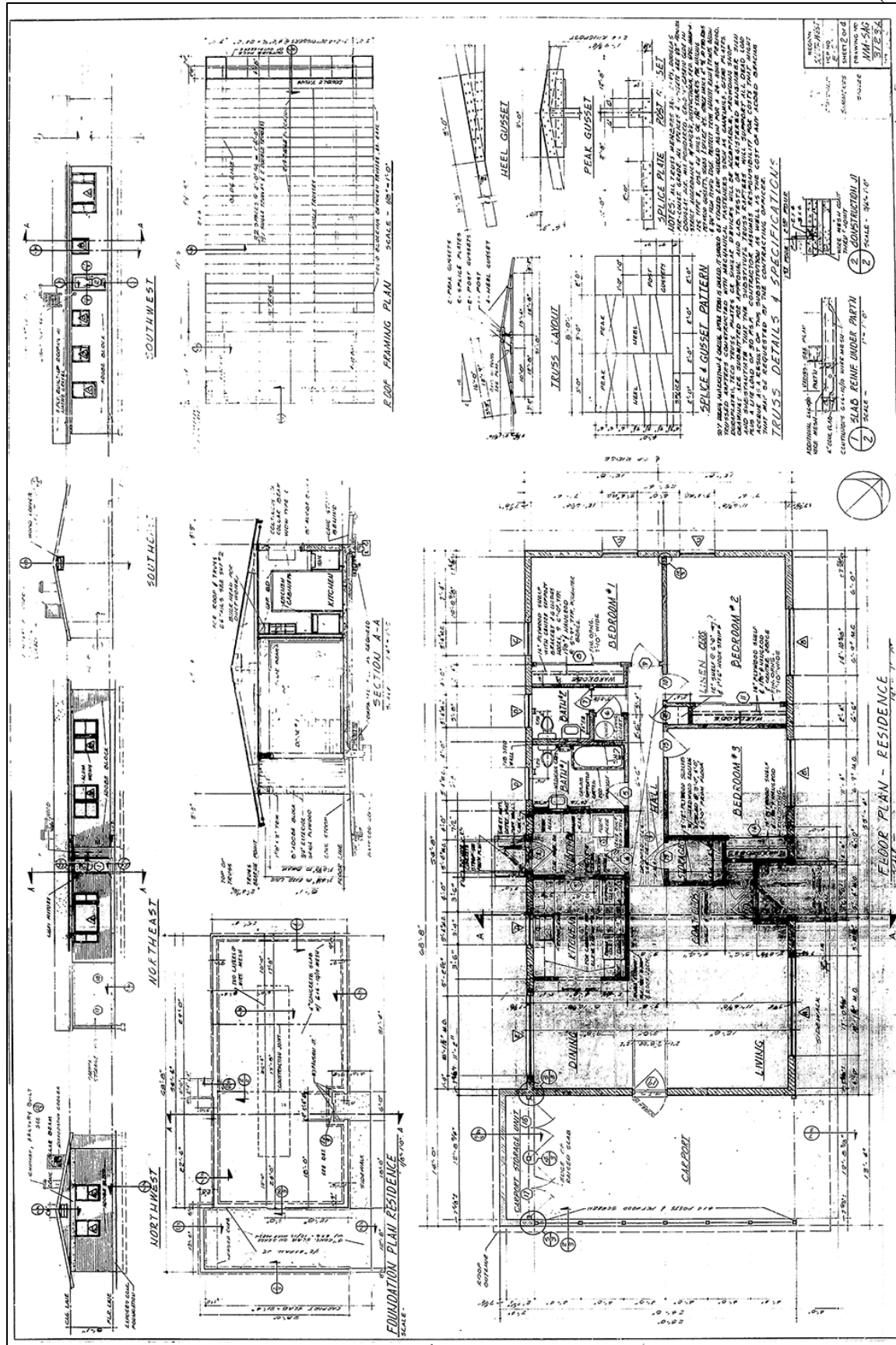


Figure 7. Drawing NM-SAG 3123-A, Sheet 2 of 4. Residence Building Plan, Buildings 14, 15, and 16. Dated not readable.

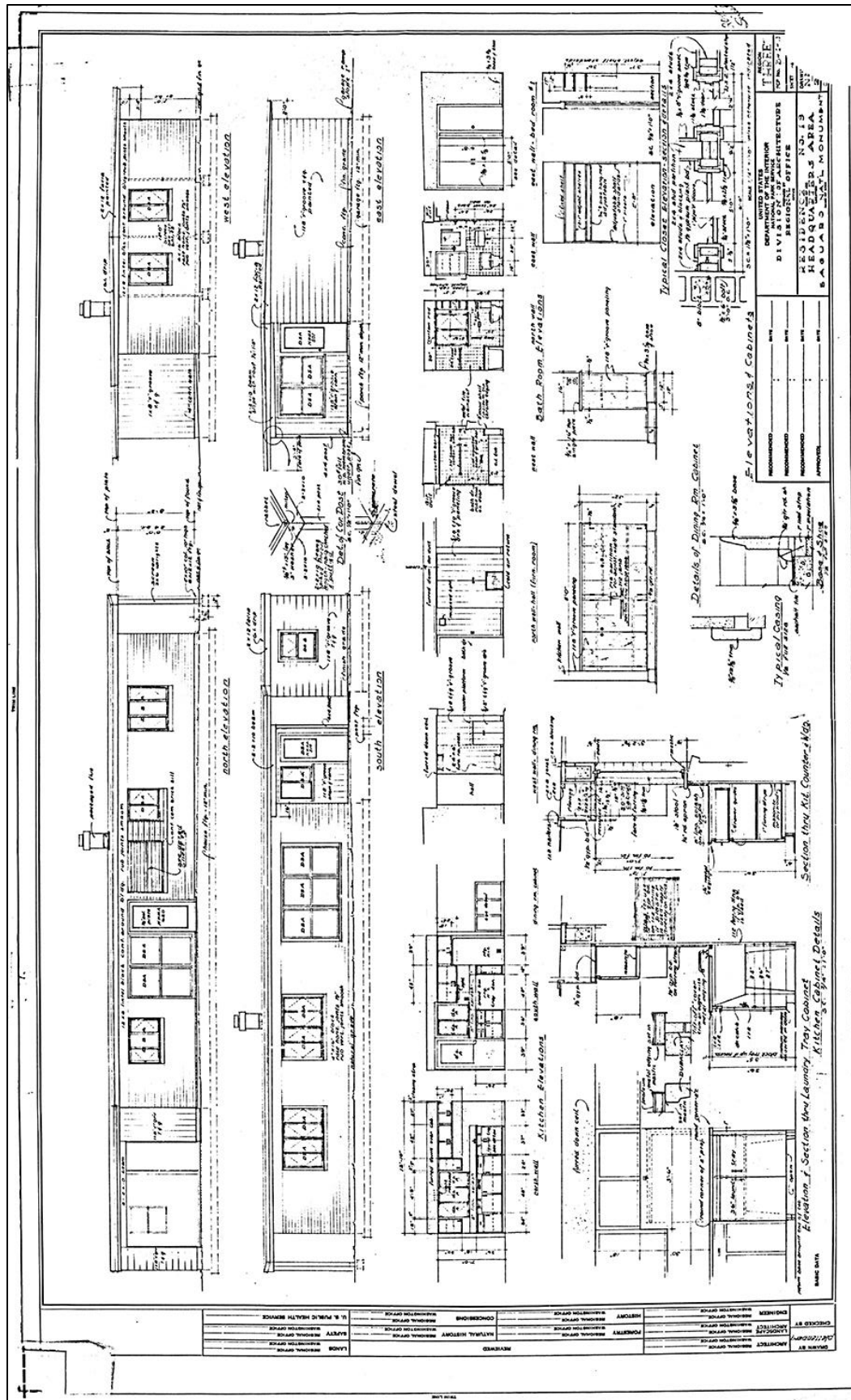
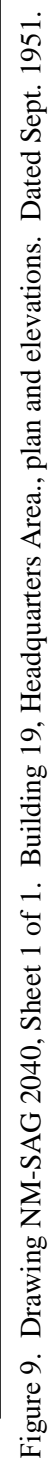


Figure 8. Drawing NM-SAG 2040, Sheet 4 of 4. Building 19, Headquarters Area. Dated 1951.



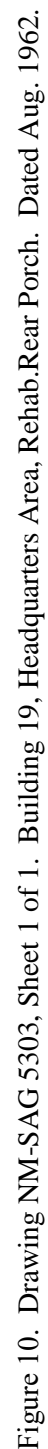




Figure 11. Drawing NM-SAG 3108-B, Sheet 1 of 1. Equipment Storage and Warehouse Building, Building 29 and yard, Headquarters Area, Dated 1958.



Figure 12. Drawing NM-SAG 3108-B, Sheet 1 of 7. Equipment Storage and Warehouse Building. Building 29, plan and elevations. Headquarters Area, Dated 1958.

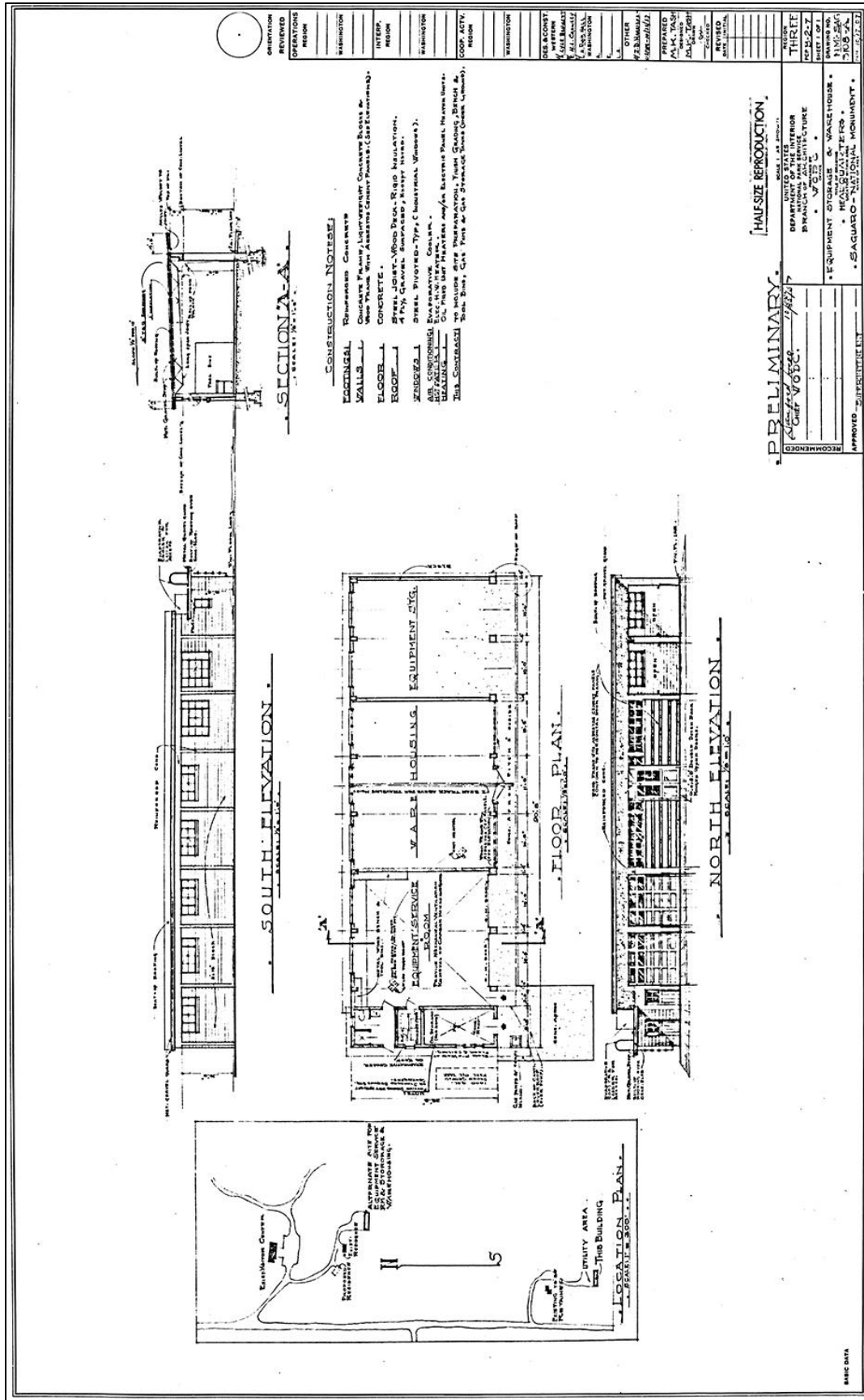


Figure 13. Drawing NM-SAG 3108-A, Sheet 1 of 1. Equipment Storage and Warehouse Building, Building 29. Plan and elevations, Headquarters Area, Dated Oct. 1957.

(Page 22)

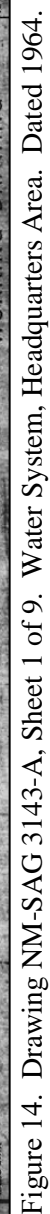


Figure 14. Drawing NM-SAG 3143-A, Sheet 1 of 9. Water System, Headquarters Area. Dated 1964.

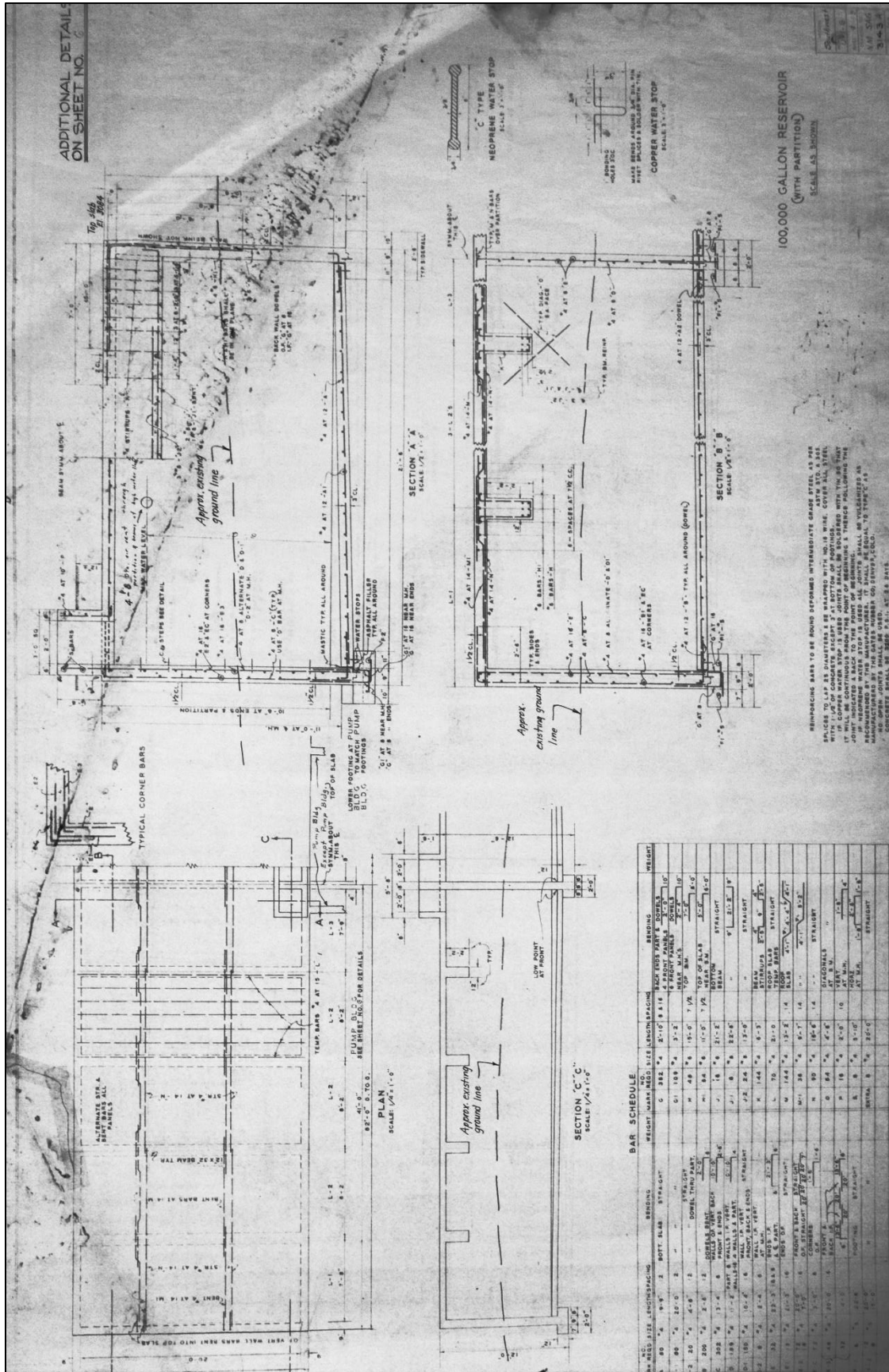


Figure 15. Drawing NM-SAG 3143-A, Sheet 4 of 9. 100,000 Gallon Reservoir, Headquarters Area. Dated Dec. 1963.



Figure 16. Drawing NM-SAG 3143-A, Sheet 6 of 9. Pump House Plan and Cross-Section, Headquarters Area. Dated June 1964.