

United States Department of the Interior  
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**National Register of Historic Places  
Multiple Property Documentation Form**

This form is used for documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form (National Register Bulletin 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information. For additional space, use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

New Submission  Amended Submission

**A. Name of Multiple Property Listing**

Historic African American Churches in Craven County, North Carolina: 1864-1947

**B. Associated Historic Contexts**

(Name each associated historic context, identifying theme, geographical area, and chronological period for each.)

1. The Formative Years of Freedmen's Churches in North Carolina: 1863-1866
2. Expansion of the African American Church Network in North Carolina: 1866-1900
3. Consolidation of the African American Church Network in Craven County, North Carolina: 1900-1947

**C. Form Prepared by**

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city or town Raleigh state North Carolina zip code 27607

**D. Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*William A. Brown SHPD* 4/29/97  
Signature and title of certifying official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper Date

**Table of Contents for Written Narrative**

Provide the following information on continuation sheets. Cite the letter and the title before each section of the narrative. Assign page numbers according to the instructions for continuation sheets in How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form (National Register Bulletin 16B). Fill in page numbers for each section in the space below.

	<b>Page Numbers</b>
<b>E. Statement of Historic Contexts</b> (If more than one historic context is documented, present them in sequential order.)	1-14
<b>F. Associated Property Types</b> (Provide description, significance, and registration requirements.)	15-18
<b>G. Geographical Data</b>	18
<b>H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods</b> (Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.)	18-20
<b>I. Major Bibliographical References</b> (List major written works and primary location of additional documentation: State Historic Preservation Office, other State agency, Federal agency, local government, university, or other, specifying repository.)	20-23

**Primary Location of Additional Data**

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

Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**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 120 hours per response including the 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 Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   E   Page 2

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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John Cook and Elisha Brinson. Cook died in 1856, and the inscription on his gravestone in New Bern's black cemetery, Greenwood Cemetery, states that "He was converted and joined the Methodist E. Church at this place in 1818 and soon after became a Preacher in the Gospel." His monument was erected by "his brethren and friends both white and colored...." Brinson died in 1858, and his epitaph notes that he was "a leader and a faithful servant of the M.E. Ch."<sup>4</sup> By 1864 the black Methodists numbered about four hundred.<sup>5</sup> In Beaufort, black Methodists worshipped in an 1820s frame church given to them by the white Methodist congregation in 1854 when the whites built a new church. This congregation is now known as Purvis Chapel.<sup>6</sup>

Blacks who belonged to the Moravian Church in Salem, North Carolina had their own congregation, known as the Colored Moravian Church (later named St. Phillip's Moravian Church), which met in its own building, originally a log church built in 1823, later a brick church built in 1861.<sup>7</sup>

In some antebellum churches in North Carolina, black members outnumbered white members. St. Stephen A.M.E. Church was established in Wilmington in 1865, but was actually a continuation of a large African American Methodist church, known as "The African Church," established by Rev. William Meredith in the late eighteenth century. Initially, the church attracted primarily slaves, but became fashionable with whites in antebellum years.<sup>8</sup> In 1865 the

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<sup>4</sup>These gravestones stand with a group of antebellum monuments believed to have been moved from Cedar Grove Cemetery to Greenwood Cemetery in New Bern after 1865.

<sup>5</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 85-87.

<sup>6</sup>Catherine W. Bishir and Michael T. Southern, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Eastern North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 219.

<sup>7</sup>Langdon E. Oppermann, *Winston-Salem's African-American Neighborhoods: 1870-1950* (Forsyth County Joint Historic Properties Commission and the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1993), 52.

<sup>8</sup>Letter from Wilmington from the Jonathan C. Gibbs, A.M.C. missionary, *The Christian Recorder*, May 6, 1865; author's conversation with Catherine W. Bishir, November 1996.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 3

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

---

black members sought to affiliate with the national A.M.E. denomination, but this effort was unsuccessful. They then withdrew and established the present-day St. Stephen A.M.E. Church.<sup>9</sup>

In September 1862 President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation: effective January 1, 1863 all slaves were freed. This action ushered in the formative period for independent black churches in the South. Lasting through the remainder of the Civil War to 1866, these three years saw Northern missionaries, both white and black, pour into the South to bring religion to the freedmen. Beginning in 1862 as Union armies occupied coastal areas in the Chesapeake and Potomac areas of Virginia; in New Bern, Wilmington, and the Outer Banks of North Carolina; in Charleston, South Carolina; and in the Sea Islands of Georgia, missionary activity occurred behind the Federal lines, with intense competition among the missionaries to be the first to claim a black congregation for one's own denomination. Federal military authorities granted passes to missionaries who wished to travel into occupied territory; ministers were also appointed as chaplains to white and black Union troops in these territories. Not until the end of the war in 1865 did missionaries penetrate into the Southern interior.<sup>10</sup> By the end of 1866 the formative period was over; the independent black church had gained a firm foothold in the South.<sup>11</sup>

Freedmen's congregations sprang up through the work of Army chaplains, Northern white missionaries, and Northern black missionaries. A.M.E. minister Henry M. Turner, the first black appointed to be a chaplain to a regiment of black Union troops in North Carolina, served at Roanoke Island in 1863. Apparently finding an existing black Baptist congregation on the island, he commented on its lack of connection to other congregations: "Baptists are not disposed to claim relations to an organized body whatever, but are simply Baptists."<sup>12</sup> The Rev. Horace James, a white Federal Chaplain, came to New Bern in 1862. In 1863 he was appointed Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina. Remaining in New Bern, he established a

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<sup>9</sup>Bishir and Southern, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Eastern North Carolina*, 252-53.

<sup>10</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 57.

<sup>11</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 96.

<sup>12</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 57, 86.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   E   Page 4

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

---

freedmen's settlement, James City (across the Trent River from New Bern), where several churches, including one A.M.E. Zion and one Baptist, were established by 1864.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning in 1862, Northern white churches sent Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Catholic, and Congregationalist missionaries to the slaves. Some of these efforts occurred even before the Emancipation Proclamation in September of this year; apparently sufficient numbers of slaves had "freed themselves" that religious groups saw need for missionary efforts. Baptists were the largest black denomination, and Methodists the second largest, with primary strength in urban areas. There were three branches of Methodism: the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E. Zion) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, and the Colored Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church. The A.M.E. Church had its origins in 1787 in Philadelphia, when a group of free blacks, led by Richard Allen, withdrew from the white Methodist Episcopal Church because of racist treatment and formed their own congregation. The church was formally organized as the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1816. By 1860 there were many A.M.E. churches in northern states and a few churches had been organized in the South, some of which had been dissolved because of whites' suspicions of slave assemblies.<sup>14</sup> A.M.E. Zion Church was established in 1796 in New York City.<sup>15</sup> The C.M.E. Church was created for blacks by the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South after the Civil War.<sup>16</sup> The saga of each denomination's quest to establish freedmen's congregations in the South follows.

### The Black Baptist Church

The American Baptist Home Mission Society sent missionaries to Beaufort, South Carolina in spring 1862, and within three years had sixty-eight missionaries in the Southern field.<sup>17</sup> Black

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<sup>13</sup>Thomas J. Farnham and Francis P. King, "The March of the Destroyer": The New Bern Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1864," *North Carolina Historical Review* (LXXIII, No. 4, October 1996), 467.

<sup>14</sup>Montgomery, 7-9; 29.

<sup>15</sup>Larry G. Murphy, J. Gordon Melton, Gary L. Ward. *Encyclopedia of African American Religions* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., Inc., 1993), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Encyclopedia of African American Religions*, lxvi..

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 5      Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

---

Baptists formed associations in North Carolina within a few years: Gray's Association in Bladen County and the old Eastern Missionary Baptist Association in James City were two of the earliest, both formed in 1865. Soon after, William H. Banks and William Greene organized Ebenezer Baptist Church in Wilmington and others in the lower Cape Fear area and created the Middle District Association in 1872. North Carolina black Baptists formed a Baptist state convention in 1867.<sup>18</sup> Black Baptist activity in North Carolina was paralleled in several other Southern states.

**The A.M.E. Zion Church**

Andrew Cartright, an escaped slave who fled to the North, then returned to the South as an A.M.E. Zion missionary, started an A.M.E. Zion congregation in Virginia in 1863, believed to have been near Fortress Monroe in the Norfolk vicinity. No further information is known about this congregation, and it probably disbanded at the end of the war.<sup>19</sup> In the next decade Cartright founded A.M.E. Zion churches in the Albemarle area of North Carolina. His first church was near Manteo in 1865; other churches were at Plymouth, Jamesville, Bethel, and Macedonia in the later 1860s and early 1870s.<sup>20</sup> Locust Grove A.M.E. Zion Church in Chowan County is said to have been established in 1865, perhaps by Cartright. In 1866 Kadesh A.M.E. Zion Church was established in Edenton as an offshoot of the Edenton (white) Methodist Church.<sup>21</sup> Cartright's most important legacy was his missionary work in Africa. He left Plymouth, N.C. in 1876 and

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<sup>17</sup>Montgomery *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 58.

<sup>18</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 112-113.

<sup>19</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 64; telephone interview with author William Montgomery, December 11, 1996.

<sup>20</sup>North Carolina Historic Highway Marker, Dare County, B 44; William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, N.C.: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, 1974), chapter 25. The Manteo congregation built a church in Manteo about 1900 at the corner of Sir Walter Raleigh and Bideford streets. This was known as Cartright Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church. The building was destroyed in the 1940s and is now a ruin. See "Manteo Historic Architectural Survey Report," J. Daniel Pezzoni, 1995. Copy at the State Historic Preservation Office.

<sup>21</sup>Bishir and Southern, *Guide*, 141.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 6      Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

---

sailed to Liberia, where he organized the first A.M.E. Zion Church on the continent in 1878 and did mission work there until his death in 1903.<sup>22</sup>

A.M.E. Zion missionary James Walker Hood left Massachusetts for North Carolina in December 1863, arriving in January 1864 at New Bern. There he struggled against a white Methodist Episcopal missionary and two rival A.M.E. missionaries for the hearts of a large congregation of black Methodists, known as Andrew Chapel, established out of the white Methodist congregation in 1844. During this year, Hood enrolled the church in the A.M.E. Zion "connection," as he termed the denominational affiliation. Later named St. Peter's, this is the first permanent A.M.E. Zion congregation in the South and is known as the "Mother Church of Zion Methodism in the South." Several weeks later he enrolled another established black congregation, Purvis Chapel, in Beaufort, North Carolina. A.M.E. Zion missionary John Williams established congregations at Roanoke Island and James City, North Carolina later in 1864.<sup>23</sup> Hood later established Evans Chapel congregation in Fayetteville and Clinton Chapel in Charlotte. He was one of the founders of Livingstone College in Salisbury, the A.M.E. Zion college in North Carolina. In Wilmington, the two largest black congregations --St. Luke's and St. Stephen's--had both affiliated with the A.M.E. Church. Hood is said to have influenced the situation so that St. Luke's Church affiliated with the A.M.E. Zion Church, although it later reverted back to A.M.E. affiliation.<sup>24</sup> As with most of the black missionaries, Hood's activities had a political dimension. He was a delegate to the convention of blacks who assembled in Raleigh in 1865 to attempt to influence the Reconstruction convention of whites meeting there at the same time, and was elected president. In 1868 he was a delegate to the constitutional convention of North Carolina. In 1868 he became Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction in North Carolina.<sup>25</sup>

#### The A.M.E. Church

A.M.E. missionary Benjamin Tucker Tanner organized St. John's Chapel in Alexandria,

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<sup>22</sup>Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*.

<sup>23</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 64-65.

<sup>24</sup>Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*.

<sup>25</sup>Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1992 reprint of 1921 original edition), 214.



**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Section E Page 7**      Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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Virginia in June 1862. When Union forces occupied areas of coastal South Carolina in 1863, A.M.E. 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 A.M.E. missions in the South. Later a number of missionaries, including George A. Rue of New England, were sent into other Southern states.<sup>26</sup> Rue, said to have been a native New Bernian, came to New Bern in the summer of 1865 and established an A.M.E. congregation which later became known as Rue Chapel, one of the earliest A.M.E. congregations in North Carolina.

By 1866, three years after the A.M.E. church entered the South, churches had been established in Norfolk, Portsmouth and Richmond, Virginia; Wilmington, Raleigh, and New Bern, North Carolina; and Charleston, Hilton Head and Beaufort City, South Carolina. In other parts of the South, A.M.E. emissaries established four churches in Georgia; one church in Alabama; two churches in Mississippi and two churches in Tennessee.<sup>27</sup>

**The Black Presbyterian Church**

White Presbyterian congregations in the South had African American members for much of the antebellum period. Presbyterian doctrine emphasized an educated ministry and discouraged dramatic demonstrations of God's presence. Free blacks tended to be more attracted to the denomination than the freedmen. At the end of the War, blacks were segregated by congregation, but these remained under white supervision because the Presbyterian church leadership made no provision for educating black ministers until 1876. Consequently, black Presbyterians left the denomination in large numbers after the war, some for the new black Baptist and Methodist churches, others to the northern Presbyterian church. The northern Presbyterian church had made mission efforts in the South during the war, but by 1870 had achieved only small success.<sup>28</sup> Ebenezer Presbyterian Church, the black Presbyterian church in

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<sup>26</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 59, 63; L. L. Berry, *A Century of Missions of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: 1840-1940*, 65.

<sup>27</sup>Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 74. It is not known if Beaufort City is the same town as present day Beaufort.

<sup>28</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 74-77.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   E   Page 8

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

---

New Bern, did not separate from the white Presbyterian church until 1878, about two years after black ministers began to be trained.<sup>29</sup>

**The Black Episcopal Church**

Like the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Church appealed more to free blacks than to slaves. White Episcopal congregations had small numbers of black members, generally educated and affluent free blacks. In New Bern's white Episcopal congregation, Christ Church, there were services for blacks as early as 1826. By 1866 there were sixty white and fifteen black members in Christ Church. By 1867 the blacks had formed their own congregation, St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church. This church had white priests until 1880 and has generally had black priests since that time.<sup>30</sup>

**The Black Catholic Church**

The Catholic Church has historically not been well-represented in North Carolina; at the close of the antebellum period the state had nine Catholic churches, including those at New Bern, Edenton, Washington, Wilmington, Fayetteville, Raleigh, and Charlotte. New Bern had the oldest and one of the largest Catholic congregations in the state during this period, due largely to the influence of New Bern native and prominent Catholic William Gaston. Before emancipation, blacks who were baptized as Catholics were almost invariably the slaves of white Catholics. Gaston brought priests to his plantation near New Bern to baptize twelve of his slaves in 1833, and eleven in 1842. The New Bern Catholic congregation, known as St. Paul Catholic Church, built a sanctuary in the early 1840s.<sup>31</sup>

Following emancipation, the Catholic Church had little interest in mission work among the freedmen. The growth of black Catholicism was also hampered during the rest of the nineteenth

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<sup>29</sup>Rev. L. C. Vass, *History of the Presbyterian Church of New Bern, N.C.* (Richmond, Va.: Whittet & Shepperson, Printers, 1886), 183-84.

<sup>30</sup>"A Brief History of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church," copy in file. The church had a white priest within the past thirty years; currently it has a white priest.

<sup>31</sup>Stephen C. Worsley, "Catholicism in Antebellum North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* (LX, No. 4: October 1983), 406-409.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   E   Page 9

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

---

century because the church was strongly opposed to admitting blacks to the clergy. A few black Catholic congregations were established out of white Catholic churches in North Carolina, including St. Joseph Catholic Church, founded in 1887 in New Bern.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, during the formative years of freedmen's churches in North Carolina, from 1863 to 1866, missionaries, primarily representing the Baptist and Methodist denominations, endured dangerous wartime conditions and the immediate postwar disarray in coastal North Carolina to bring religious autonomy to blacks, most newly freed and searching for institutions tailored to their own race. Throughout the coastal regions occupied by Federal troops in 1862--New Bern, Wilmington, and the Outer Banks--fledgling black congregations were established. Although most of these probably did not survive the Reconstruction Period, some of them are still in existence and have statewide significance as formative period black congregations. These include St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church in New Bern, the oldest surviving Zion congregation in the South, and Rue Chapel A.M.E. Church in New Bern, one of the first A.M.E. churches in North Carolina.

**2. Expansion of the African American Church Network in North Carolina: 1866-1900**

Northern white and black missionary activity intensified after the war. By the 1880s and 1890s African Americans had left the white churches to which they belonged during slavery and joined churches under separate black organizations, with ministers and other officials of their own race and choosing. In the South as a whole, the majority of African American church members belonged to the Baptist denomination.<sup>33</sup>

In North Carolina, by the last quarter of the century, between one-third and one-half of all black North Carolinians belonged to churches. Over three-fourths of these belonged to the Baptist or African Methodist Episcopal Zion congregations.<sup>34</sup> Black North Carolina Baptists increased their ranks dramatically in the 1880s, from about 91,000 in 1882 to 123,000 by 1888. Black Baptists

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<sup>32</sup>Montgomery, 82-83: brochure on St. Paul's Catholic Church, New Bern, copy in file.

<sup>33</sup>Frenise A. Logan. *The Negro in North Carolina 1876-1894* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1964), 164.

<sup>34</sup>Jeffrey Crow, Paul D. Escott, Flora J. Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, 1992), 98.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   E   Page 11      Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

---

New Bern and Wilmington were the two leading centers of black church activity in North Carolina during the second half of the nineteenth century. New Bern, with its distinguished antebellum history as the site of the largest population of free blacks in the state, and its later nineteenth century status as a mecca for black education, religion, business and culture, may have produced the largest number of church leaders. Such nationally-acclaimed leaders as Joseph Green, James Walker Hood, George Rue, Joseph Charles Price, George H. White, Israel B. Abbott, Sarah Dudley Petty, and A.L.E. Weeks found fame in or emerged from New Bern between 1865 and the early 1900s. The A.M.E. Zion church came to "achieve a concentration of strength in North Carolina," and many of its leaders were raised in New Bern.<sup>40</sup> A.M.E. Zion minister Joseph Green and his wife Gracie Green were educators who operated an important school during Reconstruction.<sup>41</sup> Hood founded St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church and went on to make North Carolina the stronghold of this denomination in the South. George Rue established Rue Chapel A.M. E. Church in New Bern and played a statewide role in freedmen's politics.

After the Reconstruction period ended, black New Bernians continued to distinguish themselves in the statewide arena. Joseph Charles Price (1843-1893) moved to New Bern as a child and was discovered by Rev. Hood in a class at St. Peter's Church in 1866. Price evolved into the most eloquent spokesman for black education in the country. He became the first president of Livingstone College in Salisbury, N.C. in 1882 and built it up as one of the most significant black colleges in the country before his untimely death from kidney disease in 1893.<sup>42</sup> Lawyer George H. White and minister Israel B. Abbott founded *The Good Samaritan* newspaper in New

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<sup>39</sup>"Kittrell College Campus Plan," Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle & Wolff Architects, Raleigh, N.C., 1989. Report in Kittrell College Survey File, State Historic Preservation Office.

<sup>40</sup>Larry G. Murphy, J. Gordon Melton, Gary L. Ward, eds. *Encyclopedia of African American Religions* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., Inc., 1993), 9.

<sup>41</sup>Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 292; Mobley, *James City: A Black Community in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1981), 52.

<sup>42</sup>Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   E   Page 13

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

---

of spiritual nurture during these troubled times. In New Bern African Americans endured the destruction of some forty blocks of the predominantly black residential areas by the Great Fire of 1922. A number of churches, including three beautiful sanctuaries of the five oldest black churches, were destroyed by the fire. At the same time that they were rebuilding their own homes and businesses, New Bern's African Americans managed to reconstruct new sanctuaries. Ebenezer Presbyterian Church's congregation and Rue Chapel A.M.E. Church's congregation purchased lots at new locations and rebuilt. St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church rebuilt on the same lot, although it took nineteen years to complete their new sanctuary. Using the abundant construction trades skill of their own congregations, the churches raised new sanctuaries in the "establishment" Gothic Revival style.

The Great Depression of the 1930s hit New Bern's black community particularly hard, coming on the heels of the Great Fire. St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church was still rebuilding its sanctuary and, slowed by the Depression, would not finish the new building until 1942. St. John's Missionary Baptist Church built a new sanctuary in the later 1920s and almost lost their building when they got behind in their mortgage payments during the Depression. Large numbers of New Bern blacks moved North to get jobs.<sup>49</sup>

African American communities in New Bern were also disproportionately impacted by city government-sponsored urban renewal programs. During the reshaping of the inner city during the 1920s to 1940s, African American-owned land was condemned for roads, public parks, cemeteries and public housing projects. In 1939 the Housing Authority of New Bern, planning the construction of Craven Terrace Public Housing project, condemned a portion of the lot on which the second Rue Chapel had been built after the fire. Rather than lose their church, members dismantled the building and rebuilt it on an adjacent lot. This act of congregational perseverance represented the importance of black churches as a center of community solidarity and spiritual renewal through all of the struggles of the Jim Crow era.

The black settlement of James City has faced a long series of attacks on its very existence. During the late nineteenth century the people were evicted from their homes by the white landowner and they moved east of the original settlement to "new" James City. Leaving behind their old churches, probably small frame buildings, they managed to build large and beautiful

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<sup>49</sup>Hanchett & Little, *The History and Architecture of Long Wharf and Greater Duffyfield*, 18.





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   F   Page 15      Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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**F. African American Churches in Craven County**

**Description**

The original buildings which housed pioneer African American congregations have all disappeared through various circumstances--replacement by larger and more permanent construction, fire, etc. A black church historian described the progression of freedmen's places of worship as moving from brush arbors to rude log buildings and finally to frame and brick churches.<sup>51</sup> Few of these congregations had the means to erect landmark churches during the formative years. The present buildings are generally the third or fourth sanctuaries erected by the congregations.

The African American church comes in the same variety of forms and styles that characterize the white church, but with certain distinctive features. Black churches constructed of brick, like most white brick churches, almost invariably contain a marble cornerstone. Yet even frame churches of black congregations often have cornerstones. The Live Oak Free Will Baptist Church, an abandoned building of an African American congregation across the Neuse River from New Bern, has frame construction, yet one of its brick foundation piers contains a marble cornerstone indicating that it was constructed in 1931.<sup>52</sup> A cornerstone for a frame church of a white congregation is apparently a much rarer occurrence. The frequent usage of cornerstones may reflect the hard work of black congregations to replace their nineteenth century buildings with stylish brick sanctuaries in the twentieth century.

The style of black churches varies as greatly as that of white churches. Predominant in the first half of the twentieth century are the Gothic Revival and the Classical Revival. Since the design of most black churches originated with the builder, often a part-time artisan who belonged to the congregation, rather than with an architect, they tend to be simple and straightforward. Few black churches possess high style ornamentation such as stained glass windows, but nearly all have colored glass windows. Many African American churches are of frame construction and have been brick veneered since 1950.

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<sup>51</sup>J. A. Whitted, *A History of the Negro Baptists of North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Co., 1908), I.

<sup>52</sup>"US 17 Neuse River Bridge & SR 1004 Trent River Bridge Replacement Environmental Assessment," 36.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   F   Page 16      Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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Urban black sanctuaries were often built on raised basements, allowing space for a fellowship hall and Sunday School rooms. In white churches, these functions are more typically housed in extensions to the main block. One explanation for the frequent inclusion of basement rooms was their greater economy of construction in comparison to wing extensions. Another is the size constraint of the small urban lots on which many black churches are sited.

On the interior, the floor plan is identical to that of white churches of the period. All follow a longitudinal processional from entrance into a vestibule, through sections of pews usually separated by a single center aisle but sometimes by two aisles, to the chancel area containing the pulpit, chairs for church leaders, choir seating, and, generally, an altar table. The importance of music in a black service often led even the smaller churches to equip their space with an organ.

Associated resources: The only resource typically associated with the black church is the parsonage. If present, it is located close to the sanctuary. Like white congregations, black congregations usually built a residence for the minister in order to avoid the expense of paying his rent. None of the New Bern or James City churches has an associated cemetery or educational wing.

### Significance

No single institution was of greater importance to black people than the church. During slavery, religious imagery had provided an outlet for yearnings for freedom, and, following emancipation, the church became the focus of black political activity. W. E. B. Du Bois expressed the church's significance as "the center of economic activity as well as of amusement, education and social intercourse."<sup>53</sup> Founding independent churches gave blacks some of their first experiences in organizing their own institutions after emancipation. The advancement of black religious freedom was inseparable from black political freedom and black educational opportunities during Reconstruction. Church organizations evolved to reflect black society. Unlike the patriarchal organization of white churches, black churches allowed women an important role. Of equal importance to the male deacons were the deaconesses, often called "mothers," who ministered to the sick female church members and instructed young females in church sacraments.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 306.

<sup>54</sup>Several of the women, particularly Frances Jones, who were interviewed in New Bern, discussed this system.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   F   Page 17

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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On the whole, historic black church buildings tend to be smaller and more vernacular in design than white church buildings, thereby expressive of the limited economic resources in the black community. The older the building, the more expressive of economic constraints. African Americans excelled in the building trades, particularly brick masonry and carpentry, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Buildings were often designed by builders who were members of the congregation, rather than by outside architects. Yet a number of historic black churches in larger North Carolina towns possess equal architectural grandeur to white churches of the era: among these black churches are the First Baptist Church and St. Paul's A.M.E. Church in Raleigh and St. Stephen A.M.E. Church, Wilmington. The only black church in Craven County known to be the work of an architect is the 1910 St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, New Bern, designed by Herbert W. Simpson, a local architect who did residential, religious and institutional work in town.

The form and materials of historic black churches often illustrate the use of recycled materials and construction over a long period of time. Jones Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church and Mt. Shiloh Baptist Church in James City were built in the early twentieth century out of salvaged brick. Salvaged brick was used in the rear walls of St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church during its rebuilding in the 1930s. Church furniture was sometimes donated by white churches or businesses; for example Rue Chapel's chancel furniture came from a New Bern hotel. The church basement was a significant feature because it provided a temporary space for worship, from the usual two or three years to, in the case of St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church, nineteen years.

#### Registration Requirements

In order to be eligible for the National Register, black church buildings in Craven County must derive primary significance from architectural or artistic distinction, or historical importance (Criteria Consideration A). As well, they must possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Most often, eligibility will come from historical importance, that is, from the significance of the congregation and its church building in its local setting, whether town or county.

As the primary expression of this significance, the building must itself be historic and retain integrity. Having been moved from its original site would not necessarily render it ineligible as long as it has remained in the community in which it achieved its significance and its new setting

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Section F, G, H Page 18**      **Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947**

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is comparable to the original. The application of newer materials, such as vinyl siding or brick veneer, on top of the original materials does not automatically exclude the building from eligibility. A determination of its relative integrity must be made.

The level of significance of the eligible church building--national, state, or local--is determined within the context of the period during which the building was constructed. According to National Register guidelines, the historic property must illustrate its historic context; that is, it must possess the physical features necessary to convey the aspect of history with which it is associated. Although a church may have been established during the formative period of black churches in North Carolina, it would not be of statewide significance under National Register guidelines unless its building was built during the formative period. Thus St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church would be of statewide and even national significance as a "place" in the National Register of Historic Places if its original building, Andrew Chapel, were still standing. St. Peter's current building, completed in 1942, must be evaluated within the context of the first half of the twentieth century, a period when there were a number of local black congregations, most of which were able to build such buildings. Thus, although St. Peter's congregational history is of national significance, St. Peter's church building has local significance.

**G. Geographical Data**

The geographic area covered by this submission is Craven County. The county seat and largest city is New Bern, with the largest concentration of black churches in the county. James City, founded by freedmen during the Civil War and located just across the Trent River from New Bern, contains the second largest concentration. Numerous rural black churches stand in the county.

**H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods**

This submission is based upon the survey of African American neighborhoods in New Bern, conducted in the early 1990s by Brenda Elliott and Donna Logsdon, historians from Kissimmee, Florida. Their survey was analyzed and compiled into a report, "The History and Architecture of Long Wharf and Greater Duffyfield: African American Neighborhoods in New Bern, N.C.," prepared by Tom Hanchett and Ruth Little in 1994. It should be noted that the spelling of the name of New Bern has changed through the years; earlier versions are "Newbern," "New Berne," and "Newberne." The survey documented seven historic black congregations: St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, Clinton Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church, First Baptist Church,

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   H   Page 19

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, Ebenezer Presbyterian Church, Star of Zion Missionary Baptist Church, and Rue Chapel A.M.E. Church. As part of the survey process, the First Missionary Baptist Church, St. John Missionary Baptist Church, and Rue Chapel A.M.E. Church were recommended for nomination to the National Register.

This Multiple Property Documentation Form submission is phase two of the ongoing documentation project for African American resources in New Bern. It includes not only the three churches initially recommended, but two additional churches: Ebenezer Presbyterian Church and St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church (initially believed to be listed in the Register as part of the New Bern Historic District, but later found not to be in the district).

Although the five nominations included in this submission are located in the city limits of New Bern, the county boundaries form a more logical area of study, primarily because of the close connection between New Bern and James City, which are located across from one another on the Trent River. During the Civil War and Reconstruction period when black congregations were established, and continuing to the present day, there was much interaction between the black communities in each settlement. Although no James City churches are included with this submission, it is hoped that the historic church buildings of this settlement will be nominated later. Likewise, there are dozens of rural black churches in the county established during Reconstruction whose sanctuaries may be eligible for the National Register.

Archival research presented the most challenging aspect of this study. Research emphasized the formative years of the congregations during Civil War and Reconstruction. As no church records from this period exist, the first sources to be investigated were local records: deeds, census records, directories, newspapers, local histories, and white church records.

The second area of investigation was denominational records: biographical dictionaries and who's who of church leaders, national church newspapers and magazines, denominational histories and biographies written by church historians, and secondary publications. The A.M.E. Zion national newspaper, the *Star of Zion*, had been extensively researched by other scholars for this period and thus the establishment of St. Peter's Church is well-documented. For this project, the A.M.E. national newspaper, *The Christian Recorder*, for the 1862-1866 period was examined, thereby documenting the foundation of Rue Chapel. Ebenezer Church's origins in the white Presbyterian congregation were already documented in the white church's published

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section H, I Page 20

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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history. Baptists were never as tightly organized as other black denominations and early national records, such as denominational newspapers for the formative period, do not exist. Thus the establishment of the two Baptist churches: First Missionary Baptist and St. John's Missionary Baptist, was unable to be documented in denominational records. The earliest available North Carolina black Baptist history, of 1908, does not mention the establishment of either church, although it discusses later activities of these churches. Based on this area of research, the historic contexts were drawn to enable future researchers to assess the statewide significance of a congregation based upon its date of establishment. This assessment does not determine the level of significance of the church building; this is determined by the date of construction and its physical integrity.

The third area of research was oral history, an indispensable tool for gathering African American history. Interviews were conducted with the following older African Americans in New Bern who have played prominent roles with their churches: for Rue Chapel: Melissa S. Vailes, Adelaide R. Fenner; for St. Peter's: Dorcas E. Carter; for First M.B. Church: Frances Hatch Jones, Dorothy H. Bryan; for Ebenezer Church: Eliza M. Dudley, Arabelle Bryant; for St. John's M.B. Church: Luke Martin Jr. and Dorothea White. Tapes of these interviews are on file at the New Bern Planning and Inspections Department.

Each church was recorded with black and white photographs, color slides, site plans and survey forms. All materials are on file at the New Bern Planning and Inspections Department and at the State Historic Preservation Office.

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   1   Page 21

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   1   Page 23

Historic African American Churches  
in Craven County NC, 1864-1947

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St. Peter's 18/313740/3887000  
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Ebenezer 18/313530/3887150  
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