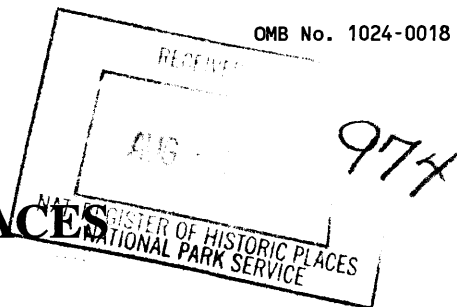


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM



1. Name of Property

historic name: First Episcopal Methodist Church of Chester

other name/site number: Liberty County Museum

2. Location

street & number: Second Street and Madison

not for publication: n/a
vicinity: n/a

city/town: Chester

state: Montana

code: MT

county: Liberty

code: 051

zip code: 59522

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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.


Signature of certifying official/Title

7-23-97
Date

Montana State Historic Preservation Office

State or Federal agency or bureau

(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

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

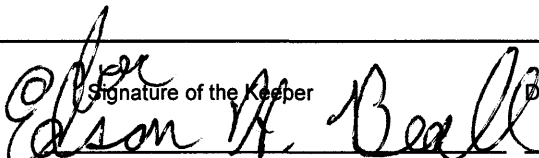
4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this 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
 see continuation sheet
- removed from the National Register
 see continuation sheet
- other (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

 8/29/97

5. Classification

Ownership of Property: Building	Number of Resources within Property	
Category of Property: Private	Contributing	Noncontributing
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0	<u> 1 </u>	___ building(s)
Name of related multiple property listing: n/a	___	___ sites
	___	___ structures
	___	___ objects
	<u> 1 </u>	___ TOTAL

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions:

RELIGION: Religious facility

Current Functions:

RECREATION & CULTURE: Museum

7. Description

Architectural Classification:

Other: Gable-front Church

Materials:

foundation: concrete
walls: wood clapboard
roof: wood shingle
other: n/a

Narrative Description

The First Methodist Episcopal Church of Chester is a very simple church -- a one story rectangular building with a gable roof. The building is covered with wooden lap siding. A square bell tower centered on the roof gable crowns the building. It is capped with a pyramidal roof, and shingled with wood to match the rest of the building.

There are five double hung windows on each side of the structure. The original window units remain in place although they are currently covered with wooden shutters on the exterior and wooden panels on the interior to maximize display space and control light entering the museum exhibits for conservation purposes.

The main facade faces east with a central entryway that has four concrete steps and iron hand railing leading to the front door. Double wooden doors beneath a multipane transom form the main entry to the church. The building sits on a raised concrete basement added in 1947 when the church was turned to face east. Originally, the vestibule tower projected from the front of the church. When the church was turned, this space was squared off by extending the front walls of the church to enclose a cry room and office.

On the interior, the square vestibule is carpeted, with stairs descending northward to the basement and ascending west to what used to be the main chapel. The ceiling is tiled. A small room on the left of the vestibule, now used as a special exhibit room, was a cry room. In this room, the original fiberboard walls and masonite paneling are still present. The room's ceiling is also tiled and the floor has what appears to be the original linoleum. A small room to the right of the vestibule is now an office.

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The main chapel is six steps up from the vestibule. It has a hardwood floor and an arched ceiling of fiberboard which is continuous from the floor, across the ceiling and down to the floor on the other side. The window in the east wall of the chapel separates that space from the cry room. At the west end of the chapel running the width of the building are two steps which lead to the altar area. A varnished wooden railing separates the altar area from the congregation. On the west wall behind the altar area is a wide fiberboard arch positioned in the center of the wall.

The basement contains a kitchen with original cupboards and sink, a gathering area, a restroom, and a back staircase. All these areas are now used for museum displays.

Integrity

The overall design, workmanship and materials used, both outside and inside, are still well represented and in good condition. The building sits on its original site although during its history it was turned to face east.

Adaptive reuse of this building as a local museum is compatible with the church's original function as a community gathering place. The interior space remains largely as originally designed, and steps, altar rails and other details remain to indicate spatial patterning. The sanctuary floor retains wear marks from the positioning of the pews, although no interior furnishings remain.

From the exterior, the building is little changed, it is a simple rural church in a small homestead-era community. In the built environment of Chester, it remains one of the larger, more substantial buildings on the streetscape. Its scale, placement and relationship to the surrounding town help to define and order the rectilinear, gridded spatial rhythms that set railroad towns apart across vast prairie spaces.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria: C

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A, B

Period(s) of Significance: 1911 - 1947

Significant Person(s): n/a

Significant Dates: 1911, 1947

Cultural Affiliation: n/a

Architect/Builder: unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

Statement of Significance

The First Methodist Episcopal Church of Chester is an important building in this homestead community, erected to meet the local demand for meeting space to serve the social and spiritual needs of the community during the period of settlement. An unassuming building, it is nevertheless a typical example of the homestead architecture of that time period. It is representative of the hundreds of rural churches that sprang up throughout Montana during the first two decades of the 20th century-- a period of railroad promotion and homestead settlement across the state. For these important local associations, it is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A & C.

History of Chester

The community of Chester is one of the oldest settlements in the north-central Montana region known as the Hi-Line. Located on Montana's windswept high Northern Plains, the Hi-Line was once the sole domain of the Blackfeet and other native people who hunted the buffalo that roamed the prairies surrounding the Sweet Grass Hills. For thousands of years these northern plains were renowned buffalo country, and as late as 1859, it was observed that as "far as the eye could reach, these plains were covered with troops of buffalo, thousands and thousands were constantly in sight."

The first European-Americans to venture into the area were the Verendrye Brothers in 1743. Following the Lewis & Clark Expedition 1804-1806, white entrepreneurs began to venture along the upper Missouri River to trade furs, whiskey and other goods with the tribes in the region. Later, as settlers came to the newly created Montana Territory, open range cattle ranching was introduced. By the late 1880s, the banks of Cottonwood Creek became a resting spot on the long trail drive to the railhead at Minot, North Dakota (opened in 1886), and seeds for the town of Chester were sown.

In 1887, the Manitoba Railroad laid track across much of northern Montana, to Havre, and then on down to Great Falls. Gold discoveries near Chester in the Sweetgrass Hills drew hopeful miners during the late 1880s and early 1890s, and the stopping place on Cottonwood Creek soon became popular with freighters traveling the "Old Freight Road" from the rail hubs, to and from the mines.

The completion of the transcontinental Great Northern Railway in 1893 transformed the character of Chester and the surrounding countryside, as tracks were finished and communities founded all along the Hi-Line route. A post office in the Chester Trading Company store was established November 22, 1895; the name Chester was chosen for the Pennsylvania hometown of the town's first telegraph operator. The town emerged from the railroad-building era as one of the most developed on the line, as homestead and dryland farming began to draw settlers to the area. The original town stood on the north side of the Great Northern line, along a curve in the line. When the line was straighten a quarter of a mile to the south in about 1907, the community picked up and relocated to a spot just south of the newly-aligned track.

The town of Chester was incorporated in 1910, and held the first council meeting on November 29, 1910. The population at that time was about 500. Polk City Directories reported in 1913-1914, that the community had grown to some 750 residents. However, the 1920 census listed that the population stood again at 500. That year, Liberty County was formed and Chester became the county seat.

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Founding of the First Methodist Church of Chester

Built in 1911 as the first designated place of worship in the town of Chester, the church building has been used for a variety of purposes from a community gathering place for services, pot lucks, a temporary school room, and recently the county museum.

According to an article in the local paper in December of 1910, "Chester should have churches as...a progressive city like Chester is not taking the right course by neglecting the building of churches." At that time, church services were being held in several locations, including the school, the Grand Bar & Hotel, and Albright's Hall because there were no established church buildings in the town. The faithful went out of their way to attend some sort of worship, even though it often was uncomfortable and crowded. It came to a point in 1910 that the community unanimously decided that at any cost a church had to be build in the tiny village. Methodist members believed that they needed a real church building quickly, before their minds were corrupted and turned from God.

On March 10, 1910, the land destined to be the site of the future Methodist Church was bought by the first Episcopal Methodist Congregation of Chester from Maurice and Metta Spangler for seventy-five dollars. A stipulation in the sale required that within two years a church building had to be erected on the lot. If this did not happen, the sale became void and the land went back to the Spangler family.

The church authorized construction on June 29, 1911. The community immediately began scheduling planning meetings and organizing fund raisers to pay for materials. Work began in September under supervising carpenters Jake Burkhart and Paul Funderhide. On September 23, 1911 (within two weeks), the framework was up. With all the community people pitching in both labor and supplies, the long-awaited first service was held on November 5, 1911.

"Much of the furnishings were donated to the church in memory of lost family and friends... [and] included things like a Wurlitzer piano, an altar, built-in cabinets, the completion of a cloak room, chairs, blinds, collection plates, an altar set and several other things." (P. 42, MT Heritage project) The bell was donated by Conrad Heiminger.

Several religions shared the building, including the Catholics, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, dividing time on Sundays for each congregation. Since everyone had helped in the planning and constructing of the building, it was only fair for everyone to be able to use it until each group could build a church of their own.

In the summer of 1946, it was decided that the church should be turned to face east instead of south, because east was thought to be more "Godly." Since they were going to be lifting the church for turning, it was decided to add on a basement. The popularity and size of the congregation was increasing so rapidly that the original building wasn't big enough for the growing number of worshippers. By squaring up the entry area and bringing the front wall of the church flush with the front wall of the vestibule, space was created for a cry room and office in the building's front corners.

Concrete was poured in the spring of 1947, with work continuing through the summer and fall months at a total cost of about \$9400. The cornerstone inscribed "Sept AD 1947 First Methodist Church" was laid at a dedication ceremony. In the years following, many typical modifications have been made, including the installation of a furnace, and reshingling of the roof. On March 16, 1953, the church basement was flooded, destroying many of the records of baptisms, marriages, and deaths.

In April of 1968, it was decided that the building would no longer be used as the Methodist Church because a new one was being built on the other side of town. The building sat vacant for a few months while decisions were made about its future. Not wanting to see the building demolished, on December 5, 1970, the Methodists sold the church for one dollar to the Liberty County Museum Association. The museum is opened seasonally, although it can be accessed by appointment year-round. It is currently the only

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museum in the county and is utilized by all the people in Liberty County. Its displays recall the settling of the area and include an authentic Post Office from early Chester, a general store, a barber shop, an Armed Services display, and an exhibit of horse-drawn carriages and buggies as well as a complete Great Northern Railroad station. The museum is enjoyed by young and old and is a great asset to the town of Chester.

Criteria Considerations

Two National Register criteria considerations -- A for religious properties, and B for moved buildings -- apply to the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Chester.

Meeting consideration A, the church is very definitely a religious property. However, for purposes of listing, the property derives its primary significance for its architectural values, representing as it does, the rural body of ecclesiastical architecture which proliferated with the founding of rural communities in early 20th century Montana.

The church is also a moved building, and criteria consideration B must be applied. In this case, the building was never moved away from the original site, but rather turned on its axis 90° to face east. Thus, the associations with location were never broken although the orientation was changed. In addition, the movement of the church was carried out in 1947, and thus was a historic event which falls within the property's period of significance. Finally, the primary significance of this building is its architecture, a prerequisite when considering moved buildings.

For these reasons, the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Chester was found to meet the considerations regarding religious properties and moved buildings, and to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

This nomination was researched and completed by Chester's high school graduating class of 1997 in conjunction with the Montana Heritage Project.

9. Major Bibliographic References

See continuation sheet

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 -- Specify Repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: Less than one .

UTM References: **Zone** **Easting** **Northing**
 12 502780 5372860

Legal Location (Township, Range & Section(s)): Located in the SE¼, SE¼, SW¼ of Section 21, T32N, R6E.

Verbal Boundary Description

The First Methodist Episcopal Church of Chester is located on Lot 12, Block 3 in Spangler's First Addition to the Chester Townsite.

Boundary Justification

This is the property associated with the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Chester since its construction in 1911.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Chester Graduating Class of 1997
organization: Chester High School date: April 1997
street & number: Box 550 telephone: (406) 759-5108
city or town: Chester state: MT zip code: 59522

Property Owner

name/title: Liberty County Museum Association
street & number: Box 205 telephone: (406) 759-5274
city or town: Chester state: MT zip code: 59522