

Oak Cliff Christian Church
Tenth Street, Dallas, Texas

Description of Physical Appearance

The historic Oak Cliff Christian Church is located at the southeast corner of East Tenth Street and South Crawford Street in the historic neighborhood of Oak Cliff, Dallas, Texas. The church is comprised of two distinct components – the 1916 sanctuary building and the 1926 Education Building, located behind the sanctuary. The Sanctuary building faces Tenth Street and has a secondary entry at Crawford Street; the adjoining Education buildings' entry also faces South Crawford Street.

The original Sanctuary Building is rectangular in plan, Neo-Classical style, with a slightly protruding classical temple front portico with Corinthian stone columns. At the north façade, facing East Tenth Street, the enframed portico gable is outlined in dented stone and an ornamental stone design in the center of the gable. The raised entry is framed by six columns – pairs at each end and the center two frame three openings with three pairs of doors beyond. The building is 3 stories in height with façade materials of light yellow brick with white stone trim, columns, a paired water courses and stone ornaments at the roofline. Most windows are rectangular openings although above the secondary entry at South Crawford Street, a slightly larger than normal window is topped by a small stone pediment. At the south end of the west façade (facing South Crawford Street), semi-engaged rectangular columns with a pediment above, imitate the main entry portico of the north façade.

The 1926 Education building is slightly taller than the original due to its additional 4th floor – one floor higher than the Sanctuary building. The west façade (facing South Crawford Street), is comprised of seven bays, with paired windows with a simple brick sill. The yellow brick façade has little ornamentation – stone cornice and coping, and brick water course. The rear faced, facing the alley is faced with common red brick and has single windows in a less organized pattern that the west façade.



Sanborn maps, Courtesy of the Dallas Public Library/Texshare.
1922 (at left) and 1955 (at right); earlier map shows original 1916 construction of the sanctuary while later map shows Education building addition that was added in 1926.

While the building façade materials and stone is currently intact, the historic doors and windows have been removed in the past, and replaced with aluminum windows and storefront doors.

Statement of Significance

Early Church History:

Officially organized in 1890, the year Oak Cliff, Texas, became a city, the congregation of Oak Cliff Christian is one of the oldest in Dallas County. Early members of the denomination were attracted to Marsalis' vision of an idyllic, godly city on a hill. The congregation at first met in rented rooms close to the original business district of Oak Cliff. It is reported that Brother Dave Smith, one of the congregation's first spiritual leaders, mesmerized the faithful with sermons devoted to "the Bible, (as) a divine revelation," dwelling frequently on sin, which, as he noted, "seemed to be flourishing in this throbbing growing town."¹

Even though members of the little congregation were attracted to Oak Cliff because of Marsalis' promises, the faithful had their share of earthly trials. The little congregation suffered losses in 1890 from a devastating fire that destroyed their organ, chairs, and table. Meeting several months later in the fall of that year in a second story room of a frame building located at the corner of Jefferson and Marsalis, the assembled brought their own chairs, kerosene lamps, and aspirations. There were probably no more than twelve people present. The service was opened with a rendition of *Standing on the Promises*. A crisis was at hand. The treasury had no money, they owed Brother Brickey 20 cents for a lamp chimney, and, worst of all, their current meeting place had been rented out to a business and they would have to leave. The little group resolved to stop the migration between rental properties, buy a lot, and build a permanent church when "Providence deemed it best." The service closed with a rendition of *Standing on the Promises*.²

Providence must have been benevolent because a lot at the corner of Ninth and Beckley was purchased shortly thereafter and a small frame building was erected on it. It was dedicated on June 1, 1893 by A. J. Bush, a local pioneer pastor. Membership at that time was estimated to be about 30 active members with many of the converts baptized in nearby Marsalis Creek.³

With possession of a permanent church building, the congregation began looking for a pastor. With the Ladies Aid pledging \$1.50 a month, Mr. H.E. Luck was hired at a salary of \$30.00 a month in 1893. It was observed that he was man of vision and by the next year the congregation had grown to 147. Meticulous and diligent, Mr. Luck noted in his pastor's notebook that year that although his flock had grown, seventeen that had strayed, others were "morally restored," and more were "investigated and found worthy."⁴

In the Depression of 1896, the church and its members suffered financial setbacks. Mr. Luck, who was making \$40.00 a month at that time, was forced to take a salary reduction. Through mutual consent, a new contract, "agreeable to both sides," was made that only obligated the congregation to "pay him what they could."⁵

In 1897 the church purchased the lot at the corner of Crawford and Tenth Street under the pastoral guidance of Mr. Gabel, one of the first Superintendents of the Juliette Fowler Home and a founder of the

¹ Year Book and Sixty-Seven Years, Oak Cliff Christian Church, September 22, 1957, p. 56.

² Ibid., 56.

³ Ibid., 58-59.

⁴ Ibid., 58-59.

⁵ Ibid., 60.

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South Dallas Christian Church. A frame church was built on the site. Membership continued to grow and by 1906 membership were around 200.

Marsalis founded Oak Cliff with a vision of it becoming a "New Jerusalem," inhabited by a moral people. No intoxicating liquors or questionable resorts would be found on this shining city on a hill. Tent meetings and revivals were numerous in the early days of Oak Cliff with different Protestant denominations competing vigorously for chances to save the same souls.⁶ In 1908, the Baptists, Disciples of Christ (i.e., Oak Cliff Christian) and the Seventh Day Adventist fought to save the legions of the fallen with simultaneous revivals during the same week within blocks of each other.⁷

The old frame church of Oak Cliff Christian at its lot at Tenth and Crawford, was angled so that the front doors faced both Tenth and Crawford. The temperance movement was strong in Oak Cliff in the early years of the twentieth-century and Oak Cliff Christian was one of the leaders. In 1906 Arthur W. Jones, an evangelical Temperance Lecturer joined the church. The subsequent year he became the pastor and inspired the church to have temperance parades, and "oratorical and declamation contests (that) stimulated great interest in the Sunday School."⁸ A parsonage had been built on a vacant lot on the south side and between the angled church and the parsonage, huge outdoor temperance meetings took place. A fire station was located directly across from the church and the bells at the fire station would frequently ring at the time of the temperance meetings⁹

New church building - 1916

The church continued to thrive and needed a place of worship that could accommodate its growing population. After years of saving, a new church building cornerstone was dedicated on Feb. 2, 1916. The new imposing neo-classic building was designed by Van Slyke and Woodruff. A contemporary newspaper reporter commented that "the building, when completed, in every respect of a beautiful style of architecture, and will represent the culmination of the efforts of this congregation extending over a period of several years to erect a church structure that will be a distinct addition to the civic beauty of the section of the city in which it is located."¹⁰

The church was filled to capacity that day. The Rev. John Slayter, minister of East Dallas Christian and a visiting dignitary, told the assembled that "it has required years and much effort to raise the money with which to build this church...while it may have been hard at times, it is decidedly better for the congregation that you had to work hard to make the building possible than if by some work of magic you had found upon this lot some morning a handsome new building in the place of the old one...In the process of working for the new building you have grown in spiritual strength, and when the new church is ready you will be ready to occupy it."¹¹

The church was finished and dedicated on September 10, 1916. The church was able to obtain a loan of \$15,000 from the American Christian Missionary Society to complete the work. It was estimated that the property then was worth \$40,000 and the congregation numbered around 400.¹²

When the church was completed in 1916, it consisted of the Sanctuary, offices and some classrooms; a small wood frame building existed at the rear of the lot. A large, 3-story Education building was constructed at a cost of \$40,000 in 1925-26, and was dedicated on March 13, 1926 with a day-long

⁶ Bill Minutaglio and Holly Williams, *The Hidden City, Oak Cliff, Dallas* (Dallas, Elmwood Press, 1990), 67-68.

⁷ "Tent Revivals in Oak Cliff," *Dallas Morning News* September 6, 1908, 12.

⁸ Year Book, op. cit., 62.

⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰ "Cornerstone of Oak Cliff Church Laid," *Dallas Morning News* Feb. 21. 1916.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Year Book, op. cit., 67.

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celebration and dedication services.¹³ This Education building, located behind the original sanctuary, occupied the remainder of the lot. With this new addition, Oak Cliff Christian became one of the larger churches on Tenth Street.

Eventually Tenth Street became known as "Church Street" and held the record in Ripley's *Believe It or Not* for having more churches per mile on a street than any other place in the world."¹⁴ On Sundays, Tenth Street became a crowded Road to Salvation as thousands of souls sought refuge in its churches. Tenth Street was parallel to Jefferson Avenue, the largest commercial street outside of a downtown in the Southwest. Jefferson Avenue also provided cheap and efficient transportation via the streetcar.¹⁵

After World War II, the area went into a decline. The sale of alcohol was banned, changes in zoning took place, and the automobile culture was born. Billie Alice Moon, long-time member at Oak Cliff Christian, remembers that her church left Tenth Street for a location farther south because of the automobile. There was limited parking on Tenth, the church owned only a small parking lot, and with a church population of over 2,000 and an average attendance of around 500, members were forced to park at lots on Jefferson or on the surrounding blocks.¹⁶

Oak Cliff Christian sold its property at Crawford and Tenth in 1962 and moved to a Keist Boulevard. The church remains active at that location, although with a much smaller congregation than it had at its Tenth Street location.

1963: Church witnesses historic events in conjunction with Kennedy's assassination

The following year the church witnessed a national tragedy. After shooting President John F. Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald returned to his boarding house in Oak Cliff and "then walked south and south-east, passing by Adamson High School and then, turning at 10th Street and passing on the sidewalk in front of Oak Cliff Christian Church. Just a block past the church, he shot and killed Officer Tippit at the corner of Tenth Street and Patton Street. Following that he walked back towards Jefferson Street, and appears to cut thru the block and immediately behind the church, dropped his jacket which was later collected by the Dallas police."¹⁷

¹³ "Oak Cliff Christian Church will Dedicate \$40,000 Sunday School Building", *The Dallas Morning News*, March 13, 1926. Pg 8.

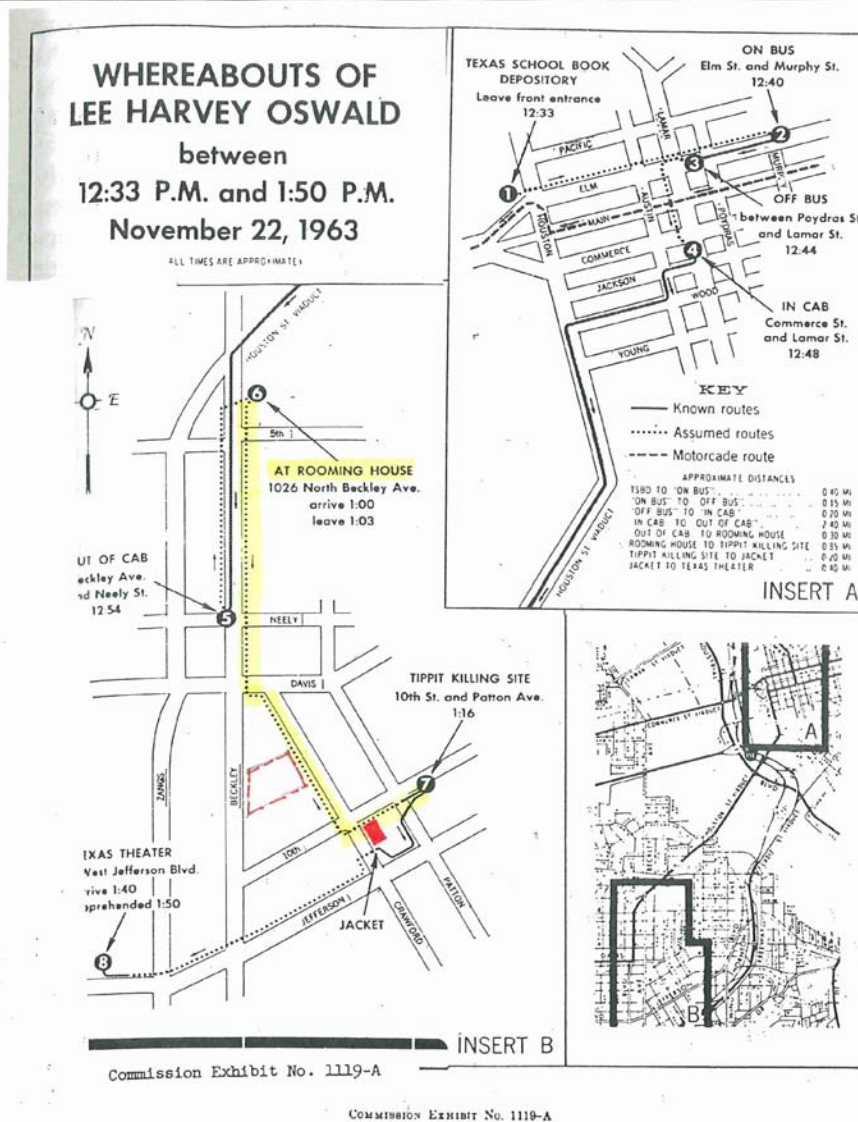
¹⁴ "Oak Cliff Quotes Believe It or Not," *The Dallas Morning News* August 19, 1968, 2.

¹⁵ Rene Schmidt, "Road to Glory, Tenth Street Becomes Church Street," *Legacies*, Fall 1909, pp. 38-48.

¹⁶ Interview with Billie Alice Moon, January 2009. Schmidt, op. cit. p. 46. ,

¹⁷ Warren Commission Report (Exhibit No. 1119-A) p. 149.

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Warren Commission Report, Exhibit 1119-A, showing Oswald's route from his boarding house, past Oak Cliff Christian Church to the next block where he shot Officer Tippit, then past the rear of the church where he discarded his jacket on his way to Jefferson Street and the Texas Theater.

The former Oak Cliff Christian Church building was a star in the crown of churches that once glittered on Tenth Street. Its growth mirrors the development of Oak Cliff as a desirable place to live and its subsequent decline reflects the conflicting legacies left by the rising of the automobile culture, the city's patchwork attempt at misguided zoning regulations in the inner city, and Oak Cliff's banning of alcohol within the old city's limits. It was a silent witness to that fateful day when Lee Harvey Oswald walked past the church and murdered Officer Tippit a block away. It is a beautiful and elegant solitary sentinel that has stood as Dallas landmark for almost 100 years.

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Van Slyke and Woodruff - Architects

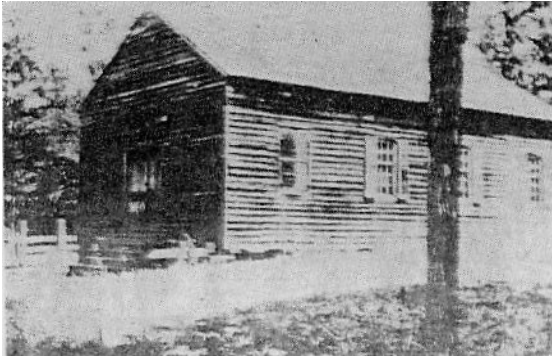
The prominent Fort Worth architectural firm of Van Slyke and Woodruff designed numerous religious facilities in north Texas during the first third of the 20th century:¹⁸ the First Christian Church in Fort Worth in 1914, South Side Baptist Church in Fort Worth, McKinney Avenue Baptist Church in Dallas (later the Hard Rock Café, demolished) and First United Methodist Church in Paris (constructed in 1919-1924). Among their other work is the original gymnasium of the Texas Christian University, the, and the Star Hotel formerly located on Main Street in Fort Worth.

In 1934, Woodruff, as part of the new firm Kleuser & Woodruff, Architects, designed the stone pavilion at Dallas' Tietze Park in East Dallas.

¹⁸ "First Christian Church of Fort Worth National Register Nomination", Texas Historic Commissions' *Atlas* (<http://atlas.thc.state.us/shell-county.htm>)

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Historic Photographs



First Oak Cliff Christian Church, 9th and Beckley Avenues; c. 1893



Oak Cliff Christian Church, c. 1916

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Oak Cliff Christian Church, 1955



Oak Cliff Christian Church, 1955

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Current Photographs



Oak Cliff Christian Church, late 2009; view of north façade at E. Tenth Street..



Oak Cliff Christian Church, January 2010; view of north (E. tenth Street) and west (crawford Street) facades.

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Oak Cliff Christian Church, January 2010; view of west façade (Crawford Street).



Oak Cliff Christian Church, January 2010; views of Education Building west façade (Crawford Street) and south façade (at alley).

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Oak Cliff Christian Church, January 2010; view of east façade of main building (façade faces adjacent house); main entry at Tenth Street is at right edge of photo.