

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Little Chapel in the Woods

Other name/site number: NA

Name of related multiple property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 415 Chapel Dr.

City or town: Denton

State: Texas

County: Denton

Not for publication: ☐Vicinity: ☐

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this
(☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility) meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the
National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my
opinion, the property (☒ meets ☐ does not meet) the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:

☒ national ☐ statewide ☐ localApplicable National Register Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D

Signature of certifying official / Title

Date

Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

☐ entered in the National Register☐ determined eligible for the National Register☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.☐ removed from the National Register☐ other, explain: _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

SBR Draft

Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

☐	Private
☐	Public - Local
☒	Public - State
☐	Public - Federal

Category of Property

☒	building(s)
☐	district
☐	site
☐	structure
☐	object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
1	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
2	0	total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions: RELIGION: religious facility

Current Functions: RELIGION: religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification: Modern Movement: Mixed

Principal Exterior Materials: Stone: Fieldstone; Concrete; Brick; Wood, Metal: Copper, Glass

Narrative Description (see continuation sheets 7-6 through 7-15)

Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

☐	A	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
☐	B	Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
☒	C	Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
☐	D	Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations: NA

Areas of Significance: Art and Architecture (*national level of significance for each*)

Period of Significance: 1939-1941

Significant Dates: 1939, 1941

Significant Person (only if criterion b is marked): NA

Cultural Affiliation (only if criterion d is marked): NA

Architect/Builder: Ford, O'Neil

Narrative Statement of Significance (see continuation sheets 8-16 through 8-25)

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography (see continuation sheet 9-26 through 9-27)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. Part 1 approved on (date)
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- ☐ Other state agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other -- Specify Repository:

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): NA

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: Approximately 2.5 acres

Coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

1. Latitude: 33.229674° Longitude: -97.128531°

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundary is shown as a red line on the accompanying map on continuation sheet pg.28.

Boundary Justification: The boundary includes the chapel and surrounding wooded site and terracing historically associated with the building that retains its integrity and contributes to the significance. It excludes university property developed after the period of significance, which is demarcated on the north by Administration Drive, sidewalks on the east, and Chapel Drive to the south.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Kathryn O'Rourke, Professor and Architectural Historian
Organization: Wellesley College
Street & number: 106 Central St.
City or Town: Wellesley State: MA Zip Code: 02481
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Telephone: 781-283-3309
Date: January 1, 2024

Additional Documentation

Maps (see continuation sheet MAP-29)

Additional items (see continuation sheets FIGURE-30 through FIGURE-48)

Photographs (see continuation sheets PHOTO-49 through PHOTO-64)

Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photograph Log

Property: Little Chapel in the Woods
Location: Denton, Denton County, Texas
Photographer: Bonnie Tipton (Texas Historical Commission)
Date: May 15, 2025

Photo 1: Front (south) elevation showing retaining wall.
Photo 2: South (Primary) Elevation
Photo 3: Entrance Details
Photo 4: East Elevation
Photo 5: East Elevation detail showing parabolic arch/buttress and window details
Photo 6: East Elevation
Photo 7: Rear (north) elevation
Photo 8: West Elevation
Photo 9: Wall detail
Photo 10: Vestibule, looking west.
Photo 11: Vestibule, looking east
Photo 12: Interior, looking north from balcony.
Photo 13: Interior, looking south.
Photo 14: Ceiling details.
Photo 15: Pews. Camera looking east.
Photo 16: Portion of stained glass window in vestibule. Camera looking east.
Photo 17: Stained glass panels on west wall. Camera looking west.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Narrative Description

The Little Chapel in the Woods is a small, non-sectarian church that stands on the campus of Texas Woman's University (formally Texas State College for Women) at 415 Chapel Drive in Denton, Texas, in Denton County. Completed in 1939, the chapel was designed to be harmonious with its wooded hilltop site with two terraces and a masonry sidewalk connecting it to the larger campus. The single-nave building is 90 feet long, 42 feet wide, and 30 feet high and accommodates approximately 125 people. It is supported by five parabolic arches formed of poured concrete ribs and faced in orangey-pink brick from Bridgeport, Texas. Exterior walls consist of irregular courses of gray Bridgeport fieldstone. The interior walls are plastered and the ceiling is of exposed redwood, with painted wooden beams. Nine stained-glass windows in the nave and above the altar (installed 1939-1941) together comprise the biographically based figurative cycle *Woman Ministering to Human Needs*; an abstract rose window is above the door; and a "signature" window with images documenting the commission and construction of the building is to the right of the main entrance. The interior is further enriched by hand-carved wooden pews, a pulpit and lectern, and globular metal chandeliers. Despite changes to the surrounding campus, the unaltered building and preserved natural setting have integrity to convey the property's architectural significance.

Setting

The Little Chapel in the Woods was designed by architects O'Neil Ford, Arch B. Swank, and Preston M. Geren and constructed by members of the National Youth Administration (NYA). Completed in 1939, it stands on the north side of the Texas Woman's University campus at 415 Chapel Drive in Denton, Denton County, Texas. Until 1957, the university was named Texas State College for Women.

The nominated boundary encompasses the natural landscape as a contributing site significant to the chapel's design and demonstrative of O'Neil Ford's philosophy of harmonizing architecture with its setting. The chapel sits on a grassy, wooded hill, and name is derived from its strikingly diminutive scale (2300 square feet) and site, which was originally known as Lowry Woods. This wooded area was surrounded by the Texas Garden, designed by college faculty and tended by students beginning in the early 1930s but was overgrown by the 1970s. The chapel served as a signature element in a landscape that included native trees, shrubs, and perennials and was intended to support the contemplative aspects of education.¹ Despite the loss of the 1930s-era landscape scheme, the immediate setting is characterized by mature trees which help screen the chapel from newer university buildings, like the 21 and 24-story Stark and Guinn Halls to the east. A masonry sidewalk surrounds the chapel and bisects two low, brick retaining walls, providing a path to campus through the terraced site.

Little Chapel in the Woods

The Little Chapel in the Woods was designed by architects O'Neil Ford, Arch B. Swank, and Preston M. Geren, and constructed by members of the National Youth Administration (NYA). It was funded by the NYA and private donations. Completed in 1939, it stands on the campus of Texas Woman's University, which until 1957 was named Texas State College for Women. Since its inauguration, the small building has continuously served as a chapel—intended more for mediative reflection than formal rituals, despite being the site of numerous weddings—for the college community.

The plan of the building is T-shaped and consists of a vestibule, accessed via a porch, and containing a spiral staircase that leads to a shallow loft; a nave; a chancel, accessed by three steps and flanked by enclosed spaces for robing for by

¹ Kathryn Holliday, "Making the Woods for The Little Chapel: The Native Landscape Movement and Modern Architecture in Texas," in *O'Neil Ford Monograph 8: The Little Chapel in the Woods: O'Neil Ford and Arch Swank* ed. by Wilfried Wang (Austin and Berlin: The University of Texas at Austin, Wasmuth & Zolen Verlag UG, 2021), 41.

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the choir and clergy members; and, at the far end, a platform with a carved wooden altar and a pair of wooden altar rails. Four poured concrete parabolic arches faced in orangey-pink brick from Bridgeport, Texas support the nave and subtly divide it into bays. A fifth, lower and narrower parabolic arch, frames the chancel. A pair of one-story porches flanks the main volume at the rear of the building.

The chapel's exterior walls are of grayish brown fieldstone brought from Bridgeport by workers in the Civilian Conservation Corps. The stones were split and laid by members of the NYA, and the walls are notable for the irregularity of the courses and units, and for the increasing refinement of the masonry as the walls rise. The two long walls of the nave are each supported by four stone buttresses. Above the porch on the south façade is a circular window. This, along with the triangular form of the gabled roof and the cubic volume of the porch introduce the strong, simple geometries that govern the building as a whole.

The richness of the building lies in its materiality and craftsmanship of the building, in the works of art within it, and the integration of all of these with clearly articulated structural forms. To reach the main door, on the south end of the building, one passes beneath a wooden lintel carved with the words, "Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness," and crosses a small square-shaped porch with openwork brick screens. The attention to detail in craftsmanship that characterizes the building as a whole is introduced here, where brick is laid in stack bond above the pair of doors that give onto the vestibule, and in running bond on either side of them. The two doors made of mahogany, are carved with abstract pattern of large diamonds, and include decorative brass ornament and handles. The doors were designed and fabricated by Carmeta Drummond.

Stylistically, the Little Chapel is a synthesis of a historic precedents and modern tendencies. Inspired in part by a single-nave church that Ford saw in New Mexico, the building also broadly evokes the sober language of Romanesque architecture, while owing to their context, its parabolic arches at once summon medieval vaulting bravura generally, and more specifically evoke the great parabolic arches of early twentieth-century hangers, particularly the 1923 buildings designed by French engineer Eugene Freyssinet, which were widely published in the architectural press and immortalized by Le Corbusier in *Vers un Architecture*. The chapel's extraordinary collection of works of art in wood, metal, and glass, and its varied palette of materials places it in the strand of modernism associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement, which in turn informed Bauhausian ambitions to unify the arts and dissolve the distinctions between craft and high art. The implicit centrality of labor to the project—embodied by the work of untrained masons and students, and made explicit in the figurative program of the windows—further linked the building to the socialist tendencies of the Bauhaus, even as it also echoed themes in some WPA-era murals.

The interior of the building is defined by its variety of materials, textures, and colors, works of art, and by its strong geometrical forms. Among these, the parabolas of the arches dominate, and lead the eye rapidly toward the altar and the blueish triptych window above it. The arches divide the plastered walls of the nave into 8 bays and descend to a brick water table and to the brick-paved floor. The central aisle is defined by wooden pews that run to the walls.

Above the nave, the ceiling is of wooden boards aligned vertically to follow the line of the roof gable; in the chancel, boards are laid longitudinally and heighten the telescoping effect created by the spatial and visual relationships between the smaller fifth parabolic arch, the slow terracing of the chancel platforms, and the segmental arch above the tripartite blueish stained-glass window above the altar. The sense of rapid visual movement toward the window above the altar is further heightened by the narrow wooden beams painted in dark colors and with geometric patterns that run along the ceiling above the nave perpendicularly to the larger, unpainted boards. The designs on the narrow beams were stenciled by Mildred Bates, Edith Mae Rhodes, and Pauline Shoolroy.

The visitor enters the nave from a small vestibule with curved side walls inlaid with narrow bands of mosaic, created by Nelda Bell, La Merle Quillian, and Marilyn Jones. To the left of the central axis as the viewer faces the altar is a spiral staircase formed of cantilevered concrete slabs and a brass banister. This leads to a loft. To the right, inset in a

Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

brick window frame is the “signature window,” which depicts the history of the commission, design, and construction of the Little Chapel. From top to bottom are the donors and university administrators; the architects and building committee, who surround a model of the chapel; the National Youth Administration builders hammering and laying stone, observed by Denton’s NYA administrator, F.B. Hodges; and Texas State College for Women students at work designing, carving, chiseling, and cutting glass. They are observed by faculty member Dorothy A. “Toni” LaSelle, whose back is to the viewer. **(Photo 16)**

The stained-glass window cycle, *Woman Ministering to Human Needs*, consists of 9 panels dealing with different aspects of labor. The cycle was designed, fabricated, and installed from September 1938-June 1941 by students under the supervision of faculty member Dorothy Anotoinette “Toni” LaSelle and her colleagues. Four narrow panels are inset in the bays of each of the long walls of the nave. These are 2.5’ wide by 17’ high. The four on the west wall (left when facing the altar) are comprise the subsection “Women Taking Care of the World” and depict historical women working in the fields of nursing, education, science, and social science and include quotations by major figures in the fields. The windows on the opposite wall depict “Ministration to the Aesthetic Needs of the World.” The cycle culminates in the 10’ wide by 15’ high triptych above the altar at the north end, on the theme of motherhood. An inventory of subject, major iconography, quotation, and artists of each window in *Woman Ministering to Human Needs* are on page 9.

Other works of art inside the building are the wooden pews, a pulpit, a lectern, the altar, and an altar rail. These were designed by Lynn Ford, one of the country’s finest woodworkers and metalsmiths (and O’Neil Ford’s brother), and carved by Billie Marie Culwell. The faceted metal spherical light fixtures were designed and fabricated by Sammy Tate and Helen Solberg, under the direction of LaSelle and Thetis Lemmon, another faculty member.

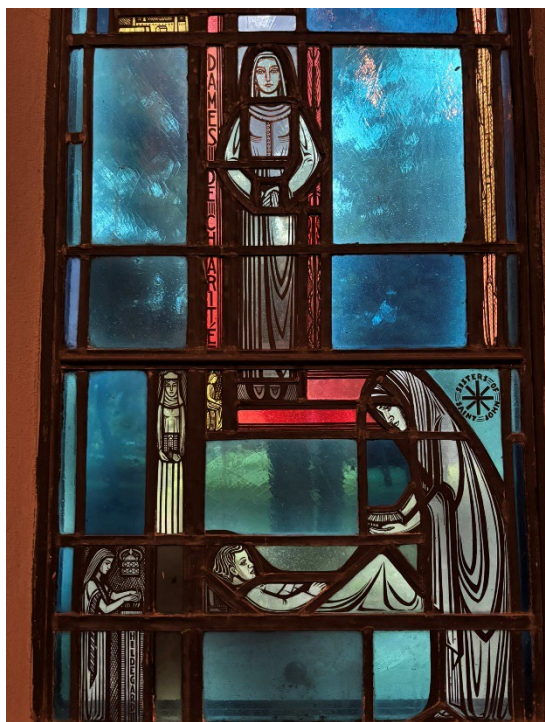
Integrity

The Little Chapel in the Woods has been thoughtfully maintained and unaltered in the decades since it was completed. Its architectural significance, in part as a “multi-level juxtaposition of traditional materials and craft with modern structural forms and techniques,”² is conveyed primarily through integrity of design, materials, workmanship, and setting. Despite changes to the surrounding campus, the preserved natural setting and location continues to reflect the architect’s intentional integration of the building with its environment. Since its inauguration, the small building has continuously served as a chapel—intended more for mediative reflection than formal rituals, despite being the site of numerous weddings—for the college community.

² Brantley Hightower, “The Subversive Modernism of O’Neil Ford,” in *O’Neil Ford Monograph 8: The Little Chapel in the Woods: O’Neil Ford and Arch Swank* ed. by Wilfried Wang (Austin and Berlin: The University of Texas at Austin, Wasmuth & Zolen Verlag UG, 2021), 32.

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“Women Taking Care of the World” West Wall



Theme: Nursing

Iconography: Florence Nightingale, Hildegard of Bingen; Clara Barton; Dames de Charité

Quotation: "What is the having to do with dead canvas or cold marble compared with having to do with the living body, the temple of God's spirit." (Nightingale) (The text on the window followed this sentence in the full quotation: "Nursing is an art; and if it is to be made an art requires as exclusive devotion as any painter's or sculptor's work.")

Artist(s): Beatrice Paschall



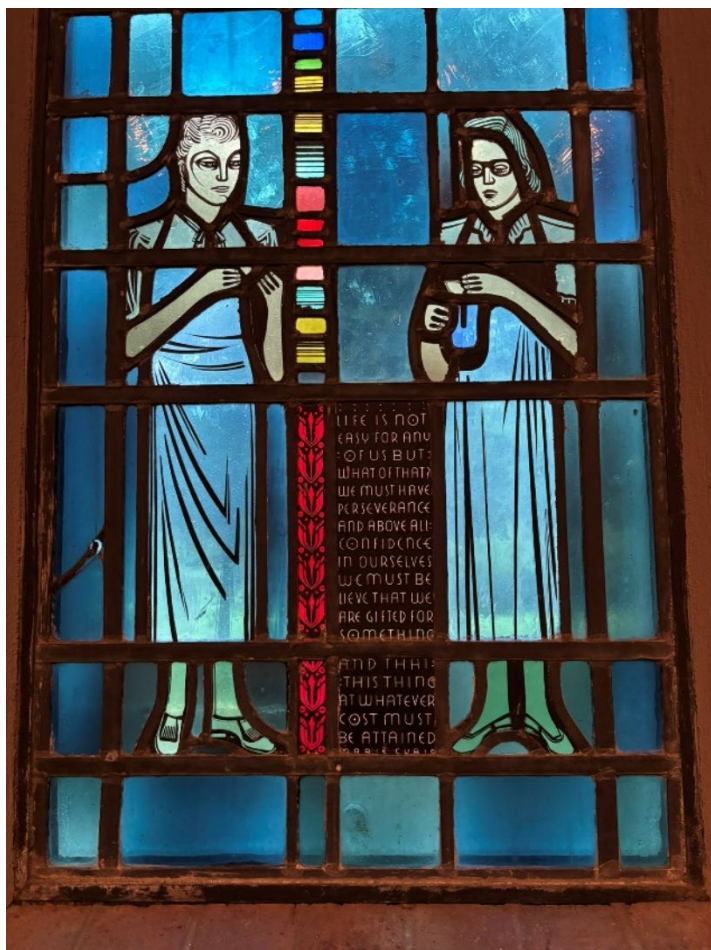
Theme: Education

Iconography: Mary Lyon (founder of Mount Holyoke College; holding a model of Mount Holyoke's main building), Helen Keller, Ann Sullivan

Quotation: "Never mind the brick and mortar; only let us have the living minds to work upon." (Lyon)

Artist(s): Ivy May Chollar

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Theme: Science

Iconography: allegorical figures of Chemistry, Physics, and Biology; student scientists

Quotation: "Life is not easy for any of us, but what of that? We must have perseverance, and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something, and that this thing, at whatever cost, must be obtained." (Marie Curie)

Artist(s): members of Advanced Art History Class, 1939; Nora May Pierce, Mary Ann Chadick, Eloise Carriker, Beatrice Pascall, Billie Marie Culwell

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Theme: Social Service

Iconography: Hull House, a factory, and women working, in the words of Dorothy A. LaSelle, to “improve living and working conditions through legislation to raise labor standards, promote safety measures, standardize wages, and limit child labor” and to “promote understanding among all peoples of the world,” personified by large central female figure who “appeals, by means of the radio, to all individual segregated by race, creed, or nationality, to work toward a brotherhood of man.” Settlement worker leading “one a little negro child and the other a white child, symbolizing the abolishment of racial antipathies.”³

Quotation: “No two people or group of people can come into an affectionate relationship with one another unless they carry on a mutual task.” (Jane Addams)

Artist(s): Betty Winston

³ *Iconographies of Stained Glass Windows, Little Chapel-In-The-Woods, Texas State College for Women, Denton, Texas*, ed. by Dorothy A. LaSelle (Denton, Texas: Texas State College for Women, 1941), 5.

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“Ministration to the Aesthetic Needs of the World” East Wall



Theme: Speech
Iconography: allegorical figure; Isabella Andreini, Renaissance actress; radio; phonetic symbols, Stage set equipment

Quotation: "Speech is a mirror of the Soul. As a man speaks, so is he."
(Publius Surus)

Artist(s): members of Advanced History of Art, Spring 1939; Nora May Piece



Theme: Literature
Iconography: allegorical figure; Emily Bronte; pattern based on wampum writing system

Quotation: "O may I join the Choir Invisible of those immortal dead who live again in minds made better by their presence." (Emily Bronte)

Artist(s): Lucille Cudd

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Theme: Dance

Iconography: allegorical figure; figure meant as symbolic allusion to Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey; contemporary dancers modeled on members of a student dance group expressing "reverence," exaltation," and "praise"

Quotation: "Praise ye the Lord—
Let them praise His Name in the dance"
(Pslam 149)

Artist(s): Beatrice Paschall



Theme: Music

Iconography: organist; mother singing a lullaby; choir; girls playing cello, horn, violin; opera Singer

Quotation: "Gloria In Excelsis Deo"

Artist(s): members of Advanced History of Art, Spring 1939; Mary Cook; Nora May Pierce; Betty Winston

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Motherhood Window, above the altar



Center Panel: Large female figure with young child and baby framed by abstraction of yucca plants

Upper Register: Food preparation sewing

Left and Right Middle Register: Gardening; gathering flax in fields

Left and right Lower Register: Three children grouped with mother; mother with child and husband

Quotation: "She looketh well to the ways of her household and eateth not the bread of idleness. She seeketh wool and flax and worketh willingly with her hands. She openeth her mouth with wisdom and in her tongue is the law of kindness. Her children arise and call her blessed, her husband also and he praiseth her. Strength and honor are her clothing and she shall rejoice in time to come." (Book of Proverbs)

Artist(s): Billie Marie Culwell, Correen M. Spellman, Beatrice Paschall, Helen Crain, Ivy May Chollar Mary Ann Chadick, Dorothy A. LaSelle, Marilyn Yates, Lura Mae Kendricks

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Rose Window
Over the main (south) entrance

Circular abstract composition with central sunburst motif; primarily dark blues, with red, orange, and turquoise tones. The window was meant to broadly evoke the hues and “moods” of Texas landscapes, including wildflowers and the colors of changing skies, and abstractly convey “woman’s joy in the physical world about her. It expresses the pure exaltation that comes from contact with external reality.”⁴

Artists: Marilyn Yates and Art Department Staff



⁴ *Iconographies of Stained Glass Windows, Little Chapel-In-The-Woods, Texas State College for Women, Denton, Texas, 13.*

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Statement of Significance

The Little Chapel in the Woods is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the national level of significance under criterion C as a unique work of modern architecture in the United States. The building is significant at the national level for its distinctive and superbly achieved integration of two major tendencies in architectural modernism: its status as a foundational building in the career of master architect O'Neil Ford; for the art within it, including stained glass windows, hand carved works in wood, and metalwork; its status as a rare and possibly unique example of the integration of designs and work by trained and untrained architects, builders, artists, and craftspeople, the overwhelming majority of whom were collegiate women; its association with the National Youth Administration and Eleanor Roosevelt; and for the ways the building's stained glass windows enlarged and complicated central themes and formal principles associated with WPA-era muralism. The period of significance is 1939-1941, representing the years of construction and installation of stained glass windows.

The institution now known as Texas Woman's University was founded in Denton, Denton County in 1901 by the Texas Legislature as Girls Industrial College. It was renamed the College of Industrial Arts in 1905, and Texas State College for Women (TSCW) in 1934. The present name was adopted in 1957. TSCW president L.H. Hubbard was the initial driving force behind the construction of a non-sectarian chapel that could accommodate people of different faiths. He envisioned the building primarily as "a haven for prayer and meditation" that could also be used by student and faculty for religious ceremonies.⁵

Construction of the Little Chapel was part of a larger TSCW campaign, started under Hubbard in the early 1930s, to improve the campus built and natural landscape. This effort resulted in the construction of seven WPA-funded buildings by 1935—Hygea Hall, Stoddard Hall, Stephen F. Austin Hall, Sam Houston Hall, the Science Building, the Fine Arts Building, and the Music and Speech Building.⁶ Multiple landscape projects transformed the area northeast of the new buildings (**Figures 8 & 20**):

When The Little Chapel in the Woods opened...in 1939, it was on a part of campus known as Lowry Woods and surrounded by the Texas Garden designed by faculty and nurtured by students. Native trees, shrubs, and perennials like cedar elms, red buds, oaks, thrift, asters, wood violets, and columbine combined with popular specimens like bachelor buttons and pinks to create a series of shade gardens, rock gardens, and flowering beds. A spring-fed fountain cascaded down a series of terraces formed by stone taken from the site, flowing toward a pond shaped in the form of Texas and filled with water grasses. Meandering pathways led from the campus to the chapel through the gardens and created what one student later called a "woody theater of stateliness."⁷

Little Chapel in the Woods was, "the final piece of a native landscape in development for a decade and should be understood as one piece of a larger effort to design an idealized, meditative landscape through artistic and scientific collaboration."⁸

⁵ Quoted in George, 51.

⁶ Bridges, "Louis Herman Hubbard," in *Marking a Trail*, 24.

⁷ Kathryn Holliday, "Making the Woods for the Little Chapel," in *O'Neil Ford Monograph 8: The Little Chapel in the Woods: O'Neil Ford and Arch Swank* ed. by Wilfried Wang (Austin and Berlin: The University of Texas at Austin, Wasmuth & Zolen Verlag UG, 2021), 40.

⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

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Little Chapel in the Woods

From the beginning, the Little Chapel was a highly collaborative undertaking. A gift of \$15,000 by the W.R. Nicholson family of Longview provided the seed money for further fundraising. Additional monies were raised by students, faculty, and alumnae. A jury, which included Hubbard and artist Dorothy Antoinette “Toni” LaSelle, associate professor of art, selected the firm of Ford and Swank to design the building after an open competition. Critical additional support was provided through a National Youth Administration grant, thanks to the efforts of an influential administrator, Dallas architect David R. Williams, who had been O’Neil Ford’s mentor and was a friend of President Roosevelt’s. The final cost came to about \$28,000.

The chapel was to be built on a small hilltop in a wooded setting that shielded it somewhat from the rest of campus. Using gentle terracing, Ford and Rogers relied on topography and vegetation to shape a precinct of sorts for the building, to both underscore its programmatic difference from dormitories and academic buildings and heighten its character as a mediative place. The distinctive name of the chapel—pointedly not that of a donor—was at once straightforwardly descriptive, conveyed the building’s non-sectarianism, and served to heighten the association of the building with the landscape, all of which distinguished it from most religious buildings in Texas, and indeed in the United States, in the 1930s. Members of the Civilian Conservation Corps, another major federal Depression-era program, brought fieldstone quarried in Bridgeport, Texas and brick created there to the campus, where approximately 90 mostly young unemployed and underemployed men from Denton County hired by the National Youth Administration constructed the building beginning in spring of 1939.

TWU professor Antoinette “Toni” LaSelle, a major abstract Texas painter, helped influenced the design of the building, making suggestions on the platform and altar, but her most important role was as director of Chapel Arts Projects. LaSelle studied with Ralph Stackpole and Maurice Sterne at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco in 1931-32, a critical moment in the development of modern art in US, as Stackpole and other artists began translating the principles (and sometimes the politics) of Mexican muralists into murals, most importantly the frescoes at Coit Tower (completed 1934). LaSelle had also studied stained glass in French gothic cathedrals in 1937 and was strongly influenced by the aesthetic theory of avant garde artist Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. She marshalled these disparate influences as she shepherded the students’ work in Denton, helping to make the windows, like the building, impressive syntheses of several currents in modern art.

Along with other faculty members in the Art Department, including Marjorie Baltzel, Edith Brisac, Lura Kendrick, Thetis Lemon, Mary Marshall, Hazel Reneau, and Coreen Spellman, LaSelle guided the work of the students who, working 6-12 hours per day at points, created the narrative program and designs for the stained-glass windows, designed and fabricated the chandeliers, and the doors. They also carved the patterns in the wooden pews, pulpit, lectern, and altar according to designs by Lynn Ford. Although estimates vary, it seems that roughly 300 students had a role in realizing the chapel. Among the most important were graduate student Beatrice Paschall, who supervised the design of the windows and created one; Sammy Tate, who oversaw metal work, including the sawed-pierced and riveted brass chandeliers and the candelabras and cross on the altar; Helen Solberg, who was designed and fabricated vases on the altar, porch lights, and the stone pattern on the floor of the vestibule; Betty Winston, Nora Mae Pierce, and Lucille Cudd, and Ivy May Chollar, who each created a stained-glass window; and Carmeta Drummond, who designed and fabricated the main doors. For their work, Solberg, Pierce, Winston, and Cudd received the college’s Leman trophy. The prize also went to Margaret Glen Green for photographing the chapel and the students’ work.

Ford and Swank

Ford and Arch B. Swank (1913-1999) formed Ford and Swank in Dallas in 1938. The firm operated until 1941. In addition to the Little Chapel, the firm was known for its residential design. For the Little Chapel, they partnered with Fort Worth-based Preston M. Geren, an architect and engineer who had been chief engineer at the firm of Sanguinet,

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Staats, and Hedrick before he began his own firm, with his son, Preston M. Geren, Jr., in 1934. In 1939, Ford and Swank began reconstructing and planning La Villita in San Antonio, another project partially funded by the NYA. The partnership ended as both architects took on wartime duties. Each later went on to successful careers, Swank based in Dallas, and Ford in San Antonio. In partnership with Roscoe DeWitt after World War II, Swank's career flourished and included the commission for the Preston Center branch of Neiman Marcus (1952), which helped establish the model for vastly-scaled luxury department stores. Ford and Swank collaborated repeatedly in the 1950s and 1960s, most notably on the Texas Instruments campus. Both architects were later inducted as fellows of the American Institute of Architects.

O'Neil Ford and the Little Chapel

Formally, the Little Chapel was a watershed building in O'Neil Ford's career and in the history of US architecture. The building was also the first significant built expression of Ford's ideas about the relationships between architecture and landscape, and the principles that would undergird his works throughout his long career. Ford (1905-1982) one of the foremost US architects of the middle decades of the twentieth century. Born in Pink Hill, Texas, he came from a resourceful family of expert makers. Ford had a robust primary and secondary education in Sherman. His family moved to Denton after his father's death. At North Texas State Teachers' College he learned drafting and woodworking. Ford had little formal training in architecture, but studied it by correspondence through the International Correspondence School of Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Ford spent his professionally formative years in North Texas under the tutelage of Dallas architect David R. Williams and in the orbit of some of the Texas's most innovative artists, most notably those associated with the Dallas Nine. As a young man, with his brother Lynn, and Williams, Ford traveled widely in Texas and the southwest sketching and honing his understanding of nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century vernacular buildings built by European colonists and their descendants. During this period, Ford also first came into contact with Spanish colonial missions, which would be of life-long personal and professional interest. He and his wife, Wanda, were married in the granary at Mission San José in San Antonio in 1940.

Ford came to national prominence (and received international attention) in the early 1950s with his pioneering use of the Youtz-Slick Lift-Slab construction method at Trinity University in San Antonio. Ford's work on the Trinity campus, with Jerry Rogers, Bartlett Cocke, William Wurster, and landscape architects Arthur and Marie Berger, was widely published in national architecture journals, including *Architectural Record*, *Architectural Forum*, and *Progressive Architecture*. In collaboration with Richard Colley and Félix Candela, he designed multiple buildings for Texas Instruments, in the US and abroad, at a critical moment in the development of the Cold War-era defense industry, which depended in part on technologies created and refined by Texas Instruments scientists.

Ford was respected nationally as an architect, teacher, and theorist. He served as a visiting critic at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard in 1952 and was Commonwealth Professor at the University of Virginia in 1976-77. President Lyndon Johnson appointed him to the National Council on the Arts in 1968. There Ford served alongside Gregory Peck, Charles Eames, and other titanic figures in the arts. He also sat on the Rockefeller Committee on the Arts and Education, and was among the architects included in the 1958-59 study of architectural creativity undertaken by the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research at the University of California, Berkeley.⁹ Other subjects included Eero Saarinen, I.M. Pei, Philip Johnson, Louis Kahn, Richard Neutra. Ford was among the respondents to Robert Oppenheimer's keynote address at the 1960 American Institute of Architects' annual convention. In 1964, Ford was one of seven architects, including Pei, Victor Gruen, and Pietro Belluschi, invited to lecture in "The People's Architect's" series at Rice University. There, in segregated Houston, at an all-white university, Ford spoke forcefully in favor of civil rights and of the intimate connections between the built environment and society. In 1953, *Vogue*

⁹ Pierluigi Serraino, *The Creative Architect: Inside the Great Midcentury Personality Study* (Monacelli Press, 2016).

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magazine had declared Ford “one of twenty-two Texans who help run the place,” and described him as “a brilliant, fertile-minded, rangy-talking architect.”¹⁰ (He was the only architect among the group, which centered on businesspeople and philanthropists.) In recognition of his decades-long dedication to historic preservation and capacious understanding of the intimate relationship between architecture and the American landscape, in 1974 the National Endowment for Arts designated Ford himself a National History Historic Landmark. The citation summarized his approach and mentioned just a few of the preservation struggles he had led:

“Whereas the Alamo has not been torn down to park four Buicks and
whereas the freeway across Brackenridge Park stands like an embarrassed
dinosaur at the gates of San Antonio, and
whereas many great buildings exist across the land with architectural quality,
human scale and compassion, and respect for natural materials, and
whereas all these things and more can be in part attributed to the imagination,
perseverance and genius of one O’Neil Ford,
be it therefore resolved that the aforesaid O’Neil Ford be designated a National
Historic Landmark.”

Ford’s keen sense of the deep relationships among materials, craft, and site alluded to in the landmark citation first emerged clearly and compelling in the Little Chapel in the Woods. In a 1932 essay published in *Southwest Review* (and that deserves to be counted among the major theoretical texts of US architectural modernism) Ford interpreted US attitudes toward architecture and land in relationship to colonialism and in sharply critical terms:

It is not easy to account fully for the present rather amorphous status of American architecture, but at least some of the influences at work can be detected. For instance, we seem to have inherited from the frontier an unconsciously hostile attitude toward our environment, toward the land, which makes it difficult for us to build in harmony with the landscape. Again, there is frequently in our architecture a hint of a will-to-power, an assertion at all costs of the individual ego, which is possibly connected with the individualism of the Industrial Revolution. And then there is that curious American humility which leads us to imitate European styles in every branch of art.¹¹

Throughout the essay, Ford positioned himself implicitly in the tradition of organicism associated with Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, but also referred to European modernism, and critiqued historicism. His text revealed the social and political conscience that underlay his life’s work and which would lead him, in the 1960s to repeatedly take professional risks in publicly supporting civil rights, opposing the demolition of low-income, non-white urban neighborhoods in San Antonio for the building of HemisFair, and, with his wife Wanda and others, fight—all the way to the US Supreme Court—the building of an expressway, Highway 281—through San Antonio. As Ford’s first really important buildnig, the Little Chapel reflected core principles already articulated and those that would define his built work for decades.

The design of the Little Chapel was inspired at least in part by a single nave, gable-roofed church that he admired and had sketched in New Mexico in 1928. His drawing suggests that building had very few windows, minimal or no visible buttressing, a rather infelicitous pyramidal tower above main door, and was set alongside a cemetery in walled atrium few trees. For the building in Denton, Ford also channeled Romanesque basilical forms and the dramatic parabolic arches used in some early twentieth-century airplane hangars that by the 1930s were strongly associated with the technophilic aspects of modern architecture, not least because they were beloved of Le Corbusier, who illustrated them

¹⁰ Allene Talmey, “Power in Texas: 22 Who Help Run the Place,” *Vogue* (Jan. 1953), 140–144.

¹¹ O’Neil Ford, “Organic Building,” originally published as Thomas D. Broad and O’Neil Ford, “Toward a New Architecture,” *Southwest Review* 17.2 (Winter 1932): 209–229

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in *Vers une Architecture* (1923), which was one of the most important treatises on architecture written in the twentieth century and went through multiple printings.

Ford fused broad allusions to medieval ecclesiastical architecture and avant garde European modernism with the principles of the Arts of the Crafts movement, carried most obviously in the hand-laid masonry and hand-made works of art on the inside. At the same time, the expression of rough, earthy materiality in the stone courses and exposed bricks, and explicit rootedness to the landscape, placed the Little Chapel firmly in one of the main currents of 1930s modernism internationally, exemplified by Le Corbusier's *Petite Maison de Weekend* (La Celle Ste. Cloud, France, 1935) and Frank Lloyd Wright's *Taliesin West* (Maricopa Mesa, Arizona, begun 1936). The result in Denton was not a work of pastiche or eclecticism, but an astoundingly coherent and potent design that demonstrated its architects' firm, creative command of form, materials, structure, as well as histories and theories of architecture. The achievement was even more astonishing by the fact of the building having been ultimately the work of ensemble, shepherded by Ford and Swank, in collaboration with Toni LaSelle, but embodying the creative vision and labor of many.

The degree and sophistication of aesthetic synthesis that Ford and his collaborators achieved in the Little Chapel is rare among works of US architecture in this period, and even rarer still in religious buildings. In the late 1930s, revival styles were overwhelmingly favored for churches by clients and architects alike. The Little Chapel anticipated the post-World War II embrace of modernism in religious buildings by at least ten years. As a work of campus architecture, it also foreshadowed the boom in modern chapels in collegiate settings typified by St. Savior's Chapel at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1952); Kresge Chapel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, MA (Eero Saarinen, 1955); and St. John's Abbey Church on the campus of St. John's University in Collegeville, MN (Marcel Breuer, 1961); and Tuskegee Chapel at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama (Paul Rudolph, Louis Edwin Fry, and John A. Welch, 1969). The shaping of space using parabolic vaults was also highly unusual, but anticipated the adoption of the form in later buildings. Architects Bard and Vanderbuilt used the parabola prominently in St. Austin's Catholic Church in Minneapolis (1938), an exact contemporary of the Little Chapel. That building, however, was made of wood and stucco and demolished in 1968. The parabola would come into use for religious buildings in the 1950s and 1960s in the US, as, for example, in the St. Louis Priory, in St. Louis, MO (Hellmuth, Obata, and Kassabaum, 1962), thanks in large part to the influence of Mexican architect Félix Candela, with whom Ford collaborated on the First Christian Church in Denton and the Texas Instruments Semi-Conductor Building in Dallas.

Although it is larger, built of reinforced concrete, and formally quite different from the Little Chapel, as a modern chapel on a college campus, Frank Lloyd Wright's Annie Pfeiffer Memorial Chapel at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, FL of 1941, is one of the Denton building's few near-contemporaries. Unlike the Little Chapel, it is strongly identifiable as the work of a single architect. Yet like the Little Chapel, the Pfeiffer Memorial Chapel is responsive to its site and integrated into the landscape. In 1932, Ford had entitled an important theoretical essay, "Organic Building," using the term Wright most often used to describe his philosophy of architecture.¹² Like Wright, Ford was deeply concerned throughout his career with creating harmonious relationships between buildings and their sites and using materials straightforwardly and innovatively. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Wright's work typified the manifestation in the US of aspects of the Arts & Crafts Movement, just as the Little Chapel would decades later.

The Little Chapel belonged to the group of buildings associated with the popularization of the "small church" in the US in the 1930s. "Small churches" were promoted in religious journals as economically suitable alternatives to larger works during the Great Depression and imagined to serve small congregations. Promoters of such buildings rarely recommended styles, but did envision highly-quality construction using local materials. A competition to design a

¹² Ford, "Organic Building," reprinted in *O'Neil Ford on Architecture*, ed. by Kathryn E. O'Rourke (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 67-80.

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small church organized by the architecture school at Notre Dame University in 1939 yielded four honorable mentions designed in modern idioms.¹³

Other Nationally Notable Projects Associated with Ford

Ford translated the sensitivity to local histories and contexts, and broad understanding of architectural history and modernism revealed in the Little Chapel to many of the works that followed. Immediately after the Little Chapel commission, Ford moved to San Antonio, where, through the influence of his mentor David R. Williams, deputy director of the National Youth Administration (1936-1941), he received the commission to design La Villita, an arts and commercial district meant to evoke nineteenth-century urban patterns and building types in San Antonio. A pet project of Maury Maverick, San Antonio's left-leaning mayor and friend of President Roosevelt, La Villita was, along with Colonial Williamsburg, one of the nation's first purpose-built projects intended to define place with reference to historical urbanism (albeit from a rather narrow perspective). Unlike Williamsburg, however, La Villita was not meant to be an open-air "museum" frozen in time, but a center for arts education that drew on Mexican craft traditions and attracted students, many of them Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, who had arrived relatively recently in San Antonio in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. Somewhat as at the Little Chapel, doors, fixtures, and woodwork were created by hand—this time by local craftspeople (most of them Mexican and Mexican-American) funded by the NYA. Two Little Chapel artists, Sammy Tate and Beatrice Paschall, were among the instructors at La Villita.

Ford's first experience in planning had also come through Williams and had national connections. In 1934, Ford joined Williams in Pine Mountain Valley, Georgia, where Williams worked as chief planner of a project funded by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for the rural community. Pine Mountain Valley is about 15 miles from Warm Springs, where President Franklin Roosevelt vacationed and rested nearly every year between 1924 and 1945, and where he established the "Little White House" during his presidency.¹⁴ Because of its proximity to his Georgia residence, the president visited Pine Mountain Valley with some frequency and federal funds flowed to it abundantly. Although it was typologically quite different from the Little Chapel, like it the Pine Mountain Valley project had at its core issues of community, cooperation, work, and landscape—themes that would course through Ford's major projects throughout his career, particularly the large scale works for university and research campuses.

Engagements with history, community, and planning coincided in Ford's decades' long work in historic preservation, most notably in the five Spanish colonial missions in San Antonio. Ford became involved in preservation through his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Graham, one of the founders of the Conservation Society of San Antonio, and one of the early champions of preserving the missions. Ford and his wife, Wanda, lived in the house, Willow Way, that Elizabeth Graham designed and whose construction she directed, largely using materials salvaged from demolished buildings in San Antonio. Ford would add to that house as well. Preservation became a mainstay of his architectural practice, and in collaboration with his associates, Carolyn Peterson foremost among them, and other advocates, he shepherded the creation in 1978 of a National Historic Park consisting of four of the missions: San José, Concepción, Espada, and San Juan Capistrano, all of which sit near the San Antonio River south of downtown. The creation of the park helped conceptually integrate the missions and South San Antonio into the fabric of the city and solidify San Antonio's place as a national tourist destination. UNESCO designated the four missions, along with the Alamo, World Heritage Sites in 2015.

Toni LaSelle, the WPA, and Muralism in the Americas

As important as the architecture of the Little Chapel to the history of modern art in the US, were the works of art created for it. These were overseen faculty member Dorothy Antoinette (Toni) LaSelle (1901-2002) in her capacity as

¹³ Jay M. Price, *Temples for a Modern God: Religious Architecture in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 43-47.

¹⁴ The Little White House State Historic Site and Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute is a National Historic Landmark: https://www.nps.gov/places/roosevelts_little_white_house.htm

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director of Chapel Arts Project. LaSelle was an important abstract Texas painter, whose contributions to modern art have long been overshadowed by those of male artists in the state. Along with other faculty members in the Art Department, including Marjorie Baltzel, Edith Brisac, Lura Kendrick, Thetis Lemon, Mary Marshall, Hazel Reneau, and Coreen Spellman, LaSelle guided the work of the students who, working 6-12 hours per day at points, created the narrative program and designs for the stained-glass windows, designed and fabricated the chandeliers, and the doors. LaSelle's contributions to the design of the Little Chapel included suggestions about the designs for platform and altar.

Although they were made of stained glass, in their figuration, entwining of historical figures and contemporary allusions, and commingling of social and political themes and regional references, the windows in the chapel were part of the effloresce of American muralism that began in Mexico in the 1920s and accelerated in the US under the patronage of the federal government through the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) within the Works Progress Administration. The best-known examples of PWAP works are the murals painted in post offices throughout the US during the 1930s. In Mexico, beginning with the work of Diego Rivera in the early 1920s, the principles of narrative wall painting associated with late medieval and Renaissance fresco were adapted by artists to address modern political and social conditions, often with references to national and regional histories. Notably, motherhood—the topic of the largest window in the Little Chapel—was also among the recurrent themes of Rivera's work.¹⁵

The media Rivera and his contemporaries used varied and included stained glass.¹⁶ With Enrique Villaseñor, Rivera designed four stained glass windows that interpreted Earth, Air, Water, and Fire in terms of modern labor for the Ministry of Health Building in Mexico City in 1929. This building was published in article by US architect William Spratling in *Architectural Forum*, one of the country's leading architecture journals, in 1931.¹⁷ Fermín Revueltas was another leading Mexican artist who treated labor in modern figurative stained glass, for example in the Hospital of the National Railroad Workers in Mexico City (1934).

Developments in Mexican muralism attracted international attention as early as the mid-1920s, and interest on the part of US patrons grew after Rivera painted his first US murals in the San Francisco in 1930-31.¹⁸ For eight months during their stay in California, Rivera, and his wife, Frida Kahlo, lived and worked in the San Francisco studio of artist Ralph Stackpole, who had been instrumental in bringing Rivera to the US and securing the commission for him of the mural, *Allegory of California*, in the San Francisco Stock Exchange. Stackpole was one of the artists who first translated the principles (and sometimes the politics) of Mexican muralists into US murals, most importantly in the famous frescoes in San Francisco's Coit Tower (completed 1934).¹⁹

From 1931 to 1932, at the very moment that modern art in the US was being transformed under the influence of Rivera, Toni LaSelle studied with Stackpole and Maurice Sterne at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. LaSelle also studied stained glass in French gothic cathedrals in 1937, and was strongly influenced by the aesthetic theory of avant garde artist Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. She marshalled these disparate influences as she shepherded the students' work in Denton, helping to make the windows, like the building, impressive syntheses of several currents in modern art.

¹⁵ James Oles, "From Murals to Paintings: Mothers and Children," in *Diego Rivera's America*, 78-95.

¹⁶ See *Vitrales de México* (Mexico City: Comisión Nacional de libros de texto gratuitos / Pinacoteca Editores, S. A. de C. V., 2004).

¹⁷ William Spratling, "The Public Health Center, Mexico City," *Architectural Forum* (Nov. 1931), 589-94.

¹⁸ On Rivera's work in San Francisco, see Maria Castro, "Diego Rivera's New American Art: San Francisco, 1930-31, in *Diego Rivera's America*, 110-139.

¹⁹ On the Coit Tower murals and muralism in California, see Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (University of California Press, 1999).

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With its central theme of labor—understood broadly to include intellectual labor, social work, the making of art, and motherhood—the iconographic program of the windows at once echoed the one of the main currents in WPA-era muralism and complicated its implicit conceptualization of labor as primarily male. Like many 1930s muralists, the artists of the Little Chapel windows used figuration, including portraits and allegorical figures, to celebrate work, but they did so by foregrounding women as agents of history. Most radical of all was the artists’ assertion that motherhood was a form of work that stood alongside the labor that produced innovations in education, science, medicine, and directed social reform. By recasting forms and ideas familiar from WPA murals, and established by muralists in Mexico in the 1920s, the Little Chapel artists not only created an inspirational cycle for the Little Chapel’s most important audience—young women—but shifted the terms on which gender and work might be understood. Potently, their message was carried in the work literally of their own hands, as they transferred politically and socially inflected figurative realism from fresco and canvas to glass—a medium that itself was redolent with medieval and futuristic associations with transcendence and transformation by virtue of its prominence in European cathedrals and in the imagery of the Deutsche Werkbund and the Bauhaus.²⁰

The students also carved the patterns in the wooden pews, pulpit, lectern, and altar according to designs by Lynn Ford. Although estimates vary, it seems that roughly 300 students had a role in realizing the chapel. Among the most important were graduate student Beatrice Paschall, who supervised the design of the windows and created one; Sammy Tate, who oversaw metal work, including the sawed-pierced and riveted brass chandeliers and the candelabras and cross on the altar; Helen Solberg, who designed and fabricated vases on the altar, porch lights, and the stone pattern on the floor of the vestibule; Betty Winston, Nora Mae Pierce, and Lucille Cudd, and Ivy May Chollar, who each created a stained-glass window; and Carmeta Drummond, who designed and fabricated the main doors. For their work, Solberg, Pierce, Winston, and Cudd received the college’s Leman trophy. The prize also went to Margaret Glen Green for photographing the chapel and the students’ work.

National Youth Administration in Texas

The National Youth Administration (NYA) was a functionally autonomous program begun under the Works Progress Administration that operated from 1935 to 1943. It provided financial assistance to men and women students between the ages of 16 and 25 in exchange for work performed after school, in part-time jobs. It also employed young people who had dropped out of school. White and Hispanic participants (primarily male) contributed to the building of infrastructure, schools, parks, and public buildings throughout the state, often receiving training in the building trades on the job. Stenography and office management were also taught, chiefly to women students. The Texas NYA ran a separate program for African-Americans, who also worked on construction projects and received training for domestic work. More than 175,000 young Texans received financial assistance through the NYA, and more than 75,000 worked through the out-of-school program. In Texas, the program was administered by Lyndon Johnson from 1935-37 and Jesse Kellam from 1937 to 1943.

The exterior walls of the Little Chapel in the Woods are visual and tactile reminders of the NYA and the people it employed. The somewhat irregular and inexpert character of the masonry in places on the walls attest to the presence of novice masons who themselves gained valuable professional experience as they laid stone and brick. The material remainders of their hands further deepens the building’s association with labor, social history, and government in Texas and vividly illustrates the commitment to craft that defined O’Neil Ford’s work throughout his career.

National Admiration for the Little Chapel

Although the chapel was not complete, the first of many weddings was held there on September 23, 1939, and the building was dedicated on November 1, 1939. The ceremony included remarks by Eleanor Roosevelt, J.C. Kellam,

²⁰ Kathryn E. O’Rourke, “Women Who Work: The Radical Art of The Little Chapel in the Woods,” in *O’Neil Ford Monograph 8: The Little Chapel in the Woods: O’Neil Ford and Arch Swank* ed. by Wilfried Wang (Austin and Berlin: The University of Texas at Austin, Wasmuth & Zolen Verlag UG, 2021), 48-71.

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director of the NYA in Texas, President Hubbard, members of local clergies, and James Washington, one of NYA workers who built the chapel. As if to performatively symbolize the centrality of labor and cross-class, public-private collaboration in the project, Washington presented the key to chapel to Hubbard who “accepted it in all humility.”²¹ For her part, in a subtle plea for secularism that broadly echoed the entwining of the worldly and the religious carried in the building’s windows and program, the First Lady cast the chapel as a place whose meaning would be defined distinctly by its users, and noted the interconnection of personal experience and world affairs clouded by the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II, saying, “In this time when there is such a sense of frustration and hopelessness about the people of the world we must make our religion a personal matter, and live according to our beliefs.”²²

Later Works by O’Neil Ford

Again and again, in the decades that followed the Little Chapel, in collaboration with other architects and artists, Ford shaped restrained yet powerfully evocative buildings marked by the careful integration of technically inventive solutions, straightforward expression of structure, reverence for materials and workmanship, a profound respect for limitations and for history, and collaborations with artists and craftspeople. Outstanding examples of the ethic that crystallized in the Little Chapel include the campus of Trinity University in San Antonio; the Texas Instruments Semi-Conductor Building in Dallas, designed with Swank, Richard S. Colley, and Félix Candela; and in the Assembly Hall at La Villita, San Antonio, and the Civic Center in Denton. The Little Chapel in the Woods provided the basis for Ford’s design in the mid-1960s, of Margarite B. Parker Chapel on the Trinity campus. Parker Chapel is considerably larger, but, like the Denton building, defined by parabolic vaults, broad allusions to Romanesque architecture, and set in a precinct somewhat apart from other buildings. It too includes woodwork by Lynn Ford, as well as art glass windows by Ruth Dunn and tapestries by Martha Mood.

Although he is also well-known for designing numerous private houses, Ford’s project at Texas Woman’s University presaged later works on educational campuses. In addition to the Trinity campus, are those at Skidmore College, the University of Dallas, the University of Texas San Antonio, St. Mary’s Hall in San Antonio, and the Selwyn School in Dallas. Ford’s other buildings in Denton include the First Christian Church, with Howard Wong and Félix Candela (1959) and five buildings, with Roland Laney and others, for the City of Denton (1963-1968).

Criterion C: Architecture

The Little Chapel in the Woods captured the attention of the national architectural press, appearing in two 1940 articles in *Pencil Points*, a major journal of the period. The journal noted that the chapel “is of interest...as a setting for original handcraft, as well as an exceptionally direct solution of the problems presented by a small place of worship.” Further, it revealed, “the stained glass windows and metal fixtures and furnishings have won the admiration of those visiting the chapel.”²³

Talbot Hamlin, one of the country’s foremost architectural historians and critics, wrote at length about the “remarkable” Little Chapel in his article on modern churches, and compared Ford and Swank’s structural ingenuity to Wright’s at the recently competed Johnson Wax Building. Hamlin praised the building and its designers:

Like all real architects, the designer here has been as creative structurally as he has aesthetically. The parabolic arches which crown the nave are only two rowlocks thick. By all the empirical rules-of-thumb that control arch design, they ought not to stand up, any more

²¹ “Her Day at TSCW Brings Out Spiritual and Citizenship Needs,” *The Lass-O*, Nov. 3, 1939, p. 3.

²² “Her Day at TSCW Brings Out Spiritual and Citizenship Needs,” *The Lass-O*, Nov. 3, 1939, p. 3.

²³ “Chapel in the Woods,” *Pencil Points* (Feb. 1940), 67.

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than Wright's mushroom columns for the Johnson Wax Company at Racine, [WI] should stand; yet the choice to make them only two rowlocks thick enabled the use the lightest possible scaffolding and centering, and the forms of the arches themselves guaranteed their strength and stability.

All the details of the building have been conceived with a similar imagination—the lighting fixtures with their rich intersecting patterns of dark lines, the altar with its three square panels of convex strips, and the beautiful simple porch of stone and brick. Noteworthy, too, is the way the arch lines show on the outside in the frankly projecting buttresses that carry down the feeling of the curve. Here, then, is a chapel which is entirely of our own time, owing its beauty...to the limitations imposed upon its designers—limitations of size, and of cost, and of structure. In it there is that perfect expression which comes from the absolute uniting of structural with architectural form—that unity which is the essence of all architectural sincerity.²⁴

As a work that deftly integrated multiple strands of architectural and painterly modernity into a single, compelling whole, the Little Chapel potently reflected the debates and formal variety that defined US architecture in the 1930s, a decade in which no single style predominated. That the building achieved this at the same time that it brought together the ideas and craftsmanship of so many people makes it all the more exceptional in the history of US architecture. The themes of women as laborer and creators in many fields carried powerfully in the windows was itself exceptional in US art, as was the method and manner of its creation. That the building—as a work of young, then nearly unknown architects, unidentified laborers, and women students—drew the praise of Hamlin further attests to its exceptional significance in US architecture.

Conclusion

In sum, the Little Chapel in the Woods is nationally significant as a singular work of outstanding artistic value, and as an exceptionally creative and well-developed US response to dominant concerns in modern architecture internationally. Its significance lies as well in its status as one of the foundational projects in the career of O'Neil Ford; in the depth and breadth of collaboration across class, gender, and professional lines integral to its realization; its association with the National Youth Administration and Eleanor Roosevelt; and for the ways that the program of its stained-glass windows enlarged the framework of modern public art in the US using the principles of WPA-era muralism.

²⁴ Talbot Hamlin, "Three Churches," *Pencil Points* (Feb. 1940), 80-81.

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Section 10 – Geographical Data

Scale Map of Nominated Boundary



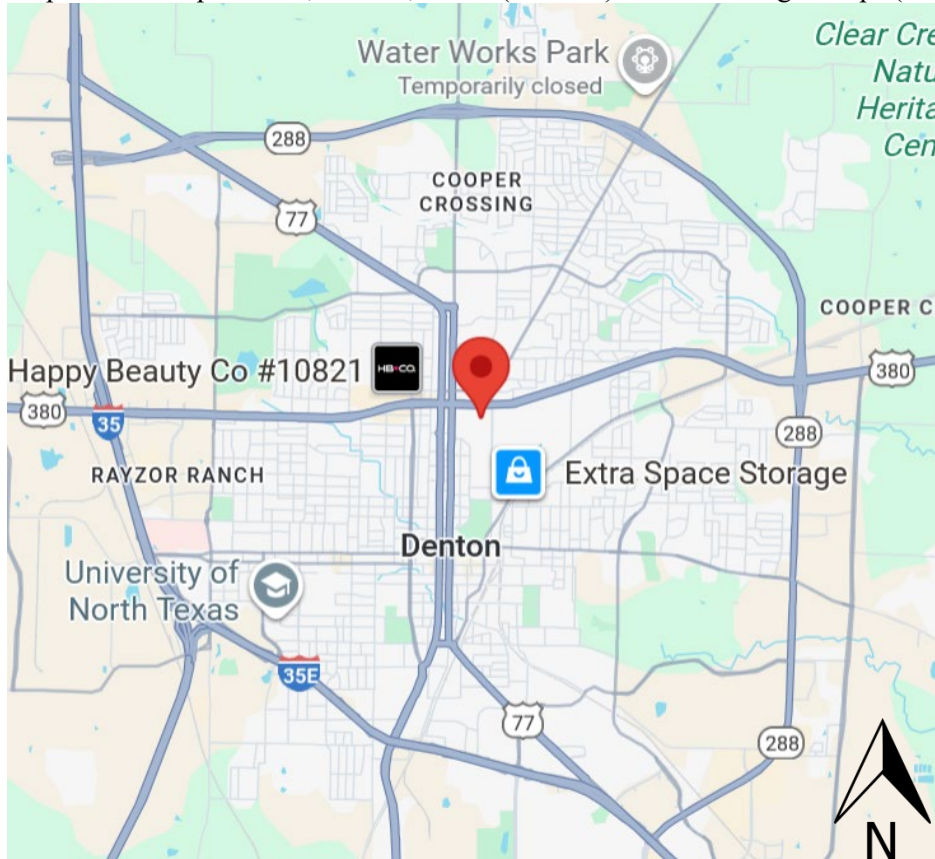
Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Maps

Map 1: Denton County, Texas



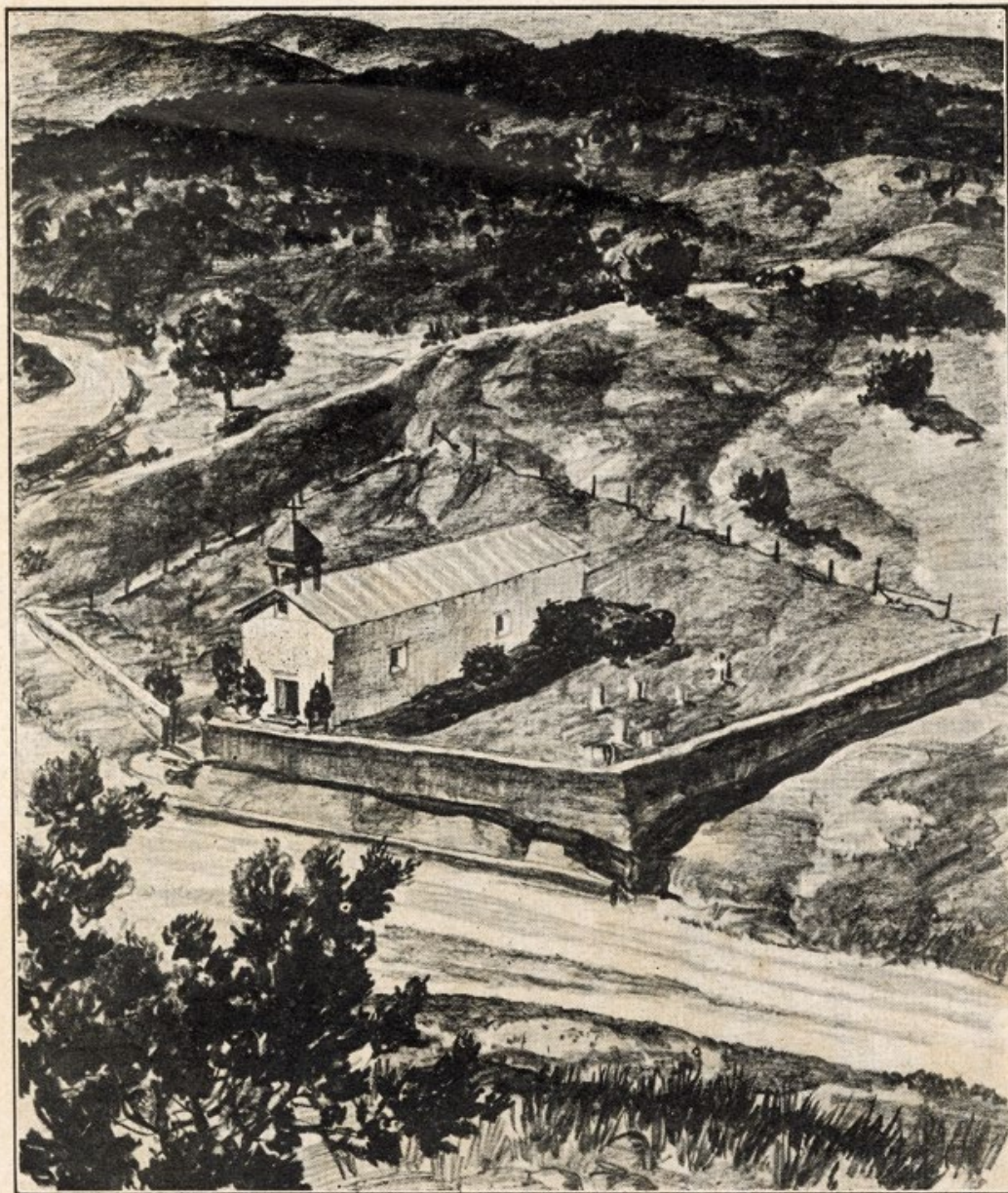
Map 2: 415 Chapel Drive, Denton, Texas (red icon). Source: Google Maps (9/23/25)



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

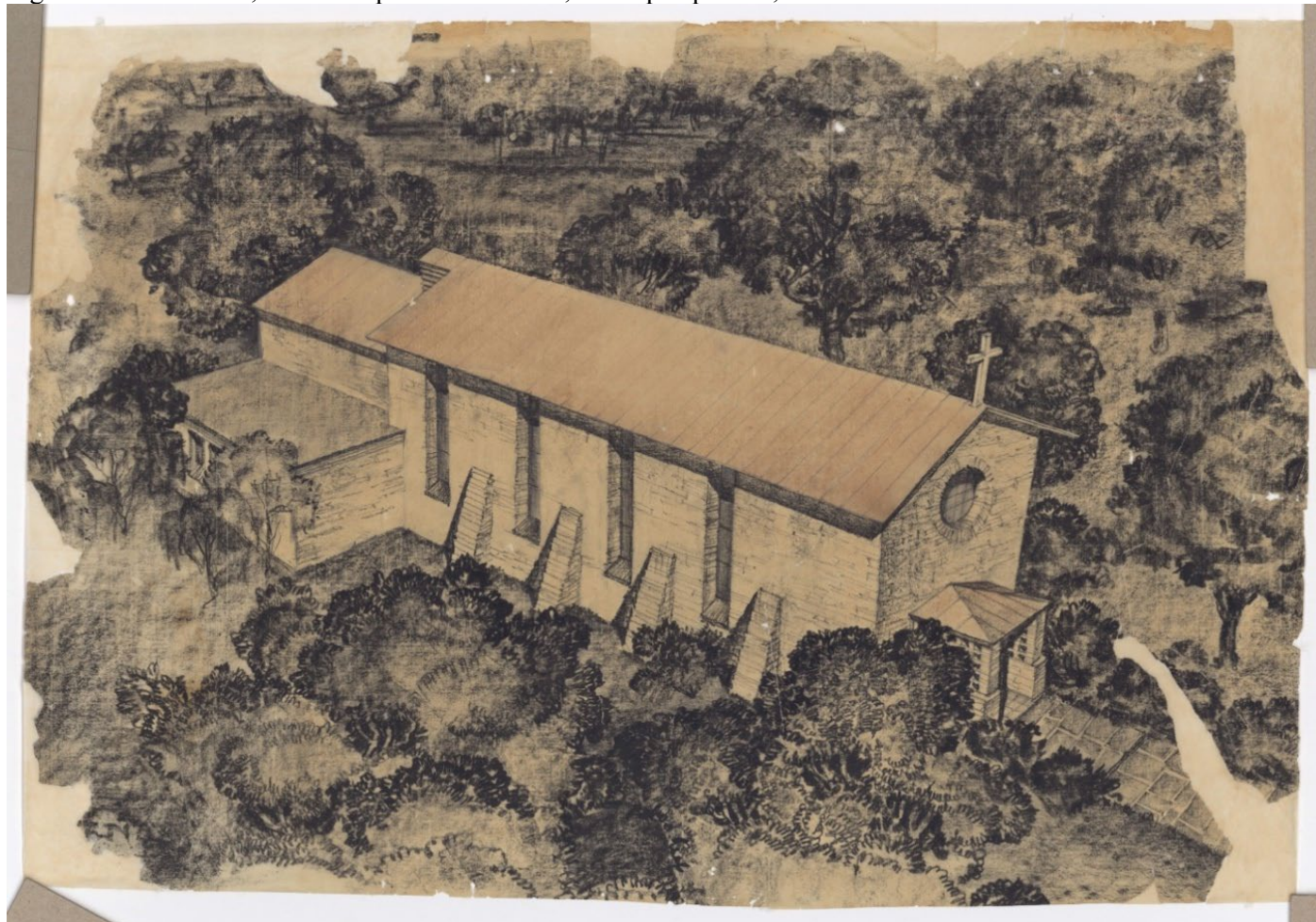
Figures

Figure 1: O'Neil Ford, sketch of a church in New Mexico, 1928. (Between Pecos and Santa Fe.) Alexander Architectural Archives.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

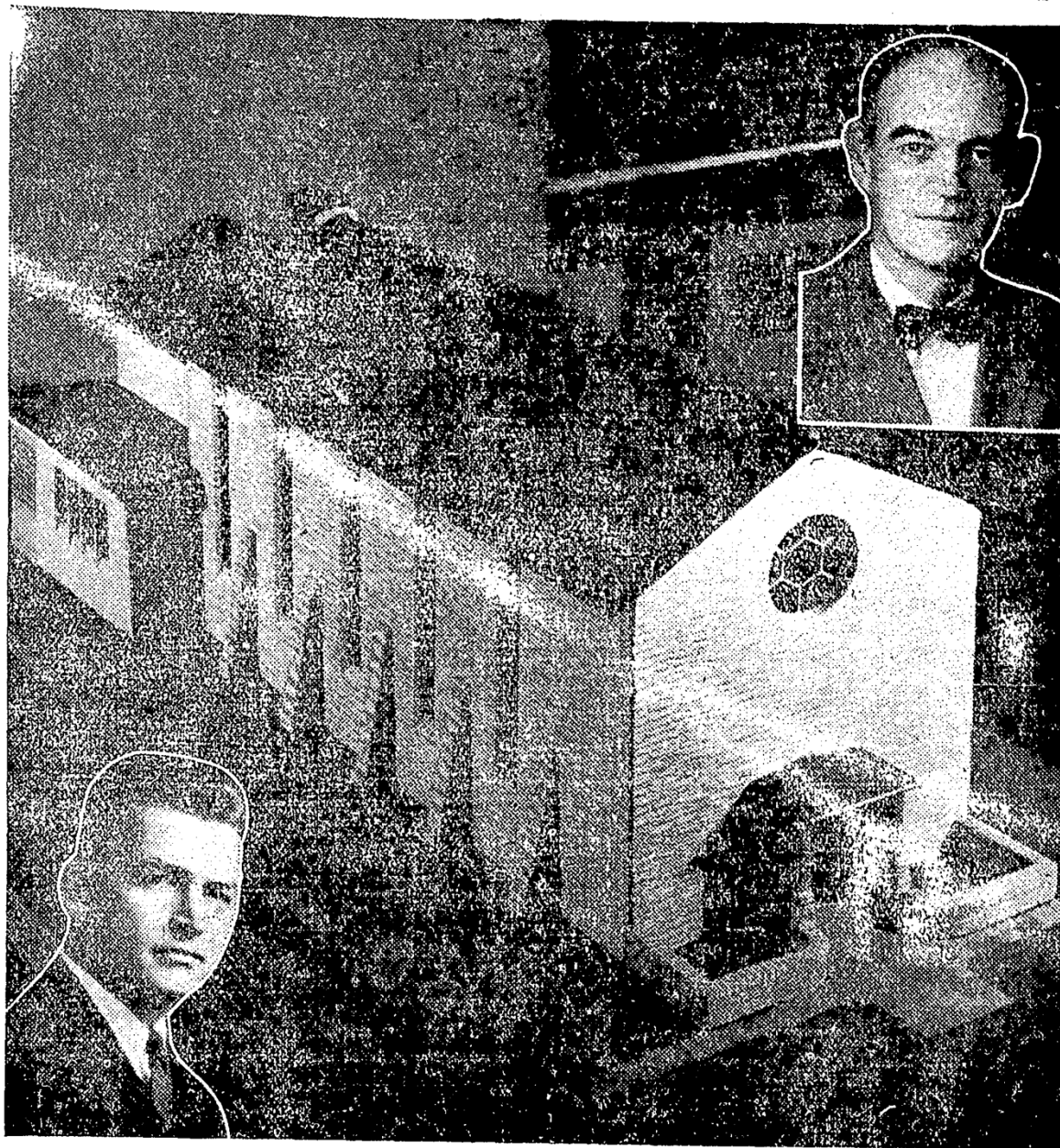
Figure 2: O'Neil Ford, Little Chapel in the Woods, aerial perspective, 1938. Alexander Architectural Archives.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

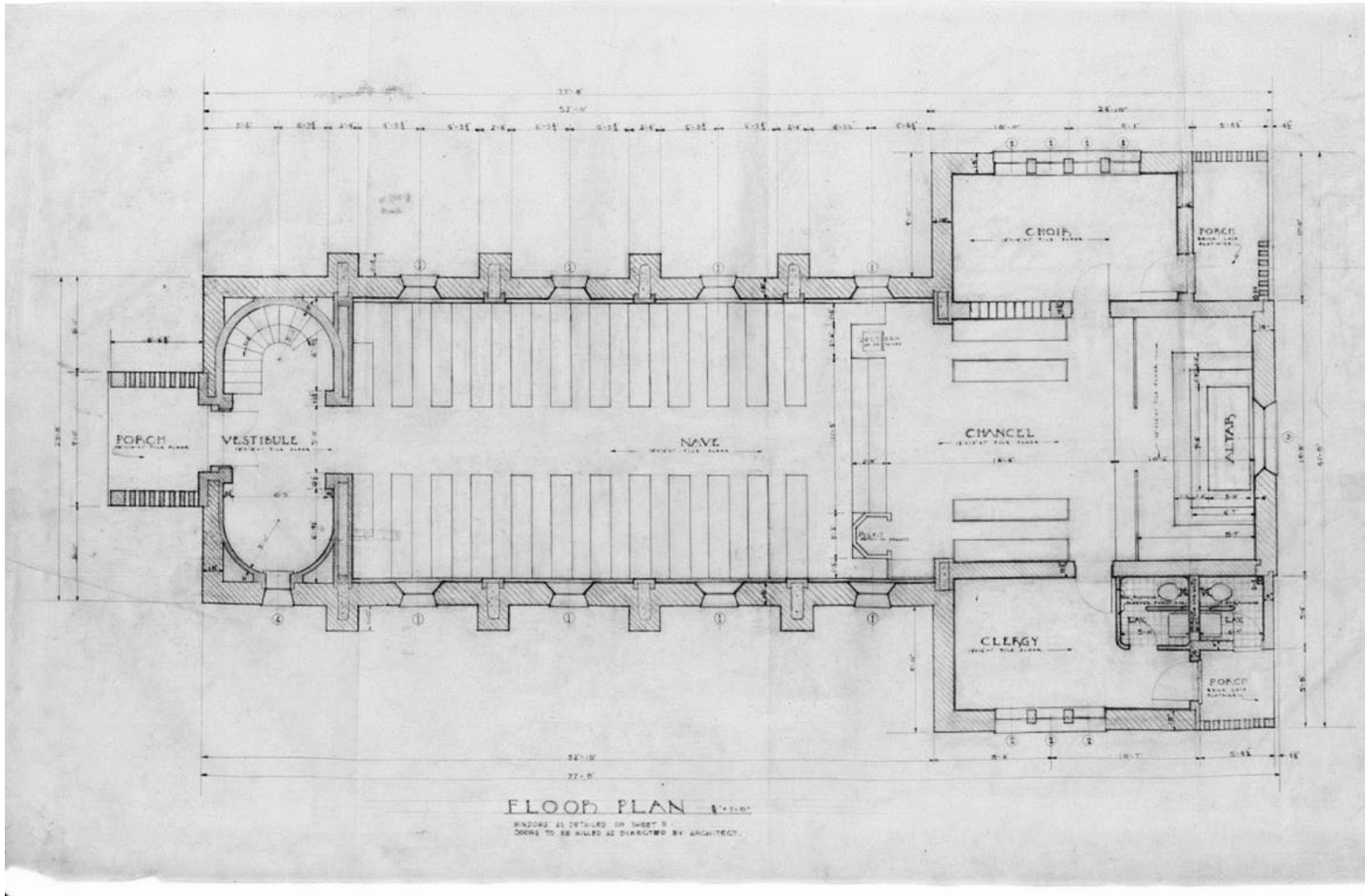
Figure 3: The Hearne Democrat, Feb. 17, 1939, sec. 2, p. 3. Image shows model of the Little Chapel by Ford & Swank. Pictured lower left is J.C. Kellum, director of the NYA in Texas; in upper right is TSCW President L.H. Hubbard.

College Receives N.Y.A. Aid to Build Long-Awaited "Chapel in the Woods" for Informal Student Worship



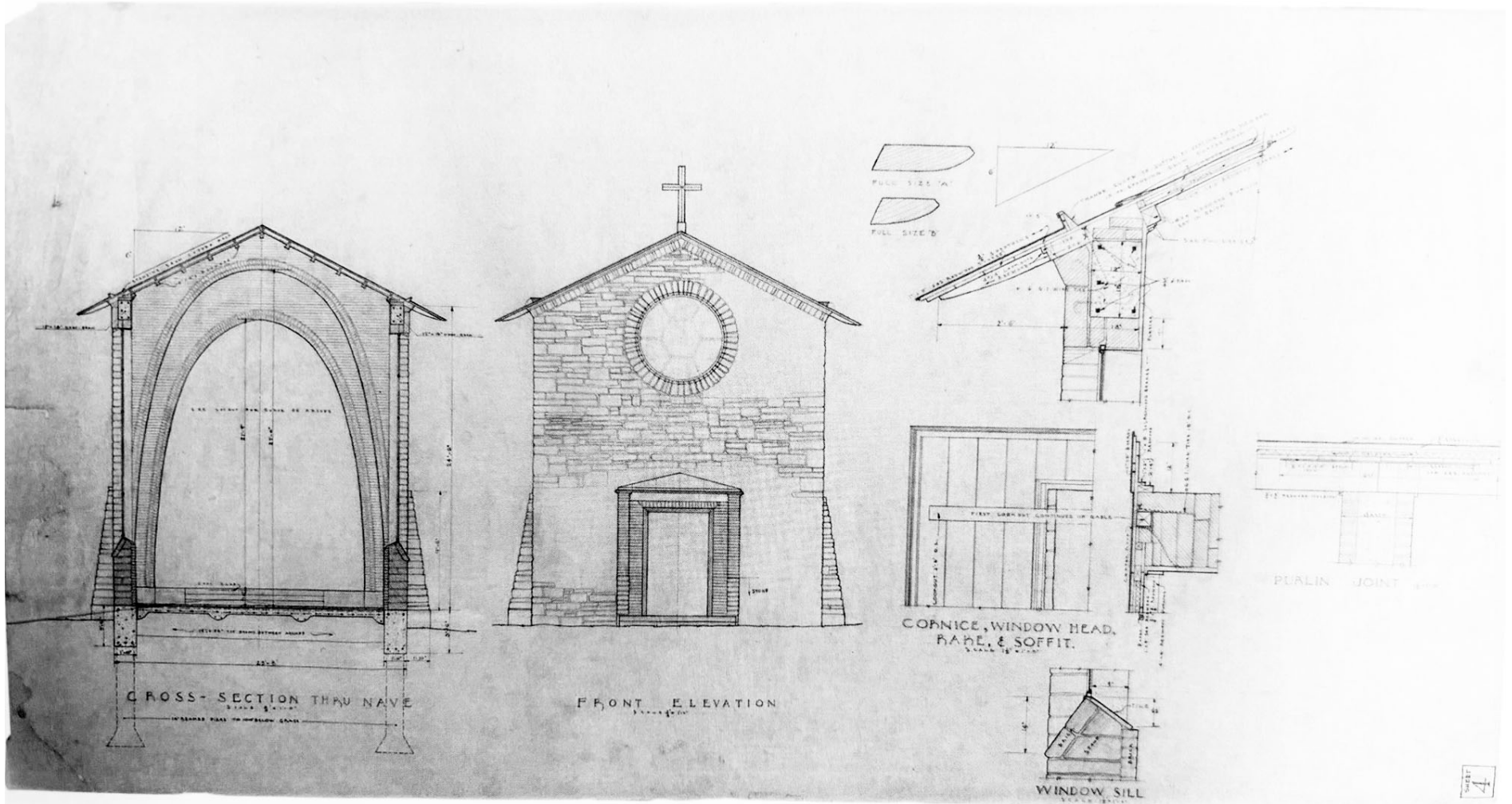
Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 4: Ford, Little Chapel in the Woods, Plan, 1938. Alexander Architectural Archives.



SBR Draft

Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 5: Little Chapel in the Woods, 1939. National Youth Administration, Alexander Architectural Archives.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 6: Little Chapel in the Woods, during construction, 1939. National Youth Administration, Alexander Architectural Archives.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 7: Eleanor Roosevelt at chapel dedication ceremony, Nov. 3, 1939. National Youth Administration, Alexander Architectural Archives.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 8: Looking north at the Little Chapel in the Woods, date unknown. The Texas Pond and Texas Gardens are in the foreground. Photo by Carruth Studio. Denton Public Library.



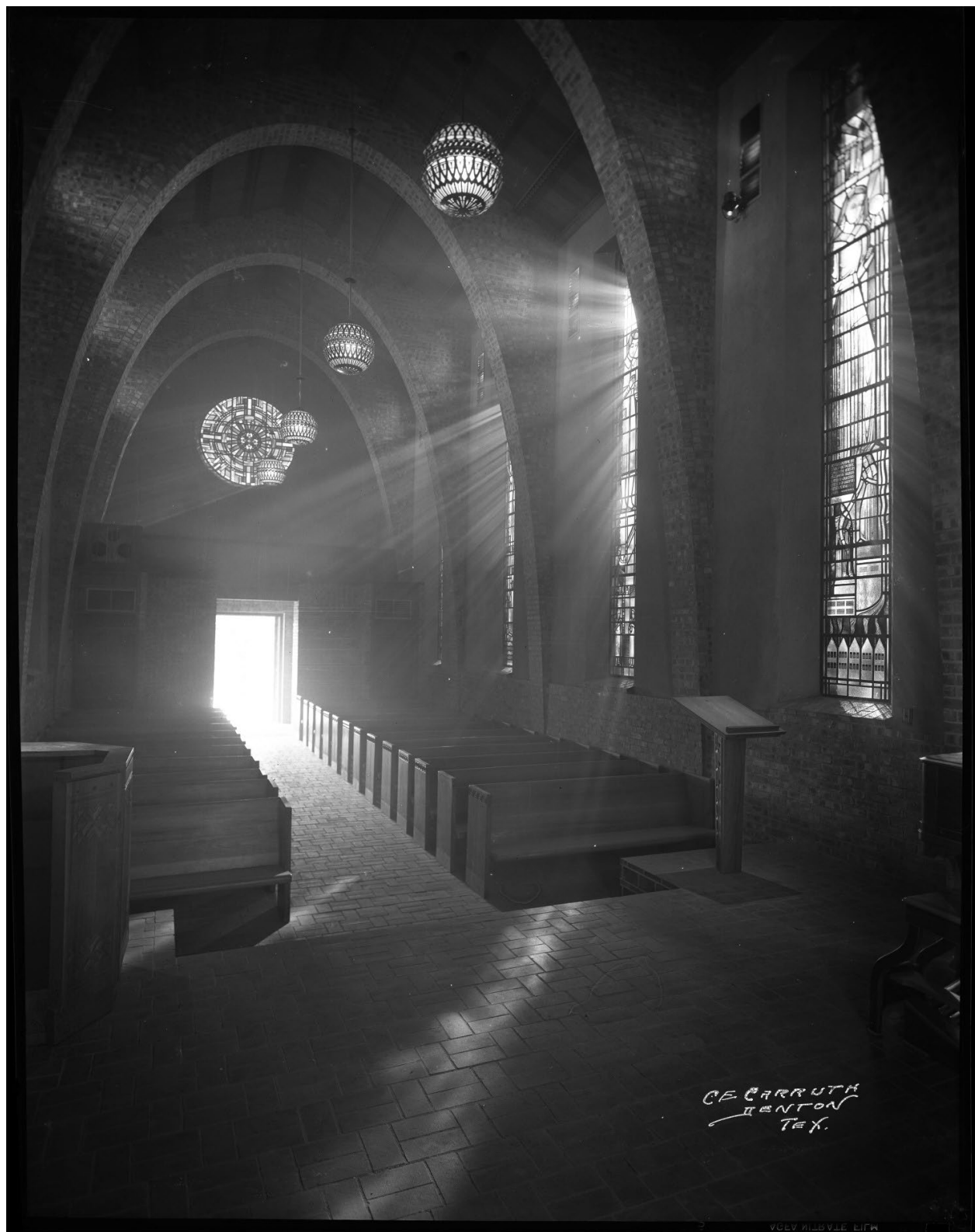
Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 9: Religious service inside Little Chapel in the Woods, prior to installation of the stained-glass windows in 1941. Photo by Carruth Studio. Denton Public Library.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 10: Interior view of Little Chapel in the Woods, c. 1941. Photo by C.E. Carruth. Denton Public Library.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 11: Denton Lass-O, June 7, 1940, p.1.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 12: Unidentified student artist carving the pulpit, supervised by Dorothy Antoinette “Toni,” LaSelle, c. 1940. Photo attributed to Margert Glen Green. Texas Woman’s University Archive.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 13: Unidentified artist at work on a cartoon for a window. Photo attributed to Margert Glen Green. Texas Woman's University Archive.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 14: Unidentified artist preparing mosaic, c. 1940. Photo attributed to Margert Glen Green. Texas Woman's University Archive.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 15: Unidentified artists at work on altar cross, c 1940. Photo attributed to Margert Glen Green. Texas Woman's University Archive.



Figure 16: Unidentified student and Toni LaSelle inspecting cartoon for rose window. Photo attributed to Margert Glen Green. Texas Woman's University Archive.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 17: Unidentified masons at work on the floor of the chapel vestibule. Photo attributed to Margert Glen Green. Texas Woman's University Archive.



Figure 18: Unidentified artists at work on the lintel over the main entrance. Photo attributed to Margert Glen Green. Texas Woman's University Archive.

Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 19: Faculty and students Texas State College for Women who contributed to building Little Chapel:

Dorothy Antoinette “Toni” LaSelle, artist

Eloise Carriker, artist

Mary Ann Chadick, artist

Ivy May Chollar, artist

Mary Cook, artist

Helen Crain, artist

Lucille Cudd, artist

Billie Marie Culwell, artist

Lura Mae Kendrick, artist

Beatrice Paschall, artist

Nora May Pierce, artist

Coreen M. Spellman, artist

Betty Winston, artist

Marilyn Yates, artist

Helen Solberg, artist

Sammy Tate, artist (

Carmeta Drummond, artist

Adalene Lee, artist

Mildred Bates, artist

Edith Mae Rhodes, artist

Pauline Shoolroy, artist

Nelda Bell, artist

La Merle Quillian, artist

Marilyn Jones, artist

Margaret Green, artist

Elizabeth Miller, artist

Lynn Ford, artist

James Washington, NYA mason

Members of Advanced History of Art, Texas State College for Women, Spring 1939

Unidentified builders of the National Youth Administration

SBR Draft

Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Figure 20: Little Chapel is located in the northeastern part of TWU's campus, which was undeveloped in the 1938 and 1958 aerials. Historicaerials.com

1938



1958



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photographs

Photo 1: Front (south) elevation showing retaining wall.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 2: South (Primary) Elevation



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 3: Entrance Details



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 4: East Elevation



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 5: East Elevation detail showing parabolic arch/buttness and window details



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 6: East Elevation



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 7: Rear (north) elevation



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 8: West Elevation



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 9: Wall detail

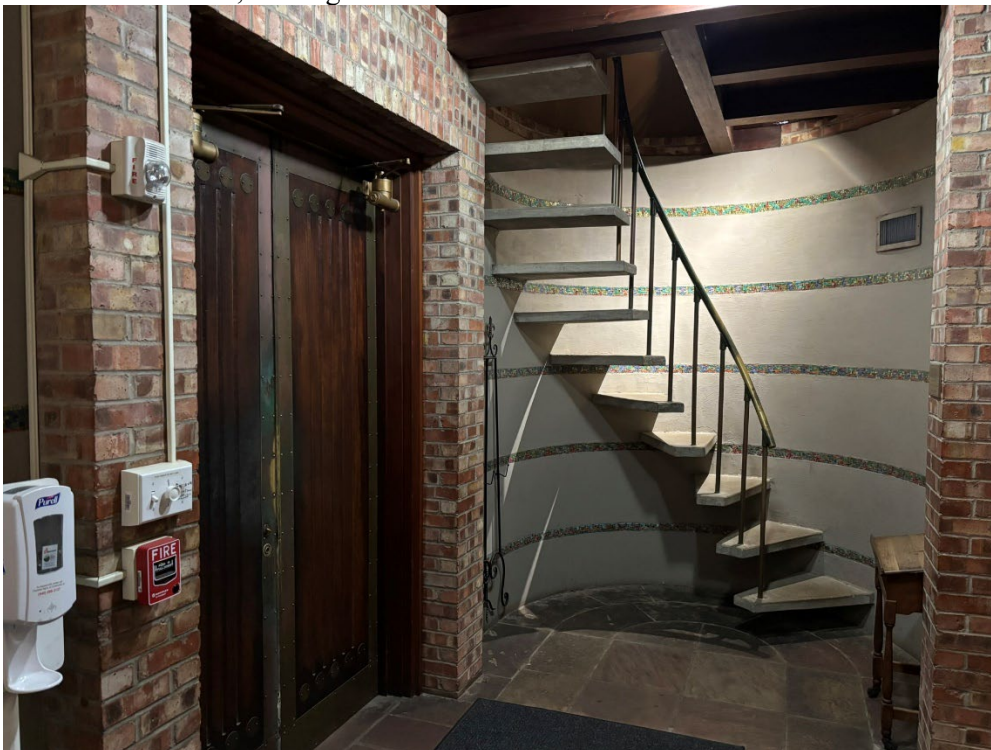


Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 10: Vestibule, looking west.



Photo 11: Vestibule, looking east



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 12: Interior, looking north from balcony.



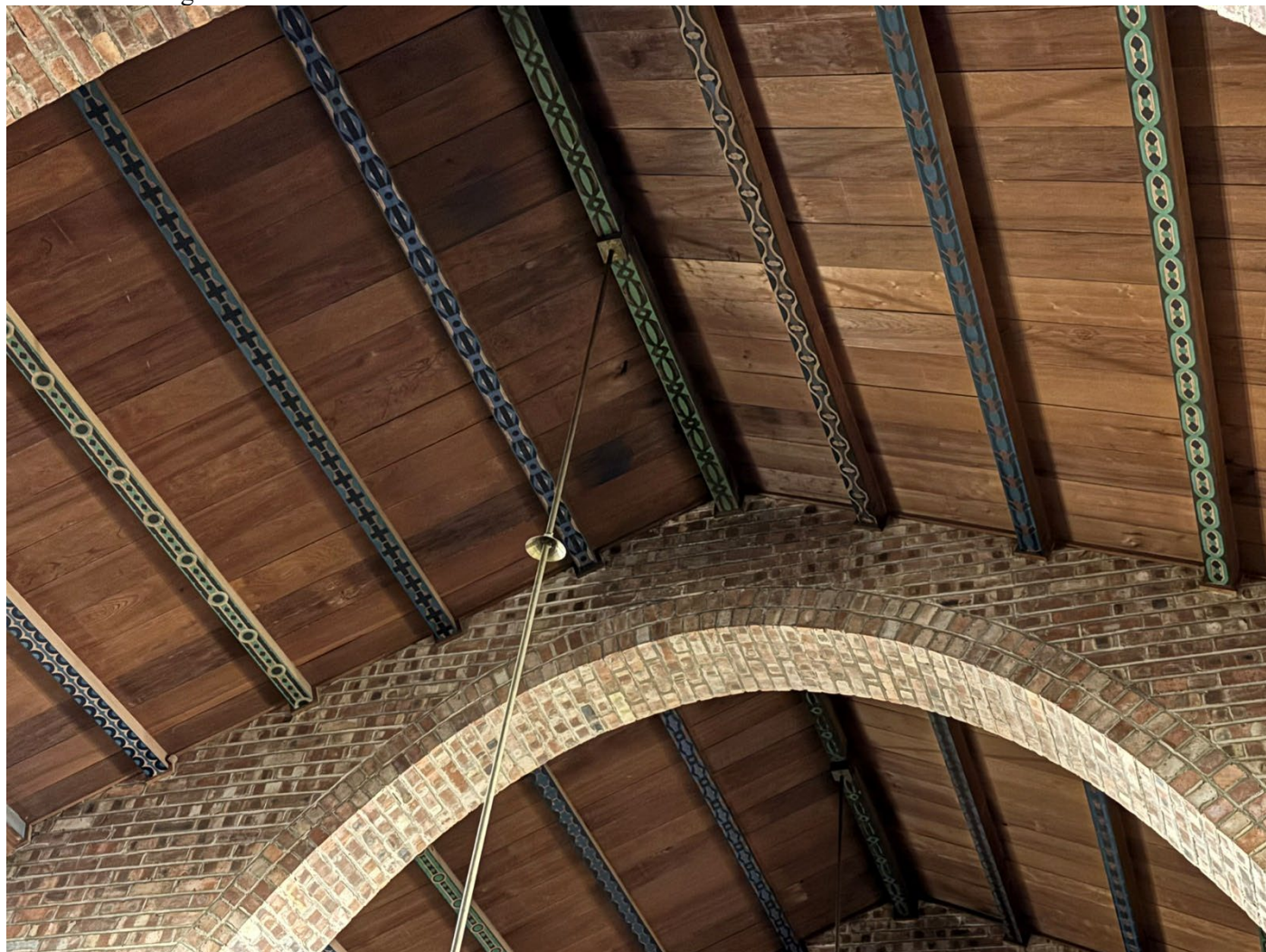
Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 13: Interior, looking south.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 14: Ceiling details.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 15: Pews. Camera looking east.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 16: Portion of stained glass window in vestibule. Camera looking east.



Little Chapel in the Woods, Denton, Denton County, Texas

Photo 17: Stained glass panels on west wall. Camera looking west.

