

First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara
Southeast corner of 6th and Maple Streets
Niobrara
Knox County
Nebraska

HABS No. NE-26

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NEB,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NE-26

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF NIOBRARA

- Location: Southeast corner of 6th Avenue and Maple Street, Niobrara, Knox County, Nebraska.
- USGS Niobrara Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14.579440.4733640.
- Present Owner: United States of America (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District).
- Present Use: Vacant, scheduled to be demolished. (Moved to the third townsite of Niobrara after this documentation was written in 1977.)
- Significance: The Presbyterian Church, built in 1882, was the first church to be constructed in what was then the "new" townsite of Niobrara (established 1881). The congregation itself is believed to be the oldest ecclesiastical organization in the town. It is, in addition, the only parish established in the nineteenth century that has continued to remain strong in the Niobrara community. Architecturally, the church is an adaptation of a standard building plan and form of similar churches in Nebraska.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The Niobrara Pioneer reported that the foundation of the church was laid on January 27, 1882. Upon completion of its construction, the church was formally dedicated in July 1882.
2. Architect: George G. and Benjamin D. Bayha were most likely the designers as well as builders.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The church is located on lots 11 and 12, block 4 of Starr's Addition in Niobrara. These lots were among the lands platted for public use by its original owner, James Starr, following the 1881 flood in the original waterfront town of Niobrara. In that year Henry E. Bonesteel was the first purchaser of the lots. On April 27, 1882, the lots were deeded to the trustees of the First Presbyterian Church by Bonesteel. It remained in parish ownership until its sale to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on October 10, 1974. The church was moved to the new third townsite of Niobrara after 1977.

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The following is the chain of ownership of Lots 11 and 12 block 4 of Starr's Addition from the Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska:

- 1881 Deed August 5, 1881, recorded August 5, 1881, Book D page 344, James Starr to Henry Bonesteel. For consideration of \$600 for numerous lots including lots 11 and 12
- 1882 Deed April 27, 1882, recorded April 29, 1882, Book D Page 575, Henry Bonesteel to Trustees of the First Presbyterian Church. For consideration of \$1.00 for lots 11 and 12
- 1882 Mortgage May 2, 1882, recorded May 30, 1882, Book B Page 358, First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara to Board of Church Election Fund of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of U.S.A. For consideration of \$700 (Release never recorded)
- 1905 Mechanics Lien October 15, 1905, recorded October 18, 1905, Book 4 Page 151, First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara to Updike Lumber and Coal Company. Lien for \$244.78 for construction of manse (Release June 15, 1906, recorded June 21, 1906, Book 4 Page 224)
- 1906 Mortgage May 7, 1906, recorded May 8, 1906, Book 18 Page 189, First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara to The Board of Church Election Fund of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. For consideration of \$350 plus interest (Release June 1, 1909, recorded June 9, 1909, Book 23 Page 218)
- 1926 Mortgage May 12, 1926, recorded May 22, 1926, Book 51 Page 148, First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara to The Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. of New York City. For consideration of \$500 with no interest (Release July 15, 1947, recorded July 19, 1947, Book 72 Page 491)
- 1957 Deed January 2, 1957, recorded February 20, 1957, Book 81 Page 140, First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara to First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara, Inc. For the consideration of \$1.00

- 1962 Easement April 14, 1962, recorded April 16, 1962, Book 20 Page 135, Benjamin M. Thompson and wife to First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara. For consideration of \$1.00 for an easement over the north 5' of the east 75' of lot 10 in block 4 for purpose of access to exterior of building upon lands of granite for maintenance and upkeep
- 1962 Mortgage June 16, 1962, recorded June 18, 1962, Book 82 Page 262, First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara to Bank of Niobrara. For consideration of \$9,000 and 5% interest, plus taxes (Release October 18, 1974, recorded October 18, 1974, Book 92 Page 714)
- 1974 Deed October 7, 1974, recorded October 11, 1974, Book 96 Page 375, First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. For consideration of \$52,000
- 1974 Resolution July 8, 1974, recorded October 11, 1974, Book 25 Page 229 Discussion of sale of property with church retaining salvage rights to buildings.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: George G. and Benjamin D. Bayha, according to Niobrara Tribune dated January 13, 1882, were the builders of the church. Reuben Cash was also named as the builder in the Niobrara Centennial 1856-1956.
5. Original plan and construction: After the contract for the First Presbyterian Church of Niobrara was awarded to the Bayha Brothers in January 1882, construction of this proposed 34 x 56', approximately \$2,500 structure began immediately. This information is from the Niobrara Pioneer dated January 13, 1882. The dimensions indicated are slightly larger than those of the existing structure. An article appearing in the Niobrara Pioneer, dated April 7, 1882, reported:

"The new Presbyterian Church building is nearing completion and begins to look neat. It will be heated by a furnace, handsomely seated and ring a bell."

On June 30, 1882, the Pioneer reported:

"The Presbyterian Church will be dedicated next Sunday morning. The church is one of the finest in Nebraska and a credit to our town. The church will have one of the finest bells in the state."

6. Alterations and additions: A mechanic's lien filed October 18, 1905 by the Updike Lumber and Coal Company for the "Materials for construction of a manse" helps us to date the addition of the parish house to the east of the structure as well as giving us a relative idea of the date of the photocopy (included in Sources of Information, Old views) capturing the church in the polychromatic Victorian splendor.

The church has since been painted, eliminating most of the decorative elements achieved by the contrasting colors. Other decorative detailing, such as a small triangular feature on the bell tower roof, visible in the early view of the church, has been slowly phased out over the years.

Major renovations occurred in the 1960s with most alterations occurring on the interior. The interior was "repaired and redecorated and all all new pulpit furniture installed" (Niobrara Centennial, 1856-1956, page 23). The educational wing was added to the east side of the church, behind the manse, at this time, including a pastor's office, kitchen and fellowship hall.

Evidence of the use of flathead cut nails in the decorative exterior vertical tongue-and-groove band and wire nails in the clapboard areas indicates the possibility of a portion of the original fabric still remaining with only replacement of the clapboarding over the years.

The manse was removed during the winter of 1976-1977 and the educational wing and the original stained glass windows were integrated into the plan of the new church now under construction at the new townsite (1976). The stained glass window on the right side of the north (front) elevation is composed of irregularly shaped patterns on the upper and lower panes. This oddity is a result of the replacement of part of the window from a rear vestry window after the front pane was damaged by a hail storm.

B. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photocopy of the then multi-colored church and manse, date unknown. Included in the HABS collection.
2. Bibliography:
 - a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Register of Deeds, Knox County Courthouse, Center, Nebraska.

Interviews:

Interview with the pastor of the Church, July 14, 1977, information regarding the stained glass windows.

Richard I. Ortega, Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District Office, August 17, 1977, discovery of flathead cut nails on exterior of structure.

Mrs. Marie Schwach, Niobrara resident, early photograph of church.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Andreas, A. T. History of the State of Nebraska, Vol. II Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882.

Niobrara Bicentennial Committee. Niobrara Centennial 1856-1956 (updated 1976). Niobrara, Nebraska: Verdigre Eagle, 1976.

Niobrara Pioneer. Newspaper articles, January 13, 1882, April 7, 1882, June 30, 1882.

Determination of eligibility information, prepared by the Nebraska State Historical Society for submission to the National Register of Historic Places, June 1976.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:

The church records were unavailable during the period of research but exist and may reveal additional information on the history of the church.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The church is an adaptation of a standard building plan and form of similar churches in Nebraska. Typical architectural characteristics include the use of a central entrance belfry with a steep hip roof and Gothic Revival elements. During the Victorian times the exterior of the church had a painted polychromatic style.
2. Condition of fabric: The condition of the building ranges from good to excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The one-story church measures 28' (three bays) x 56' and is rectangular in shape.
2. Foundations: The church sits on a fieldstone rubble foundation.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: White painted horizontal clapboards at the vertical band line and at the areas above the foundation level run around the entire structure. The vertical band consists of wood tongue-and-groove boards. As previously mentioned, these walls were formerly painted in a polychromatic fashion.
4. Structural system, framing: The church is supported by wood frame walls.
5. Porches and stoops: A bracketed hood with inset trefoil design shelters the double-door front entrance. Below it is a three-step, poured cement stoop with wrought iron side railings which appear to be a later addition.
6. Chimneys: One chimney of cream-colored brick is found on the east side of the roof toward the rear of the structure.
7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Three-panel front double doors on the north provide access to the worship area. The earlier view (see Sources of Information, Old views) reflects the stiles and rails of the doors painted in a dark contrasting color although they are now all white.

The west side has a set of modern hollow core double doors which provide entrance to the vestry.

- b. Windows: Three basic patterns are employed in the stained glass windows: 1) square panes 2) intersecting diamonds and 3) large half circles. All patterns are defined by the leading of the windows and floral and religious scenes are in some cases combined with these basic patterns. The borders are composed of a narrow arch of rectangular pieces and an outer band of either square or a half circle pattern. Vestry windows are of clear glass. Each window is surrounded by wide round-arch moldings. Storm windows or screens are wood frame and are set on the outside window framing, flush with exterior walls.

A circular opening is located on the second stage of the belfry. Its large clear glass pane has been divided into four lights by intersecting, diagonal mullions.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: A high steep-pitched hip roof of asphalt shingling shelters the church. Metal flashing covers all joints and ridge strip with spherical metal balls at each end of the ridge line.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Solid quarter round brackets with a simple vertical tongue-and-groove band are found along the cornice line of the church, approximately one-and-a-half to two feet apart, supporting an eight to ten inch overhang.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: A three-stage bell tower is centrally located and crowned by a steep pitched flared end roof and a wooden finial at its peak.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The church is entered through a small vestibule leading into the main worship area. A center aisle, running the length of the room to an elevated altar, is lined with simple wooden pews on either side. The elevated area is in two sections, consisting of a lower level to the left for a small choir and the altar centrally located on the upper level. A right side doorway on the south wall leads into an approximately 13' x 28' vestry area. Double doors on the west wall provide and exit from the rear. A door on the east wall, at one time a window, provided entrance to the educational wing.
2. Flooring: The entire church floor has been covered with linoleum tile squares (brown in the worship area, gray in the vestry).
3. Wall and ceiling finish: Green painted plaster side walls and white ceilings are found in the worship area. Wood paneling is found in the vestry area. The baseboards, chair rail and window moldings are simple in design and are painted pale green to match the walls. The ceiling in the worship area is hipped at the north end and runs into a flat south wall between the altar and vestry.

4. Doorways and doors: All interior doors are modern hollow core doors.
5. Decorative features and trim: Any original decorative features have been removed as a result of previous renovations. A simple wooden cross hangs on the south wall behind the altar. The brightly colored stained glass windows, to be incorporated into the new church (1977), serve as the dominating decorative interior feature in the church.
6. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: A modern gas heating unit stands in the northeast corner of the rear room. A ground level tank is at the rear of the structure.
 - b. Lighting: Incandescent lights are located at the exterior entryways as well as throughout the interior. Suspended incandescent glass globe fixtures are in the main church area.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church faces north standing on the southeast corner of Maple Street and Sixth Avenue.
2. Landscape: The church is surrounded by American Elm trees to the right of the front entrance.
3. Outbuildings: A manse originally stood to the east of the church. It was built at the turn of the century and was just recently demolished (1976-1977).

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Historic American Buildings
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Summer 1977
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Summer 1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Niobrara project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in co-operation with the citizens of the Village of Niobrara. The project was funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District, in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of the Gavins Point Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, chief of HABS, the project was completed in the HABS Field Office in Niobrara, Nebraska during the summer of 1977 by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania), project historian Kathryn A. Burns (George Washington University), team foreman Larry Jones (Texas Tech University) and student architects Peter Darlow (McGill University), Lisa Becker (Notre Dame University) and Darl Rastorfer (University of Pennsylvania). The written historical and architectural data was prepared by Kathryn Burns, and edited by Susan McCown, a historian in the HABS office in August 1979. One exterior photo was taken by Sam Amato in the fall of 1977.