

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For HCRS use only
received JUL 30 1979
date entered SEP 20 1979

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic The First Colored Baptist Church

and/or common The First Baptist Church

2. Location

street & number 709 Martin Luther King, Jr. Street (formerly Sylvan St.) not for publication

city, town Selma vicinity of _____ congressional district 7

state Alabama code 01 county Dallas code 047

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" 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 The First Baptist Church

street & number 709 Martin Luther King, Jr. Street

city, town Selma vicinity of _____ state Alabama 36701

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Dallas County Courthouse

street & number 105 Lauderdale

city, town Selma state Alabama

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Alabama Inventory has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1978 federal state county local

depository for survey records Alabama Historical Commission

city, town Montgomery state Alabama

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input checked="" 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

This is a large urban church constructed in the late 19th century and influenced by the Gothic Revival. It faces east and is located on the southwest corner of Martin Luther King, Jr. Street (formerly Sylvan Street) and Jeff Davis Street. The building is currently in poor condition, the result of a 1978 tornado which caused the toppling of the wood-frame spire, the outward collapse of the north and south walls of the sanctuary, and a partial collapse of the ceiling and roof systems above. However, the remaining wood truss construction over the central sanctuary and chancel area and the solid brick-bearing walls of the remainder of the structure are intact and the building is suitable for rehabilitation. The remainder of the church suffered little damage, although exposure to the weather has resulted in additional damage to floors, plaster and other finishes.

Prior to the tornado damage, the church had been little altered since its construction in 1894. It is a one-story structure over a full basement with the main floor raised approximately 8' above grade. The exterior walls are load bearing brick and support the system of heavily built-up wood scissor trusses with wood purlins and sub-purlins. The plan of the church is cruciform with the sanctuary and chancel housed beneath a steeply-pitched, cross-gable roof and the assembly room (on the east) beneath a slightly lower gable. The exterior of the building reflects the influence of the Gothic Revival with its pointed windows and twin towers located at the juncture of the assembly room and sanctuary. The towers serve as entrances to the building and access to them is from small raised entry porches which have simple shed roofs supported by turned wooden columns and decorated with gingerbread trim. The tower to the south is the bell tower and featured a tall wood-framed spire, while the northern tower is topped with a low pyramidal roof. Upper level windows of the bell tower are set into a raised corbeled plane which terminates above the base of the spire in small gablets pierced with small round windows. Windows of the northern tower are set within recessed panels.

The side gabled walls of the sanctuary were similar to the existing east wall (rear of the assembly room). The dominant feature is a large triple lancet window flanked by smaller single lancet windows on either side. Originally the windows were pivotable wood sash with stained glass, but were fixed when a protective plastic shield was installed on the outside. The remaining windows of the main floor are single lancet type, similar to those flanking the larger openings. All windows have corbeled arches with a skim coat of stucco painted white and are connected by a continuous brick belt course at the springline of the arches. A similar belt course separates the main floor from the basement which features segmental arched windows. All windows are in reasonably good shape with the exception of those which were destroyed with the collapse of the two side walls. The west gabled wall, which featured a single off center window, has had a small shed roof addition, obscuring the windows. This addition was given a window treatment similar to the other gable ends.

8. 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 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 checked="" 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) black history
<input type="checkbox"/> invention				

Specific dates 1894; 1963-1965 **Builder/Architect** Dave Benjamin West

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The First Baptist Church is most noted as one of the major landmarks associated with the mass rallies and demonstrations which occurred in the mid-1960's in Selma and which lead to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Additionally, it is significant as one of the finer late 19th century Black churches in the state and as the work of a local Black architect.

The congregation was organized in the early 1840's by a freed slave, Samuel Phillips, and jointly shared a building with a white congregation. Shortly after the close of the war, the white congregation bought out the claims of the blacks who then constructed a new building on St. Phillips Street. During Reconstruction, the congregation was instrumental in establishing Selma University, an early black college and theological school, donating to the school the use of an audience room, oil, fuel, and the services of its pastor. In 1894, the congregation constructed a new building on Sylvan Street (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Street). On its completion, the church was hailed as "the finest colored church edifice in Alabama" by an early historian of the Black Baptist congregations. The new building was designed by Dave Benjamin West, a local Black contractor/architect. At present, little is known about West. He was born in Marion in 1850, and apparently came to Selma sometime after the close of the Civil War. He served as one of the Trustees of Selma University and was responsible for some of the early structures of that campus.

In 1963 under the leadership of Reverend M. C. Cleveland, the church became the first in the city to open its doors for activities and meetings of the Dallas County Voters League. During the next two years, the church was a focal point of the mass meeting and non-violent teaching sessions sponsored by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and in late 1964, meetings were held in the church to plan the mass rallies and demonstrations of early 1965 which culminated in the Selma-to-Montgomery march. During the early months of 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headquartered in Brown's Chapel half a block away, spoke nightly to the youth gathered at First Baptist Church.

After the march, the church continued to headquarter the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and continued to serve as a distribution center for food and clothing for those persons who suffered the loss of jobs.

In 1978, the church was struck by a tornado, resulting in the damage mentioned in the description. Currently, the congregation is attempting to restore the church to its original appearance.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Boothe, C. O. The Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama: Their Leaders, Their Works. Birmingham: Alabama Publishing Company, 1895.

Boynnton, Amelia Platt. Bridge Over Jordan. New York: Carlton Press, 1979.

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than 1 acre _____

Quadrangle name Selma

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

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4	9	8	3	2	0
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3	5	8	6	1	6	0
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Verbal boundary description and justification

see continuation sheet

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state _____ code _____ county _____ code _____

state _____ code _____ county _____ code _____

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Ellen Mertins

organization Alabama Historical Commission

date July 17, 1979

street & number 725 Monroe Street

telephone (205) 832-6621

city or town Montgomery

state Alabama 36130

12. 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 Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Wils B. Howard, Jr.

title SHPO Alabama

date July 19, 1979

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

William H. Preston
Keeper of the National Register

date 9-20-79

Attest: *Carl A. Dink*
Chief of Registration

date 9/19/79

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND RECREATION SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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The interior floors are of wood construction supported on masonry load bearing walls or a system of columns and beams below. The floor of the main sanctuary slopes from the rear to the chancel area terminating at a raised dias which extends some two-thirds across the sanctuary width. The walls are plaster; the ceiling, which in the sanctuary follows the pitch of the bottom cord of the scissor truss system, is beaded wood. The wainscot contains a field of reeded 1x4s alternating with plain 1x4s. The door and window trim is simple, with molded blocks at the springlines of the arches and corners of the doors.

The building is currently undergoing restoration. The damaged walls are being rebuilt with concrete block faced with original brick. As of June, 1979, the walls are nearly completed and the windows are being roughed in.

FHR-8-300A
(11/78)

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

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Fager, C. E. Selma 1965: The March that Changed the South. New York: Scribner, 1974.

Garrow, David J. Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yale University Press, 1978.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 10 PAGE 2

Abstract of that lot of land situated in the City of Selma, in Dallas County, Alabama, and which is described as follows, to wit: Commencing at the corner formed by the intersection of the south margin of Jeff Davis Avenue with the west margin of Sylvan Street and from said point running southerly along the west margin of Sylvan street 83 feet, thence running west at right angle with Sylvan street 120 feet to the center of the block thence at right angle running northerly 41 feet and 2 inches, thence at right angle running easterly 49 feet and 8 inches, thence at right angle running northerly parallel with Sylvan street 73 feet and 3 inches more or less to the south margin of Jeff Davis Avenue, thence running east along the south margin of Jeff Davis Avenue 74 feet and 7 inches to the point of beginning, being all of lot 21 and part of lot 20 of the subdivision of Out lot 23 in the City of Selma.