

The First United Methodist Church stands within a block-sized parcel located near the edge of the small central business district of the Ouachita Parish community of West Monroe. A railroad tract borders one side of the property. The original portion of the building is a two-and-one-half story masonry church constructed in 1920 in the Colonial Revival style. An unstyled education wing, of masonry construction and two stories in height, was added between 1945 and 1950. Despite some alteration, the church retains its National Register eligibility.

The footprint of the original building resembles a "T". The wide leg of the "T" contains a partly above-ground basement with a large meeting space and, above the basement, an equally large auditorium. Although the latter reads as a two story building on the exterior, its interior reads as a tall one story space with a balcony. The T's cross member, two stories in height, contains an office and classrooms. The newer education annex stands several feet to the side of the auditorium and connects at the rear via a hyphen-like element. Each of its floors contains a series of rooms flanking a hallway.

The auditorium's facade is distinguished by a temple front reached by a wide bank of stairs. (Doors to the raised basement flank the staircase.) Fluted Corinthian columns forming five bays support an entablature which also wraps around the sides of the building. Above the entablature, a pedimented gable features a simple raking cornice. Within the gable, a vent is treated as an oculus. Behind the columns are three round arch doors outlined by bands of brick springing from concrete imposts. Additionally, the arches are surmounted by keystones. Two windows with Jack arches also open to the auditorium's lower level. Five smaller windows line the facade at the balcony level. Round arch windows featuring prominent keystones and imposts pierce the auditorium's two side walls. The tympanums of these arches are subdivided to create fanlights. Below the arched windows, a second set of openings (square in shape) allows light into the basement story. The rear office/ education portion of the building also exhibits Colonial Revival elements. These include gable end returns, a vent treated as an oculus, nine-over-nine windows, and an arched entrance surmounted by a shallow portico. The entrance has the same keystone and impost treatment found on the facade, but the tympanum of its arch is glazed by solid glass rather than being subdivided as a fanlight. The portico features Tuscan columns, a wide entablature, and a pediment with a ranking cornice.

The auditorium's most interesting interior feature is the tall paneled wainscot which encircles the space. Paneling similar to the wainscot also outlines the edges of the two-level altar, which has the appearance of a theater stage. Of additional interest is the chamfering found on the posts which support the balcony. The latter's solid railing is painted in such a manner to emphasize its paneled surface. Pilasters similar to the chamfered posts flank what appears to be an original sound booth located at the balcony's center. A picture rail and a cove ceiling complete the auditorium's decoration. The church office features a simple mantel with a molded surround. The hallways of the education area have simple wainscots and paneled doors. The basement's only surviving Colonial Revival features (see below) are a set of fluted pilasters which flank a small stage and the decorative entablature which the pilasters support.

The alterations to the exterior of the 1920 portion of the church include the installation of lattice over some of the basement level windows, the replacement of the basement doors which flank the exterior stairway, the removal of what appears to have been a porch roof from the portion of the education area connecting to the newer education annex, and the replacement or modification of the doors on the facade. Changes to the auditorium's interior include the placement of fabric over some of the space's walls, the construction of a second sound booth within the balcony, the installation of carpet on the lower floor and of tile on the floor of the balcony, and the placement of a tile ceiling in

the balcony. Tile ceilings have also been installed in the older education classrooms and the basement. Other basement alterations include the installation of a tile floor, the subdivision of the space to create a large kitchen, the placement of modern paneling on the walls, and the installation of modern light fixtures.

Rehabilitation of the 1945-1950 education annex has recently been completed. (Restoration of the 1920 building is planned for a later date.) Tasks accomplished in this project include the removal of a wall between two rooms to create a larger space; the upgrading of electrical and mechanical systems; and installation of the following: 1) a new rubber roof, 2) new glass and bronze doors at the annex's three entrances (the older doors did not meet code), 3) awnings above the entrances and the second floor windows, 4) ceramic tile in the hallways, 5) carpeting in the classrooms (now converted into offices), 6) new light fixtures throughout, 7) new fire rated doors throughout, 8) a drop down grid ceiling throughout, and 9) window shutters that are decorative rather than functional. In addition, all the bathrooms were made handicap accessible and handicap ramps were added to the entrances.

While the above list of alterations is lengthy, they have had little impact on the historic character of the 1920 church. In fact, the exterior survives virtually unchanged. And the annex was appended in such a manner to allow the original temple front church to be visually dominant from most view sheds. (In fact, the two almost read as separate buildings.) Hence the First United Methodist Church retains the features which define its architectural character and significance. As a rare landmark within West Monroe, the church is a legitimate candidate for National Register listing.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1920
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Unknown
CRITERION: C

The First United Methodist Church is locally significant in the area of architecture as a landmark within the City of West Monroe. It achieves this distinction as a rare and monumental example of the Colonial Revival style.

Located across the Ouachita River from Monroe, West Monroe traces its ancestry to two small steamboat ports of the antebellum period -- Cottonport, where the present downtown is located, and Trenton, to the north. The town of West Monroe, however, was not chartered until 1889, owing its existence directly to the arrival of the Vicksburg, Shreveport and Pacific Railroad earlier in the decade. The new town's economy, as had been the case with Cottonport and Trenton, was based on cotton (shipping, warehousing, cotton compress, cotton seed oil plant, etc.). Later the town benefited from the discovery of natural gas near Monroe in 1916. Nevertheless, West Monroe's population remained small, numbering only 2,240 in 1920, the year the First United Methodist Church was built.

Although West Monroe has not been completely surveyed, historic preservation staff estimate (by way of a windshield survey) that roughly 200-300 historic buildings are located there. It appears that only one dates from before the late nineteenth century, and the overwhelming majority are from c. 1915 through the 1930s. With but very few exceptions, the community's historic buildings are modest, being comprised mainly of low-key "folk" bungalows, plain cottages, and plain early twentieth century commercial buildings. There are a few residences (all one story) showing the influence of the Colonial Revival style, but none are fully developed examples. Instead, each exhibits only one or two elements of the style, such as columns or a pediment above a door. Perhaps 3 or 4 West

Monroe buildings can be called landmarks when evaluated against this background, and the Colonial Revival style First United Methodist Church is one of these. In fact, with its grand temple front and handsome Corinthian columns, it is easily the most impressive historic building in town. Hence it meets the National Register definition of local significance and is a landmark, within its context, to even the casual observer.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Division of Historic Preservation, Partial Standing Structures Survey of West Monroe, Louisiana.

Site visit by National Register staff.

Staff knowledge of West Monroe, Louisiana.

Three historic photographs of the First United Methodist Church, West Monroe, Louisiana; copies in National Register file.