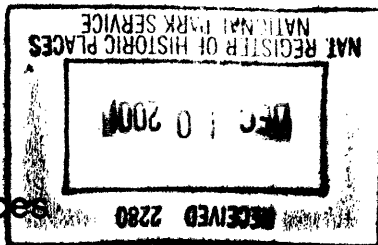


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



OCT 25 2001

1484

### National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

#### 1. Name of Property

historic name St. John Baptist Church

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. Location

street & number 715 6th Street SW  not for publication

city or town Mason City  vicinity

state Iowa code IA county Cerro Gordo code 033 zip code 50401

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Rowell J. Surke, DSHPO October 25, 2001  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

**STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA**  
State of Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

entered in the National Register.  See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register  See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:)

Edson M. Beall 1.24.02  
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property (Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

- Ownership options: private, public-local, public-State, public-Federal

- Category options: building(s), district, site, structure, object

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/Religious Facility/Church

RELIGION/Religious Facility/Church

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

20th C./Other: Ecclesiastical

foundation CONCRETE

walls STONE/Limestone

WOOD

roof ASPHALT

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black

Period of Significance

1937-1951

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

Significant Dates

1937

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Unidentified

Congregation & Spencer Brothers (?)

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

St. John Baptist Church  
Name of Property

Cerro Gordo County, IA  
County and State

### 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property Less than one acre.

#### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 

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4	7	7	5	2	8	0
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Zone Easting Northing

3 

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Zone Easting Northing

4 

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 See continuation sheet

#### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

#### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

### 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Molly Myers Naumann, Consultant

organization \_\_\_\_\_ date May 2001

street & number 167 West Alta Vista telephone (641) 682-2743

city or town Ottumwa state IA zip code 52501-1437

#### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

#### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

#### Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

#### Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.) (See attached)

name St. John Baptist Church, Inc. c/o Calvin George Duncan

street & number 3818 N. 22nd Street telephone (402) 438-0511

city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68521

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

St. John Baptist Church  
Cerro Gordo County, IA

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NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION:

St. John Baptist Church is located in the southwest quarter of Mason City, on the south side of 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW. 6<sup>th</sup> Street has been widened and is a busy east/west thoroughfare. The Chicago & Great Western and the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific railroad tracks are located one block to the east, while the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific tracks are three blocks to the south.

This church is rectangular in shape, measuring 24' x 56' with a 4' vestibule on the façade (north elevation). It features a gable roof with a square wooden bell tower centered above the front entrance. All roof surfaces are covered with asphalt shingles. A single chimney is located in the southeast quarter of the roof. The building rests on a high (5'6") stone foundation with three steps leading from the sidewalk up to the entrance (originally double doors). An alley is located along the east side of the building, and a chain link fence encloses a play area on the west. A small shed roof frame addition at the southwest corner of the building encloses steps from a rear entrance.

St. John Baptist is an example of simple vernacular design, based on the centuries-old rectangular nave floor plan. No architect has been identified, although some believe that Spencer Brothers, a local African-American construction firm, may have drawn the plans. Labor was contributed by members of the congregation.

The exterior of the church is of coursed rock-faced limestone blocks of varying sizes (ranging from 13" x 16" to 4' x 1') that were salvaged from Grant Elementary School when it was demolished in 1937. An identification stone "St. John Baptist" is found above the front entrance, while a date stone "1919/1937" is located on the north face of the northeast corner. 1919 is the date the congregation was established, and 1937 is the date construction was started on the building. The projecting vestibule has buttress-like stepped sides. Stones of similar size and color are used to create belt courses around the building: one serving as a watertable at the top of the basement windows, one at sill level of the main floor windows, and a third which connects the tops of the main floor windows. On the façade a single tall slender window with flat arched top is located to each side of the vestibule. The side elevations contain six evenly spaced tall windows. These are single light double hung windows with a transom above. The rear of the building features two of the tall transomed windows with timber lintels. At the basement level, there are five windows along each side elevation and three on the rear. The mortar joints show a heavy sand content. On the rear of the building a stone that reads "school" has been laid in the wall upside down. This is the builders' recognition of the use of Grant School materials.

On the interior the building consists of the entrance, sanctuary, and offices at the rear. Upon entering the front door, five steps lead up to a broad landing. Stairs to the basement open off the west side of this landing, while double doors into the sanctuary are located one step up on the south. The sanctuary proper measures approximately 38' x 22'. It contains

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C. April 23, 1953

seven pews on each side of the central aisle. A piano is located along the west wall. At the south end there are three steps leading up to the pulpit and altar area which is approximately 11' deep. The pulpit is located near the southeast corner and chairs for the choir are arranged along the west half of the area. An arched recessed opening contains the altar and cross, with a painting of the Lamb of God on the wall behind the cross. This painting was created by church member Jo Dahl in 1946. The arched opening is flanked on each side by a door going into separate offices, the larger one on the southeast corner (approx. 8' x 11') is the pastor's study, while the smaller southwest room (approx. 8' x 10') appears to be general office, and has a door which leads to the outside.

Interior finishes have been altered somewhat over the years. Modern light colored paneling now covers the lower 5' 10" of the walls with the original plaster finish above. Floors

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are tile covered except for the carpeted center aisle and altar area. The ceiling has been covered with acoustical tile in the sanctuary, while the original beaded board remains in the two offices. The windows are original and, like the stone, were purchased from the old Grant School. These feature round prisms that spread the light throughout the sanctuary. The oak pews appear to be original to the building.

At the rear (north) of the sanctuary are two doors, one on each side of the double entry. The door on the west side opens into a small closet, while the one on the east opens into a cloakroom which also allows entry to the attic. The rope from the bell tower hangs into the cloakroom providing easy access for ringing on Sunday mornings.

The basement level consists of furnace room, Sunday School room, and a kitchen. This area has a concrete floor, plastered walls, and a beaded board ceiling. Small half windows provide light and ventilation.

Even though regular services have not been held in St. John since 1996, the building has been well-maintained and has been used for special events. The only alterations to this church have been made on the interior, primarily the installation of wall paneling and the tiles on the sanctuary ceiling. The church retains an unusually high degree of integrity.

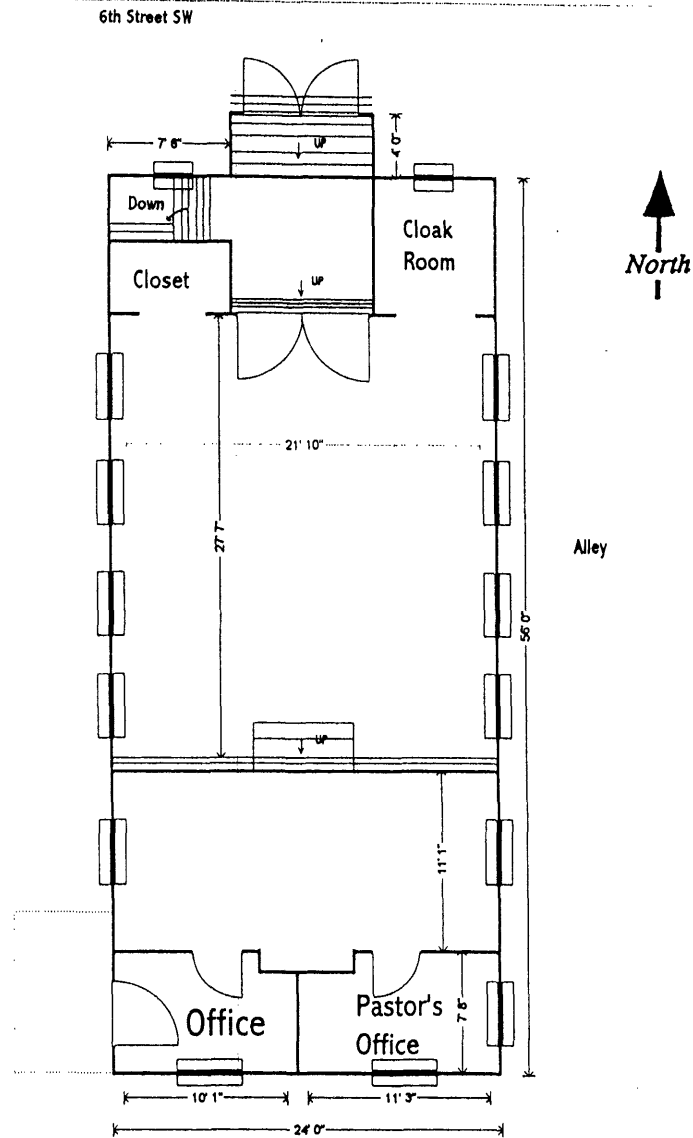
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Floor Plan



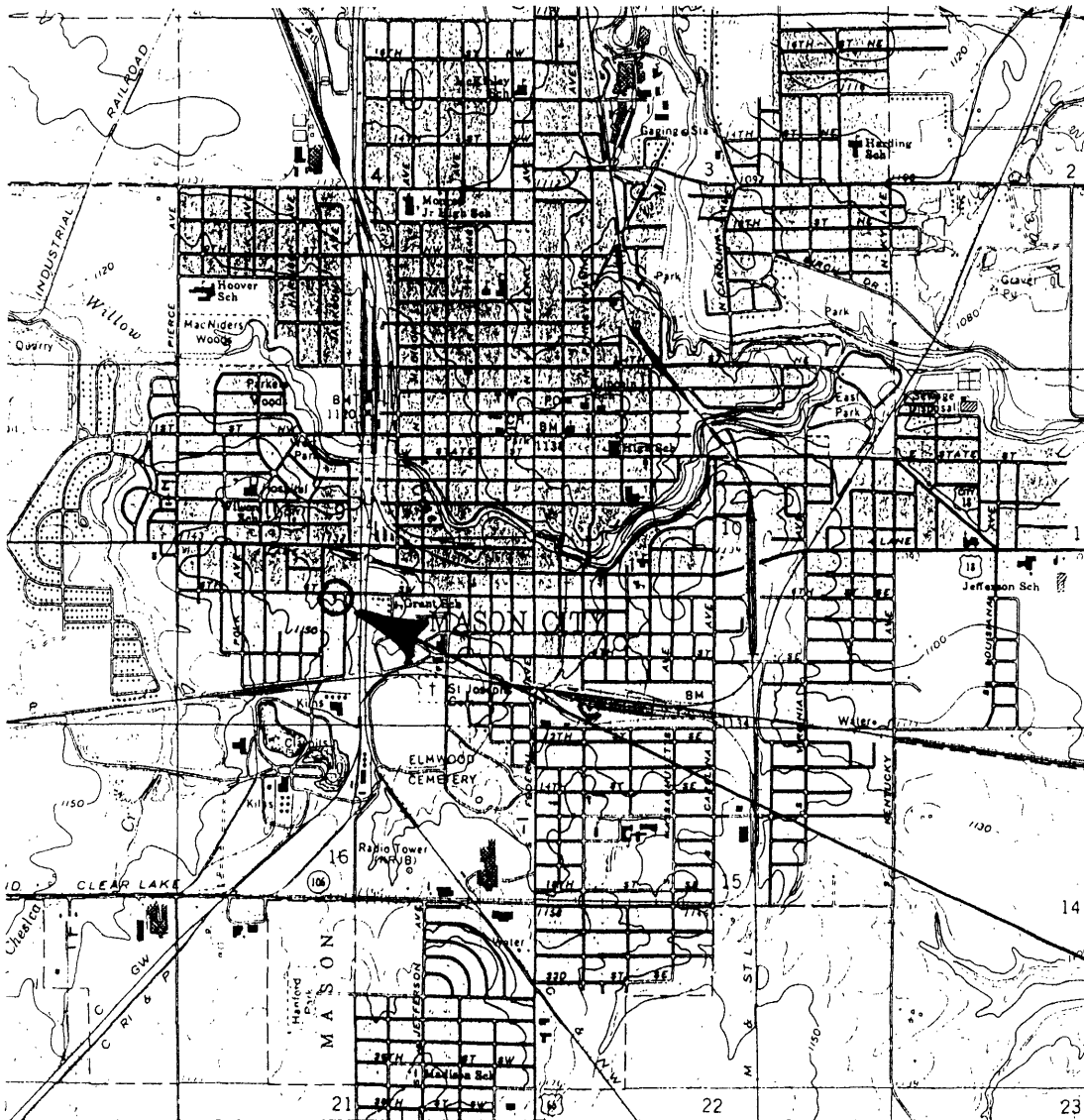
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U.S.G.S. Map of Mason City  
Location of St. John Baptist indicated by arrow

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

St. John Baptist Church (1937) of Mason City is locally significant under Criterion A for its association with a strong African-American community, and the role the church played in an ethnically diverse neighborhood. It meets Criteria Consideration A as it derives its significance from its ethnic association. 1937 was selected as the date of significance because the story of the church begins with its construction and the active role the members physically played in making the building become a reality.

Unlike counties in the southern part of the state, Cerro Gordo County had few "colored," or black, residents in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 1870 census recorded only four, and this had only increased slightly to nine by 1890. In a 1953 *Mason City Globe-Gazette* article Thomas C.B. Tyler wrote of his father's decision to move to Mason City and of other early Negro residents. When Lewis W. Tyler brought his wife and son to town in 1892, there were only about a dozen "colored" people, men, women, and children. Tyler worked as a barber for many years, training his son Thomas to follow in his footsteps. Eventually Thomas Tyler went to work at the Milwaukee roundhouse, staying 30 years until his retirement.

The Milwaukee Railroad is credited with bringing many of the early black residents to Mason City. Mason City was a terminal for their food service on westbound trains, and the terminal for their sleeping car service on the eastbound trains. Many of the early railroad employees stayed at a local hotel (the Stanton) between trips. Some liked Mason City well enough that, like Lewis Tyler, they moved their families to town, and often provided rooms for other railroad employees. By 1900 "colored" residents in the county numbered fifty-eight, and by 1910 there were 148 "colored" residents. They worked not only for the railroad, but for the city, for other companies such as Crystal Lake Ice & Fuel, and the brick and tile companies, and many had their own businesses as barbers, hair dressers, or cooks. In the early years there was no "colored" church and each family attended one of the white churches of their choice. In 1912 a group got together and organized the Union Memorial Methodist Church. The following year they built a brick church, designed by local architect E.R. Bogardus, at 610 4<sup>th</sup> Street NE, in the northeast quarter of the community. (This church is presently used as a residence and child care center.)

By 1915 Mason City's population had reached 17,152 and 213 (1.24%) of these were listed as "colored." The Iowa census for that year counted seventeen AME (African Methodist Episcopal) churches statewide, one of which was in Mason City. In addition, there were sixteen "colored" Baptist congregations in the state. In 1919 a small group of "colored" Baptists met in Mason City to form St. John Baptist Church. The church was incorporated the following year, and members met in various homes for services. For a year they rented a labor hall for meetings, before finally buying a house at 715 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW as a meeting site in 1926. Soon the house was moved and a basement chapel that could be used for services was dug, with plans to build a "real" church on the site as finances allowed. Although there was not a specific "colored" neighborhood in Mason City, it appears that the majority of African-Americans lived in this southwest quarter of town.

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St. John basement church c. 1930

After worshipping in the basement for a number of years, members of the congregation took advantage of the demolition of the nearby Grant School to obtain materials to build their church. The summer of 1937 church members bought building stone, flooring, windows, a stairway, and even wiring and pipe from the demolished school. This was transported the short two blocks to the site for the construction of "a small, but commodious church." (*Globe-Gazette*, no date) The building committee consisted of O.H. Burrell, A.C. Macer, B.F. Parker, James Jeffries, W.B. Martin, and the Rev. J. Lee Lewis.

Under the leadership of the Reverend J.M. Eaves, the cornerstone of the new church was laid on Sunday, September 19, 1937 "with appropriate ceremonies." An interesting note concerns another stone that was placed near the cornerstone the same day. It was found on the Knob Creek farm near Hodgenville, Kentucky where Abraham Lincoln spent his early boyhood days. (*Globe-Gazette*, 9-10-37) Placement of this stone in such a place of honor reflects the continued reverence of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator."

During the next three years members of the congregation, aided by Spencer Brothers Construction, poured the forms for the basement walls, laid the stone, shingled the roof, and completed the interior. When completed, the limestone church measured twenty-four by fifty-

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six feet. The basement contained the kitchen, furnace, and Sunday School room, while the upstairs housed the "auditorium."

St. John Baptist was dedicated on Sunday, September 29, 1940 in a ceremony attended by more than 250 people. In addition to members of the congregation, participants included Dr. Roy Helfenstein, president of the Mason City Ministerial association, Rabbi Levinson, the Rev. J Lee Lewis, pastor of the First Baptist Church, and pastors from the Little Cedar and Des Moines Maple Street Baptist churches. Members of the Maple Street choir provided music for the event.

The *Globe-Gazette* described the interior as "It is gas heated, has a raised rostrum, with pulpit furniture and choir loft, 22 pews, and baptistery. The ceiling is tinted blue, the walls white, and the window trimmings are brown." The newspaper noted that the grounds of the church had been landscaped, and that the building and grounds represented an investment of \$5,000. An unusual part of the dedication was "the presentation of the keys by W.B. Martin, deacon and treasurer, the offering baskets, the dust-mop and pan, the hymn books, the communion tray, and the dishes from the kitchen, each being presented by the person responsible as president or chairman of that group."

The importance of African-American churches like St. John Baptist cannot be over emphasized. A study of rural African-American churches conducted by Middle Tennessee State University says "...the church is the single most important institution in African-American life..." and goes on to say "The black church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community." (*Powerful Artifacts*, p 3) These churches are "the artifacts of the creation, development, persistence, and continuity of three vital and interrelated components of African-American ethnic heritage: 1) ethnic identity; 2) religion; and, 3) education." (p 27)

St. John Baptist illustrates all of the points above. Members remember that the church was the focus of their life in the neighborhood. Not only were there services on Sunday mornings and evenings, but a number of different social groups met there as well. Lodge meetings were held, the ladies of the church met for mission purposes, youth groups were active, and, during various periods, before school breakfast was served for neighborhood children. It has been said that "...singing is second only to preaching as the magnet of attraction and the primary vehicle of spiritual transport for the worshipping congregation." (*Powerful Artifacts*, p 35) One long-time member recalls the joy of singing in the St. John choir. Although the choir was small, usually about eight, it was a major element in the worship celebration. The choir often traveled to churches in neighboring communities such as Manly to sing at special services. The congregation of St. John numbered around twenty to twenty-five families. It held fundraisers (fried chicken dinners with sweet potato pie) to pay off the mortgage, and in 1944 they held a mortgage burning ceremony. Like the dedication four years earlier, this was attended by many prominent members of Mason City society.

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Burning of the mortgage, June 25, 1944

The impact of St. John Baptist extended far outside the African-American community. The various industries in Mason City attracted workers from outside the area, and the southwest quarter of Mason City became a melting pot of emigrants. The neighborhood was known by different names including the "Brickyard" (because of the numerous brick and tile plants along the southern edge) and "Powder Street" (because a local gun shop owner stored his extra

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ammunition in a shed at the end of Jackson Street). It became the home of many eastern European emigrants, with large numbers of Montenegrins, Serbians, Croatians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Italians, Mexicans, and an increase in the African-American population. In 1915 Mason City's population was 31% foreign born. At one time students attending the neighborhood elementary school (Grant) represented twenty-one different nationalities. Mason City residents who went to Grant remember it being "truly integrated. We didn't have any problems. We all hung together." (*Globe-Gazette*, 11-5-2000) Sterling Macer recalls playing football, with his brothers and all the Papajohn boys, Aristotle, Socrates, and John. The Papajohn family ran a grocery store on 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW. Former St. John member Lola Rehm says she developed "an intense liking" for Greek and Armenian food living in the neighborhood. Whenever any of the different ethnic groups (Mexican, Greek, Armenian) held a celebration (name days, feast days, weddings) everyone was invited.

Although there was another small African-American congregation in the neighborhood (Church of God and Christ), St. John was the center of the African-American community. To Rehm "Church was extremely important. It kept the community together. It helped your sense of belonging. Our parents instilled a church attitude in my generation." Sterling Macer, says "The church was my family. My father died when I was eight years old. My mother raised four boys. We all finished high school. We all went to college. I didn't get any scholarships. My relatives and the church were so supportive. That's the reason I made it."

In recent years the membership at St. John has declined. Many young people have moved from Mason City, and many of the older members have died. Regular services have not been held in the church since 1996, but it has continued to be used for special occasions.

The strength of St. John Baptist and its heritage can be seen today in the move to have this church nominated to the National Register. The two men behind this nomination, Sterling Macer and Everet Jeffries, are sons of two of the original Building Committee members. Macer and Jeffries would like to see the sturdy stone building again play an important role in the neighborhood, perhaps as a senior center or child care center.

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9. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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*Mason City Globe-Gazette:*

9-10-1937	"St. John's Baptist Church Under Construction."
9-15-1937	"St. John's Baptist Pastor Served in War with Spain."
9-30-1940	"Preside at St. John's Baptist Dedication."
6-1-1953	"1890: Early Negroes in City." By Thomas C.B. Tyler.
11-5-2000	"Life in the Brickyard." By Kristin Buehner.
11-12-2000	"Powder Street." By Kristin Buehner.

**Interviews**

Sterling Macer by Molly Naumann: 2-15-2000, 5-22-2000, and 6-2-2000.

Leonard Foster by Molly and Gary Naumann: 6-27-2000.

Lola Rehm by Molly and Gary Naumann: 6-27-2000.

Everet Jeffries by Molly Naumann: March 2001.

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**St. John Baptist Church  
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**10. GEOGRAPHIC DATA**

**Verbal Boundary Description:**

The east one-half of Lot One (1) in the Subdivision of Lot Fourteen (14) in the Subdivision of Lots Three (3), Eight (8), Fourteen (14) and Fifteen (15) in Emeley & Adams Subdivision of the Northeast Quarter of Southwest Quarter (NE ¼ of SW ¼) of Section Nine (9), Township Ninety-six (96) Range Twenty (20) West of the 5<sup>th</sup> P.M., in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa.

**Boundary Justification:**

This is the area historically associated with this resource.

**PROPERTY OWNER (continued)**

St. John Baptist Church, Inc.  
c/o Dr. Deborah Turner, MD  
180 Lakeside Drive  
Mason City, IA 50401

(641) 424-8326



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**St. John Baptist Church  
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The photographs submitted with this nomination were taken by Molly Myers Naumann. The exteriors were photographed in November 2000, and the interiors were done in May 2001.

1. Façade to the SSE
2. Façade looking due S
3. Detail: Identification stone above front entry
4. Detail: Date stone from NE corner of facade
5. Façade and east elevation to SW
6. Rear and east elevation to NW
7. Rear elevation to N
8. Detail: "schoo" stone from rear elevation
9. Interior from entry looking toward altar, to S
10. Interior from altar to front entry, to N
11. Interior showing pews to SW