

NR 3-26-87

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

received  
date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Centennial Baptist Church

and or common

2. Location

street & number York and Columbia Streets

N/A not for publication

city, town Helena

vicinity of

state Arkansas

code 05

county Phillips

1234

code 107

3. Classification

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	N/A in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Membership of Centennial Baptist Church

street & number c/o Mrs. Dessie P. Kennedy, 716 Adams Street

city, town Helena

vicinity of

state Arkansas

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Phillips County Courthouse

street & number Cherry Street

city, town Helena

state Arkansas

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Phillips County Survey

has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date May 1985

federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Arkansas Historic Preservation Program

city, town Little Rock

state AR

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

### SUMMARY

The Centennial Baptist Church in Helena is a Gothic Revival structure completed in 1905. It is a single-story brick building that is T-shaped in plan, has a steeply pitched gable roof, and a two-tower facade with a prominent front gable. The overall massing is heavy and squat -- the towers are lower than the roof ridge. On the interior the space is very open; there are no piers, posts, or columns to create the traditional Gothic spatial organization of a nave with side aisles. There are exposed beams from the roof, wooden wainscoting, and plaster walls.

### ELABORATION

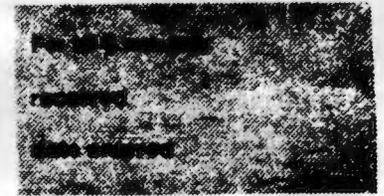
The Centennial Baptist Church is located on the southeast corner of York and Columbia Streets. The west (or front) elevation is a two-tower facade with a prominent central gable. As in the Gothic model, the towers function as the entryways. The north tower is two full stories while the south is only one-and-a-half. Both towers are topped with bell-cap roofs. The gable demarcates the "nave", which on the exterior is divided into three bays, with three lancet windows in each bay. In the gable there is a large round-headed, stained-glass window in the space traditionally filled by a rose window. Stepped corbelling is found below the eaves of the west gable as well as in the gables of the transept. There is intricate corbeling on the upper level of both towers and there is also an oculus in each gable. The exterior elevations are divided into bays by buttresses. Other than those in the gables which were previously described, all apertures are of the pointed-arch type.

The interior of Centennial Baptist Church retains most of its original detailing. The most prominent feature is the space created by the exposed structural members of the roof. Made to appear similar to a hammer-beam roof, the design includes some ornamental details such as pendants and curved braces. The exposed roof structure and its detailing help to accentuate the height of the gable. All suspended, circular, multi-globe light fixtures are original and intact. The wall surface is of two materials: wooden wainscoting is approximately three feet high, and from the top of the wainscoting to the ceiling the wall surface is brick covered with plaster. The door and window surrounds are wooden with no detailing. Unusual curvilinear pews add interesting lines to the floor level and serve to compliment the sweeping roof braces.

The east elevation possesses two exterior doors that lead to two small rooms on either side of the altar. One serves as a vestibule on the south end and the other as a storage area on the north. The two rooms flank the altar area which is arranged with the pulpit at the front behind which are the choir and the old elaborate pipe organ that is the focal point of the interior. Both the church's interior and its exterior have been well-maintained and are virtually unaltered.

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religious literature throughout the country. Morris' belief that black achievement and religious growth were tied to education led to his being the moving force behind the formation in 1884 of one of the state's foremost institutions of higher learning for blacks, Arkansas Baptist College. Morris served on the board of trustees there for twenty-five years.

Morris' increasing leadership in Arkansas led to a growing influence in the National Baptist Convention. This organization had been founded by black Baptists in 1880 as the administrative arm of their denomination, but for the next decade it was plagued by in-fighting and personality conflicts. In 1895 Morris was elected president of the National Baptist Convention, and due to his leadership and organizational skills a unification of the various factions within the denomination was realized. This achievement was largely attributed to Morris' establishment of a national publishing house sponsored by the Negro Baptists, which began operations in 1899. Morris held the position of president of the Convention for twenty-four years, until 1919.

Morris' stature in the black church, which was in effect the center of the lives of most of his people, led to widespread involvement in other types of endeavors. His faith in education was unshaking, and his founding of Arkansas Baptist College has already been mentioned. Morris also served for many years on the Helena school board. His view that social justice for blacks could be attained through the political system led to considerable involvement in the Republican Party. He represented Arkansas' First Congressional District as a delegate to the Republican National Conventions of 1884, 1888, and 1904. In 1908, Morris was appointed as an emissary to the Belgian Congo by President Theodore Roosevelt, and his visit contributed to the removal of total control of that colony from Belgian King Leopold and its placement in the hands of the Belgian parliament.

While Morris believed a separate religious structure was in the best interest of blacks, this view did not preclude his feeling that a peaceful working relationship with whites was necessary, and he was respected by their leaders as well as by those of his own race. In 1900 Morris organized the Arkansas State Mission Board as a vehicle for cooperation between the National Baptist Convention and the white Southern Baptist Convention. In 1903 he helped organize the bi-racial General Convention of America and in 1905 assisted in the formation of the Baptist Word Congress, and was the only black member of the executive committees of both. Morris' stature in the white community is further reflected by the fact that on the occasion of his death in 1922, the mayor of Helena declared that all the city's businesses, both black and white, be closed for the funeral.

Throughout his long career Morris remained pastor of Centennial Baptist Church. As the membership grew during the early years of his pastorate, so did the necessity of replacing the congregation's original house of worship. Morris' descendants tell the story that the clergyman saw a church building on his travels which impressed him and described it to one of his congregation who had studied architecture, Henry James Price. Price had graduated summa cum laude from Howard University in Washington D.C. and moved to Helena c. 1900. While the building he designed for Centennial Baptist Church reflects the traditional Gothic influences, it is unique in that it is the only known Arkansas example of a black church designed by a black architect.

The structure remains virtually unaltered. The congregation has dwindled in recent years, but the church stands not only as a monument to the black leader who was its pastor for forty-three years, but also as an architectural achievement for the people he led.

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National Park Service

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## MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Arkansas Democrat, November 20, 1908.

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A Comprehensive History of the Negro Baptist in Arkansas, 1938.

Franklin, John Hope, From Slavery to Freedom, 1974.

Hamilton, Beacon Lights of the Race, 1914.

Helena World, March 13, 1960.

Interview with Dessie P. Kennedy, November 3, 1986.

Journal of the 39th Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention, 1918.

Mather, Frank L., ed. Who's Who of the Colored Race, 1915.

Meier, August. Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915, 1963.

Moore, Waddy W., ed. Arkansas in the Gilded Age, 1976.

Richardson, National Cyclopedia, 1919.

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1905, 1879-1922      **Builder/Architect** Henry James Price

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

**SUMMARY**

Centennial Baptist Church is significant not only for its distinction as a religious structure designed for a black congregation by a black architect, but also for its association with one of Arkansas' leading figures in the development of black organized religion after the Reconstruction period. Dr. Elias Camp Morris, while in his position as pastor of Centennial Baptist, became a spokesman for his race and to his race on matters ranging from the religious to the social to the political.

**ELABORATION**

Although some black congregations existed in Southern states prior to the Civil War, they were exceptions rather than the rule. Legal restrictions on the congregating of slaves for any reason severely limited the opportunity for development of their own religious organizations, and for the most part blacks tended to follow the Protestant denominational affiliations of their white masters. After the war, however, blacks began to organize their own congregations of these denominations in an effort to provide not only spiritual guidance to the freedmen, but also to serve as a basis for educational, economic, and social adjustment and advancement. During Reconstruction years most of these black congregations remained a part of the hierarchical structure of their white denominations. However, in the post-Reconstruction years there was an increasing sentiment on the part of black religious leaders that it would be to their advantage to separate totally from their white brethren and "run their own show." By the turn of the century this was largely accomplished.

Dr. Elias Camp Morris, pastor of Centennial Baptist Church in Helena, was one of the black clerics who was instrumental in the solidification of the Negro Baptists as a separate entity. Morris became pastor of Centennial in 1879, three years after the church had been founded by members who had left Helena's original black congregation. Struck by "Kansas fever" in 1877, Morris was bent on emigrating there from his home in Alabama when he stopped in Helena and chose to remain. He began preaching night services at Centennial and in 1879 became their pastor.

When Morris took over Centennial Baptist Church, it was a fledgling congregation of twenty-three members. When he died in 1922, its membership numbered over one-thousand, a testament to the leadership and involvement of Elias Camp Morris in his role as a leader of his race. Soon after assuming the pastorate of Centennial, Morris became active in the state Negro Baptist Convention, being elected secretary in 1880 and president in 1882 (a position he held for nearly thirty years). This period saw a growing feeling on the part of black Baptists for a consolidation of their separate hierarchical organization. Morris believed this could be achieved through the establishment of a separate publishing apparatus for black churches, which up until then relied on the white denomination for newsletters and Sunday School lessons. It was to this end that Morris began publication of the Baptist Vanguard in 1882, which quickly became the mouthpiece for black Baptists in the state and a model for black

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Helena, Arkansas

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A 

1	5	7	2	1	1	4	10	3	8	2	2	8	6	5
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

D 

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

E 

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F 

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G 

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H 

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**Verbal boundary description and justification** The property is located in Helena, Arkansas, in Phillips County on Lots 394 and 393 of that part of Helena known as Old Helena. Excluded from this is the southwest part of Lot 393. To elaborate, beginning at the southwest corner of 393, proceed north 20 feet, then proceed east 80 feet, then proceed south 20 feet, then proceed west 80 feet to the point of beginning.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title AHPP staff

organization Arkansas Historic Preservation Program date 12/30/86

street & number 225 East Markham telephone (501) 371-2763

city or town Little Rock state AR 72201

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature Wilson Stiles

title State Historic Preservation Officer date 2-13-87

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

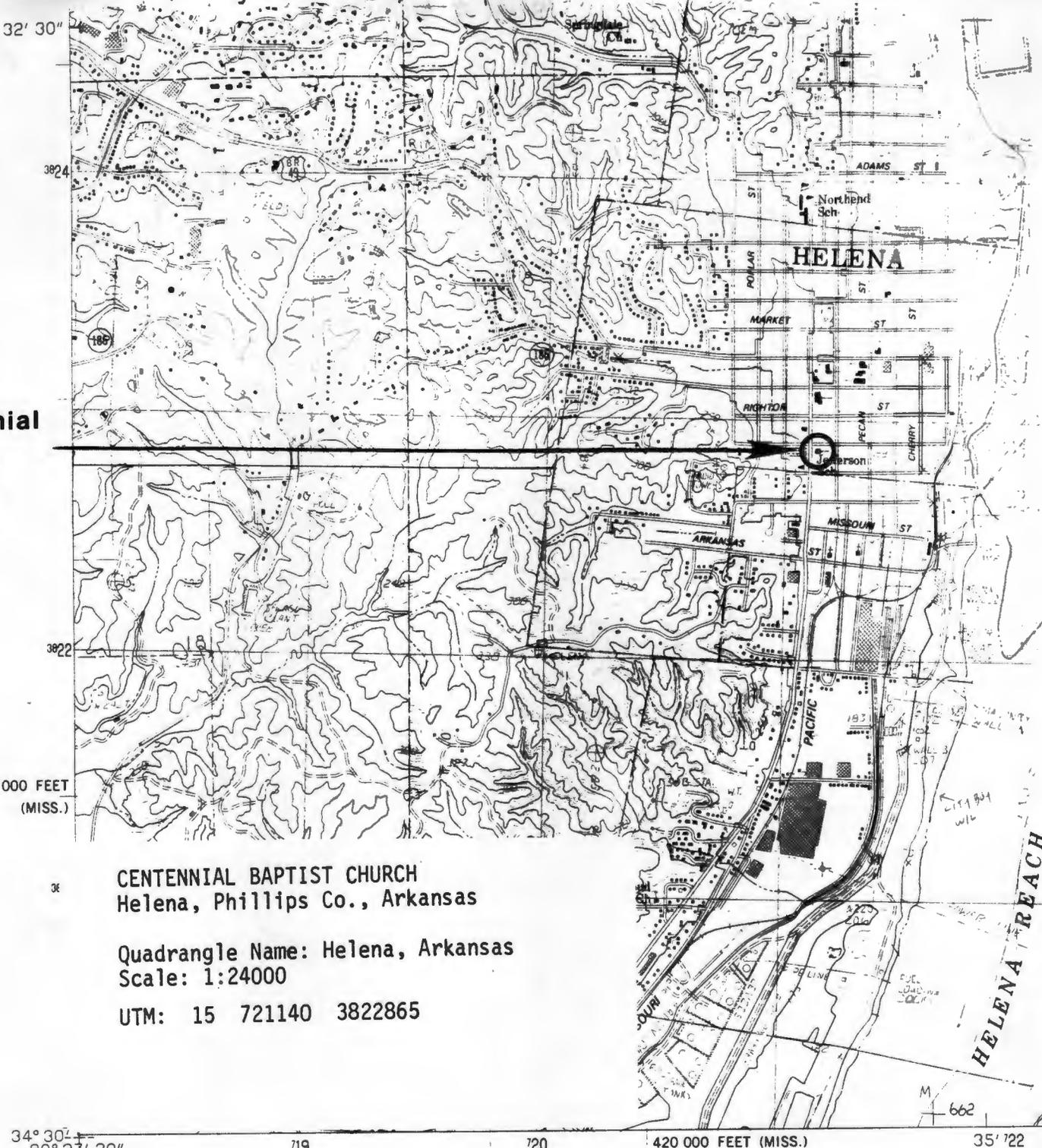
date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration



**Centennial Baptist Church**

**CENTENNIAL BAPTIST CHURCH**  
 Helena, Phillips Co., Arkansas

Quadrangle Name: Helena, Arkansas  
 Scale: 1:24000

UTM: 15 721140 3822865

1 460 000 FEET  
 (MISS.)

420 000 FEET (MISS.)

34° 30' 30"  
 90° 37' 30"

35° 12'

(FRARS POINT NW)

Mapped, edited, and published by the Geological Survey

Control by USGS and NOS/NOAA

Topography by photogrammetric methods from aerial photographs taken 1977. Field checked 1978. Map edited 1982

Projection: Mississippi coordinate system, west zone (transverse Mercator)

10,000-foot grid ticks based on Mississippi coordinate system, west zone and Arkansas coordinate system, south zone

1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid, zone 15 1927 North American Datum

To place on the predicted North American Datum 1983

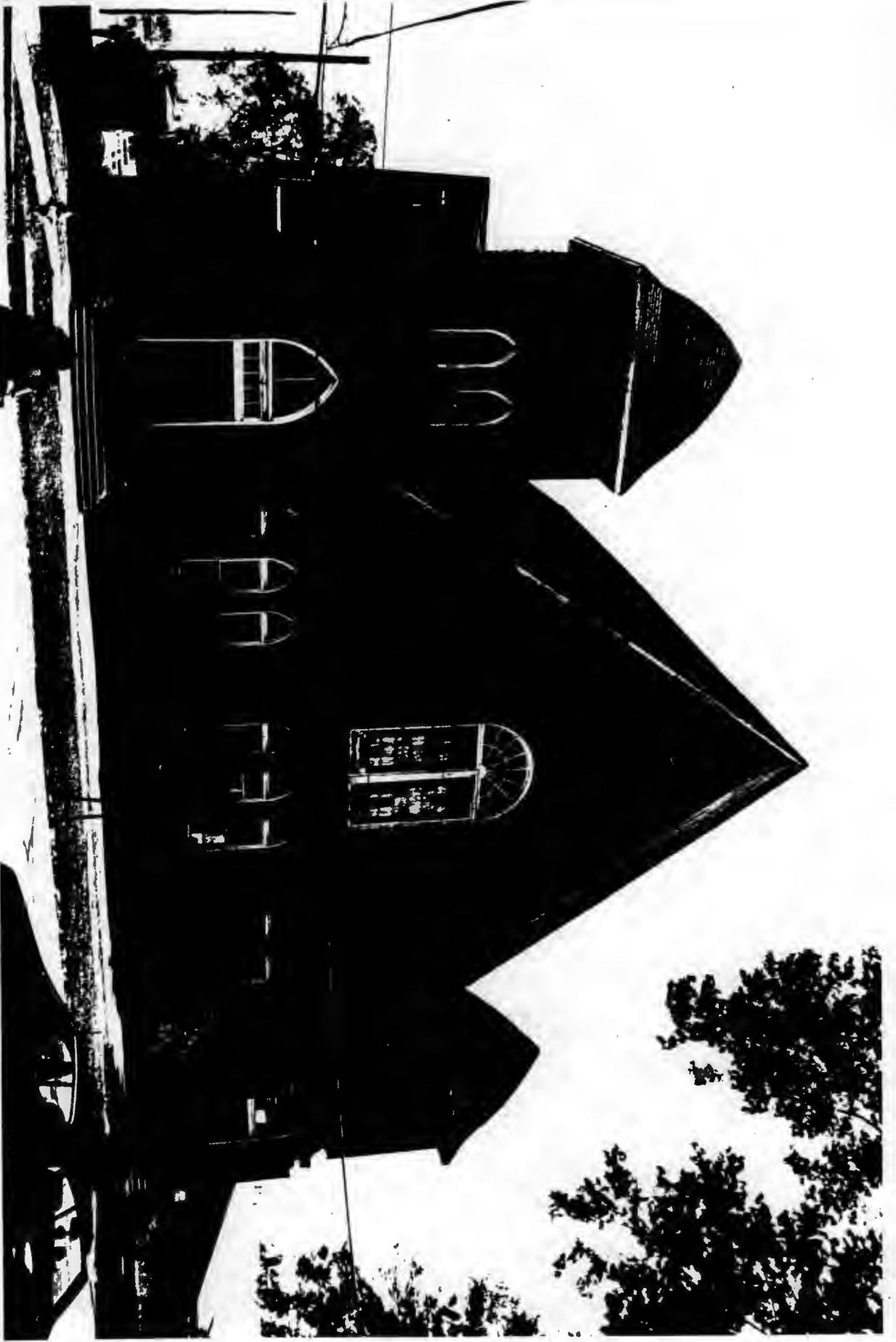
move the projection lines 8 meters south and 9 meters east as shown by dashed corner ticks

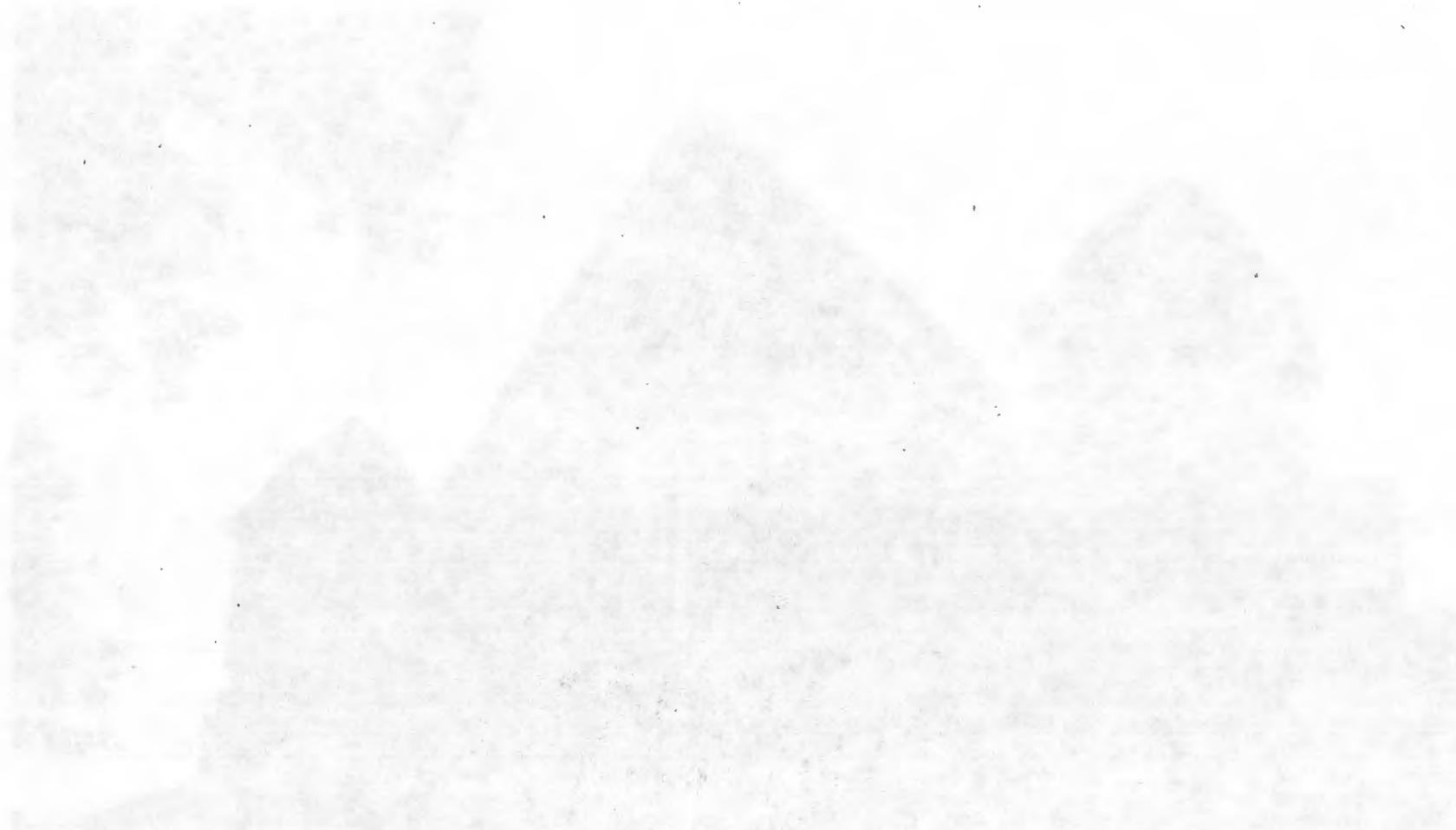
There may be private inholdings within the boundaries of the National or State reservations shown on this map

Gray tint indicates area in which selected buildings are shown



UTM GRID AND 1982 MAGNETIC NORTH DECLINATION AT CENTER OF SHEET





Centennial Baptist Church

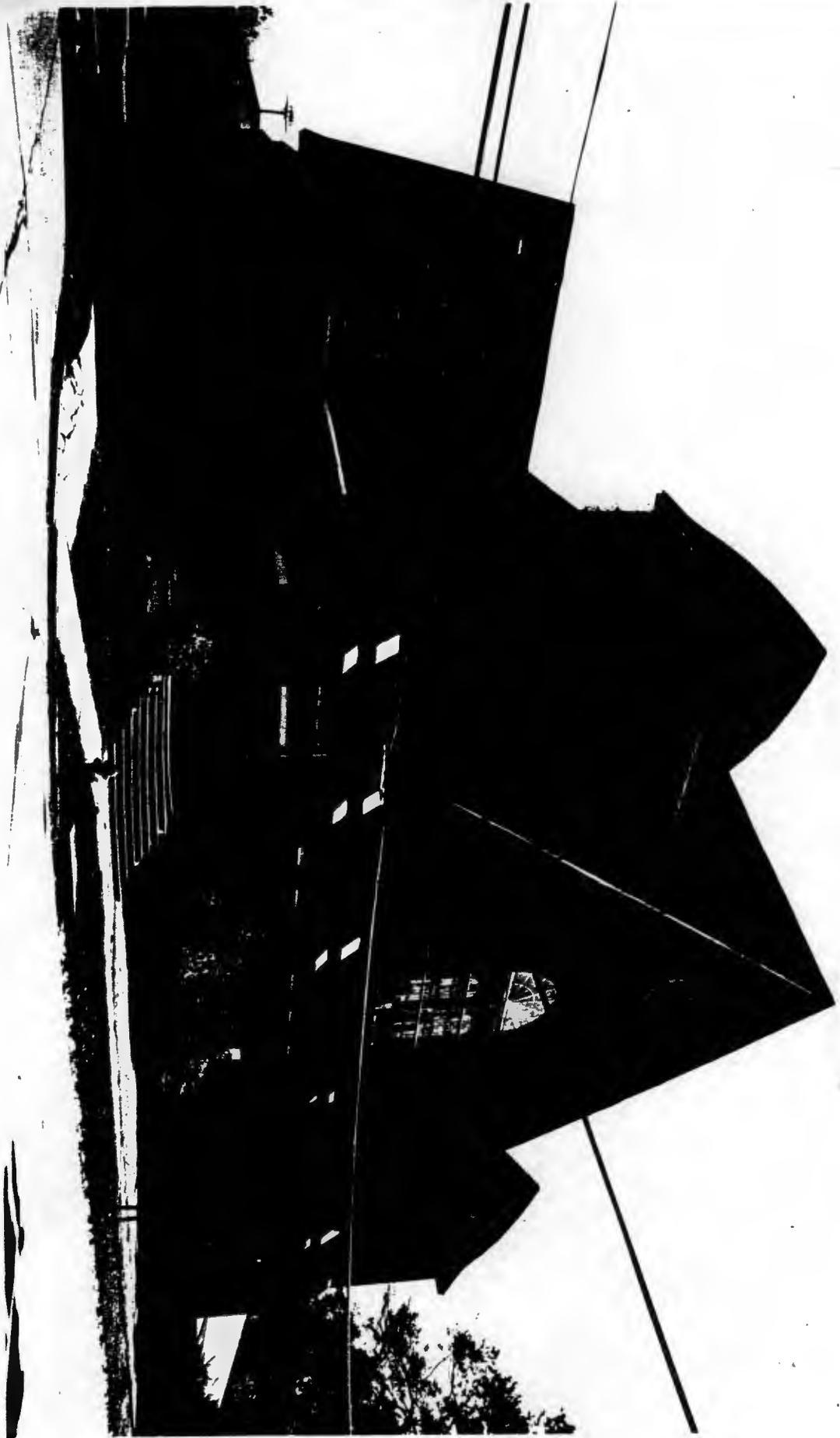
Helena, Phillips County

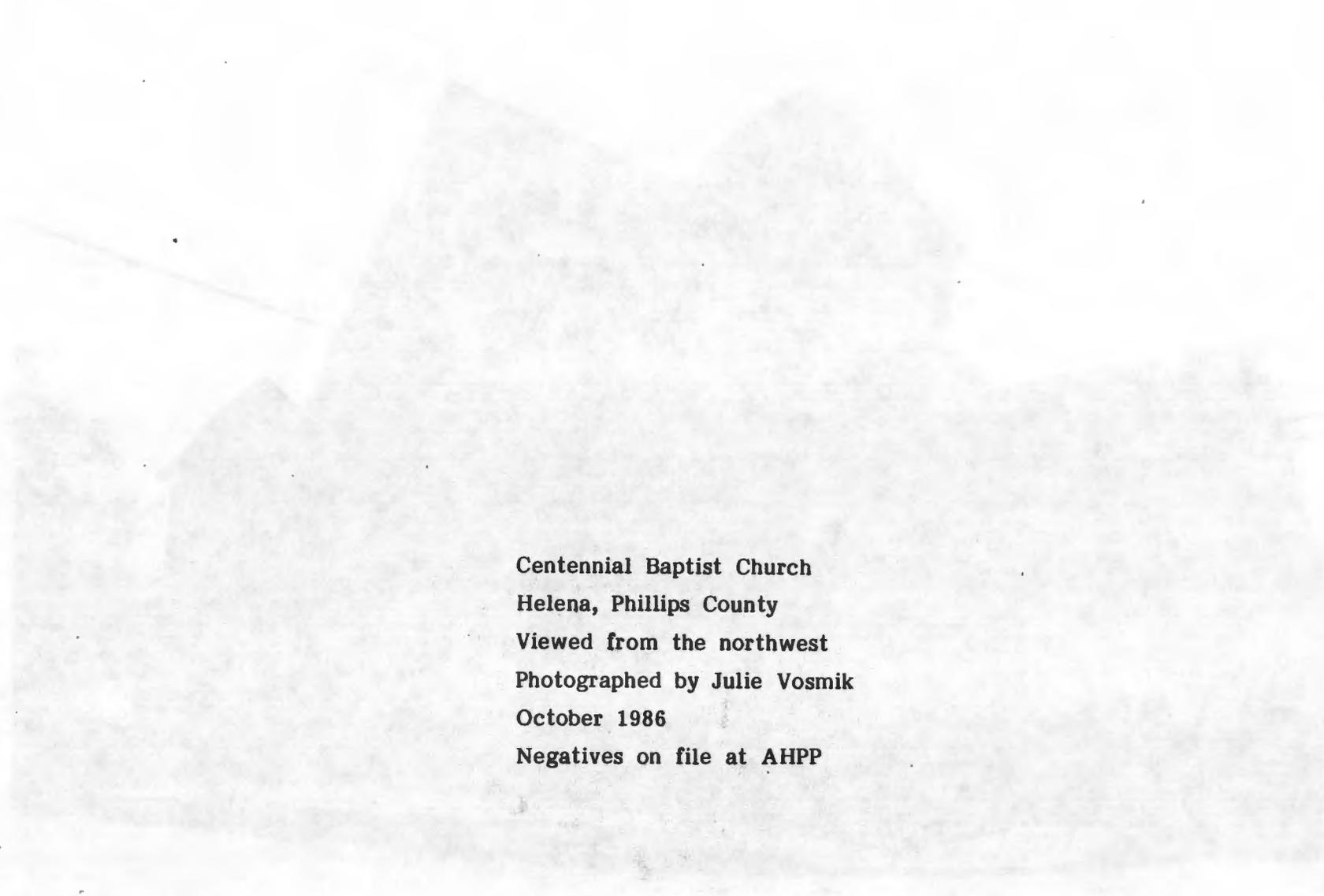
Front elevation

Photographed by Julie Vosmik

October 1986

Negatives on file at ARND





Centennial Baptist Church  
Helena, Phillips County  
Viewed from the northwest  
Photographed by Julie Vosmik  
October 1986  
Negatives on file at AHPP



**Centennial Baptist Church**

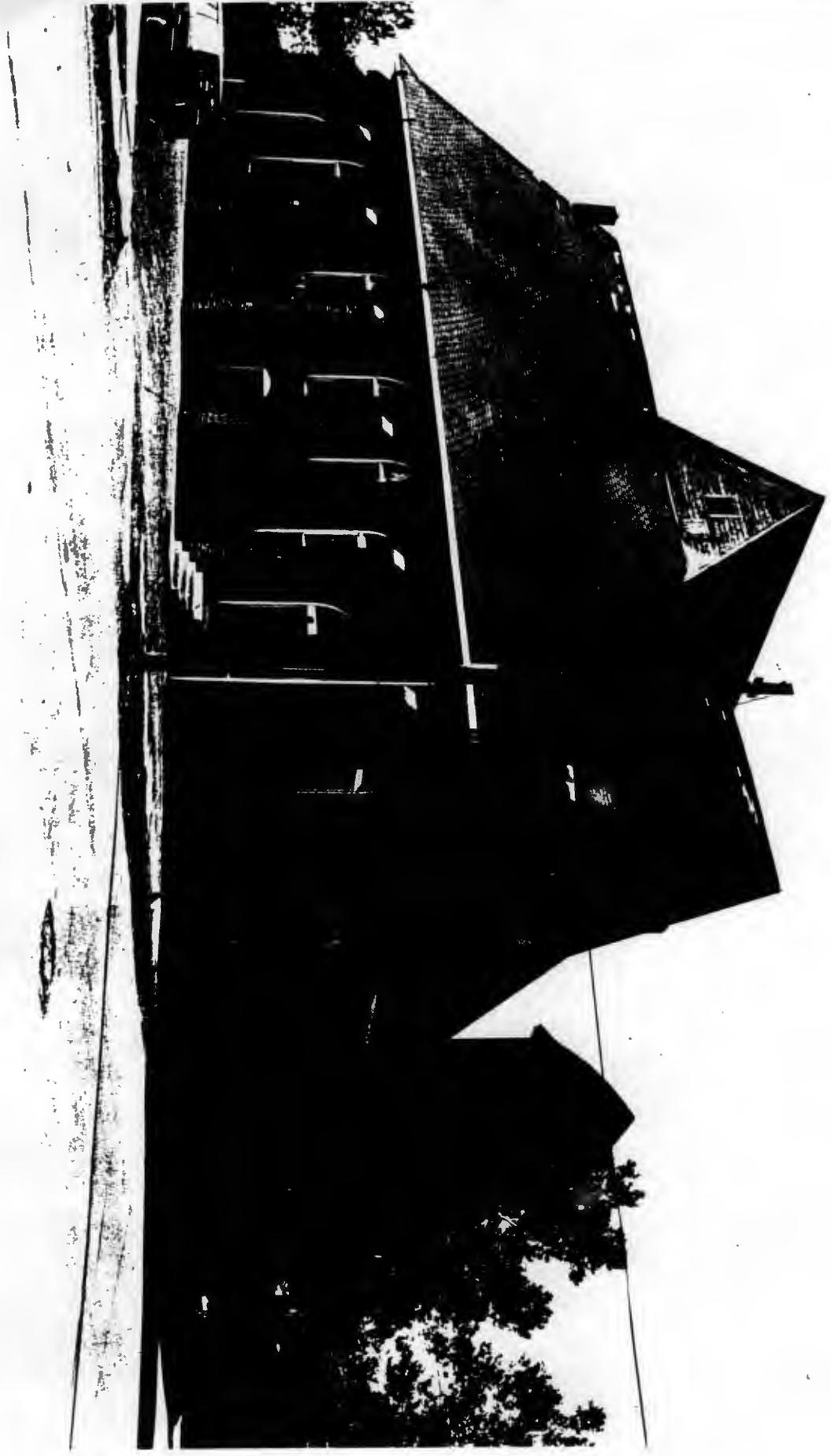
**Helena, Phillips County**

**South elevation**

**Photographed by Julie Vosmik**

**October 1986**

**Negatives on file at AHPP**





**Centennial Baptist Church**

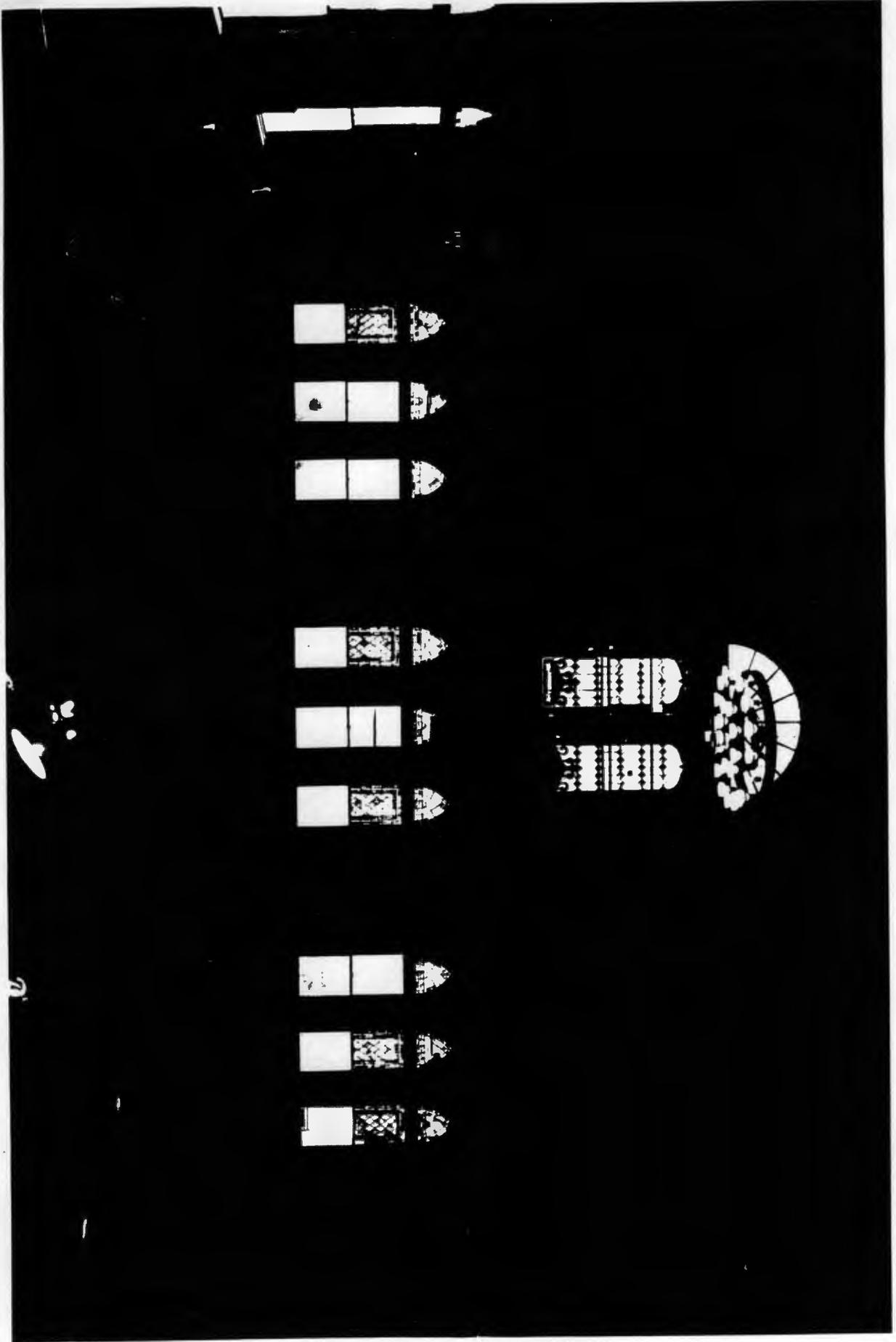
**Helena, Phillips County**

**Viewed from northeast**

**Photographed by Julie Vosmik**

**October 1986**

**Negatives on file at AHPP**



Centennial Baptist Church

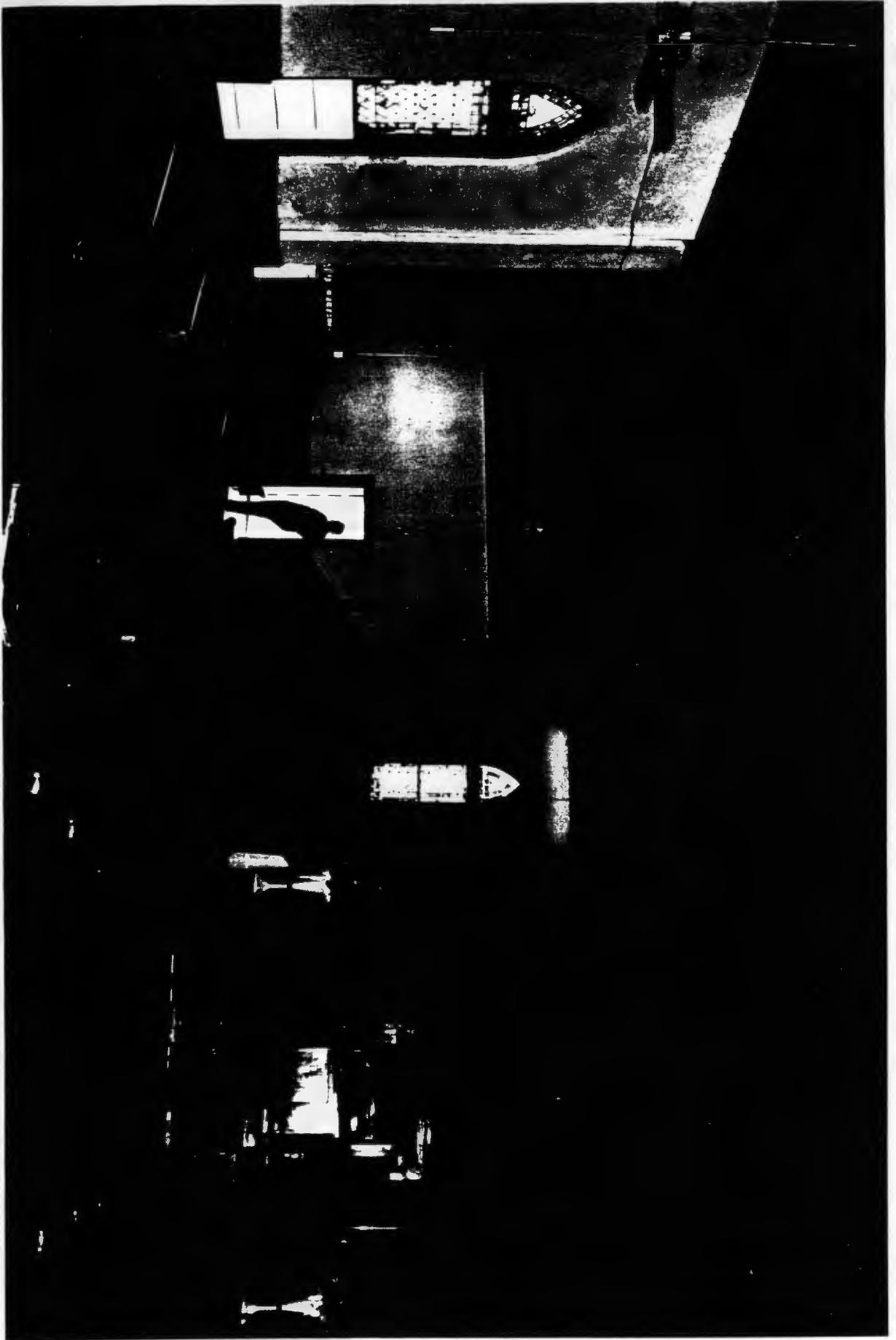
Helena, Phillips County

Interior

Photographed by Julie Vosmik

October 1986

Negatives on file at AHPP



**Centennial Baptist Church**

**Helena, Phillips County**

**Interior**

**Photographed by Julie Vosmik**

**October 1986**

**Negatives on file at AHPP**