

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

PH0689629

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RECEIVED	NOV 7 1978
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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

First Presbyterian Church of Natchez

AND/OR COMMON

First Presbyterian Church of Natchez

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

117 South Pearl Street

\_\_ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Natchez

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT  
Fourth

\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

Mississippi

CODE

28

COUNTY

Adams

CODE

1

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

**CATEGORY**

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

**OWNERSHIP**

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

**STATUS**

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

**PRESENT USE**

- AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- COMMERCIAL
- PARK
- EDUCATIONAL
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ENTERTAINMENT
- RELIGIOUS
- GOVERNMENT
- SCIENTIFIC
- INDUSTRIAL
- TRANSPORTATION
- MILITARY
- OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

First Presbyterian Church of Natchez

STREET & NUMBER

117 South Pearl Street

CITY, TOWN

Natchez

STATE

Mississippi 39120

\_\_ VICINITY OF

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Office of the Chancery Clerk  
Adams County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

Courthouse Square

CITY, TOWN

Natchez

STATE

Mississippi 39120

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Adams County Landmarks Inventory

DATE

1974-1977

\_\_ FEDERAL \_\_ STATE  COUNTY \_\_ LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Natchez Metropolitan Planning Commission

CITY, TOWN

Natchez

STATE

Mississippi 39120

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The First Presbyterian Church of Natchez is a stuccoed brick building facing westerly from an elevated downtown corner lot. The design utilizes the Tuscan order throughout and incorporates elements of both the late Federal and Greek Revival styles. Measuring 51 by 108 feet with a height comparable to a two-story domestic building, the church seats 1,000. The structure is divided into three blocks which are, in decreasing width and in order from east to west, the sanctuary, vestibule, and portico. The sanctuary is five bays deep, although the easternmost bay on the southerly side is hidden on the exterior by the addition of Stratton Chapel. The vestibule and portico are each one bay deep.

The giant order columns of the portico, disposed to allow a wide central bay defining the entrance, are echoed by full box columns attached to the front corners of the vestibule and by paired pilasters set at all other corners and along the sides of the sanctuary. The pilasters rest on shallow plinths above a low basement and support a full entablature and paneled parapet. They flank tall windows set in shallow reveals along the sides of the sanctuary. The sash bars of the double-hung sash are interlaced within the semicircular heads to form a Gothic pattern. The openings are closed by exterior blinds hung on strap hinges and spike pintles. Similar openings are found on the side walls of the vestibule. The lower portion of each of the two vestibule openings, however, contains a double-leaf eight-panel door framed by molded and capped pilasters which support a projecting molded shelf. The northerly door serves its original function by giving onto an enclosed winding stair leading to the upper gallery, while the southerly door has been shut and the stair rearranged to allow access to the gallery from the vestibule interior.

Rising high above the central portion of the vestibule is the three-stage wooden tower. The bottom stage is a simple block with pilastered corners and a partial entablature framing the matched boarding of the walls. The middle stage is more elaborately treated with three-quarter columns set in antis supporting a full entablature. Centered on each side is a clock face and a louvered opening set in a molded rectangular frame. The corners of the octagonal top stage are pilastered, and the faces each contain a semicircular-headed opening fitted with a molded frame and fixed louvers. Surmounting the frieze and cornice of the top section is a high metal-clad dome terminating in a heavily turned spire with an arrow weathervane.

Primary entrance to the church is through a full-height Tuscan frontispiece centered on the front wall of the vestibule. The wooden frontispiece has three-quarter columns supporting a full entablature. The columns flank double-leaf eight-panel doors set within paneled embrasures. Flanking the frontispiece are two smaller rectangular doorways containing double-leaf single-panel doors. These doorways are surmounted by heavy molded wooden pediments supported by pairs of molded consoles. The three front doors are echoed on the back wall of the vestibule by three inner doors which pierce the westerly wall of the sanctuary in bays defined by four giant order three-quarter columns which rise through the westerly gallery to reach the flat ceiling covered with pressed metal.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES 1828-30, 1901

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Stratton Chapel--Spier and Rohns,  
Detroit, Michigan

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The First Presbyterian Church of Natchez is the most outstanding example of a Federal church building in Mississippi. Completed in 1829 and dedicated New Year's Day, 1830, the building has since undergone a major enlargement, several minor renovations, and an addition; the basic integrity of the structure, however, remains unaffected.

Although the first church building was begun in 1812 and completed in 1815,<sup>1</sup> the First Presbyterian Church of Natchez was not officially organized until 1817.<sup>2</sup> The first church building, the steeple of which is visible in John James Audubon's landscape of Natchez painted in the early 1820s,<sup>3</sup> was located on the site of the present structure. The architect of the first building was Massachusetts native Levi Weeks.<sup>4</sup> The only other extant Natchez building designed by Weeks which has been documented is Auburn, a National Historic Landmark. Auburn was designed for Lyman Harding, also a native of Massachusetts,<sup>5</sup> who was a trustee for the subscription to build the original structure of the First Presbyterian Church.<sup>6</sup>

The church building designed by Weeks was razed in 1828, and the hill upon which it had stood was graded to accommodate a more commodious structure.<sup>7</sup> Some historians have maintained that Weeks was architect of the second church building as well as the first, but since he died in 1819<sup>8</sup> such attribution is doubtful. Unfortunately, definite identification of the architect of the present building has not been determined.

One of the earliest descriptions of the present building is found in Joseph Holt Ingraham's The South-West, By a Yankee (1835). "Of the other public buildings of Natchez," Ingraham writes,

the Presbyterian church is the finest and most imposing. It stands on a commanding site, overlooking the public square. . . . [The church] is constructed of bricks, which are allowed to retain their original colour; and surrounded by buff-coloured pilasters of stucco work, which is here generally substituted for granite in facings. It is surmounted, at the west end, by a fine tower of successive stories; on one side of which is a clock, conspicuous from the most distant parts of the city and suburbs.<sup>9</sup>

Ingraham describes the interior of the building as plain and vaulted. The pulpit stood opposite the entrance, over which was a gallery for the "coloured people."<sup>10</sup> The first pictorial representation of the building is found in a ca. 1835 sketch by James Tooley.<sup>11</sup>



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On the sloping floor of the sanctuary are the original paneled box pews, divided into four ranges by the three aisles. From among the pews rise reeded and capped cast-iron posts supporting the paneled architrave and heavy turned balustrade of the gallery. The gallery is projected at the center and hollowed at the two corners; it is carried along the side walls to abut the east wall of the sanctuary. This wall is plain except for a central frontispiece and two tall windows set toward the corners. The windows are trimmed, like the other windows and doors of the sanctuary, with casings molded deeply, delicately, and symmetrically and broken by concentrically molded corner blocks used at the semicircular heads as impost blocks and keystones. The central ornament of the east wall is the wooden Greek Revival frontispiece behind the raised pulpit. Composed of paired pilasters and a full entablature, the frontispiece is crowned by an anthemion set on a suppressed pediment. Within the frontispiece is an exedra painted "en grisaille" with paneled pilasters supporting a paneled semidome. The painting is the remnant of an elaborate decorative scheme dating to 1859 when all interior walls of the church were frescoed to resemble ashlar marble in shades of gray and the ceiling was painted in an elaborate architectural design, parts of which have been recovered and are on file at the church office. The pulpit before the frontispiece is supported by elaborately carved consoles and set on a raised platform with a simply paneled front matching the panels on the flanking steps.

The church building has remained unusually intact despite some changes made since its construction. The exterior has not been substantially altered except for the installation of a chimney on the southerly side and the addition of the Stratton Chapel to the easterly end. The interior of the church is much the same as it was in 1860 after its major remodeling except for the loss of the fresco work, the change in the southerly stair, the installation of organ pipes in the westerly gallery, and the installation of the pressed metal ceiling. The integrity of the structure is remarkable for an unrestored public building in continuous use since 1830.

Attached to the easterly end of the church is Stratton Chapel, a two-story stucco building facing southerly from a position adjoining the sidewalk on State Street. Erected in 1901, the chapel projects beyond the church to the north and south and wraps around it to cover one bay on the southerly side. The chapel is both a well-executed design of its period and an excellent example of a sympathetic addition to an older building of a different style. The transition from the Romanesque center of the chapel facade to the Federal classicism of the original building is deftly done in stages without denying or falsifying either style.

The facade of the chapel is divided, like the church, into three projecting blocks. The central block is enriched with Tuscan pilasters to form a slightly projecting two-tiered pedimented pavilion. On the lower level, high pedestals support two pairs of Tuscan

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pilasters which carry a full entablature. The same scheme is followed on the upper level but elaborated by panels placed in the pedestals and by dentils used in the entablature defining the tympanum. Within the bay defined by the upper pilasters are three tall windows. The lower bay contains a wide semicircular arch carried on short paneled pilasters set on pedestals. The arched opening gives onto an open vestibule where a wainscot of glazed bas-relief tiles adjoins an oak-trimmed doorway with fluted pilasters and a double-leaf glazed door.

Flanking the central block of the chapel are the slightly recessed single bays of the intermediate block. These bays are simply treated and begin the transition from the design of the central block to the design of the church. From the central block, the water table, the frieze and cornice of the entablature at the second-floor level, and the cap of the parapet are carried across the intermediate block, where each bay contains a simple rectangular window above and a short semicircular-headed window below. The lower windows are filled with stained glass and set below semicircular molded arches with keystones and impost blocks.

Flanking the intermediate block are the single bays of the third block. The treatment of these bays completes the design transition to the church and is carried onto the two bays on the westerly side of the chapel, where the latter abuts the church. This treatment utilizes a full entablature carried on giant order pilasters which are set on a basement and which are all at the same level and of the same form as the pilasters of the church. The pilasters of the chapel, however, are used singly and are slightly more attenuated than those of the church. The division of stories in these bays of the chapel is evident only by the two tiers of windows, a rather square upper opening and a taller rectangular lower opening divided into a transom and a pair of double-hung one-over-one sash. The lower windows on the facade are glazed with colored glass set in an intricate leaded pattern. The other windows are glazed with clear glass.

The only major change to the chapel occurred in 1929 when the original towers were removed. Set over the intermediate bays of the facade, these two towers were domed one-stage rectangular structures with round-headed arches in the faces.

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The first major addition to the sanctuary occurred in 1838 when galleries were added on the side walls.<sup>12</sup> These were extensions of the gallery described by Ingraham as being located over the church entrance. Some minor changes to the building may have occurred when repairs were made after a tornado struck the church on May 7, 1840. The Presbyterian Church, according to the Mississippi Free Trader, had its tower thrown down, its roof broken, and its walls shattered.<sup>13</sup> The damage was probably not as severe as the newspaper account indicated, however, since services were held as usual in the sanctuary the following Sunday.<sup>14</sup>

In 1843 the Reverend Dr. Joseph Buck Stratton arrived from Princeton to assume the pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church. Dr. Stratton was the active pastor of the church for fifty-one years, retiring as pastor emeritus in 1894. Active until a few days before his death in 1903, Dr. Stratton kept a detailed journal spanning the entire breadth of his sixty years of service to the church and the community. His journal, the primary source for much of the history of the church, is also the most comprehensive extant account of nineteenth-century Natchez. Dr. Stratton ministered to the victims of the many yellow fever epidemics that struck the city, married the daughter of one of the town's most prosperous citizens, preached to the planters who made Natchez one of the wealthiest towns in American before the Civil War, endured the hardships following the war, and lived to accompany his fellow citizens into the twentieth century. All the events of this sixty-year period are meticulously recorded in his four-volume diary.<sup>15</sup>

The only major enlargement to the First Presbyterian Church building was completed in 1851. Sixteen feet were added to the pulpit end of the church, necessitating removal of the session house, which had stood at the rear of the sanctuary.<sup>16</sup> The stuccoed finish was probably applied to the bricks at this time to blend the addition with the older section. (The stucco possibly could have been added earlier to repair the tornado damage.) The 1851 addition increased the seating capacity of the sanctuary to about one thousand.<sup>17</sup>

An elaborate redecorating of the sanctuary interior was undertaken in 1859. The walls and ceiling were frescoed, gas lights were installed, and an exedra was painted within the frontispiece behind the pulpit.<sup>18</sup> Interior pictures taken in 1893 reveal that the frescoing of the walls (long since painted over) was done to resemble blocks of marble and that the exedra remains unchanged.<sup>19</sup> No picture is known to exist of the frescoed ceiling now covered by a metal ceiling added in remodeling in 1896. (The original colors of the metal ceiling were cream, saffron, and light blue.)<sup>20</sup> Also in the 1896 remodeling the gas light fixtures were converted to electricity.

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In 1900 the congregation decided to erect a new building to house the Sunday school. Plans were submitted by the firm of Spier (Frederick H.) and Rohns (William C.) of Detroit. The building was constructed as a memorial to Dr. Stratton, who was present at its dedication March 17, 1901. This addition, joined to the rear of the main building, is a very successful blending of newer architectural styles with the original Federal design. Stratton Chapel formerly had two towers similar to that of the main building, but they were removed in 1929.<sup>21</sup>

The Manse, four blocks from the church at 307 Rankin Street, is an 1820s house which since 1838 has accommodated ministers serving the congregation. It has been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>J. Julian Chisolm, History of the First Presbyterian Church of Natchez, Mississippi. (Natchez: McDonald, 1972), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Chisolm, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Audubon's landscape of Natchez is owned by Mrs. Dexter Ferry, Grosse Pointe, Mich. Detailed slides of this painting are owned by Ronald W. Miller, 506 High Street, Natchez, Miss.

<sup>4</sup>Mildred McGehee, "Levi Weeks: Early Nineteenth Century Architect," unpublished master's thesis on Levi Weeks, University of Delaware, 1975, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup>McGehee, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Chisolm, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>Chisolm, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup>McGehee, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup>Vol. II (New York: Harper & Brothers), p. 41.

<sup>10</sup>Ingraham, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup>A print of the original sketch is owned by the Natchez Historical Society, Coyle House, Natchez, Mississippi.



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<sup>12</sup>Chisolm, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup>Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, May 11, 1840, n. p.

<sup>14</sup>The Weekly Courier and Journal, May 16, 1840, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup>The original of the unpublished diary is at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph B. Stratton, Memorial of a Quarter-Century's Pastorate: A Sermon Published on the Sabbaths (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1869), p. 40.

<sup>17</sup>Chisolm, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup>Stratton, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup>Chisolm, photographic insets, n. p.

<sup>20</sup>Chisolm, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup>Chisolm, pp. 85-86.

9 - MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Ingraham, Joseph. Holt. The South-West. By a Yankee. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835.

McGehee, Mildred. "Levi Weeks: Early Nineteenth Century Architect." Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1975.

Natchez, Miss. Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Daily Gazette. May 11, 1840.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Weekly Courier and Journal. May 16, 1840.

Stratton, Joseph Buck. Memorial of a Quarter-Century's Pastorate: A Sermon Published on the Sabbaths. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1869.

Tooley, James. A print of the original sketch. Natchez Historical Society, Coyle House, Natchez, Miss.

