

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only  
received SEP 28 1983  
date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Moss Hill Church

and/or common N/A

2. Location

street & number Vernon-Greenhead Road, (SR 279) N/A not for publication

city, town Vernon vic. X vicinity of

state Florida code 12 county Washington code 133

3. Classification

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Moss Hill United Methodist Church

street & number 418 South 4th Street

city, town Chipley N/A— vicinity of state Florida

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Washington County Courthouse

street & number W. Jackson Street

city, town Chipley state Florida

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title N/A has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date N/A  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records N/A

city, town N/A state N/A

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved    date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Moss Hill UMC is located approximately 150 feet south of Vernon-Greenhead Road in Washington County, Florida, approximately 3 miles southeast of Vernon. It is a simple, unpainted wood frame building constructed by Lamp Powell in 1857. The gable front of the building faces north. Each of the sides of the church has four nine-over-nine, double hung wood sash windows. The interior is as austere as the exterior. The only ornamentation is provided by the design of the pulpit and altar. There have been almost no alterations to the building since its construction. The Church adjoins a cemetery of approximately 1.5 acres.

Moss Hill church occupies a clearing among trees draped with Spanish Moss on the Holmes Valley escarpment, about three miles southeast of Vernon, Washington County, Florida. Located immediately east of the Church is a cemetery which is approximately 1.5 acres. The building is about 150 feet south of the Vernon-Greenhead Road, which crosses the escarpment here.

Only about a half mile of the escarpment's old dirt road route has been paved, with the remainder much as it was during Territorial Days. It was then a main thoroughfare and stagecoach route from Tallahassee to Holmes Valley and environs.

The church clearing contains few trees, although several oaks remain. The remainder of the more than 80 acres of church owned land is covered with heavy growth of hardwood, except in a few places where thin soil supports relatively sparse growth. The dense growth near the church provides a host pattern for Spanish Moss.

The church is a weathered, unpainted woodframe structure that is 40 feet long and 32.5 feet wide. The building rests on brick piers. It faces north and is a landmark easily seen by passing motorists. It has a gable roof with boxed eaves and returns. It is covered with hand-split shakes. The roof provides a nominal one foot overhang at the eaves and along the rake. The building has matched double leaf doors in the north facade, one providing entry for the side of the church reserved for "women and girls," and the other for "men and boys." Steps leading to the doors have been rebuilt, and a few floor planks have been replaced. Otherwise, there is little evidence of changes since the building was erected 126 years ago.

One by six lapped pine or cypress siding, applied horizontally, covers the outside of the building. Flush siding is used to accent the gables. On each side of the building there are four nine-over-nine, double hung wood sash windows. Their similarity and spacing gives the structure a well-balanced appearance. Two similar windows are on the southern end of the building. Over the years, the exterior of the building has weathered to a silver gray color, similar to that of the Spanish Moss.

The interior of the church has flush wood siding on the walls and on the ceiling. The trim surrounding the windows and doors is simple with mitred corners. Two aisles separate the seven rows of pews into three banks. Architecturally, the pulpit area is, perhaps, the most interesting design feature of the church. It was built, like the pews, of high quality, hand-dressed lumber. The pulpit area features a Chancellory rail with a wooden bench in front of the altar and pulpit. The pulpit is raised on a dais and features square, tapered, boxed pedestals located at the steps at either end of the dais. The arrangement and materials are original to the church. The pews, built with wide, hand hewn lumber, have suffered some peripheral termite damage, but they remain sound and serviceable.

(See Continuation Sheet)

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

**Specific dates** 1857 **Builder/Architect** Lamp Powell

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

This 1857 building is significant architecturally as a remarkable example of unaltered frontier construction. Moss Hill Church is a simple, unpainted, wood frame building whose structure and environment are little changed since the late 1850s. Moss Hill is historically significant for the role it played in the nineteenth century settlement of West Florida.

The history of Moss Hill Church is closely interwoven with that of the valley and Holmes Creek. The church gets its name from the moss-shrouded trees on the elevation on which it stands. It is referred to as a hill because it is a part of the Holmes Valley Escarpment, which is elevated about 100 feet above the floor of the valley.

The valley and environs, like the church itself, have preserved much of their past in their appearance. Historian John Lee Williams and Catholic Bishop Michael Portier each described the valley and environs as they visited the area in the 1820s.

"Holmes Valley, on the east side of the Choctawhatchee, contains from 10 to 12 good sections of land," wrote Williams. "The soil is dark sandy loam. A good mill stream runs through it, collected from the springs, which issue abundantly from the sides of the valley. Near these springs, the inhabitants usually fix their residences."

Williams noted that the level of the valley was about 100 feet below that of the surrounding pine country. He observed that the land was "covered with white oak, black, red and water oak, white ash, black gum, wild cherry, red bay and magnolia, with witch hazel, paw paw, sassafras, haw shrubs, the whole mixed with wild cane of extraordinary growth . . ."

Bishop Portier wrote:

"The land that borders the Choctawhatchee is quite rich ...The Holmes and Euchee Valleys are becoming more attractive while fully preserving their wild and imposing grandeur. For several miles I passed fragrance of laurel and magnolia. All along these hillsides the air was cooled by a number of small streams which tumbled over rocky eminences and flowed away through virgin meadows ...I pursued my way slowly along the middle of a rich valley and in sight of the farmhouses that,

(See Continuation Sheet)

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

(See Continuation Sheet)

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 2.0

Quadrangle name Vernon

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

### UTM References

A 

1	6	6	2	6	7	9	0	3	3	8	4	0	6	0
Zone		Easting					Northing							

B 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

C 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

D 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

E 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

F 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

G 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

H 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

### Verbal boundary description and justification

(See Continuation Sheet)

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title E.W. Carswell/Larry S. Paarlberg, Historic Sites Specialist

organization Division of Archives, History & Rec. Mgmt. date August 26, 1983

street & number The Capitol telephone (904) 487-2333

city or town Tallahassee state Florida

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *George W. Percy*

title George W. Percy, State Historic Preservation Officer date September 21, 1983

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

*Patrick Anderson*  
Keeper of the National Register

date 11/7/83

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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Alterations to the building or its built-in furniture and fixtures have been minimal. The building has no electric service, although an outdoor night light is maintained. This building has apparently never had a permanent heating unit or plumbing. It has, however, had various portable heating devices in the past. A portable unit recently in place has been removed. The building stands on brick piers, but it is unknown if they are the original supports. ✓ Visible structures, other than the main building, include a pump house near the southeast corner of the church and a shelter house equipped with a table for picnic dinners. A flag pole stands about fifty feet east of the church and an historic marker has been erected about 150 feet opposite the northeast corner of the church. The cemetery south of the church is contemporary with the building. The cemetery has been in use since the mid-nineteenth century, but very few headstones which date from before the 1880s survive in tact. The cemetery includes some excellent examples of nineteenth century sculptured headstones. The cemetery is enclosed by a wire fence and the grounds are well maintained.

The building, despite a weathered appearance, is relatively well preserved and may be one of the nation's best examples of frontier church architecture.

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at quite a distance apart, occasionally arrested my attention. The odd construction was in striking contrast to the evergreen groves that shielded them from the glowing sunlight."<sup>2</sup>

The church is the oldest unaltered building in Washington County, where it is credited with being the second building to be erected with glass windows. The Robert C. Russ home was the first.<sup>3</sup>

It is a successor to an earlier mission church, which was also used as a school, that had existed nearby. Exact date of the earlier building's construction has not been determined, but a Methodist mission was reported in existence in the area when Washington County was created in 1825.<sup>4</sup>

Stanley's "History of Jackson County" (the area was a part of Jackson County from 1822 to late 1824) speaks of Methodist work in Holmes Valley in 1823. A Methodist preacher was reported in the neighboring Econfina Creek area as early as 1821, the year that Florida was formally transferred from Spain to the United States. He may have also been in nearby Holmes Valley as well. The church is situated on an elevated site beside the valley.<sup>5</sup>

Methodist records mentioned the mission in 1826, when Morgan Clower Turrentine was named to the Holmes Valley Mission Charge by the South Carolina Methodist Conference. That Conference then included South Carolina, Georgia and parts of Alabama and Florida. In February of 1823 this organization had appointed J.J. Trigg and John Slade to its Chattahoochee Mission, which possibly included the Holmes Creek Settlement that included Holmes Valley.<sup>6</sup>

The Holmes Valley Escarpment is an unusual formation for Florida. It is possible to travel for almost 15 miles by dirt road along its course today without encountering a stream or a depression requiring a bridge or culvert for passage. It was incorporated into the Pensacola-St. Augustine Road, which for several years lacked a means of providing passage for stage coaches and other teams across Holmes Creek and Choctawahatchee River.

In the early 1830s, however, two-horse stages began trundling along the escarpment past Moss Hill four times a week, hauling mail and passengers between Tallahassee and the Holmes Valley communities. Mail and passengers moved by boat and local stage between Pensacola and the same communities.<sup>7</sup>

It was on the site of the present Moss Hill Church that Rev. Lemuel Tippins of Alabama conducted a revival that was followed on July 20, 1846, by the formation of the Holmes Valley (now Ebenezer) Baptist Church. Prominent among the early ministers or leading members otherwise were Joshua Mercer, David P. Everett, G.W. Underwood, Benjamin Mellichamp and John Nelson. Mercer was the son of Silas Mercer, for whom Georgia's Mercer University is named. Joshua Mercer was associated with Everett in the 1850s in the establishment and operation of Orange Hill Academy, about 10 miles northeast of Holmes Valley.<sup>8</sup>

Moss Hill was near a dirt road that angled off the escarpment (and legendary Indian trail) route in a northwesternly direction to Holmes Creek in the vicinity of today's Vernon. In addition to religious gatherings the road junction was a convenient place for Holmes Valley settlers to gather for defense, social, educational and sometimes governmental purposes. In 1848, for example, the Florida General Assembly directed Washington County's Judge of Probate and County Commissioners to assemble at Moss(y) Hill Meeting House on

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the first Monday in February, 1849 ... "to arrange and determine upon the most suitable or practicable plan for building a courthouse, and other public buildings for said county..."<sup>9</sup>

A blockhouse-fort was built on an escarpment projection approximately a half mile north of the turnoff road intersection and the church site. It provided a sanctuary for settlers when Indians threatened. It was also a meeting place for other purposes during the early territorial days. It was here that early religious services were conducted by circuit preachers and lay ministers.<sup>10</sup>

Members of the Holmes Valley Baptist Church in 1850 erected a meeting house in newly-designated Vernon, but it was blown down by a hurricane in 1856. Meetings were suspended until 1858, when they were resumed in today's Moss Hill Church, which had been built the previous year. The Baptists, who baptised by immersion, are credited by legend with providing a name for a lake near the Methodist Church known as Baptising Lake.<sup>11</sup> The Methodists usually performed the baptismal rites by sprinkling.

The land on which the church is situated was a gift from Igdaliah Wood, but not until several years after the building was erected on what had been the public domain.<sup>12</sup> Wood's patent from the U.S. Government, a copy of which is still among the church's records, was issued on the order of President Abraham Lincoln on December 5, 1861, four years after the building had been completed and nearly 11 months after Florida had seceded from the United States to join the Confederate States of America. Just how title was passed on to Wood remains a matter of speculation.<sup>13</sup>

Bill Tiller selected the virgin pines from which lumber for the church was sawed at Davis (later Gilbert) Mill on Hard Labor Creek. An upright saw, powered by water, was used in the process. The planks, some of them nearly knot-free and up to 18 or 20 inches wide, were hand dressed. The pews, pulpit furniture, including a chancellory rail and bench, were handmade. They remain, after 126 years, in remarkably good condition.<sup>14</sup>

Lamp Powell, a carpenter, was in charge of construction, with Green Worthington, Sr., as his assistant. Powell is credited with planning the structure.<sup>15</sup> Members of the Church, including some slaves, contributed the labor. Many of the planks still bear the hand or fingerprints of the workers, and the barefooted imprint of children may be seen on the ceiling.<sup>16</sup>

The Baptist congregation met in the Moss Hill Methodist Church, as guests of that congregation, for seven years or until after the end of the Civil War. Minutes of their meetings, which seem to be complete for the life of the church, fail to mention the war during the years that it raged.<sup>17</sup> Nearly every family, however, must have had one or more members absent in military service. Most were in the Confederate service, but some strong Union sentiment existed in Washington County.<sup>18</sup>

Gen. Alexander Asboth's Union Army that raided Marianna in late 1864 must have traveled along the escarpment road enroute to Point Washington, at the head of Choctawhatchee Bay, to embark by steamer for the return trip to Fort Barrancas, near Pensacola. That army halted in Vernon,<sup>19</sup> which could have been easily reached from the Moss Hill intersection.

Former slaves, who were members of the Moss Hill Methodist and Holmes Valley Baptist Churches prior to gaining their freedom at the end of the war, formed their own churches afterwards. Two of the churches, Sylvania A.M.E. and Mt. Calvary Baptist, are today located in the valley only two or three miles from their parent churches.<sup>20</sup>

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The pioneer atmosphere is strong at Moss Hill, which is often called West Florida's "Little Church in the Wildwood." It preserves, through its simple architecture and setting, the lingering flavor of the frontier.

Its existence was threatened in the decades after World War II up to 1981 because of vanishing membership. That trend was reversed in 1982, following formation of the Moss Hill UMC Foundation, a non-profit corporation, dedicated to the maintenance and preservation of the building and the development of its forested acres for church-related and directed public use.

In the late 1960s the Presbyterian Church acquired a parklike tract of several hundred acres directly north of and adjoining the Moss Hill property for development as a youth recreation and training encampment site. The developmental process has been continuing in the meantime for a Presbytery or district extending from the Monticello area to the Pensacola area, inclusive.<sup>21</sup>

Even more recently, New Jerusalem, U.S.A., a non-denominational group, has acquired several hundred acres of partly lakefront land, about two miles southwest of Moss Hill. Plans are being made for its development as a Bible Conference Center and Christian Community.<sup>22</sup>

The Moss Hill area, embracing only a few square miles of land, has had a strong and enduring attraction for religious or church-oriented activities. The two earlier churches particular have played key roles in providing leadership and membership in other churches in through out-migration. Holmes Valley, over the decades, has declined in population, perhaps because it has been bypassed by railroads and major highways. These gave rise to new communities, such as Chipley, Bonifay, Lynn Haven and Panama City, which provided economic opportunities that attracted rural people. The gradual exodus left Holmes Valley an area that seems remote from activities often associated with modern civilization. Moss Hill Church, after 126 years, is a visible reminder of the nation's pioneer past.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Carswell, Elba Wilson, "Holmes Valley," Central Press, Bonifay, Florida, 1969, pp. 9-11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Carswell, "Holmes Valley," p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 52-53.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 53-55.

<sup>7</sup>Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 54-55.

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<sup>8</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 38-39.

<sup>12</sup> Carter, Clarence Edwin, "Territorial Papers of the United States, Territory of Florida, 1834-39," General Services Administration, Washington, D.C., 1956, pp. 37, 334.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter 284 of the Act (No. 76) of the Acts and Resolution of the Florida General Assembly in 1848, as reproduced in the Moss Hill Messenger, Chipley, Florida, September 1982, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 30-33.

<sup>15</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 92-97.

<sup>16</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 92-93.

<sup>17</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 78-79.

<sup>18</sup> Carswell, Elba Wilson, "Tempestuous Triangle," Washington County School Board, Chipley, Florida, 1975, pp. 80-81.

<sup>19</sup> Carswell, "Tempestuous Triangle," pp. 92-93.

<sup>20</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Carswell, "Holmes Valley," pp. 116-117.

<sup>22</sup> Interview: Moore, A.C. New Jerusalem, U.S.A. Corporate Director, by E.W. Carswell, December 3, 1982.

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As reproduced in the Moss Hill Messenger, Chipley, Florida. September 1982.

Carswell, Elba Wilson. "Holmes Valley." Bonifay, Florida: Central Press, 1969.

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Dodd, Dorothy. "Locating the County Seat of Jackson County." Florida Historical Quarterly,  
vol. XXVI, number 1, 1947.

Historical Marker, erected by Florida Board of Parks and Historic Memorials, Moss Hill  
Church, 1963.

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collection, Chipley, Florida, 1982.

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Vernon, Robert O. "Geology of Holmes and Washington Counties, Florida." Tallahassee,  
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Verbal Boundary Description

Begin at the intersection of the southern right-of-way for SR 279 and the south section line for Section 7, Range 14W, Township 2N. (Point A) Follow the southern right-of-way of SR 279 east for approximately 200 feet. (Point B) Turn due south and follow a line for approximately 200 feet. (Point C) From this point follow a line north and west for approximately 400 feet. (Point D) Continue north and west along a new line for a distance of approximately 333 feet to the southern right-of-way for SR 279. (Point E) Follow the southern right-of-way of SR 279 for a distance of approximately 333 feet to the point of beginning.

Justification

This boundary includes all significant above grade cultural resources associated with the Church. These include the church, the access drive, the immediate grounds, and the cemetery.