

BRAD TENNANT

## **“In the footsteps of the pioneer”**

### **Ethnic Settlers and Their Churches in Brown County**

Early twentieth-century author Ole E. Rølvaag focused his writing on the Norwegian immigrant experience in South Dakota and the northern plains. In *America-Breve*, one of his novels based on his own journey as a Norwegian immigrant, Rølvaag illustrated the importance of religious faith in the lives of new settlers on the plains. “There was no force other than the church,” he claimed, “which could draw mind and thought away from the struggle for survival.”<sup>1</sup> Half a century after the publication of Rølvaag’s book, the United States Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, creating the National Register of Historic Places program as a means to “identify, evaluate, and protect America’s historic and archeological resources.”<sup>2</sup> In South Dakota’s Brown County, four churches appear on the National Register for their significance in the settlement of the area: the Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church, the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church of Savo Township, the Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church, and the Welsh Presbyterian Church. As their names indicate, ethnicity played an important role in the establishment of each church, which in

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1. Quoted in [Lynwood E. Oyos], “Protestant Faith and Learning,” in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Harry F. Thompson (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 2005), p. 335. Ole E. Rølvaag’s novel was later translated and published as *The Third Life of Per Smevik*. See Rølvaag, *The Third Life of Per Smevik*, trans. Ella Valborg Tweet and Solveig Zempel (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

2. U.S., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, “What Is the National Register of Historic Places?,” <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/what-is-the-national-register.htm>, accessed 30 Nov. 2018. The National Park Service oversees the National Register of Historic Places, which in South Dakota is administered by the State Historic Preservation Office. Among the office’s duties are evaluating properties

turn served important roles in the lives of the immigrants who settled Brown County.<sup>3</sup>

At slightly less than two thousand square miles, Brown County is one of the largest counties in eastern South Dakota. Located in the northeastern part of the state in the James River Valley, it abuts North Dakota's Dickey and Sargent counties on the north, with its eastern edge lying just over fifty miles from the Minnesota state line. The region's relatively flat topography resulted from glaciation during the Wisconsin Glacial Stage approximately ten to seventy-five thousand years ago. During the late nineteenth century, the treeless prairie appealed to settlers, many of whom were immigrants seeking land suitable for farming.<sup>4</sup>

The Dakota Territorial Legislature officially established Brown County in 1879, and surveying of its southern reaches began in earnest that summer. In 1880, territorial governor Nehemiah G. Ordway appointed John James, Clarence Johnson, and Don McKenzie to serve as the county's first commissioners. Once the gubernatorial appointees convened on 14 September 1880, they designated individuals to fill a variety of offices and named Columbia as its seat to begin the process of officially organizing the county. Settlers soon streamed into the area looking to secure land claims, causing the population to jump from 353 in 1880 to approximately 8,000 only three years later.<sup>5</sup> The rapid settlement of the county coincided with the territory-wide growth in what

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proposed for nomination for their significance in a number of areas, including ethnic history, religion, and architecture, all of which are especially pertinent to the churches explored here.

3. Two other churches in Brown County, Trinity Episcopal Church in Groton and First United Methodist Church in Aberdeen, are also listed on the National Register of Historic Places but are not closely associated with any single ethnic group.

4. *Brown County History* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: Brown County Museum and Historical Society, 1980), p. 3; Edward Patrick Hogan and Erin Hogan Fouberg, *The Geography of South Dakota*, rev. ed. (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1998), pp. 10, 17.

5. *Brown County History*, pp. 69, 71; Arthur L. Rusch, *County Capitols: The Courthouses of South Dakota* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014), p. 22. As was a common practice, the territorial legislature named the county for one of its members, Alfred Brown from Hutchinson County. Whether he ever visited his namesake county is not known.

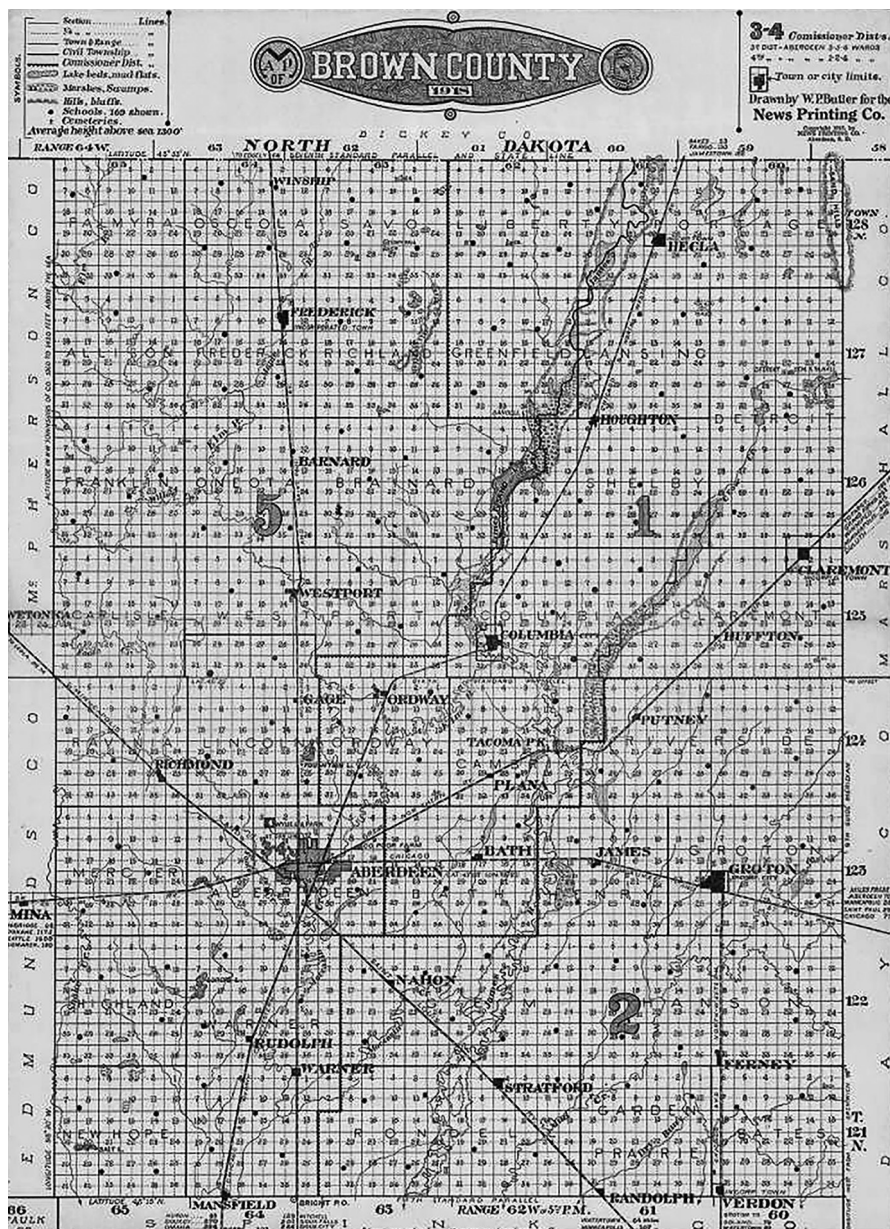
became known as the Great Dakota Boom of 1878–1887. During this “Dakota fever” period, the region witnessed substantial increases in railroad miles, townsites, land filings, and acres farmed. Brown County continued to experience growth, reaching 12,241 residents in 1885 and 16,855 by the year after South Dakota became a state.<sup>6</sup>

Those who came to Brown County had three legal options for acquiring land, all enacted by Congress to encourage western expansion. The first was the Homestead Act of 1862. The act required a person to file a claim through a land office and then improve 160 acres, also called a quarter section, by building a suitable house and cultivating a portion of the property. At the end of five years, the claimant “proved up” and received patent for the land. A second option came from the preemption clause in the Homestead Act. This article allowed a homesteader to purchase the land for \$1.25 per acre after six months’ residency, preempting the five-year waiting period in the process. The Timber Culture Act, as amended in 1878, provided a third option. Under its provisions, a settler could gain title to another quarter section by planting and maintaining ten acres of trees on the land over an eight-year period. Each option allowed early settlers to gain 160 acres of land for minimal cost. Individuals could also use a combination of these measures to add acreage beyond their initial quarter section. While some took advantage of the land acts only to turn around and sell the claims for a profit, many others, including a growing number of European immigrants, utilized one or more to start a new life.<sup>7</sup>

Because railroad lines did not reach Brown County until June 1881, many of the early settlers who came between 1879 and 1881 journeyed from Watertown, the location of the nearest land office. Beginning in May 1882 until late that summer, immigrant settlers regularly filled one

6. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2004), pp. 158–60, 165; U.S., Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890, Part I* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), p. 311. The census for 1890 showed a total population of 328,808 for the newly created state.

7. *Early History of Brown County, South Dakota* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: Brown County Territorial Pioneer Committee, 1965), p. 13; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 170–73; “Homestead Act (1862),” in *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, ed. Howard R. Lamar (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 492.



This 1918 map shows many of the towns European immigrants established in Brown County during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

to six cars of each train that arrived in Aberdeen.<sup>8</sup> This flood of people marked the beginning of the settlement of Brown County in earnest. A variety of ethnic groups, including significant numbers of Irish, Germans from Russia, Germans, Norwegians, Finns, Swedes, and Welsh, made up the majority of the county's new residents.<sup>9</sup>

European immigrants had found their way to Dakota Territory well before Brown County's founding. These pioneers created a diverse ethnic population. Historian Robert F. Karolevitz noted that from the territory's early history, it had become home to emerging "islands" of nationalities and ethnic settlements. In 1861, William Jayne, Dakota Territory's inaugural governor, arranged for the printing of his first official message to the legislature in English, Norwegian, German, and French. Jayne's action gives insight into the pattern of ethnic settlement in Dakota Territory, and later North Dakota and South Dakota, into the early twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

As with most late nineteenth-century immigrant populations, ethnic groups tended to settle near others who shared the same language, customs, and religion. Churches followed a similar pattern and were among the first structures built in South Dakota's emerging towns and rural communities. Beyond serving as a place of worship, the local church became a center for social events. Because it often reflected the congregants' ethnic identity, it also served as a means of preserving their cultural heritage. By 1890, the first full year of South Dakota's statehood, 774 churches, with a comparable number of church halls, had already been established. As historians David Erpestad and David Wood stress, churches provided their members with "symbolic centers of religious, social, and ethnic identification."<sup>11</sup> In Brown County, the

8. *Early History of Brown County*, pp. 13–14. For more on the extension of railroad lines into Brown County, see *Brown County History*, pp. 383–91.

9. For more on early Brown County ethnic groups, see Brad Tennant, "A Gathering of Peoples: The Ethnicity of Early-Day Brown County," in *Papers of the Twenty-third Annual Dakota History Conference, May 30–June 1, 1991*, ed. Arthur R. Huseboe (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1991), pp. 672–86.

10. Robert F. Karolevitz, *Challenge: The South Dakota Story* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Brevet Press, 1975), p. 88.

11. David Erpestad and David Wood, *Building South Dakota: A Historical Survey of the State's Architecture to 1945* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 1997), p. 59.



Gatherings like the Savo Township Finnish Lutheran Church picnic gave members of the ethnic community the opportunity to socialize with one another.

National Register of Historic Places recognizes the following four ethnic churches for their vital role in immigrants' religious and social lives.

### **Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church**

More than 750,000 Norwegians entered the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with over 75 percent of them arriving after 1880. In 1882 alone, more than twenty-nine thousand Norwegians sailed to America, many of whom eventually found their way to Dakota Territory. After reaching the United States, most stopped at other established Norwegian settlements in the Midwest to work and make money before reaching their ultimate goal: land-rich Dakota Territory. While some nineteenth-century immigrant populations left their homelands to escape oppressive governments, military conscription, or hunger, most Norwegians emigrated because of the lack of available farm land in Norway and the subsequent economic struggles for those who did not have property. Many young Norwegians viewed the United States and its abundance of tillable land as a place of new beginnings. Looking to establish viable farms, Norwegian immigrants flooded the prairies of modern-day eastern South Dakota, becoming the state's largest foreign-born population by 1900.<sup>12</sup>

12. Karolevitz, *Challenge*, p. 89; James S. Olson and Heather Olson Beal, *The Ethnic Dimension in American History*, 4th ed. (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp.

Norwegian settlers first arrived in what became Brown County in 1877. With the eventual extension of railroad service into the territory in the 1870s and improved conditions after five years of drought and locust infestation between 1873 and 1878, increasing numbers of Norwegian immigrants staked their claims in the years leading to South Dakota statehood. Letters to family members in Norway and railroad company fliers promoting immigration caused a further influx. After arriving, Norwegian settlers continued to use their native language at home, when visiting neighbors, and, especially, at church, where Norwegian-language services remained common until around 1920.<sup>13</sup>

Although several Brown County townships had noteworthy Norwegian populations, a significant number settled in Richland Township, southeast of Frederick, where they established the Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church. Stories that those first Richland settlers—Norwegians and others—passed down reflect the experiences of many immigrants to the region. They recounted spending weeks at sea traveling from the old country to the United States, then arriving in Brown County by covered wagons or railroad cars. Until their homesteads became productive, many held second jobs. The search for employment often took them away from their families and new homes for extended periods of time, with some going as far away as the Red River Valley in present-day North Dakota. Once their property became more established, they returned permanently to their homesteads.<sup>14</sup>

Settling on the open prairie, a region far different from the mountains and fjords of their homeland, presented a variety of hardships for the newcomers. They suddenly faced new and unfamiliar challenges, including the construction of suitable shelter, plowing of previously uncultivated prairie sod, prairie fires, and blizzards. Ole Rølvaag remarked that it was difficult for those who had not lived on the frontier to “imagine how the church has followed in the footsteps of the pioneer, followed him through struggle and suffering into the wilderness, into the forest, and out over the endless prairie.”<sup>15</sup>

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49–50; [Gary D. Olson], “Yankee and European Settlement,” in *New South Dakota History*, pp. 124–26.

13. *Brown County History*, p. 338; [Olson], “Yankee and European Settlement,” p. 125.

14. *Early History of Brown County*, p. 154.

15. Quoted in [Oyos], “Protestant Faith and Learning,” p. 335.

During the Great Dakota Boom years, Norwegian congregations built dozens of Lutheran churches throughout the territory. By statehood in 1889, there were 128 churches in South Dakota identified as Norwegian Lutheran. During the next quarter century, from 1890 to 1915, Norwegian communities built an additional 119 churches.<sup>16</sup> The pioneers in Brown County's Richland Township took part in this movement when they organized as the Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church congregation in 1885, naming it in honor of their primary point of departure, the municipality of Aurland, Norway. Lacking a church building, the Aurland Lutherans initially held their worship services in a schoolhouse constructed in 1884 called the Christie (later Sumption) School or in members' homes.<sup>17</sup>

In 1897, twelve years after the Aurland Lutherans officially organized, construction of the church began. Seven years later, in 1904, church members from southern Richland Township joined with those in northern Brainerd Township to finish the structure. Materials cost a total of eight hundred fifty dollars. Men of the congregation donated their labor and much of the equipment to both construct the building and finish its interior. Because congregants donated their free time, completion of the interior proceeded in piecemeal fashion. The Ladies Aid Society contributed by raising money that went specifically toward the purchase of the altar and the pews. The Junior Ladies Aid, meanwhile, raised funds primarily for the organ and lamps.<sup>18</sup> The congregation reportedly modeled their church's design on the one in Aurland, Norway, that dated back to 1202. Unfortunately, any similarities are difficult to confirm, as no images of the church from their homeland have been located, but it is not inconceivable that details, such as the pediments above the windows, may have been inspired by the earlier church.<sup>19</sup>

16. Rex C. Myers, "An Immigrant Heritage: South Dakota's Foreign-Born in the Era of Assimilation," *South Dakota History* 19 (Summer 1989): 151.

17. *Early History of Brown County*, p. 154–55.

18. *Ibid.*; *Brown County History*, p. 125. The interior was not completed until 1905, but the church is typically listed as being finished in 1908.

19. *Exploring Brown County: A Guide to Sites on the National Register of Historic Places* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: Aberdeen/Brown County Landmarks Commission, 1989), pp. 9–10.



With its simple architecture and associated cemetery, the Aurland United Lutheran Church typified many prairie churches in eastern Dakota Territory.



The pediments crowning the windows of the Aurland Lutheran church may reflect those of the immigrants' home church in Norway.

The Richland Township church itself consisted of a simple framed structure presenting a modest exterior appearance common among many small rural churches. The interior, however, included several more elaborate features that made the building a beautiful place of worship. The white and gold colors of the altar make it stand out prominently in the sanctuary. An impressive canvas of Christ ascending to heaven that covers the Gothic reredos serves as the ornate backdrop. Additionally, a traditional semicircular communion rail fronts the altar. Aurland Lutheran also possessed many features typical of its contemporary Lutheran churches, such as a modest wooden baptismal font, a Gothic chair for the pastor, and a reed organ, which produced sound when the organist pumped a foot pedal.<sup>20</sup>

The Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church served as an important community center for Richland Township residents throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Although socializing after the weekly Sunday services became a popular practice, three annual

20. Ibid.



The painting of Christ ascending provided a focal point for worshipers in the Aurland church.

events tended to draw the biggest gatherings of the Aurland congregation: one in connection with the Fourth of July, one for Christmas, and the annual Ladies' Aid Picnic.<sup>21</sup>

Ethnic food often played an important role in these social gatherings. Such events usually featured a fruit soup, known as *frukt suppe*, consisting of sago, prunes, raisins, and other available fruit ingredients. Occasions such as Christmas also featured the standard *lutefisk* dinner. According to one history of Richland Township, the congregants were "very fond" of its centerpiece, reconstituted dried cod. Coffee was the common drink, but, with real coffee in short supply, making it involved some creative measures on the worshipers' part. This process often involved combining parched barley with molasses and chicory, then baking or drying the mixture before grinding it by hand.<sup>22</sup> Although established before the construction of the church, these occasions became commonplace and a standard part of the social aspect of the congregation.

By the late 1920s, demographic changes in Brown County, specifically fewer first-generation Norwegians, initiated the decline of Aurland's status as the central gathering place for the township and forced the congregation to adapt. The exclusive use of English in the weekly services became more frequent by the end of the decade. Eventually, dwindling membership caused the congregation to discontinue regular church services in 1953.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Aurland's diminishing role in the community, the remaining members of the congregation and other locals took steps to memorialize its importance to Richland Township's early history. In 1961, the Ladies Aid Society arranged for the placement of a fieldstone monument in front of the church that included two memorial plaques and an enclosed display of items used in early church services. One plaque provides a brief church history, which is dedicated to the "memory

21. *Early History of Brown County*, p. 154–55.

22. *Ibid.*

23. U.S., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, "Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church, Frederick, S.Dak.," sec. 8, p. 3, South Dakota State Historic Preservation Office (hereafter SHPO), South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre; *Early History of Brown County*, p. 154.

of the Pioneer Members of the Aurland Congregation” and acknowledges those who contributed to the various interior fixtures. The second plaque includes a list of the church’s early pioneer members and founders. On 22 August 1993, community members dedicated a special service at the church to its forty-one original charter members from 1885.<sup>24</sup>

The National Park Service recognized the church’s importance to the history of Brown County when it listed Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. In its nomination, the State Historic Preservation Office noted the church’s significance “in the areas of ethnic settlement, religion, and vernacular architecture.” The nomination further described the structure as a “well-preserved example of a simple, frame country church” that also “remains a symbol of Norwegian settlement in Brown County.” The nomination concluded, “Despite its simplicity, the church was well made and its furnishings reflect the spirit of its pioneer builders.”<sup>25</sup> As with many rural churches, the legacy of the local settlers who attended the Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church is still evident among the headstones found in the church’s cemetery.<sup>26</sup>

### **Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church**

Finnish pioneers represented a much smaller percentage of South Dakota’s early ethnic settlement, accounting for only 1,381 of the state’s residents according to the federal census in 1910.<sup>27</sup> In Brown County, Finns made up less than 5 percent of the population in 1930. Still, due to their concentration in Savo Township, the Finnish heritage remains evident and is represented on the National Register through the additions of Savo Hall (also known as Finnish National Society Hall) and the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church.<sup>28</sup> Similar to Aurland United

24. “Aurland Lutheran Church 1885–1953,” printed dedication service program, Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church, Frederick, S.Dak.

25. “Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church,” sec. 8, p. 3.

26. W. E. (“Gene”) Aisenbrey, *Monuments, Markers, Memorials of Brown County* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: Aberdeen/Brown County Landmarks Commission, 1998), pp. 24–25.

27. This statistic may be misleading because it includes only “Finnish-born” residents and not all people of Finnish descent who lived in other parts of the United States before coming to South Dakota. See Myers, “Immigrant Heritage,” p. 138.

28. [Olson], “Yankee and European Settlement,” p. 141; John P. Johansen, *Immigrant*

Norwegian Lutheran Church, the Finnish Apostolic Church held a prominent place in the community's early history.

In 1881, the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad advanced north from Aberdeen toward the site of what soon became the town of Frederick. At the time, Finnish-born Kustaa Frederick Bergstadius served as the official in charge of immigration and settlement for the railroad. He asked a close friend and fellow Finn, Erik Pikkarainen, to investigate the potential for agriculture and settlement in Dakota Territory. When Pikkarainen reported favorably, news spread quickly. From the newly founded town of Frederick (Bergstadius's middle name), Finnish settlers spread out to the north and east, establishing Savo Township, named for Bergstadius's home province in Finland.<sup>29</sup> Articles in Finnish-American newspapers, such as the *Amerikan Suomalainen*, further spread the news of the farming potential of the "Zim," or James,

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*Settlements and Social Organization in South Dakota*, South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin no. 313 (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1937), p. 18; *Exploring Brown County*, pp. 11–12, 15–16. For more on Savo Hall and its preservation, see Tennant, "Gathering of Peoples," pp. 682–83.

29. *History of the Finnish Settlement in Brown and Dickey Counties of South and North Dakota, 1881–1955* (N.p.: [Savo Finnish Historical Society], 1955), p. 10.



These immigrant men were early members of the Savo Township Finnish Apostolic Lutheran congregation.

River Valley. With that promotion, almost eight hundred Finnish pioneers from Massachusetts, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Finland itself—mostly from the provinces of Oulu and Vaasa—settled in the territory’s newly created Brown and Dickey counties in the two years after 1881.<sup>30</sup>

As with the Norwegian settlers in Richland Township, the Finnish population of Savo Township was primarily Lutheran. Unlike their Norwegian neighbors, however, the Savo Finns identified with an apostolic sect, founded in Calumet, Michigan, in the 1870s. This apostolic character, which emphasized modest churches and personal devotion, generally meant that the churches’ architecture was less ornate and the services were less formal, or non-liturgical, than other Lutheran sects.<sup>31</sup> The Finnish Lutherans initially held services in homes that, in many cases, were nothing more than sod structures. Then, in 1884, community members constructed the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church about a mile south of the present-day border with North Dakota.<sup>32</sup> The community located the church on land that a local farmer, Matt Henhela, offered to them. Henhela promised to provide ten acres of his land for the construction of a church and the placement of a cemetery on the condition that church supporters plowed fifty acres for him in return. The Finnish settlers agreed, and forty men with plows pulled by oxen and horses reportedly fulfilled the requirement in a single day. Community members worked quickly to complete the structure, laying the foundation on 3 June 1884 and dedicating the church on Saint John’s Day, 24 June. The congregation, however, did not officially become the Apostolic Lutheran Church of Savo until 1887.<sup>33</sup>

Although several churches served Brown County’s Finnish population over the years, the apostolic church in Savo represents “the oldest

30. U.S., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, “The Architecture of Finnish Settlement in South Dakota” sec. 7, pg. 5, SHPO.

31. U.S., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, “The Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church of Savo Township, Frederick, S.Dak.,” sec. 8, p. 3, SHPO; Arnold A. Alanen, “Finnish Architecture,” in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David J. Wishart (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 79.

32. *Early History of Brown County*, p. 166; *Brown County History*, p. 123.

33. *Early History of Brown County*, p. 166; *Exploring Brown County*, p. 15. The death of



Built in 1884, the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church has been well cared for over the decades.

and best preserved example of 19th century Apostolic Lutheran pioneer settlement in South Dakota,” according to the Pioneer Church Restoration Association, which has maintained the structure as an important legacy of the Finnish settlement of Brown County since 1972.<sup>34</sup> Architecturally, the building represents a basic nave plan with a central aisle dividing the pews into two sections.<sup>35</sup> According to the National Register of Historic Places nomination, the church embodies an

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Henhela’s wife, Valborg, may have prompted his offer of land. She died during childbirth in June 1883, and, at the time, there was no church or cemetery in the area. She and her son were the first interments in the cemetery. Aisenbrey, *Monuments, Markers, Memorials*, p. 27.

34. “Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church,” sec. 8, p. 3.

35. “Nave” refers to the area of the church where the worshippers sit during services. Churches constructed on a nave plan are rectangular buildings with little to no additions beyond the nave. For a fuller description, see Erpestad and Wood, *Building South Dakota*, p. 63.

“American vernacular tradition and clearly reveals the underlying philosophy of this religious group in its simple, unadorned architecture.”<sup>36</sup> The apostolic mindset is apparent from the exterior, as the structure is a simple rectangular building with three windows on both the north and south sides. Likewise, the interior has a semicircular communion rail in front of a raised altar area but possesses no formal altar. Instead, the congregation used a simple table during their services. The absence of a cross or any religious paintings further defined the church’s apostolic nature.<sup>37</sup> With construction that reflects its founders’ ethnic and religious heritage, the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church has been listed on the National Register since 1984, the centennial of its construction.

Almost seventy years after the church’s completion, in 1952, the congregation decided it needed a new church and erected one across the

36. “Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church,” sec. 8, p. 3.

37. Ibid., sec. 7, p. 2.



The interior of the Finnish church lacks elaborate decoration, in keeping with its members’ beliefs.



This stone monument memorializes those whose wooden grave markers burned in an early prairie fire that swept the church cemetery.

state line in Dickey County, North Dakota. Although the congregation left the original building behind, locals in and around Savo Township continued to commemorate the church's place in the community's history. In 1989, the Pioneer Church Restoration Association dedicated a special memorial in the church cemetery.<sup>38</sup> Sometime in the church's early history, at least one prairie fire destroyed the wooden crosses that marked many of the gravesites. In remembrance, the cemetery memorial acknowledges "fifty-five souls whose wooden grave markers were destroyed in a prairie fire. Their names are recorded in the church, but their final resting places are known only to God."<sup>39</sup> Over the years, the list of unknown and unmarked graves increased to sixty-three; these names appear on a small, framed list inside the church. As with the building itself, the rather plain, simple roll seems an appropriate acknowledgment for some of the area's earliest Finnish pioneers.

38. Ibid., sec. 8, p. 3; Aisenbrey, *Monuments, Markers, Memorials*, p. 27.

39. Aisenbrey, *Monuments, Markers, Memorials*, p. 27.

## Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church

The federal census in 1900 reported slightly fewer than nine thousand Swedish-born residents in South Dakota. As with other ethnic groups, many people of Swedish descent settled close to one another, creating enclaves in certain parts of the state. Historically, the first Swedes established communities in the southeastern corner of Dakota Territory, where many settlers entered through northern Iowa and Minnesota. From the late 1860s to the mid-1870s, a notable number of Swedish settlers began inhabiting Clay County. Gradually, Swedish immigrants moved north, eventually settling in eastern Brown County starting in the early 1880s.<sup>40</sup>

In 1881, Louis Johnson and a group of approximately two hundred other settlers of Swedish lineage moved to northern Riverside Township. Many of them had previously settled in Chisago County, Minnesota, northeast of Minneapolis, before deciding to homestead in Dakota Territory. Uprooted from their homes in Minnesota, they established what became known as the Riverside Swedish Colony, based on the pillars of shared language, customs, and religion. Their strong Christian beliefs assisted the new settlers in forming a community, and the establishment of the Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church exemplifies the religious aspect of their ethnic bond.<sup>41</sup>

Soon after the newcomers started settling in, they turned their focus toward organizing a church. They formally established the Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church congregation on 25 July 1884, when twenty-four adults and thirty-seven children gathered in the home of Lot A. Linn for the first worship service. Because there were not enough chairs for the large group, many attendees sat on oat sacks. The baptism of seven young children highlighted the service. Like the Norwegian and Finnish worshippers, the Swedish congregation held services in various homes and a local schoolhouse, commonly known

40. [Olson], "Yankee and European Settlement," p. 129; U.S., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, "Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church, Claremont, S.Dak.," sec. 8, p. 1, SHPO.

41. *Groton Centennial History, 1881-1981* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: North Plains Press, 1981), pp. 228-29.

as the Johnson School, until 1899, when construction of the church began.<sup>42</sup> After its completion and dedication in early 1900, the Augustana Lutherans immediately started holding services there.<sup>43</sup>

The rural setting of the congregation meant that formal church services depended on the availability of a pastor. One pastor, the Reverend A. Engdahl, traveled by train from Milbank every three weeks to lead worship services for an annual salary of one hundred fifty dollars. In 1897, two years before the church's construction began, the Reverend C. A. Carlson became the first regular pastor.<sup>44</sup> Until 1925, the pastors led services in Swedish. In that year, the congregation decided to begin transitioning to predominantly English-language services while still holding a Swedish service once a month. Eventually, the leaders ended the monthly services in Swedish.<sup>45</sup>

Although the congregation first organized and worshiped in Riverside, additional Swedish settlers filed claims in neighboring townships, including Claremont to the north and Groton to the south. With the population expanding into neighboring villages, the Augustana Lutherans acquired land for a permanent church in neighboring Claremont when Karl Green donated five acres. Workers brought in building material from the surrounding towns on bobsleds. Granite boulders from the Langford area became the foundation. Lumber from Groton provided the frame and exterior siding. Before initiating the project, the building committee had hired William Carlson as the general contractor to oversee the church's construction. Carlson lived in Center City, Minnesota, the town from which many of the Riverside Swedes emigrated. The design of the Augustana church reflects Carlson's participation, as its tower and spire are similar to the larger Lutheran church in Center City. His craftsmanship is also found among many of the hand-carved interior furnishings, such as the altar and pulpit. Workers built a large barn as well, approximately one hundred feet in length, that could shelter up to fifty teams of horses while the

42. Ibid., p. 229.

43. "Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church," sec. 8, p. 1; *Early History of Brown County*, p. 156.

44. *Groton Centennial History*, p. 229.

45. "Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church," sec. 8, p. 2.

parishioners attended church services and activities. A tornado later destroyed the barn, which the worshippers never rebuilt; the need for it had already begun to wane with the rise of automobiles.<sup>46</sup>

The Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church became an important social center and hosted a variety of community events, but none drew as large a crowd as the church's annual picnic, which usually occurred in July. Over the years, the picnic moved from the grove on John Benson's property northeast of the church to Charlie Falk's grove to the south and, eventually, to another grove north of the church. The picnic became a much-celebrated event and drew as many as two thousand attendees from as far away as Aberdeen.<sup>47</sup>

46. Ibid; *Groton Centennial History*, p. 229; *Early History of Brown County*, p. 157.

47. *Groton Centennial History*, p. 229.



The Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church possesses more elaborate features, thanks to a larger congregation and the work of a professional builder.



The belfry and steeple of the Swedish church feature elements of the Gothic Revival style.

The State Historic Preservation Office nominated the Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church for listing on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988 as “an excellent example of ornate country churches once common to South Dakota and a particularly good example of Swedish-American vernacular church architecture. In addition, it is associated with the emigration of Swedes into Dakota Territory during the expansion years of the 1880s and displays many of the ethnic symbols they brought with them.”<sup>48</sup> Although the church no longer stands on its original foundation, resting on a more modern concrete one, most of the original Gothic Revival features, such as its steeple and belfry with louvered Gothic arches and its Gothic arched windows and entrance, remain. Likewise, the interior still has many original features, including the altar, communion rail, pulpit, and trim, which William Carlson largely designed and carved himself.<sup>49</sup> Of the four churches discussed here, the Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church is the only one still used for services and remains in a well-kept condition.

### Welsh Presbyterian Church

On 12 April 1880, a small group of Welsh immigrants arrived at Columbia, Dakota Territory, to file land claims in the James River Valley. As with so many other immigrant groups, the Welsh first settled farther east before making the move to Dakota Territory. This group came from Wisconsin, traveled by railroad to Jamestown in northern Dakota Territory, and then moved south along the James River to Columbia. More Welsh soon arrived and established Cambria Township, “Cambria” being the ancient name for Wales.<sup>50</sup>

Like many of the Swedish settlers, the Welsh pioneers who followed did not come directly from Wales but moved from established settlements in Iowa and Minnesota in addition to Wisconsin. The first rush of Welsh settlers came to work in the quartzite quarries around Sioux

48. “Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church,” sec. 8, p. 1.

49. Ibid., sec. 7, p. 1; *Exploring Brown County*, pp. 14–15; *Groton Centennial History*, p. 229.

50. U.S., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, “Welsh Presbyterian Church, Plana, S.Dak.,” sec. 8, p. 1, SHPO; *Early History of Brown County*, p. 9.

Falls. When Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad officials advertised rich, flat farmland in the territory, Welsh farmers seized the opportunity to relocate.<sup>51</sup> By early September 1882, E. L. Williams, a reporter for the *James Valley Post* in Bath, informed readers that approximately one hundred fifty inhabitants resided in the “Welsh Colony.” He then reported that the Welsh pioneers occupied over 12,000 acres of land, 1,162 acres of which were already being cultivated for wheat and oats. Williams predicted that the number of acres farmed would increase annually, as additional “Welsh friends [were] coming in.”<sup>52</sup>

The railroad had initiated Welsh settlement, and another rail line completed in 1887 brought a significant population influx. The Great Northern Railroad entered the territory from the northeast. The tracks ran diagonally through Cambria Township, which led to the founding of the town of Plana as more Welsh pioneers arrived. Plana soon pro-

51. *Brown County History*, pp. 338–39; [Olson], “Yankee and European Settlement,” p. 140.

52. *James Valley Post* (Bath, S.Dak.), 2 Sept. 1882.



The Welsh Presbyterian Church still stands on the open prairie, although the elements have taken their toll.

vided a variety of services, including a depot, several grain elevators, stores, a barbershop, and a Presbyterian church that became known as the Welsh Presbyterian Church.<sup>53</sup>

As the Welsh population of Plana grew in the early 1880s, community members began organizing religious services. Similar to the Norwegian, Finnish, and Swedish congregations, members first held services and Sunday school in the homes of Plana residents before moving to the Bath depot. Twenty-seven students gathered for the first Sunday school session in April 1882 in a congregation member's home. Initially, Reverend J. W. Morgan served as the congregation's pastor. Being from Wisconsin, Morgan acted as a connection to many of the Welsh settlers' previous homes. Later, from 23 April 1882 to 25 June 1887, the Reverend Daniel L. Rowlands served as pastor. He kept a record of his weekly sermons, one of which reportedly lasted one hour and forty minutes. For many years, the congregation held two Sunday services—one in Welsh, and one in English. Even in the English service, however, worshipers sang in Welsh.<sup>54</sup> With a familiar pastor and the consistent use of Welsh in the services, the parishioners developed and maintained a strong sense of community through their church.

By the end of Rowland's tenure as pastor in 1887, the congregation had completed construction of a church building. Worshipers provided the time and money to erect the simple rectangular structure, which features three tall, narrow windows in both the north and south walls. They added some elaboration with a vestibule featuring a gable peak over the main entrance. Inside, the structure consists of a simple nave with wooden pews and a raised pulpit at the western end. The existing pulpit is most likely not the original, as the imprint of a previous fixture points to a larger one in the same area. The members added a parsonage—living quarters for the pastor—near the church in 1900. It was sold and moved in 1928.<sup>55</sup>

53. *Early History of Brown County*, p. 9. The town was originally called Hadley, but another town in Dakota Territory already possessed the name, forcing a change.

54. "Welsh Presbyterian Church," sec. 8, p. 2; *Brown County History*, p. 131; Transcript of "The Brown County Centennial Minutes" aired 15 Aug. 1988, in Helen Bergh, *People, Place and Events: 100 Years in Brown County, South Dakota*, 2 vols. (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: Dacotah Prairie Museum Foundation, Inc., 1989), 1:n.p.

55. "Welsh Presbyterian Church," sec. 7, pp. 1–2, sec. 8, p. 2. The vestibule refers to a



Congregation members hand-finished most of the interior features of the Welsh church, including the pews and wainscoting.

The removal of the parsonage from the grounds indicated changing times in Plana. After the town's general store burned in 1927, the community went into decline. Today, the only original reminders of Plana's existence are the community hall, now used as a garage; the Plana School; and the Welsh Presbyterian Church. On 22 November 1941, the church held its last regular worship service, but it remained available for descendants of the original members to use for special events. They held a commemorative service for the United States Bicentennial in 1976 and another in June 1981 to celebrate the church's centennial.<sup>56</sup> A wooden plaque on the church's exterior notes that a group of trees nearby had been planted in memory of twenty men who represented the "Founders of Plana Church."<sup>57</sup> Another sign next to the front door simply states, "Welsh Presbyterian Church, Plana, So. Dak., Built 1887, Closed 1941, In Memory of Our Pioneers."<sup>58</sup>

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small entryway between the main entrance and the door to the nave. A gable peak is triangular shaped, created where the two slopes of the roof meet.

56. "Welsh Presbyterian Church," sec. 8, p. 2; *Brown County History*, p. 131.

57. "Welsh Presbyterian Church," sec. 7, p. 2.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

In 1995, the Welsh Presbyterian Church became the fourth ethnic church in Brown County added to the National Register of Historic Places. According to the State Historic Preservation Office nomination, “a high degree of craftsmanship” went into the construction of the building, as seen in the hand-carved wooden pegs used for the window frames (as opposed to nails) and notable interior woodwork, which included hand-grained doors, pews, and wainscoting.<sup>59</sup> The fact that the building is the only known Welsh church in South Dakota adds to its significance.<sup>60</sup> Just as the other churches had done for the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish communities, the Welsh Presbyterian Church helped the Welsh settlers of Brown County maintain their cultural and community identity.

Throughout South Dakota’s history, churches played a vital role in communities, serving as places of worship, centers of social events, and as a means of retaining ethnic identity.<sup>61</sup> In his work on Protestant faiths in South Dakota, historian Lynwood Oyos noted that early settlers created more churches than South Dakota’s population could ultimately sustain. Outmigration from rural areas, which began in the 1920s and continues today, led to the closing of many churches.<sup>62</sup> Like others, the Aurland United Norwegian Lutheran Church, the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church, the Augustana Swedish Lutheran Church, and the Welsh Presbyterian Church faced the common challenge of having small, ethnically oriented congregations. The mobility automobiles allowed made access to churches in more populous areas easier, tying congregants into larger religious communities and making rural churches less necessary. Inter-marriage between people of different backgrounds created more diverse communities. As a result, churches oriented to specific ethnic groups became less important to an individual’s identity. Still, these four churches held an important

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

60. Carolyn Torma, “Welsh and Black Settlements; Concrete and Log Architecture Recorded in Summer Historic Sites Survey,” *History Notes* (South Dakota State Historical Society newsletter) 4 (Sept./Oct. 1988): 1.

61. Erpestad and Wood, *Building South Dakota*, p. 59.

62. [Oyos], “Protestant Faith and Learning,” p. 341.

place in the early history of Brown County. The preservation of the church buildings and their inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places serve as reminders of how immigrant settlers facing new and unique challenges created communities that could support them in trying times.

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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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