

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME
HISTORIC
First Baptist Church
AND/OR COMMON
Same

2 LOCATION
STREET & NUMBER
Oak and Woodfin streets
CITY, TOWN
Asheville
STATE
North Carolina
VICINITY OF
CODE
37
NOT FOR PUBLICATION
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
11th
COUNTY
Buncombe
CODE
021

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC ACQUISITION	<input type="checkbox"/> ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY
NAME
First Baptist Church c/o Dr. Cecil E. Sherman, pastor
STREET & NUMBER
Oak and Woodfin streets
CITY, TOWN
Asheville
VICINITY OF
STATE
North Carolina

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION
COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC
Buncombe County Courthouse
STREET & NUMBER
CITY, TOWN
Asheville
STATE
North Carolina

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS
TITLE
DATE
FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL
DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS
CITY, TOWN
STATE

DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The First Baptist Church of Asheville, a two-story domed, polygonal structure, is an unorthodox marriage of a monumental, Classical Beaux-Arts form (rather than style) with Art-Deco and highly individualistic detail. It is built of tan pressed brick laid in mechanical bond. The vestibule, a giant return, one bay deep and three wide, breaks out of the polygonal auditorium along the main (north) facade. Brick pilasters at either end of the facade frame the pyramidal composition of the monumental triple entrance. The flanking doors are three-fourths the height of the central entrance. Each entrance is a double-leaf door with square decorative panels. A raised beveled star fills most of the space of each square while small chamfered cubes fill each corner. Above each entrance is a marbelized Greek cross with polygonal apses framed by headers laid in a diamond pattern. Vertical bands of brick in which alternate bricks are recessed, ornament either side. The bands are flanked by rows of headers. Above the Greek cross over the higher center portal, which is correspondingly higher than the lateral ones, is a stylized pediment of molded brick. The three panels as well as the three doors are framed by stack bonded brick laid in stretchers and soldiers.

The entrance facade is emphasized by a colossal hectastyle portico. Its shallow, coffered ceiling is supported by slender brick piers which rest on entry steps of pink Georgia marble. The piers are laid in an ornamental variation of mechanical bond. In the capital zone of the piers are, on each face, decorative bands consisting of two vertical rows of sawtooth bricks and neck moldings. At the top of each pier is a molded, terra cotta cap. The entablature of the portico consists of an architrave of a highly plastic molding inscribed with a repetitive pattern of simple abstract figures; a frieze with a rectangular stone slab incised with the name of the church in block letters, flanked by Greek cross panels identical to those surmounting the entrance doors; and the cornice, a recapitulation of the architrave molding. Over the portico the cornice, breaking upward in a shallow frontispiece, forms a vestigial pediment.

The entablature continues around the main body of the building, the frieze of which is decorated with square stone plaques alternating with Greek crosses set in molded brick frames.

Above the cornice the massive, slightly bellcast dome rises ninety feet high above grade spanning the building's ninety-foot diameter. The steel ribs of the dome are clad with polychromed terra cotta tile webbing. The colors are sharply gradated, rising from purple and rust at the base, through a middle belt of rust and ochre to a strident green around the circumference of the foot of the tall, octagonal, copper cupola. The cupola rests on a heavy, molded base. Slender columns without bases or capitals support a tall, peaked roof, and feature a stylized feather motif favored by Douglas Ellington.

The church is entered through a handsome vestibule. Along the southern wall of the vestibule are matching closed-string half-turn staircases with winders, creating a spiral effect. The closed balustrades are pierced by stylized floral motifs. The steps themselves are marble, and the handrails are rounded and terminate in elegant spiral newels.

A triple doorway connects the ground floor of the vestibule with the auditorium proper. The three adjacent double doors are set in a continuous wooded architrave with simple geometric molding. Group, deeply cut, arched lancet arch panels combine with a border of circles.

SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW							
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGION				
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE				
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE				
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN				
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER				
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION				
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)				
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION						

SPECIFIC DATES

1925-1927/1955

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

Douglas D. Ellington

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The First Baptist Church of Asheville, built during the years 1925-1927, is a monumental, polygonal domed building that is one of the city's most prominent landmarks not only by virtue of its considerable size and importance to the religious life of the community, but also by its curious and extraordinary architectural quality. Douglas D. Ellington, its architect, who also designed other important Asheville landmarks, applied to a traditional, classical form his highly individualistic, often bizarre, ornamental and polychromatic version of the Art Deco style.

The First Baptist Church of Asheville, completed in 1927, is that congregation's fourth building. The church is believed to have been founded February 28, 1829, when four early settlers of Buncombe County met for a religious service. According to local tradition, the first church building was dedicated in 1832, but financial problems forced the trustees to sell it for \$20 in 1850. For about the next ten years, Asheville's Baptists met in the Buncombe County Courthouse or in quarters borrowed from the town's Presbyterian or Methodist congregations. By about 1860 the Baptist congregation, numbering about twenty-nine, had completed the basement of a new meetinghouse; by May, 1871, the entire structure had been completed and dedicated. This building was designed and built by the Asheville firm of Clayton and Shackelford.

The decade of the 1880s was a boom time for Asheville. Likewise, the membership of the First Baptist Church increased substantially: Between 1874 and 1890 it rose from about thirty-seven to 500. In June, 1892, the congregation's third building was dedicated at the corner of Spruce and College streets. (Its 1871 building was conveyed to a local Jewish congregation, which re-named it Temple Beth-ha Tephila. The building survives today in that function.) For the next three decades the congregation met in this building. By the early 1920s the church's membership had grown to about 1,500 and a portion of the 1892 building had been condemned as unsafe. An Asheville newspaper reported in 1922 that "church authorities are faced with the need of larger quarters."

The present church was constructed between 1925 and 1927 at the southeast corner of Oak and Woodfin streets. It was designed by Douglas D. Ellington, an architect then living near Asheville. Born in Clayton, North Carolina, on June 26, 1886, Ellington was educated at Randolph-Macon College, Drexel Institute, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. While in Paris he became the first southerner to win the Prix de Paris, and the only American at that time to be awarded the Prix Rougeot. His measured drawing of the eleventh century Church of St. Trophime at Arles, France, has been cited by experts as the finest such execution of that structure in existence. He was also one of ten first prize winners in the worldwide Christopher Columbus Memorial Competition, in which more than a thousand architects competed. He served for a time as professor of architecture at Drexel Institute, Columbia University,

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The auditorium is a single grand space which fills the main body of the church, and rises "to a height equal to five stories," according to the dedication booklet description. It has five aisles and four blocks of curved chestnut seats. Cantilevered balconies, partially supported by square-in-section posts, line the polygonal walls of the church from the rear to the sanctuary.

During the extensive church renovation of 1955, remodeling considerably altered the southern end, replaced the window glazing and lighting fixtures, altered the color scheme, and added the elaborate decorative panels concealing television facilities at the base of the dome. The panels, new chestnut paneling in the sanctuary, pews, and most of the other added fixtures are intended to continue the architect's decorative scheme, with angular elements in the Art Deco spirit, including architect Ellington's beloved stylized feather motif.

Of the original ceiling decoration, the frieze, cornice, and molding remain. The frieze consists of flat rectangular molded panels interrupted by raised diamond-shaped panels and roundels. Also original are the ornamental bands decorating the vertical edges of fenestration and panels of the southern walls. They repeat the architrave decoration in the vestibule. Other original elements include the elaborate geometric grillwork panels behind the choir, featuring Ellington's feather motif, and other wall panels framed by geometric bands.

Attached to the rear of the church is an asymmetrical grouping of dependent facilities, including a chapel, nursery, library, classroom, and offices, all of which are meant to harmonize with the church proper. Both the library (to the east) and the chapel complex (to the southwest) are two-and-one-half story hipped roofed brick buildings which flank and frame the church--and are original. While of little intrinsic architectural merit, the various auxiliary buildings serve as needed anchors for the church which is isolated from neighboring buildings by parking lots and major highways.

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and Carnegie Institute of Technology, and was also noted for his talents as a water-colorist. His first important work in the South was for old St. Paul's Church in Richmond, Virginia.

According to his obituary in the Asheville Citizen-Times, Ellington first came to Asheville in the 1920s. In 1926 he purchased a three-acre tract of land in Chunn's Cove upon which he built his home. (This house was later selected by House Beautiful Magazine as one of the fifty most artistic and interesting residences in North America.) Among the buildings he designed for Asheville were the Lee Edwards High School, the Asheville City Building, Biltmore Hospital (which he later redesigned as the home office of the Imperial Life Insurance Company), the S & W Cafeteria Building, and the Merrimon Avenue Fire Station (all of which are still standing), and a large number of residences. In addition, he designed the model town of Greenbelt, Maryland, and restored the Dock Street Theater in Charleston, South Carolina. Beginning in 1937, he is said to have spent a good deal of his time in Charleston, where he was involved in construction and restoration projects. He was active in a number of professional organizations and his practice extended throughout the eastern seaboard. Ellington died at his home near Asheville on August 27, 1960.

The present First Baptist Church consists of an octagonal main auditorium capable of seating 2,000, surrounded by four "educational" rooms together capable of seating an additional 3,000. Altogether there are 101 rooms in the one-million-cubic-foot structure. The cost of the site, building, and equipment was approximately \$635,000. The design of the church was described at the time of its dedication as "one of originality, expressing elegant simplicity and practicability as well as beauty and durability." Specifically cited as "a feat in engineering" is the great dome of the structure's main building. Built by the Miller Engineering Corporation of Washington, D. C., Norfolk, Virginia, and Asheville (the same contractor that collaborated with Douglas Ellington on the Asheville City Building), the dome was described as the only one of its kind and execution:

The steel and nail crete combine to make it a unit which rests like an inverted bowl on the octagonal walls of the auditorium. The form is similar to the dome of the Cathedral of Florence, Italy. This type of dome is self-contained, all stresses revolving in itself and carried vertically to the supporting walls.

When the church had been completed, so the story goes, some of its members expressed doubts that the main auditorium would ever be filled. These doubts were soon dispelled, however. By 1951 the membership numbered 2,720, making the First Baptist Church by far Asheville's largest congregation. It was joyfully reported in 1954 that "in the building which some said 'we won't need for 50 years,' classes were meeting in the kitchen."

¹ Gertrude Ramsey, "First Baptist Church To Hold Three-Day Victory Celebration," Asheville Citizen-Times, December 31, 1950, p. 10A.

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²"Ellington Obituary," Asheville Citizen-Times, August 28, 1950, sec. 8, p. 8.

³Elma Towe (comp. and ed.), Dedication of the First Baptist Church, Asheville, N. C. (Asheville: n.p., 1927), 4.

⁴George Pennell, "History Repeats Itself," in Pastor's Tenth Anniversary & SANCTUARY DEDICATION, January 3, 1954: First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C. (Asheville: n.p., 1954), n.p.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Asheville Citizen. "Asheville And Buncombe County Churches Have 45,000 Members And Property Valued At \$7,515,398," August 18, 1951 /from clipping file, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill/.

Asheville Citizen-Times. "Ellington, Architect and Artist, Dies Here," August 28, 1960.

Asheville Times. "RELIGIOUS LIFE IS PROMINENT IN WEST CAROLINA," December 15, 1922.

Buncombe County Records, Buncombe County Courthouse, Asheville, North Carolina (Subgroups: Deeds).

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 2

UTM REFERENCES

A	17	359300	3940380	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

FORM PREPARED BY

NAME/TITLE Research by Robert Topkins, survey specialist; architectural description by Mary Alice Hirson and McKelden Smith, consultants

ORGANIZATION	DATE
Division of Archives and History	5 April 1976
STREET & NUMBER	TELEPHONE
109 East Jones Street	919/829-7862
CITY OR TOWN	STATE
Raleigh	North Carolina

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL STATE LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER'S SIGNATURE

TITLE State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE 5 April 1976

DATE

DATE

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PAGE one

- Buncombe County Records, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina
(Subgroups: Deeds)
- Pennell, George. "History Repeats Itself," in Pastor's Tenth Anniversary & SANCTUARY DEDICATION, January 3, 1954: First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C. Asheville.
- Ramsey, Gertrude. "First Baptist Church To Hold Three-Day Victory Celebration," Asheville Citizen-Times, December 31, 1950.
- Sondley, Forster A. A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina. Asheville: Advocate Printing Co., 2 volumes, 1930.
- Towe, Elma, comp. and ed. Dedication of the First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C. Asheville.



First Baptist Church
Oak and Woodfin streets
Asheville, North Carolina

UTM Reference:
17/359800/3940380