

*Desha County
McGehee
Temple Meir Chayim*

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NR LISTED
MAR 29 1999
AHPP

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Temple Meir Chayim

Other Name/Site Number: DE0305

2. Location

Street & Number: 4th and Holly Streets

Not for Publication: N/A

City/Town: McGehee

Vicinity: N/A

State: AR County: Desha Code: 041 Zip Code: 71654

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private

Category of Property: Building

Number of Resources within Property:

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>+</u>	<u> </u>	Buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	Sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	Structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	Objects
<u>+</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: N/A

Name of related multiple property listing: Minority Settlement in the Mississippi River Counties of the Arkansas Delta, 1870-1930

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4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination _____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets _____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Cathryn A. Statu
Signature of certifying official Date

Arkansas Historic Preservation Program
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- _____ entered in the National Register _____
- _____ determined eligible for the National Register _____
- _____ determined not eligible for the National Register _____
- _____ removed from the National Register _____
- _____ other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper Date
Of action

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6. Function or Use

Historic: Religion Sub: Religious facility

Current : Religion Sub: Religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification:
Romanesque

Materials: foundation Brick roof Composition Shingle
walls Brick other _____

Describe present and historic physical appearance:

Temple Meir Chayim in McGehee is located in a mixed residential/commercial neighborhood three blocks east of the downtown area. The two-story buff brick synagogue at 4th and Holly Streets was constructed in 1947 to serve the Jewish communities of Dermott, Eudora and McGehee. The building displays restrained Romanesque Revival architecture with a Mission influenced parapet on the front, eastern facade. The simple lines of the rectangular plan temple are adorned with arched stained-glass memorial windows and a tablet of the Ten Commandments above the arched double-leaf entry. The exterior of the building has been unchanged since its construction and has been maintained in excellent condition by the small congregation.

Historical Background

Temple Meir Chayim at 4th and Holly Streets in McGehee displays subdued Romanesque Revival architecture in its rectangular plan. The buff brick building features simple decorative elements in the form of a Mission style parapet, corbeled half-pilasters and stained glass memorial windows depicting the Star of David.

The front, or western facade of the temple is reached by eight wide concrete steps with a wrought-iron handrail in the middle. Brick half-walls topped with concrete painted white flank the steps that lead to a small patio. The double-leaf entry echoes the rounded Mission style parapet above. The heavily carved wooden doors with centered knobs are placed within a brick arch and surrounded by three stepped arches of soldier bricks. A stained glass fan light transom above the doors reads "MEIR CHAYIM TEMPLE." Two arched stained glass hopper windows with the Star of David incorporated within their design flank the front doors. Arches of soldier bricks with a concrete keystone rims

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the windows. Brick sills complete the window surround. A concrete tablet of the Ten Commandments is centered above the door and beneath the rounded terminus of the parapet. This tablet was brought from the Temple Beth El Emeth in Camden which dated from 1872. Two brick pilasters topped with concrete stand at the north and south corners of the building. The top of the pilasters extends about three feet above the top of the parapet which angles up to two corbeled half pilasters on either side of the central rounded parapet.

The northern elevation reveals the gabled roof of the temple behind the front parapet. Fenestration from left to right consists of a single eight-over-eight double-hung window. A single leaf paneled door beneath a slightly rounded overhang is reached by six concrete steps. The steps are bounded by brick half walls topped with concrete. The overhang is supported by two thin iron posts and two scrolled brackets. Five arched stained glass windows with the Star of David motif extend to the western corner of the building. Each window and the door are flanked by brick pilasters, eight altogether.

The gabled end of the eastern elevation is fenestrated from left to right with a short eight-over-eight double-hung window beside a single-leaf door. The door is sheltered by a small overhang supported by two scrolled brackets. Five concrete steps ascend to the entry from the north and a wooden handicapped ramp leads to its small porch from the parking lot to the east. A pair of double-hung windows is centered on the first-story next to a single window at the northern end. Two pilasters embellish the north and south corners. The second-story is lit by three double-hung windows. The southern facade is similar to the north minus the entry.

The front entry of the temple leads to a foyer on the interior. Accoustic tiles cover the ceilings in the foyer and the sanctuary. A single hanging light fixture illuminates the hall. Wooden paneling extends to a chair rail on the walls. Two stained glass windows flank the double-leaf entry. The ladies and men's rooms are on the north and south ends of the foyer. Wooden shelves dedicated to Samuel David Wolchansky line the walls on either side of a pair of paneled wooden doors carved with a floral pattern that lead to the sanctuary.

Four hanging light fixtures in the sanctuary extend from a tray ceiling above the rows of seating. Wooden paneling lines the walls to the level of the window sills. The rear, western wall of the sanctuary is lined with five panels depicting the first five books of the Old Testament painted by congregation member Sheldon Stelzer in 1967. Four stained glass memorial windows line the north and south walls on either side of rows of upholstered folding theater seats. Two wall sconces in the design of the hanging fixtures are affixed to the north and south walls. The original hardwood floors are visible in the center aisle leading to the pulpit but the rest of the floor is covered with carpet installed in 1966. A framed fragment of torah from a German synagogue that was destroyed in 1939 during Kristalnacht, a period of random violence against German Jews, hangs on the southern wall.

The pulpit is centered on the eastern wall between two doors leading to the social hall at the rear of the building. A slightly raised crescent shaped dais supports the altar and ark, which was remodeled in 1964, containing the torahs. The doors to the ark are frosted glass with an etched pattern of the

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Ten Commandments. They are opened electronically to access the handwritten parchment torahs wrapped around silver menorah. Five wooden fluted pilasters and rich mahogany panels surround the ark. The eternal light hangs above the ark. A tablet of the Ten Commandments flanked by two gilt Lions of Judah from the 1882 Temple B'Nai Sholom at Bastrop, Louisiana stands above the altar. The temple was destroyed in 1920 for the construction of a highway. The space above the altar was once an open choir loft but it was enclosed in 1964.

The social hall at the rear of the temple was remodeled in 1981 and contains a kitchen and seating area. Before the temple Meir Chayim was built the torahs were stored in Jewish families' homes and were contained in a wooden ark which stands in the social hall. The second-story of the temple covers only the rear of the building and is used for classroom space. The classrooms are accessed by a spiral metal staircase to the north of the fellowship hall.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Local

Applicable National Register Criteria: C, A

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A

Areas of Significance: Architecture
Ethnic Heritage

Period(s) of Significance: 1947

Significant Dates: 1947

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: N/A

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and period of significance noted above:

Temple Meir Chayim is situated on the southeast corner of 4th and Holly Streets in McGehee. The temple stands in a mixed neighborhood of residential and commercial and religious structures. The building displays simple

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Romanesque architecture with a Mission style parapet and decorative arches. Prior to the construction of the temple Jewish residents worshiped in homes of Jewish families. Temple Meir Chayim was built soon after World War II to serve the Jewish community of southeast Arkansas, which had been present for a century. As the focal point of Jewish religious life in the Mississippi Delta into the mid-twentieth century, Temple Meir Chayim is being nominated to the National Register with local significance under Criterion A, Criteria Consideration A associated with the context, "Minority Settlement in the Mississippi River Counties of the Arkansas Delta, 1870-1930." This context provides an insight into minority influences on the region including McGehee. This influence extended past the 1930s and can still be seen today. It is also being nominated to the National Register with local significance under Criterion C for its Subdued Romanesque architecture with Mission influences.

Historical Background

Jewish settlers to southeast Arkansas in the early 19th century played a major role in the economic and civic life of the Mississippi Delta even though they were but a small proportion of the population. The early Jewish families were merchants, farmers, political leaders and civic boosters, donating time and resources to better their communities. Following the 1927 flood many farmers could scarcely recover before the onslaught of the Depression, and local banks could not supply them with the loans they needed to come out from under the devastation. Five men from the Jewish community in Desha County, Sam Abowitz, Charles Dante, Adolpf Hamburger, William Hamburger and Sam Wolchansky, pooled their resources to provide the farmers with the funds they needed to continue farming, thus saving the agricultural future of the area.

Jewish community leaders also took the matter of religious worship into their own hands. Eli Dante of Dermott began holding group religious services in his home in the early 1920s, presiding over the services himself. Mr. Dante extended an invitation to all of the Jewish families in the area to his house for High Holy Days services. Arrangements were made to find lodging for those who had traveled from long distances to attend. Soon the number of worshipers outgrew the Dantes' house so they moved the services to the second floor of the Dermott Picture Show Building. Mr. Dante moved to Louisiana in 1927, which meant members had to travel to Pine Bluff and Little Rock until 1940. In that year Mr. Henry Hamburger of McGehee and Isadore Pinkus of Dermott held services in their homes. Soon the groups got together and met in the Missouri Pacific Booster Hall and later the St. Paul Episcopal Church Sunday School Building, both in McGehee. For a short time Rabbi Morris Clark conducted services but then Mr. Dave Myer and Mr. Sol Myer took over.

In 1946 a suggestion was made that the Jewish community construct a temple in McGehee. The idea was met with great enthusiasm and a building committee was selected. A central location was chosen at the corner of 4th and Holly Streets on two lots obtained through a trade with the McGehee Church of Christ. The proposed name of the temple was Beth Chayim Temple or "House of Life" in honor of Dave Myer, who instigated the idea of a Jewish place of worship. The current name was decided upon to memorialize Sergeant Herbert M. Abowitz, who died in action during World War II. Funds to build the temple were collected from raffles and private donations both in and outside of Arkansas.

No architect was used, as the Romanesque design for the building was decided

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upon by the building committee through trips to other cities to inspect temples and churches. Sam Wolchansky took on the role of construction supervisor. Building materials were obtained through friends from as far away as St. Louis, Missouri. Most of the lumber was cut from local farms and millwork was made on the site by workmen. The temple was completed in 1947 and dedicated in 1949. After a century of transient worship the Jewish residents of southeast Arkansas at last had a home dedicated to their beliefs and community.

Temple Meir Chayim met the needs of the Jewish community of southeast Arkansas after a century long void. Despite the small number of Jewish residents in the Delta they made an impact on the economic and social life of the area and were able to make a joint effort toward one end, that of constructing the first Jewish temple in the area in which to conduct their religious services. As a symbol of the early Jewish settlement in the lower Delta the Temple Meir Chayim is being nominated to the National Register with local significance under Criterion A, Criteria Consideration A and is associated with the context, "Minority Settlement in the Mississippi River Counties of the Arkansas Delta, 1870-1930." This context compiled by the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program provides insight into the early years of Jewish settlement in southeast Arkansas. The influence of the Jewish community continued through 1930 past the 1947 construction date of the temple to the 1990s and can still be seen in other areas besides religion. The temple is also being nominated to the National Register with local significance under Criterion C for its Romanesque architecture with Mission decorative influences. The temple's construction is unique in the small town of McGehee as much of the architectural influence in the historic area of the adjacent downtown is Art Deco or Colonial Revival.

9. Major Bibliographical References

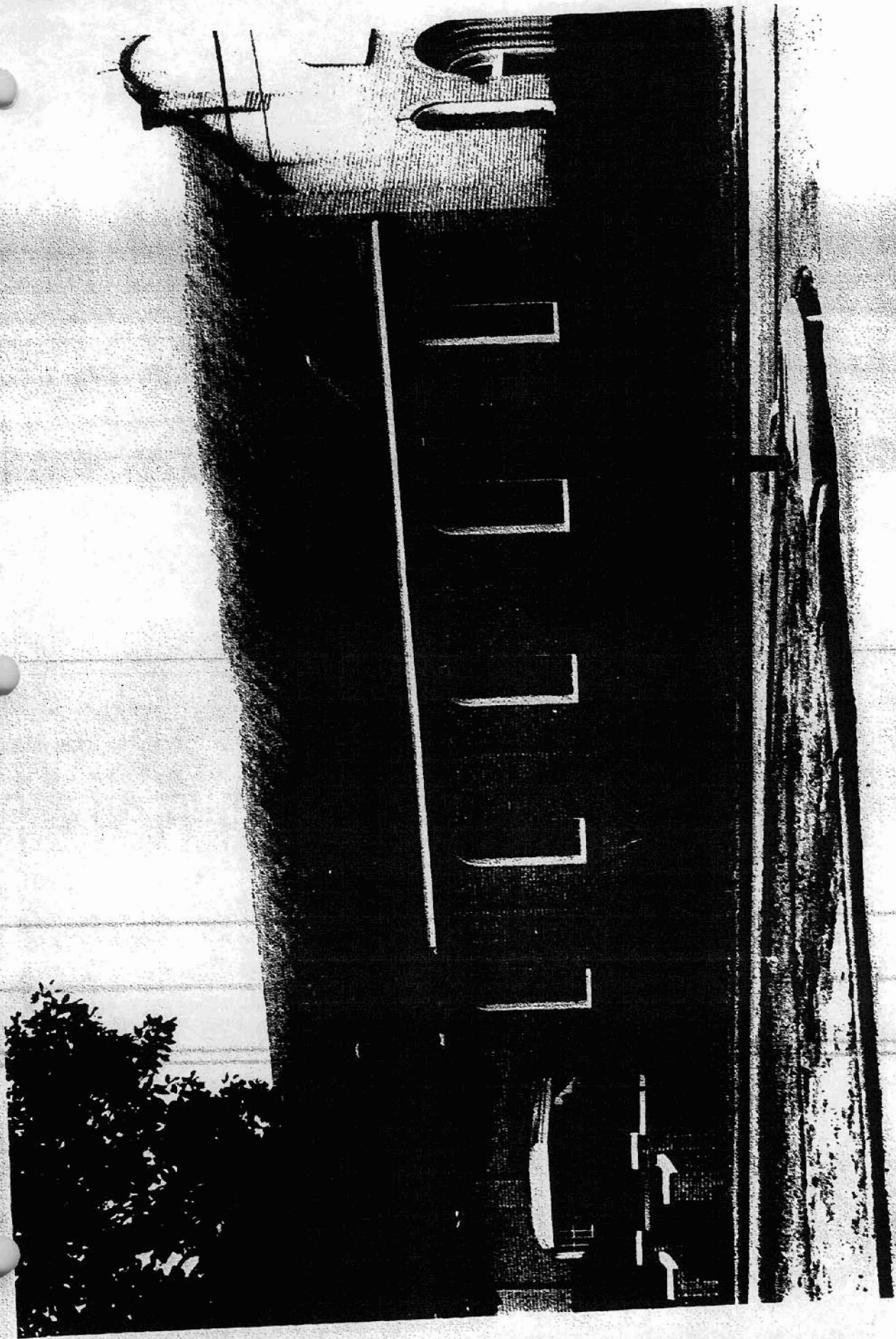
Driedel, E.M. "Temple Meir Chayim A Century Old Need." Programs of Desha County Historical Society. Dumas, Arkansas: Clarion Publishing Company, 1978.

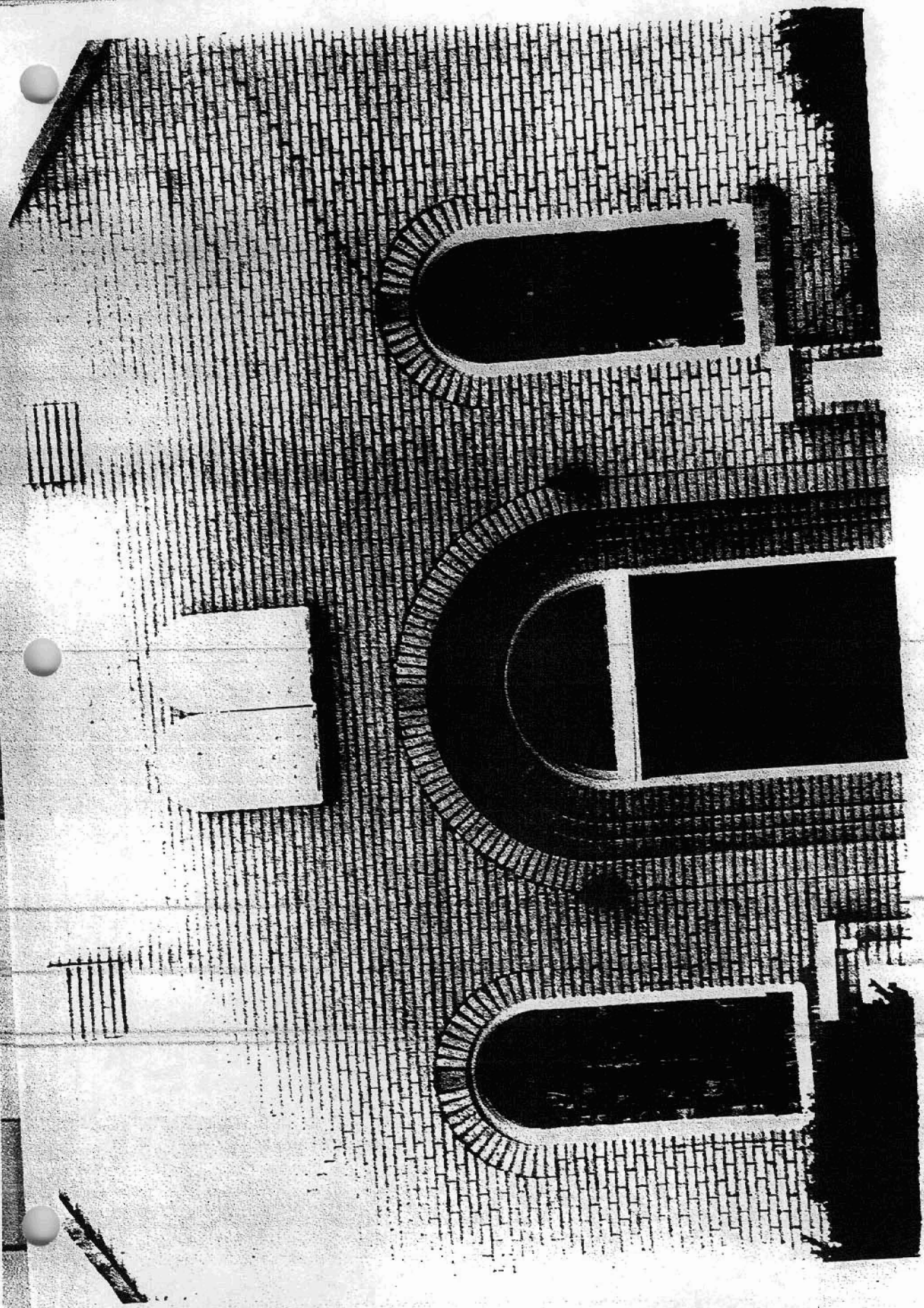
Previous documentation on file (NPS):

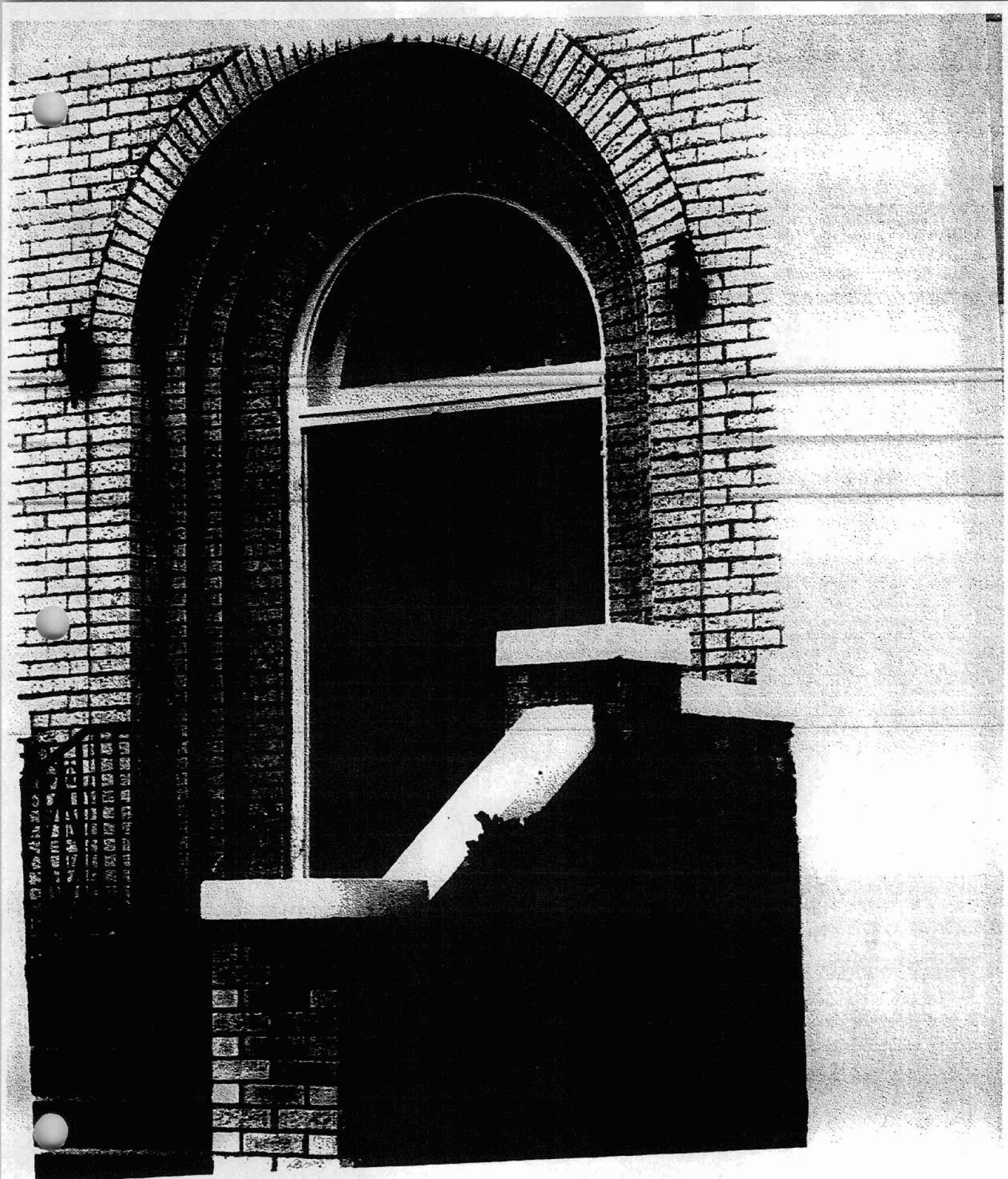
- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary Location of Additional Data: _____

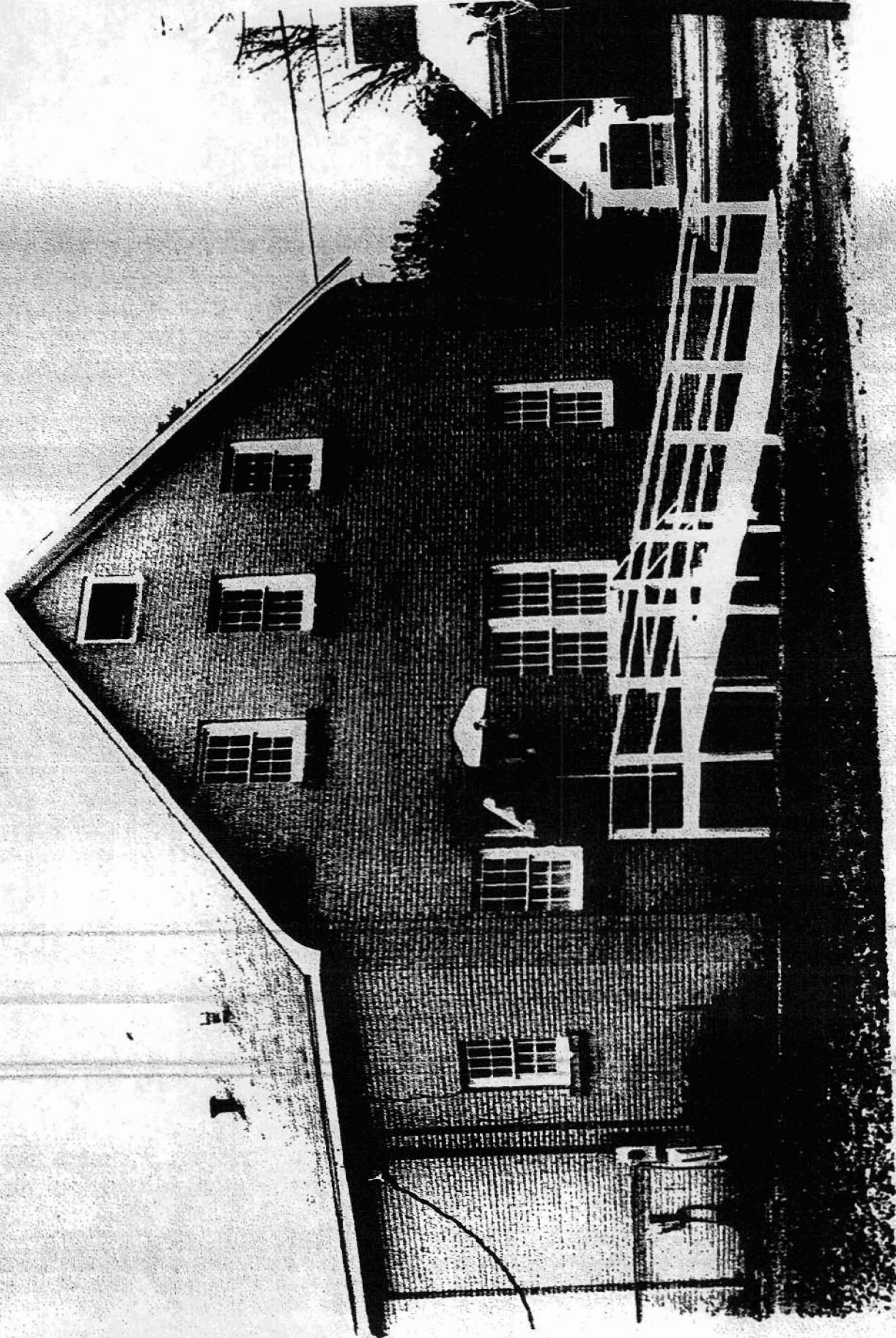
- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University





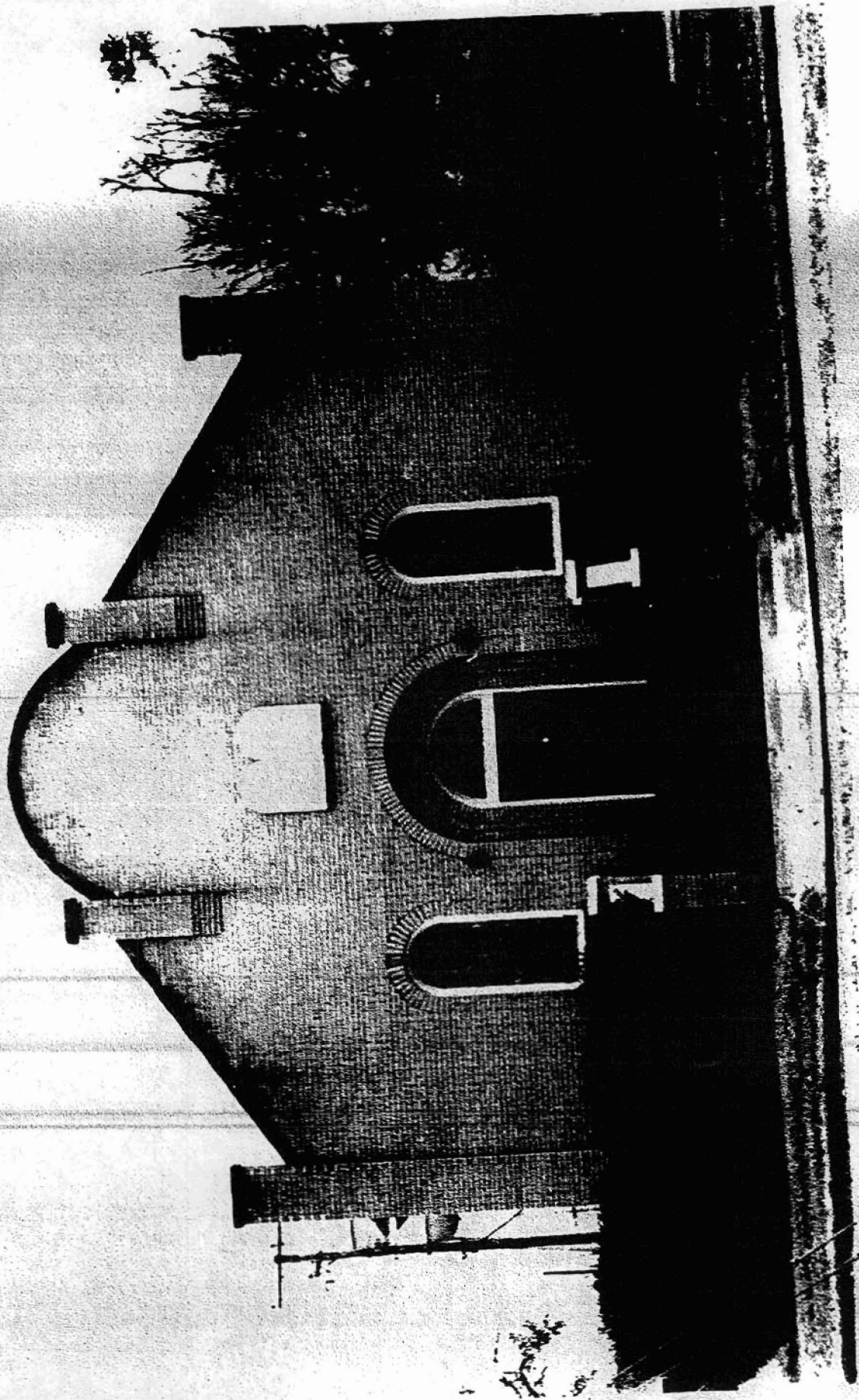




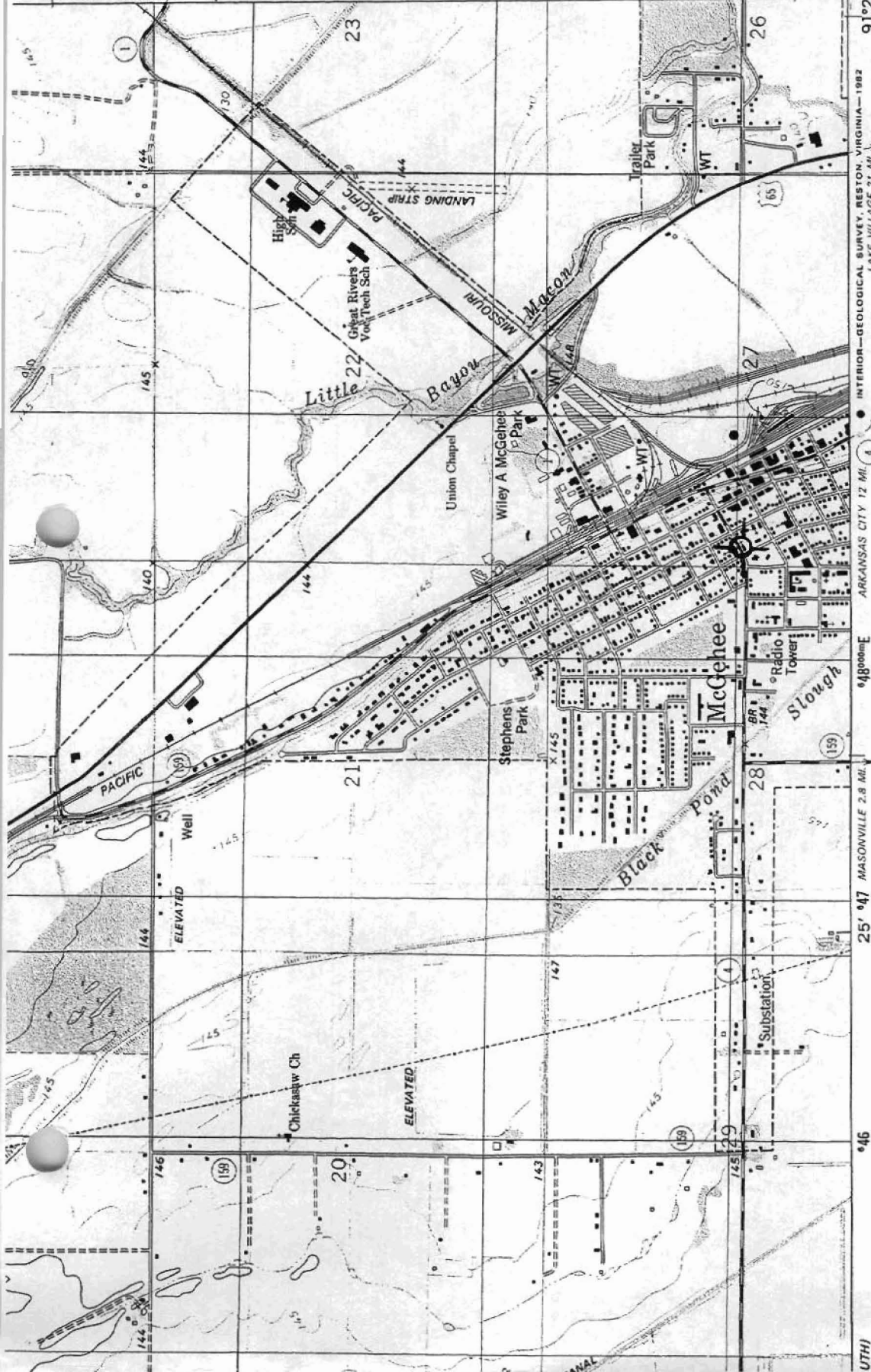








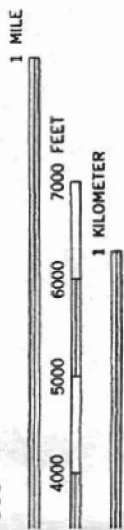
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ROAD CLASSIFICATION

- Primary highway, hard surface —————
- Light-duty road, hard or improved surface ————
- Secondary highway, hard surface ————
- Unimproved road ————
- Interstate Route U. S. Route State Route



AL 5 FEET
 DATUM OF 1929

MC GEHEE NORTH, ARK.
 NW/4 MCGHEE 15' QUADRANGLE
 N3337.5-W9122.5/7.5

MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
 COLORADO 80225, OR RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092
 N. LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS 72204
 D SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

1981

DMA 7751 III NW-SERIES V884