Powerful Artifacts:
A Guide to
Surveying and Documenting
Rural African-American Churches in the South

Center for Historic Preservation
Middle Tennessee State University

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Project Staff:

Carroll Van West, Director
Caneta Skelley Hankins, Projects Coordinator
Anne-Leslie Owens, Research Coordinator
Nancy Smotherman, Executive Aide
Contents

Acknowledgments ................................................................................................................ ........................................ 4
Introduction ................................................................................................................... ............................................... 5
Denominational Histories
   African Methodist Episcopal Church ............................................................................................. ................. 7
   African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church ................................................................................................. 9
   Christian Methodist Episcopal Church ........................................................................................... .............. 11
   Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ .......................................................................................... 12
   Church of God (Original) and Church of God ..................................................................................... ........ 14
   Church of God in Christ ......................................................................................................................... 15
   Cumberland Presbyterian in America and United Presbyterians .................................................................16
   Baptists .................................................................................................................................................. 17
   Primitive Baptists ................................................................................................................................. 22
   United Methodist Church .................................................................................................................. 24
Assessment Guidelines for Nominating Historic Rural
African-American Churches to the National Register of Historic Places ......................................................... 27
   I. 1850-1890: Creating a Tradition ......................................................................................................... 28
   II. 1890-1945: Maintaining Traditions in an Era of Jim Crow Segregation .............................................. 32
   III. 1945-1970: The Modern Era ........................................................................................................ 42
African-American Church Visual Survey Form .................................................................................. 51
African-American Rural Church Survey ................................................................................... 55
Bibliographical References ........................................................................................................ 57
Acknowledgments

The Tennessee Rural African-American Church Project, begun in 1997, has quickly become a rich documentary collection of religious, social, cultural, political, and architectural history. With over 350 churches now represented, the project continues to gather information throughout the state through application forms and requests for assistance with research, architectural conservation, and National Register of Historic Places nominations. The statewide church project is directed by Carroll Van West, who also coordinated the first multiple property nomination of selected churches to the National Register to come from this program. The denominational histories, assessment guidelines, and bibliography in this guide are based on the research and information compiled for that nomination. Assisting with the initial survey and preparation of the denominational histories and bibliography were graduate assistants Teresa Douglas, Heather Fearnbach, Susan Besser, and Rebecca Smith. Nancy Tinker and Anne-Leslie Owens served as the coordinators and Caneta S. Hankins is the project’s co-director.

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Without the cooperation, hospitality, oral traditions, and wonderful historical collections shared by the church members, ministers, and friends who are a part of the many congregations of all denominations who have responded to the Tennessee Rural African-American Church Project, this guide would not have been possible. We are grateful.

Caneta Skelley Hankins, Project Co-Director
Introduction

The Black Church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community. Not only did it give birth to new institutions such as schools, banks, insurance companies, and low income housing, it also provided an academy and an arena for political activities, and it nurtured young talent for musical, dramatic, and artistic development. E. Franklin Frazier’s apt descriptive phrase, “nation within a nation,” pointed to these multifarious levels of community involvement found in the Black Church, in addition to the traditional concerns of worship, moral nurture, education, and social control. Much of black culture is heavily indebted to the black religious tradition, including most forms of black music, drama, literature, storytelling, and even humor. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya in The Black Church in the African American Experience, Duke University Press, 1990, p. 8.

Everyone knows that the black church in America is a rock and a beacon, and others are far more steeped in its ways and history, more qualified to speak of its nature, than a white woman whose beliefs do not rest within any one system. But surely people of any faith or ancestry may feel the moral fire that has moved in this church and others like it. And anyone may register the gravitas of its rooms. Anyone may notice that this church is a place of routine loveliness, an American place whose respect for elders, whose gloved ushers and afternoon collations, whose tradition of formal address and courtesy titles (Reverend, Deacon, Doctor, Brother, and Sister), are all elements in a honed artistry—in the sheer comeliness of the community—that is itself a form of sanctuary. Emily Hiestand, a native of Oak Ridge, Tennessee in “Hymn,” from The Atlantic Monthly, July, 1998, p. 74.

For over 100 years, scholars of African-American culture, history, and religion—along with writers and commentators over the decades in between—have consistently pointed to the church as the single most significant institution in African-American life, from the late antebellum era to modern times. In the fall of 1997, the Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), with the assistance of the Tennessee Historical Commission and the Office of Sponsored Programs at MTSU, launched an ongoing documentary program titled the Tennessee Rural African-American Church Project. Its three initial goals were: 1) to bring together and establish a network of scholars, activists, and preservationists across the state who are interested in the history and preservation of rural African-American churches; 2) to conduct a statewide reconnaissance survey of extant African-American churches in the Tennessee countryside and small towns; and 3) to prepare for the Tennessee Historical Commission a Multiple Property Nomination that addresses the rural African-American church as a distinct and significant property type and to begin a process of nominating eligible churches to the National Register of Historic Places.

As the project progressed, several state historic preservation offices and other organizations and individuals expressed an interest in this work. With the completion of these goals including a survey of some 350 churches, the CHP staff submitted a proposal to the Southern Regional Office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation which subsequently funded, in part, this publication. This guide, intended to serve a broad audience, is both a summary of what we have discovered and a guide to what future assessment may uncover. It begins with brief denominational histories of the primary African-American churches; these sketches are useful for any state and are not Tennessee-specific. Next, the text is organized around questions of assessment—what makes the building eligible for the National Register—keyed to three different chronological periods from 1850 to 1970. Attention is given to questions of integrity, date of significance, and criteria of eligibility in the extended discussion of property types and registration requirements based on the survey of Tennessee. To facilitate recognizing and documenting some basic types and elements of African-American churches, a visual survey form is included. Additionally, an adaptable survey/application form is provided. Finally, there is a representative bibliography of scholarship about African-American history in general and African-American religion in specific. We hope these sources and materials will assist other states and communities in exploring, documenting, recognizing, and interpreting the history and role of the African-American church.
Mt. Zion Baptist
(Henry County)

New Hope Missionary Baptist
(Gibson County)

Pikeville Chapel AME Zion
(Bledsoe County)

Interior, Mt. Zion, Union City
(Obion County)
African Methodist Episcopal Church

In 1794 Richard Allen and his followers assembled in his Philadelphia house and organized the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church struggled for its independence until 1816 when the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania declared Bethel to be an independent church. Allen saw his chance to propagate his ideas about Methodism and decided he needed an organization with disciples located around the country. Sixteen delegates assembled in Philadelphia on April 9, 1816. They came from Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. They resolved to unify as a new church called the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, which was controlled by African Americans and dedicated to improving their condition.

The church that Allen and his associates organized adopted the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church (ME) with only a few minor changes. The pro-slavery provisions in the Methodist Discipline were stricken out, and the office of presiding elder was abolished in the AME hierarchy. Elections were held on April 9, 1816, for the office of bishop with the Reverend Daniel Coker elected. However, he resigned the next day, opening the door for Richard Allen to be elected two days later. From these beginnings the AME Church spread throughout the North and Midwest and by 1856 numbered some 20,000 souls. Allen and the AME Church both desired to improve relations between blacks and whites and to instill a sense of civic pride in blacks and immediately offered their support and services to the community. This tradition of public service was transferred to the South when AME missionaries embarked from the northern states to uplift their southern brethren.

Prior to the Civil War, the AME Church was banned from many areas in the south by slaveowners, who feared that it would serve as a catalyst for slave revolts. But when Union forces occupied areas of coastal South Carolina in 1863, AME missionaries James D. Lynch and James D. Hall were sent from Baltimore to Charleston to establish mission churches. Their arrival marked the beginning of permanent AME missions in the south. By 1866, missionaries and local residents had established AME churches in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

The AME missionaries condemned the institution of slavery and excluded all slaveowners as members. They also tried to set moral examples of dignity, education, and neat physical appearances for the southern African Americans.
in hopes of alleviating some of the prejudices against color. The AME ministers did not approve of emotional outbursts at its services and instructed the members to approach the altar decorously. The AME Church hoped to uplift the black race by pointing the way. Some of the most prominent black men in the south joined the church during the nineteenth century. These included Martin R. Delany, doctor, explorer, and black nationalist; Henry M. Turner, bishop of the AME Church, Georgia politician, and African emigrationist; James Lynch, clergyman and Mississippi politician; and Hiram Revels, clergyman and senator from Mississippi.

After the Civil War the AME Church became very active in Reconstruction politics and pushed for civil and political equality for black people. The Reconstruction Act of 1867 provided African Americans with the opportunity to participate in southern politics. Taking advantage of this situation, a heterogeneous group of twenty-three AME Church missionaries became politicians who held public offices. Only three were northerners, the rest came from the south and border states. Thus, from its very origins in the crucible of Reconstruction, the AME church established a reputation for community and political activism.

In the late nineteenth century, the AME church made quick headway among the millions of newly freed people of color in the South. In the times of slavery, the Methodist Episcopal Church counted over two hundred thousand African-American members. With emancipation, most of this group shifted its religious affiliation to the AME church. By 1866 only 78,742 black members out of the 207,766 remained associated with the southern white M.E. Church. Four years later, in 1870, most of the African Americans who still remained in the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South, left to establish the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) church. Many black Methodists in the south believed that the AME church provided them with the greatest opportunity to exercise their talents and education, and to express their identity and dignity. It always has been a larger denomination than the CME church. By 1868, AME churches were founded in every southern state and by 1896 there were over 450,000 members.

In the early part of the twentieth century the path of AME Church began to expand nationwide as urban and rural African Americans began the Great Migration from the south. Overseas missionary work for the AME church, in addition, claimed some one million members and over twenty-two thousand churches in Africa and the Caribbean. The AME Church became recognized as the most effective of all the African-American denominations in its overseas missionary efforts. The AME Church also became the largest of the black Methodist communions, a position it maintains today throughout the south. In 1989, church membership totaled 2.2 million.
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

Historically associated with the AME Church is the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church. In 1796 the blacks who worshipped in the John Street Methodist Church of New York City withdrew from the congregation because of resulting tensions and discriminatory treatment when their numbers had risen over forty percent of the membership. Also dissension among the black congregation had peaked from the white controlled church's refusal to fully ordain black preachers and allow them to join the conference as itinerants. Under the leadership of Peter Williams, a former slave employed at the John Street Church, some of the former members organized a separate African chapel. It met at member William Miller's cabinetmaker's shop. Local African-American preachers of the John Street Church conducted services there until the building of a new house of worship was completed in September of 1800. In 1801 the chapel was incorporated as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of the City of New York with Peter Williams and Francis Jacobs as signatories.

From 1800 to 1819 the Zionites existed as an independent congregation within the Methodist Church. During this time the Methodist Church supplied the black congregation with ministers. Ultimately the arrangement proved to be unworkable because the blacks began to resent the control the whites exercised over their affairs. The Zionites asked Bishop Richard Allen of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to ordain a minister for them. William Lambert was sent to Philadelphia to be ordained but when he returned he shunned the Zionites by establishing a new church. The
Zionites believed Bishop Allen of the AME Church had encouraged Lambert to desert them and that he was only interested in building up the AME Church. This suspicion was correct; Bishop Allen did indeed want to unite all black Methodists into one church. In consequence, the Zionites convened their first annual conference on June 21, 1821, in New York City, with representatives from four other congregations in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New York. They were determined to establish an identity distinct from that of the AME Church, which was based in Philadelphia. This conference is commonly accepted as the official organizing meeting of what became the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination, although a total break with the Methodist Episcopal Church did not occur until after the 1824 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

In 1822 James Varick, then pastor of Zion Church, was elected the first superintendent and became regarded as the founder of the denomination. And in 1848 the word Zion was officially added to this African Methodist Episcopal church to make clear the distinction of this denomination from Allen’s AME Church. Because of internal dissension and competition from the AME Church, the Zion Church experienced only modest growth prior to the Civil War. Starting with 1,400 members and twenty-two preachers in 1821, the church in 1860 numbered 4,600 with 105 preachers. Expansion was limited in these years to the northeast but gained momentum in the south following Emancipation. Long known as “The Freedom Church,” AME Zion claims such abolitionist luminaries as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Reverend Jermain Louguen, Catherine Harris, Reverend Thomas James, and Frederick Douglass, who was licensed as a local AME Zion preacher. Many Zion members, pastors, and church officials were abolitionists and were intensely involved with the Underground Railroad.

Like the AME Church, Zionites went as missionaries into the south during Reconstruction and founded AME Zion Churches throughout the southern states. By 1884 the church had grown to 300,000, and in 1896 membership stood at 350,000. In the second half of the nineteenth century foreign mission programs were established in South America, Africa, and the West Indies. The twentieth century brought a third major period of expansion with the growth of cities and the migration of African Americans to the North and West following the two world wars. Currently, the AME Zion Church is the second largest of the black Methodist denominations, numbering 1.2 million members in the United States and an additional 100,000 in Africa and the Caribbean in 1989. The church claims three thousand clergy, who serve 2,900 churches, two hundred of which are overseas.
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

The earliest recognized Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) church is Capers Memorial CME Church in Nashville. It dates to 1866 and its leaders had a prominent role in the creation of the formal CME convention in 1870. In that year, Capers members along with about forty black Methodists in West Tennessee broke from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and formed an independent denomination more reflective of issues central to the black community. Advanced education, community involvement through outreach, and spiritual growth were just a few of the tenets of the founding group, that became the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America (CME) on December 16, 1870, in Jackson, Tennessee.

Compared to the earlier African-American Methodist organizations, the new CME church was more conservative. Old segregated “colored churches” within the white Methodist Church, South, comprised its initial members. White conservatives within the Methodist Church, South, had urged their black brethren not to join the AME or AMEZ movements. They encouraged, however, the creation of another separate black Methodist organization for several reasons. First, increasing racial prejudice during the Reconstruction years meant that white members wanted the black churches out of their organization. Second, a separate black organization eliminated white financial responsibility for black Methodist activity. As Lincoln and Mamiya explain, “the strategy appeared to be to formulate an arrangement that would create a separate church for the former slaves which would retain unofficial ties with the parent church rather than become a part of the existing African [Methodist] movement.” (2) In 1870 the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, turned over all titles to “colored church property” to the CME church, making the separation of white and black Methodists official.

Due to its historical relationship with the white Methodist church, the CME church was sometimes derisively referred to as the “old slave church.” From its inception, the CME Church eschewed political activity in favor of a devotion to spirituality, in what members considered to be a more black-controlled and dominated church and services. In county seats and larger towns in West Tennessee, the church became popular with middle-class and professional African-Americans. CME congregations mushroomed from 1870 to 1880, claiming 78,000 members by 1880. Early bishops included William Henry Miles, Richard H. Vanderhorst, Isaac Lane, Lucius H. Holsey, and Joseph A. Beebe.

The key church leader was Bishop Isaac Lane, who was the fourth bishop of the CME. Born a slave in Madison County, Tennessee, Lane established a CME school, that later became Lane College, in Jackson in 1882. His daughter, Jennie Lane, was its first teacher and principal. His son, James Franklin Lane, became the college’s president in 1907 and served in that role for the next thirty-seven years. During its first fifty years, the CME
Church promoted the foundation of twelve colleges, four of which are still in operation: Lane College (Jackson, Tenn.), Paine College (Augusta, Ga.), Texas College (Tyler, Texas), and Miles College (Birmingham, Ala.).

By 1890, church membership totaled 103,000, the vast majority of whom were in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. The Great Migration and missionary activities during the first half of the twentieth century led to church members establishing congregations in eighteen states by 1945. The broadening of the membership base also coincided with a broadening of the church’s mission and its level of activism in community affairs. In the 1920s, for instance, Bishop Charles H. Phillips led the church to become more activist in the region-wide anti-lynching campaigns of that era. CME colleges and churches supported the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s by providing meeting sites and voter registration centers and supporting activist ministers. It was also during this period that the CME Church changed its name from the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (1954), and moved its headquarters from Jackson to Memphis in 1970.

The modern CME church operates missions and relief agencies in Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia. Outreach within the United States continued to focus on the strong support of scholastic endeavors, culminating in the 1994 “One Church, One School” project, which pairs churches with schools to fund school programs. Women have always played an important part in the missionary societies of the CME Church, and are now beginning to be represented in the clergy as well. Today the CME Church has more than 3,000 congregations with over 800,000 members in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa.

Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ

Religious reformers Barton W. Stone (1772-1844), Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), and Thomas Campbell (1763-1854), united in 1832 to promote a return to the doctrine, worship, and practice of New Testament Christianity. They traveled throughout Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, organizing congregations known as Disciples of Christ, the Christian Church, and locally, Churches of Christ. The Disciples shared some affinities with Protestant denominations: simplicity of worship, lay ministry, adult baptism, separation of church and state, stringent rigorous and ascetic morality, and freewill doctrine. Efforts to organize a national church never came to fruition. By 1860, as church membership grew to almost 200,000, theological, political, social and economic differences, exacerbated by the controversial issue of slavery, resulted in a schism among the congregations.
Stone and the Campbells were opposed to the American institution of slavery, but the regional spread of congregations in the border states between the north and the south included proslavery areas. The lack of a formal national denominational structure precluded a split in the church over slavery and secession, but sectional divisions festered and correlated with later congregational divisions. The more conservative Churches of Christ, located for the most part in rural areas south of the Ohio River, argued for a strict interpretation of the scriptures and objected to the formation of missionary societies and the use of instrumental music in church services. The moderate, predominately northern, urban, and more affluent, Disciples of Christ advocated a more progressive reading of the scriptures. Despite the dissension, congregations continued to grow, doubling by 1875 and including over one million members by 1900. By 1906, the federal religious census recognized the two groups as separate and distinct denominations.

In 1906, the census recorded 159,658 members of the Churches of Christ, with almost two-thirds of that total living in the former states of the Confederacy. By 1994, the Churches of Christ had become a worldwide movement, found in 121 nations. United States membership totaled 1,260,838, with Texas having the most, followed by Tennessee, with 169,190 members. As Dr. Harold Hazelpip of Lipscomb University observes, “historically marked by internal and external controversy, the Churches of Christ remained committed to their ideals. While some representatives have claimed these churches include the only known Christians, others insist that their commitment is to be ‘Christians only’—an ideal which reflects the original goals of unity (nondenominational) and restorationism (restoring primitive practices of the earliest churches).”

Marshall Keeble was an important leader in the twentieth century. He reportedly baptized over 40,000 whites and blacks across the country while establishing 300 churches in a remarkable career from the late 1890s to 1968. Keeble preached for harmony between the races and looked upon Booker T. Washington as the race’s key leader. White members readily accepted this religious accommodationism. David Lipscomb of Nashville, a turn of the century leader of the splintered Churches of Christ denomination, stated that a true Church of Christ congregation could not discriminate based on race. Yet, Lipscomb and many other white church leaders practiced racial accommodationism and had separate seating sections in churches. Only in modern times did southern Churches of Christ accept racial integration.

The Disciples of Christ in the twentieth century has proven to be the more favored among urban African Americans of the historic Stone-Campbell movement churches. One of Campbell’s reformers, young English immigrant Philip S. Fall, began missionary work in Nashville in 1826. His efforts led to the eventual establishment of the Vine Street Christian Church, one of the church’s most influential congregations. Its historic membership was almost equally divided between white and black. As debates about slavery and abolition intensified in the 1850s, however, the Vine Street church’s black members split off and formed the Gay Street Colored Christian
Church in 1855. The Vine Street church continued to supervise the Gay Street church, which was headed by free black Peter Lowery. Today this initial Disciples of Christ African-American congregation is the Gay-Lea Christian Church in north Nashville. In 1917 Preston Taylor, a prominent turn-of-the-century black Nashville businessman, and others organized the Colored Disciples of Christ Convention and held its first meeting at the Gay Street church, with Taylor presiding. The Disciples’s largest single congregation is the 9,000-member Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, an African-American congregation, in Memphis.

Church of God (Original) and Church of God

Holiness and Pentecostal movements gained in popularity in the south between 1880 and 1920, resulting in the formation of new denominations such as the Church of God, the Church of God in Christ, and the Assemblies of God. The socially and economically isolated populations of southeastern Tennessee, northern Georgia, and western North Carolina shared a heritage of revivalism and a belief in the necessity of conversion conducive to an enthusiastic, optimistic, and authentically biblical approach to religion. Most southern Holiness and Pentecostal congregations opposed the production, consumption, or sale of alcoholic beverages. They sanctioned a strict observance of the Sabbath. They forbade women to wear jewelry or makeup, cut their hair, or wear pants. They objected to the formation of labor unions, Masonic orders, and secret societies such as the Ku Klux Klan. They also advocated a pacifistic response to war, particularly the draft. Women preached in some congregations, and even became church leaders. Interregional revivals impacted the spread of charismatic religious movements in the south, diversifying the region’s indigenous evangelicalism.

A 1906 revival at Azusa Street, a mission in Los Angeles, had a national impact when southern Holiness leaders such as Aubrey J. Tomlinson of the Church of God of Cleveland, Tennessee, embraced the Pentecostal doctrine of speaking in tongues. Tomlinson became general overseer for life in the Church of God in 1914. Controversy regarding the disbursement of Church of God funds at Tomlinson’s discretion resulted in the 1923 split into the Tomlinson Church of God and the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). In 1953, ten years after Tomlinson’s death, the former denomination became known as the Church of God of Prophecy.

Many early African-American Holiness churches trace their beginnings to the missionary work of Mary Magdelena L. Tate (1871-1930), a Tennessean who has been recognized as one of the founders of the holiness movement in the country. In 1903 Tate, along with her sons Walter C. Lewis and Feliz E. Lewis, established the House of God. In 1908, the Bishops and Board of Trustees of the Church of God formally ordained her. That same year, she
helped to organize and presided over the First General Assembly of the Church of God, which was held at Greenville, Alabama. In 1924, the Church of God’s headquarters was established in Nashville.

Southern Holiness and Pentecostal Churches were interracial until the 1910s. Southern blacks did create their own denominations, however. An important question to assess with any African-American Church of God property is whether it has a significant association with the missionary work of Mary Magdelenata, due to Mother Tate’s significance in the Holiness movement.

A council of Pentecostals founded the Assemblies of God, another major southern Pentecostal tradition, in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1914. They advocated an empirical interpretation of the New Testament, protesting against the modern rejection of God based on reason and science. Disputes over the issues of unity and race resulted in the formation of the Apostolic Overcoming Holy Church of God (all-black congregations), the Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ (principally white congregations who later became the United Pentecostal Church), and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (predominately black congregations based in Indianapolis).

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**Church of God in Christ**

The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), headquartered in Memphis, is estimated to be the second largest black religious denomination in the United States and is characterized as a Pentecostal denomination. Followers of Pentecostal faiths embrace the spiritual gifts that early Christians first received on the day of Pentecost (the fiftieth day after the Resurrection of Jesus). COGIC emphasizes all the gifts of the Spirit, particularly speaking in tongues, which is testimony to the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Although the convening of the first Pentecostal General Assembly of the church in Memphis during November 1907 is regarded as the official founding date, the antecedents of the church date much earlier. COGIC’s architect was Charles Harrison Mason, who in November 1878 at the age of twelve, became a professing Christian at the Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church near Plumerville, Arkansas. In 1893 the Mt. Gale Missionary Baptist Church in Preston, Arkansas, licensed Mason into the ministry.

In 1895 Mason met C.P. Jones, J.E. Jeter, and W.S. Pleasant. These radical holiness preachers conducted a revival in Jackson, Mississippi, the following year. The dogmatic teachings of Mason resulted in his alienation from the Baptist Church, but this did not stall his ministry. His meetings continued to take place in an abandoned cotton gin house in Lexington, Mississippi. Despite Mason’s independent stance, persecution still followed him. Five pistol shots and two double barreled shotgun blasts disrupted one meeting, wounding several worshippers. Such attacks failed to discourage Mason and
Denominational History

his followers. Instead, they founded the holiness sect known as the Church of God. In 1897 Mason envisioned the name “Church of God in Christ,” and the name change gave Mason’s church its own distinct identity.

1907 marked a maturation point in Mason’s efforts to establish a distinctive church when he and Elders D.J. Young and J.A. Jeter attended the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles. There, under the teaching of W.J. Seymour, Mason became a believer in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and in tongues as witness to this baptism. Upon his return to Memphis, where his church was now located, Mason proclaimed speaking in tongues a New Testament doctrine. C.P. Jones split with Mason over this issue and led the non-Pentecostal faction of COGIC, which eventually became known as the Church of Christ (Holiness), U.S.A. Mason’s followers retained the COGIC name and convened the first Pentecostal General Assembly in Memphis in 1907. Representatives from twelve churches attended the initial meeting.

Between 1907 and 1914, the Church of God in Christ was the only incorporated Pentecostal body in the nation. Mason ordained both white and black clergy, since both needed licenses of ordination, but whites and blacks generally gravitated to separate congregations. Many of the white clergy ordained by Mason helped to form the Assembly of God Church in 1914. COGIC grew in numbers and influence, especially in urban areas, in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In the Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee, COGIC congregations and churches played an important leadership and support roles. At Mason Temple in Memphis in April 1968, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his final major public address, the “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” sermon, the night before his assassination. The world headquarters of the Church of God in Christ is in Memphis. Church membership had topped five million and today COGIC is ranked as the largest Pentecostal denomination in the country and is one of the ten largest denominations in the country.

Cumberland Presbyterian in America and United Presbyterians(5)

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church grew out of revivals on the Tennessee-Kentucky frontier in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The formation of the independent Cumberland Presbytery on February 4, 1810, at Dickson, Tennessee, by ministers Finis Ewing, Samuel King, and Samuel McAdow, and the subsequent establishment of the Cumberland Synod (1813) and General Assembly (1829) followed controversies over Calvinist theology and church order raised by the “New Side/Old Side” division within the Presbyterian Church in general, and more specifically, the frontier revivals.
The Church grew fivefold in membership from 1835 to 1860 and survived the Civil War without division. In 1869 a contingent of African-American ministers, representing approximately 30,000 black members of the church, petitioned for the formation of independent “presbyteries of colored ministers.” The General Assembly of what is known currently as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America (CPA) was established in 1874 in Nashville. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America remains a small institution today.

Throughout the region are scattered churches of African-American United Presbyterian congregations, an outgrowth of the church’s missionary efforts that began after the Civil War. The United Presbyterian Church is aligned with the Presbyterian Church and is not part of the Cumberland Presbyterian faith.

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Baptists

The Baptist denomination is one of the oldest and largest denominations in the United States, and a leading faith among African Americans. Exposed to the faith as it spread throughout the south in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Africa Americans found not only a spiritual experience that spoke to their African heritage, but also a rare opportunity for independence and equality in an otherwise brutally racist world. A sustaining source of strength and solidarity through the trying times of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, the Baptist church has been more than a spiritual force in black communities; it has played a central role in their social, political, and economic lives as well. The number of black Baptists reflects the denomination’s status as a leading institution among African Americans. Figures from 1990 estimate over eleven million African Americans belong to eight major black Baptist associations. The largest among these, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., consists of over 7.5 million members, making it the largest black organization in the world. As such a significant force in black communities, the development of the Baptist denomination plays a primary role in African-American history.

The Baptist faith was one of several Protestant faiths that developed during the Reformation in fifteenth century England. It is chiefly known for the practice of adult baptism by immersion and an insistence of the separation of church and state. But as the faith spread throughout the American colonies many sub-denominations emerged. General, Regular, Arminian, Particular, Separatist, Primitive, Free Will, Hardshell, Missionary, and Progressive are but a few of the over eighty divisions that exist today. Although subtle but distinguishable differences in doctrine and practices make each sub-denomination unique, they largely fall within two broad categories based upon their redemption beliefs—either general atonement...
or Calvinistic predestinationism in varying degrees. Seeds of both doctrines took root early in the American colonies during the late seventeenth century.

The Baptist faith first appeared in the south in the late seventeenth century with the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina. This early group of Baptists were Calvinist in doctrine, preferred an educated clergy, and worshipped in an orderly fashion. By the mid-1700s, however, another Baptist group arose in the south that came to shape the defining regional character of the faith. Its leader was the dynamic evangelical preacher Shubel Stearns, who traveled and led revivals throughout the South. He adhered to a modified Calvinism, which offered the possible salvation for all who had a personal conversion experience with God. The masses found this doctrine, Stearns' emphasis on antiworldliness, and his spontaneous, emotional preaching greatly appealing. These characteristics came to determine the basic nature of the Baptist faith in the south as the majority of congregations that developed adopted Stearns' doctrine.

The first black Baptist churches began in the south in the last half of the eighteenth century. The African Baptist or "Bluestone" Church formed on William Byrd's plantation in Mecklenberg, Virginia in 1758 is the earliest church whose origin date is verifiable. The Silver Bluff Baptist Church near the Savannah River in South Carolina might also claim this title, but its origin dates cannot be confirmed. Its significance, however, is well known. Scholars estimate that slave George Liele established Silver Bluff between 1750 and 1775 during which time he spread the Baptist faith through mission work at nearby plantations. Liele eventually gained his freedom and for a time settled in Savannah, where he became a well-known preacher, before moving to Jamaica c. 1782. Liele left behind many slave converts who continued to spread the Baptist faith among African-Americans. Among them were Andrew Bryan and Jesse Peters, who established the First African Church of Savannah c. 1788. Black churches soon spread throughout the region, especially in areas with a concentration of free blacks. Other evangelical faiths were also sweeping through the south in this era, but the Baptist faith obviously held something special for African Americans as by 1800 there were over 25,000 black Baptists in the United States.

The Baptist faith appealed to blacks, the majority of whom were slaves, for a variety of reasons. The faith's beliefs, rituals and practices had much in common with African religious traditions; its message of eventual salvation gave them hope past their current life of enslavement; and, more than any other denomination, it offered them some degree of equality and freedom. Many aspects of the Baptist faith, such as its concepts of visions, spiritual journeys, rebirth, healing, and prophecy, shared many similarities with African religious traditions and values. Although blacks managed to maintain much of their African heritage, the circumstances of slavery contradicted and weakened their connection to traditional concepts. The African worldview had been one of personal independence and a sacred cosmos that connected the spiritual and material worlds. The world of
slavery, however, demanded submissiveness and looked upon African religious beliefs as foolish. The similarities between traditional African values and the Baptist faith prepared African Americans to participate in the Great Awakening, out of which they created a faith both African and Baptist. In addition, the Baptist emphasis on congregational autonomy and individual religious experience gave blacks some degree of self-determination. With limited white authority, blacks were allowed to preach and could start their own congregations. The ability to form and conduct their own religious services was a step toward independence and the message of salvation in the next life gave enslaved African Americans an inner strength to meet the harsh realities of their current situation.

Prior to the Great Awakening, slave owners were largely disinterested in converting their slaves to Christianity. Their economic priority was to occupy slaves' time with work, and they feared that baptism might give slaves the impression they were free. Also many planters were not deeply religious themselves but viewed participation in religious activities as a mere extension of their power and social status. A preacher's time needed to be devoted to whites, not to people the planters saw as barbarians incapable of understanding Christianity. The Anglican Church did make some efforts to involve slaves, but its emphasis on literacy and decorum did not appeal to the group. Compounding this situation was the fact that keeping the race uneducated and unsophisticated was in the best interest of slaveowners.

In contrast to the strict formalities of the Anglican Church, African Americans found the emotion and spontaneity of the newly emerging faiths of the Great Awakening inviting and accepting, as did many whites. In its initial stages, the Great Awakening was in many ways a populist movement, giving poor whites a distinct social and religious outlet beyond the authority of the elite planter class. The conventions of the Anglican Church only reinforced the south's rigid social order, but the new evangelical faiths liberated the masses to an equal spiritual, if not social, plane. Their emphasis on emotion, conversion by individual personal experience, and a lack of strict dogma related more to the life experiences of the common people.

Over time, however, the new faiths became more widespread and conformist. What had emerged in the first Great Awakening as separatist sects, became major denominations as their practices became more widely accepted by the upper classes. Revivals declined, congregations became less radical, and the majority of them held a much weaker antislavery stance. As tensions over slavery increased and slave rebellions were more frequent, black churches were suppressed out of white fear of potential black defiance. Black congregations then either melted into white churches or existed in secret. Yet slaveowners, many of whom were now among the converts, leaned toward Christianizing their slaves. It increased slaves' obedience and by allowing slaves to participate in religious activities within the slave quarters, planters could oversee, and thus control, the services. Planters also used this "interest" in their slaves' spiritual well-being to appear benevolent to and appease abolitionists.
As slavery became an increasingly pressing national issue, Baptists, like other denominations, split over the question. Initially, Baptists tried to remain neutral, claiming that slavery was a political and not a religious issue. But the issue came to a head in 1845 when the election of a slaveholder to the national board was denied. Southerners then withdrew and formed the Southern Baptist Convention.

After emancipation, African Americans rapidly withdrew from white churches to form independent congregations. Finally free to worship as they chose, a large percentage of blacks chose the Baptist faith, and the number of black Baptists rose from 150,000 in 1850 to 500,000 in 1870. Some white congregations assisted the fledgling churches in establishing facilities and organizing administrative systems, while others cut all ties with African-Americans. Creating their own religious institutions and associations was extremely important to the newly freed people. Like owning their own land and educational establishments, the ability to freely worship in their chosen manner and space was a large step toward independence and self-determination. Desiring to distance themselves from both southern discrimination and northern paternalism, African-American Baptist congregations retained only marginal relations with white congregations and gradually began to develop a separate network of black associations.

The first all black Baptist associations were formed in the west. In Ohio, African Americans organized the Providence Association in 1834 and the Union Association in 1836. Illinois' Wood River Association was established in 1839, and the Amherstburg Association in Michigan began in 1841. In 1864, these four associations formed the Northwestern and Southern Baptist Convention, a regional association which represented eight states. The first regional organization, however, was the American Baptist Missionary Convention formed in 1840 by members from the New England and Mid-Atlantic areas. The first attempt at a national black Baptist association came in 1866 when the Northwestern and Southern Baptist Convention merged with the American Baptist Missionary Convention to form The Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention. The national organization, which held its first meeting in Nashville in 1867, lasted twelve years, until 1879. By then the national organization was splitting into separate regional conventions.

(NBC, USA), which became, and has remained, the most prominent African-American Baptist organization in the country. It would later split into two institutions, the National Baptist Convention, USA (unincorporated) and the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. Reverend E.C. Morris served as the first president, and the association immediately formed subsidiaries addressing foreign missions, home missions, and education. It later added publishing in 1897. The convention was also very active in supporting education and racial equality issues.

The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. has had a special relationship with Tennessee since the late nineteenth century. In 1896 Reverend Richard H. Boyd established and located the National Baptist Publishing Board in Nashville. It soon became one of the largest businesses in the country that was owned and operated by African Americans. The world headquarters for the church, and its primary seminary (American Baptist College), were also located in Nashville.

The Baptist church remained a source of strength, solace, and solidarity in African-American communities at the turn of the century as the enactment of Jim Crow laws confirmed that severe racism still existed. Throughout the Jim Crow years, black churches grew in numbers and in membership. Black Baptist ministers, who were important leaders and authorities in the community, increased from 5,500 to 17,000 between 1890 and 1906.

Despite their strong affinity, African-American Baptists did experience internal conflicts. The Baptist tendency toward schism over policy and ideology resulted in significant divisions among the members of the National Baptist Convention. The first split came in 1897 with the appointment of a new secretary to the Foreign Mission Board and the movement of its headquarters to Louisville. Conflicting loyalties and resentment over the new publishing activities caused some members to withdraw from the organization and form the Lott Carey Foreign Missionary Convention. The Lott Carey faction largely consisted of the well-educated members of the NBC, reflecting a class and ideological division within the convention. The two groups reconciled by 1905, and remained separate but affiliated organizations.

A major split, however, came to the National Baptist Convention in 1915. With more than three million members, the convention split over a ten-year conflict involving leadership and control of the publishing division. Dissenting members formed the National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA), which subsequently initiated the National Baptist Publishing Board. After the split, NBC, USA incorporated and created the Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention. The NBCA became a leading black institution in its own right and developed programs for home and foreign missions, education and training, and benevolent activities.

Conflict returned again to the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., in the early 1960s as members disagreed over how to respond to the era's impending social issues. Under the leadership of Reverend Dr. Joseph H.
Jackson, the organization had become increasingly conservative during the 1950s. Jackson strongly opposed the civil disobedience strategy of Martin Luther King, Jr., and prevented the convention from participating in the civil rights movement. In 1961 King and others withdrew from the NBC, USA and founded the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Despite the fight on the national level, however, local churches remained a source of service and leadership to African-Americans throughout the struggle for civil rights. Whether providing facilities, funds, or direction for voter registration, sit-in organization, or inspiring speeches, the community church was the pivotal spiritual and physical guiding force for many individuals.

This social activist tradition continues in African-American Baptist churches today as the church plays a continuing vital role in the spiritual and social lives of its members. The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. maintains its world headquarters in Nashville. Its American Theological College in Nashville produced the notable student leader, John R. Lewis, during the Civil Rights Movement.

**Primitive Baptists**

A hallmark of Baptist polity is the strong autonomy of individual congregations, a characteristic that has eased, and to some degree encouraged, the many divisions within the Baptist faith that have emerged over time. If unresolvable conflicts over basic doctrines and practices arose within a congregation, the usual outcome was that the group that disagreed with the church’s current direction would splinter off and form a separate autonomous congregation. This was the case in the 1700s as Calvinist “Particular” Baptists emerged separately from Arminian or “General” Baptist congregations. Another division among the Baptists occurred in the early 1800s with the rise of the missionary movement.

In the early 1800s benevolent and missionary activities became increasingly prevalent among Baptists and other denominations. As their efforts grew, they began formal organizations to manage their operations. By 1810 Congregationalists formed the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Baptists soon followed this lead and in 1814 established the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions. This organization, which later became the American Baptist Missionary Union, primarily funded overseas missions. Although many Baptists strongly supported missionary activity, those who were staunch Calvinists strongly opposed it and as controversy erupted over the issue an anti-mission movement quickly emerged.

The anti-mission movement was a bitter conflict nationwide among many denominations. Daniel Parker, John Taylor, and John Leland were key
leaders of the movement, which was fueled by a fear of a strong church-state relationship and of the power of large eastern ecclesiastical agencies. This fear was particularly strong in the south. In addition, the majority of southern congregations held strong Calvinistic or restorationist views that directly conflicted with missionary activity. They believed in predestination and that salvation was only for the elect; therefore they objected to missionary work because they saw it as interfering with the saving of those God had chosen. In their view, if the redemption of mankind was predetermined, then attempting to convert or save individuals, the objective of missionary activity, was futile. God already decided the outcome. Advocating the simplicity and freedom of the primitive church, which they saw as a model to emulate, antimissionists were also opposed to the elaborate organizations that missionary work required.

Baptists involved in the anti-mission movement became known as Primitive Baptists. The majority of them derived from rural restorationist congregations in the Shubel Stearns tradition of strong allegiance to the primitive church and to scripture. The title “Primitive” then refers to the original or pure church and faith of the apostles. Their cardinal doctrine is a rigid predestinationism and they reject all auxiliaries not in scripture—including seminaries, Sunday schools, and Bible societies in addition to missionary organizations—because these outreach programs are viewed as vain and offensive to basic church doctrines. Nonetheless, regional and national Primitive Baptist associations do exist, but authority is vested in the local church. Associations generally meet annually and are primarily social in nature. It is common for individual congregations to meet once a month, particularly in rural areas where ministers travel and preach at a different church each week. Members then will often attend a neighboring church on the weeks when their local church does not meet.

Primitive Baptist ministers are not formally trained but are simply respected elders of the local congregation to whom God has given the gift of preaching. They are often unsalaried outside of donations from the congregation and so usually have an additional occupation. The local congregation ordains potential preachers only after they have demonstrated their ability. Proving that their vocation is truly inspired from God, Primitive Baptist ministers do not prepare sermons in advance, but provide a spontaneous oration.

Both the worship and the architecture of the denomination reflect this emphasis on simplicity and fundamental methods. Services are simple in nature, composed largely of preaching, prayer, and singing. Members sing lined hymns in a distinctive rhythmic manner without musical accompaniment, which most Primitive Baptists do not allow. Baptism is by immersion, and many Primitive Baptists participate in foot washing, the practice of washing one another’s feet as an act and lesson in humility.

The buildings in which these services are held are equally unassuming and humble. Churches are usually small rectangular wooden structures coated with white paint. Lacking adornment they have no steeples and have plain
glass windows. The interiors are likewise uncomplicated with plain white or paneled walls and no decor. Plain wooden pews provide the seating, which in the early years was segregated by gender. Older Primitive Baptist churches also have separate entrances for men and women; generally two doors stand parallel under the gable end opposite the pulpit.

Given the general Baptist propensity toward schism, it is not surprising that different divisions have emerged even within sub-denominations. Today there are five discernible groups of Primitive Baptists: Absoluters, who are the most rigid predestinationists; Old Liners, who grant people responsibility in predestination; Progressives, who are the least rigid and have Sunday schools and paid ministers; Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit-Predestination Baptists, of which only a few members remain, are primarily in Texas and Louisiana; and National Primitive Baptists, who are African American.

Although originally a white denomination, Primitive Baptists have gained an even greater following among blacks. After having withdrawn from white congregations at the close of the Civil War, African Americans initiated their own congregations, which were on the average more progressive than those of whites, operating both conventions and Sunday schools. In 1907 black Primitive Baptists formed the National Primitive Baptist Convention of the United States of America, which in 1990 had an estimated 250,000 members.

United Methodist Church

The Methodist church was the first mainstream white denomination to actively bring evangelism to Tennessee slaves, largely through the work of William E. Capers of Virginia. This pattern of denominational affiliation began to shift toward the Baptists in the 1850s. Toward the end of the Civil War, in 1864, the Methodist Episcopal Church, North launched an ambitious and aggressive missionary program in the defeated southern states. In part, church leaders pushed this missionary agenda, but President Abraham Lincoln also encouraged northern Methodists to take over what were then abandoned buildings of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in the occupied south.

These efforts of the mainstream Methodist church, however, lacked the success of evangelizing and church building associated with the AME or AME Zion churches. However, Methodist membership for African Americans throughout the nation did remain larger than those Methodists who belonged to the CME church. By 1896 nationwide, for example, United Methodist black membership totaled almost 250,000 while there were only 130,000 CME members.

By 1868 eight black Methodist conferences existed in the United States, but these remained segregated units within the Methodist Church for the
next one hundred years. In 1939 the various Methodist bodies—the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church adopted a plan for union, establishing the United Methodist Church, with five jurisdictions, based on geographical region, spread across the nation. African-American Methodists, however, were excluded from this union. They comprised a sixth jurisdiction, the Central Jurisdiction, which was officially segregated. “The effect of this action,” according to Lincoln and Mamiya, “was to institutionalize a black Methodist church, literally a church within a church. Not until 1966 when a merger with the Evangelical United Brethren Church was effected was the Central Jurisdiction officially abolished. True integration in the church, however, failed to follow local desegregation. In practice if not in policy, black Methodists remained separate.” Only in 1972 did the last segregated unit—the South Carolina Conference—become integrated into the church as a whole.

While the degree of social activism may vary from church to church, United Methodist congregations in general have been supportive of community attempts to improve education and living conditions, and to promote civil rights and equality, in their communities. Due to their relatively small numbers in comparison to Baptist and AME congregations, however, United Methodist churches lacked the building size, and leadership potential, to play a primary role in the Civil Rights Movement in the rural South in the 1950s and 1960s.
Endnotes


2. Lincoln and Mamiya, 62.


4. This section is adapted from the entry by Randolph Meade Walker in the Tennessee Encyclopedia.

5. Parts of this section are adapted from the entry by L. Thomas Smith, Jr., in the Tennessee Encyclopedia.

Assessment Guidelines for Nominating Historic Rural African-American Churches to the National Register of Historic Places

by Carroll Van West

Historic rural African-American churches are, above all, historical artifacts of the creation, development, persistence, and continuity of three vital and interrelated components of African-American ethnic heritage: ethnic identity, religion, and education. After Emancipation, the actual places or locations of historic rural African-American churches signified the establishment of a sacred place where community institutions would be nurtured, cemeteries would be established, and rituals of culture and identity perpetuated and protected. Rural African-American churches also were closely associated with the development of social institutions that were designed to promote the welfare of African-American society and with the creation and enhancement of African-American drama, dance, and music.

The fact that this process of historical and cultural transformation took place over a long period of time, involving different people with different motives working within different, or at least changing, buildings, makes the assessment of rural churches a formidable task. The way of thinking about the National Register eligibility of rural churches that is detailed below reflects the historical and cultural patterns found in the 1997-98 survey of 365 churches across Tennessee. While this number does not include all of the possible rural African-American churches in Tennessee, it is much more than a small random sample. Indeed, this intensive survey suggests that, depending on the nature of the resource, there are two ways to assess the National Register eligibility of a rural African-American church: 1) as an individual property, and 2) as part of a church-based historic district.
I. 1850-1890: Creating a Tradition

Context

There are no known examples of rural or small-town church buildings in Tennessee that date to the years of slavery or the years of Civil War occupation between 1861 and 1865. But most rural African-American churches that have strong associations to the establishment and development of communities of newly freed people after the Civil War date between 1863 and 1883, with those founded between 1863 and 1870 having especially strong historical significance due to their early founding date.

Historians of Reconstruction and of African-American history agree that the years immediately after the Civil War provided a crucible for the creation of permanent African-American institutions. "Blacks were free now, and they enjoyed options they could only have imagined a short time earlier," observed historian William E. Montgomery. "No longer required to attend racially mixed churches or chapels established for them by whites, thousands of blacks began organizing their own autonomous congregations. The months that followed emancipation marked the beginning of a new era for the black church, a time during which it began to mature and to take on new forms and functions." These new churches took ideas of organization and ritual from the hundreds of church missionaries that flooded the state, from such organizations as the AME, the AME Zion, the Methodist Freedmen's Aid Society, the American Baptist Home Mission Society, and the American Missionary Association (see the denominational histories). But they blended the ideas and traditions of the missionaries with their own prior heritage and traditions of worship, what William Montgomery has called “the folk church, the product of a primal culture, nonintellectual, experiential, and indigenous in the sense that it was the syncretistic product of a dynamic African-American culture.”

The newly established church immediately became a focus of identity, culture, and heritage. Historian Leon Litwack adds: “with the withdrawal of thousands of blacks from the white-dominated churches, the black church became the central and unifying institution in the postwar black community. Far more than any newspaper, convention, or political organization, the minister communicated directly and regularly with his constituents and helped to shape their lives in freedom. Not only did he preach the gospel to the masses in these years but he helped to politicize and educate them.”

Several Criterion A (historical events) themes are significantly associated with these buildings. Religion is an important theme, for example, because the buildings often represent the beginnings of organized religious institutions among local African-Americans. Their continuance until the present underscores their significant associations with the development, practice, and enhancement of religion in local black communities. Reverend Kelly Miller Smith of Nashville summarized the African-American religious legacy, and its enduring significance, in his 1982 essay, "Religion as a Force
in Black America.” Studies by professors of religion and a social historian in the 1990s have documented the historical roots and cultural significance of African-American religion.4

The scholarship has exploded the previous stereotype that African-American religion was mostly a derivative of existing white religious practices, and thus deserving of little individual attention. As Lincoln and Mamiya argue:

The black sacred cosmos or the religious worldview of African Americans is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as scared, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath. It has been only in the past twenty years that scholars of African American history, culture, and religion have begun to recognize that black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldviews as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests.

Faith in salvation through Jesus Christ was a sustaining force through the violence and degradation of slavery, then Jim Crow segregation and onto the renewed promise of freedom in modern times. The words of the Holy Bible further taught African Americans that their church was true to the teachings of Jesus and the dictates of God. The black Christians who formed the historic black churches also knew implicitly that their understanding of Christianity, which was premised on the rock of anti-racial discrimination, was more authentic than the Christianity practiced in white churches.5

This basic understanding provided the faith that many African Americans took into the battlefields of the movement for Civil Rights from Reconstruction to 1970.

When historian Eric Foner reviewed the Reconstruction era across the South, he concluded that the newly freed African-Americans rushed first to create three separate institutions: churches, cemeteries, and schools. Education, therefore, is important to consider as an area of significance.

No incidents of social activism and civil rights activism could be documented for these churches between their construction and 1890, but social history was an area of importance later in the twentieth century.

Criterion B (association with a significant person) for these early churches should focus on the ministers who established the congregations and directed the construction of the churches. Certainly established scholarship indicates that the prominence of early ministers is an issue always worth investigating. The minister, or pastor, is the central person associated with the worship services, rituals, social history projects, and community events associated with the rural African-American church. In The Souls of Black Folks, W.E.B. Du Bois movingly wrote of his first experience with a rural revival in DeKalb County, Tennessee:
From these experiences with rural DeKalb County religious meetings, Du Bois concluded that the preacher, the music, and the frenzy were the three key components of the black religious experience. “The preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil,” he stressed. “A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss’, an intriguer, an idealist—all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men. . . . The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it.”

For decades after Emancipation African-American ministers found themselves situated squarely between their congregations and God, and between their congregations and the white world outside their everyday existence. Thus, concludes Leon Litwack:

Compared to his white counterpart, the black preacher exerted a greater authority within his community. That authority, however, rested on precarious grounds, dependent as it often was on white whims and toleration. . . . the black minister in the South viewed himself as a necessary agent of social control. He had to find ways to navigate the conflicting roles assigned him, that of pleasing constituents while not alienating necessary white tolerance and support. Even as he encouraged the aspirations of his people, he needed to disabuse their minds of extravagant pride and unrealistic ambitions. That delicate balance was not always easy to maintain.

The prevailing scholarly consensus for a century is that from the days of slavery through Emancipation and into the days of Jim Crow, African-American ministers were the most powerful and respected members of local black communities. Historian William E. Montgomery’s chapter, “The Preachers,” in his book Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900, provides a very able summary of the significance of the ministers in establishing the actual church, increasing its membership, and enhancing the social, cultural, and religious life of their communities. Beginning at the turn of the century, the new professional and merchant class began a tradition of secular leadership within the black community, but the minister still maintained respect and significance, as would be evident in their leadership roles in the Civil Rights Movement.

The significance of founding ministers is also documented in the interiors of many rural African-American churches, where formal photographic portraits of the congregation’s ministers received a prominent place, often on the walls flanking the pulpit, where they brought wisdom, passion, and courage every Sunday.
For the era of 1850-1890, Criterion C (significant architecture or craftsmanship) is an important consideration. The vernacular tradition of the frame, gable-entrance church building is a dominant property type for rural African-American churches throughout the twentieth century. When assessed within the social, cultural, and economic context in which they were created, church buildings can be recognized for what they are: a sincere, intentional attempt to create a distinctive and meaningful place of worship within a social and built environment that, in most cases, was antagonistic to the notion that African Americans even deserved a spot in the landscape.

As an architectural style within the National Register guidelines, it is probably best to classify most of the churches as “No Style.” Within the literature of architectural history, most buildings would be classified as “vernacular,” but that word here is used as American studies scholar John Kouwenhoven used it almost forty years ago in his classic chapter, “What is American about American Architecture,” in his book of essays titled The Beer Can by the Highway. In his opinion, the attributes of American vernacular design were conveyed by four words: “resilient, adaptable, simple, and unceremonious.” Focus should be on the form and its evolution over time. The Tennessee survey of 365 churches identified a few with an architectural style (typically either Gothic Revival or Classical Revival and usually located in small towns), but most churches fell into several categories of dominant forms and types, which could be found in all denominations, geographical regions, and time periods. “The difference between style and form is the difference between a statement and a language,” observes Stewart Brand. “An architectural statement is limited to a few stylistic words and depends on originality for its impact, whereas a vernacular form unleashes the power of a whole, tested grammar.” With the rural African-American church, the form is much more important than its style. In assessing the architectural significance of these buildings, the form and how it has changed over time should be evaluated within the context of Kouwenhoven’s four terms of resiliency, adaptability, simplicity, and unceremoniousness. The most typical rural African-American church building for 1850-1890 is a one-story, gable roofed, rectangular-shaped building, with the primary entrance on the gable end. The foundation may be brick, concrete, or stone piers. The walls are frame and the windows typically are square or rectangular.

Summary

Rural African-American church buildings that date between 1850 and 1890 are so few in number that when surveyed and identified, they should receive careful scrutiny from historic preservationists. Their dates of construction and survival into the twenty-first century strongly suggest that they possess potential significance under Criterion A (association with historic events). The most pertinent themes are settlement patterns (the beginning of post-Reconstruction freemen communities), religion (the
beginnings of organized black religious institutions), education (the begin-
nings of freemen schools), and social history (the beginnings of black social
activism, community programs, and organizations). Another primary area of
eligibility lies with Criterion C (architecture/craftsmanship) for their signifi-
cance as extant examples of late nineteenth century African-American
craftsmanship. Criterion B (association with a significant person) is a second-
ary category of eligibility if the initial ministers of the congregation also were
significant in the creation of other African-American congregations and
churches in the region. Several early churches are known as "mother
churches" since their first pastors also helped to establish other congregations
throughout the area.

II. 1890-1945: Maintaining Traditions in an
Era of Jim Crow Segregation

Context

The vast majority of historic rural African-American churches date to the
era of Jim Crow segregation. As ample scholarship documents, and as Leon
Litwack has summarized in his recent Trouble in Mind (1998), this era was
the nadir of race relations throughout the south. Violence and intimidation
became increasingly common. Ministers used church pulpits to denounce
the violence. Led by sermons and publications from Bishop Henry M.
Turner, the AME and AME Zion pulpits especially decried the situation
African Americans found themselves in during the Jim Crow era. For
example, in a 1900 publication, Turner thundered: “Every man that has the
sense of an animal must see there is no future in this country for the
Negro . . . we are taken out and burned, shot, hanged, unjointed and
murdered in every way. Our civil rights are taken from us by force, our
political rights are a farce.”

In response, African Americans turned to their churches for guidance.
Historian Bobby Lee Lovett concluded that “Not only was school held in
the church, but the teachers were often ministers or church missionaries.
The important meetings involving black politics and movements for civil
rights and suffrage always took place in the churches.” In the long Jim
Crow era, churches were among the few public spaces where African
Americans could and would gather. They became more important as a
nurturing center for African-American identity. Through their Sunday
sermons, for example, ministers gave local African Americans the courage
to seek out better solutions to their lives. Editorials and speeches by Bishop
Henry Turner, published in various AME publications and given as sermons
to local AME congregations during the early twentieth century, preached
pride and self worth. “Convinced that the church should play a role in
transforming the black psyche,” Turner developed a “theology designed to
improve the self-image of the race. It asked black people to reject any of the teachings and practices of white Christianity that reinforced feelings of inferiority."12 Turner and other AME ministers especially questioned the significance of “whiteness”—and in AME churches in specific, and many other faiths in general, images of Jesus stopped being white, and were black. Images of other black heroes were placed on Sunday School walls. As Edwin S. Redkey has suggested, the church, while decrying the violence of the era, also promoted a “basic optimism” among African Americans, an optimism grounded in the eventual integration of society and Christian redemption. This optimism never disappeared; once refocused and energized in the post-World War II era, it became a basic faith of those who fought for civil rights.13

This optimism helps to explain the comparative explosion of adjacent social and community institutions located next to prominent churches. Education is perhaps the most prominent example. In the Tennessee project as of August 1, 1998, thirty-three extant school buildings stood immediately on the church lot or were located in the immediate lot because the church had either provided land or served as a major sponsor for the school’s establishment. This represented about nine percent of the total number of church properties surveyed.

The schools’ dates of construction range from the turn-of-the-century to last gasp attempts to maintain “separate but equal” facilities in the 1950s. Several of the schools are associated with the Rosenwald school building program of the late 1910s and 1920s. According to the research of Mary S. Hoffschwelle, church congregations again played a key role in supporting, and providing land for, the ambitious Rosenwald program. Rosenwald agent Robert E. Clay typically held his first organizing meetings in a given African-American community at a local church. Women church members, who supplied the labor and dedication for Sunday school programs, grasped similar leadership roles in the Rosenwald campaigns. They organized community suppers, entertainments, and chicken feasts, usually at local churches. Of course, in some communities, denomination divisions between congregations led to local fights over the Rosenwald campaigns. Clay invariably returned to the communities and generally ordered the
warring factions to stop and to work together, giving what he called a “frank” speech.  

Fraternal lodges also impacted church property during this time in two ways. Some lodges built their buildings on church lots or adjacent property. Lodge members also built new church buildings. In the Jim Crow era, fraternal lodges transcended the function of group effort and race consciousness. According to Bobby Lovett, “blacks had no choice but be racially conscious—a racist society and white-imposed Jim Crow rules dictated that for them. “ To Lovett, “lodges signaled the development of white and elite class structures in the post-Emancipation Negro communities, and often embodied the leadership for erecting” such institutions as schools, churches, and cemeteries.  

As historian Lester Lamon adds: “in addition to creating occasions for socializing, the fraternal organizations usually provided small illness or death benefits, represented blacks in public celebrations such as Fourth of July parades, and served as important training grounds for black leaders.”  

One artifact associated with fraternal lodges are the dedication stones that record the lodge that constructed the church building. Rarely is there any information available about the builders of rural African-American churches. But dedication stones indicate that, at least, in the twentieth century, fraternal lodge members helped to reshape the local African-American built environment through their construction of church buildings. This also was a continuation of the building traditions of slave craftsmen; African-American stone and brick masonry is an important folk attribute still documented in many rural church buildings. The Jim Crow era also witnessed the beginnings of organized civil rights activism among rural church congregations. As Leon Litwack points out, many African-American ministers "struggled in various ways to make life less hellish on each. The many churches burned to the ground since emancipation and the number of preachers beaten, intimidated, and murdered provided grim testimony to the price paid by blacks to wage such a struggle. How could the church stand apart from politics, a black journal asked soon after emancipation, when the issues in question were civil rights, suffrage, education, and equal protection under the law?"  

“As an institution managed and owned by black people,” the African-American church “by its very existence and democratic structure imparted racial pride and dignity, providing parishioners of all classes the opportunity to participate in its meetings and rituals and to exercise roles denied them in the larger society.” For years, therefore, the church created the best, and often the only, available laboratory in rural Tennessee for African Americans to practice and learn the benefits of democracy. In the brutally segregated spaces of the Jim Crow era, the church and its lot served as a public space where social and cultural rituals grounded in equality took place on each Sunday morning. Historian William E. Montgomery aptly summarizes
Recent research on the over-arching significance of the African-American church in an era of violence and terrorism:

The churches were the nerve centers of their denominations, simultaneously sending pulses of humanity running upward through the institutional hierarchy and generating cohesion and a sense of belonging among people in isolated neighborhoods and settlements whom the larger society shunned because of their race. The congregations were an essential element in the personal identity through which the people defined themselves as Christians and as members of an African-American community. In a myriad of ways, the congregation recognized the hopes and fears of the people who came together regularly to worship and to socialize and communicated them to others far away through a network of denominational agencies. They gave support and succor to people who struggled to maintain a positive self-concept against an onslaught of negative images and assertions emanating from the dominant white society and against poverty and the frustration of opportunity for advancement that were closed to them. In helping to promote a distinctive African-American identity, the congregations were vital contributors to African-American culture.

Churches most often were the initial meeting places, and recruitment centers, for the emergence of African-American civic groups. Much more research needs to be directed toward the creation of the civic leagues and like-minded groups as well as the demographic composition of these groups, especially in smaller towns and rural areas. In the 1930s the Farm Security Administration attempted to build a new base of African-American landowning farmers through various projects across the south. Several new churches were founded and built to serve the members of these New Deal communities.

The anti-lynching movement also was prominent in the Jim Crow era. In the mid-1920s, for example, the decision of CME leaders to speak out against lynching is considered a turning point in that denomination’s history.

Martin Tabernacle CME
(Gibson County)
the first step toward the church’s name change from the Colored Methodist Episcopal church to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in the mid-1950s. Church congregations, who held anti-lynching meetings, who were led by activist anti-lynching leaders, and who supported the various political and legal strategies of the early twentieth century to end the violence and madness, have an important historical association with the movement.

The performing arts became more important at rural churches during the Jim Crow era. The church has been long recognized for its importance in the nurturing of African-American drama and music. The African tradition of call-and-response was present in the services of the earliest churches from the slavery era and Reconstruction and remains a mainstay in most congregations today. Black preachers became masters of this type of worship. “Sermons were—and still are—characterized by an increase in emotional and spiritual intensity, expressed by the gradual transition from traditional pulpit oratorical style, through chanting, to highly emotional singing,” explained scholar Bruce A. Rosenberg. “Many black folk preachers are excellent singers and have had several years’ experience with church choirs, if not on the professional stage. Quite a number have been choirmasters. A musical sense has thus been acquired, and its rhythms, intonations, timbres, and verbal phasing are inextricable parts of the tradition.”

In their recent survey of the black church in the United States, Lincoln and Mamiya observe that “singing is second only to preaching as the magnet of attraction and the primary vehicle of spiritual transport for the worshiping congregation.” In fact, their research indicates that:

good preaching and good singing are almost invariably the minimum conditions of a successful ministry. Both activities trace their roots back to Africa where music and religion and life itself were all one holistic enterprise. There was no disjunction between the sacred and the secular, and music, whether vocal or instrumental, was an integral aspect of the celebration of life, as indeed was the dance which the music inspired in consequence of its evocation of the human spirit. So it was that music initially assumed a major role in the black experience in region as the West African diaspora sought to adapt to the new forms of spiritual intercourse to which they were eventually introduced in the United States. First of all, music served the important function of convoking the cultus, that is, assembling the faithful to a common place and a common experience of worship. Once this was accomplished it functioned to transcend or to reduce to insignificance those social, cultural, or economic barriers which separate individuals in their secular interests in order than genuine corporate worship might take place.

One rural African-American church from the Jim Crow era that has already been evaluated for its significance in music is Woodlawn Baptist Church in Haywood County, Tennessee. This church is associated with important performers and writers of gospel, blues, and popular music, including Bootsie Whitelaw, Tina Turner, and Sleepy John Estes. Nearby Spring Hill
Baptist Church is also associated with the early singing career of Tina Turner, who first sang as a regular church choir member here. Other churches may have significant associations with individual artists and composers or have local significance as the place where annual church singings and performances take place. Musical forms influenced by the black church include gospel, blues, ragtime, jazz, and rock-n-roll. Church of God in Christ congregations deserve careful evaluation for their significance in music. “The Church of God in Christ, more than any other single denomination, has pioneered in the creation of contemporary gospel,” declares Lincoln and Mamiya. The church has produced such performers as the Hawkins Singers, Andre Crouch, and the Clark Sisters, and their influence has been such that every contemporary gospel choir of whatever church is almost inevitably brushed with elements of Pentecostalism through its music and its performance practices.” If Wyatt Tee Walker is correct in his conclusion that black religious music is “the primary root of all music born in the United States,” the African-American church is an important reason why.

For nominations under Criterion C, it is important to keep in mind that from 1890 to 1945, the design of rural African-American churches took on distinctive characteristics. In the larger towns and county seats, a few of the older and more established congregations erected imposing landmark buildings of architectural distinction. These multi-story buildings of brick and concrete were typically built in the first half of the twentieth century and exhibit varying interpretations of late Gothic Revival style. Although influenced by Gothic design, few churches have Gothic-influenced lancet windows; fewer still have stained glass, although several churches use an imitation type of stained glass where colored plastic sheets are applied over the glass windows.

By the 1930s, Colonial Revival influenced churches began to appear, but in small numbers overall; this style would become more popular for African-American churches after the Second World War. For the small congregations located in the countryside, vernacular traditions of a frame building with gable front entrance still predominated.

Another very interesting design characteristic of the Jim Crow era church was the emergence of dedication stones on church buildings. Dedication stones, or date markers, are another important way that the church buildings themselves serve as key historical documents about the church’s origins and development. In analyzing the totality of the material culture associated with the rural African-American church, they become a dominant feature and a key element to the identification of the building and its historical importance. Dedication stones sometimes take the form of the traditional cornerstone, a stone or concrete rectangular object that gives the date when a building was constructed. But the majority of dedication stones found at historic rural African-American churches are more similar to plaques that detail considerable information about the builders as well as the date of the building. At the New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Fayette County,
Tennessee, the dedication stone gives considerable detail about the members of the congregation involved in the “rebuilt” of the church on its historic site in 1968. But it also tells when the church was organized—1873—and who gave the land for the original church site, Julia B.F. Anderson.

The most powerful artifacts among the dedication stones are ones from each phase of the church’s evolution that, when combined together, create a dedication wall that documents history and memory for the congregation. Some dedication stones exhibit a high degree of craftsmanship and are a significant folk art form as well as a historical document. The tradition of dedication stones has deep historical roots within rural African-American church buildings. Examples can be found from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century and in modern times. At Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Gibson County, for example, stones mark a remodeling in 1982 as well as an arson in 1995 that prompted President Bill Clinton, Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., and others to participate in its rebuilding in 1996. The arson of this church in 1995 galvanized state and national attention to the recent spate of African-American church burnings in the south. In the fall 1996, President Bill Clinton and Vice-President Albert Gore, Jr., visited the church and participated in its rebuilding. Clinton gave a presidential address on the need to protect African-American churches from arson at that time. Salem Missionary Baptist is the only place in the nation where the President of the United States officially addressed the significance of rural African-American churches and the need for their preservation.

President Bill Clinton and Vice-President Albert Gore, Jr. visited Salem Missionary Baptist Church (Gibson County) to participate in its rebuilding after it was burned.
The Tennessee survey found that for churches dating to the Jim Crow era, several had different, but related, buildings, structures, and sites existing on either the church lot or on immediately adjacent lots. By themselves, the church buildings were problematic as individual building nominations. But as part of a related church-based historic district, the churches and contributing structures and sites could potentially be eligible for listing. The extended discussion below is designed to help historic preservationists to sort out the admittedly difficult assessment of these potential National Register districts.

The most important contributing property, outside of the church building, is a historic cemetery. Historic cemeteries that surround the church buildings, or that lie immediately adjacent to the building, are typically much older than the building and will often contain graves that have death dates from the nineteenth century. Many have been in use since the 1860s and 1870s. The African-American cemetery, according to folklorist John Michael Vlach, “has long had special significance. Beyond its association with the fear and awe of death, which all humans share, the graveyard was, in the past, one of the few places in American where overt black identity could be asserted and maintained.” The presence of a historic cemetery will lend credence to oral traditions that a given church congregation dates to the Reconstruction era. Moreover, historic cemeteries are invaluable resources in their own right and may be eligible for the National Register for their associations with African-American folklife, folk arts, and settlement patterns.

Next, there may been historic school buildings or fraternal lodges on the church property or on adjacent property. At some places churches, schools, and cemeteries stand side by side on one lot of land. The function of the church site as a place of memory and identity is further enhanced when congregations transform their old church bells into monuments that signify the congregation’s long life and persistence. Church bells placed on pedestals, either on top of the church sign or adjacent to the sign, are the most common way that congregations use their old church bells to link past with present. From the survey, it appears that the bell monument tradition began in the mid-twentieth century.
A careful consideration of the overall historical setting of the property is one final caution in assessing the significance of rural African-American churches in both the Jim Crow era and the Modern era. This involves the identification and interpretation of how the church site fits into the overall patterns of black and white settlement in a given area, especially the impact of residential segregation. Church properties that can be best assessed as historic districts will have a combination of the various physical components listed above—a nearby school, cemetery, bell monuments, and lodges. But they also will possess a setting within the larger landscape of settlement that helps to clarify that this place may be of significant symbolic importance to the African-American community.

This landscape pattern of the symbolism inherent in the placement of African-American churches within the larger settlement landscape is most clearly seen in small towns and villages across Tennessee. For example, on the north outskirts of Whiteville, in Hardeman County, Tennessee, is Lane Chapel CME Church, which faces west toward a main artery into the town (Tennessee Highway 179). Across the street from the church is the local African-American funeral home. Directly behind the church is the primary African-American neighborhood of Whiteville, a residential area characterized by small homes, small lots, and narrow streets. Lane Chapel CME, thus, serves as the public opening to the outside white world of an almost hidden African-American world. Two blocks east of Lane Chapel CME is El Canaan Baptist Church, located on a small rise that is visible only within the African-American neighborhood. While Lane Chapel CME served as an African-American public face to the outside white world, the lot of El Canaan Baptist was the center of the local African-American public, cultural, and religious world. Immediately north of the church is a deteriorating brick Rosenwald school, with later 1950s school wing. Next to that is a “shopping center” that served local residents in the days of segregation. Together the two churches define the public and private worlds of the local community.

Another important association worth exploring is when African-American churches are located adjacent to railroad corridors. Certainly the phrase “the other side of the tracks,” as a reference to the location of African-American neighborhoods applies to Tennessee’s railroad towns and villages. In his book *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (1989), historian Neil R. McMillen identified a pattern where railroad towns of the late antebellum and Victorian eras were much more formally segregated than pre-existing towns. Charles S. Aiken’s *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (1998) finds this pattern of segregation across the region. But an aspect in this residential pattern that remains unexplored is the location of these church lots and their potential association with Union forces of occupation during the Civil War. The locations of contraband camps along southern railroad lines are still largely unknown. But existing research indicates that the location of contraband camps often became initial African-American settlement areas as soon as the battles were over.
Summary

To determine National Register eligibility for rural African-American churches dating between 1890 and 1945, questions on both history and design are useful. Important Criterion A themes will be education, social history, and performing arts. Due to the nature and intensity of Jim Crow segregation, churches became even more important rallying centers for African-American culture. Schools and fraternal lodges were often located adjacent to the church buildings. Cemeteries become more prevalent. For Criterion C, identified architectural styles can be found at churches in small towns and county seats. Gothic Revival and Colonial Revival style predominate. Vernacular architectural traditions continue at countryside churches. Dedication stones become important parts of the church exterior. While many Jim Crow era churches can be assessed as individual building nominations, the presence of multiple historic sites, structures, and buildings on church properties indicates that possible historic districts exist. To assess potential historic districts, key questions include: is a historic school or other community building on the grounds? Where is the cemetery—when did it begin? How long was this particular location within the larger cultural landscape used for religious purposes by African-Americans? Are there symbolic artifacts, such as bell monuments or dedication stones, on the church property?

II. 1890-1945: Maintaining Traditions

Wingo Missionary Baptist (Carroll County)

Miracle Temple COGIC built in 1940 is a typical example of a Colonial Revival Church (Haywood County).
III. 1945-1970: The Modern Era

Context

In a new overview of the history of the rural south since World War II, historian Ted Ownby concludes:

Two developments stand out as new political emphases in the post-World War II rural south. First, African-American churches took increasingly aggressive roles in the civil rights movement and expanded the range of their political and economic activities in the wake of that movement. Second, white evangelicals likewise expanded their political interests into new arenas, even if a great many remained issues of personal morality.25

In her study on the history of the civil rights movement in Tennessee, historian Cynthia Griggs Fleming begins with the early abolitionist movement in East Tennessee—a region that, in general, was always hostile to slavery and remained Unionist in the Civil War—and, then, the immediate agitation by African Americans during the early years of Reconstruction for civil rights. At a meeting at St. Paul AME Church in Nashville in 1865, freedmen proclaimed:

The government has asked the colored man to fight for its preservation and gladly has he done it. Will you declare in your revised constitution that a pardoned traitor may appear in court and his testimony be heard, but that no colored loyalist shall be believed even upon oath? If this should be so, then will our last state be worse than our first, and we can look for no relief on this side of the grave.26

From the beginning, African-American churches were at the forefront of the movement for civil rights, a struggle that began in the mid-1860s and continued until the early 1970s, until the south’s black population finally could see the effect of the Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 on local politics and institutions. In many places, significant change did not happen until the 1970s. The long chronology of the struggle for civil rights is crucial to understanding the role of African-American churches in what was perhaps the most significant social and cultural transformation in the American south during the twentieth century. Too often attention is focused solely on the implementation of desegregation after the Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954 and the subsequent push for the passage of meaningful federal civil rights and voting rights legislation in the mid-1960s. But these years are only the culmination of decades of argument, demonstrations, courage, and conviction. Indeed, church burnings have long been a tool of those who oppose equality and civil rights. They understood that to strike at the heart of an African-American community, one only needed to strike at their churches.

From the histories of the churches surveyed in the Tennessee project, it is clear that the years of 1945 to 1970 were important years of change and improvement. Congregations that possess surviving historical photos or
illustrations of earlier church buildings—or whose members can give a verbal description—indicate that the vast majority of this new construction resulted in a brick building, with indoor plumbing and electricity, which replaced a frame building that had neither indoor plumbing or electricity. It was a quantum leap in physical comfort.

Clearly there are multiple reasons why these changes occurred at this point in time. Many similar examples can be found at white churches from this era. Affordable rural electrification programs became available in the later years of the New Deal and quickly spread statewide. Other New Deal agencies, especially the Works Progress Administration and the Public Works Administration, established modern utilities and sewers in many Tennessee towns. But the benefits of new technology appeared much more slowly in African-American neighborhoods, and even more so in rural areas where black farm families congregated. For example, well into the 1950s and even the 1960s in some counties, black children typically continued to be educated in the Rosenwald program’s school buildings of the 1920s and 1930s; these facilities usually had outdoor privies only. The technology certainly was there for better buildings, but without a fundamental change in the assumption that “public services and utilities” were for whites only, the benefits of new technology rarely extended to African-American communities.

Better church buildings became possible with the challenge and eventual smashing of Jim Crow segregation. This intensified period of church building and modernization is further associated with demographic change in rural communities and towns, where the expectations of World War II veterans, the rising number of professionals, and the expansion of a black middle class combined to provide the leadership and financial infrastructure for the push for civil rights. African Americans received civil rights in Tennessee because they organized, demanded their rights, and marshaled the financial and emotional resources necessary to sustain the fight.

The plethora of new churches reflected this assertiveness, pride, identity, and shared cultural purpose as the new quarters themselves served as the nerve centers for the battles, both large and small, that marked the era. Here is where congregations heard pleas from ministers and political speakers to stand together, where civil rights workers would instruct potential voters on how to register to vote, and where strategy sessions for court cases, boycotts, and demonstrations took place. These political and legal struggles at the local level are what brought about an end of Jim Crow in most southern communities—in most cases, the only remaining physical resources left are the churches. “Most of the local black people, who provided the bodies for the demonstrations, were members of black churches acting out of convictions that were religiously inspired,” concluded Lincoln and Mamiya. “Black church culture also permeated the movement from oratory to music, from the rituals and symbols of protest to the ethic of nonviolence... the role of the Black Church in whatever success that movement has accomplished is self-documented.” 27

III. 1945-1970: The Modern Era
However, for the purposes of listing historic rural African-American churches in the National Register, we need to be cognizant of the general rule that a building must be at least 50 years old to be eligible for listing, unless it can be documented to possess extraordinary significance. The “50 year rule test” means that careful attention must be directed to this modern era in the history of the rural African-American church. It is helpful to divide the Modern Era into two periods, 1945-1950 and 1951-1970.

First, church buildings that date between 1945 and 1950 do not have to meet the test of “extraordinary significance” because they are already 50 years old. These immediate post-World War II years, however, were not ones of great activism from most rural African-American congregations and especially their ministers. Their areas of significance mirror those from the first half of the twentieth century. Research by Ted Ownby, John Dittmer, and Taylor Branch indicates that many ministers feared that social activism and civil rights activity could undermine support from black middle-class professionals and white town leaders. Few congregations were ready to sponsor meetings by the NAACP or other civil rights groups. Such actions might also provoke white backlash and violence. Yet, there was a new force shaping black communities—the leadership of World War II veterans and a younger generation who wished for change—that would become very important in the next two decades. This younger generation's new confidence and assertiveness carried over to all aspects of African-American culture, including religion.

In this next period of the Modern Era, from 1951 to 1970, the church took on an extremely significant role in the local movement for civil rights across Tennessee. As Ted Ownby concludes, rural churches and especially their members became crucial forces in the civil rights movement. Even if the congregations as organized groups and ministers as individuals did not offer early leadership for civil rights activities, most came around to offering support after the movement was under way. By the mid-1960s, small-town churches had become common as meeting sites.28

This second period from 1951 to 1970 falls into the National Register assessment of extraordinary significance. In assessing whether an individual church building holds extraordinary significance for this period, under the Criterion A themes of social history and the civil rights movement, the Tennessee survey suggests several areas of investigation. Special attention should be paid to a church’s association with:

**Voting rights activism** (registration workshops; informing members about the candidates). The effort to register to vote dates to the late 1950s in most rural areas of Tennessee, especially after the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1957. The effort did not become of great significance in most communities, however, until the passage of the Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, which put real meaningful power into the legislation. Churches by the mid-1960s to circa 1970, by which time large numbers of African American
Americans were registered and voting in elections, often hosted meetings and workshops on how to register.

Public school integration (providing meeting places for parents, supporting legal counsel, a minister joining a desegregation suit against a local school board). In East Tennessee, compared to other southern states that practiced “massive resistance,” efforts to integrate some schools came fairly quickly after the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954. Oak Ridge was the first to integrate in 1955-56. Nearby Clinton attempted integration in 1956, with leadership coming from the minister at the African-American Mt. Sinai Baptist Church in Clinton. The Colonial Revival-styled church building was built in 1955 and meetings were held there in 1956 and 1957. The push for integration in Tennessee and most of the South came much later in most of the state, typically from the mid-1960s to 1970. Thus, some churches have little relationship with the school integration movement until the late 1960s.

The creation of new community organizations. The relationship between rural churches and African-American private and public community groups is important. During the 1950s and 1960s, private insurance companies were established, often with churches providing meeting places and audiences ready for recruitment. Civil rights and education programs, such as Head Start, often began in rural schools and churches.

Merchant boycotts. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, African-American groups in Fayette and Haywood counties, Tennessee, led some of the better known, and eventually successful, boycotts in reaction to a concerted white effort to throw black tenants, who attempted to register to vote, off their farms. Several Baptist churches in Fayette County were involved with the boycotts, providing food, clothing, and other essentials.
for evicted farm families. In 1961, for instance, the National Baptist Convention, USA, purchased 400 acres in Fayette County to provide homes for the tenant farmers evicted after they had attempted to register to vote in 1960. Church congregations gave similar support to other boycotts across the South.

**Speaker platforms.** Churches provided platforms and meeting places for civil rights leaders, who gave support speeches and raised funds for voter registration drives at these meetings. The speakers came from the national (NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality), state, and local groups. Local chapters of these same groups often held their initial organizational meetings, and initial chapter meetings, at black churches.

**Association with Highlander Folk School and/or Highlander Research and Education Center,** identified by the school’s biographer as “the educational center of the early civil rights movement.” The school was located at Monteagle, Tennessee; the later research center was initially established in Knoxville, but moved to permanent quarters near New Market, Tennessee, in 1972. Its prominence in training leaders for the Civil Rights Movement has long been recognized.

For a church building to have “extraordinary significance” for the civil rights movement and social history, it should be strongly associated within its local community as leader in one or more of the above categories. This association, in fact, may have a design component when congregations decided to add additional rooms in order to serve better their expanded community functions. This new space provided space for Sunday School rooms, storage for choir robes, an office for the pastor, a kitchen and community room for meetings and church suppers, and men’s and women’s restrooms. The community room was especially important for civil rights meetings and for meetings of community groups such as insurance companies.

Thus, an important aspect of the actual church building in the Modern Era is the addition of a new wing, most often at the rear but sometimes at either side, which allowed the congregation to better serve its expanded religious and social mission. A primary form found among rural African-American churches are variations on a L-shaped building. These buildings are rarely built at once in this form, but are rather adaptations over time, where a single wing has been added to the rear side of a rectangular gable-end entrance church. Other forms found in lesser amounts the cross form and the gable-roof rectangular form, with a side shed-roof addition.

In assessing integrity and architectural significance, consequently, the date of these changes and the function they served for the congregation are very important questions. Not all churches built or altered between 1950 and 1970 are eligible for the National Register. The reverse, however, is also true. Changes that date between 1950 and 1970 are not by definition problematic; it depends on the function of the change, how it was related to significant people, places, and events, and whether the change alters the overall integrity of the historic property.
Stylistically, the Modern Era witnessed the explosion of Colonial Revival churches across the South. Few are architecturally distinctive examples of the style. More common, however, is the lack of such an obvious stylistic reference. The porticoes may reflect what can be described as a restrained interpretation of Classical Revival style, but certainly they reflect a “simple” and “unceremonious” approach to the concept of the classical portico and are in keeping with Kouwenhoven’s “vernacular” designation. For example, Mt. Tipton CME Church (1955) in Tipton County, Tennessee, is an excellent representative of the form of church that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s across the state. With its lunette and four Doric columns supporting the portico, it conveys a mild interpretation of Classical Revival style. The rear wing is present as well, giving the church an overall T-shape. Brick is the primary building material and windows are rectangular. The steeple was added at an unknown date, but does not distract significantly from the simple and unceremonious aesthetics of the building.

In the Modern Era of 1945-1970, extant examples of folk art associated with historic rural African-American churches become another potential area of significance under Criterion C. Dedication stones, for instance, possess skilled hand-carving in the names found on the stones as well as decorative details enhancing the overall image projected by the stone. Adjacent cemeteries will possess significance in folk art in the designs of historic headstones, mortuary art, and the landscaping of the site. Two other significant artistic attributes of rural African-American churches lie in the locally designed and hand painted signs that announce the presence of the church building and the paintings found over baptismal pools in many Missionary Baptist churches. Of greater significance are the baptismal pool paintings found at many Baptist churches. From oral interviews and the few instances of artist-signed work, it appears that the tradition is recent, dating after 1950. Due to the date of their creation, the art might not contribute to Criterion C eligibility, unless it had extraordinary significance. Yet, the survey indicates clearly that more study needs to be directed at these neglected artistic expressions: did members of the congregations usually serve as artists? Was someone from the community known as a competent artist asked to prepare paintings for several surrounding churches? When did the paintings first appear? How many different denominations used such paintings in their sanctuaries? Were the images available commercially from African-American religious publishing houses? What is the religious significance of the paintings? The baptismal pool painting at Woodlawn Baptist Church, Haywood County, Tennessee, suggests that it was a deliberate attempt to connect the past with the present. Water rites and celebrations of water were common in West African cultures, thus slaves from that region readily accepted the baptismal rituals associated with the Baptist church. Or was the context more immediate and local? With indoor plumbing, church members did not have to venture into a cold creek to be immersed but the bright colors and naturalistic themes of the paintings created an “outdoor” setting for the baptism.
Assessment Guidelines

Summary

A large number of extant rural African-American church buildings date to the era of 1945 to 1970. Significant association with the civil rights movement dominates the history of many of these churches. For churches constructed and/or altered substantially after 1950, National Register eligibility must be documented to be of “extraordinary significance,” with the most obvious area being Criterion A and the theme of the civil rights movement in the local context. Important areas of investigation are voting rights activism, public school integration, the creation of new community groups and organizations, merchant boycotts, serving as meeting places for civil rights and social reform groups, and involvement with the civil rights projects of the Highlander Folk School and other similar organizations working in the region between 1950 and 1970. In the architecture of rural churches, classical porticoes gain increasing acceptance, replacing the earlier No Style buildings. Rear or side wing additions are also more common. The buildings are increasingly built with brick and have electricity. Art becomes an important area of investigation as well, although most of the documented art to date comes after 1950. Rarely will the art or architectural style of a church building meet an “extraordinary significance” test for Criterion C. Most likely, if the building is eligible, it will have extraordinary significance under Criterion A. A few church buildings may meet “extraordinary significance” under Criterion B, if the minister is the acknowledged leader and instigator of civil rights activism in the local community.

The painting over the baptismal pool in Fredonia Baptist Church recreates the outdoor setting of baptisms in creeks and rivers.
III. 1945-1970: The Modern Era

Endnotes


2. Ibid., 36.


7. Ibid., 141.


18. Ibid., 391.

19. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 254-55.


22. Ibid., 364.


## African-American Church Visual Survey Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>LANDSCAPE</strong></th>
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<td>URBAN</td>
<td>BRICK</td>
<td>DEDICATION STONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTBUILDINGS</td>
<td>L-SHAPE</td>
<td>RURAL</td>
<td>STONE</td>
<td>BELL ON PEDESTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CREEK / SPRING</td>
<td>IRREGULAR</td>
<td>SUBURBAN</td>
<td>RAISED ON PIERS</td>
<td>ENCLOSED VESTIBULE</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>EXTRAS</strong></th>
<th><strong>EXTRAS</strong></th>
<th><strong>EXTRAS</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BELL CUPOLA</td>
<td>BELL CUPOLA ON TOWER (SIDE)</td>
<td>BELL CUPOLA (CENTER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WALLS</td>
<td>FRAMES</td>
<td>CONCRETE BLOCK</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROOF SHAPE</td>
<td>GABLE</td>
<td>HIPPED</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOORS</td>
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<td>SEPARATED</td>
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<tr>
<td>WINDOWS</td>
<td>RECTANGULAR SASH</td>
<td>RECTANGULAR STORM</td>
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<tr>
<td>GLASS</td>
<td>PLAIN OR MULTI-PANE</td>
<td>STAINED GLASS</td>
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<td>PORCH</td>
<td>STOOP</td>
<td>ONE STORY</td>
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<td>TOWERS</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SINGLE SIDE</td>
<td>TWIN</td>
<td>UNMATCHED TWIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLAT</td>
<td>CONICAL</td>
<td>CRENELATED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use blank spaces to sketch additional elements specific to your locale.
African-American Rural Church Survey

Please answer the following as completely as possible.

Name of Church

Address of Church

Directions to the Church if not easily located from address. (For example, 2 miles off Hwy. 50 on Barker’s Branch Road):

Founding date of this congregation

Denomination

Date existing building was constructed

Are there historic photographs that we can copy when we visit the church? No ___ Yes ___

Is there a cemetery adjacent to or very near this church? No ___ Yes ___

If yes, what is the name of the cemetery?

Date cemetery founded? ________________

Is the cemetery still in use? No ___ Yes ___

Was the church ever used as a school? No ___ Yes ___

If yes, please give the name of the school and the date it ceased to be a school.

Is there a school adjacent to or very near this church? No ___ Yes ___

If yes, please give the name of the school.

Was there a school at one time adjacent to or very near this church that no longer exists? No ___ Yes ___

If yes, please give the name of the school and any other information you may have about why it no longer exists.
Are there historic photographs of the school that we can copy when we visit the church?  No ___ Yes ___

If a history of the church has been written, is a copy available and where may it be obtained?
____________________________________________________________________________________________

Are there articles, brochures, or any other information on the church’s history available and where may they be obtained?
____________________________________________________________________________________________

If the existing building was constructed prior to 1950, was the church ever used by another denomination?  
No ___ Yes ___

If yes, please explain giving name of previous church and the date the current congregation took over the building. Also include any major changes or improvements that have been made to the building and the approximate dates of those changes (please use additional space if needed):
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________

Please provide any other information you believe would be useful such as how the land for the church was acquired, a list of pastors, historical events or persons associated with the building, special features of the building such as a bell or original pews and altar furnishings.
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________

Name of Contact Person _______________________________________________________________________
Address of Contact Person ______________________________________________________________________
Telephone # of Contact Person __________________________________________________________________

This form was created by the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation and used successfully in the Tennessee Rural African American Church Project. It may be adapted for similar use in your state.
Select Bibliographical References

African-American Preservation


African-American Religion- General


Winsell, Keith. "Evolution of Religion Among Negroes in Antebellum America."


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Specific Congregational Histories

**AME**


**AME Zion**

Note: Many of the above sources on the AME church also address the history and significance of the AME Zion church.


**CME**


**African Methodism, General**


Bell, W. A. *Missions and Co-operation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South with the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, 1932-1933.* n.p., 1933.


Gaines, Wesley J. *African Methodism in the South or Twenty Five Years of Freedom.* Atlanta: Franklin Publishing House, 1890.


Sweet, William W. *The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War.* Cincinnati: Methodist Book concern, 1912.


Baptist


Daily, John Harvey. History of the Primitive Baptist Church from the Birth of Christ to the Twentieth Century. n.p., 1917.


Back cover photos (clockwise from top left): Clayborn Chapel AME (Maury County); Freedman School, 1864, Currently Blue Iris Inn (Washington County); Hackney Chapel AME Zion (Loudon County); Quinn Chapel AME (Henry County); Dancyville Church of God in Christ (Haywood County); Plaque, Pikeville Chapel AME Zion (Bledsoe County)