

**Preservation Recommendations
for
Palestine Methodist Church and Cemetery
Carroll County, Tennessee**



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Introduction

In January 2020, former State Representative Steve McDaniel contacted Dr. Carroll Van West, state historian and director of the Center for Historic Preservation (CHP), requesting assistance at the rural Palestine Methodist Church building and cemetery in Carroll County, Tennessee. Wesley Collins, a concerned community member, had previously brought to Representative McDaniel's attention vandalism to the historic building and cemetery that occurred in October 2019.

On January 30, 2020, Dr. West, along with research professor and CHP cemetery specialist Dr. Stacey Graham, CHP fieldwork coordinator Savannah Grandey, and graduate research assistant Robert Kurtz traveled to the property to meet with Mr. Collins and Andy Arnold to survey the damage and discuss steps that could be taken to deter future vandalism and ensure appropriate preservation of the site. After this on-site assessment of the church building and cemetery, Dr. West proposed the development of a report that would document the historic resources and address preservation issues.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic limited the scope and depth of this report. The Center for Historic Preservation, in compliance with both Center for Disease Control and Middle Tennessee State University guidelines, limited fieldwork and research trips to local archives in Carroll County and its vicinity to keep its faculty, students, and the communities it serves safe. As a result, much of the information in this report derives from online, or on-hand resources.

Brief History Assessment

Palestine Church is a c.1890 frame church building located off of Dees Road and Palestine Church Loop on State Route 424 in Carroll County, Tennessee. Once an active Methodist church, descendants of the original congregation occasionally use the historic building and grounds for reunions and picnics. A large cemetery accompanies the church building with burials dating back to 1842. New burials continue to take place in the cemetery. Surrounding the church is a rural landscape untouched by development. Taken together, the Palestine Church and Cemetery forms an intact cultural landscape of religious and rural life in Carroll County, Tennessee.

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented archival research at the Browning Museum and Genealogical Library, Tennessee State Library and Archives, and the Tennessee Methodist History Library and Archives in Nashville. However, an analysis of the cemetery list located on Rootsweb reveals much about the people who worshipped at Palestine Church and lived in the surrounding area.¹ A roster of those buried at the cemetery accompanies this report and contains information derived from census, birth, and death records found on Ancestry.com. A study of this information reveals historical trends that defined the lives of those buried in the cemetery.

According to the information available on Rootsweb, the number of burials within the Palestine Cemetery number approximately 158. The earliest burial occurred in 1842, and the cemetery remains active and contains space for several more interments. The most common cause of death was from either old age or heart related sickness. The average age of those buried in the Palestine Cemetery is 59 years old, though there are nineteen infants buried in the cemetery that are not counted towards this average. Finally, with the exception of six people, everyone buried at the Palestine Cemetery was either a farmer, farm laborer, sharecropper, or otherwise involved in general farming, and lived nearby in either Cedar Grove or Yuma. This prevalence of farm-related jobs speaks to the area's deep agricultural roots. Indeed, agriculture dominated the county's economy until manufacturing recently replaced it as the number one economic driver.²

¹ This list can be found at the following website: <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~tncarrol/cemetery/PalestineC.html>.

² Joe David McClure, "Carroll County," *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018), <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/carroll-county/>, accessed 7.17.2020.

The remaining occupations represented in the cemetery include change-room attendant, a custodian for the county schools, highway engineer, night watchman for a local factory, and a file clerk for Sears Roebuck.

The first burial in 1842 shows those who founded the original church and cemetery were among the first to settle Carroll County, which was officially created by the Tennessee General Assembly on November 7th, 1821. Those who settled Carroll County would have found abundant game, fertile land, and large forests.³ According to a survey of extant headstones, Daniel Ross and his family were the earliest marked burials in the cemetery and serve as representative examples of early white settlers in the area. The earliest burial was Daniel Ross in 1842. Ross was born in 1790 in South Carolina. By the time of the 1830 census, Daniel and his wife Elizabeth (also from South Carolina), he lived in Carroll County.⁴ In 1849, Ross acquired 200 acres on Reedy Creek. Daniel, Elizabeth, and their seven children cultivated 40 acres of this land and kept livestock.⁵ There is no evidence of the Ross family enslaving people. Many of Daniel and Elizabeth's children continued in general agriculture after their father's death.⁶ In his will, Daniel Ross left his wife Elizabeth the house, all the land, a mare, two cows and calves, sows, a bed, kitchen furniture, a saddle and bridle, and farming tools. The 1850 agricultural census indicates Elizabeth owned three horses, one mule, one milk cow, two oxen, three sheep, and thirty pigs. She grew corn, oats, and beans. Elizabeth farmed the land until at least 1860, after which she lived with her son Hiram and his family. After she passed, the land was divided between their four sons William, Frederick, Hiram, and Jacob. To the remainder of his children including his daughters Lucinda, Catherine, and Nancy, he left cash (which did not exceed \$12.50), bed furniture, cows and pigs.⁷ Many of the Ross children were also buried in Palestine Cemetery.

Looking collectively at the people buried at Palestine, analysis of information gleaned from available death certificates indicate some of the historic events that affected this community. From 1914 to 1919, there were seventeen burials. Typhoid fever, a disease spread by

³ Joe David McClure, "Carroll County," *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018), <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/carroll-county/>, accessed 7.17.2020.

⁴ 1830 Census, Carroll County, Tennessee, Series M19, Roll 174, Page 159, *Ancestry.com*.

⁵ Carroll County, North Carolina and Tennessee, Early Land Records, 1753-1931, *Ancestry.com*.

⁶ 1840 Census, Carroll County, Tennessee, Roll 521, Page 68, *Ancestry.com*.

⁷ Will Books, 1822-1864, Carroll County, Tennessee, Page 53, *Ancestry.com*.

contaminated food and water, caused five of those seventeen deaths. From 1918 to 1951, there were seven deaths from Tuberculosis, or “consumption.” People were infected with tuberculosis through the inhalation of respiratory droplets exhaled from the mouth or nose. Twenty-seven of the burials in Palestine were children aged ten and under, with twenty of those being either stillborn or infant. Analysis of available death certificates reveals a community that experienced disease and premature death, with the church serving as a focal point for that community.

The Palestine Cemetery also contains many veterans who fought in major wars. Wesley H. Williamson fought in the Civil War on the side of the Confederacy, and served with the 11th Tennessee Cavalry. Jesse M. Tate also fought in the Civil War but on the side of the Union, and served as a corporal in Company I, 7th Regiment in the Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry. Berry D. Wiles, Daniel Boone Collins, and Neil A. Dees all fought in, and survived, World War I. Again, members of the community answered the call during World War II. Brothers Ernest Ray Davis and James C. Davis both served in World War II. Ernest served in the Navy, and his brother James served in the Army. While Ernest survived, his brother James C. Davis was killed in action on June 5th, 1944, one day before D-Day.



Figure 1. Headstone of Civil War veteran Wesley H. Williamson

The examination of each family's genealogy also reveals the extent to which the Palestine Church influenced the community. Many of the families buried in this cemetery had sons and daughters that would go on to marry members of the other church families. In doing so, they strengthened the bonds of community that were necessary for the survival of rural life. Though the Palestine congregation disbanded in 1956 due to low membership, the Collins and Ledsinger families continue to hold family reunions on the grounds. These reunions take place on the Sunday before Labor Day and has taken place there since at least the 1950s. In this way, the Palestine Church and Cemetery continues to unite and serve the community around it.

Preservation Recommendations

Vandalism

The greatest preservation challenge facing the Palestine Church and Cemetery is recurring vandalism. This vandalism is possibly linked to Palestine’s association with dark tourism and the paranormal as well as its relative seclusion. Several websites, including Google Maps, claims that the small church building and cemetery are haunted. Each website provides the physical location of the church and cemetery, and several note that the church building itself is easy to access due to its isolated and “abandoned” nature.

Media sources have reported three vandalism incidents at Palestine in 2013, 2016, and 2019. In September of 2013, *WWBJ7 Eyewitness News* reported that vandals destroyed nearly twenty-four headstones, in addition to leaving satanic drawings and hateful graffiti.⁸ In September of 2016, vandals again targeted the cemetery, smashing and knocking over historic tombstones.⁹ Finally, in October of 2019, vandals busted the storm windows out, flipped the piano on its side, shattered the back door, knocked holes in the floor, shoved four pews through the church windows, and busted out the windows in the front double doors.¹⁰



⁸ Natalie Potts, “Cedar Grove Graveyard and Church Vandalized,” *WBBJ 7 Eyewitness News*, September 23rd, 2013, <https://www.wbbjtv.com/2013/09/23/cedar-grove-graveyard-and-church-vandalized/>, accessed 4.3.2020.

⁹ Eric Perry, “Residents speak out after Cedar Grove cemetery vandalism,” *WBBJ 7 Eyewitness News*, September 19th, 2016, <https://www.wbbjtv.com/2016/09/19/palestine-church-cemetery-cedar-grove-vandalized/>, accessed 4.3.2020.

¹⁰ Ron Park, “Vandals hit Palestine Church again,” *Carroll County News Leader*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.newsleaderonline.com/2019/10/22/vandals-hit-palestine-church-again/>, accessed 4.3.2020.

Figure 2. Results of 2019 vandalism, courtesy of the Carroll County News Leader

This makes identifying and implementing vandalism deterrence strategies a priority. After all, it will do little good to invest in restoring windows and repairing tombstones if they are going to be subject to vandalism in another three years. Preventing vandalism can be a difficult process, complicated by Palestine's rural location, infrequent use, and association with dark tourism and the paranormal. The following recommendations are strategies that take into consideration these factors in addition to limited budgets and reliance on volunteers.

Formation of a Friend's Group and a Patrol Schedule

Consider forming a group that represents the Palestine Church and Cemetery, if one does not already exist. Forming this group can be the first step towards building a network that can provide potential support for helping to monitor the church and cemetery in the future.

The next step is to develop a patrol schedule for the Palestine Church and Cemetery. Providing constant patrol for the property would be cumbersome and altogether unnecessary but we encourage concerned locals to identify particular times of the year when vandalism may be more likely. For example, past incidents of vandalism occurred in the September and October, and due to the property's association with hauntings, more vandalism could occur annually around Halloween/October 31st. Identifying periods of time where potential vandals are most active can guide locals regarding when and how frequently monitoring should occur.

Other factors should be considered regarding community monitoring of the property. A study conducted titled "Reporting on Desecration: Church Vandalism in the News" looks at vandalisms of Tennessee holy places as reported by news outlets from 2000-2020. This study found that the average age of vandals in these cases was sixteen years old, with the oldest vandal identified being twenty years old.¹¹ Equipped with this knowledge, it could be assumed that increased vigilance will be needed during school breaks and on weekends.

Here it is necessary to stress that patrol members **should never directly confront vandals, attempt to stop a vandalism taking place, or use any kind of force to subdue vandals.** As mentioned, most vandals are teenagers, and most vandalisms are opportunity vandalisms. If

¹¹ My paper, pg. 3. This statistic also includes the vandals that took part in the 2019 vandalism of the Palestine Church and Cemetery.

vandalism is witnessed, the patrol member should immediately contact local law enforcement. It may be of benefit to consult your local law enforcement about your patrol group before implementing it. Providing local law enforcement information about your schedule, your purpose, the members of your group, even the vehicles you drive, can lead to better cooperation in the future. Additionally, local law enforcement can better instruct the group on what to do should a patrol member witness a vandalism take place. Again, under no circumstances should patrol members take any actions to stop the vandalism. This is critical to ensuring the safety of both parties.

Installing Locks and Restricting Entrance

An assessment of the entrances and their security should also be completed. Though there is a gate located near the western boundary of the cemetery, consider placing an additional barrier closer to the entrance from State Route 424 (See *Figure 3*). This can be a relatively cheap expense that may help deter vandalism. Potential vandals, deprived of parking nearer the cemetery and church where vegetation obscures visibility from the main road, would be forced to leave their vehicles in plain sight. This may serve as a deterrent and makes it easier for the patrol group to identify any vandals.



Figure 3. Aerial map showing location of extant gate and proposed location of new gate

While determining ways to restrict entrance, it is important to keep in mind those who would visit the Palestine Cemetery in remembrance of their loved ones. Reasonable access to a cemetery is required by law in Tennessee. However, it is not illegal to have a cemetery secured from dark to dark, which could provide a satisfactory solution. Contact information could also be posted so that any visitors could call and request that the bollard and chain be unlocked. Either way, considering how to provide access to those who would use the site as it was intended to be used must be a consideration when regulating access.

Lighting and Trail Cameras

Finally, lighting and trail cameras could be installed on the property to help deter vandalism. A well-lit area is much less likely to be vandalized than an unlit area. When selecting security lighting, it is important to consider access to electricity. Hardware stores such as Lowe's and Home Depot sell battery and solar powered lights that do not require external sources of electricity, though they are not as bright as lights that require an external electrical source. To determine how best to install lighting and acquire electrical power for the building, the friend's group should contact a licensed, insured, and bonded electrical contractor in the area. This contractor will be able to accurately and safely assess your needs in addition to providing quality service in the future.

The friend's group should also think about lighting placement and where a light can do the most good in deterring vandalism. We recommend placing a light next to the church, the cemetery, and possibly the entryway. However, if there are spots or areas that are vandalized more frequently, serve as paths/entrances, or are more secluded, it may be beneficial to put lights there as well. Additionally, it is also important to protect your lighting from vandalism itself. Indeed, vandals frequently target sources of lighting for their vandalism. A publication prepared for the National Park Service titled *Vandalism Control Management for Parks and Recreation Areas* recommend that post luminaries be mounted 30-40 feet high to minimize breakage from thrown rocks or other improvised projectiles.¹² Additionally, the purchase of heavy-duty mesh to surround the light with can also prevent breakage.

¹² Monty L. Christiansen, *Vandalism Control Management for Parks and Recreation Areas* (State College: Venture Publishing, Inc), pg. 82, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Photocopy/94573NCJRS.pdf>.

Trail cameras also provide another level of security and vandalism deterrence. Though traditionally used by hunters for identifying game on their property, trail cameras are also a great low-budget security measure. They have motion sensors, so any trespassers on the property would trip the motion sensor, at which time the trail camera would take a time stamped picture. The owner would then check their trail cameras for any pictures they captured, though some trail cameras can send pictures to a connected cell phone in real time.

When selecting trail cameras, it is important to consider budget and what you want it to do. According to an article titled “Game Cameras for Home Security: A Quick Guide,” potential trail camera users should consider the following options when selecting their product; no glow, HD, motion sensor range, videos, and cellular capability.¹³ No glow simply means that the trail camera uses infrared flash rather than traditional flash to take photos. This can be important. If a vandal or trespasser is alerted to the presence of a trail camera, they can attempt to remove or destroy it, costing the friend’s group money and any pictures or information on the trail camera. HD means high definition, and this guide recommends that the camera you purchase be able to take pictures with at least 720p. This will make the pictures and images much clearer, which can be useful in identifying and prosecuting vandals. The motion sensor range refers to the distance and angle degree at which a trail camera can capture movement. Finally, video and cellular capability refer to the trail camera’s ability to capture video, audio, and then be able to transmit that information in real time to your phone. We recommend one that is no glow with an HD camera.

Much like your lighting, trail cameras should be strategically placed to cover the most area. However, unlike lighting, you should strive to keep your trail cameras hidden. When setting up trail cameras, try to place them in as inconspicuous an area as possible, and high enough that they are still able to capture pictures, but not low enough where they can be accessed without ladders. Outdoorspeople will be able to help with trail camera placement. It should also be noted that if the friend’s group so desires, contacting security system companies can provide a more professional security system to the property, but will incur increased costs.

¹³ “Game Cameras for Home Security: A Quick Guide,” *ProtectAmerica*, 2020, https://www.protectamerica.com/home-security-blog/tech-tips/game-cameras-home-security-quick-guide_23059#:~:text=How%20They%20Work,game%20comes%20to%20the%20area, accessed 7.15.2020.

Preservation of Church Building

When addressing preservation concerns, it is best to begin at the top and move down, though in the case of the Palestine Church building, the stability of the building's movement and foundation should be addressed first. There is a gap between the middle floorboards on the interior that suggest movement of the building, as if the sides are pulling outward. This is further evidenced by the stacked stone piers, some of which are leaning to one side. While building movement is common and does not always require intervention, a professional should inspect this movement and potentially restore stability before other work is done.

At the time of the visit, the roof appeared to need repair to fix leaks in the front and rear of the building. The roof also appears to need a new ridge cap and chimney cap at minimum to prevent rain from falling directly into the building. More extensive repairs may be necessary upon closer inspection by a professional roofer. These more extensive repairs may include splicing or repairing rotted rafters, and/or complete replacement of the roof covering. After the repairs are complete, the roof should be periodically checked to ensure that no sections are missing or that parts of the roof are leaking. This should be done especially after heavy rainfall, storms, and high winds.

The exterior weatherboard walls should be scraped of loose paint and repainted. There are some individual boards that are deteriorated from moisture, and other small pieces that are missing. Those missing and deteriorated boards should be replaced with sound pieces of wood that resemble the thickness and shape of the original weatherboard.



Figure 4. Southwest corner of building showing peeling paint and missing weatherboard

The caretakers of the property did quick work stabilizing the vandalized building as best they could by installing aluminum frames with plastic sheeting to prevent the elements from entering through the broken windows. When repairing the windows, preserve any wooden parts of the existing windows that are in good shape, and replace deteriorated parts, and wholly missing windows (as seen in *Figure 4*), with four-over-four wood frame windows to maintain the historic look of the building. Consider adding a drip cap to the top of each window to prevent water from seeping in.



Figure 5. Broken window covered in temporary plastic

The foundation remains on top of the original stacked stone piers. The caretakers of the property have done a good job of keeping vegetation away from the sides of the building. Filling in between the stone piers or letting vegetation grow up against the building will cause moisture issues, which will accelerate the deterioration of the wooden elements of the building.



Figure 5. Stacked stone piers

Church Building Interior



Figure 6. Interior of building

Work on the interior should not begin until the roof and windows are fixed. On the ceiling, there are areas of peeling paint, deteriorated wood, and missing boards. Missing boards and those with advanced deterioration should be replaced with boards of similar width and painted. The same guidelines apply to the boards that clad the interior walls. Mold, mildew, and peeling paint should be removed, and areas of deterioration addressed before repainting. Missing and deteriorated floor boards can be replaced with poplar or cypress planed to the same thickness as the existing boards.

Items inside the Church

The Palestine Church building is also home to various pieces of material culture, which includes a pulpit, a piano, and pews. Here our greatest preservation concern is again vandalism. The destruction of the floorboards and continued vandalism of the piano have a strong correlation with the paranormal stories online. For example, the paranormal websites report that someone can be seen playing the piano, or that you can hear things under the floorboards. Because many paranormal “investigators” believe that you can provoke entities by damaging objects associated with them, it is not hard to see the relationship between the piano and floorboard damage. This desire to provoke entities might also play into the destruction of the pews.



Figure 1: Vandalized pews

As steps to reduce vandalism are taken, the material culture should be examined for functionality and integrity. Damaged pews should be repaired, if possible with parts from destroyed pews, though new lumber is also acceptable. Reconstruction of destroyed pews should follow the pattern of the remaining pews as best they can. If the piano is salvageable, it may be worth

contacting a professional piano tuner to come out and fix the piano. Otherwise, the friend's group may need to consider if the presence of the non-functioning piano is something they want to keep in the building.

Considering the Future

These preservation concerns and recommendations are intended to provide the community group with immediate, realistic, and effective steps to preserving the Palestine Church building. This section will encourage the friend's group to consider how this building space will work and serve the community in the future. Establishing a vision for the building may also dictate future preservation activities or needs. For example, the church and its ground are currently utilized for family reunions, and the cemetery is still active. It would be easy then to see how the church and grounds could be adapted to serve as a community place for picnics, family reunions, or even host small church services, revivals, or wedding services. Thus, the friend's group may consider adding electricity to the building, which will require someone with experience working with historic buildings to complete. This of course is only an example, and something that should only be undertaken once the immediate needs of vandalism deterrence and building preservation recommendations are met. However, by opening dialogue at an early stage about the direction and vision of the Palestine Church and Cemetery, the friend's group can streamline the entire process.

Cemetery

The Palestine Cemetery is an incredibly important part of Palestine's cultural landscape. Unfortunately, it is also the most at risk. Unlike the church building, the cemetery cannot be locked up in a building to protect from vandalism. Following the recommendations for deterring vandalism is going to be the number one way to address many of the preservation concerns surrounding the Palestine Cemetery.

Immediate Steps

The remaining preservation concerns and recommendations are classified as immediate, maintenance, and future projects. Addressing broken or fallen tombstones are immediate steps. If a tombstone has been broken, place the broken pieces in front of the tombstone with the pieces together and the inscription lying face down. This will help keep the pieces together and also

protect the inscription from further damage or deterioration. If a tombstone has fallen over, leave it where it lies. If it is safe and manageable, place the inscription face down. Sometimes a fallen tombstone can be easy to remount. If it is a slot in base tombstone, simply place slot the tombstone back into the base. Never, under any circumstances, use cement to remount fallen tombstones or to assemble broken pieces. Cement is impossible to remove without damaging tombstones, is frequently harder than the materials around it, which creates a weak point likely to snap or be damaged again, and traps moisture, which can expand and cause further fracturing and breakage of historic tombstones. If the friend's group is interested in having broken tombstones fixed or historic tombstones reset, they should contact professionals experienced in cemetery conservation.

Another immediate step that the friend's group can take is simply to take pictures of and record the information on every tombstone within the cemetery. Though much of this has already been done, particularly on Find-A-Grave.com, having hard copies of this information can ensure that no amount of information is lost to vandalism. Indeed, several tombstones are missing from the Palestine Cemetery. If not for documentation by the community, that information would be lost.



Figure 2: John Ledsinger, a missing tombstone from Palestine Cemetery. Courtesy of M.A. Gray



Figure 3: Dicey C.'s tombstone, another tombstone missing from Palestine. Photo courtesy of M.A. Gray

Maintenance

The first maintenance concern is damage done by mowing and weed eating. Almost every cemetery has tombstones with either mowing or weed eating damage. It is recommended that power equipment be kept away from tombstones, and the remaining grass cut between the graveyard itself and the tombstone with non-powered equipment. This can be a time-consuming task, particularly when the labor for cutting and maintaining the cemetery is frequently volunteered. In the end, communicating with whoever maintains your cemetery about the damage that powered equipment can cause is a good compromise. Another option is to put pea gravel or vinca in around tombstones, thus negating the need for mowing or weed eating around the tombstones.

Future Projects

Lying outside of immediate steps and maintenance is future projects. These projects focus on beautification of the cemetery and repairs that do not need to be addressed immediately. Cleaning tombstones should be your first future project. Tombstone cleaning has immense benefits for the cemetery. By removing vegetation and biological growth, you are protecting the

tombstone against both deterioration, making the information easier to read, and beautifying the cemetery. Consider organizing a cemetery cleaning day in which volunteers come to the cemetery to help clean tombstones. This is a great way to get the community involved, or it can be a great Scouts or high school service hours project. The Center for Historic Preservation hosts these workshops. If you are interested, contact Dr. Stacey Graham (who attended the site visit to Palestine Church and Cemetery) about cemetery cleaning and best practices for scrubbing tombstones. Her contact information is as follows:

Phone: 615-898-2947

Email: stacey.graham@mtsu.edu

Examples of Historic Headstones found at Palestine Cemetery



Figure 10: Jacob Ross Tombstone



Figure 11: Martha J. Ross tombstone



Figure 4: Graves outlined with stones and brick

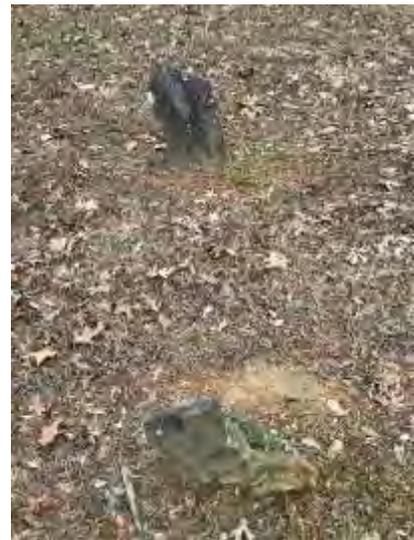


Figure 5: There are also simple fieldstones at Palestine