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Article Summary: The design and construction materials of the Steele City Baptist Church were ambitious. Its members could not always support a pastor, however, and after cars became common the building saw only occasional use.

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The Stone Baptist Church of Steele City, Nebraska

By Ceres Henkel

A stone building, formerly the Baptist Church of Steele City, Nebraska, is a survivor in Jefferson County. Few structures there have endured so long and so well. Started in 1882 and dedicated in 1884,¹ it is the oldest church building in the county. It precedes the older sections of two structures, now part of the United Church of Christ, both dedicated in the spring of 1885, one in Diller and the other near Harbine.²

The Steele City Baptist Church is more elaborate than most of its area contemporaries. With a Romanesque style of architecture, it is an exhibit of the stonemason's craft and still structurally sound. The building, unoccupied since 1974,³ has been strengthened, repaired, and renovated by the Jefferson County Historical Society. It is part of the Steele City Historic District entered on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.⁴

The church is located in southeastern Nebraska only 2½ miles from the Kansas line, just north of the village limits of Steele City. It is on bottomland near the Little Blue River, which played an important role in the congregation's baptismal practices in the early years. The river was north and west, near the church, until it changed its course.⁵

It lies farther away now. Directly east of the building run the main line tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad, at first the St. Joseph and Denver City. East of the tracks the town lies on a sloping hill crowned by a schoolhouse on the northeast.

Steele City itself was an outgrowth of two earlier communities located on the river about one-half mile south of town. Freeport, on the west side of the river, was uprooted by the flood of 1869; and Jenkins Mill, on the opposite side between river and hill, was stifled in its narrow setting by the

coming of the railroad in 1871-1872.⁶ As a result, Steele City was established by Dudley M. Steele and Thomas Harbine in 1872 and platted in 1873.⁷ The area was so rapidly settled that Newton precinct, as it was defined in 1870, was more populous than Fairbury precinct (442 persons compared with 370), though the latter would soon gain the county seat. By 1880, however, their relative positions were reversed, with Newton recording 1,215 persons and Fairbury 1,581.⁸ Steele City probably reached its peak in 1890 with a population of 390, though an enthusiastic writer placed it earlier at 500.⁹ In 1890, 35 businesses and professional persons functioned there. By 1980 the town had a population of only 137,¹⁰ and there were four business firms. As one former resident said, "The automobile ruined the small town."¹¹

During the years it flourished as a trading center, it presented a different aspect. A young man returning from Texas before 1900 reported: "The first Saturday I was back, there must have been 250 people on that road west to town. I thought it was the best town I had ever seen."¹² He was speaking of the road leading to the T-shaped business district, which adjoined the Baptist Church on the south. It ran one block south from the church with buildings facing the railroad and then approximately 1½ blocks east and 1½ blocks west, with businesses on both sides of Main Street.¹³ A pottery and brick manufactory prospered nearby for a time. There were two flour mills, one north and one south of town.¹⁴

Three churches were established during the town's earlier period: Congregational, Methodist, and Baptist. The United Brethren were there but did not organize.¹⁵ Both the Congregationalists and Methodists¹⁶ refer to the heavy migration of 1872 as being from states farther east. The people were characterized by the Congregational pastor in 1872 as "very poor." He wrote:

They were poor when they left the East. Could with difficulty raise money enough to bring them here. . . have to make their "Dugouts" to live in; and if they can get corn enough to keep them from starving they do well. The prospect is that in a year or two more their struggles with poverty will be over and they will be comfortably situated.¹⁷

Ten years later a writer (probably D. C. Jenkins of Steele City) presented a more optimistic picture: "Steele City is noted for the large number of highly educated people that located in

the town and adjoining country; and also for their morality, or more strictly speaking, the larger per cent of professed Christians, far above the average of new towns in the west."¹⁸

Yet, in 1965 an old resident recalled, "It was a rough town, fights and gambling and all went with it."¹⁹ Steele City was probably composed of an assortment of people, like most towns; and the churches worked in their midst.

The Congregational and Methodist churches were both organized in 1872, while the Baptists organized in 1882. All three had been active in the area before their formal organization.²⁰ Congregationalists built a frame church in 1874 or 1875 on the site of the present Presbyterian Church, and the Methodists built a frame structure in 1877-1878 southwest across the street.²¹ Eventually the three churches disbanded in favor of one church—Presbyterian—for the town.²² The transfer occurred during 1920 and 1921. Services were held at first in the former Methodist building.²³ During 1927, while the Presbyterian Church was under construction, Presbyterian services were held in the former Baptist building.²⁴ The Congregationalists, having transferred their property in 1926, saw their building replaced by the Presbyterian. After the former Methodist building was demolished,²⁵ only the Baptist was left standing.

The Rev. Mark Noble of the Fairbury Baptist Church held meetings at Steele City "for some time" before the congregation officially organized, probably in March, 1882, when the Fairbury congregation appointed delegates to Steele City.²⁶ By July the Steele City church was sending representatives to recognize the formation of a new congregation at Washington, Kansas.²⁷ On October 20, 1882, Robert Crinklaw transferred—or donated—land to the trustees of the Steele City Baptist Church.²⁸

The congregation immediately started constructing the edifice facing east. A stone, later placed over the main entrance, commemorates the year 1882. Romeo, a Steele City reporter for the *Fairbury Gazette*, wrote on October 20, 1882: "Work on the new Baptist church at this place is going ahead and will not cease till completed." Nevertheless, winter intervened;²⁹ work resumed the following spring, but another winter was to pass before the building was completed.

For a congregation which was to peak at about 60³⁰, it was

indeed an ambitious project. The exterior measurements were to be more than 26 x 46 feet with an additional 8½-foot square bell tower on the southeast corner.³¹ The structure is of cream-colored limestone on three sides; the west side, or rear, is of a contrasting sandstone.

Several interesting design features may be noted. A circular window, 8½ feet in diameter, is perhaps the most outstanding.³² It contains a simple, petal design, utilizing large areas of colored glass instead of an intricate pattern of many parts. All windows were topped by a Roman arch complete with keystone, rather than the familiar Gothic arch. Basement windows, though shortened, allowed a quantity of light into the basement. Here Sunday school and other church meetings were held.³³ The church did not originally contain a baptistry, all baptisms being by immersion in the river. One of the early baptisms occurred "below Mr. Willey's," while a later one was performed "by the west bridge." A witness added that once a couple was baptized when "they had to cut the ice open." Later a baptistry was constructed in the basement.³⁴ Four small rooms with individual doors are located there. They could have been used for dressing rooms even when baptisms were in the river.

Walls of the building contain a dead space of 3-4 inches.³⁵ It has been suggested that this was to provide for moisture that stone walls exude. Several drainage holes for the same purpose may be seen on the outside. Nearby on the south wall about three feet from the ground several metal rings were fastened into the mortar. Corners of exterior walls exhibited decorative edgings of stone. Entry into the upper level was through the tower, which afforded a vestibule or narthex entrance rather than directly into the sanctuary. This door and the ground-level door to the basement are the only two entrances into the building. Altogether the details of design reveal a master plan resulting in a unified, handsome structure, hand-built, using the heaviest of materials.³⁶

To build this well-planned structure, the members are said to have "hailed a fine grade of limestone from near Hanover, Kansas," some distance away. The stone was hand cut by Arthur Bower, and his cousin Ferdinand Bower, stonecutters from England. Bower "shaped the limestone into . . . blocks of the same size. Each block had a border of the smoothed rock;

the natural, uneven surface forming the inner part of the block."³⁷ Where necessary blocks were rounded to form a curve. Balance had to be maintained to allow for straight surfaces such as for the roof support and bell tower.

Newspaper accounts report the progress on the new building. After the vigorous start reported in October, 1882, hopes were high. The Steele City correspondent to the *Gazette* reported on December 13 that "should the weather remain fair till Christmas the greater part of the enclosing will be done." By December 20 these hopes had been dashed and "work on the Baptist Church we are told has been abandoned till spring." March 8, 1883: "The stone cutters are busy at the Baptist Church. Masons will soon go to work again." Later that month: "Work on the Baptist Church is moving steadily along." In April: "The workmen are busy every day on the new Baptist church and ere long the roof can be put on when it will be rushed on to completion." Early in May: "The masonry . . . is about completed. The carpenters are as busy as they can be and will have the building ready for use at the earliest possible date." May 23: "The roof on the new church is completed." A few days later: "The new organization has been the fortunate recipient from the First Baptist Church of Chicago of an excellent \$300 Estey organ, communion service, a fine pulpit, three pulpit chairs and six lamps. These contributions we are informed were procured through the instrumentality of Mr. R. M. Graves" (whose daughter lived in Chicago). Services were held for a time in the basement. Services may have started upstairs in September when the occurrence of baptism was reported and the name of the minister was first printed in the newspaper.³⁸

Work continued in December, 1883, when Olds & Wing, wagon painters, were at work "doing the finest job of frescoing ever attempted in this section." Following this announcement the reporter complained about Olds & Wing advertising in the building by leaving their professional card displayed. Olds & Wing replied by explaining it was merely under the stairs in the basement. Romeo, the reporter, ended the debate with a final rebuttal. He also attempted to describe the services: "Meetings at the Baptist Church continue, with what results, we are not informed. Rev. Lewelling is a deep thinker, and preaches some brainy sermons."³⁹ Finally on March 8, 1884,

the Gazette reported the building was completed: "Work being just completed on the Baptist church; the dedicatory service has been set. . . . In workmanship and stability this church is hard to beat in the state. The masonry, carpenter work and painting are first-class."⁴⁰

It is likely the hardwood flooring and lowered ceiling were added in succeeding years. Equipment such as the bell and pews were added as the congregation could afford them. Windows were opened with a pulley device at the top and could be held in position by wrapping the cord around a metal cleat on the window frame. The heating stove was located toward the back of the sanctuary.⁴¹ The organ, perhaps the one received from Chicago, was described by a former organist as a "tiger." "It took all your strength. . . . It was a small organ but it was a tough one to pump air into!" A friend had told her that "whoever played the organ in the Baptist church at Steele City should have a golden crown most beautiful."⁴²

Compared with the simpler frame buildings of most churches of the time and vicinity, the design of the Steele City church was ambitious. Then, too, the previous year 1881 had been a year of drought, hail, and severe flooding.⁴³ Perhaps this was offset by the spirit of the times in Steele City. The previous year a brick school building was erected on the hill to the east. It was a two-story structure with large tower and a degree of ornamentation, impressive for the youthful town. The county superintendent had termed it the "number one" school in the county as well as carrying the name School District 1. The second flour mill, three stories above the basement, had also appeared in 1881 some distance north of the Baptist Church site.⁴⁴ It was an optimistic period for the village. It is possible, too, that the English⁴⁵ stonemason-designer and the English pastor from Fairbury, Mark Noble, may have had similar views on church architecture.

Its new building completed, the congregation started its spiritual life with much fanfare. Dedication services were planned for an entire week, with continual activities for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, March 8-10, 1884. Members of the Baptist congregation in Fairbury were invited to attend and the Steele City congregation asked them to suspend their own services so everyone could attend at Steele City.⁴⁶ The follow-

ing description of the dedication appeared in the March 15, 1884, *Fairbury Gazette*:

The First Baptist Church of Steele City was dedicated on Sunday morning last. It is a very pretty stone building consisting of two rooms, the upper one being for the usual church services and the lower or basement for Sabbath school, prayer meetings, etc. They are both 23 x 43 feet. For beauty of finish there is nothing within many miles that can be compared with them. Everything seems to have been done which can tend to comfort and gratify the taste. The expense is somewhere about \$4,400, and all paid, so that no collection had to be made at the dedication services. The weather being pleasant many friends went from here and with others crowded the building to its fullest capacity above and very nearly so in the basement.

The services commenced at 11 o'clock by the choir singing an anthem. The devotional exercises were conducted by Elder Cressman of the Congregational, Elder Biggs of the Methodist, and Elder Noble of the Baptist Church. Elder Osborne preached a fine discourse and Elder Webb closed with the usual dedicatory prayer. Words of gratitude were spoken by the pastor, Elder Lewelling, and the assembly dispersed. In the afternoon a large assembly gathered in the basement and enjoyed the Sabbath school, which was closed with a very telling address from Mr. Exton.⁴⁷ A crowded audience listened in the evening to a very excellent sermon from Elder Webb. Everything went off very satisfactorily calling forth words of thankfulness and delight from all. The whole was brought to a close on Monday by a very delightful prayer and social meeting in the afternoon, and a sermon at night by Elder Noble of Fairbury.

In succeeding years revivals conducted by visiting evangelists were held each winter for a time. The visiting minister would stay with a family of the congregation, and services might be held daily for a week or more. For many years Robert Partlow was a leader in the church and Arthur Graves its Sunday school superintendent. Some active members were the families of Robert Crinklaw, Clifton Campbell, Fred Blair, Riley Turner, Alfred Weddel, Frank Beckwith, the Vandercars, Conk Bracken, Guy Cassell, Frank and Walt Lenker, Bill Loom, Mrs. Eugene Zoellin, Alvin Southwick, and the Partlow and Graves families.⁴⁸

A personal story involving two of the families has been told. Arthur Graves and Clifton Campbell were friends in Illinois and went to college together in Rockford, receiving their degrees at the same time. After graduation Arthur came to Steele City, Nebraska. Later, Clifton Campbell followed and lived with the Graves family while he taught a rural school. He attended the Baptist Church with his friend and was there converted to that faith. In later years Clifton started a Baptist church at Harbine.⁴⁹

Through the years the Steele City Baptist Church sometimes supported a pastor of its own, but often a pastor from another congregation served them. "At times there wasn't much cash 'to pay the preacher,' but chickens, eggs, flour, potatoes, clothing—anything that the members had and their pastor's family could use—was given to supplement his salary." It was a mission church which received support from the Nebraska Baptist State Convention, its parent body.

"About 1920, after cars became common, many of the older members passed away, the younger people moved away, and as living conditions changed it became more difficult to maintain a pastor."⁵⁰ Records show that the church transferred its property to the Baptist State Convention on March 1, 1921. The convention then sold the building on December 29, 1921, to trustees of the Lindon Lodge, Knights of Pythias 146, Steele City. After that there was an occasional funeral service or other service in the building, but it was principally a meeting place for the Pythians and Pythian Sisters. In 1974 the lodge sold it to the Jefferson County Historical Society.⁵¹

Since that time the society, led by Mrs. Frank Knocke, president, has developed a master preservation plan which includes the former church building.⁵¹ Funding has come from donations and the county one-tenth mill levy. The interior was cleaned and furnishings collected, as the first step. Later cracks in outer walls were repaired, retaining rods and shingles added. A special Sunday service was held in the church on September 20, 1981. During the winter of 1981-1982, the large circular window was repaired and installed. It centers on a small circle containing a star said to be the only remnant of the original glass. The interior of the upper room was renovated under the leadership of Vernon Cassell and Kyle Swett; and a centennial observance was held August 15, 1982.⁵³ When funds are available, a steeple will be replaced on the tower. One more historic Nebraska structure has been given a new lease on life.

NOTES

1. A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), 1,000; *Fairbury Gazette*, October 28, 1882; March 8, 15, 1884; First Baptist Church, Fairbury, Nebraska, MS Minute Book, 1870-1897, 61-62.

2. Mrs. Jennie Line, "First Presbyterian Church, Diller, Nebraska"; Mrs. Scott A.

Miller, "The Diller Congregational United Church of Christ"; "United Church of Christ, Harbine, Nebraska . . ." In Mrs. Genevieve Clark, *Wider Grows the Kingdom* (Fairbury, Nebraska, 1967), 116, 132, 136.

3. *Beatrice Daily Sun*, August 26, 1980.

4. *Lincoln Evening Journal*, March 29, 1972.

5. *Plat Book of Jefferson County* (Philadelphia: Northwest Publishing Company, 1900), 9, 19-20; "Steele City Roller Mills," *Early Life in Old Steele City*, unpagged, 1973.

6. Andreas, 993; Charles Dawson, *Pioneer Tales of the Oregon Trail and of Jefferson County* (Topeka, 1912), 313; *Fairbury Gazette*, December 16, 1871; March 16, April 6, 1872; S. C. Dean, MS First Quarterly Report, May 18, 1872. In American Home Missionary Society papers at Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

7. *Fairbury Gazette*, March 23, 1872, 3; Jefferson County Deed Record, Book G, 93.

8. Andreas, 325.

9. Elton A. Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1982), 108; Andreas, 1,000.

10. *Nebraska State Gazetteer* (Omaha, 1890), 507; Mary Schmal, Jefferson County Clerk.

11. *Fairbury Journal-News*, August 11, 1967.

12. Dawson, 427, for date of father's death; Frank Crinklaw, quoted in *Fairbury Journal-News*, August 11, 1967.

13. Lewis Bugbee interview, July 13, 1970; *Plat Book*, 19-20; picture in "Steele City in 1906," *Early Life*.

14. Levi Bloyd, "Historic Steele City," *Fairbury Daily News*, April 26, 1965, 3; *Plat Book*, 18.

15. Dean, May 18, 1872.

16. *Ibid.*, May 18, 1872; Nebraska Conference Minutes, 1872, 27-30.

17. Dean, May 18, 1872.

18. Andreas, 1,000.

19. Frank Crinklaw in *Fairbury Journal-News*, August 11, 1967.

20. Jefferson County Miscellaneous Records, Book A, 357-358; Congregational Church Minute Book, Steele City, March 3, 1872; Andreas, 1,000; The first mention in conference minutes was in 1875, 18; Dawson, 283; Vernon Cassell interview, May 9, 1982; Dean, May 18, 1872; Andreas, 1,000.

21. Clark, 48; Andreas, 1,000; *Fairbury Journal-News*, August 11, 1967; Andreas, 1000; Nebraska Conference Minutes, 1877, 1888, 44; Jefferson County Deed Record Book K, 386; *Plat Book*, 19-20.

22. Stewart Earhart, "Steele City Presbyterian Church in Clark," Clark, 124.

23. Methodist Archives, Lincoln, Nebraska, letter of August 2, 1967, quoting 1921 Conference minutes; Steele City Congregational Church Minute Book, September 12, 1920.

24. *Fairbury Journal-News*, August 11, 1967; Mary Andersen interview, August 15, 1982.

25. Jefferson County Deed Record, Book 54, 106; *Fairbury Journal-News*, August 11, 1967.

26. Andreas, 1,000; First Baptist Church Minute Book, 51.

27. *Washington County (Kansas) News*, July 1, 1982.

28. Jefferson County Deed Record, Book T, 585.

29. *Fairbury Gazette*, October 28, 1882; December 23, 1882.

30. Clark, 22.

31. Wilson and Company, "Jefferson County Historical Society . . . Historical Restoration and Preservation Plan," October 1974, Figure 9a.

32. *Fairbury Journal-News*, March 26, 1982.

33. Mrs. Dottie (Compton) Howland, August 15, 1982; and Mrs. Ruth Graves Lutz interview, February 23, 1975.
34. *Fairbury Gazette*, September 22, 1883; Mrs. Ruth Graves Lutz interview; Clark, 22.
35. Vernon Cassell and Wayne Brandt, May 7, 1982.
36. A 1967 sketch of the church with tower is on the cover of Clark; a photo is in *Fairbury Journal-News*, August 11, 1967. Clark, 22.
37. Clark, 22; Mrs. Doris Renner and Mrs. Elizabeth Knocke, April, 1982.
38. *Fairbury Gazette*, December 16, 23, 1882; March 10, 24, 1883; May 5, 26, 1883; June 2, 1883; January 5, 1884; September 22, 1883.
39. *Ibid.*, December 22, 29, 1883; January 5, 26, 1884.
40. *Ibid.*, March 8, 1884.
41. Harry Wilson of Hastings, Nebraska, August 15, 1982.
42. Lutz.
43. Andreas, 993; and W. C. Smith letter of Jan. 1, 1882, in *Fairbury Gazette*, January 9, 1882.
44. Andreas, 1,000; *Fairbury Journal-News*, August 11, 1967; "Steele City Roller Mills," in *Early Life*.
45. First Baptist Church, Fairbury, 3.
46. *Ibid.*, 61-62.
47. Layman from the First Baptist Church, Fairbury, and church clerk.
48. Clark, 22; Lutz.
49. Genevieve Clark notes of interview with Mr. and Mrs. Russell Campbell, 1966 or 1967; Clark, 15-16.
50. Clark, 22.
51. Jefferson County Deed Record, Book 44, pp. 234, 295; 47, p. 319; p. 230; *Beatrice Daily Sun*, August 26, 1980.
52. Wilson and Company.
53. *Fairbury Journal-News*, March 26, August 17, 1982.