

BLACK CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

Michael J. Margaglia  
Urban Planning 199-M  
Instructor - Richard Mattson  
12-20-88

URBANA FREE LIBRARY

The main focus of the material contained herein is about the architecture of black churches in the north end of Champaign, Illinois. An interesting topic? Yes, this is a very interesting topic. The main idea was to compile factual information on the architecture of churches located in the north end of Champaign, IL. This sounds straightforward enough doesn't it? This is a straightforward look and it is not the proper way to approach a subject of this nature.

The problem lies in the 'coldness' of this viewpoint. We just cannot look at the architecture of a black church, recite the facts, compare the designs, and expect to understand the information and conclusions based on the information fully. There is more to the architecture of the black church than building dimensions, contractors, architects and building dates. This important revelation was experienced by the writer during the compilation of information for this topic. The research stage brought a lot of interesting information into the open. The existence of this information cannot be ignored. Even though this new information wouldn't occur to some people as being applicable to the subject of Church architecture, it is applicable in this case.

The information mentioned deals with the people. The existence of the community and the congregation cannot be overlooked. The people are the lifeblood of the church.

The church needs the people and the people need the church.

It is the people that build the church. The economic situation of the congregation dictates what type of structure is used as their place of worship. The economic limits are set by a chosen group of knowledgeable and responsible persons. These people look at what they have to spend, how much can be acquired through a bank loan, and available building sites. Money decides the fate of church building. Money decides where the church will be built, the size and design of the building, and the materials that will be used in the structure. The people are directly associated with the architecture aspect of the church. This is a strange but true relationship that is logical and will no longer be overlooked. Examples of the important involvement of the church community will be given in the following material on the individual church buildings.

Before the individual churches are addressed, it is necessary to provide some background information on the subject of black church architecture. The background information comes from a book called Historic Black Resources, A Handbook for the Identification, Documentation, and Evaluation of Historic African-American Properties in Georgia. This work was written by Carole Merritt, edited by Carolyn S. Brooks, and put out by the Historic Preservation section

of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in 1984.

Our background information starts with the years following emancipation. Most blacks left the white congregations to start their own churches. The land on which these black churches were founded was sometimes given to the people by white churches or individuals. More often, however, black cooperative activities were required in the process of acquiring land and building a church.

"Churches founded by rural blacks in the late nineteenth century were usually simple one-room frame structures of rectangular shape, with gable roofs and little or no ornamentation or architectural detailing. Sometimes the church had a rectangular wooden steeple, a central tower mounted on the roof, or a tower at one or both of the front corners. Often these towers were later additions, as were front and rear extensions. The entrances of rural churches were usually centered. The interiors were often unplastered and unceiled." Of course there are exceptions to these descriptions, the typical rural black church is described but, architectural design depended on the needs and monetary resources of the congregation. The larger and more affluent the congregation, the higher the quality of the structure, and vice versa.

"The rural church site was large enough for a burial ground and outdoor social activities. It could also accommodate building expansion. When a new building was constructed, the older one often remained in use as a school, meeting house, or dining and fellowship hall. These original frame buildings, some of which still stand near the newer structures, are invaluable records of the church's early history."

Some background information of urban churches is appropriate at this point. Due to the high price tag put on land in cities, the amount of black church acreage was relatively small. "Moreover, the location of black churches was likely to change to accommodate urban development and settlement patterns. As black residents began to concentrate in sections outside the central area, so did the churches." A significant number of urban black churches do not occupy their original sites. "Many urban churches built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were very much like rural churches - simple, rectangular, frame buildings with few or no stylistic features. They were larger, however, and more likely to have a tower centered or to one side or, more typically, twin towers. Basements were more common than galleries. In accordance with the rural plan, the entrance of city churches was nearly always centered, opening directly into the sanctuary. Small churches expanded sometimes by building new exterior brick walls or adding a gallery. Churches

were often built in stages, a basement serving as the sanctuary until the main story could be built. Brick veneers were often applied in the 1940s or later." Here also we have more complex and elaborate exceptions to the general plan of late nineteenth and early twentieth century churches.

"Size, design, and building materials were not only indicators of the congregation's economic status but also measures of the leadership's ability to organize and sustain fund raising.

Now that a background in black church architecture has been presented, the material can now turn to the selected churches in the north end of Champaign, Illinois. The first church to be presented is Salem Baptist Church. This church was chosen to be included in this look at black church architecture because it has been a part of the community it serves for over 120 years, is structurally typical in design, and has a long architectural record.

Salem Baptist Church was organized as the Second Baptist Missionary Church in 1867 by Susan Franklin Johnson, Kitty Lee, T. J. Shores, J. W. Randolph and Martin Dandrage.

A lot on the corner of Fifth Street and Park Street in Champaign was purchased in 1869 and a frame building erected. This frame building burned, causing the membership to rent a place for worship. By 1887 the church

had purchased a lot on Clark Street, and erected a building there. The name was changed to Salem Baptist about 1900. The present church building, on the original site, is designed of simple, clean edged masses of red brick. In 1908, the cornerstone was laid while the church was being erected by S. L. Edwards P.C..

In 1911, the old seats were discarded and new pews installed. These pews were used until September, 1958. In 1917, the ceiling was lowered. In 1920, the church was remodeled and the lot in the rear of the church was purchased. A baptistry and some restrooms were also installed. The 1957 addition now stands on the lot which was purchased. In 1925, the front stairs were remodeled and the entrance was changed from the west to the south side, where it is now located, and an indebtedness of \$16,000.00 was paid. In April, 1938, a new heating plant was installed. In 1950, a mortgage burning service was held and the building fund was started for the church annex.

On May 27, 1957, the church officially voted to build the annex. A \$25,000.00 loan from the First Federal Loan and Savings Association was granted. A ground-breaking ceremony was held July 28, 1957. In August, 1957, the new addition was started. The original building, which included the auditorium, basement and balcony, was inadequate for

the congregation of about 400 persons. The two-story addition, which extends from the north end of the original building, will follow lines of the original building. Dimensions of the new wing are 48 by 46.8 feet. Estimated total cost of the program was set at about \$40,000.00, with Doyle Construction Co. as holder of the contract. The annex was almost completed by February, 1958, and consisted of a new basement, ten new class rooms, two new restrooms, baptismal pool, pastor's office and study, complete new modernized kitchen, banquet room, three storage closets, new light fixtures, one hundred steel folding chairs, new heating system, and two new entrances. The exterior of the church proper was tuck-pointed and sandblasted, complete new front entrance, cottage style windows, outside trim painted, and new outside oak doors. The inside was completely redecorated with new pews, pulpit furniture, communion table, seven deacon's chairs, and rubber tile floor. Just before the completion of the addition, building fund clubs were organized. The entire church was organized into three building fund clubs. \$5.00 and \$2.50 per month for adult members, and \$1.00 per month for the youth, with dues to be paid on the first Sunday of each month.

All of this information on Salem Baptist Church comes from the Fifty Years of Jubilee historical anniversary

booklet, that was published in 1958 by the Salem Baptist Church in Champaign, Illinois and a booklet on historical sites in Champaign, IL.

The next church structure that is portrayed is the St. Luke C.M.E. (Christian Methodist Episcopal) Church, located at 809 N. Fifth Street in Champaign. This structure was chosen because its design is of the typical 'twin tower' type. This design trait likens St. Luke's to Salem Baptist Church.

St. Luke C.M.E. was organized in 1909 and located on Eads Street in Urbana. In 1914 the group moved its headquarters to Fifth Street where the church is presently located.<sup>1</sup>

As part of a remodeling and enlargement project, a new front entrance, elevated choir loft, and enlargement of the worship area took place and was dedicated on August 19th, 1962, at 3 p.m., along with the new six-room Sunday School addition.<sup>2</sup>

The church building was constructed at St. Luke Tabernacle C.M.E. Church in 1914 by Reverend W. T. Whitsitt, according to the building's cornerstone.

---

<sup>1</sup>"49th Birthday of St. Lukes." Champaign-Urbana Courier, July 27, 1958, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>"C.M.E. Church To Dedicate." Champaign-Urbana Courier, August 9, 1962, p. 2.

In March of 1968 a fire, that started at the rear of the church, caused extensive damage to the structure. No clues as to what caused the blaze showed up as of March 27, 1968, and there was still no reason to assume that arson was responsible for the fire. "The city building inspector said our church is structurally sound," replied the Reverend A. W. Bishop, as plans for the shell of the church to be used as the basis for the rebuilding project continued. In the meantime, church rights were carried out in the basement of the church.<sup>1</sup>

The next church to be focused on is a church that is in a total different category from the churches already covered. This church is the New Freewill Church that is currently under construction at the southeast corner of Sixth and Grove Streets in Champaign. This church is being built by the Reverend King James Underwood. The Reverend Underwood explained, through an interview, exactly what his church is about and how he is constructing it.

The idea and basic plan of Reverend Underwood's church came to him in the form of a vision from God. The building is to be constructed in sections.

---

<sup>1</sup>"No Clues Found in C.M.E. Church Fire." Champaign-Urbana Courier, March 27, 1968, p. 1.

Problems that arise with building and starting your own church are bountiful. First you must acquire a name and an account for your church, this is done for the state and tax purposes. The second step is to acquire property on which to build the church and establish a parking area. Reverend Underwood found it difficult to find the owner of the land that will become the churches parking area. It took two years to acquire both properties (adjacent to each other), church site and parking area. The next step was to have plans drawn up from his vision. A friend of the Reverend's referred him to a local architect on University Avenue in Champaign. The architect for the church, the late Donald Doney, helped the reverend acquire the proper permits and covenant for the building and the land. The building is designed to accommodate 96 people. The Reverend is his own general contractor because he has been doing it for a while. Construction started in January of 1988. First stage plumbing (underground) was finished before the Reverend's brother poured the concrete slab floor. The exterior walls, roof and roof finishing came next. The roof is almost finished as of now. After the roof is trussed and shingled, the external walls can go up. The external walls consist of gypsum boards covered with black paper, then the brick mason can lay the bricks. Window installation and dry wall work will be done by the

reverend himself. Union sub-contractors will install the last phases of the plumbing, electrical wiring, heating and air conditioning systems. A steeple, a porch, and doors will finish off the building's exterior. A drop ceiling, finished interior walls and floor will finish the structure's interior by the end of 1989. This church is one man's mission to serve God.

This church building was chosen due to its freshness. This is the newest form of black church architecture in Champaign, as compared to the other churches in the north end. This is also the only church that I have found that has God as its designer. This makes the New Freewill Church a very special building indeed.

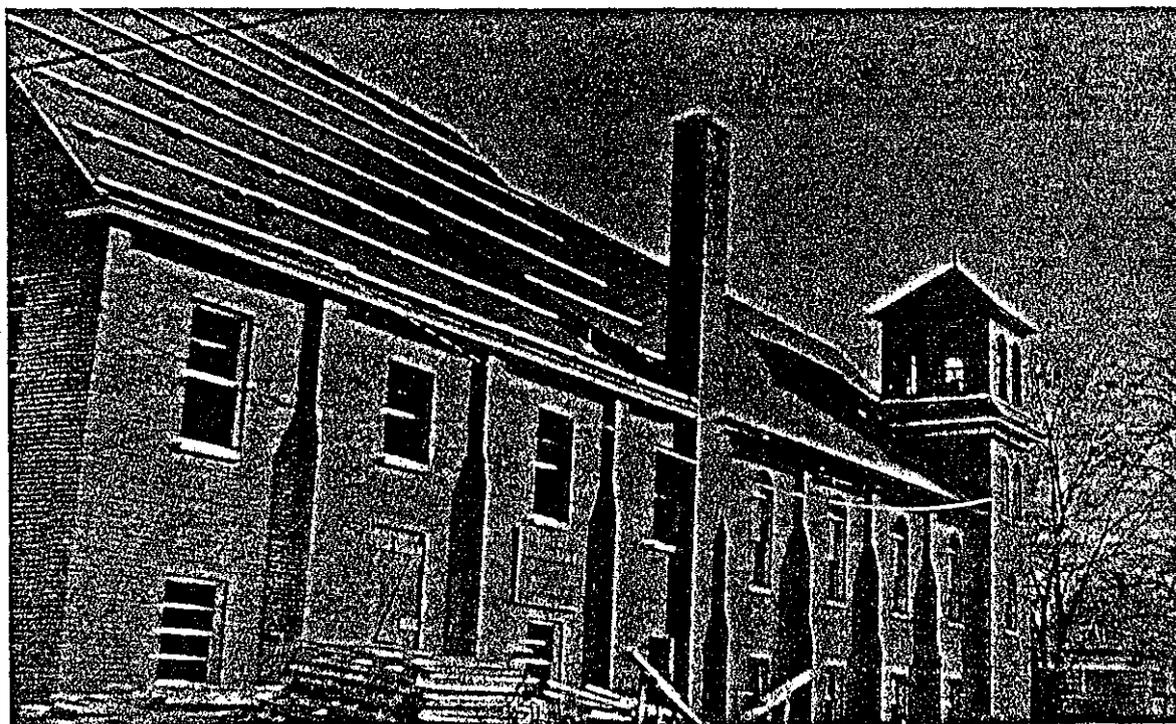
## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baker, Willis C., A Commemorative History of Champaign County, Il. 1833-1983, Illinois Heritage Association, 1984.
- "C.M.E. Church To Dedicate," Champaign-Urbana Courier, August 9, 1962, p. 2.
- "49th Birthday of St. Luke's," Champaign-Urbana Courier, July 27, 1958, p. 4.
- Merritt, Carole, Historic Black Resources, a handbook, for the Identification, Documentation, and Evaluation of Historic African-American Properties in Georgia, Historic Preservation Section - Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 1984.
- "No Clues Found in C.M.E. Church Fire," Champaign-Urbana Courier, March 27, 1968, p. 1.
- "Salem Baptist Church, Fifty Years of Jubilee," Fifty Years of Jubilee, 1908-1958, 1958.
- Underwood, Reverend King James, interview, 12-17-88.



CHURCH UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Salem Baptist Church

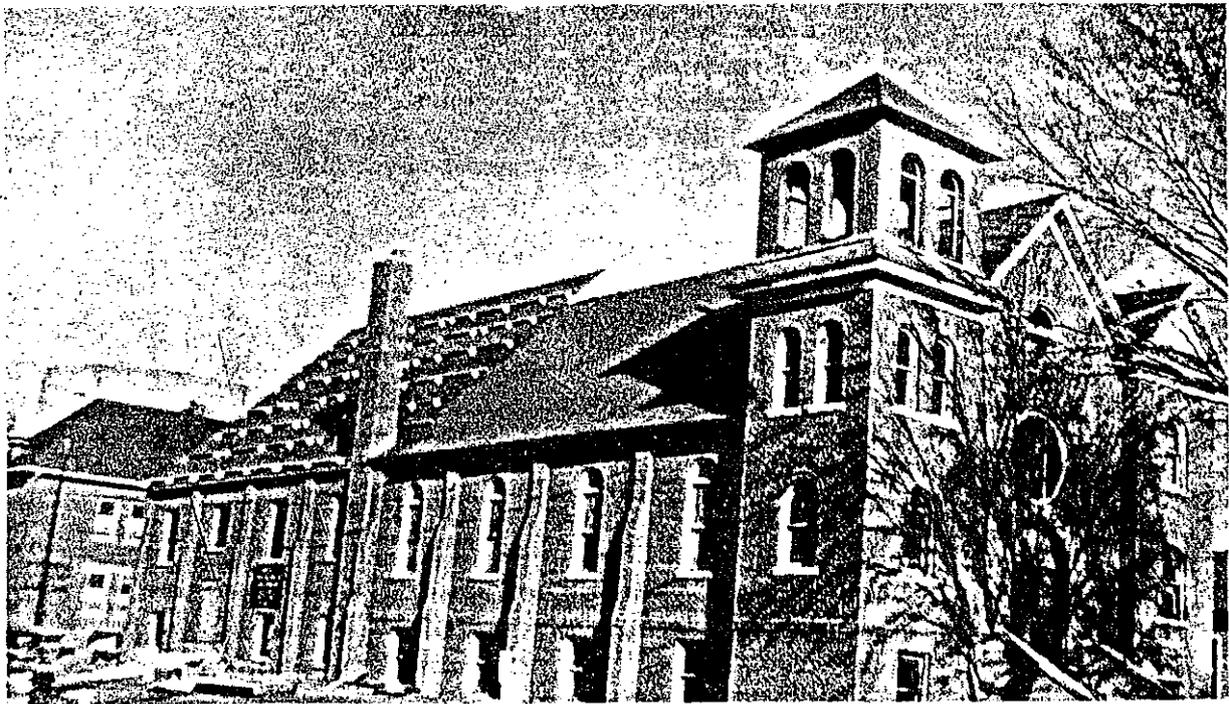


NEW ROOF - NO WINDOWS  
WEST SIDE LOOKING SOUTH



THE OLD FRONT PARK STREET

Salem Baptist Church



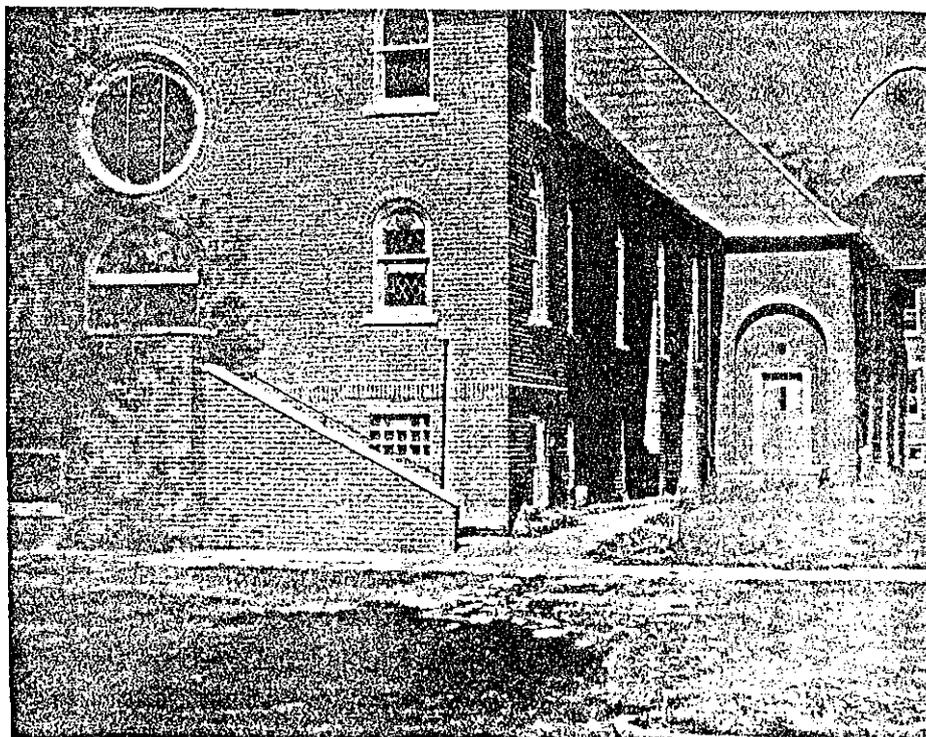
FIFTH STREET LOOKING NORTH



CORNERSTONE - 1908

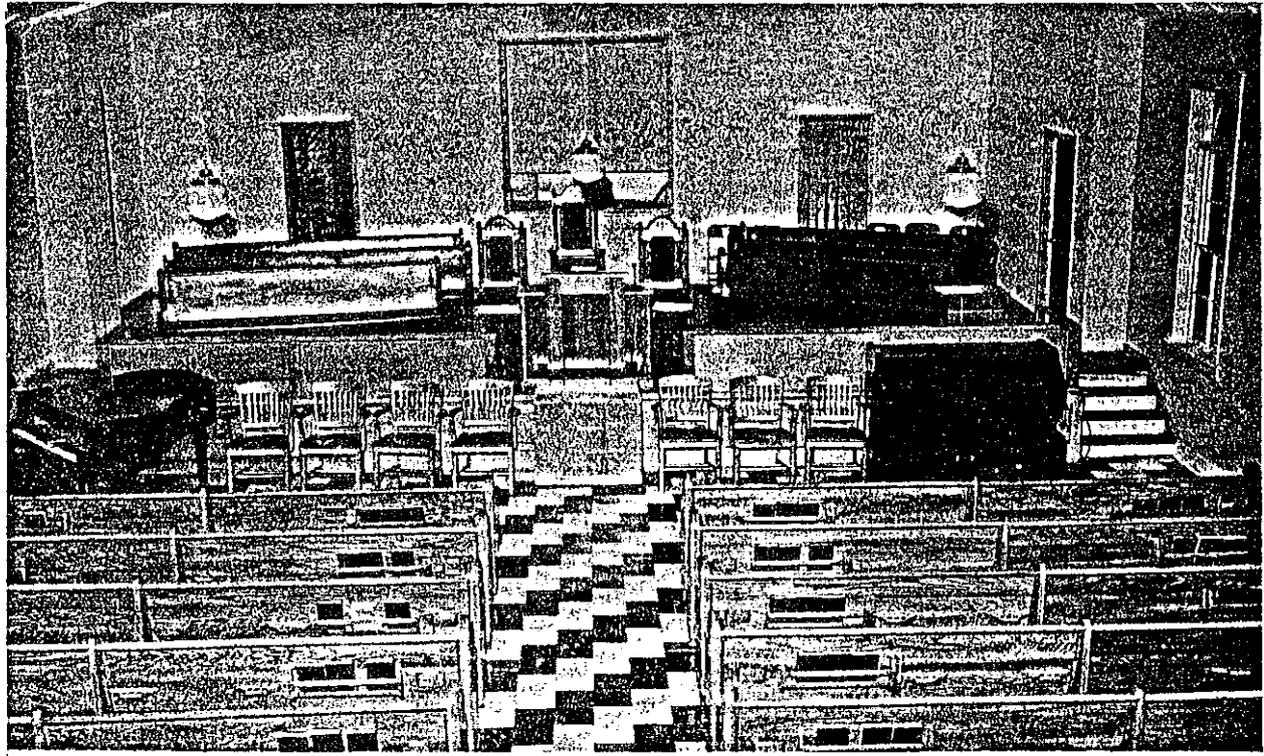
Trustees: Louis Brown, Job Harris, Pete Hawkins  
Rev. S. L. Edwards, Pastor  
Pictured is David Sayles

## Salem Baptist Church

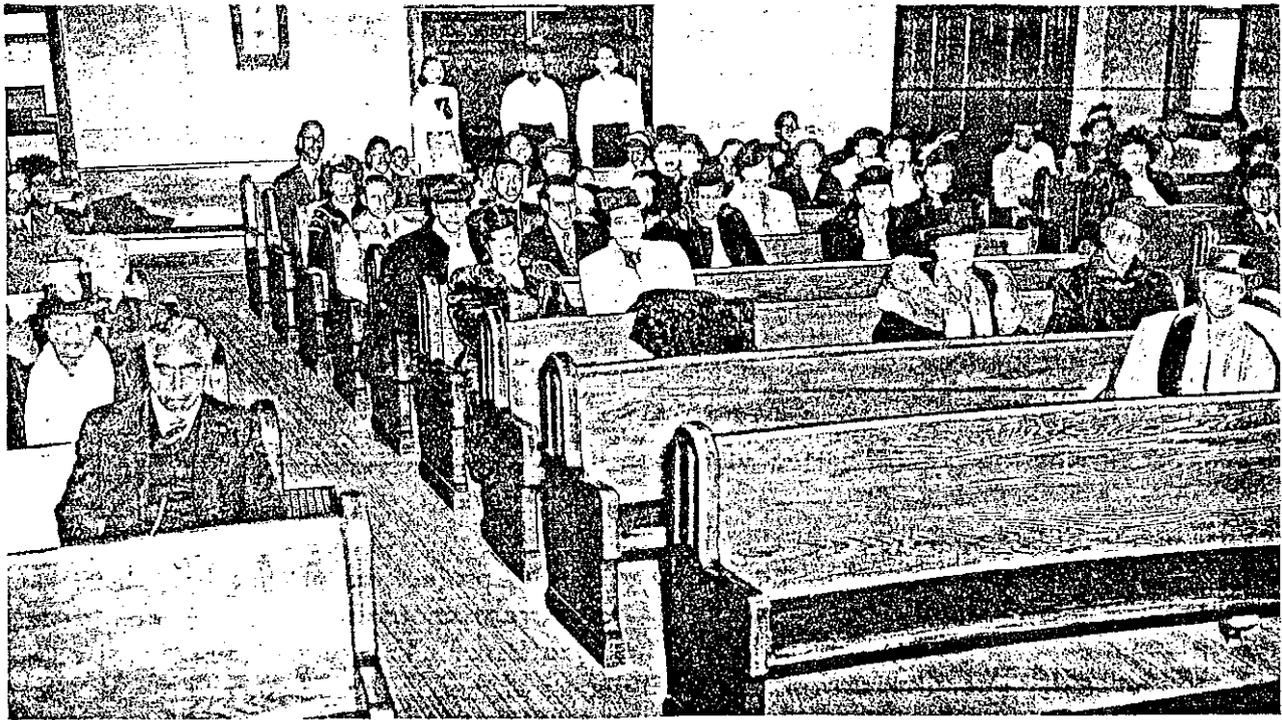


From The East

SALEM BAPTIST CHURCH



INTERIOR OF CHURCH



CONGREGATION IN THE LATE 40's

