



FBC Pontotoc



Researched and Written by Wayne L. Carter

FINDING THE UNEXPECTED

Avondale Baptist

In the hallway of our Church Offices is a collection of photos some of which are rather old. I pass by them at least once per week, and I admit to not having paid a great deal of attention to each and every one. An exception might be the one of the Adult Choir back in the seventies, one in which if I look closely I can see my smiling face. There are also a few photos of GA's at a coronation service, too. Yet the one that recently captured my imagination is a fading image of what at first glance appears to be an architectural drawing of our present sanctuary building.

It even states in big letters "Proposed New House of Worship, Baptist Church, Pontotoc, Mississippi." It also clearly shows the name J. E. Greene, Archt. Birmingham. Equally clear is the name Avondale Bapt. Church.

The overall design is quite similar to that of our building with the four Grecian styled columns, the steps leading to the porch of our east entry, the domed roof, the brick masonry work around the stained glass windows, the overall shape of our large stained glass windows, all give one the impression he or she is looking at a drawing of our church. But, it's not a drawing of our church.

I remember thinking, "I wonder what the Avondale Church looks like today. Does it still exist?"

I've read much of our church history compiled into book form a number of years ago by our history committee. The book, "A Walk of Faith," is a collection of photos and writings brought together by various committees and assembled under the able guidance of the late Callie B. Young. It is an impressive work that shares many of the important events in the first 150 years of FBC Pontotoc.



PROPOSED FOR PONTOTOC

Among those churches mentioned in our history book, I am familiar with the church building in Indianola, Mississippi. I would clarify my usage of familiar here to mean I have driven by the church several times. I have never been inside it.

So, with a few clues from our very own history book and those provided by the architectural drawing, I began to search the Internet for photos of Baptist churches of similar design.

I did not find much on J. E. Greene, architect except a couple of floor plans, and that Greene is credited with 16 churches in Mississippi including First United Methodist Church in Batesville.

Our church's history book lists Jacoby Art Glass as the company that produced our stained glass windows, but I didn't find our windows in my searches. However, I did find that the building in the photograph that aroused my curiosity is still standing in Alabama.

Avondale Baptist Church in Birmingham has a history that to some extent parallels our own. Avondale was founded in the late 1880s. FBC Pontotoc began about forty years earlier. Avondale



“AVONDALE” MORE RECENTLY



soon grew to need a larger building and chose to build the one pictured in our hallway. They began construction in 1914 and their building was completed in 1916. Similarly, FBC Pontotoc opted to build a new facility in 1914 and completed construction in 1915.

Interestingly, both Avondale Baptist and Pontotoc First Baptist built new parsonages adjacent to their respective churches.

As one might imagine Avondale Baptist Church grew and soon expanded (as did our church) in order to gain more educational and office space. They would also celebrate, in grand style, their 50th Anniversary in 1937. But sadly, Avondale Baptist Church would close its doors before its 100th Anniversary. In fact, due to declining membership, Avondale’s fellowship of believers merged with Irondale Baptist Church and sold their property to a Black congregation, breathing new life into the aging structure.

Still later the building would remain vacant for a number of years before a vibrant new congregation, Redeemer Community Church, began in 2008 in the heart of Birmingham, purchased the former

Avondale Church property in 2014, and following a few renovations now enjoys the merger of old things and new things in meeting their present needs. At last report they have four morning worship services.

May God continue to bless His people everywhere.

J. E. GREENE CHOSEN AS ARCHITECT

Exploring Our Past

The book *A Walk of Faith*, compiled by our history committee, shares much of the history of First Baptist Church Pontotoc. I became interested in discovering other churches whose building design is by the same architect who designed ours,

I thought I remembered a few churches being mentioned in *A Walk of Faith* as similar to ours. However, when I re-read page 54, it occurred to me that the three churches our building committee visited in 1914 were not necessarily all designed by the same architect.

It only makes sense that the Building Committee elected to visit churches by different architects, in order to make a final selection. For a Building Committee to visit multiple churches by the same architect would be comparable to a Pastor Search Committee going to hear the same pastor multiple times. Multiple choices often provide better results.

In June of 1914, and prior to selecting an architectural design and a contractor, the Building Committee of FBC Pontotoc visited Batesville, Indianola, and Brookhaven, all in Mississippi.

Of these three churches, only First United Methodist Church Batesville and First Baptist Church, Indianola remain much as they did in 1914. The building that housed First Baptist Church Brookhaven was destroyed in 1914.

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) has been unable to determine the architect who designed FBC, Brookhaven, constructed in 1885, but destroyed in 1914. To complicate my research, MDAH lists a construction date of 1914 for another sanctuary, for Brookhaven, again without the architect’s name. The building’s architectural type is Neoclassical which seems to be a common type for the time period.



FBC PONTOTOC CIRCA 1935

While many people point to similar architectural features shared by FBC Pontotoc and FBC Indianola, they were designed by different architects.

The Baptist church in Indianola was designed by H. J. Harker

The Methodist church in Batesville was designed by J. E. Greene.

Given the fact our Building Committee chose J. E. Greene to design our building, I can only conclude they were more impressed by FUMC Batesville than the other two churches, if not for its stately grandeur, perhaps for its functionality to meet the needs of our membership. Regardless their reasoning, I applaud their choice 108 years after the fact.

DESIGNED BY SAME ARCHITECT

Sister Churches

Having successfully found we had a sister church in Alabama, I became interested to learn more about Mississippi churches that were designed by the architect James E. Greene, who designed First Baptist Church Pontotoc.

It was only by chance that I happened upon a blog "Preservation In Mississippi" in which the writer noted the similarities of FBC Pontotoc and that of First United Methodist Church in Batesville. I discovered within the blog article that J. E. Greene had designed both the Methodist Church in Batesville and our very own.

In all, J. E. Greene designed a known total of sixteen churches throughout Mississippi. I would also learn

that J. E. Greene was James Edward Greene, of Birmingham, Alabama.

I remember thinking how I would really like to know where those other churches were in Mississippi and whether or not they resembled our church. I continued to think on these things for a few days and eventually began a quest to find out the whereabouts of those other fourteen of the sixteen J. E. Greene churches. (Batesville and Pontotoc were already found).

Susan Allen had authored the blog article referenced above and was kind enough to explain to me how to find additional information on the website of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH). Armed with new information, I soon was immersed in checking out the many Mississippi churches designed by J. E. Greene.

As far as I can determine only seven of the sixteen churches designed by J. E. Greene still remain. Some were lost in fires, others were outgrown and were torn down, one was converted into a hotel, and a hurricane destroyed another.

MDAH certifies the sixteen churches to be the work of J. E. Greene and indicates their confidence level with one of the following:

D - Documented,
A - Attributed,
C - Conjectured.

The nine missing churches that no longer exist are in order of construction date:

FBC Cleveland (1910, A)
 FBC Columbia (c. 1914, A)
 FUMC Amory (1914, destroyed by fire 1926, A)
 FBC Philadelphia (c.1914, A – later Sanders Hotel)
 Forest (c. 1915, A)
 Iuka (c. 1915, A)
 Louisville (1915, A)
 Belzoni (1922, D)
 Biloxi (1924, D).

The seven churches designed by J. E. Greene that still exist are:

FUMC Batesville (1913, D)
 FBC Lambert (c. 1914, A)
 FBC Pontotoc (1914, D)
 FBC Itta Bena (1915, A)
 FBC Liberty (1915, C)
 Camden (1916, D)
 FBC Okolona (1924, D).

While I have been able to account for the sixteen churches listed by MDAH, I know of two more churches that appear so similar in design to our church that I believe they must also have been designed by J. E. Greene. Of these two, only one still exists, Chalybeate Baptist Church in northern Tippah County. FBC Ripley looked like a downsized version of our church, but its congregation outgrew its downtown location and moved to an area with room to expand. Neither church can be found in MDAH.

SISTER CHURCH NO. 2

FUMC Batesville

I mentioned previously that there are several churches in Mississippi that are all similar in appearance, as they were each designed by James E. Greene, an architect who once lived in Birmingham, Alabama.

Armed with information gleaned from the Mississippi



FUMC BATESVILLE



Department of Archives and History, I began a systematic search for photos and information relating to the Mississippi churches designed by J. E. Greene. It became something of a quest. I wanted to see each of the churches on the list that was still standing.

The first church on my list was the Methodist Church in Batesville. Barbara and I were in Batesville visiting her niece and decided to drive by the Methodist Church prior to returning home. Unfortunately, the church offices were closed for lunch and no one was available to let us inside the sanctuary.

A few weeks later, we were back again to visit Barbara's niece and were able to gain entrance into the sanctuary of First United Methodist Church in Batesville, Mississippi.

The interior of the church is very similar to that of our church, at least the features of our church fifty years ago, with curved wooden pews. The stained glass windows are remarkably similar to ours in overall design (two feature windows, four lesser windows, and four round windows). The seating capacity of the church is less than that of our church, perhaps by as much as 150.

I was unable to get any interior pictures as good as those shown of FUMC Batesville's Facebook page, and I didn't make a picture of the stairs leading to the balcony, though I've since regretted not doing so. Unlike the stairs leading to our balcony, a single flight of stairs on either side and separated from the worship area, the Methodist church's stairs started inside the worship area and zigzagged their way upward past one landing midway to the top of the stairs.

We didn't tarry long basking in the beauty of the sanctuary, as we were keeping an office worker from performing the work she was hired to do, a part of which was manning the desk she was now away from.

If you ever want to see a church building that looks much like our own, you need only make the trek to Batesville to visit First United Methodist Church.

SISTER CHURCH NO. 3

FBC Liberty

Comedian Jerry Clower once proudly shared about the years of his youth growing up at Route 4 Liberty, MS. However, you may not have heard that the First Baptist Church building in Liberty and our sanctuary building were both designed by James E. Greene of Birmingham, Alabama. Mr. Greene designed or is credited with designing several churches in Mississippi.

I recently discovered we had a sister church in Liberty. While searching for information and photos of the First Methodist Church in Batesville, MS, I happened upon a blog related to preserving Mississippi History. The writer mentioned that Greene is believed to have designed 16 churches in Mississippi. She would later help me find the listing of these churches in Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

The Building Committee of our church charged with



FBC LIBERTY



choosing an architect in 1914 visited the churches listed in our history book. It seems they were impressed enough with the designs they saw firsthand to contact and secure the services of James E. Greene.

I'm sharing photos I borrowed from the Facebook page of FBC Liberty, Mississippi. The interior picture was taken on the occasion of their 175 anniversary celebration in 2014.

SISTER CHURCH NO. 4

FBC Itta Bena

Itta Bena lies on the fringes of Greenwood, in the Mississippi Delta. Like many places in Mississippi, its name hails from the Native Americans who lived there until the mid-1830s. In the Choctaw language Itta Bena means "forest camp," which likely inspired the town's slogan "Home in the Woods."

Sister churches in this series should be understood as buildings designed by the same architect, James E. Greene or those churches whose buildings appear quite similar to our own First Baptist Church



FBC ITTA BENA



Pontotoc, and in the latter respect FBC Itta Bena certainly qualifies. It has two porches each with 4 columns. The porches front consecutive sides. It even boasts a dome on top of its roof. Additionally, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History dates the building as circa 1915.

I've observed that not every structure can be documented as the work of James E. Greene, but the styles are so similar that the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) credits the building as Greene's work by noting: (D) documented, (A) attributed or (C) conjectured.

Apparently, the church in Itta Bena no longer has the supporting documents to prove theirs was designed by Greene, but the Mississippi Department of Archives and History "attributes" the design to J. E. Greene.

I've not personally visited FBC Itta Bena, but from the photos I see a strong resemblance to FBC Pontotoc with respect to both interior and exterior design.

SISTER CHURCH NO. 5

FBC Lambert

With a 2020 population of 1,172 Lambert, Mississippi is ranked as Mississippi's 143rd largest city. During my career with Supervalu, I often traveled (as in hundreds of times) through Lambert on my way to Indianola, Mississippi where my office was located. I never once saw the First Baptist Church of Lambert.

The highway I traveled largely skirted the city (I say town), and the one grocery store I needed to visit in Lambert was near the highway and not in the downtown area.

My chance to see FBC Lambert came during a recent visit that Barbara and I made to Batesville to visit her niece. Lambert is not on the way to Batesville, but we took time to drive still further from Pontotoc to photograph the exterior of FBC Lambert.

FBC Lambert has a Facebook page from which I was able to glimpse inside their sanctuary and compare it to ours. Their Facebook page also had an exterior photo, but much of the grand porch was obscured by shrubs.



FBC LAMBERT



Technology is great but it is often flawed. Such is the case with the location of FBC Lambert. Google Street Maps shows a building at a particular address for FBC Lambert, but the photo is of a different church. Undeterred, we kept driving up and down different streets until we found FBC Lambert a few blocks east of the location cited by Google as well as my GPS.

I failed to note the street names of the corner location of the church while there but have since revisited Google maps and discovered the church is on the southeast corner of 6th St. and Darby Ave. FBC Lambert is one of sixteen churches in Mississippi that were designed by James E. Greene, the same architect who designed our very own church.

SISTER CHURCH NO. 6

Camden Baptist

Camden Baptist Church is located in one of those places one might describe as “you can’t get there from here.”

Actually, you can get there from here, but Camden is in a remote part of Madison County, northeast of Jackson, Mississippi. Camden is not an incorporated town, but it does have its own zip code and a post office.

Camden was given its name by Mississippi Governor William McWillie, who was raised in Camden, South Carolina.

While Camden Baptist Church bears no resemblance to FBC Pontotoc, its building (1916) was designed by James E. Greene, who was the architect for FBC Pontotoc.



CAMDEN BAPTIST CHURCH



I spoke by phone to Bro. Jim Joiner, who has pastored Camden Baptist Church for more than 16 years about what he knew of the church’s history. Though, unsure of the date the present building was constructed, he agreed it was likely constructed in the early 1900s. Bro. Joiner did say it was renovated

and added onto prior to his becoming the pastor. At that time the twenty-four foot ceilings were dropped to eighteen feet.

I also learned that the average church attendance for Camden Baptist Church reflects life in rural areas whose economic life has shrunken over the years. Camden’s big draw in the past was their vocational school. Not a lot of folks live in Camden or have reason to pass through there. According to Bro. Joiner the average Sunday morning church attendance for Camden Baptist Church is presently twelve to fifteen people.

Please pray for this church body and its pastor as they maintain a Christian presence in their community.

SISTER CHURCH NO. 7

FBC Okolona

Okolona was named as Rose Hill in 1845 early in its settlement, but residents later discovered that another location had this name. When a US post office was established [t]here in 1850, a new name was needed to avoid confusion in mail delivery. According to the Okolona Area Chamber of Commerce, Colonel Josiah N. Walton, postmaster of nearby Aberdeen, remembered an encounter with a Chickasaw warrior years earlier. The man’s name was Oka-laua, meaning peaceful, yellow, or blue water. Walton renamed Rose Hill as Okolona in his honor.

Church buildings may be sisters but still not look much alike. Such seems to be the case with FBC Pontotoc and FBC Okolona.

As a child, our family lived in multiple towns before returning to live in Pontotoc, my birthplace. The town of Okolona was one of these. I lived there for three years and completed grade 3, 4, and 5, before we moved back to Pontotoc.

My parents took me to FBC Okolona. If you look at the photos shown here, you don’t see a lot to indicate that FBC Pontotoc and FBC Okolona are sisters, because in outward appearance they don’t favor very much. Yet if you dig into the history of Okolona you’ll find that her building was designed by the same architect who designed FBC Pontotoc, namely James E. Greene of Birmingham.



FBC OKOLONA



I have very few childhood memories as to what the sanctuary of FBC Okolona looked like. I mainly remember sitting on the center front pew most Sunday nights with a couple of friends while my parents sat a few rows behind me just in case they needed to “jerk a knot” in my tail for misbehaving. Apparently, I wasn’t too much of a distraction, because the pastor, Rev. B. L. Mohon, bragged to my dad that “your son seems to hang on to my every word.” The pastor even told Dad that I might well become a preacher one day.

FBC Okolona does have a four-columned front porch that is similar to that of our church. The original building, constructed in 1924 is rectangular, unlike our fan-shaped structure. Ours is called fan-shaped because its footprint looks like a partially opened hand fan. Think of a 90 degree angle with an arc opposite the angle.

The sanctuary has a balcony wrapping around three walls. The pulpit area is situated at the opposite end of the entrance, with the choir loft behind the podium. The organ and baby grand piano sit at opposite ends of the choir loft.

One of the most noticeable differences between our church and the Okolona church are the stained-glass windows. Okolona has no windows depicting a Biblical scene but are nonetheless beautiful in design.

Okolona has managed to keep one of the windows from the church building they outgrew in the 1920s. Today that window is mounted in the hallway of their educational building alongside the exterior wall of the sanctuary itself. It is arch shaped and approximately 8 feet wide. And, it portrays two angelic beings in flight, who appear to be surveying the Earth below them.

First Baptist Church, Okolona has existed almost 175 years which is a testament to how God can bless his people through difficult times and circumstances. From outward appearances, FBC Okolona looks better than the downtown area in which the church continues to thrive. Much of downtown Okolona is decaying as are many of the houses within the small town. The storefronts of yesteryear are largely gone, and many buildings are empty or boarded up.

While visiting the Okolona church a few weeks ago, I was given a copy of their church history. A part of their church’s Mission Statement reads, “This church seeks to grow in number, develop believers through Bible study, minister to needs of the community, and to help proclaim Christ to everyone on earth.”

Perhaps God will use His people to revitalize the town of Okolona and surrounding areas.

Closing note: One of our own, the late Bill Wardlaw, served as Minister of Music for FBC Okolona from 1993-1996.

SISTER CHURCH NO. 8

Chalybeate Baptist

Chalybeate is located in the northern part of Tippah County, near Walnut. The small town was first called Chalybeate Springs because of an iron-enriched spring located there. Chalybeate is one of those words most people mispronounce the first time they encounter it. It’s not Chaly-beat, rather it’s Cuh-le’-be-it. Chalybeate is Latin and means ‘full of iron.’ From the very beginning, the water from the springs was considered to be beneficial to health and, according to Wikipedia, the



CHALYBEATE BAPTIST



time.

Chalybeate was once a thriving community and was well known for its quality school system. While school consolidation in Tippah County floundered in the sixties and most smaller community schools now go only through the eighth grade, Chalybeate School is still respected for its quality education.

Chalybeate Baptist Church was organized in 1843 as "Union," with services once each month on Saturday and Sunday. Likely, the first services for *Union were in a log structure, prior to 1857 when a frame construction was completed. A new church building was begun in 1916 and completed in 1918. Another year would pass before the new church building was dedicated in 1919. At the same time, the church's name was changed from Union to Chalybeate Baptist Church.

Chalybeate Baptist Church is strikingly similar to FBC Pontotoc. It has large porches for ease of entry and columns much like ours. While it is considerably smaller than ours, it boasts a fan-shaped footprint as does our building. Plus, it has a dome atop its roof.

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History does not list it among the churches designed by James E. Greene, but the design compares favorably with our building and that of several of the churches I have shared in this series.

Chalybeate Baptist Church is a single story building which has stood for 102 years. This certainly falls within the time frame of the sixteen Mississippi Churches believed to have been designed by James E. Greene.

My friend Shelley Palmer Jamison, whose father pastored Chalybeate Baptist Church from 1947 to 1967, grew up living in Chalybeate. She told me years ago that both churches of our youth look so much alike. Shelley and I agree the church building in Chalybeate must have been designed by James E. Greene.

SISTER CHURCH NO. 9

FBC Ripley

My wife (formerly Barbara Crouch) was baptized at First Baptist Church, Ripley, Mississippi. Sadly, that church building no longer exists. It was constructed in 1915-1916 and was located on Hwy. 15, only one block north of the Court Square in downtown Ripley. While it was then a prime location for a church it would outgrow its building by the early 1950s and find a more suitable site to accommodate future growth.

The route of Highway 15 would later be moved a few blocks east of downtown Ripley probably in an effort to improve traffic flow and most likely occurred when Hwy 15 was rerouted more directly between New Albany and Ripley. Similarly, Hwy 15 once passed through downtown Pontotoc, but by the late fifties a bypass was constructed to improve the flow of traffic and avoid an existing railroad crossing.

I reached out via email to the office of First Baptist Church, Ripley, hoping to find within their records a mention of the name of the architect who designed the 1915 building. Thus far, the diligence of Janet Turner, the church's office manager has not turned up any mention of who the architect was. While, I believe it is likely James E. Greene of Birmingham, I have no provenance to support my conjecture.

Having learned from Janet that FBC Ripley moved into its current building in 1954, I sought to reconcile how my wife was baptized at age nine in the old



FBC RIPLEY (OLD)



DIXON & GRISHAM WEDDING

building, as she would have not been nine until 1955.

Janet was able to locate a record showing Barbara made a profession of faith on 5/27/1955 and was baptized on 7/17/1955. The records indicate Barbara was correct as to the year of her baptism. Still, this does not explain her baptism occurring in the old church building. However, Barbara believes that for sentimental reasons her parents requested she be baptized in the old FBC Ripley, which must have still been owned by First Baptist Ripley. Thus, Barbara remembers two other candidates for baptism and herself were the last three to be baptized in the old church's baptistery.

I failed to get the name of the architect of the old church building and count my personal research of FBC Ripley as a limited success. I have on my bucket list to one day travel to Ripley and peruse the archives of The Southern Sentinel newspaper in hopes of discovering who designed the old building

that looks so much like its sister church Chalybeate and remarkably similar in design to FBC Pontotoc.

This article concludes a series of articles pertaining to the sixteen churches in Mississippi that the Mississippi Department of Archives and History show as designs of James E. Greene plus the two in Tippah County, that I believe to be designs by Mr. Greene.

SISTER CHURCHES

Closing Thoughts

It was a blogger whose penname is Suzassippi, to whom I am indebted for bringing to my attention the many churches in Mississippi designed by James E. Greene, the architect who designed our very own First Baptist Church, Pontotoc. And, it was also Suzassippi who provided me with detailed instructions on navigating and searching the website of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History to find the listing of those churches casually referenced in an article she had written about a few of the architectural elements of our church more than a decade ago.

"Greene is credited with 16 churches in Mississippi, including First United Methodist Church in Batesville," literally leaped from the page as I read her story.

"Sixteen Mississippi churches all designed by the architect that did our church? Amazing," I thought.

Suzassippi's article would spur me to discover those churches for myself. I wanted to see them if not in person, then to at least see pictures of them. Thus far, I have seen three of these and found photos of several more. Sadly, some no longer exist. A lot can happen in a hundred years, and most of the churches on the list are more than one hundred years old.

Here's a rundown of the First Baptist Churches on the list: Belzoni, Biloxi, Camden, Cleveland, Columbia, Forest, Itta Bena, Iuka, Lambert, Liberty, Louisville, Okolona, Philadelphia, and Pontotoc. The others are both Methodist churches, Amory and Batesville.

Perhaps even more significant than the number of churches is the fact that thirteen of these were constructed between 1910 and 1916. Three were built from 1922 to 1924.

Sadly, only seven of the sixteen original church buildings are still around, namely Batesville, Camden, Itta Bena, Lambert, Liberty, Okolona, Pontotoc.

In the first story I shared about sister churches, I mentioned two churches that are likely designed by James E. Green, and both are in Tippah County. I shared a photo of each of these in that story. Chalybeate Baptist Church is still alive and well. FBC Ripley was sold and demolished after its members chose to build a larger church in a few blocks away. My wife tells me she was one of three baptismal candidates who can famously claim to have been the last members baptized in the old FBC before it suffered demolition.

I can't say why the old FBC Ripley and the Chalybeate Baptist are not recorded in our State's database of historical churches. I will say, I'm thankful for the wealth of information Mississippi has made available to us via the Internet.

In closing I'd like to say, I've learned a lot about our so-called sister churches in my research. I'm just as proud of the beauty of our church now as I was when I discovered the Avondale Church in Alabama that piqued my interest in similar architectural projects by James E. Green.

I truly think we have one of the most beautiful sanctuaries in Mississippi, and I pray First Baptist Church Pontotoc will continue to serve this present generation and those generations yet to be born.