### National Register of Historic Places Inventory -- Nomination Form

#### See instructions in how to complete national register forms

**TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**

### Name

**Historic**
First Baptist Church

**And/or Common**
Same

### Location

**Street & Number**
Oak and Woodfin streets

**City, Town**
Asheville

**State**
North Carolina

**Vicinity of**
__NOT FOR PUBLICATION__

**Congressional District**
11th

**Code**
__UNOCCUPIED__

**County**
Buncombe

**Code**
021

### Classification

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Present Use</th>
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### Owner of Property

**Name**
First Baptist Church c/o Dr. Cecil E. Sherman, pastor

**Street & Number**
Oak and Woodfin streets

**City, Town**
Asheville

**State**
North Carolina

**Vicinity of**
__NOT FOR PUBLICATION__

**County**
Buncombe

**Code**
021

### Location of Legal Description

**Courthouse, Registry of Deeds, etc.**
Buncombe County Courthouse

**Street & Number**
__NOT FOR PUBLICATION__

**City, Town**
Asheville

**State**
North Carolina

### Representation in existing surveys

**Type**

**Date**

**Federal State County Local**

**Survey Program**

**City, Town**

**State**
The First Baptist Church of Asheville, a two-story domed, polygonal structure, is
an unorthodox marriage of a monumental, Classical Beaux-Arts form (rather than style).
with Art-Deco and highly individualistic detail. It is built of tan pressed brick laid in
mechanical bond. The vestibule, a giant return, one bay deep and three wide, breaks
out of the polygonal auditorium along the main (north) facade. Brick pilasters at
either end of the facade frame the pyramidal composition of the monumental triple
entrance. The flanking doors are three-fourths the height of the central entrance.
Each entrance is a double-leaf door with square decorative panels. A raised beveled
star fills most of the space of each square while small chamfered cubes fill each
corner. Above each entrance is a marbelized Greek cross with polygonal apses framed
by headers laid in a diamond pattern. Vertical bands of brick in which alternate
bricks are recessed, ornament either side. The bands are flanked by rows of headers.
Above the Greek cross over the higher center portal, which is correspondingly higher
than the lateral ones, is a stylized pediment of molded brick. The three panels as
well as the three doors are framed by stack bonded brick laid in stretchers and soldiers.

The entrance facade is emphasized by a colossal hatchastyle portico. Its shallow,
coffer ceiling is supported by slender brick piers which rest on entry steps of pink
Georgia marble. The piers are laid in an ornamental variation of mechanical bond.

The capital zone of the piers are, on each face, decorative bands consisting of two
vertical rows of smooth bricks and neck moldings. At the top of each pier is a
molded, terra cotta cap. The entablature of the portico consists of an architrave of
a highly plastic molding inscribed with a repetitive pattern of simple abstract figures;

a frieze with a rectangular stone slab incised with the name of the church in block
letters, flanked by Greek cross panels identical to those amounting the entrance
doors; and the cornice, a recapitulation of the architrave molding. Over the portico
the cornice, breaking upward in a shallow frontispiece, forms a vestigial pediment.

The entablature continues around the main body of the building, the frieze of
which is decorated with square stone plaques alternating with Greek crosses set in
molded brick frames.

Above the cornice the massive, slightly belcast dome rises ninety feet high above
grade spanning the building's ninety-foot diameter. The steel ribs of the dome are
clad with polychromed terra cotta tile webbing. The colors are sharply graded, rising
from purple and rust at the base, through a middle belt of rust and ochre to a striated
green around the circumference of the foot of the tall, octagonal, copper cupola. The
cupola rests on a heavy, molded base. Slender columns without bases or capitals support
a tall, peaked roof, and feature a stylized feather motif favored by Douglas Ellington.

The church is entered through a handsome vestibule. Along the southern wall of
the vestibule are matching closed-string half-turn staircases with windows, creating
a spiral effect. The closed balustrades are pierced by stylized floral motifs.

A triple double doors, matching the three entrance double doors, are set in a continuous wooded architrave
with simple panelled webbing. Crisp, deeply cut, carved panels such panels combine
with a banner of crosses.
The First Baptist Church of Asheville, built during the years 1925-1927, is a monumental, polygonal domed building that is one of the city’s most prominent landmarks not only by virtue of its considerable size and importance to the religious life of the community, but also by its curious and extraordinary architectural quality. Douglas D. Ellington, its architect, who also designed other important Asheville landmarks, applied to a traditional, classical form his highly individualistic, often bizarre, ornamental and polychromatic version of the Art Deco style.

The First Baptist Church of Asheville, completed in 1927, is that congregation’s fourth building. The church is believed to have been founded February 28, 1829, when four early settlers of Buncombe County met for a religious service. According to local tradition, the first church building was dedicated in 1832, but financial problems forced the trustees to sell it for $20 in 1859. For about the next ten years, Asheville’s Baptists met in the Buncombe County Courthouse or in quarters borrowed from the town’s Presbyterian or Methodist congregations. By about 1860 the Baptist congregation, numbering about twenty-nine, had completed the basement of a new meetinghouse; by May, 1871, the entire structure had been completed and dedicated. This building was designed and built by the Asheville firm of Clayton and Shuckelford.

The decade of the 1890s was a boom time for Asheville. Likewise, the membership of the First Baptist Church increased substantially; between 1874 and 1890 it rose from about thirty-seven to 500. In June, 1892, the congregation’s third building was dedicated at the corner of Spruce and College streets. (Its 1871 building was conveyed to a local Jewish congregation, which re-named it Temple Beth- ba Tephila. The building survives today in that function.) For the next three decades the congregation met in this building. By the early 1920s the church’s membership had grown to about 1,500 and a portion of the 1892 building had been condemned as unsafe. An Asheville newspaper reported in 1922 that “church authorities are faced with the need of larger quarters.”

The present church was constructed between 1925 and 1927 at the southeast corner of Oak and Woodfin streets. It was designed by Douglas D. Ellington, an architect born in Clayton, North Carolina, on June 26, 1886. Ellington was educated at Randolph-Macon College, Breslau Institute, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. While in Paris he became the first southerner to win the Prix de Rome, and the only American at that time to be awarded the Prix de Rome. His measured drawing of the eleventh century Church of St. Trophime at Arles, France, has been cited by experts as the finest such execution of that structure in existence. He was also one of the first prize winners in the worldwide Christopher Columbus Memorial Competition, in which more than a thousand architects competed. He served for a time as professor of architecture at Pratt Institute, Columbia University,
The auditorium is a single grand space which fills the main body of the church, and rises "to a height equal to five stories," according to the dedication booklet description. It has five aisles and four blocks of curved chestnut seats. Cantilevered balconies, partially supported by square-in-section posts, line the polygonal walls of the church from the rear to the sanctuary.

During the extensive church renovation of 1935, remodeling considerably altered the southern end, replaced the window glazing and lighting fixtures, altered the color scheme, and added the elaborate decorative panels concealing television facilities at the base of the dome. The panels, new chestnut paneling in the sanctuary, pews, and most of the other added fixtures are intended to continue the architect's decorative scheme, with angular elements in the Art Deco spirit, including architect Ellington's beloved stylized feather motif.

Of the original ceiling decoration, the frieze, cornice, and molding remain. The frieze consists of flat rectangular molded panels interrupted by raised diamond-shaped panels and roundels. Also original are the ornamental bands decorating the vertical edges of fenestration and panels of the southern walls. They repeat the architrave decoration in the vestibule. Other original elements include the elaborate geometric grillwork panels behind the choir, featuring Ellington's feather motif, and other wall panels framed by geometric bands.

Attached to the rear of the church is an asymmetrical grouping of dependent facilities, including a chapel, nursery, library, classroom, and offices, all of which are meant to harmonize with the church proper. Both the library (to the east) and the chapel complex (to the southwest) are two-and-one-half story hipped roofed brick buildings which flank and frame the church—and are original. While of little intrinsic architectural merit, the various auxiliary buildings serve as needed anchors for the church which is isolated from neighboring buildings by parking lots and major highways.
and Carnegie Institute of Technology, and was also noted for his talents as a watercolorist. His first important work in the South was for old St. Paul's Church in Richmond, Virginia.

According to his obituary in the Asheville Citizen-Times, Ellington first came to Asheville in the 1920s. In 1926 he purchased a three-acre tract of land in Chunn's Cove upon which he built his home. (This house was later selected by House Beautiful Magazine as one of the fifty most artistic and interesting residences in North America.) Among the buildings he designed for Asheville were the Lee Edwards High School, the Asheville City Building, Biltmore Hospital (which he later redesigned as the home office of the Imperial Life Insurance Company), the S & H Cafeteria Building, and the Herriman Avenue Fire Station (all of which are still standing), and a large number of residences. In addition, he designed the model town of Greenbelt, Maryland, and restored the Dock Street Theater in Charleston, South Carolina. Beginning in 1937, he is said to have spent a good deal of his time in Charleston, where he was involved in construction and restoration projects. He was active in a number of professional organizations and his practice extended throughout the eastern seaboard. Ellington died at his home near Asheville on August 27, 1960.

The present First Baptist Church consists of an octagonal main auditorium capable of seating 2,000, surrounded by four "educational" rooms together capable of seating an additional 3,000. Altogether there are 101 rooms in the one-million-cubic-foot structure. The cost of the site, building, and equipment was approximately $35,000. The design of the church was described at the time of its dedication as "one of originality, expressing elegant simplicity and practicability as well as beauty and durability." Specifically cited as "a feat in engineering" is the great dome of the structure's main building. Built by the Miller Engineering Corporation of Washington, D.C., Norfolk, Virginia, and Asheville (the same contractor that collaborated with Douglas Ellington on the Asheville City Building), the dome was described as the only one of its kind and execution:

The steel and nail crete combine to make it a unit which rests like an inverted bowl on the octagonal walls of the auditorium. The form is similar to the dome of the Cathedral of Florence, Italy. This type of dome is self-contained, all stresses revolving in itself and carried vertically to the supporting walls.

When the church had been completed, so the story goes, some of its members expressed doubts that the main auditorium could ever be filled. These doubts were soon dispelled, however. By 1951 the membership numbered 7,720, making the First Baptist Church by far Asheville's largest congregation. It was joyfully reported in 1954 that "in the building which some said 'we can't used for 30 years,' classes were meeting in the kitchen."


**MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Asheville Citizen. "Asheville and Buncombe County Churches Have 45,000 Members and Property Valued at $7,515,393," August 18, 1951 [from clipping file, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill].


Buncombe County Records, Buncombe County Courthouse, Asheville, North Carolina (Subgroups: Deeds).

**GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

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**VERTICAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

**LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES**

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**PREPARED BY**

- Research by Robert Tophill, survey specialist; architectural description by Mary Alice Hinton and McKeen Smith, consultants.

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**STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION**

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

- National: ______
- State: ______
- Local: ______

(As required by the State Historic Preservation Office and the National Park Service.)

**STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION**

[Signature]

**DATE:** 5 April 1976
Buncombe County Records, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina
(Subgroups: Deeds)
Pennell, George. "History Repeats Itself," in Pastor's Tenth Anniversary & SANCTUARY
DEDICATION, January 3, 1954: First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C; Asheville.
Ramsey, Gertrude. "First Baptist Church To Hold Three-Day Victory Celebration,"
Asheville Citizen-Times, December 31, 1950.
Sendley, Forster A. A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina. Asheville: Advocate
Printing Co., 2 volumes, 1930.
Tove, Elma, comp. and ed. Dedication of the First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C.
Asheville.
First Baptist Church
Oak and Woodfin streets
Asheville, North Carolina

UTM Reference:
17/359800/3940380