

Second Presbyterian Church
(Cathedral of Christ the Good Shepard)
1315 8th Avenue
Fourth Ward Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5857

HABS
PA,
7-ALTO,
77-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
(Cathedral of Christ the Good Shepherd)

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Location: 1315 8th Avenue

Date of Erection: 1870-71, 1875-77

Description: This church is unusual for the Fourth Ward because it is not built on a corner. The structure consists of two main sections; a brick sanctuary fronts on 8th Avenue while an older stone chapel runs to the edge of the alley at the rear.

The rear stone chapel, of the same width as the sanctuary, has a single side-gable ridge running parallel to 8th Avenue; it is thus not visible when the church is viewed straight on. In each gable end are two tiers of thin round-arched windows surrounded in brick and installed with non-pictorial stained glass. In the taller upper tier, the central window extends beyond those at each side, drawing the eye into the steeply pitched gable. Two faceted brick furnace chimneys protrude above the gable of the northern stone wall. Inside, the main chapel space is on the second floor.

The sanctuary, constructed in red brick with buff brick and stone accents, takes its form from intersecting gables on three sides, which create a rounded interior with three deep balconies and pulpit at the rear. A large pointed-arch stained-glass window is installed in each gable. Entrance towers rise from each front corner; a bell tower at right is now missing its steeple, while a shorter tower at the left has a pyramidal roof. Buff, glazed brick forms rows of horizontal banding in the front gable and bell tower and outlines the large gable windows, tower windows, and the rows of smaller stained-glass windows below each gable face. Window sills, along with entrance arches and columns, are in stone, as are diagonal faces in the decorative buttressing of the front wall and left-hand tower. Although Stick-style bargeboards seen in an early photo are gone from the projecting eaves of each gable front, wood and metal brackets joining from the gable corners to the wall face below remain.

The sanctuary interior was described in the December 18, 1876, issue of the Altoona Mirror as "with few exceptions, the most beautiful and commodious and well-arranged audience room in the State of Pennsylvania."

The galleries are reached from both the front and rear ends of the building. The pews are arranged in amphitheater form with four centre and two side aisles, are made of ash timber are cushioned, free, and are furnished with the Hymnal. The floor has a declination of two feet and is carpeted. There are a front, side and organ galleries, all finished in ash and well supported. The seating capacity is 1,300.

Alterations to the church include the removal of the steeple in 1939, and a major renovation in 1960, which included the installation of new pews, removal of the central chandelier, and enlargement of the pulpit platform. For a short time the brick walls were painted, but have now been sandblasted to restore their original appearance. In the 1876 description of the structure, the rear chapel is referred to as brick. It also appears as brick on the 1882 map, although it is shown in stone by 1888. If stone siding was added later, this may explain the presence of brick window surrounds in this section.

History: Currently home to a religious group called Servants of the Good Shepherd, this structure was built during the 1870s as Altoona's second Presbyterian church. The Second Presbyterian Church was first organized in June 1869 by forty members of the First Presbyterian Church on the city's west side. William M. Lloyd, the Altoona banker, was an influential founding member. By 1870 there were 472 members, by 1880, 507. The present structure was the congregation's first, built while services were held at Bell's Hall on 7th Avenue at 12th Street. The chapel at the rear of the property was constructed in 1870-71 at a cost of \$28,000 while the large and impressive main sanctuary, built during 1875-77, cost \$62,965.65 to complete. Land for the building was purchased officially from John Wright in September 1876.

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The construction of the Second Presbyterian Church was an ambitious undertaking--this is clear from the large size and stylistic sophistication of the building, erected as the first structure of a congregation not yet firmly established. An article in the Altoona Tribune of January 27, 1876, explained Altoona's social and religious context at the time of the main sanctuary's construction:

THE GREAT AWAKENING--Never in the history of this city, has there been such a vast religious inquiry manifested as at this time. Our evangelical churches are nightly crowded with attentive and serious audiences. . . . The work in the Second Presbyterian church has been a very gracious one, and there seems to be no abatement of the interest. Every night during the past week the church has been filled to overflowing. On Sunday morning one hundred and twenty-two persons were received into full membership on profession and eight by certificate, as the result of the past few weeks' labor.

By December, a full issue of the Altoona Mirror was devoted to the congregation and its new building, making clear the evangelical and modern aspirations of these Presbyterians. The author explained that "as a people we are fully awake to the fact that we are living in the latter half of the 19th century and that it won't do to carry on a church as it was done fifty or a hundred years ago."

The architectural consequences of this approach were also explained:

If the modern amphitheatrical audience room is better calculated to reach the masses than one constructed on the gloomy medieval style, we have said to our architect give us the circular seats and the slanting floor.

The name of the architect is unfortunately omitted.

Effective January 1, 1981, the Second Presbyterian Church of Altoona merged with the Broad Avenue United Presbyterian Church. The Broad Avenue church building became the home of the new congregation, which sold this structure to the United Southern Baptist Chapel in August of that year. In July 1982, the name was changed to Solid Rock Southern Baptist Church.

The church building was acquired by the Western Orthodox Church in America in October 1986. The Servants of Christ the Good Shepherd are a Catholic splinter group that has received controversial and negative press in the Altoona Mirror and other western Pennsylvania publications.

Sources: Maps: 1882. Africa, 172. Illustrated Altoona, 83. Photographs in Altoona Mirror files. "A History of the Second Presbyterian Church, Altoona, Pa," Altoona Mirror (December 18, 1876, 1-2; July 22, 1939; October 19, 1939; October 18, 1960; September 2, 1969. Mirror Almanac and Home Reference Book (Altoona: H. & W. H. Slep, 1899), 39. Deed books: 1068/401, 1133/982.

Project Information: This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. Overviews of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and the fourth ward neighborhood (HABS No. PA-5786) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Susan Garfinkel in the summer of 1989 under the supervision of HABS senior historian Alison K. Hoagland and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Garfinkel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian, and Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.