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Octagons on the Prairie: Vernacular Churches migrated from Norway

In 1863 a pastor in the Norwegian-American Lutheran church published the very first article about Norwegian church architecture in America. That was 19 years after the first church was built. At that time there were already 2-300 Norwegian Lutheran congregations in America, many of them with their own church building, but far from all. The number should be rapidly growing with the accelerating mass immigration from Norway, and around 1900 almost 4000 congregations were established. Here we shall concentrate on the early period of Norwegian immigration, more precisely the 1850s and 1860s. And we shall concentrate on the early Norwegian heartland in the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota in The Upper Midwest.

In his article from 1863 the pastor stated that the Norwegian churches in America till then had usually been built in American ways — as to furnishings and the organizing of the interior. He also said that the buildings were either four-sided or octagons, and he said it in a way which makes one believe the octagons were very common among the perhaps 100-200 Norwegian-American churches built by that time. A possible explanation may also be that he knew the octagons especially well since he had been pastor in two of them.

Today, no Norwegian octagon churches still exist in America. And only five of the earlier ones are identified till now. There may have been many more, but so many of the early churches are not yet investigated or not even identified and defined. The five documented octagon churches are known partly through shallow descriptions and illustrations which sometimes have discussable source values

I have presented these churches in an article about early Norwegian-American church architecture, which will be printed by the Norwegian-American Historical Society in Northfield, Minnesota. The presentation of the material now will therefore be very swift before we concentrate on problems of vernacular crossing borders rather than on building styles, theology and church history.

The very first of the Norwegian-American octagon churches was built in West Koshkonong, Dane County, Wisconsin in 1852-1853. This was a large Norwegian pioneer settlement and very important as transit society for enormous lots of later immigrants who often stayed here for longer periods, earning cash to pay their tickets or to start by their own, and not least: learning American farming. — And important to our theme: They could also learn about a Norwegian octagon church in America.

The church was built in brick, replacing the first pioneer church in logged timber. This building is the very best documented among the octagons as there exists several photographs of both exterior and interior, all of them probably from short time before demolition in 1893.

The photographs show a regular octagon crowned by a central lantern, composed in proportions which were also very common in Norway.

In the interior we can see galleries running around five of the eight sides and that both galleries and ceiling is supported by big columns. These features are also typical of the Norwegian octagon churches. More American is the organizing of the pews with two passages leading through up to the altar area instead of one central axis which is the rule in Norway.

After serious cracks had developed in the foundation of this building, it was demolished in 1893. This was done by dynamite attached to vital constructions. Being very tragic, of course, this incident also luckily left us a helpful photograph:

It shows the brick walls being relatively thin and that they probably were supported by an inner frame of wooden posts. Besides, the interior columns and the loft beams were probably also important parts of the static system. Thin brick walls with inside frame construction seem to be related to the American brick veneer construction which very soon was to be much used in Norwegian-American churches. Other American details and constructions can also be identified, as for instance the significant sash windows.

The other four octagon churches are known only through more shallow illustrations which all seem to have been produced some years after these churches were demolished. The church in Valders, Manitowoc County, Wisconsin was built in 1853-1854 by a local builder with a very Norwegian name (Michael Blekkelien). As the congregation grew rapidly, a separate choir was added after a few years. The church was replaced already in 1869 by a larger church. The illustration here was published for the first time in 1925 and is probably a photograph showing a model, perhaps made for that publication. It shows a regular octagon with a central lantern, constructed in logged timber. The windows are shown with pointed Gothic arches which add some churchly look.

The octagon church of Otter Creek, Iowa County, Wisconsin from 1858 or 1859 is known from a local painting, mentioned first time around 1935 and described as made by the memory of the artist. It shows simply a regular octagon built in logged timber without much detail.

In connection with dedication of the next and present church of Otter Creek in 1877 it was said that the old octagon was very simple, and that it was built by the eight family fathers in the congregation of that time with each of them logging on his corner. That sounds really vernacular.

The octagon church in Freeborn County, Minnesota from 1865 is known through a model made around 1940, long time after the church was replaced by a new one and sold to be used as a barn. Here again we learn about the main forms and constructions while it is difficult to believe in every detail. The logged timber walls are shown with outside plastering and the roof is covered with wooden tiles, both more common in America than in Norway, but we do not know the age of these details. The roof and central lantern is supported by four columns which the church may have had from the very beginning and which was also a widespread solution in Norway.

The last and youngest of the octagons was Crow River, Kandiyohi County, Minnesota. It is known from a drawing made by a trained hand and with seemingly great attention to detail. The drawing was probably made for the anniversary booklet of 1911, and that was already ten years after the church was demolished. At this time most of the readers would still have a relatively precise memory of what it had looked like. However, it is difficult to know how

much to believe in this drawing. It shows persuading logged timber walls, probably with typical American lime mortar in the horizontal joints between the logs, while written sources tell about exterior wooden siding. Written sources also tell that the church originally had a steeple which was removed in 1883 when they added interior galleries.

In this congregation there has been done a lot of genealogical research, identifying where in Norway the different members came from. Analyzing these data gives interesting results regarding octagon churches as part of their Norwegian heritage. When they decided to build the Crow River octagon church, there were 78 family fathers in the congregation, and as much as 30% of these men came from congregations (“sogn”) in Norway with octagon churches. Besides, these Norwegian churches were all relatively new and still modern when these people left the old country around 1860.

| Stor-Elvdal Church | Sandnes Church in Bygland | Svatsum Church in West Gausdal |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1809-1821 | 1843-1844 | 1857-1860 |
| Octagon with central lantern | Octagon with west steeple | Octagon with west steeple |
| From Stor-Elvdal: 1 person | From Bygland in Setesdal: 6 persons | From Svatum, W. Gausdal: 7 persons |
| | From Setesdal: 2 persons | From West Gausdal: 5 persons |
| | | From East Gausdal: 2 persons |

Their origins were concentrated to the two congregations of Sandnes in Bygland in Valley of Setesdal and Svatum in the Valley of Gausdal.

Both these churches have the same kind of roof as the Crow River torso, and this may indicate what the Crow River church looked like when the original steeple was still in situ there. Regarding the proportions and placing of the windows, one may suggest that the Sandnes church was the closest model. The placing of the windows, in lower part of the walls can be explained by the fact that there is no interior gallery in Sandnes, as there was not either in Crow River when it was erected.

This was a brief presentation of the Octagon case material of the study.

These churches can easily be defined as vernacular: — As far as we know, they were all designed and built by local people. Besides, academic architecture was far behind the reach of these small groups of rural pioneers. Where we have the possibility to study details, constructions and technical solutions, we find American trends related to local, American building materials. Looking at the carpenter work of the furnishings, it seems more difficult to identify the American from the Norwegian. These similarities may be explained by the fact that they were made from materials and species of wood similar to those the immigrants were used to in their country of origin.

Adapting to new and local building materials was also necessary in the new world, especially before railways and industry introduced revolutions in transport and production which opened radically new ways of supporting building materials for every need and wish. The new environment of local building materials was also a challenge to the heritage in craftsmanship among the immigrants. They were forced to learn new ways to manage and handle the new materials. And established American ways were of course the easiest at hand. We shall here also remember that in conquering the west, there were not only immigrants from Europe, but

enormous lots of Yankees, established Americans from the east, who usually formed dominating and leading groups in the pioneer societies.

The challenge of the new cultural environment was much less practical than the use of new building materials. As to the octagon form for churches, it seems this is much more significant for a heritage from Norway than being part of American culture. Octagon churches were very rare in America. A few are known from the Dutch settlements in the New York area during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but they were all gone by the time of Norwegian immigration. Three octagons of German origin from ca. 1845-1875 are known from Texas, far away from the Norwegian settlements in The Upper Midwest. There are also a few octagon examples among the academic architecture from the early 1800s in the bigger cities in the east. These city churches look so very different from our material and the European tradition from Holland, Germany and Scandinavia that a connection or influence does not seem striking, not even plausible.

In Norway, on the other hand, octagon churches were very widespread, most of them built during the last hundred years before 1850. They were even in majority among all new churches built during the 1820s. This means that the octagon shape was what many Norwegians of this time thought was the appropriate form for a new church. It was a significant part of their modern Norwegian heritage crossing the Atlantic with them.

If the Norwegian immigrants did not meet any other octagon churches in America, they could indeed see several octagon dwelling houses in their new country, not least in their own region in The Upper Midwest. These dwelling houses were built during more than a decade as results of a very popular book first published in 1848. That book propagandized through eager and rational argumentation the octagon shape as the very best and most practical and economical way of building. This popularity of octagon dwelling houses cannot explain why one ethnic group started to build churches in that shape, but it could well have helped and urged the Norwegians transplanting a homeland tradition for such churches.

There may have existed many more Norwegian octagon churches in America than the five which are identified now, but from today's knowledge about many of the first 200-300 built before 1870, there is not reason to believe the octagons were really numerous. The few we do know were scattered over long distances and so heterogeneous that they did not really form a group with sufficient strength to maintain the phenomenon and spread it wider. It seems their main reason for existence was more a kind of culture and tradition left back in Norway and not really integrated as part of a common Norwegian-American culture. As the ties with the old country weakened and the octagons went out of fashion even in Norway, they soon disappeared totally in America.

Using a common pictorial phrase from the Norwegian-American history, we can say they were for some time part of the cultural mosaic in the new world. But no substantial influence or amalgamation has been noticed. We cannot really say that they melted in the melting pot, which is another commonly used phrase. — The process of our octagon churches was more like drowning in the melting pot.