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Black Protestant Churches of Muskogee

1. First Baptist Church (No. 1 on Sketch Map and Photo Nos. 1-6)

Location: Sixth and Denison Streets
 Muskogee, OK 74401

Owner of Property: First Baptist Church
 Sixth and Denison Streets
 Muskogee, OK 74401

Location of Legal Description: Office of County Clerk
 Muskogee County Courthouse
 Muskogee, OK 74401

Description: The First Baptist Church is a 1½ story, detached, religious building with raised basement. The building is square-shaped with gabled roof. The facade to rear portion has north-south orientation with an east-west oriented cross gable. The red brick wall finish is laid in the running bond.

The facade, or north side, has two crenallated towers, one at either corner. The one on northwest corner is three story and the one on northeast corner is two story. Within each tower on facade side are round arched entryways, both of which contain double metal doors with glass lights. Each of the doors have two-paned transoms. The entryways, located on first floor above raised basement, are reached by stairwells partially enclosed with red brick walls adorned with pilasters. There is also a double door entry to basement in facade. It is located between the two main stairwells. The basement doors are metal with lights in the upper half and are framed with polychromatic brick laid in three rows. The gable end portion of the facade has a long rectangular opening with ten fixed panes. It is topped with a round arch which has miniature dentils. Flanking this center window are two 2/2 double-hung sash windows with rock-faced lintels and continuous sill running below all three windows. Above the main window arrangement in the gable end is a smaller replication of the larger band. The three story tower on facade side has two long rectangular openings which have been covered with metal panels, one on each floor above entryway. The two story on facade side has similar fenestration.

The west side has similar fenestration to the facade. Exceptions include two 2/2 double hung sash windows in first floor of the three story tower, two 2/2 double-hung sash windows flanking the gable end window arrangement, and a two story tower on the southwest corner. This tower has double metal doors with glass lights topped with two-paned transom and round arch. Above the southwest corner entry on the second floor of tower are two openings covered with metal panels. There are six openings in the raised basement level on west side all of which have been covered with corrugated metal.

The east side also has similar fenestration to facade, especially in the gable end. Toward north of gable end is one 2/2 double-hung sash window and to the south are two double-hung sash type windows, one of which is 2/2 and the other 1/1. There are six openings at basement level, all of which have been covered with corrugated metal. There is a metal door located in the center of the raised basement level.

The rear, or south side, has four long, rectangular-shaped openings in the two-story tower, two on each floor. The first story windows are 1/1 double-hung sash and the second floor openings have been covered with metal panels. In the center is a 2/2

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double-hung sash window flanked by smaller 2/2 double-hung sash windows. On either side of this group are single 2/2 double-hung sash windows. There are four openings at basement which have been covered with metal panels. There are two wall chimney stacks, one in the rear and one on the east side.

Decorative elements include the crenallated towers and crenallation along parapets of the gable ends, rock faced belt courses in gable end and three story tower on the facade, stepped pilasters marking corners of the three story tower, and rock faced water table dividing first story from raised basement levels. Additional features included decorative round arches over door and window openings, rock faced lintels and sills on east and west sides, and polychromatic brickwork framing entrance to basement on the facade side.

Alterations are minimal. Other than window lights being replaced with metal panels in towers and basement, the property has remained intact for over 80 years.

Statement of Significance: The First Baptist Church is historically significant because: (1) it is the oldest Black Protestant church in Muskogee having been built in 1903, four years before Oklahoma statehood and (2) it is one of the two oldest buildings of any type which remain intact in the black community of Muskogee, historically the largest black community in Oklahoma outside of Oklahoma City and Tulsa. The Esco (Simmons) Building, a commercial structure, was also built during the Territorial Era of Muskogee's black community.

In 1877, a mission school was established for black freedmen and Indians in Muskogee at Fourth and Elgin Streets. The First Baptist congregation evolved from this mission school and eventually purchased land at Sixth and Denison to construct a new building because of increased membership and to accommodate the spiritual and social needs of Muskogee's black Baptist population. In 1900 the cornerstones were laid and the First Baptist Church was completed in 1903, four years prior to Oklahoma statehood.

Membership peaked in the 1920s at approximately 700 members, one of the largest black congregations in Oklahoma. During the same decade, the church hosted the annual National Baptist Convention, the largest black Baptist organization in the United States. During the depression of the 1930s, the church assumed an active role in providing food for the poor and unemployed by sponsoring a soup kitchen at the church.

Although membership has declined in recent years, the First Baptist Church celebrated its 100th Anniversary as a congregation in 1977 and 80th Anniversary of the building in 1983. For over 80 years, the First Baptist Church of Muskogee has been a source of inspiration for the black community of Muskogee as well as retaining both its historic and architectural integrity.

Major Bibliographical Sources:

First Baptist Church's One-Hundredth Anniversary Program. Muskogee, Oklahoma, 1977.

Personal Interviews: Mrs. B. I. Jones, June, 1982.

Mrs. Eunice Simmons, June, 1982.

Quadrangle Name: Northeast Muskogee, OK

Scale: 7.5 minutes

UTM: 15/285350/3958930

Verbal Boundary Description: Lots 1 and 17, Block 11, Original Townsite of Muskogee, OK.