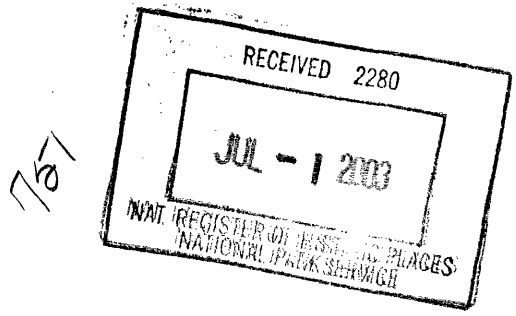


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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 any 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 Austin Methodist Church  
other names/site number

**2. Location**

street & number 135 Court Street N/A not for publication  
city or town Austin N/A vicinity  
state Nevada code NV county Lander code 015 zip code 89310

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant \_\_\_ nationally X statewide \_\_\_ locally. ( \_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ronald M. [Signature] 6-26-03  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or 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 commenting or other official/Title 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.
- removed from the National Register.
- other (explain):

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action  
Elson H. Beall 8/14/03

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**

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

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

1

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

*Category*

*Subcategory*

RELIGION

religious facility

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

*Category*

*Subcategory*

GOVERNMENT

city hall

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Italianate

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation	Stone
walls	Brick
roof	Metal
other	Wood

**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.)

- 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.

**Criteria Considerations**

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

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a 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 fifty years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION

ARCHITECTURE

**Period of Significance**

1866

**Significant Dates**

1866

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Bell, Daniel P. (architect)

McGinnis & Cronin (contractors)

**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:

\_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

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**Acreeage of Property** approximately 0.09 acres

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing		Zone Easting Northing	
1 11	494130 4371180	3 11	
2 11		4 11	

\_\_\_ 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**

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name/title	<u>J. Daniel Pezzoni</u>	date	<u>June 1, 2003</u>
organization	<u>Landmark Preservation Associates</u>	telephone	<u>(540) 464-5315</u>
street & number	<u>6 Houston St.</u>	zip code	<u>24450</u>
city or town	<u>Lexington</u> state <u>VA</u>		

**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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name	<u>Lander County</u>		
street & number	<u>315 South Humboldt</u>	telephone	<u>(775) 635-5195</u>
city or town	<u>Battle Mountain</u>	state <u>NV</u>	zip code <u>89820</u>

**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 the 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 Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET 7

Section 7 Page 1

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**Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada**

## **Section 7 Description**

### **Summary**

The 1866 Austin Methodist Church is located at 135 Court Street in Austin, Lander County, Nevada. Austin is situated at an elevation of approximately 6,600 feet above sea level in Pony Canyon near the northern end of the Toiyabe Range and near the geographic center of the state. The town lies in the watershed of the Reese River, a tributary of the Humboldt River, and it is served by US Highway 50. The southwest-facing church stands on a man-made bench overlooking the town's commercial district. It is a one-story nave-form building of American-bond brick construction with a standing-seam metal front-gable roof, a corner tower with Italianate-style details, a front entry vestibule, and a small rear wing. The interior, remodeled in the early 1980s, features a nave with a raised stage. Behind and to the right of the church stands a one-story brick parsonage, also erected in 1866 (not included in the nomination).

### **Exterior**

The dominant exterior feature is the two-stage tower at the front south corner. The brick first stage rises to a granite cap course above which is a frame belfry. The belfry has paired, round-arched, louvered openings on each side and a cornice with small brackets; the paired round-arched openings and the bracketed cornice are the principal Italianate features of the church. Above the belfry rises a slender pyramidal spire with wood and metal roofing and an arrow weather vane. The tower foundation has a decorative but uninscribed cornerstone at the south corner.

Next to the tower, centered on the front gable end, is a brick vestibule with a bracketed cornice similar to that on the tower. The entry has two-leaf doors (six and six panels) surmounted by a four-light transom and with a cyma molded wood surround and decorative granite threshold. In front of the vestibule extends a wood stoop of heavy frame construction on granite footers. The rear wing has a shed roof, a segmental-arched entry with a beaded batten door and a blocked transom, and a segmental-arched six-light window. The rear wing appears to consist of an original northwest end and an added southeast end, and there is a plaster residue on the northeast side indicating the presence of a former wing. The four-bay side elevations retain most of their large six-over-six windows with louvered shutters of pegged construction. The granite foundation has a brick segmental-arched opening on the northwest side, a block next to the opening with a pecked surface with either manmade or naturally occurring pattern, and a block at the front west corner with thin

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CONTINUATION SHEET7

Section 7 Page 2

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**Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada**

## **Section 7 Description, continued**

pink feldspar veins that form a cross on one face. Brick flues with dentil-like corbelling rise from the ridge at the center and northeast gable end of the building.

The early 1980s remodeling resulted in several exterior changes. A new entry was created out of the southernmost window on the southeast elevation with a panel door and cantilevered stoop below the remaining upper half of the window. The windows at the base of the tower have been mostly blocked up. A segmental-arched door or window opening on the northeast side of the tower base has a modern panel door. This door and the new southeast elevation entry open on to a concrete handicap ramp.

### **Interior**

The principal interior space is the nave, which occupies the entire main section of the church and which was substantially remodeled in the early 1980s. Typical interior features and finishes include plaster on brick walls, a vinyl tile floor, a modern vertical board wainscot with canted top, and a flat plaster or plasterboard ceiling. The side windows have simple surrounds and are centered in large but shallow recesses in the walls. Double leaf doors, six and six panels, open into the vestibule through an embrasure with molded panels. The vestibule retains a grained and beaded vertical matchboard wainscot. The room at the base of the tower (originally the pastor's study) has been made into a bathroom. Standing in the west corner of the nave is a decorative stove inscribed "The Union Stove Works, New York" on the top and "Circular 24, 1876" on the door. Along the walls are a number of nineteenth century pews that could be original to the church.

The raised stage is located at the northeast end of the nave, and a doorway on the northeast wall has an old Z-brace door with modern battens applied to the side facing the nave. This door opens into the southeast room of the rear wing. The room has a stair that rises to the exterior entry, a painted sloped ceiling, and patternless off-white wallpaper. At the top of the room are remnants of a border paper with a design of swags and foliage (bouquets?) in olive drab. The northwest room appears to be the original organ and choir alcove, now the furnace room. A round-arched opening that once opened into the nave is evident and ties into a barrel vault. The back corners of the alcove are also rounded. The walls are plaster painted gray with graffiti in pencil. Pieces of the church organ are stored in the Gridley Store Museum of the Austin Historical Society.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET7

Section 7, 8 Page 3

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**Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada**

## **Section 7 Description, continued**

### **Integrity Statement**

Austin Methodist Church retains good exterior integrity and fair interior integrity. The church exterior preserves its principal character-defining features and many historic finishes. The only significant exterior changes are the blocking up of the windows at the base of the tower and the addition of an entry and handicap ramp on the southeast elevation. The interior finishes date largely to the early 1980s remodeling, although the historic character of the space has been retained.

## **Section 8 Statement of Significance**

### **Summary**

Austin Methodist Church, built in 1866, is one of Nevada's oldest surviving Methodist churches. The brick edifice with Italianate bell tower was built during the pastorate of J. L. Trefren, who conceived an enterprising approach to construction financing. Trefren organized the New England & Nevada Silver Mining Company and sold stock based on the potential earnings of Austin's silver claims. The church was built and a fine organ was purchased (possibly the first church organ in Nevada) before the scheme collapsed. Mechanical engineer Daniel P. Bell served as supervising architect for the building, which was apparently designed by a California architect, and Bell may have been responsible for the building's innovative form. Today, this handsome building--one of Austin's trio of nineteenth-century churches--serves as the town hall.

### **Applicable Criteria**

Austin Methodist Church meets Criterion A and is eligible in the religion area of significance for its association with the early history of Methodism in Nevada as one of the state's oldest surviving Methodist church buildings, and for the innovative way in which construction of the church was financed, combining traditional solicitation of contributions with mining claim speculation. The building is also eligible under Criterion C in the architecture area of significance for its innovative design. The period of significance corresponds to the date of construction in 1866. The building is eligible at the state level of significance. Austin Methodist Church is located in the Austin Historic District, listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. Information in support of eligibility appears throughout this section.

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CONTINUATION SHEET<sup>7</sup>

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**Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada**

## **Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued**

### **Acknowledgments**

A number of organizations and individuals assisted in the preparation of this report. The nomination was sponsored by Lander County (the property's owner) and the Austin Historical Society with Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding from the Nevada Commission of Economic Development, and it is one of ten nominations prepared for prominent historic landmarks in Austin in 2003. Assistance was provided by Allen D. Gibson, Deputy District Attorney, Lander County; Christy Caronongan, Administrative Assistant, Lander County Executive Director's Office; Ray H. Williams Jr., Ray and Irene Salisbury, Phillip "Poncho" and Joan Williams, and Joy Brandt with the Austin Historical Society; Ray "Ramey" Williams III, Austin; Dee Helming and Herbert Wallace "Wally" Trapnell, The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce; and Mella Rothwell Harmon, Architectural Historian/National Register Coordinator, and Ronald M. James, State Historic Preservation Officer, Nevada State Historic Preservation Office.

### **Historic Context**

Silver was discovered in Pony Canyon in May 1862 and within a year the population of the nascent community of Austin and its immediate vicinity stood at nearly 1,000. The Comstock Lode boomtown of Virginia City provided a staging area for the settlement of Austin and in many respects served as a template for Austin's economic, demographic, and architectural development. Austin was made the seat of Lander County on September 2, 1863, and in November 1864 the town's population was reliably estimated at approximately 6,000, briefly making Austin the state's second largest community. Austin rapidly passed through the three incipient developmental stages identified by the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office as characteristic of the state's mining towns: the settlement stage (provisional architecture and haphazard organization), the camp phase (more permanent frame buildings and town platting), and the town phase (masonry construction, public buildings, established infrastructure, and stylistic sophistication).<sup>1</sup>

By the end of 1866 Austin boasted two substantial brick churches (Austin Methodist and St.

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<sup>1</sup> Neu, "Austin Historic District;" Abbe, *Austin*, 56; Hulse, *Silver State*, 79; and Harmon, "How to Prepare Nominations," 8-9. One authority claims a peak Austin population of 10,000 in the summer of 1863 (Nevada State Historical Society, *Nevada*, 259). Another suggests a peak population of approximately 8,000 (Smith, "Austin, Nevada," 7).



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Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada

### Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued

Augustine's Catholic), several banking houses, the *Daily Reese River Reveille* newspaper, the International Hotel (moved from Virginia City), and hundreds of brick, stone, wood, and adobe mining structures, commercial buildings, and dwellings. American-born whites constituted the majority of the population; Chinese, English/Welsh, Irish, and "civilized Indians" were important groups as well. Austin also experienced, to a degree, a fourth phase of Nevada mining town development: partial abandonment, as the silver played out and the town's economy and population contracted at the end of the nineteenth century. Austin's status as a trade center for central Nevada prevented it from becoming a ghost town, but the town's population declined to 702 by 1900 and stands at about 300 today.<sup>2</sup>

Methodism was practiced in Nevada as early as 1855. The territory's first Methodist church building was erected in Virginia City in 1861 (and was replaced three times by 1876). The Nevada Territory District was created out of California District the same year. Nevada's earliest surviving Methodist church is located in Carson City. Construction of First United Methodist Church at 412 W. Musser St. began in 1863 and was completed in 1865, a year before Austin Methodist Church was built.<sup>3</sup>

Angel dated the beginnings of Methodism in Austin to 1864 and claimed that the Rev. C.A.E. Hertel was Austin's first Methodist minister. The July 3, 1866 issue of the *Reese River Reveille*, Austin's newspaper, gives a different account. The *Reveille* identified local minister William G. Blakely, who preached "the first sermon in the Reese River country" in May 1863, as the original founder of Austin Methodism. The Methodist Episcopal Church in Austin, the church society's official name, was organized on December 11, 1864 by the Rev. A. N. Fisher with eleven original members. The Rev. J. Lewis Trefren, a native of New Hampshire, arrived in Austin in May 1865 and within a few weeks, according to the *Reveille*, he "initiated the novel enterprise which has placed in the hands of the Society, for church purposes, the very handsome sum of fifty thousand dollars." Trefren's brainchild, the New England & Nevada Silver Mining Company, was organized

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<sup>2</sup> Neu, "Austin Historic District;" Abbe, *Austin*, 58-59; and Harmon, "How to Prepare Nominations," 9.

<sup>3</sup> Angel, *History of Nevada*, 207-209; Historic Environment Consultants, "First United Methodist Church."

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**Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada**

### **Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued**

in Boston, Massachusetts on January 3, 1866 for the purposes of working silver mines, building a mill for processing the silver ore, and building a church. William G. Blakely superintended the construction of the "Methodist Mining Company" mill at Kingston.<sup>4</sup>

The colorful story of Trefren's church construction scheme was related in detail by Myron Angel in his 1881 *History of Nevada*. Angel was once editor of the *Reese River Reveille*, which gave him a close familiarity with the story, although his memory for details seems to have been inaccurate at times. According to Angel:

Trefren exhibited shrewd business tact in this achievement. The community was rich in prospective treasure but exceedingly poor in pocket. The Pastor found everybody willing to contribute toward the erection of a church building, but nobody could pledge ready money for the cause. Nearly every man approached to subscribe was the owner of mining claims. If the Pastor would accept an interest in these claims he was welcome to them. A brilliant idea seized the reverend canvasser. He would accept donations of this character. The next difficulty was how to convert these claims into cash. At last Trefren hit upon the idea of pooling the claims, and organizing a Methodist Mining Company. The church was subsequently built on this magnificent claim. [Trefren marketed the stock among the Methodists of New Hampshire, who] saw, as though by intuition, how they could at the same time serve the Lord, do good, and make money. Such a mine would pay dividends in heaven as well as on earth. There was a "boom," and Trefren realized over \$250,000 on the sale of the stock. The result was the erection in Austin of the largest brick building in the State, with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church at Virginia City. A splendid organ was also purchased, and a brick parsonage built. The amount expended on these improvements aggregated over \$35,000.

Stock schemes and other funding mechanisms, some legitimate and others more questionable, were part and parcel of the Austin area's development. In 1863 Austin offered free town sites to settlers

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<sup>4</sup> Angel, *History of Nevada*, 210; *Reese River Reveille*, July 3, 1866 and July 10, 1897; and *Harrington's Directory of the City of Austin*, 45. The company organized by Trefren may also have been known as the Church Enterprise & Silver Mining Company (*Reese River Reveille*, July 6, 1866).

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CONTINUATION SHEET<sup>7</sup>

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Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada

### Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued

who would donate labor to the construction of a road connecting the town to the valley. Early Austin visitor J. Ross Browne commented on the "many worthless claims palmed off on a credulous public" dazzled by accounts of the Austin area's rich silver ledges. The most fanciful scheme of the era was the creation of the Reese River Navigation Company to freight silver ore in barges to the railroad at Battle Mountain. The Reese River, which averages a few inches deep, does not have sufficient flow for navigation.<sup>5</sup>

An early reference to the planned church appeared in the April 10, 1866 issue of the *Reveille*. The paper reported:

We received yesterday a brief note from Rev. W. G. Blakely, dated San Francisco, April 2d, requesting us to announce to his friends that Rev. Mr. Trefren was too ill to undertake the fatiguing journey over the mountains at present; and that he had an architect engaged in drawing the plan of the church, the erection of which will be commenced immediately after his return to Austin.

Over the course of the spring and summer the *Reveille* recounted the rapid construction of the church in its pages. Grading commenced on May 30. The July 3 issue identified Daniel P. Bell (b. ca. 1830) as the "architect and superintendent of building" and McGinnis & Cronin as the "contractors of mason work." In a later issue the *Reveille* proclaimed Bell "equal to anything from an elegant church to a superb quartz mill." The accolade hints at Bell's principal line of work as a "machinist" or mechanical engineer. He was also at the time an assistant engineer with the Austin Fire Department. Bell remained in the Lander County area through the early 1870s when he designed the 1871 Lander County Courthouse in Austin. McGinnis and Cronin are less well documented. An 1867 business directory suggests they were based in Austin. It is possible that McGinnis was Joseph McGinnis (ca. 1834-1901; also spelled McGinness), who operated a saloon on Main Street as early as 1863.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Angel, *History of Nevada*, 210; Lewis, *Town that Died Laughing*, 11; Browne, "The Reese River Country," 38; Toll, *Complete Nevada Traveler*, 127; and "Welcome to Austin."

<sup>6</sup> *Reese River Reveille*, May 16, 1863, April 10 and July 5, 1866, and June 23, 1871; Lander Lodge No. 172 Membership Roster; Austin Cemetery Records; Langley, *Pacific Coast Business*

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Section 8 Page 8

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Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada

### Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued

The July 3, 1866 *Reveille* also presented a detailed description of the church to its readership:

The building will be of brick with stone foundation and basement, will be forty feet front and sixty-two feet in depth, and the main story will be sixteen feet in high [*sic*]. On the southeast [i.e., south] corner, fronting Court street, is a tower ten feet square, which will reach with brick to the greatest height of the main building and extended to a lofty spire constructed of wood. The lower story of the tower will constitute a study room for the pastor, and a bell will be placed in the belfry. It is also designed to have a large clock in the tower with faces outside showing the time to the public. The main room of the Church will have capacity for comfortably seating four hundred persons. The pulpit stands at the north [i.e., northeast] end, and on the right of the pulpit is a gallery for the choir, and will also contain a first class organ. The basement will contain a furnace room for heating the Church, which will be twelve by twenty-four feet in dimensions. There are now employed upon the building seven masons and six laborers at the mason work, and four carpenters are engaged in preparing the woodwork. Near the Church, and fronting the same street, a parsonage is in course of construction, which will be of brick twenty-two by forty feet, and will contain seven rooms.

On July 12th it was reported that the building's walls, vestibule, and tower would be finished within a week. The paper attributed the quality of the mason work to "the wide-spread skill of McGinnis & Cronin." The 400-pound bell was brought to the site on July 16 and its "pleasant and homely sound" first rang from the tower on September 7.<sup>7</sup>

The *Reveille* ran another detailed report in its August 2 issue:

The new edifice of the Methodist Episcopal Church will be the most conspicuous object in town. As you pass up Main Street from the grade, it alone attracts and fills the eye. While we do not altogether admire the deviations from the original plan, which placed a broader

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*Directory for 1867*, 298; Kelly, *Second Directory of Nevada Territory*, 461; and Pezzoni, "Lander County Courthouse."

<sup>7</sup> *Reese River Reveille*, July 3, 12, and 17 and September 7, 1866.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
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Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada

### Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued

and statelier tower in the center of the front of the building, through which a spacious vestibule led into the church, the edifice will yet be an ornament to the city. It is being rapidly pushed to completion. Several days since the masons gave way to the carpenters, and the walls and ceiling will be plastered and handsomely finished on Saturday. The brick tower is being surmounted with woodwork, which will project about four feet above the peak of the roof, and will be finished by a light balustrade. The furnace is already placed in an excavation on the southwest [i.e., west] corner of the building from which its flues will branch out and pass under the floor to the escape flue leading out of the roof. We are informed by Mr. Bell, the architect of the building, that it is his intention to have it entirely finished by the 20th inst., to accomplish which he will immediately add largely to his staff of workmen.<sup>8</sup>

Austin Methodist Church was dedicated on September 23, 1866, and the *Reveille* declared the proceedings "deeply interesting . . . being the inauguration of the first edifice dedicated to Christian worship in the American desert." (The opening of Austin's second church, St. Augustine's Catholic Church, was celebrated at Christmas 1866.) The congregation was quick to share its fine building with the townspeople. In November the Methodist Sunday School children gave a concert. Among the performers was seven-year-old Emma Wixom, the future opera diva Emma Nevada, who sang two solos at the close of the concert and a "comic song" earlier in the program. In March 1867 it was announced that "meetings for prayer and social exercises will be held in Prof. Gallagher's school room, in the rear of the Methodist Church." The wording is ambiguous but may indicate the existence of a separate school building behind the church or a missing rear wing that was used as a schoolroom (architectural evidence suggests the existence of the latter). The lots directly behind the church were sold to the trustees by J. L. and Sarah L. Trefren and William G. and Susan E. Blakely on February 15, 1867. At Yuletide 1866, Christmas trees hung with \$1,000 in presents were displayed in the church, and Santa Claus also made appearances at church Christmases.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., August 2, 1866.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., November 24 and December 26, 1866, March 23 and December 26, 1867, and July 10, 1897; Lander County Deed Book 30, pp. 369 and 371.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET 7

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Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada

### Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued

Unfortunately, Austin's Methodists soon experienced a reversal. The principal mining venture of the New England & Nevada Silver Mining Company was the erection of the New England & Nevada Mill in Kingston at a cost of \$75,000. Kingston's initial silver excitement did not last long, however, and this combined with the presumably poor showing of the forty or so other silver mines connected to the company created a problem. According to Myron Angel:

Trefren had sold his stock on the installment plan. Before the final installments were paid the "wild-cat" collapsed, and there was no money to pay the last claim against the church, and a debt of \$6,000 was left on it. The property was sold to the county for a Court House, but was subsequently redeemed by the Church Extension Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The true situation appears to have been more complex. In October 1867 the church trustees mortgaged the church and parsonage to William N. Cunningham of Nye County to secure a debt of \$9,000 (perhaps Cunningham was involved in the construction of the mill at Kingston). The mortgage on the church was released in 1868, perhaps due to the intervention of the county commissioners. In June 1870 the church property was deeded to the Church Extension Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia, which secured it for use by Austin's Methodists. By this time the Rev. Trefren had left Austin; as Angel put it, he transferred "at his own request" to the California Conference in 1868.<sup>10</sup>

After the near-death experience of the late 1860s the church led a quiet existence. One event of note was the return of Emma (Wixom) Nevada on December 7, 1885. Nevada was by then an international celebrity, and her concert at the church including a rendition of *Home, Sweet Home* generated considerable excitement. Physical improvements were made to the church after its initial construction; in 1897 the building received new roofing and was painted and papered on the interior. Through the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the number of church members slowly declined along with the town's general population. Among the last church-related functions to occur in the building was a wedding held in 1935. By the early 1940s the church was abandoned.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Reese River Reveille*, July 3, 1866 and June 13 and 18, 1870.; Hall, *Romancing Nevada's Past*, 95; Angel, *History of Nevada*, 210; and Lander County Mortgage Book 3, pp. 232 and 324.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, *Town that Died Laughing*, 212; *Reese River Reveille*, July 10, 1897; and Ray H.

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Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada

## Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued

On May 4, 1951 the California-Nevada Annual Conference of the Methodist Church transferred the property to the Lander County Civic and Historical Society. In 1982 the building was rehabilitated by the Nevada West Construction Company according to a design by the architectural firm Habitat, Inc. The \$40,000 project received funding from the National Park Service, the Fleischmann Foundation, and Lander County, and included structural work, a new roof and floors, and electrical and heating upgrades. Since the 1982 renovation, Austin Methodist Church has served as Austin's town hall.<sup>12</sup>

### Architectural Analysis

Austin Methodist Church, which Myron Angel proclaimed the "finest Methodist Church edifice in the State," is at once conventional and innovative in form and detail. The building's basic elements are typical of nineteenth century church architecture: gable-fronted nave form, bell tower with spire, tall side windows. What is unusual is the separation of the main entrance and the bell tower, a departure from the architect's plans that the editor of the *Reveille*, for one, disapproved of. The change created two innovative features: the projecting vestibule, an architectural vestige of the tower that would have occupied the same location, and the minister's study at the base of the shifted tower with its commanding views of Austin and the Reese River Valley beyond. As originally conceived, Austin Methodist Church was very similar to St. Augustine's Catholic Church, built in Austin the same year (1866), which features a centered entry and bell tower. There are other similarities between the two churches; both are brick nave-form buildings with square-headed windows, arched organ alcoves, and furnace heating systems (intended or realized). The original design was also more in line with the design of Virginia City's early Methodist church.<sup>13</sup>

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Williams Jr. personal communication.

<sup>12</sup> Florin, *Historic Western Churches*, 95; plaque in church; "Methodist Church/Town Hall;" and Mella Harmon and Ray H. Williams Jr. personal communication.

<sup>13</sup> Angel, *History of Nevada*, 210; *Reese River Reveille*, August 2, 1866; Pezzoni, "St. Augustine's Catholic Church;" and James, *Roar and the Silence*, 113, 200.

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Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada

### Section 8 Statement of Significance, continued

Newspaper accounts of the building's planning and construction suggest that Daniel P. Bell, identified as the "architect and superintendent of building" in July 1866, did not actually design the church. The April 10 *Reveille* reported that an architect "over the mountains," that is, in California, was in the process of drawing a plan. It is not impossible that the architect in California in April and D. P. Bell in Austin in July were the same person, but it seems more likely that Bell, an accomplished builder of stamp mills and other structures, played a role analogous to an associate or supervising architect responsible for implementation of the plan. Beyond this limited role it may be that Bell was responsible for the innovative modifications of the original design.<sup>14</sup>

There are other, lesser departures from the original design. The "light balustrade" intended for the belfry and described by the *Reveille* on August 2, 1866 appears not to have been installed (it may be that the newspaper used an incorrect term to describe the bracketed cornice). There does not appear to be evidence for a "gallery" for the choir and organ to the right of the pulpit location, that is, in the east corner of the building, as described by the *Reveille* in its July 3, 1866 issue, although the paper may have been describing the alcove to the left of the pulpit. The vaulted ceiling and rounded walls of the alcove may have been designed to project the music into the nave. Likewise, the furnace "excavation" or housing on the front west corner does not survive, although the brick-arched opening in the foundation at that location may have received the flues of the original heating system.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, a subtle exterior feature deserves comment. The existence of a block of granite with feldspar veins in the form of a cross at the important front west corner of the foundation suggests the possibility that the block was specifically selected for the position, perhaps as an informal act of sanctification. Traditional stonemasons occasionally used unusual stones to decorative effect in their work, although symbolism of the kind that may be present in the Austin Methodist Church foundation has not been encountered by the author.

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<sup>14</sup> *Reese River Reveille*, April 10 and July 3, 1866.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, August 2, 1866.



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## **Section 10 Geographical Data**

### **Verbal Boundary Description**

The nominated area corresponds to Lander County tax parcel 01-106-06.

### **Boundary Justification**

The boundaries of the nominated area correspond to the present boundaries of the parcel on which the church stands.

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**Austin Methodist Church, Austin, Lander County, Nevada**

## **PHOTOGRAPHS**

1.     1. Subject: Austin Methodist Church (same for all photos)  
       2. Location: Lander Co., Nv. (same for all photos)  
       3. Photographer: J. Daniel Pezzoni (same for all photos)  
       4. Photo date: March 2003 (same for all photos)  
       5. Original negative archived at the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office,  
           Carson City, Nv. (same for all photos)  
       6. Description of view: Southwest (front) and southeast elevations. View looking north.  
       7. Photograph number appears at beginning of entry (same for all photos)
  
2.     6. Northeast and southwest elevations. View looking southeast.
  
3.     6. Southwest elevation. View looking southeast.
  
4.     6. Nave.