

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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A LANDMARK

This dramatic photograph of the First Baptist Church in Albion was taken by local photographer Dr. James Orr early one spring morning. The rising sun and strong dominating shadows highlight the sculptural qualities of this landmark. Romanesque Revival in style, it was designed by Harlo Wilcox and erected in 1860.

Of the seven churches surrounding the Historic Court House Square, this one has often been overshadowed by the beautiful sandstone neighboring church of St. Josephs. Thereby hangs the tale about Wm. P.L. Stafford, the disgruntled Baptist who sold out to the Catholics stipulating that they build their church as close to the street as possible so as to block the view of the Baptist church next door. And then there's the extraordinary First Presbyterian Church with its magnificent 175 foot spire built of our native Medina Sandstone sweeping upward in grandiose Gothic Style. Here hangs another tale about the benefactor of that ediface who wanted a spire to be higher than the Baptist one. And then there's the Pullman Memorial Universalist Church which is noteworthy alone just because it was the gift of the famous 19th century sleeping car industrialist, George M. Pullman who was willing to pay \$7,500 in 1893 for a building lot he considered to be one of the most prominent sites in the village. And then historically speaking, the First Free Methodist Church is outstanding because of its unusual Norman Revival Style and the fact that it is truly the very first Free Methodist Church in the denomination.

Indeed, the First Baptist Church may seem overshadowed as a landmark. However, lets take a fresh look at this extraordinary 130 year old structure. I suppose it does seem sort of tucked away down West Park Street at the corner of Liberty. But there, believe it or not, stands an architectural treasure, a real jewel. The next time you have a chance, take a look. Its most unusual feature is the hexagonal tower and spire 160 feet high, which abuts the sanctuary. This may be seen for miles around and is one of the landmarks characterizing the county seat. About a third of the way up is the original clock with dials on three sides, all in working order. The basement of the tower was designed for a most unusual purpose. Made entirely of brick with a vaulted brick ceiling, this was Albion's community holding vault from 1860 to 1874. By 1874 the Mt. Albion Cememtry Commissioners had erected a holding vault and chapel there for such purposes. Holding vaults were very necessary years ago and are occasionally used today when the ground is frozen and it is impossible to dig graves.

Aside from these features of the tower and spire, take time to notice the very intricate designs in the brick work. Notice the buttresses at the corners of not only the tower, but the sanctuary as well. Note too, the pinnacles on these buttresses and how finely tooled the stone work appears to be where used for trim. And if you look closely, you



will see a diamond pattern in the original slate shingles on the spire around the dormer windows.

If this church stood on a ten acre lot at the head of a 500 foot long reflecting pool everyone would notice its spectacular beauty. But because it is sandwiched into an old residential neighborhood, it has visually been taken for granted and is unnoticed and seldom appreciated as one of Orleans County's outstanding 19th century landmarks. Indeed, this church edifice should never be overshadowed by any of its neighbors because architecturally it merits right up there with the best of them all.

Two weeks ago as county historian, I personally hosted the Landmark Society of the Niagara Frontier. They arrived in Albion in two buses (91 people). I led them on a tour of the Court House and three of the Albion churches. They were overwhelmed with the wealth of architectural beauty we possess in historic buildings. Many commented on the fine condition in which these structures are kept and many noted how fortunate we are to still have so much in tact as to original details, although several questioned what the thinking or lack of thinking was, when the county jail was erected. But aside from this, I was impressed with these people because they were so impressed with our community treasures. As a result, I'm even more impressed myself especially with the Baptist Church, having looked at it in a new light.