

First Baptist Church
1 Summer Street
Nantucket
Nantucket County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MA-1252

HABS
MASS,
10-NANT,
91 -

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

HABS No. MA-1252

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MASS,
10-NANT,
91-

- Location: 1 Summer Street, Nantucket town and county,
Massachusetts
- Present Owner: First Baptist Church
1 Summer Street, Nantucket, MA 02554
- Present Use: Church services and related functions
- Significance: The First Baptist Church was originally built as the Baptist Meeting House. Fredrick Brown Coleman designed the church. His design was interpreted in a very unornamented and detailed style by the builder, John Chadwick. This simple Greek Revival structure remains very true to the architect's original intentions and contributes significantly to the island's character and architectural authenticity.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1839-1840.
2. Architect: Fredrick Brown Coleman.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The church was originally designed as a meeting hall for the Nantucket Baptist Society. The building has been in continuous use by the Baptist Society and the Baptist Church since its construction.
4. Builders, suppliers: The First Baptist Church was constructed by John Chadwick. The suppliers are unknown.

5. Original plans and construction: Visually, the interior space and exterior design are mostly as originally intended.
6. Alterations and additions: The addition of the Steere and Son organ in 1912 altered the spacial characteristics of the auditorium by replacing the trompe l'oeil behind the altar. Various additions occurred to the rear of the church. These showed little regard to the structure of the building, yet do not alter the quality of the building. The tower, added in 1841, was rebuilt in 1962 without the steeple

B. Historical context:

The First Baptist Church was built during the peak of Nantucket's role as the center of the whaling industry. Released from the austerity of Quaker influences, Greek Revival details were utilized in domestic and institutional architecture. Due to its heritage and location, construction was of wood. Master builders, using carpenter manuals, either faithfully followed patterns or improvised new interpretations. A disasterous fire in 1846 destroyed the central business district but spared this building, the Second Congregational Meeting House (MASS 838), and the Methodist Church (MASS-), all of which are fine examples of this architectural style and historic period.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: Built during the "Golden Years" on Nantucket island, the First Baptist Church is one of the defining buildings to the Nantucket skyline. As a significant landmark, its simplified Greek Revival structure and prominent three tiered

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tower distinguishes the church as an important representation of the burgeoning whaling era.

2. Condition of the fabric: Though mostly in good condition, the building is in need of a good maintenance schedule. The Baptist Society is financially unable to perform such a study and even more poorly equipped to properly maintain the building. The majority of the problems are structural defects caused by settlement. Foundation brick and mortar is failing. A poorly designed and maintained roof drainage system adds to the structural problems . Structural movement and poor drainage has damaged plaster ceilings in the basement.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The one story Greek Revival church building is three bays in width and features an auditorium and full basement. Its overall dimensions are 47'-1" X 68'-10". A three tiered tower is located near the front of the gable roof.
2. Foundations: The original foundation walls are of brick painted gray and are roughly 1'-3" thick. The foundation has been modified through the addition of access doors to the basement and the partial removal of some of the foundation walls in the rear; the rear brick foundations are unpainted.
3. Wall construction: Exterior walls are of wood frame with exterior clapboarding painted white. Equally spaced wood pilasters appear at the front and side elevations.
4. Structural system, framing: The building utilizes a prefabricated braced frame and queenpost trusses which were constructed in Cherryfield, Maine. The trusses and joists in the attic have been joined with

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tongue and groove inserts and secured with wooden pegs and dowels.

5. Porches, stoops, balcony, and bulkheads: The front steps and platform are not original and are constructed of concrete with brick inserts on treads and landings.
6. Chimneys: Though not original, a brick chimney of 1'-8" X 1'-11" is located off center on the north elevation.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The primary entrance to the building is through a double door in the south facade. The doors are panelled and painted gray. A geometric fret decorates the header over the door. A stained glass "Welcome" panel serves as a transom. A doorway into the east foundation wall provides access into the front part of the basement. A doorway to the rear basement and secondary first floor stairway is built into the side of an addition
 - b. Windows and shutters: Dating from between 1925 to 1962, three 5' X 12' stained glass windows are equally spaced in the east and west facade. Two windows of equal size are in the south facade. The large stained glass windows are divided into six sections with lower wooden mullions and upper metal muntins. The top middle panel is operable on each window for ventilation. Some of the windows into the basement utilize an early pulley system; other newer windows provide light into the organ works and other spaces.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Simple gable shape roof with composition shingles. The pediment is sheathed with clapboards painted white.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The simply detailed wood cornice is in the Greek Revival style. The eaves are wood and include built-in gutters.
- c. Tower: The square tower, located over the ridge of the gable roof towards the front, was added in 1841 shortly after the buildings construction. It is supported by four corner posts through the roof and consists of three tiers, each progressively smaller as they rise. The tower features simple Greek Revival details with flush horizontal siding painted white. The second tier has four louvered windows while the third tier has one four-over-four double hung window per side. The tower was once topped by a steeple; it currently has a square pyramidal hip roof.

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: A full basement exists under the entire building. The main space, a classroom and meeting room, is located in the middle of the basement. Secondary classroom, kitchen, storage, and organ machinery are located at the north end of the basement. Mechanical equipment and toilets are in the northeast rooms. An office, prayer room, and small work space is at the south end of the basement.

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- b. First floor: The double front doors open into a vestibule with symmetrical entrances into the auditorium. The focus of the auditorium is the organ and podium. A wood railing separates the podium from the auditorium. Enclosed staircases at both ends of the vestibule lead to the balcony above; one of those staircases also leads to the basement below. Stairs located in the north east corner of the church provide access to the basement below. A baptistry is located below the podium at the right side.
 - c. Balcony: The balcony is located above the vestibule space and accessed by the vestibule stairways. The balcony space is subdivided into rooms and does not appear to be as originally intended. A small stair leads to the attic from the balcony.
 - d. Tower: In the attic, stairs and ladders lead to the tower; these spaces are for storage.
2. Stairways: Wood stairways provide access from the vestibule to the balcony and basement.
 3. Flooring: The entry vestibule and balcony are wood painted gray. The auditorium is wood painted gray with blue carpet near the podium and down the aisles. The podium is blue carpet. The basement flooring is carpeting and tile on concrete.
 4. Wall and Ceiling finish: Plaster ceilings in all secondary spaces. Paint colors vary with rooms. The vestibule has plaster walls painted blue and off-white with a white ceiling. The auditorium has plaster walls painted an off-white, blue wood trim, and a white pressed metal ceiling with a blue ventilator. The balcony has off-white plaster walls. The basement walls and ceilings are plaster painted off-white. Original colors were not investigated.

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5. Doorways and doors: Miscellaneous wood panel doors exist, with two and four panel, one or two per opening being typical.
6. Decorative features: The organ case and pipes, altar rail, and pulpit in the auditorium.
7. Lighting fixtures: Modern electric fixtures.
8. Heating: An oil burning forced hot air system utilizes the remaining fragments of gravity-feed warm air furnace with vents in auditorium floor.

D. Site

1. General setting: The church faces south onto Summer Street with Traders Lane to the east. The neighborhood is a residential area dominated by architecture with Greek Revival proportions and details. Several buildings in the immediate area have been documented by PI:N and are in the HABS archives.
2. Outbuildings: None
3. Landscaping: None

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Old Views: None
- B. Primary and unpublished sources:

Church Records and Documents
Deed Office Book #40, p.379, 399
Folger, WMC. WMC Folger Diary, 1840. Folger Museum

PI:N Maintenance Study, 1989
Sanborn Maps
Tax Assessor Parcel 4233-070

C Secondary and published sources:

- Asher, Benjamin. *The Architect of Practical House
Carpenter*, Dover Pub., N.Y., 1830.
Lancaster, Clay. *The Architecture of Historic Nantucket*,
McGraw/Hill, N.Y., 1972.
Lancaster, Clay. *Nantucket in the Nineteenth Century*,
Dover Pub., N.Y., 1979.
Lafever, Minard. *The Modern Builder's Guide*, Dover Pub.,
N.Y. 1969.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Preservation Institute:
Nantucket, a program of the University of Florida. Recorded
under the direction of PI:N Director Emeritus, F. Blair Reeves,
FAIA, and PI:N Director, Susan Tate, AIA, the project was
completed by numerous students during the summers of 1989
and 1990 at the Preservation Institute studios. This report was
prepared by David Rosenthal, PI:N student in 1989 and
teaching assistant in 1991.