

First Presbyterian Church
Southwest corner of Church and 19th Streets
Galveston
Galveston County
Texas

HABS No. TX-2106

HABS
TEX
84-GAW,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS NO. Tx-2106 22-

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Location: Church and 19th Streets (SW corner), Galveston, Galveston County, Texas.

Present Owner: First Presbyterian Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: An outstanding example of the Norman phase of the Romanesque Revival style, prevalent in this country in the second half of the nineteenth century, the building is architecturally distinguished both in its faithful and competent eclecticism and in its aesthetic merit. The architects, Jones and Baldwin, were designers of numerous notable buildings in the Memphis, Tennessee area. Clayton, the supervising architect, received his training in this office and later became Texas's outstanding nineteenth century architect. The Reverend Robert Franklin Bunting, an important pioneer Texas churchman, was instrumental in promoting the erection of this structure.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: Construction began in 1872; dedicated February, 1889. At some time in the early 1870s Reverend Robert Franklin Bunting initiated a drive to erect a majestic church house. The church had met for some years in a small wood frame building which was considered no longer adequate for the growing congregation. Bunting, no doubt, pressed the issue for a new building and a building committee was formed with James Sorely as chairman. A subscription list was compiled and private solicitations were made. The ladies of the church also contributed funds which were raised by holding weekly musical events, socials and teas. By August, 1872, the plans for the building had been accepted and the old frame church building was removed. Flake's Daily Bulletin noted that the "brick for laying the foundations and walls of the new Presbyterian Church are being hauled and piled near their lot, corner of 19th and Church Streets. The work will soon be commenced."

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While the building material and funds were provided by late 1872 and construction began in October, the work progressed slowly. It was not until March, 1875, that the "roofing" of the church was laid. In a special edition of the News, September 1, 1876, it was recorded that the "chapel of the Presbyterian Church" had been completed during the preceding several months.

Funds for the continued construction of the church were exhausted with the completion of the chapel building. Services were held there while the ladies of the church set out again to raise new funds. At one point the News related "The ladies of the Presbyterian Church gave their regular weekly ice-cream sociable at the parlors of their church last evening. These entertainments are devised as a means to aid in adding to the building fund."

The debt against the building of \$15, 000 was finally lifted in 1883. Three years later the ladies of the church "undertook to complete the outside of the building, a work that was finished by the fall of that year." In October, 1887, the work of finishing the interior and "fitting up everything for occupancy" began and by the spring of 1888 a church canvass secured the needed funds.

"When completed and dedicated, the church will have cost between \$80,000 and \$90,000, the whole being the joint work of Reverend Dr. Bunting, who started the ball moving and laid the foundation and Dr. Scott who took up the work . . . and carried it to a successful completion." The church was dedicated on Sunday, February 26, 1889.

2. Architects:

The plans and specifications were prepared by the firm of Jones and Baldwin, Architects, Memphis, Tennessee, and were to be carried out under the supervision of Nicholas J. Clayton. Clayton had worked in this office just before and after the Civil War and received his architectural training there. The firm had an extensive practice and designed a number of imposing buildings in the Memphis area. Clayton remained in Galveston and became one of the state's outstanding 19th century architects.

The completion of the exterior of the church in the fall of 1886 at a cost of \$8,500 was supervised by Nicholas Clayton. Clayton, however, was not commissioned to finish the interior. "The work of preparing designs for the interior was given to George E. Dickey of Houston and all that has been done was in accordance with plans submitted by him and accepted by the building committee."

3. Builder, contractor, supplier:

James Sorely, as chairman of the Building Committee, signed a contract with John Parry, local builder, that required Parry to "furnish all the materials and labor of every kind . . . necessary to execute and finish complete in every respect and so to erect and finish complete the brick work of the First Presbyterian Church . . ." at the rate of \$24 per thousand bricks laid.

The contract with Parry stipulated that construction was to begin "on or before the 31st day of October" and the foundations were commenced on that date.

While Parry continued erecting the brickwork, the Building Committee executed on December 14 a contract with W. G. Crookshank, a local carpenter, to perform all of the required carpenter work for the sum of \$2,700.50. Unfortunately, Crookshank was able to complete only \$785 worth of the work before he died and work on the church was suspended. Finally on April 3, 1874, a new contract was signed with N.S. Sabell and on April 15 the News reported that work had resumed on the church, the "new building designed by E.C. Jones of Memphis. It is to be of the Norman style of architecture and is being superintended by Mr. Clayton."

4. Original plan and construction:

A local paper noted on November 1 that "We observed yesterday, the workmen preparing the foundation for the new Presbyterian Church on the old site, corner of Church and 19th Streets. We had previously examined the plans which were received some weeks ago from Jones and Baldwin, architects, Memphis, and are glad now to chronicle the beginning of this handsome structure. It is to be built of brick and the exterior stuccoed to resemble sandstone. The principal front will be on Nineteenth Street and the audience room will extend west on Church Street about ninety feet and connect with the chapel which fronts on Church Street. The Church will be a single story of thirty-five feet without galleries. The Chapel presenting on the outside the same height as the Church will be two stories, the lower for Sunday School, the upper for minister's study, parlor, classrooms, etc. On the front northeast corner will be an auxiliary tower eighty feet in height. Between the towers, the principal entrance by three wide doors opens into a vestibule or lobby ten feet wide from which the inner doors give entrance to the audience room over the lobby. A small gallery extends between the towers.

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The interior is to be finished in the new style of paneled roof, scrolls over the windows and points between the windows - all done in frescoes on a plain surface. The pews will have the ends and rails of black walnut and will seat from seven hundred to eight hundred persons. One new feature we noticed which we think an improvement, the choir and organ will be at the same end of the room as the pulpit and about ten or twelve feet to the right. This will bring the choir in front of the congregation instead of behind them; the object being to secure more accord between the choir and the people and promote congregational singing."

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

On November 25, 1868, the Reverend Robert Franklin Bunting, D.D., arrived in Galveston to assume the duties of pastor for the First Presbyterian Church. Bunting had just completed three years of service as pastor of the Nashville Presbyterian Church, Tennessee, in which he had developed one of the foremost congregations in the Presbyterian Southern Assembly. On his arrival in Galveston, Bunting was faced with another great task, in attempting to build a strong church during the depressive years following the Civil War and the ensuing period of Reconstruction.

Bunting was not a stranger to Texas as he had served his church in this state prior to the Civil War. Following his graduation from the Presbyterian Theological Seminary at Princeton, New Jersey, in the spring of 1852, Bunting, a native Pennsylvanian, was intrigued with the prospect of going to Texas and at his request was ordained "Evangelist to Texas" in November, 1852. He immediately set out for Texas, arriving in Houston in December. From there, with horse and full saddlebags "equipped after the manner of the country," he journeyed to various parts of the state before settling in the central Texas town of La Grange. His work there was successful and in three years he could claim a self-sustaining congregation of about one hundred members and a new church building finished.

Early in 1856 Bunting moved to San Antonio to become pastor of a congregation of fourteen members with an unfinished adobe for a church. By the spring of 1861 he had transformed that situation into the largest Presbyterian organization in the state and had erected a stone church building worth \$15,000. During the Civil War Bunting served as chaplain for Terry's Texas Rangers in their Tennessee campaign. Following the war he served a small church in Tennessee before going to Nashville. In 1868 he returned to Texas to undertake the task of renewing the Galveston First Presbyterian Church.

Once in Galveston, Bunting shortly unified and enlarged the membership. Within two years the proposed erection of a new church was accepted.

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After seventeen years of fund raising and intermittent slowdowns in construction, the church was dedicated on Sunday February 26, 1889.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Building Contract: James Sorely and John Parry, October 29, 1872, Manuscript located in County Deed Record Book, Book 8, pp. 550-52, Galveston County Courthouse.

Building Contract: James Sorely and W.G. Crookshank, December 14, 1872. Manuscript located in County Deed Record Book, Book 13, pp. 134-136, Galveston County Courthouse.

Deed Records - First Presbyterian Church; Book 16, p. 232, Deed of Trust - First Presbyterian Church to F.M. Jack and M.F. Mott, lot 5, Block 379 with improvements and all the buildings; p. 235, Release from John Parry to First Presbyterian Church, lot 5, Block 379; p. 236, D.O. from W.S. Sabell. (also Book 13, p. 134)

"Electrified Business," May, 1940, Houston Lighting and Power Co., Galveston Division, Galveston, Texas.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Flakes Daily Bulletin, August 1, 1872
Galveston Tri Weekly News, September 1, 1872
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Galveston News, April 15, 1874
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Prepared by: John C. Garner, Jr.
Director
Galveston Architecture Inventory
August, 1967

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The building is a large stuccoed brick example of the Norman (Romanesque Revival) style of architecture. The front facade is flanked by towers and is divided by two buttresses into three bays. It is further divided into three horizontal sections, the upper one being the gable which is broken up by a series of colonetts supporting a corbel table.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is currently in good condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The large two story brick church measures 60' x 128'-6".
2. Foundations: Brick piers and grade beams.
3. Wall construction: The walls are brick stuccoed and struck to imitate ashlar construction. All door and window openings are splayed and are spanned by round arches. All openings have a molded hood, terminating in a Gothic molded label stop.
4. Structural system: The brick load bearing walls are reinforced with buttresses. The roof system is composed of trusses.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The major entrance is from 19th Street. Three arched openings are separated by stepped buttresses. Each opening has a wood double door, each door has four panels of diagonal beaded boards. The chapel entrance on Church Street has two such openings and pairs of doors.
 - b. Windows: Stained glass windows for the sanctuary building. Those in the Chapel are four-over-four light double-hung wood sash.

7. Roof: The sanctuary is covered by a gable roof and the roof over the Chapel is also a steep pitched gable. The north tower has a high pitched hipped roof while that on the south tower is a gable.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The sanctuary is one large free-span rectangular space, two stories in height. The entrance is set off by a shallow vestibule which is flanked by the square rooms formed by the towers. There is a seating balcony over the vestibule area. The chapel is now used for Sunday school and related church gatherings and has a vestibule on the Church Street side that opens into one large space. The floor above is divided into meeting rooms.
2. Stairway: A steep wooden stair is provided in the towers to permit access to the balcony of the sanctuary. The upper floor of the chapel is reached by a wooden stair in the vestibule space.
3. Floors: The original floors throughout were wood. At present the church sanctuary is fully carpeted and the floors in the Chapel have been covered with modern vinyl tile.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls throughout were originally plaster. In the sanctuary the window openings have molded labels and label stops above which is a continuous molded plaster string-course that repeats the arch pattern over the windows.

The ceiling of the sanctuary is dark stained beaded pine ceiling divided into square bays and having wood pendants and bosses. A dark stained pine dado repeats the texture and pattern of the ceiling.

5. Doors: Wood doors, six molded panels and four molded panels with transoms above.
6. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Lighting: The original light source was a large central oculus. In that this source provided an average of less than one foot candle of light. In 1940, ten new fixtures, designed by church member L.O. Sharp, were installed. These metal fixtures were constructed with 500 watt x-ray reflectors for general light and with amber colored glass sides, lighted by four 40-watt lamps, for a decorative effect, all of which provided an average of more than ten foot candles of illumination.

- b. Heating and Air Conditioning: Modern central unit.

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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Galveston Survey was jointly sponsored by the National Park Service, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation and the Galveston Historical Foundation Inc., and developed under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). The historical data was written by John C. Garner, Jr., acting as the Director of the Galveston Architecture Inventory. The written data was edited for transmittal to the Library of Congress in the summer of 1980 by Kent R. Newell of the HABS staff. The photographs were taken by Allen Stross in the summer of 1967.