

ROBERT W. SEBESTA

## Book Excerpt

### Early Churches in South Dakota: A Lasting Legacy

Although he did not realize it at the time, Robert W. Sebesta took on a monumental task when he began visiting rural churches around his former home of Yankton, South Dakota, in the early 2000s. His casual interest quickly became a mission to record their existence in photographs, and his collection of images grew as he returned numerous times to explore the entire state, with its varied people, religious denominations, and church architecture. The history of the congregations intrigued him as well, and he set out to create a book that related what he could discover about their past along with a visual record of those churches built before 1930 that survived into the first decades of the 2000s.

Published by the South Dakota Historical Society Press in 2018, Sebesta's *Early Churches in South Dakota: A Lasting Legacy* opens with an essay on South Dakota churches and their architecture by Elizabeth J. Almlie, historic preservation specialist with the State Historic Preservation Office. Sebesta then tells the story of the state's oldest surviving church, the Old Vangen Lutheran Church built near Mission Hill in 1869. His subsequent chapters are organized by decade, from the 1870s through the 1920s. Each begins with an historical overview of the period, followed by brief histories of selected churches along with Sebesta's color images.

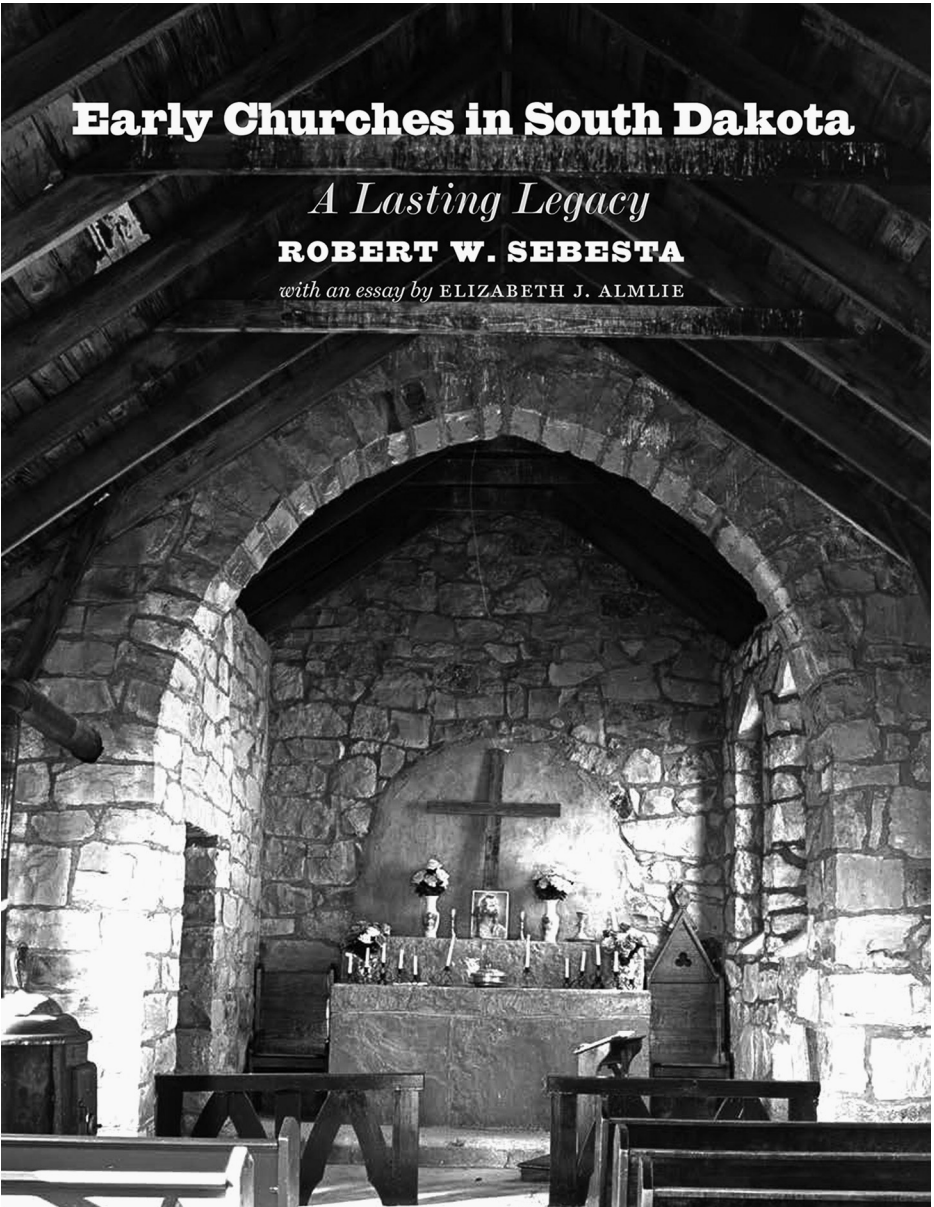
The final chapter—roughly half the book—is filled with photographs of every surviving church the author's research uncovered that had been constructed before 1930. That decade, when drought and the Great Depression prompted South Dakota's own exodus, left fewer people to attend the scores of churches built up to that time, and many buildings vanished. Sebesta's record of those that survive includes more than six hundred fifty images, organized by county and identified

# Early Churches in South Dakota

## *A Lasting Legacy*

**ROBERT W. SEBESTA**

*with an essay by* ELIZABETH J. ALMLIE



by name, location, year of construction, and the date the photograph was taken. Some are large structures still in their glory, while others are empty shells, ghosts of their former selves.

Highlighted here are churches that played roles in the lives of American Indians in South Dakota. Selected from the book's various chapters, they began as mission churches, both Protestant and Catholic, intended to convert and acculturate those who had known entirely different ways of life. Several remain in use as churches today.

### **First Presbyterian Church**

*Flandreau, 1873*

In 1862, conflict between the United States government and the Dakotas, or Santees, in Minnesota erupted in what is now called the Dakota War of 1862.<sup>1</sup> Following the war, government officials held the Santees they arrested for trial in a prison in Mankato, Minnesota, while their families were sent to Fort Snelling. The Santee families were moved several times, including a forced stay at the Crow Creek Indian Reservation in Dakota Territory. Eventually, they were moved to the Niobrara Indian Reservation (later named the Santee Indian Reservation) in northern Nebraska. After military trials ended with the execution of thirty-eight warriors in Mankato, the remaining prisoners were eventually relocated to Niobrara, where they were reunited with their families after nearly three years of separation. On 21 July 1866, under the guidance of Rev. John P. Williamson, 382 Indians, including 225 who had been moved from Crow Creek, formed the Pilgrim Presbyterian Church.<sup>2</sup> Reverend Williamson had been working with the Santee prisoners during their captivity in Minnesota.

For the next two years, the Santees were uncertain of their future. The government had moved their agency several times, and they feared

1. For more on the Dakota War of 1862, see Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, eds., *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), and Mary Hawker Bakeman and Antona M. Richardson, eds., *Trail of Tears: Minnesota's Dakota Indian Exile Begins* (Roseville, Minn.: Prairie Echoes Press, 2008).

2. Bruce D. Forbes, "Presbyterian Beginnings in South Dakota, 1840–1900," *South Dakota History* 7 (Spring 1977): 119.

they would be relocated to a more arid place. Some of the leaders were invited to participate in the negotiations of the Laramie Treaty of 1868, which they did. The treaty allowed any Indian who did not receive a tract of land on a reservation to homestead on public lands, provided they relinquished their tribal rights to government annuities. Successful homesteaders would be granted citizenship. Given the uncertainty of their lives, some Dakotas began to consider leaving the reservation and seeking homesteads. In October of 1868, several Santee families went north to hunt and to search for a suitable place for homesteading. They found such a place on a bend in the Big Sioux River, near the present-day town of Flandreau in Moody County. It was a fertile valley with trees along the river and plentiful game. In the last week of February 1869, one to two dozen Santee families, along with Reverend Williamson, began building log houses there. Because they had few horses, many of these travelers walked the one hundred and thirty miles from Niobrara to the “bend in the river.” During the difficult journey, they encountered a blinding Northern Great Plains blizzard and received rations from Fort Dakota, which was near the present site of Sioux Falls. On 3 October, forty-seven inhabitants of the new Santee village met and formed the Church at the River Bend, or River Bend Church.

In June of 1870, twenty-five Santee men signed a document in Yankton that forfeited their rights to annuities from the government and stated their desire to homestead on public land. During the summer of 1871, the Santee began to build a log meeting house to be used as a church. On 1 August, J. W. Edwards of Marquette, Michigan, contributed five hundred dollars for the construction of a church, followed by a bequest from the Second Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Ohio, for another two hundred dollars. The log construction was immediately halted, and plans were made to build a wood-frame meeting house. The Santees purchased lumber from Windom, Minnesota, eighty miles east of the new settlement, and hauled it by wagon to their building site.

The original frame meeting house soon became inadequate as more and more Santee people moved from Nebraska to the Bend in the River community. A new, larger church was a necessity. In August of 1873,



First Presbyterian Church, Flandreau, Moody County, 1873 [8/9/2006]

Reverend Williamson visited the new community from the Yankton reservation and offered to pay for some of the lumber to build a new church. The government bought the original meeting house for one thousand dollars and used it as a day school, first for Indian children and later for both Indian and white children. After its restoration in 1992, this meeting house stands today in the Moody County Museum grounds about six miles from its original location.



For the new church, the Santees purchased the lumber in Winona, in southeast Minnesota. Because of a lack of soft wood around Winona, white pine logs were shipped from Wisconsin and Minnesota to the lumber mill in Winona. Railroad cars carried the lumber to Marshall, Minnesota, where it was unloaded to oxen-pulled wagons, which hauled it the eighty miles to the church's building site, a journey that took several days.

The church design was for a twenty-four-by-fifty-foot building, with eight arched top windows, wainscoting, pine panels for the walls and ceiling, and a tall steeple. Francis and Anne Hawley purchased a fifteen-acre plot on a hill overlooking the river valley for fifteen dollars, and a local carpenter, P. A. Vannice, who was also the government schoolteacher, was hired to build the church. Men of the congregation helped. They used concrete, quartzite, and fieldstone to build the foundation. Church members donated \$175 for a four-hundred pound bell for the church, made in Troy, New York.

This structure is the oldest continuously used church in South Dakota. During the early years of the First Presbyterian Church, it was used by the non-Indian Second Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist congregations until they built their own churches. In 2003, the church was completely restored, including replacement of the steeple. One of the major accomplishments of this church congregation was the establishment of the first Indian school in Flandreau in 1879.<sup>3</sup>

### **Ascension Presbyterian Church**

*rural Peever, 1874*

Ascension Presbyterian Church is the oldest church in both Roberts County and the northeast part of what became South Dakota. The congregation was formed in 1868 with forty-five members who built a frame church six years later in 1874. The Ascension Presbyterian Church is located five miles south and four miles west of the small town of Peever in Spring Grove Township. The town, with a 2010 population of 168, is about eight miles west of the Minnesota border and

3. *An Experiment in Faith: The Journey of the Mdewakanton Dakota Who Settled on the Bend in the River* (n.p., 2003), [santeesioux.com](http://santeesioux.com); *History of Moody County* (Flandreau, S.Dak.: Moody County Historical Society, 1986), p. 18.



Ascension Lutheran Church, rural Peever, Roberts County [7/17/2007]

within the Lake Traverse Indian Reservation. The Lake Traverse Treaty of 1867 created the reservation, which straddles present-day South Dakota and North Dakota. It was originally formed to be a home for parts of the Santee tribe, specifically the Sisseton and Wahpeton sub-tribes. Indian churches on reservations at that time were given forty acres of land.

The congregation, organized in 1868, did not name the church solely for the ascension of Christ during the first Holy Week. Instead, the church was built in a hilly area, and many members had to ascend at least one hill to attend services. The second minister of the church, Rev. John B. Renville, who was ordained in 1865, was the first Santee Indian to become an ordained Presbyterian minister. He served the church for thirty-three years, from 1870 until his death in 1903. The church is still in regular use.<sup>4</sup>

4. Roberts County Centennial Committee, comp., *Roberts County History* (Sisseton, S.Dak.: By the Compilers, 1961), p. 73.

## **Brown Earth Presbyterian Church**

*rural Stockholm, 1877*

Not long after the establishment of the Lake Traverse Indian Reservation, the residents split into two opposing groups: the “church party,” members of which had converted to Christianity, and the “scout party,” whose members had served as scouts for the army in the Dakota War of 1862. The Homestead Act had been extended to Indians, providing that they relinquish their tribal rights to annuities. This factor, among others, induced about twenty-five families of the “church party” to leave the Lake Traverse Indian Reservation and establish a new settlement they named Brown Earth. In 1877, they built a Presbyterian church there, not surprisingly named the Brown Earth Church. The structure is located two miles north and two miles east of the small town of Stockholm (with a 2010 population of 108), in southwest Grant County.<sup>5</sup>

5. Information about the Brown Earth Church is found on the historical marker inside the church.



Brown Earth Presbyterian Church, rural Stockholm, Grant County, 1877 [7/16/2007]



Built from oak logs of local origin, the church is sometimes called the Old Indian Church. Although likely begun with great expectations, the settlement soon declined. In 1886, there were thirty-three families in the settlement, but only a dozen had received homesteads. When the Dawes Act in 1887 allotted each Indian head of a family the same amount of land on the reservation that white settlers were given on other government land, some of the people at Brown Earth chose to return to their original homes in Minnesota. Prior to this time, all reservation lands were owned by Indian tribes collectively rather than by individuals. The Brown Earth Church was abandoned after 1886.

Six years later, the Elim Covenant of Stockholm, South Dakota, bought the abandoned building; in 1901, they sold it to the Christian Church at Strandburg. In the late 1920s, American Legion Post No. 171 in Stockholm and Strandburg took responsibility for maintaining the building. They installed a concrete floor and replaced some of the original logs. The Old Settlers Society and Grant County Historical Association purchased the church in 1945, and in the next decade, the Peppy Pals 4-H Club planted trees near the structure. Since then, it has been the site of school and county picnics and an occasional worship service.

## **Oahe Chapel**

*rural Pierre, 1877*

Congregational minister Rev. Thomas L. Riggs and his first wife, Cornelia Foster Riggs, established the Oahe Mission in 1874 to serve the Sioux Indians in what later became central South Dakota. The mission was located on the east bank of the Missouri River, about five miles upriver from Pierre at the former site of an Arikara village named Ti Tanke Ohe. The mission adopted the name, although it was soon shortened to Oahe. The first building at the mission was a log house, but by 1877, it had become too small to use as a meeting house. The Lakotas in the vicinity of the mission helped Reverend Riggs build the Oahe Chapel, using lumber brought by steamboat from Sioux City.

Like many such structures, the chapel served as both church and school in its first few years before the mission opened the Oahe Industrial School for Indian boys in 1883 and a second boarding school for Indian girls in the 1890s. The students of the original school, which



Oahe Chapel, rural Pierre, Hughes County, 1877 [5/25/2010]

included both children and adults, learned to read the Bible in Dakota first, and later in English. In the early years of the church, religious services were held in the Dakota language, but, by the 1930s, all were in English.

In the 1950s, Oahe Dam was built about five miles south of the mission, which would be inundated when the dam was completed. In 1957, the chapel was donated to the State of South Dakota to be maintained by the State Historical Society. It was temporarily moved to a location on higher ground and was moved again in 1964 to its present site near the east end of Oahe Dam. The Oahe Chapel Preservation Society and the State Historical Society, which now owns the building, restored the chapel in the late 1980s. It is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>6</sup>

6. U.S., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, "Oahe Chapel," [nps.gov/nr/travel/pierre\\_fortpierre/oahe\\_chapel\\_pierre.html](https://nps.gov/nr/travel/pierre_fortpierre/oahe_chapel_pierre.html).

## Saint John's Episcopal Church

*rural Oglala, 1888*

Little is known about the origins of Saint John's Church, eight miles north of Oglala in what is now Oglala Lakota County. The Episcopalians had formed a mission near Pine Ridge Agency, which they named Holy Cross Mission in 1880, and Saint John's Church, built originally in 1888, was part of that mission complex and is most often referred to as Church of the Holy Cross, although it is also called Church of the Holy Fellowship.<sup>7</sup> Situated near the current town of Pine Ridge, it played a significant role following the Wounded Knee Massacre on 29 Decem-

7. This building is called the Church of the Holy Fellowship in Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, *That They May Have Life: The Episcopal Church in South Dakota, 1859–1976* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), p. 61.



Saint John's Episcopal Church, rural Oglala, Oglala Lakota County, 1888 [9/9/2010]



Interior, Saint John's Episcopal Church

ber 1890. As a snow storm closed in, the United States Cavalry placed thirty-three wounded Indians, mostly women and children, in wagons and hauled them to the Pine Ridge Agency. For lack of a more suitable place, they were housed in the church. Before putting the wounded in the church, the staff and volunteers removed the pews and placed hay on the floor as padding, laying the patients on blankets and quilts atop the hay. The church had been decorated for Christmas, and a sign hung above the pulpit reading "Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men." In spite of the efforts of Dr. Charles Eastman and some agency charity workers, most of the injured Lakotas perished.<sup>8</sup> Sometime after 1890, this church building was moved to its current location eight miles north of Oglala and renamed Saint John's Church.

8. In 1890, Eastman, who had received his medical training at Boston University, was the agency physician at Pine Ridge. Kay Graber, ed., *Sister to the Sioux: The Memoirs of Elaine Goodale Eastman, 1885–91* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), pp. 161–62.

## Saint Ignatius Catholic Church

*White River, 1899*

In 1892, members of the Two Kettles band of Sioux Indians living in the White River area, which was still part of the Great Sioux Reservation, asked to be baptized as Catholics. Father Florentine Digmann, S. J., visited them and discovered that some of the Indians also wanted a church building. On 8 December 1897, forty acres of land on the Little White River were granted to provide space for a church. A cemetery had already been established on a hill on this property, a little more than a mile west of the eventual site of the town of White River. In July 1899, construction began on the church, using a donation of fifteen hundred dollars from Mother Katherine Drexel, a Sister of the Blessed Sacrament and a wealthy philanthropist in Philadelphia. The Jesuit Brothers of Saint Francis Mission, led by Brother Andrew Hartmann, built the church. They painted the church red, and it quickly became a landmark for the area. Father Digmann was the parish priest until 1905.

In 1921, the church was moved down the hill to the valley near the Little White River. This move was not without its costs. One of the men working on the move, Silas Standing Elk, injured his leg and died about a year later. While the church was in the valley, Grothe Hall was built near it. It was named for the parish priest at the time, Father Henry Grothe. The catechist, Francis Bordeaux, Sr., and his family lived in the hall for many years.

The church and the hall were moved to the town of White River in 1961. A local business in Winner managed the move. Soon after, the parish priest, Father George Stroh, did some remodeling of the building, including refinishing the floor himself. The donations continued. A parish in Fort Pierre brought in pews and a table; Saint Nicholas Church in Valentine, Nebraska, sent Stations of the Cross; the Roberts girls donated a statue of Mary; Tony Borszich of Mission built an altar and lectern. Buildings were also donated. A government-built house was brought to the site of the church from Spring Creek to be used as a rectory. A hall was moved in from Red Leaf, where it had been used as a church from 1955 to 1958 and in Norris before that.

A major remodeling of Grothe Hall and the church was done in



the spring of 1981. The new décor was chosen to emphasize the Indian roots of the congregation. Local people did most of the interior design. Christine Fogg designed and painted the decorations on the exterior. She also created the heads on the statues of Saint Joseph and Mary in the interior, which were designed to appear as Indians in form, complexion, and clothing. Fr. Bill Stolzman sculpted the statue of Jesus. Homer Whirlwind Soldier did the woodwork.

Controversy arose in 1966 when a new parish priest, Father Leon Rausch, decided to close the Sacred Heart Church in White River, which had a congregation that was nearly all white. His plan was for the congregation of Sacred Heart to join the congregation of Saint Ignatius. After a good deal of sometimes heated discussion, the bishop



Saint Ignatius Catholic Church, White River, Mellette County, 1899 [5/29/2010]

decided against the closure of Sacred Heart. Although separate churches for Indians and whites may have appeared scandalous, the decision was made to allow the two groups to have their own approaches to worship and to control the style of their worship spaces. On various occasions, the two parishes worshipped together.<sup>9</sup> While Saint Ignatius Church is no longer in use, the building still stands in White River, near the center of Mellette County. The town's 2010 population was 581.

### **Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church**

*Saint Francis, 1922*

In the early 1870s, the government assigned religious denominations to individual reservations to administer the agencies and educate the Indians. The Catholic church was largely left out of this process, possibly because several members of President Ulysses S. Grant's administration were Masons. However, some of the Teton Sioux had had contact with an early missionary, Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, a Jesuit priest who was born and educated in Belgium, and he had impressed them favorably. As a result, Chief Spotted Tail of the Rosebud Agency and Chief Red Cloud of the Pine Ridge Agency traveled to Washington in September of 1877 and met with President Rutherford B. Hayes to ask him to send Jesuit clergymen, whom they called Black Robes, to their reservations to educate their people. However, it did not happen quickly. After the death of Spotted Tail in 1881, Chief Two Strike of Rosebud directly invited the Jesuits to come to the reservation and establish a school. In response, Father Jutz and Brother Nunlist went to the Rosebud Agency and, with the help of a large donation from Mother Katherine Drexel, a rich nun from Philadelphia who later became a saint, built a forty-by-ninety-five-foot frame church in 1885 at the future site of the town of Saint Francis. Brother Henry Wissing served as architect and construction supervisor for the church, which they named Saint Charles Borromeo.

Father Florentine Digmann arrived at this mission in 1888. He brought with him three Franciscan nuns, Sisters Kostka, Rosalia, and

9. *75 Years in Mellette County* (White River, S.Dak.: Mellette County Historical Society, 1986), pp. 556–59.

Alcantara. These three established the Saint Francis of Assisi Mission School near Saint Charles Borromeo Church. Father Digmann went on to create thirty-seven mission stations around the reservation. Because many of the people on the reservation eventually moved to towns, the church gradually closed these missions, and most have disappeared. Only six parishes now serve the reservation. On 20 January 1916, the church and many of the mission buildings burned down.



Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Saint Francis, Todd County, 1922 [8/16/2005]



Interior, Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church

The following year, the parishioners, led by Brother Andrew Hartman, began building a new church. To guard against another fire, he and his workers constructed the new building with eighteen-inch-thick concrete walls. The church, decorated with Sioux motifs, was completed and dedicated in 1922. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the church underwent renovation. The whole interior was redecorated. Artist George Hatcher accomplished this painstaking task. The twenty-four stained-glass windows were completely re-leaded. The exterior of the church is distinguished by its purple color.<sup>10</sup>

10. "Mission History" and "St. Charles Borromeo Parish," St. Francis Mission among the Lakota, [sfmission.org](http://sfmission.org); Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 1:512, 516–19.



## Chapel of the Holy Spirit (Episcopal)

*rural Firesteel, 1923*

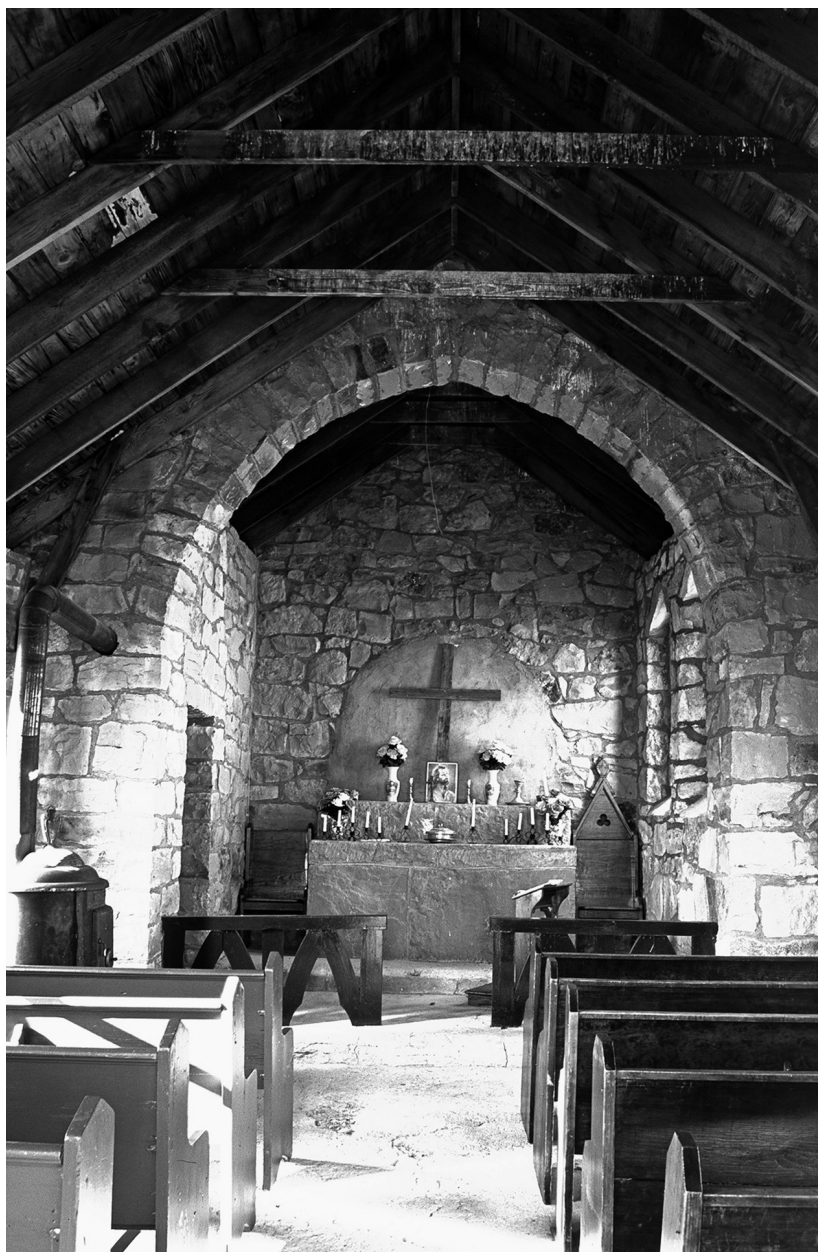
Firesteel is in the northwest part of Dewey County on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation (near its northern border). The town, established in 1910, was named after the nearby Firesteel Creek. In the late 1880s, Episcopalian missionaries built a small one-story wooden building as a preaching station along Firesteel Creek in Corson County on the southern border of Standing Rock, about ten miles north-northwest of Firesteel. As the wooden structure aged, the Indian congregation worked to put money aside for a new church.

In 1922, a surprise bequest made a new building possible sooner than expected. Mrs. George Cabot Ward of New York, a lifelong friend of Episcopal Bishop William Hobart Hare, had financially supported



Chapel of the Holy Spirit (Episcopal), rural Firesteel, Corson County, 1923 [8/18/2005]





Interior, Chapel of the Holy Spirit

his missionary work in the Northern Great Plains, in particular the building of churches on the reservations. The Society of the Double Temple in New York, which was also involved in philanthropy for the Indians of the Northern Great Plains, wanted to create a memorial to Mrs. Ward in South Dakota to recognize her many donations. They decided to build two memorial chapels in South Dakota. The northern chapel was to be built at the site of the preaching station on Firesteel Creek. The Society contributed the balance necessary to build the new church in Mrs. Ward's honor. Alfred Merton Githens, a New York architect, designed the architectural plans for the chapel for no fee. Friends of Mrs. Ward contributed the furnishings, altar books, a bell, and a communion service.

Construction began in the summer of 1922. Frank Waggoner of Keldron, a town in the northwest corner of the Standing Rock reservation, directed the construction of the chapel. Waggoner was a stonemason and building contractor. In 1890, he had built the coffin for Sitting Bull. His wife, Josephine McCarthy Waggoner, was a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. Waggoner managed a crew of Indian volunteers, who quarried blue-gray sandstone blocks from a ridge above the site of the chapel. The blocks were rolled down the hill as far as they would go on their own. They were then loaded onto a stone boat (a flat sled without wheels), which a team of horses pulled to the construction site. Waggoner, with the help of volunteers, finished the rough stones there before they were placed on the walls of the building. The chapel was dedicated on 5 June 1923. The local people refer to it as the Old Stone Church. Two of the distinguishing features of the chapel are the large stone arch over the altar and the seven-foot-high Niobrara Cross embedded in the front wall above the doorway. Bishop Hare designed the Niobrara Cross in 1874, and small versions were given to Indians when they were confirmed to Christianity. The walls of the chapel are eighteen to twenty inches thick.

By 2000, the chapel needed serious restoration. For this project, the Mary Chilton Daughters of the Revolution Foundation donated seventy-five hundred dollars; the Deadwood Historic Preservation Fund donated ten thousand dollars; the descendants of Frank and Jo-

sephine Waggoner made a significant donation; an anonymous donor contributed ten thousand dollars; and numerous smaller donations were received. The two primary parts of the restoration were the complete replacement of the roof and the tuck pointing (removing and replacing mortar) of the stonework. Currently, the chapel is accessible only by several miles of travel through a private ranch. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1996. The chapel sometimes is used for special events, such as weddings.<sup>11</sup>

11. Jack Bickel, "Holy Spirit Chapel: 'The Old Stone Church'" and "Restoration Gave Chapel New Life," in *Timber Lake and Area Centennial History, 1910–2010* (Timber Lake, S.Dak.: Timber Lake and Area Historical Society, 2009), pp. 168–72.

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*On the covers:* Churches are highlighted in the 2018 annual historic preservation issue of *South Dakota History*. Pictured on the front is the steeple of Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church in Brown County. The interior of Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Saint Francis appears on the back.

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