NAME

HISTORIC

AND/OR COMMON

West Greenwich Baptist Church (and Cemetery).

LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

Plain Meeting House Road at Liberty Hill Road

CITY, TOWN

West Greenwich Center

STATE

Rhode Island

CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

OWNERSHIP

STATUS

PRESENT USE

DISTRICT

PUBLIC

X OCCUPIED

AGRICULTURE

BUILDING(S)

PRIVATE

UNOCCUPIED

COMMERCIAL

X STRUCTURE

MULTI-

WORK IN PROGRESS

EDUCATIONAL

PRIVATE

SITE

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

ACCESSIBLE

GOVERNMENT

OBJECT

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

YES, RESTRICTED

SCIENTIFIC

SITE

IN PROCESS

YES, UNRESTRICTED

INDUSTRIAL

BEING CONSIDERED

TRANSPORTATION

OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

(See Continuation Sheet #1)

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

STATE

LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

West Greenwich Town House

STREET & NUMBER

Victory Highway

CITY, TOWN

West Greenwich

STATE

Rhode Island

REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

State of Rhode Island Preliminary Survey Report

DATE

1978

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS

R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

CITY, TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island
Church - West Greenwich Baptist Church  
c/o Mrs. Fred W. Arnold, Jr.  
Victory Highway  
West Greenwich, R.I.

Cemetery - West Greenwich Cemetery  
Mrs. Peter Langlais  
13 Chestnut Street  
Coventry, R.I. 02816
The West Greenwich Baptist Church is located at the intersection of Plain Road and Plain Meeting House Road at what was once West Greenwich Center. Of the formerly thriving village, only the church and an adjacent large, stone-wall-enclosed cemetery, surrounded by second-growth woods, now remain. Both church and cemetery are nominated.

Built about 1822-1825, the church is a modest, rectangular, one-story, clapboarded structure, without a belfry or steeple. It is sited gable-end to the road, and is entered by two doors in the south gable end. All the windows are of the double-hung, six-over-six type, and are fitted with solid wood shutters. Most of the sashes are duplicates of originals which have fallen prey to vandals in recent years.

The exterior retains its plain, molded, Federal-style gable cornice with returns; most of the rest of the exterior detailing, including the wide corner boards and unmolded frieze, the cornice-topped, wide-board-framed doorways, and the plain board window trim, however, is styled in a vernacular version of the Greek Revival.

The building, which possesses no narthex or vestibules, contains only an audience room or sanctuary. Entered through two doorways in one of the narrow ends, the audience room contains three sections of pews, divided by two aisles. The pulpit, raised on a small, step-high dais, is located at the opposite end from the entrances.

The audience room has a flat plaster ceiling, projecting cased wall and corner posts, and a horizontal-board, windowsill-height dado, with a molded upper rail. Much of the interior detail, including the window and doorway trim, and quite possibly the dado, bears the stamp of Greek Revival influence and probably dates from an 1856 refurbishing. The dark wood pulpit furnishings, which consist of a small desk and pedestal-like lamp stands set at each corner of the dais, are Late Victorian in style. The pulpit set includes two high-back, Late Victorian, Gothic-style chairs. The seating, which has been altered, includes some theater-type, folding plywood seats, with iron stanchions and arm rests, and some plain-end, early-twentieth-century, stained-wood pews salvaged from another church. In the back of the room an iron stove, installed at an unknown date, remains.

It appears that the orientation of the auditorium was reversed twice, once in 1856 when the church was repaired and refurbished, and again in the first decade of the twentieth century. A now-closed-up window, located high up in the center of the north or rear wall of the building, appears to have served originally to give light to
a pulpit located at that end of the structure. It is known, however, that in the late nineteenth century the pulpit was located at the south end, between the two entrances, the pews facing both it and the doors. This interior arrangement, the reverse of the usual plan, attained a considerable degree of acceptance in New England and elsewhere along the east coast between 1820 and 1840, and was still being adopted in the rural areas of western Rhode Island in the 1860s, 70s, and 80s.

During the first decade of the twentieth century (the precise year is not known), the orientation was again reversed. The pulpit platform was returned to its original position, the window behind it plastered over, and the theater-type seating installed.

Changes since this time have been minimal. They have consisted mainly of cosmetic repairs, such as painting and wallpapering work done in 1959, and repairs necessitated by the vandalism to which this isolated church has been increasingly subject since 1959.
West Greenwich Baptist Church,
West Greenwich Center, R.I.
SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD
PREHISTORIC
1400-1499
1500-1599
1600-1699
1700-1799
1800-1899
1900-

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW
ARCHAEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC
ARCHAEOLOGY-HISTORIC
AGRICULTURE
ARCHITECTURE
1400-1499
1500-1599
1600-1699
1700-1799
1800-1899
1900-

ARCHITECTURE
COMMUNITY PLANNING
CONSERVATION
ECOMICS
EDUCATION
ENGINEERING
EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT
INDUSTRY
INVENTION
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE
LAW
LITERATURE
MILITARY
MUSIC
PHILOSOPHY
POLITICS/GOVERNMENT
SCIENCE
SCULPTURE
SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
THEATER
TRANSPORTATION
OTHER (SPECIFY)

SPECIFIC DATES

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The West Greenwich Baptist Church, often called the Plain Meeting House because of its location on "the plain" at West Greenwich Center, possesses statewide importance as the oldest church building in the rural western edge of Rhode Island. It is of regional significance within southeastern New England as a rare survivor of a once-numerous class of early nineteenth century churches of modest size and unpretentious design erected by smaller and less well-to-do congregations. Of all the churches of the first half of the nineteenth century remaining in southeastern New England, the Plain Meeting House is, with the exception only of the always stark Quaker meetinghouses, probably the most modest and primitive extant. Its interior, despite the inharmonious seating, retains many early and mid-nineteenth century features.

The church also bears great local significance as an historical landmark. A former focal point of community religious observances, the meetinghouse was erected c. 1822-1825 by a long since defunct organization known as "The Independent and Union Society" of West Greenwich as a union meetinghouse for the use of all Christian denominations. The society, organized in 1822, financed the structure through the sale of shares to individuals. The precise date of the church's construction is not known, but the property on which it and a large cemetery was placed was purchased December 1, 1823.

During its one hundred fifty-year history, the structure has been used by two organized church groups. When the building was opened, the Maple Root Six-Principle Baptist Church of Coventry, the town directly to the north, established services there for its West Greenwich membership. This branch church used the structure until about 1868, when they merged with the West Greenwich Baptist Church.

The West Greenwich Baptist Church, founded, it is thought, in 1750, has for many years made use of the Plain Meeting House, and has had sole custody of it since the 1868 merger. The church, organized only nine years after the town of West Greenwich was created, may have originally been, like many of its sister churches in other parts of Rhode Island, Six-Principle Baptist in sentiment. Such churches held
an Arminian view of salvation, and adopted as their articles of faith the six principles of repentance, faith, baptism, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment given in Hebrews 6: 1-2. By the end of the century, however, the congregation, along with many other Rhode Island Baptist churches, had become thoroughly Calvinistic.

The church served a large area embracing the western sections of West Greenwich and Exeter and parts of Hopkinton and Richmond. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the area served was so extensive that services were held in several locations - in a meetinghouse at Nooseneck Hill, several miles east of West Greenwich Center, in private homes, and probably in the Plain Meeting House. In 1859-60 the congregation erected, as a branch meetinghouse, the building now known as the West Exeter Baptist Church at the Four Corners in the western part of Exeter, four miles south of the Plain Meeting House.

With the gradual decline of the population in this rural region, regular Sunday services of the Plain Meeting House ceased early in the twentieth century. A Sunday school, kept in operation after the suspension of regular services, also finally succumbed. The church membership (now numbering about fifteen) however, has made valiant efforts over the years to keep the church alive. An annual event which was instituted before 1920 and has been continued down to the present is a service held on the second Sunday in June. Since the late 1950s a second service has been held on the first Sunday in October. Both services are well attended, many of the worshippers coming long distances.

The continuing importance of the West Greenwich Baptist Church as a local landmark, as well as its historical value and architectural significance, merit its listing in the National Register.
Smith, Mrs. Evelyn Arnold. Plain Meeting House. Brief mimeograph history prepared in 1975, covering the years from 1934 to 1975.
West Greenwich Baptist Church
Plain Meeting House Road at Plain Road
West Greenwich Center, Rhode Island

Robert O. Christensen     November, 1977
Negative filed: Rhode Island Historical
Preservation Commission

Exterior from the southeast

#1

West Greenwich Baptist Church
Plain Meeting House Road at Plain Road
West Greenwich Center, Rhode Island

Robert O. Christensen     November, 1977
Negative filed: Rhode Island Historical
Preservation Commission

Pulpit platform from the south

#2
The bounds of the West Greenwich Cemetery correspond with the stone walls which surround the property. A "Plan of the West Greenwich Cemetery" appears in the West Greenwich Land Evidences, XIV, 93. The West Greenwich Baptist Church property is bounded east by Plain Road, south by Plain Meeting House Road, north by the West Greenwich Cemetery, and west by a stone wall which runs from the cemetery south wall to Plain Meeting House Road.

The GEOGRAPHICAL DATA section includes the acreage of the nominated property and UTM references.

The VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION section provides a detailed description of the property boundaries.

The STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION section includes the evaluation of the property's significance and the certification by the state historic preservation officer.

The FORM PREPARED BY section lists the preparer of the form, their title, organization, and contact information.

The MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES section lists the sources used in the report, such as historical sketches and proceedings.
West Greenwich Baptist Church
Plain Meeting House Road at Plain Road
West Greenwich Center, Rhode Island

Robert O. Christensen November, 1977
Negative filed: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

Pulpit platform from the south