

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

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

For NPS use only

received

date entered **AUG 17 1983**

RECEIVED

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

**NATIONAL
REGISTER**

1. Name

historic First African Baptist Church

and/or common First African Baptist Church

2. Location

street & number 2621 9th Street NA not for publication

city, town Tuscaloosa NA vicinity of congressional district 7

state Alabama code 01 county Tuscaloosa code 125

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<u>NA</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
			<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Officers and Members of First African Baptist Church

street & number 2621 9th Street

city, town Tuscaloosa NA vicinity of state Alabama 35401

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Tuscaloosa County Courthouse

street & number 714 Greensboro Avenue

city, town Tuscaloosa state Alabama

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

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

date 1970-present 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 type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" 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		

1963 addition

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Situated along the southwest edge of Tuscaloosa's central business district, First African Baptist is the city's second oldest historically black church building. Constructed in 1907 by local contractors George Clopton and William Medlock, this imposing brick building has a concrete and stone foundation and follows a modified cruciform plan. Typical of the early 20th century is the ornate brick detailing that accentuates the main openings, as well as the eclectic mixture of Romanesque and Gothic arches.

The facade of the building evokes a spirit of grandeur with its massive cornertower topped by a pyramidal roof with slightly splayed eaves. The tower belfry houses a locally acclaimed late-19th-century bell, cast in bronze by the McShane firm. A smaller secondary corner tower houses the stairway to the balcony of the sanctuary and with the main tower, flanks a deeply recessed, arched entrance porch.

The cross gable roof covering the sanctuary articulates the essentially cruciform format of the building, while leaded-glass lancet windows surmounted by hoods alternate with buttresses along the sides. Each gable front is pierced by a large rounded-arch central window surmounted by a louvered vent near the apex. Smaller flanking windows are pointed, echoing the dominant window treatment.

The large, two-aisle sanctuary has a cross-beam or coffered ceiling with inset beaded board panels. From the pulpit and balustraded choir areas at the front of the church, the pews fan outward into the transepts and nave. The choir balustrade was originally open; but as Southern Baptist tradition has demanded, the balustrade was "mock-blinded" during the 1960's in response to the rise of women's hemlines. The balcony features a paneled guard rail supported by slender post supports.

The slightly recessed pulpit area, which is accentuated by a brick segmental arch and keystone, suggests that prior to the construction of a two-story, stucco-finished educational wing at the rear in 1963, an interpretative rendition of the cruciform apse may have been originally incorporated into the building design.

Local tradition holds that the building was patterned after Robert Robinson Taylor's Institute Chapel at Tuskegee, which burned in 1957. The first black architect to graduate from MIT, Taylor was the primary architect at Tuskegee Institute during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is credited with the design of approximately 35 to 40 campus buildings constructed between 1893 and 1933. The Institute Chapel is said to have been his most favored work. In 1942 Taylor died there while worshipping during a brief return trip.

Taylor's design for the 1898 chapel included a cruciform floor plan with seating for over 2,000, a pronounced corner tower, sharply articulated wall surfaces, and an array of round arched windows of varying sizes. The highlight of the Chapel was the famous three-part "singing window" situated in the chancel, which illustrated the theme of 11 Negro spirituals.

(See continuation sheet.)

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/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) Black History
Specific dates	1907; 1964			
Builder/Architect	George Clopton & William Medlock			

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Criterion C - Architecture (1907)

First African Baptist Church is significant as one of the best remaining and least altered examples of early 20th-century church architecture in Tuscaloosa. As compared to the city's other four pre-World War I church buildings, First African is the earliest church building that retains its original site and essentially its original exterior and interior appearance. Tuscaloosa's 1845 St. John the Baptist Catholic Church has a significantly altered interior; the late-19th-century Bailey's Tabernacle CME was moved from its original site; the exterior of the 1882 Gothic Revival Christ Episcopal was severely altered in 1984; and the 1913 First United Methodist Church, which was until recently the least altered of all, suffered extensive interior modifications.

Built in 1907 by local contractor George Clopton and brickmason William Medlock, both members of the church, this imposing brick building is also significant as the only known building in the state outside the Tuskegee campus that illustrates the design concepts and themes most commonly attributed to Robert Robinson Taylor. Widely accepted as the only known building patterned after Taylor's self-proclaimed masterpiece, the Tuskegee Institute Chapel (1898), First African exhibits a strong concentration of typical Taylor-themes to substantiate this local tradition. Foremost, the building exhibits a modest monumetality accomplished through crisp massing of volumes with sharply articulated walls. It is sensitively scaled down in the tradition of early Tuskegee building with crafty detailing to accentuate the beauty of the bricks, and it has a number of notable superficial similarities to the Tuskegee Chapel, including the pronounced corner tower and the abbreviated cruciform plan. Robert Robinson Taylor (1868-1942), the 1892 summa cum laude graduate of MIT, was the institution's first black architect. Between 1893 and 1933 he designed approximately 35 to 40 buildings at Tuskegee Institute and is best known as the Institute's pioneer, in-residence architect. His most favored building, the Institute Chapel, was destroyed by fire in 1957.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet.

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than 1 acre

Quadrangle name Tuscaloosa

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A	<u>16</u>	<u>4468710</u>	<u>3671391410</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing

B			
	Zone	Easting	Northing

C			
	Zone	Easting	Northing

D			
	Zone	Easting	Northing

E			
	Zone	Easting	Northing

F			
	Zone	Easting	Northing

G			
	Zone	Easting	Northing

H			
	Zone	Easting	Northing

Verbal boundary description and justification

See continuation sheet.

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

state	NA	code	county	code

state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Betsy Hayslip, Heritage Commission of Tuscaloosa County
Shirley Qualls Range, Reviewer/Editor

organization Alabama Historical Commission date 1/29/88

street & number 725 Monroe Street telephone 205 261-3184

city or town Montgomery state Alabama

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

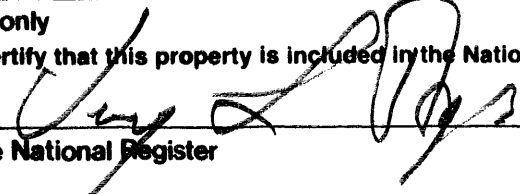
national state local

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 National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature 

title State Historic Preservation Officer date 8/11/88

For NPS use only
 I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

 date 9/20/88

Attest: _____ date _____
 Chief of Registration

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7 Page 1
First African Baptist Church

The influence of Taylor themes is evident in Tuscaloosa's First African Church through such characteristics as the accomplishment of modest grandeur through inventive massing, sensitive scaling, and sharply articulated wall surfaces. It is uncertain, however, as to whether Taylor assisted or played an active role in the design and construction of this church building--for its construction paralleled the early-20th-century building boom on the Tuskegee campus following Taylor's return to the state in 1902. But the subtle crafty detailing, proportions, and the free play of window shapes and sizes exhibited in the design of First African are strongly reminiscent of Taylor's chapel design concepts. First African is, therefore, set apart as the state's only known building outside the Tuskegee vicinity that exhibits the characteristics and concepts of Taylor's late-19th- and early-20th-century designs.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 1
First African Baptist Church

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

First African Baptist Church was organized November 1866 with 144 descenters from Tuscloosa's First Baptist Church. Under the leadership of Rev. Prince Murrell, a school teacher and the church's minister for 19 years, the church located at Hood's Mill. During its 122-year history, First African has established a record of distinction as one of the city's leading black churches in educational, cultural, political, and community services.

In 1873 the church hosted the sixth session of the Alabama Colored State Convention. This session marked the end of Rev. Murrell's two-year tenure as president of this convention. It was also during this meeting that a resolution to establish a theological school to educate and train young Baptist ministers was introduced and formally adopted. In 1878 the Alabama Baptist Normal and Theological School, now known as Selma University, opened as the state's first black Baptist theological school.

During the late 1880s the congregation purchased a church building at the corner of 4th Street and 24th Avenue -- a location locally known as Riverhill. However, all that remains from this building is a splendid late-19th-century bell cast in bronze now occupying the bell tower of the present First African Baptist Church building. Shortly after, in 1891, First African further exhibited its commitment to the advancement of black education when it hosted the first commencement exercise for Central Elementary School.

Four ministers and approximately 15 years later, the First African congregation, under the pastorate of Rev. J. H. Smith, authorized the construction of the present church building on the southeast corner lot of the intersection of 9th Street and 27th Avenue at a cost of \$25,000. The building was completed in 1907 by local contractor George Clopton and brickmason William Medlock, who were both members of the congregation. Because of the auditorium's large seating capacity, First African became a local "mecca" for the black community. During the early 20th century, the church hosted a variety of culturally stimulating speakers and performers including orator and writer, Dr. E. W. D. Issac; Tuskegee Institute's Dr. Booker T. Washington; elocutionist and later stage star Richard S. Harrison; famed soprano Mme. Azelia Hackley; and concert violinist Joseph Douglas. Following the burning of Central Elementary School in 1908, First African was one of the local churches that provided classroom space for the students until a new school building was completed in 1909.

Throughout the early and mid-20th century First African had approximately 10 ministers. In August 1963 the congregation called one of its most celebrated ministers to serve -- Rev. T. Y. Rogers, Jr. A graduate of Alabama State College, now Alabama State University, and the Crozer Theological Seminary at Chester, Pennsylvania, Rogers came to Tuscaloosa in January 1964 with a long list of notable

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 2
First African Baptist Church

endeavors and achievements including serving as executive secretary of the Philadelphia Fellowship of Reconciliation and as a leader of the 400 Negro Preachers of Philadelphia and vicinity. The social impact of Rogers' call to Tuscaloosa became evident as early as his installation which was conducted by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The late spring and summer of 1964 marked the rise and climax of the most aggressive local Civil Rights activities in Tuscaloosa. Prompted by the posting of racially discriminatory signs designating bathroom facilities in the new county courthouse, the Tuscaloosa Citizens for Action Committee emerged and launched a local campaign to challenge the local segregation practices. First African's Rev. Rogers was the chief spokesman of TCAC and key orchestrator of the local movement. The church became demonstration headquarters and the site of many local rallies, most significantly, the June 9, 1964, aborted protest march.

Paralleling the climaxing movement for federal legislation abolishing segregation -- specifically the 75-day Southern filibuster against the Civil Rights bill which was finally choked on June 10 by an overwhelming Senate vote -- the June 9 Tuscaloosa demonstration attempt was staged as a challenge to the local ban on protest marches. The incident resulted in a violent confrontation between protestors and local police whereby the police commissioner confronted and arrested Rev. Rogers after he acknowledged his intention to proceed with the protest march. Recantations from the protestors was retaliated by the local police with a charge into the crowd to drive them back into the First African Church building. Hysteria broke free when the church building was hosed with water and subjected to tear gas. More than 80 protestors were arrested.

The effect of this racial violence in Tuscaloosa effectively speeded action on several pending and subsequent court cases affecting local discrimination practices. On June 26 Federal Judge Seybourn H. Lynne ordered the Tuscaloosa County Board of Revenue to remove the county courthouse signs stating that the provisions of the 14th Amendment "forbid discrimination of any kind in the use and enjoyment of publicly-owned facilities."

Today First African still maintains a dominant and influential place in the social, political, civic, and community efforts of Tuscaloosa. Under the pastorate of Dr. W. E. Pitts since 1973, the congregation has launched and participated in a number of programs and activities to preserve the history of black life and culture in the city.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 1
First African Baptist Church

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Boothe, C. O., Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama, 1919

Hughes, McDonald, A History and Personal Account of Secondary Education for Blacks in Tuscaloosa City School System 1889-1976

Porch, Luther Quentin, History of the First Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1818-1969, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: Drake Printers, 1968, pp. 34-35

Reid, S. N., History of Colored Baptists in Alabama, Gadsden, Alabama, 1949, pp. 55

Richardson, Jesse & Herbert R. Padgett, Alabama Almanac and Book Facts 1955-1956, Birmingham, Alabama: Vulcan Press, Inc., pp. 347

Richardson, Clements, National Cyclopedia of the Colored Race Montgomery, Alabama, National Publishing Company, 1896

PERSONAL INTERVIEWS:

Personal interview with Miss Maude Whatley, fourth generation in the First African Baptist Church, July 1985

Personal interview with Mrs. Katherine Bertrand, 50-year member of the First African Baptist Church

NEWSPAPERS:

Tuscaloosa News, January 21, 1968

Tuscaloosa News, April-July 1964

Tuscaloosa News, June 9, 1964

LEGAL RECORDS:

Deed Records, Office of Judge of Probate, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, Deed Book Number 65 page 292, Deed Records Book 835 page 413

Map of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, County Seat of Tuscaloosa County 1887

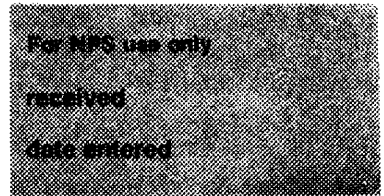
OTHER SOURCES:

Commencement Invitation, Senior Class of Central High School, June 1, 1934, eight o'clock, First African Baptist Church.

Wings Over Jordan Choral Ensemble Concert Program, First African Baptist Church, April 15, 1941, 8:15 PM

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

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



Continuation sheet First African Baptist Church Item number 10

Page 1

Northwest corner of Lot #340 in the city of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, running easterly along 9th Street a distance of 84' 6", thence in a southerly direction along a line parallel with the western boundary of said lot 132' to the southern boundary of said lot, thence in a westerly direction 84' 6" to the southwest corner of said lot, thence in a northerly direction along 27th Avenue 132' to the point of beginning.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 88001580
First African Baptist Church
Property Name

Date Listed: 9/28/88
Tuscaloosa AL
County State

N/A
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Amy Schlager
Signature of the Keeper

9/28/88
Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

The church is privately owned, and therefore this category of ownership should be checked. In addition, there is no identified resource count; it should be one contributing building.

Discussed and concurred in by Alabama SHPO on September 25, 1988.

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)