

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name St. John's Missionary Baptist Church

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 1130 Walt Bellamy Drive N/A not for publication

city or town New Bern N/A vicinity

state North Carolina code NC county Craven code 049 zip code 28560

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Jessie Crow SHPO 4/29/97
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State of Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<input type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> other, (explain:) _____ _____ _____	_____	_____

St. John's Missionary Baptist Church
Name of Property

Craven, N.C.
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

**Number of contributing resources previously listed
in the National Register**

Historic African American Churches in
Craven County, N.C. 1864-1947 -0-

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Religion: religious structure
church-related residence

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Religion: religious structure
church school

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Classical Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick
walls brick
roof metal-tin
other wood

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

St. John's Missionary Baptist Church
Name of Property

Craven N.C.
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

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

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Religion
Ethnic Heritage-Black
Architecture

Period of Significance

1926-1947

Significant Dates

1926

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Mr. Perry, contractor

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

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

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

St. John's Missionary Baptist Church

Craven, N.C.

Name of Property

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than 1 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 18 312850 38863501
Zone Easting Northing

3
Zone Easting Northing
4
Zone Easting Northing

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title M. Ruth Little
organization Longleaf Historic Resources date Jan. 31. 1997
street & number 2709 Bedford Ave. telephone 919-836-8128
city or town Raleigh state N.C. zip code 27607

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name
street & number telephone
city or town state zip code

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, Craven Co., N.C.

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St. John's Missionary Baptist Church

7. Physical Description

Constructed in 1926, St. John's Missionary Baptist Church stands on a prominent corner in the Long Wharf/Lawson Creek neighborhood of New Bern, an African American area along Lawson's Creek west of the town center. The church faces Walt Bellamy Drive (formerly New South Front Street), and Bryan Street borders the church property on the west side. To the rear and sides stand frame houses from the early 1900s, and directly across the street, on the bank of Lawson Creek, is New Bern Towers, a high-rise apartment building built in the 1980s for the elderly.

The large Neoclassical Revival style church consists of a rectangular nave, set on a raised basement, with a three-stage central entrance tower. The red brick walls are laid in one-to-five common bond, with corner quoins of yellow brick producing a polychrome effect. The lower two stages of the tower are of brick, surmounted by a stepped wooden steeple covered with clapboard siding (presently obscured by asphalt brick). The steeple has corner Doric pilasters, a round-headed louver in each face, a tall cornice and hipped roof cap with a metal dome. A hipped roof of standing seam metal covers the building. The round arches of the sanctuary windows have single brick rowlocks with concrete keystones. The tall wooden sash window frames, composed of square pane colored glass, are replacements of the original, similar sash windows. Rectangular 6/6 and 8/8 wooden sash windows illuminate the raised basement. The main entrance is a double replacement front door set within a classical surround of Doric pilasters and a flat-paneled blind

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St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, Craven Co., N.C.

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transom. An arched wooden entrance porch, with slender Doric posts, was added in the 1950s. Brick steps with an iron railing lead up to the entrance. On the rear elevation, the roof terminates in a low pedimented gable end, sheathed with vinyl siding. Two ground-level doors and rectangular 9/9 sash windows pierce this elevation. At the east corner of the main facade is a marble cornerstone inscribed:

1865

ST. JOHN M. B. CHURCH

JUNE 1, 1926

Rev. W.H.A. Stallings, D.D. Pastor

Inside the vestibule are three staircases: the central one leading up to the sanctuary, flanking ones down to the basement. A beadboard wainscot encircles the vestibule and staircases. Lists of names of pastors, deacons, deaconesses, and trustees adorn the walls above and beside the sanctuary doors. These were painted by S. H. Shields in 1964, perhaps a repainting of an earlier mural. The signature feature of the large sanctuary is the vaulted roof covered with varnished beadboard, with exposed wooden trusses. Plastered walls with beadboard wainscot and wooden floors complete the interior finish. The pine pews arranged in an auditorium style are original.

In the center of the front wall is a shallow segmental-arched alcove containing a double door and flanking single doors opening to the baptismal pool. The soffit of the alcove is lined with electric light bulbs. A chancel platform for the clergy and choir extends across the front wall in front of the alcove. The oldest chancel furniture appears to be the early twentieth century oak pulpit,

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St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, Craven Co., N.C.

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which is paneled and has free-standing turned corner colonettes. The choir spaces on each side have short railings with wide square balusters. Additional single doors lead out of the sanctuary from the corners of the front wall. All interior doors are original stained doors with five horizontal panels. The small room on the west side of the alcove is now a multi-purpose room. The east side room contains a staircase leading to the basement.

The basement, containing a large fellowship hall, is finished with a concrete floor, beadboard wainscot, plaster walls and beadboard ceiling. Two original offices and two bathrooms are located in the front section; additional offices and a kitchen located in the rear section are the result of a later renovation.

Behind the sanctuary stands a one-story brick parsonage, of Ranch house design, constructed about 1963. This noncontributing building is now the St. John M.B. Church Day Care.

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St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, Craven Co., N.C.

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8. Statement of Significance

St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, established according to congregational tradition in 1865, is believed to be the oldest black Baptist congregation in New Bern. St. John's Church purchased their property in the Long Wharf neighborhood of New Bern in 1869, and built the large brick Neoclassical Revival style sanctuary in 1926. The well-preserved church, with its tall bell tower, has been the architectural and community focus of this historic African American neighborhood throughout the twentieth century. As the architecturally significant sanctuary of a historic black congregation, St. John's Missionary Baptist Church building is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C (architecture) and A (religion and ethnic heritage-black), as discussed in the Multiple Property Documentation Form, "Historic African American Churches in Craven County: 1864-1947."

Historical Background

St. John's Church record books dating from the 1880s to the present provide more or less continuous documentation of St. John's Missionary Baptist Church's history, but its establishment during the immediate post-Civil War period remains undocumented. In the 1920s, members considered the founding date as 1865, as evidenced by the cornerstone of the 1926 building. St. John's oral tradition traces the church to a group of African Americans from James City travelling in 1865 to New Bern to worship at the First Missionary Baptist Church. As the story goes, they started a church on New South Front Street, building a house of worship out of slabs of wood brought from the lumber mills in James City. The church became known as "Slab Chapel." ¹

¹ Dorothea White, "History of St. John Missionary Baptist Church," 1995.

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Several discrepancies cast doubt on some elements of this tradition. The First Missionary Baptist Church was not founded until 1869. In the earliest definitive history of Negro Baptists, published in 1908, J. A. Whitted noted that a church known as "Slab Chapel" existed in 1865 in James City, thus residents of that community did not need to travel across the river to New Bern to worship. In James City, in the fall of 1865, the Old Eastern Missionary Baptist Association was organized by Rev. Samuel Peterson, who was the first Moderator, Fred Long, who was the first secretary, and Hull Grimes, Nathaniel Benton, Elias Brown, Henry Simmons, Emanuel Reynolds, Thad Wilson, Thomas Erkett and John Washington. Whitted states that the name of the church was later changed to Pilgrim Chapel Missionary Baptist Church.² This church is still active in James City. A description of James City by a white newspaper reporter in 1865 referred to the settlement as "slabtown," thus these two nicknames based on pieces of wood were apparently in general use for James City.³ Rev. Thadeous Wilson was an early pastor of St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, thus it is possible that St. John's congregation was already in existence at this time.⁴ The oral tradition may well be true, although it was likely New Bern blacks, rather than James City blacks, who founded St. John's.

² J. A. Whitted, *A History of the Negro Baptists of North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Co., 1908), p. 81.

³ Joe A. Mobley, *James City: A Black Community in North Carolina 1863-1900* (Raleigh: N.C. Department of Cultural Resources, 1981), 52.

⁴ White, "History of St. John Missionary Baptist Church."

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In the next major history of African American Baptists in the state, published in 1940, the tradition of Slab Chapel's existence in James City is repeated. In addition, the history states that the Old Eastern Association was the first Missionary Baptist Association in North Carolina, and that the association meeting for the next year, 1866, was held at Shiloh Baptist Church in New Bern.⁵ Perhaps St. John's was known as Shiloh Baptist Church when first established, although church members believe that this was a different church.

The first documentation of St. John's existence is the deed of 1869 in which a husband and wife from Mobile, Alabama sell on June 29, 1869 to a group of men: Reuben Waters, James Lucas, John Peyton, Aaron Spruill, George A. West and Chester Armyly for \$40 a portion of lots number 409 and 411 in New Bern, described as 80 feet by 214 feet lying at the corner of New Front Street and Bryan Street.⁶ The earliest New Bern directory, for 1880-1881, listed three of these trustees: James Lucas, who lived near the corner of Elm and Ash streets; Aaron Spruill, who lived at the west end of New South Front Street; and George A. West, who was a butcher in the New Market and lived on Broad Street west of Queen Street.⁷ According to tradition the first church building was a hut with dirt floors, no windows, and bench seating with no backs.

In order to clarify that the ownership of the property was held by the church and not by these individuals, the trustees executed a second deed for the same property in 1884. The four surviving trustees sold the lot for one dollar to themselves and to three additional men, Austin

⁵ M. W. Williams and George W. Watkins, *Who's Who Among North Carolina Negro Baptists* (1940), 107.

⁶ Craven County Deed Book 69, 367-368.

⁷ 1880-81 *Emerson & Co.'s Newbern, N.C. City Directory*.

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Brown, Moses Becton and S. A. Edwards, identified as the Trustees of St. John's Baptist Church. This deed states that the land was bought in 1869 and "conveyed to said parties of the first part and John Peyton and Chester Armly (both of whom are now dead) in trust for said St. John's Church, though not so stated in the instrument...."⁸ The impetus for registering the church property in the ownership of the church rather than under the ownership of the individual trustees may have been the construction of a new and more permanent church sanctuary, which occurred sometime during the late nineteenth century. The second building is said to have been a proper church, of frame construction with wooden floors, a balcony, pews, oil lamps, and a wood stove heater. Lifelong member Luke P. Martin recalls this building as "a nice church." The earliest surviving church record is a ledger which records the purchase of building materials, primarily from 1881, but continuing to 1887. Most of the payments are for lumber, indicating that the second church was under construction during this period.

At the turn of the century, the Rev. Luke P. Martin Sr. (c. 1839-1919) served as minister. Martin, born in Plymouth, N.C., became a prominent pastor and first moderator of the New Bern Eastern Missionary Baptist Association. While pastor at St. John's, Martin rented a house a few blocks from the church, and later purchased a small farm on Pembroke Road across Lawson's Creek on the edge of town.⁹

⁸ Craven County Deed Book 90, 170-171.

⁹ Interview with Luke P. Martin, Jr., New Bern, November 26, 1996.

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The Rev. William H. A. Stallings, the best-known and longest-serving pastor of St. John's, served the church from 1919 to 1951. Born in Edenton, N.C., he earned a Doctorate of Divinity from Guadalupe College, Texas and was ordained to the ministry in 1901. Stallings was an itinerant circuit preacher and teacher; during the time he was pastor of St. John's he was also pastor at churches in Columbia, in Tyrrell County, and Belhaven, in Beaufort County. Under Stallings's leadership, St. Luke Baptist Church and St. Paul Baptist Church in Bertie County, Melton Grove Baptist Church in Perquimans County, and Salem Baptist Church in Tyrrell County built new sanctuaries.¹⁰ Stallings must have inspired the St. John's congregation to rebuild as well, as planning for a new sanctuary began soon after he came to the church in 1919.

No doubt through Stallings's connections, the congregation selected a contractor named Mr. Perry from Edenton to construct their new building. The cornerstone was laid in 1926, and construction took from three to five years. When the grand new Classical Revival edifice was completed, it was the most luxurious Baptist church in the area. The baptismal pool was made available and used on a regular basis by other Baptist congregations. A notable feature was the bell tower, since St. John's was the only church in the Long Wharf/Lawson Creek neighborhood with a bell. Drawn by the tolling of the bell, its members walked from all over the neighborhood to church services.

By the time construction was complete, the Depression had arrived. The congregation paid monthly on their mortgage, but fell behind in their payments. The contractor intended to foreclose

¹⁰ Williams and Watkins, *Who's Who Among North Carolina Negro Baptists*, 370.

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on the church's mortgage, but some of the members met with him and he finally made a deal. "If you bring me one dollar I'll give you one dollar." In this manner the loan was eventually paid off.¹¹

On April 6, 1944 St. John's established the first black-operated Credit Union in New Bern. George Woods, a former church trustee, operated the institution, which ran for a number of years, helping African Americans become owners of their homes.¹² St. John's also supported the W. L. Douglas School run by Mrs. Penn in her home on Lawson's Creek during the Depression.

In the recent past, the church has continued to be actively involved in ministry to the community. About 1963 the congregation built a small brick parsonage to the rear of the sanctuary. This presently houses the St. John M.B. Church Day Care. During the late 1970s and 1980s the church was refurbished, including the installation of a new heating and cooling system and a new organ and piano. St. John's Church, under its new slogan, "Equipping the Saints for the Work of the Ministry," has set major goals for the future. One of these goals is structural repairs to the bell tower; perhaps one day the bell will ring out over the Long Wharf/Lawson Creek neighborhood again.¹³

¹¹ Interview with Luke P. Martin Jr.

¹² Interview with Dorothea White. New Bern, November 8, 1996.

¹³ White, "History of St. John Missionary Baptist Church."

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

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St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, Craven Co., N.C.

Major Bibliographical References

Craven County Deeds.

Emerson & Co.'s 1880-81 New Bern, N.C. City Directory.

Interview with Luke P. Martin, Jr., New Bern, November 26, 1996.

Interview with Dorthea White, New Bern, November 8, 1996.

Mobley, Joe A. *James City: A Black Community in North Carolina 1863-1900*. Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1981.

Williams, Moses W. and Watkins, George W. *Who's Who Among N. C. Negro Baptists*. n.p., 1940.

Whitted, J.A. *A History of the Negro Baptists of North Carolina*. Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Co., 1908.

White, Dorothea, "History of St. John's Missionary Baptist Church", 1995. Copy in file at N.C. State Historic Preservation Office.

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10. Verbal Boundary Description

The parcel, a rectangle 95 feet by 220 feet, is shown in the accompanying Craven County tax map: Parcel 8-11-291.

Boundary Justification

This parcel constitutes the entire property historically associated with St. John's Missionary Baptist Church sanctuary.

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Photographs:

The following information pertains to all photographs:

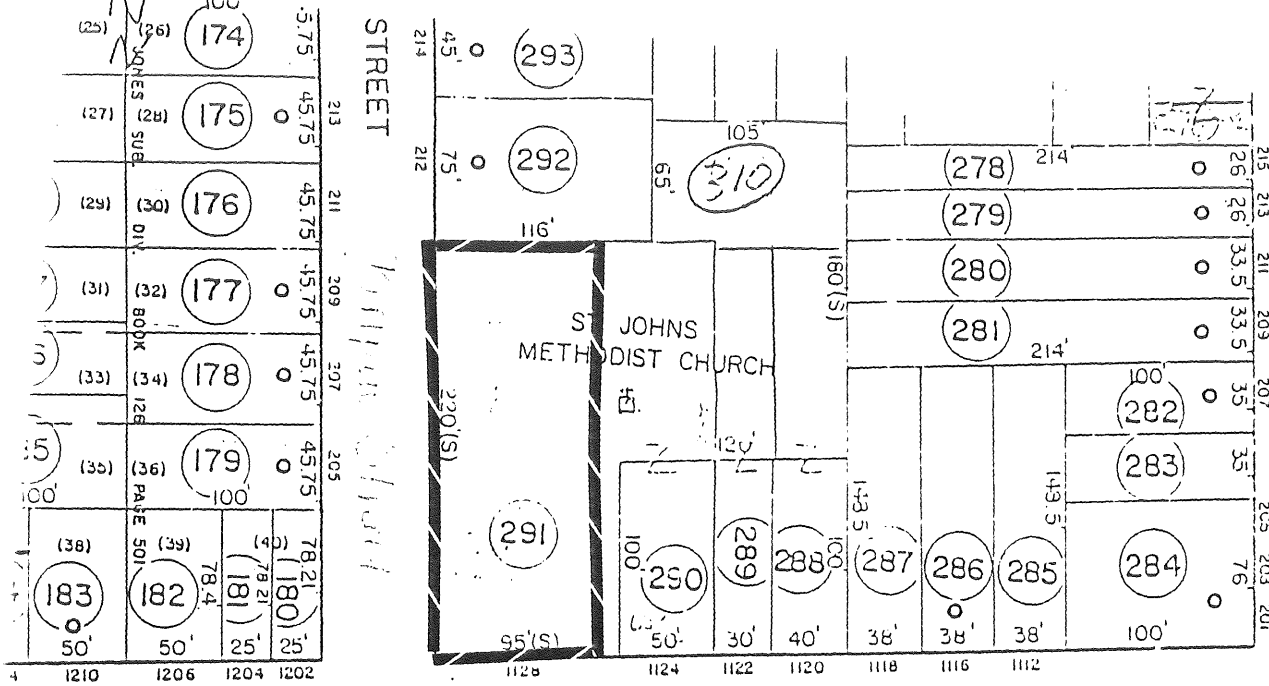
Photographer: M. Ruth Little

Date: November 1996

Location of negatives: North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, Raleigh

- A. Overall view from south
- B. Entrance view from southeast
- C. Rear view from northeast
- D. View of chancel and baptistry from south
- E. View of sanctuary from north
- F. Commemorative plaques at entrance to sanctuary

SEE MAP 8-0



SOUTH WALT BELLAMY FRONT STREET DRIVE

60'

60'



St. John's Missionary Baptist Church
 Craven County Tax Map:
 Parcel 8-11-291
 Scale: 1 inch = 100 feet

NC
CAROLINA

8-11-291

Photo No: JFI-428, JF3-150

