

**OLD FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**1. NAME OF PROPERTY**

Historic Name: OLD FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Other Name/Site Number: The Downtown Presbyterian Church

**2. LOCATION**

Street & Number: 154 Fifth Avenue North

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Nashville

Vicinity: N/A

State: TN

County: Davidson

Code: 41

Zip Code: 37219

**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: N/A

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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:

Mid-19th Century: Exotic Revival (Egyptian Revival)

## MATERIALS:

Foundation: Tennessee Limestone

Walls: Brick

Roof: Standing Seam Copper

Other: Metal (pilars &amp; pediment)

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The following architectural description has been compiled by Ridley Wills for the church:

The Old First Presbyterian Church [now called the Downtown Presbyterian Church] cornerstone was laid April 28, 1849.<sup>1</sup> Less than a year later, the building was finished sufficiently for the congregation to move in. It was not entirely completed, however, until the spring of the following year. The Church building, which is in the Egyptian Revival style, is one of several major examples of this style existant in the United States, another being the old building of the Medical College of Virginia, built in Richmond in 1845. [Designated a National Historic Landmark as the Egyptian Building in 1971.]

The church fronts on Church Street for 80 feet and extends south on Fifth Avenue North for 136 feet. A tower, 22 feet square at the base and 104 feet in height is built on each of the front corners. As the twin towers rise they gradually diminish in size by offsets and end in octagon shapes. Between the towers are steps, 36 feet in length, which ascend to the main floor of the church. The front entrance to the vestibule is by three doors finished in the Egyptian style.

The outside of the building had an unfinished appearance, when first completed in 1851, in that the two portico pillars that now stand in front of the doors were not there although there were pedestals for them. The pillars, which feature lotus blossom capitals, were added in 1871 in conformity with Strickland's original design. A classic winged disc, which decorates the pediment, was also added in 1871. On the front of the building, flanking the front doors, are two large, vertical panels. The one to the right lists significant dates in the histories of the First and Downtown Presbyterian Churches, while the other lists the names of all the ministers who have served the two congregations at the site. The panels were repainted in 1955 to include recent history of the building and the two congregations that worshipped there. In 1876, the iron fence around the church was added, while iron rails were put up the steps to the front entrance in 1940.

Extensive repairs were made to the towers in 1937. That year a great deal of the original brick in the towers was replaced. New bituminous roofs were put over the original flat-lock tin roofs on the towers, and the wood floor within the northwest tower was replaced with a concrete and steel one to adequately support a 4,013-pound bell installed in 1867. Over the years, the original standing seam-tin roof over the sanctuary was overlaid with successive layers of bituminous roof, including one applied in 1937. That same year, steel roof beams were added as part of a major restoration project in which cracked foundation stones were replaced and the wooden ground floor treated for termite damage and strengthened with supports.

The vestibule is 70.5 feet long, 16.5 feet deep in the center and 9.5-feet deep at the ends. At each end, within the towers on that level, are stairways leading to a balcony over the vestibule. The Northwest tower also includes a stairway leading to the basement level, while

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<sup>1</sup> *The First Presbyterian Church Nashville, Tennessee* (Nashville: Foster & Parkes, 1915) p. 59.

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the tower at the opposite end has an elevator which services the sanctuary level from the street level. From the vestibule, which is painted gray, four doors lead directly to the sanctuary, which is 101.5-feet long and 70.5 feet wide.

The pulpit is at the south end of the sanctuary, opposite the doors to the vestibule. The pulpit and the platform upon which it rests are made of walnut. They were installed in 1895. Behind, and elevated above them, are the choir loft and organ. Until 1858, the congregation had no organ and depended on congregational singing for music. That year an organ was installed at the cost of \$3,000. A replacement organ, installed in 1913, was completely rebuilt in 1973.

The sanctuary, which seats more than 900, originally held 1,300 people. It was designed to resemble the interior of an Egyptian temple and has a striking resemblance to the temple at Karnak on the Nile. A significant reduction in seating capacity came when the interior was extensively remodeled in 1881-82 to bring its appearance to that which we know today. When the building was originally completed, the rooms at either side of the pulpit did not exist, the spaces being used as "amen corners" with ten pews on each side. The windows were clear glass and had inside shutters. There were box pews with straight backs and panel doors instead of the present curved benches. In 1895, the ascending platform in the balcony was built and opera chairs installed. That same year, the two windows were put in the wall facing Church Street behind the balcony.

In 1941, old members of the congregation recalled that the sanctuary walls were originally of a drab medium gray color "like the inside of the capitol building," and that the ceiling was smooth and unbroken except for a very large gasolier in the middle and possibly gas side lights. According to "An Echo from Egypt," an unpublished history of the building written by Jesse E. Wills in 1941, the sanctuary had an Egyptian feel from the very beginning partially because of the bands of molding in the shape of an unusual arch or pylon which surround the windows inside. Wills's research convinced him that the Egyptian pediments over the windows and the plaster or half columns along the side walls were also originally there.

Heat originally came from a hot-air furnace in the basement through registers in the floor of the sanctuary. In 1886, a telephone was installed in the church. Two years later, a steam heat system replaced the original heating unit. Electric lights first appeared in the early to mid-1890s. For much of the balance of that decade, a combination of gas and electricity was probably used. More recently, heating and cooling systems were installed in 1961 and 1991.

The extensive changes begun in 1880 transformed the interior of the sanctuary from its drab state to the brilliantly colored room we see today. The redecoration, which was finished in December 1881, was announced in the *Nashville Daily American* on April 9, 1882 when a formal rededication of the church took place. The writer commented that, "as the building now stands, it is a work of beauty and art, unsurpassed by any in the city, and but few in the country. The walls of the interior have been beautifully frescoed in Egyptian style, corresponding to the Egyptian architecture of the interior."

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In the early 1880s renovation, the blue, red, and gold colors and the various symbols used by the architect on the columns, wall and cornices were ones which had mystic meanings in antiquity. Blue represents divine mercy. The lilies on the columns and around the cornice represent purity and innocence while the triangles on the cornice and columns symbolize the Holy Trinity. The reeded members of the cornice, which are banded together with red and gold, symbolize the church members held together with the holy band of love. The most frequently used symbol added at that time is the winged-disk of Amun-Ra, which represents eternity. It appears 13 times on the walls and woodwork on the front of the sanctuary and was carved on all four sides of the baptismal font added in 1928. Before 3000 B.C., the wings, which represent the soul, were the chief emblem of Upper Egypt. The two cobras flanking each sun-disk were the emblem of Lower Egypt. They represent wisdom. When the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt were joined in 3000 B.C. by the first Pharaoh, Menes, their respective symbols were linked to signify the union.<sup>2</sup>

It was during the renovation of 1880-81 that the two "amen" corners were partitioned off into two rooms, one for the Session and the other for various uses. The walls that separated the new rooms from the sanctuary were painted to give the effect of a series of columns stretching away into the distance from the columns in the sanctuary. The same renovation also included a dramatic modification to the ceiling which heightened the resemblance of the sanctuary to Karnak. The ceiling was divided into squares, each painted to depict clouds and blue sky. From the squares twelve small gasoliers were suspended. Along with the bracket lights on the walls, they illuminated the room "as bright as day," according to the *Nashville Morning World*.

New benches, which did not arrive until the spring of 1882, were rich walnut, highly polished and without doors. They are still in place in the sanctuary, arranged in the same semi-circular fashion they were when originally installed. In recent years, the first several rows were removed to enable a large podium to be temporarily installed in front of the pulpit for musical performances.

The next significant change to the sanctuary occurred in 1887. That year, the inside blinds were removed and the present stained glass windows were installed. Their design includes palm trees, lotus plants, and the rising sun, all of which have symbolic meanings. The next year, stained glass was put in the interior windows to either side of the choir. The 1887-88 changes generally brought the auditorium to its present appearance. In 1898, and again in 1937-38, the interior was repainted, with the designs reproduced. In the latter renovation, much replastering was done and canvas was put on the walls before the repainting effort started.

Downstairs on the basement level there is a large Fellowship Hall, a modern kitchen, and several smaller rooms. Originally, the basement level was divided into five rooms, the largest being a large, 70.5 feet by 54.5 feet lecture room. The pastor's study was 28 feet by 15 feet, while a smaller lecture room was 44 feet by 28.5 feet. There were also two smaller rooms 13.5 feet by 2.3 feet. The public entrance was from 5th Avenue North, then called

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<sup>2</sup> James A. Hoobler, "Karnak on the Cumberland," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 35 (1976) 260-61.

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Summer Street, and there was a private entrance in the rear which led directly to the church parsonage.<sup>3</sup> [No longer standing.] There was also a stairway, removed in the 1950s, that led from the Sunday school floor [in the basement] to the sanctuary, in the rear and to the right of the pulpit. The four-story Sunday school building, at the rear of the church, was begun during World War I and completed in 1919. Nashvillian Henry Hibbs was the architect.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Robert F. Bunting, D.D. *Manual of the First Presbyterian Church*, Nashville, 1868.

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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 Theme(s): XVI. Architecture  
H. Exotic Revivals  
2. Egyptian

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1849

Significant Dates: 1849, 1851, 1880-1881

Significant Person(s):

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: William Strickland (1788-1854)



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

The Old First Presbyterian Church was designed very late in William Strickland's career while he was engaged on the construction of the Tennessee State Capitol. Having started his architectural career as an apprentice to Benjamin Henry Latrobe, he advanced in his knowledge of engineering and became one of the foremost architects in the United States. In 1818, Strickland won the competition for Nicholas Biddle's Second Bank of the United States which was to be a chaste imitation of Grecian architecture. Its beautiful design put him in the first rank of architects. William Strickland worked in both the newest Gothic Style as well as the older Georgian mode. The Old Presbyterian Church is his largest, and only, full Egyptian temple and is known affectionally as "Karnak on the Cumberland."

The Egyptian-Revival style enjoyed a smaller audience than the Gothic Revival, but it was a very important part of 19th-century eclecticism. "Egyptianizing" did, however, represent specific aesthetic ideals and symbolic ideas of a formative period in American architecture.

If, among other accomplishments, the Egyptian-Revival was to represent a final crystallization of Romantic Classicism through a hyper-simplicity, sharp geometry, and clear symmetry, these qualities were to fall from popular taste by mid-century. But they were not lost. They reappeared in works of later decades, be it McKim, Mead and White, or Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson. If, on the other hand, certain forms of the Revival particularly suited practical, functional requirements, such requirements continued to be contained within the American tradition of architecture. And, finally, if the style was used to convey particular specialized meanings, this also has been a recurrent problem in all architecture; the case of the Egyptian Revival simply represents one attempt at a solution.<sup>1</sup>

The revivalism that enlivened the 19th century was not mere copy work. Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome had their religious temples and sacred precincts, and the 19th century used variations of these types of structures for banks, schools, prisons, churches, synagogues, funerary monuments, and even a series of small railroad stations on a line out of Boston.

The popularity of the new style did not mean slavish copying of ancient buildings, but rather an adaptation of forms and motifs. They were not duplicating the massive ancient temples which were built as huge private edifices for the use of a few of the religious elite. But it remains that the Egyptian funerary tradition that dominated the English Revival also heavily influenced the American equivalent. It has also been noted that the severity of Egyptian architecture was very appealing to the Calvinistic Presbyterians; several Scottish churches closely resemble the Egyptian style.

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<sup>1</sup> Carrott, Richard G. *The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources Monuments and Meaning*. University of California Press, Berkeley. 1978, p. 25.

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There were other sources for the resurgence of this ancient style. It was an outgrowth of the interest in Classical Antiquity. The fascination with Classical archeology was escalated by the discovery of Pompeii and Herculanium in 1755. In the 16th and 17th centuries, travel books on Egypt began to appear. Lavishly illustrated, they influenced architects and painters with their romantic views. Art also became propaganda in France with the Revolution and Empire under Napoleon I. Magnificent furniture was made and the lavish room decorations created were referred to as the "Napoleonic Style."

That the design could be more archeological was due to the vitally important publications that appeared after the Egyptian campaign of 1798-1799, and the succeeding occupation which ended in 1802. The first of these was Vivant Denon's account of the French army's battles in Egypt liberally illustrated with engravings of the country and its ruins. For Egyptian antiquity, it was the first attempt at scientific details and scholarly reconstructions. Hastily done, it was a preview of the monumental work commissioned by the Emperor and produced by an army, this time, of scholars, artists, scientists, and historians. This was the twenty-one volume *Description d'Egypte*.... Appearing in three folio sizes, this staggering opus included sections dealing with the topography, geography, natural history, current state, and most important for the Revival, the antiquities of Egypt. More carefully measured and painstakingly rendered than Denon's illustrations, the engravings of the monuments of ancient Egypt established the highest quality and finest tradition of scholarly archeology. They included a vastly expanded reportage of the current state of the ruins, details, and reconstructions. Napoleon's military adventure was a catastrophe, but his army of savants won him an unassailable position in the histories of art and science. It is Bonaparte's campaign and these two works which mark the serious beginning of the Egyptian Revival by producing a powerful and popular wave of interest in the Land of the Nile, and providing archeological sources of unsurpassed exactitude. Denon and the *Description* were the Leroy, and Stuart and Revett of the Egyptian Revival.<sup>2</sup>

The early American architects Strickland, Walter, Haviland and A.J. Davis were certainly aware of the Egyptian style that was first used in synagogue design in Beth Israel, in Philadelphia, in 1849, and Mikveh Israel, also in Philadelphia, in 1825. These designers saw this revival style as either Romantic Classicism or Picturesque. The Classic expressed sublime sentiments in a geometrically simple manner and the Picturesque provided variety of form.

In any case, both Strickland and Walter, at other times, showed a more archeological awareness of the Egyptian style than in their synagogues. In 1836, the former executed a fine, "pure" Egyptian Revival design for the Laurel Hill Cemetery Gate (Philadelphia) competition, and, in 1848, planned the Nashville Downtown Presbyterian Church which is certainly more Egyptian than the Mikveh Israel Temple. The case of Walter is especially

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

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telling, for his other, more archeological, Egyptian designs are earlier than his synagogue; a design for the Laurel Hill Cemetery Gate, 1836, and the Debtors' Prison at Moyamensing of 1835.<sup>3</sup>

The rarity of a number of these monuments should be noted. The Moyamensing Prison was destroyed in 1958 and part of the Debtor's gate is in the Smithsonian Institution today. Other examples that survive are the Medical College in Richmond and the small jail in Dubuque, both National Historic Landmarks.

The Downtown Presbyterian Church of Nashville, designed in 1848, was one of William Strickland's last works. Following the destruction of the former church by fire on September 14, 1849, new plans were laid. Two days later a committee was authorized to procure plans. On its December 15 meeting, the congregation considered two projects by Mr. Briscoe Vannoy [the architect of the former church], and one in perspective with a front view and ground plot by Capt. Strickland, the architect of the State Capitol. The last, having been briefly explained by the chairman, was submitted to the meeting as the one selected.... The church was built by 1851. Two palm columns of the portico were not erected until 1871 and the present interior decoration was executed in 1880, but they were made in careful conformity to the original design. Besides the extremely slender columns, the other Egyptian features consist of cavetto cornices, a winged disc over the portico, and battered window and door frames which are perhaps as Greek in form as they are Egyptian. Thus the fenestration is not as elongated as other examples, but the building is a tall one set on a high podium, and entered by a flight of frontal steps between the tower bases. The cornices are not particularly heavy, while the solid balustrades above them are de-emphasized by flat panel inserts. The facade across the structure is considerably broken up by its recessed portico and projecting tower bases.<sup>4</sup>

The first alterations and remodeling occurred after Federal forces had occupied the church building from January to August of 1863 and again from October 1863 to 1865. The building was used as a hospital, [with] beds for the wounded filling the auditorium. The church was restored to something like its original appearance with \$7,500 received for damages from Federal authorities.

Extensive alterations were made in 1881, however, and it was then that the interior was given its present appearance. The "amen corners" were enclosed to create separate rooms. The frescoed perspective above the doors to these rooms, showing Egyptian columns receding into distance, were also added at this time. The ceiling was coffered, with rosettes at beam intersections, and

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71-72.

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the square recessed panels were rendered with bits of blue sky and clouds. The existing curved walnut pews were installed to replace the earlier box pews with doors, and new gas chandeliers (since replaced) also were installed.<sup>5</sup>

The artists who painted the sanctuary were Theo Knoch and John Schliecher, the fresco painters Strickland had employed to work on the Tennessee State Capitol in the 1850s. One of the most remarkable details in the Nashville church is the painted front wall of the interior which suggests an Egyptian temple. The brilliant interior, combined with the austere exterior, make the Nashville Presbyterian Church a superb achievement in this architectural style.

Formerly the First Presbyterian Church of Nashville, a new congregation formed in 1955 in suburban Oak Hill. As a result, a group of worshipers reconstituted themselves as the Downtown Presbyterian Church, thus preserving one of the largest and most important Egyptian-Revival structures in America.

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<sup>5</sup> Brumbaugh, Thomas B., Martha I. Strayhorn and Gary Gore. *Tennessee, The Historic American Buildings Survey and Vanderbilt University*. HABS and Vanderbilt University Press. Nashville 1974, pp. 64-66.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

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Woolridge, John, editor, *History of Nashville, Tennessee*, (Nashville: H.W. Crew, 1890). pp. 466-467.

"The Towers see One Hundred Years. The Story of the First Presbyterian Church Building, Nashville, Tennessee." Pamphlet dated April 22, 1951.

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: #1970  
 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 an acre

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing  
 A 16 4001830 519810

Verbal Boundary Description:

Beginning at the NE corner of Fifth Avenue North and Church Streets, the lot runs NE 102.8 feet to NE point of lot, thence south 140 feet to a point, thence east 28.2 feet, thence south 53.75 feet to a point, thence west 2.1 feet, thence south 42.55 feet to Express Alley, thence west 128.5 feet to the corner of Express Alley and Fifth Avenue North, thence North 236.3 feet along Fifth Avenue North to point of beginning.

Boundary Justification:

This is the original lot which the church has historically occupied.

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**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Carolyn Pitts, Architectural Historian  
National Historic Landmarks Survey  
National Park Service/Washington Office  
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Washington, DC 20013-7127

Telephone: 202/343-8166

Date: November 13, 1992

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS SURVEY  
November 16, 1992