

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (Old Whaler's)

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Other Name/Site Number: "Old Whaler's" Church

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 44 Union Street

Not for publication: \_\_\_

City/Town: Sag Harbor

Vicinity: \_\_\_

State: NY County: Suffolk

Code: 103

Zip Code: 11963

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: \_\_\_

Public-State: \_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

1

Noncontributing

\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_ objects

\_\_\_ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_\_ Entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Determined eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

|           |          |      |                    |
|-----------|----------|------|--------------------|
| Historic: | Religion | Sub: | Religious Facility |
| Current:  | Religion | Sub: | Religious Facility |

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Greek Revival; Exotic Revival

**MATERIALS:**

Foundation: Cut stone  
Walls: Wood clapboard at sides and back, wood shingle on facade  
Roof: Asphalt shingles & flat seam metal  
Other:

## Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Sag Harbor is currently a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places. The most significant structure in that district is the First Presbyterian Church known locally as the Old Whaler's Church. Situated on Union Street, between Church and Division Streets, it was built in 1843-1844, and was designed by the well-known New York architect Minard Lafever. One of the most important buildings in the Egyptian Revival style to be found in the United States, its battered walls (receding as they rise) and tall slanted windows are derived from ancient Egyptian temples while Greek Revival motifs are employed along with cornice details that are adaptations of whaling implements. The original steeple, 185 feet high, was destroyed in the 1938 hurricane.

The church site is separated from the Old Burying Ground by a stone retaining wall on the west and from a series of residential backyards on the east by a densely wooded area and a fairly steep embankment. These two edges constitute a visual boundary to the East and West. [The] front of the Church, which faces North, is set back roughly 140 feet from the street. This fore-court, which was originally separated from the street by a picket fence [located] between 4 foot and 5 foot obelisk posts (until the 1880s), and appears to be divided by a driveway into 3 zones... which appears to follow the original symmetrical layout of paths leading to the two side entries to the church.<sup>1</sup>

Lafever obviously was familiar with the proportions of Egyptian monuments gleaned from 19th-century travelers' books, and he drew on this material throughout his career. Two years after his death in 1854, *The Architectural Instructor* was published which combines sketches, drawings, notes, and a summary of his career.

In addition to the fore-court and siting of the entry facade, the plan proportions of the sanctuary itself are consistent with Lafever's descriptions of Egyptian monuments. At Sag Harbor, the church sanctuary measures 60 feet by 70 feet, each dimension being exactly half of "quadrangle 140 feet long and 120 feet wide" which is cited in Lafever's description of Appollonopolis Magna, also from *The Architectural Instructor*...

Further and perhaps more obvious correlations exist between the church and the Egyptian style described by Lafever. The temple front massing with battered walls, the disposition of the three entries, along with the character of some of the detailing is clearly derivative, though by no means a literal archeological mimicry of its Egyptian precedent. The elongated proportions of the "temple front" massing differ from those of the temple described in Lafever's text, and of course the introduction of the steeple form with a projecting base has no Egyptian precedent at all, but is likely derived from an engraving which is illustrated in Lafever's fourth book, *The Beauties of Modern Architecture*.... This engraving, entitled "Plan and Elevation of a Church Designed in the Grecian Ionic Order," is a clear prototype relevant to understanding

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<sup>1</sup> Randolph Croxton, AIA, *Historic Structures Report*. September 1991, p. 18.

the sources of many design characteristics of the Church at Sag Harbor. The facade proportions and the elements which comprise the steeple clearly served as reference points in the design of the Sag Harbor Church.

Similarly in plan, the number and location of windows, the interior column locations and the overall plan dimensions are nearly identical to those at Sag Harbor, while the pulpit, situated in a curving apse, clearly recalls the apse design of the Sag Harbor *trompe l'oeil* which, like the apse in Lafever's engraving, was originally conceived as a back drop for a raised box pulpit....

The steeple form, the temple front proportions, along with many details including the entablature and blubber spade motif at the cornice are conceptually derived from the Greek Revival style in which Lafever was so well versed. Many [of the details] are then developed in a truly eclectic manner derived from Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, Persian and Moresque motifs, as well as from the symbolism of the thriving whaling industry in Sag Harbor in 1845. (In addition to the symbolism of the blubber spades along the cornice, it has been suggested that the original steeple-form symbolizes a mariner's spy-glass telescoping as it does from the dome of the Greek tempietto form that originally contained the bell, though the octagonal steeple plan shape may also be a Chinese reference to Chinese pagodas that are described in Lafever's engravings and text.)<sup>2</sup>

The facade consists of a massive central tower, wider at the base than at the top, flanked on either side by two slightly lower towers closely resembling the Egyptian Pylon Gate before the temple sanctuary. Set in the pylons are story-high panelled doors and above the doors, a tall window of translucent lavender glass.

In plan, the narthex leads into the rectangular sanctuary which has six banks of pews, divided by three aisles, facing the altar. Behind the altar is the chapel with two offices on the southwest corner. On the second level, there are two galleries on the east and west, and a large organ on the north side. The basement contains a multi-purpose room (under the sanctuary), a kitchen, and a storage area under the original tower base.

The doors in the narthex carry out the Egyptian theme with tapering moldings, smaller at the top, wider at the bottom. The narthex contains many interesting historical exhibits including the bell, which was not damaged when the steeple fell, pictures of the church with the steeple and an original pew deed (1844).

The sanctuary, in the Greek Revival style, is spacious and stately, seating about 800. The pulpit is framed by a pair of round, fluted Corinthian columns and two square pilasters that rise well over 50 feet to a coffered ceiling. The *trompe l'oeil* decoration at the back of the pulpit gives one the impression of a circular wall.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22.

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The box pews have hand carved railings of fine Cuban mahogany which was brought back by whaling ships. Many pews have engraved silver name plates on the doors. Two large galleries on either side of the church are supported by fluted columns. Tall lavender glass windows along the sides cast a soft glow. Replicas of the original whale oil lamps are between the windows.

The ceiling is a fine example of Minard Lafever's genius. It is suspended from a central beam without supporting columns. Each coffered square is surrounded by hand made "egg and dart" molding.

The original organ, installed by Henry Erben of New York City, a celebrated organ builder, was enlarged and restored in 1872. It is the oldest organ in a church on Long Island. The case is a duplicate in miniature of the church facade, decorated with a cornice of carved whales' teeth and blubber spades. It is a "tracker" organ which involves a direct mechanical connection between the keys and the valves under the pipes. Electricity is used only to provide air. The organ was completely restored, including the hand pumping mechanism, and was rededicated in October 1978.<sup>3</sup>

At the annual meeting of 1893, the Board of Trustees voted to build a chapel to be connected to the original building at the rear of the sanctuary. Fund raising was slow and it wasn't until June 1899 that a George H. Cleveland of Sag Harbor was engaged to build the chapel.

Built and furnished at a cost of \$6225, the chapel holding five rooms and a hall, is 38 by 68 feet in size, with a portico in front over which reads "Memorial Chapel." The interior consists of two parlors, 21 by 16 feet each, and, to the east, the main auditorium which is 38 by 47 [feet] with 22-foot-high ceilings. Originally, over the parlors were the pastor's study and the infant school room, shut off from the main auditorium by rolling wooden blinds. It and the two parlors could be opened to the auditorium, making it possible to seat 500 people. The rooms were finished off in varnished oak with tinted walls above, carpeted in light green, with curtains to match, and seated with folding maple chairs.

Mrs. Alexander D. Napier of Brooklyn and Miss Julia King of Sag Harbor gave all the gas fixtures, pulpit furniture, an upright piano for the ladies' parlor, and furnishings for the pastor's study.... The rooms were lighted with the Welsbach System, and one of the chandeliers was of 1200 candlepower. The chapel was dedicated on December 15, 1899, with an elaborate musical program. Among the participating clergy was Reverend Robert K. Wick of Jamaica, New York.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Church Historical Pamphlet, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Ingersoll Zaykowski, *Sag Harbor*. 1991, Sag Harbor Historical Society, p. 173.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: \_\_\_ Locally: \_\_\_

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C X D \_\_\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A X B \_\_\_ C \_\_\_ D \_\_\_ E \_\_\_ F \_\_\_ G \_\_\_

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Exceptions: 1

NHL Theme(s): XVI. Architecture  
D. Greek Revival  
H. Exotic Revivals  
2. Egyptian

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1843-1844

Significant Dates:

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Minard Lafever (1798-1854)

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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

Sag Harbor is one of the few remaining 18th-century American coastal towns that retains its integrity, architectural and otherwise. Today there are about 2,500 year-round residents with the usual summer influx of tourists seeking sun and the beaches. The architectural heritage of the village dates largely from the first half of the 19th century when it was a booming whale town and fortunes were made and legends were born. Herman Melville saw the docks in Sag Harbor, as did James Fenimore Cooper and John Steinbeck. After the boom in the 1830s-1840s, the whaling industry went elsewhere and petroleum replaced sperm (whale) oil. Time left this fishing village virtually intact, complete with its Old Whaler's Church—the most important building in Sag Harbor.

The history of the church building and its predecessors is outlined as follows:

The oldest known record of the Presbyterian Church of Sag Harbor is of "A meeting of the inhabitants of Sagg-Harbour, Hog Neck and adjacent places, Feb. ye 24th, 1766, in order to consult upon the affair of erecting a house of publick worship at Sagg-Harbour."

Soon after, "a wooden building of uncouth shap", later known as the "Old Barn Church", stood on the northeast corner of Church and Sage Streets. No picture of it exists, although Rev. Nathaniel S. Prime, minister from 1806-1809, described it as a "mere frame and outward covering, without either ceiling or plaster. If a shower of rain occurred during public worship, the minister was obliged to retreat to a corner of the ample pulpit to escape the falling drops." Rev. Prime married Julia Ann Jermain, daughter of Major John Jermain, who served in the Revolution. Rev. and Mrs. Prime lived in the minister's house at the N.E. corner of Sage and Madison and it was there in 1809 that Mrs. Prime started one of the first Sunday Schools in the nation....

In 1816, it was decided to build a larger church and the "Old Barn Church" was torn down to make way (and also supply some of the lumber) for the new building. In spite of a devastating fire in 1817 which burned much of Sag Harbor, the work on the new church continued and it was dedicated in 1818. It stood on the same corner of Sage and Church Streets as the previous building and served until the present church was built in 1844.

A great religious revival in 1842 had started a movement to build a new church. Wealthy ship owners, captains, local business men and church members of lesser means supported the effort.

Sag Harbor was at the height of its prosperity in the 1840's. [Sixty-three] whaling ships called this home port and over 1,800 men were employed in the whaling industry, which brought millions of dollars to the village.



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Minard Lafever, one of the nation's leading architects, was commissioned to design the building. The property was bought for \$2,000 and the building without the furnishings cost \$17,000.<sup>1</sup>

Wealthy businessmen as well as working men contributed and paid a "pew tax"—seats were sold at auction and soon \$15,000 was realized. The church was dedicated on May 16, 1844.

In 1871, the pulpit was replaced, the fresco on the back wall was freshened, the mahogany trim polished, and the exterior repainted. The spire was repaired and painted in 1887, including the 9 foot 10 inch weathervane, and painted again in 1903,

when [the] champion steeple repairer of the world, Charles H. Kent of Brooklyn, came to work on the spire. Upon request, Kent presented a list of nearly 100 tall steeples in greater New York and vicinity upon which he had worked without scaffolding. The repairs were completed at a cost of \$1600....

In 1926 J.L. Warner's steeplejacks, George and James Fenton, Ovilia Riel, and Edward Mansfield, of Northampton, Massachusetts, climbed the lofty spire to paint it and the weathervane that topped the steeple. The cost of this monumental task was \$1875, quite a bargain when you consider that the year before Frank Havens was paid \$1227 for painting the chapel!<sup>2</sup>

Until recently the First Presbyterian Church was attributed to Lafever stylistically and through oral tradition, but recently a letter has come to light that firmly credits the church's design to him. Writing to his mother, Edward R. Merrall, one of the laborers on the church's construction, stated:

The church we are building will be a much more handsome edifice and considerably larger (than the Methodist). The steeple is to be 165 feet high. The original contract to build was \$10,000. Since then they have added work to the amount of over \$2000 more. Instead of my finding it enclosed as Mr. Lafever had told me, some of the window frames were not in when I arrived. The steeple was not boarded up over fifty feet high and there is sixty-five feet more of the form to go up yet. I do not expect the outside work will be done in much less than two months. There were seventeen men at work on it when I came, three have left, not much liking the job. The boss gives the old hands the preference for the inside work, all but two being from New York. An English man is getting out the stairs, they are a half circle going from the basement to the gallery. The pews are to be made in New York.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Church Historical Pamphlet, 1987, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Zaykowski, Dorothy Ingersoll. *Sag Harbor*. Sag Harbor Historical Society, 1991, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

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It is known that Lefever was working on Egyptian designs at that time—the Shields Monument, in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, in 1845 and the competition drawings for the Washington Monument in 1847, which were entered in the contest but did not win and, therefore, never built.

The church facade, without the 187 foot tower with its Greek ornamental detail, is much more Egyptian than originally designed. It is one of Lefever's most eclectic creations with references to the Temple of Solomon as well as Greek motifs and especially the curious rows of whaler's blubber spades arranged as antefixes on Greek temple cornices. The interior is also filled with robust Greek ornament egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel moldings, and fringes with fretted patterns and rosettes, many taken directly from the illustrations in his architectural books. Other motifs are taken from Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*, such as the 50-foot-high columns, whose capitals support the organ gallery and the altar end of the church. These are taken directly from the Monument to Lysicrates in Athens.

The definitive study on the nuances of Egyptian Revival architecture was written by Richard Carrott, who has pointed out that the "Picturesque eclecticism" of the mid-19th century was affixed to Egyptian Cemetery gates, Debtors prisons, fraternal lodges, libraries, medical colleges, courthouses, synagogues, and churches.

Curiously enough, the three Egyptian Revival churches, Lefever's First Presbyterian at Sag Harbor (1843), the Essex, Connecticut, First Baptist (ca. 1845), and Strickland's Downtown Presbyterian in Nashville (1848-1851) [designated a National Historic Landmark in 1993] as well as A. J. Davis' Egyptian Revival church design, all may owe their style to a related idea. As the sects involved were Calvinistic, the severe simplicity of the mode would certainly have been attractive. But it should also be noted that these cults wished to return to the primitive form of Christianity emphasizing the original teachings of Christ, rejecting later interpolations. Thus there was the emphasis on the Bible, both New and Old Testaments. Therefore, if the Jewish style of architecture could be conceived of as Egyptian, it would have a particular appeal for these "primitive" Christian sects.

A more definite connection with ancient Egypt, however, is to be found in that civilization's status as the Land of Mystery. Pevsner and Lang have ably demonstrated this as well as the background for Egypt's being the source of hermetic mysteries. The Free-Masonic movement owes its dependence upon Egyptian rites and emblems to Cagliostro and Carl Friedrich Koppen who introduced these embellishments in Paris and Berlin in the seventies and eighties of the eighteenth century. However fraudulent these ideas and rituals were, they became part of the standard operating procedure of Freemasonry, and by 1791 they were ennobled through the publication of Mozart's *Magic Flute*. While stage sets of the period were usually generalized flats that could serve in a variety of productions, Karl F. von Schinkel designed, in 1815, an Egyptian-flavored group specifically for the Berlin production, which became the standard scenic interpretation of that opera. Curiously enough, there were few Egyptian style Masonic lodges before the mid-nineteenth century.

In the United States there were none prior to the Civil War, although there was certainly an awareness of the movement's dependence upon ancient Egypt. In 1835 John Fellows, an American [M]ason, published an elaborately detailed account of the sources of Freemasonry as originating in Egypt, and passing to eighteenth-century England by way of Pythagoras and his influence on the [D]ruids(!) It was the milder, less politically insidious fraternal order known as the Odd Fellows which used the style for its hall in Philadelphia at Third and Brown Streets (dedicated 1846, completed 1847), and for its cemetery gate of 1849. Considering themselves a collateral branch of Freemasonry, and therefore equally dependent from ancient Egypt, "the mistress of learning, land of mystery," the Odd Fellows emphasized the fraternal aspects of the order which combined occult secrets and ritual from the Land of the Nile with the benefit systems of Mediaeval [sic] guilds.<sup>4</sup>

It would seem, then, that the Egyptian Revival was one which went through a series of developmental phases that lasted half a century until the end of the popularity of the style. Often two or more of these phases were concurrent. But, in any case, the movement started cautiously, and, in its earlier manifestations, without a particularly profound feeling for the essential aesthetic inherent in the style. Later, with the diffusion of archeological knowledge, free interpretations were essayed which then did achieve a sense of true understanding, and proficiency in expression.<sup>5</sup>

Minard Lafever was also very well known for his buildings in the Gothic style, but he was respected for his inventive and original interpretations of historic styles—he did not copy slavishly but used sources as a guide to developing his own forms. In addition to his published books on architecture, Lafever enjoyed the esteem of his fellow architects. Calvert Vaux (1824-1895) referred to him as "the Christopher Wren of America." Samuel Sloan referred to Lafever as the "leading spirit in 'Modern Grecian.'" When the American Institution of Architects organized in 1836 (later to become the American Institute of Architects in 1857), he participated in the early organization. His influence on American architecture was wide spread and he was well respected by his contemporaries, Martin Thompson, Ithiel Town and Alexander J. Davis, Isaiah Rogers, Richard Upjohn, and James Renwick.

Talbot Hamlin, in his early study of the Greek Revival movement in America, referred to Lafever as

perhaps the greatest designer of architectural decoration of his time in America... To him more than to any other one man is due the clear, inviting quality of the interiors of Greek Revival houses and the crisp, imaginative character of the wood and plaster detail that so frequently accents and beautifies them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carrot, Richard G. *The Egyptian Revival*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978, pp. 108-110.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Hamlin, Talbot. *Greek Revival Architecture in America*. P. 147.

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## **9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

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### **MANUSCRIPT MATERIAL**

Church of the Holy Apostles, New York. Minutes of the Vestry, 1844-1848.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Listed in the National Register: **Sag Harbor Historic District**

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 (Specify Repository): \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: 0.96 acres

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing  
A 18 727600 4541770

## Verbal Boundary Description:

From the northeast corner of Old Burying Ground, eastward 128 feet, thence southward 337 feet to Latham Street, thence westward along Latham Street 138 feet, thence northward along boundary of Old Burying Ground 349 feet to beginning point.

**NOTE:** The Old Burying Ground is not part of the property of the Church and predates the present church building, and predates ownership of the property upon which the church stands.

## Boundary Justification:

COPY OF ORIGINAL DEED DATED APRIL 10, 1843:

Suffolk County Tax Map, Dist. 0903, Sec. 003, Block 004, Lot 028.

**NOTE:** I have used the boundary dimensions as they appear on the current County Tax Maps. They differ slightly from the figures on the original 1843 deed, but probably represent the most accurate dimensions of the property as it now stands.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: David H. Cory  
Vice Moderator, Historical Committee  
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Telephone: 516/725-4118

Carolyn Pitts, Architectural Historian  
National Park Service, History Division (418)  
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Date: October 28, 1993

National Park Service/WASO/History Division (418): August 5, 1994