

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination 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 the National Register criteria. () See continuation sheet.

Mark R. Edwards
Signature of certifying official

July 1, 1998
Date

Mark R. Edwards
State Historic Preservation Officer

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

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency or bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register

Edson H. Beall 8-6-98

determined eligible for the National Register

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register

other, explain:

see continuation sheet

Keeper of the National Register

Date

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions:

RELIGIOUS: religious facility

FUNERARY: cemetery

Current Functions:

RELIGIOUS: religious facility

FUNERARY: cemetery

7. Description

Architectural Classification:

EARLY REPUBLIC: FEDERAL

Materials:

foundation stone

walls brick

roof metal

other n/a

Description of present and historic physical appearance:

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION:

Bethesda Baptist Church and Cemetery consists of an early 19th century two-story, brick building, with an attached one-story classroom wing (1960), separate non-historic (1974) Sunday School building and picnic pavilion (1957), and a historic cemetery. There is also a historic baptismal pool on the property as well as a historic privy and a historic well. The church is in the vernacular Federal style and is built in American bond supported by a stone foundation. The first floor walls are 18" thick. There is a gabled roof with gable returns and a standing-seam, metal roof. There are two brick interior end chimneys, one on either end of the building. The west end facade includes two entry doors. There are seven windows on each of two levels on two sides of the church. All windows have wooden shutters. The interior consists of one large sanctuary with a raised pulpit on the west end and a wooden gallery on the east end. The gallery is supported by two rows of columns and has a solid paneled rail. The interior walls are plaster over brick, and there is a concrete floor with tile. There are fireplaces at either end of the church. Changes are minimal and include the addition of a classroom wing in 1960, the concrete floor in 1949, the elevation of the pulpit with bricks in 1955, the addition of front steps in 1960, and a new ceiling. In 1954, 22 new pews were purchased. A new pulpit was added in 1966. There have also been, in earlier times (c.1850), rearrangement and realignment of the pews, the removal of the north and south side galleries, enclosing of the windows

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Section 7--Description

with glass, etc. On the property are the non-historic Sunday School building, picnic pavilion with granite tables, and the historic spring and brick-and-concrete baptismal pool (1906). The cemetery contains marked graves dating back to the 19th century and covers over an acre of the church grounds. The cemetery was laid out with a landscaping plan at the time of the land's donation to the church in 1888. The church is located in a rural area adjoining forest land.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Bethesda Baptist Church is an early 19th century Federal-style building that is well-maintained and appears to be in excellent condition. The brick building is approximately 40 feet wide and 60 feet long and 30 feet high. The masonry walls with an American bond are supported by a stone foundation. They are 18 inches thick up to the top of the first level of windows and 12 inches thick to the top of the church. The gabled roof is front-oriented, has gable returns, and has a standing seam metal roof. There are two brick interior end chimneys. All the openings are spanned with flat arches.

The west end facade consists of two separate doors within an 18-inch paneled recess. Three clerestory windows have 9/6 sashes and wooden louvered shutters. The east end facade has a single central door, similar to the ones on the west facade, flanked by two 9/9 sash windows. There are three more clerestory windows with 9/6 sashes and shutters. The side elevations are approximately 60 feet long and each consists of seven 9/9 windows and seven 9/6 clerestory windows. All windows have louvered wooden shutters that are painted green. Full-length brick steps (1960) lead to the two doors on the west end. A c.1960 brick classroom addition is located on the north elevation, and a detached c.1974 educational building is located off the east end.

The interior consists of one large room with a raised pulpit on the west end and a gallery on the east end. The gallery is supported by two rows of columns and is accessed by an enclosed stair in the southeast corner. The interior brick walls are finished with a smooth plaster that is painted white. The 1949 concrete floor has a tile covering and a carpet along the center aisle. The gallery, dating from the 1850s, is constructed of wood and has a solid paneled rail. The ceiling is covered with white celotex tiles. All the windows have deep sills due to their placement within the thick masonry walls. Two rows of hanging lantern-light fixtures span the length of the church.

The church is built of load-bearing masonry construction. Two fireplaces are located on each end of the church. The fireplaces protrude from the wall surface, and their flues angle inward and meet at the central chimney.

The church is located on 10.75 acres and includes its cemetery, a natural spring, and a historic c.1906 baptismal pool that is constructed of brick and concrete. There is also a historic well on the

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grounds. Also on the property is a modern picnic shelter with several granite picnic tables located to the north of the church.

The potential archaeological site on the grounds, other than the cemetery, would be the possible original church site located northwest of the present church.

Bethesda Baptist Church and Cemetery is located in rural Greene County at the northeast corner of County Road 120 and County Road 129. The church and its yard adjoin forest land on the north and northeast sides. The cemetery is on the eastern edge along C.R. 120 and the baptismal pool is located in the northwest corner.

Changes to the building include: There are several historic alterations to Bethesda Baptist Church. In 1850 the brick floor was covered with a wooden floor, the pulpit was moved from the north side to the west end of the church, and the position of the pews was changed to face the west end and form two aisles. At this same time, the galleries on the north and south sides were removed leaving only an east end gallery. The windows that were enclosed with shutters were filled with glass, the door on the north side was changed to a window, and two doors were placed on either side of the pulpit on the west end. In 1949, the wooden floors were replaced with concrete and covered with tile. At this time the gallery was partitioned into three spaces and enclosed to form Sunday School rooms, and the area below the gallery on either side of the door was also enclosed. In 1952, the flues were enclosed with the introduction of a gas heating system. The brick platform and steps on the west end of the sanctuary were built to elevate the pulpit in 1955. The picnic shelter and granite tables were erected in 1957. The educational annex on the north side of the church was built in 1960, and the brick steps on the west end were built. In 1965, the current ceiling was installed and the partitions and enclosure of the gallery was removed. A new addition on the north end of the annex was built in 1966 to house restrooms and water facilities. The detached educational building was built on the east end of the church in 1974. Five years later, a ramp was built for the physically disabled.

The cemetery, which covers about one-and-one-half acres, was formally added to the church property in 1888, and had a formal landscape plan designed by a firm from New York. A copy of this plan is framed and hanging on the sanctuary wall. The cemetery, which is still in use, occupies a rectangular area on the east side of the church grounds and has a chain-link fence. The monuments are mostly out of marble and granite and reflect different types of funerary art from the basic tombstone which lies flat on the ground, to those shaped like obelisks or small columns. All of these are typical of tombstone monuments found in Georgia. Most of the tombstones are arranged in family plots in the cemetery and appear to be in rows. There are low copings of granite around some of the family plots. The landscaping today appears to be mostly grass.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): N/A

A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions):

ARCHITECTURE
RELIGION

Period of Significance:

1818-1948

Significant Dates:

c.1818

Significant Person(s):

n/a

Cultural Affiliation:

n/a

Architect(s)/Builder(s):

unknown

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Section 8--Statement of Significance

Narrative statement of significance (areas of significance)

Statement of Significance: Bethesda Baptist Church and Cemetery is significant in architecture because it is a fine example of the use of the vernacular Federal style of architecture for a public building and for the use of brick. It is one of the oldest surviving church buildings in Georgia and one of the oldest in brick. It retains many of its original materials and features including the walls, windows, gallery, and chimneys. Noteworthy architectural features reflecting the influence of the Federal style include the building's overall form, scale, and proportions, its flat brick wall surfaces with flat jack arches over the doors and windows, and the relatively thin cornices and returns.

The church is also significant in religion because it was built in 1818 and has remained active since then on the same location, serving a largely rural Baptist constituency. The church building is accompanied by several historic features including the baptismal spring and pool and the cemetery which reflect Baptist religious traditions and practices. The church congregation predates this building, having been organized in 1785 as Whatley's Mill, making it one of the oldest Baptist congregations in the state which has continued to function for more than 200 years. The nominated property is said to contain the location of the original church building. The dedication of this building was performed by Rev. Jesse Mercer, a major early Baptist figure who later founded Mercer University. The church also licensed, in 1836, an African-American to minister to his people in the region. The cemetery land was given in 1888 and enlarged in 1945. There is a Georgia Historical Marker on the property which relates the history of the congregation and the church building.

National Register Criteria

The Bethesda Baptist Church and Cemetery meets National Register Criterion A because it was one of the earliest Baptist churches in Georgia, both with regard to its congregation and more importantly the current building, dating from c.1818. The continuous use of this property as a Baptist institution places it squarely in the middle of one of the most important patterns of American history, the rise of new religions, in this case the Baptist faith, which has for over a century been the predominant faith in Georgia. The property also meets Criterion C because it is a fine, surviving and very early example of a brick church built in the vernacular Federal Style of architecture and retains many of the important features of that style. It is important that it is a rural example as well.

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Criteria Considerations (if applicable)

The nomination meets Criteria Consideration A because it is a religious property which is primarily significant as an outstanding example of the vernacular Federal style of architecture and as a rural Baptist church, built in this style and of brick; it is one of only a handful that exists. It also meets Criteria Consideration A because of its historic significance as one of the oldest Baptist churches in the state; it documents the early presence of Baptists in Georgia as well as their continuing historical presence and importance.

Period of significance (justification)

1818-1948 This period reflects the construction of the extant church building, the early presence of Baptists in Georgia, and their continuing presence as an important Christian denomination in Georgia and in this rural area throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Contributing/Noncontributing Resources (explanation, if necessary)

| | | |
|---------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|
| Contributing: | Buildings: | 2 the church itself and the privy. |
| | Sites: | 2 the cemetery, the baptismal spring |
| | Structures: | 2 the baptismal pool, the well |
| | Total: | 6 |

| | | |
|-------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|
| Non-contributing: | Buildings: | 1 the 1974 Sunday School building |
| | Structure: | 1 the picnic pavilion |
| | Total: | 2 |

Developmental history/historic context (if appropriate)

Bethesda Baptist Church was one of the earliest Baptist churches organized in northeast Georgia. It was organized in 1785 under the name of Whatley's Mill for land given by Samuel Whatley in memory of his parents who were killed by Indians in the area. (Sorrow, 3) It is located in Greene County near the South Fork of Little River. The first church building was constructed of wood and was located "a few hundred feet northwest of the present brick building." (Gardner, 443)

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Section 8--Statement of Significance

Meetinghouses were built right away if a congregation formed as a branch of another church or after they existed for an extended period of time. (Gardner, 23-24) During the early settlement stages, frontier churches were fearful of Indian attacks. In fact, members of Whatley's Mill carried arms to church to defend themselves against attacks by the Creeks. Members of the militia guarded the meetinghouse, as well, on Sundays. (Gardner, 99-100) There was also a committee of male members appointed at each service to guard against Indian attacks. (Gardner, 23)

Silas Mercer was the founder and first pastor of Whatley's Mill and presided until 1796 when his son, Jesse Mercer, continued ministering for thirty years. Silas Mercer (1745-1796) was the founder of several major congregations that were members of the Georgia Baptist Association. This association was organized in 1784 and was important in defining the Baptist position concerning doctrinal and ecclesiastical matters. Silas Mercer moderated the Association for three years and achieved status as educator, author, and delegate to the Georgia Constitutional Convention of 1795. (Gardner, 42, 44) He founded a classical school near Washington, Georgia, named Salem Academy which flourished during the 1790s but lost support by 1798. He also published "Tyranny Exposed and True Liberty Discovered," a defense of the democratic system of government. Silas Mercer was posthumously honored in a lengthy poem by Benjamin Moseley that was published in 1796 in an Augusta newspaper. (Gardner, 29)

Whatley's Mill had a fairly large membership due to the large territory it served. Many of the members came from large plantations and smaller farms in the area. Plans for a new brick church emerged in 1815 due to the threat of Indians and a need for more space. The number and wealth of church members made construction of the large brick building feasible. Between 1815 and 1818, locally formed and fired bricks were used to build the new church. It was renamed Bethesda, meaning "Brotherly Love" and incorporated by the state legislature on December 17, 1818. (Sorrow, 3-5)

Jesse Mercer ministered the church during the erection of the new building and led its dedication service on December 20, 1818. He and his family lived on a small farm about five miles away and served the families of the many plantations in the area until 1826. (Sorrow, 6) Jesse Mercer (1769-1841) was a leader in the Georgia Baptist Association and promoted missionary ideals to his church members. (Gardner, 101)

The church hosted a day school in 1824 which continued for an undocumented length of time. Two years later the church attempted to provide more than one church service a month by allowing preaching on the first Sunday and third Saturday and Sunday of each month. In 1836, Bethesda Baptist Church licensed a black man named Brother Sam to minister to the black people (mostly slaves) in the community on the second Sunday of each month in the church. (Sorrow, 6-7)

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Section 8--Statement of Significance

A major renovation began in 1850 which consisted of changing the orientation of the pulpit and seating, changing positions of doors and windows, and removing two of the galleries. (Sorrow, 7-8)

The pastors of Bethesda Baptist Church continued to live on farms from 1850 to 1900 to supplement their income. From 1834 to 1900, the membership never fell below 176 members and grew to as many as 230 members. In 1888, one acre of land was deeded to the church by Thomas and Kitty Tuggle for use as a cemetery. There does, however, exist an original plan for the formal layout of the church's cemetery. It was drawn on December 30, 1888 by Henry Mehlea (?), Office of Topographical Engineers, Dept. of Public Parks, New York City. How such a plan got drawn by a New York engineer for a Georgia church remains unknown. The plan is displayed inside Bethesda Baptist Church on the south wall. The cemetery was enlarged by a half acre in 1945. Since the church was organized, a natural spring was used for baptisms. In 1906, a brick and concrete baptismal pool was constructed to the west of the spring. (Sorrow, 8-9)

Two major additions to Bethesda Baptist Church include an educational annex attached to the north side in 1959 that houses classrooms and restrooms and a detached educational building built on the east end in 1974. (Sorrow, 13, 16)

The church remains an active congregation today, one of the oldest active Baptist congregations in the State of Georgia.

The Bethesda Baptist Church has been in continuous operation since its organization in 1785. Currently, services are held every Sunday. Membership has increased over the last fifteen years. The church currently has a full-time minister. All of the churches buildings are currently still used as well as the cemetery and picnic areas. There is discussion within the congregation concerning constructing an additional building to provide for Sunday school programs.

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography for the original submission:

Gardner, Robert G. and others. A History of The Georgia Baptist Association, 1784-1984. Washington, GA: Wilkes Publishing Company, 1988.

Sorrow, Ellis. A History of Bethesda Baptist Church. Washington, GA: Georgia Baptist Association Press, 1969.

McCommons, Bevelyn

Oral history interview with church members

Previous documentation on file (NPS): (X) N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested**
- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been issued
date issued:**
- 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, Specify Repository:**

Georgia Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 10.75 acres

UTM References

A) Zone 17 Easting 313480 Northing 3725250
B) Z17 E313800 N3725250
C) Z17 E313540 N3725030

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is shown on the enclosed plat map dated Jan. 4, 1993.

Boundary Justification

The nominated property is all the church owns at this location and is all that remains associated with the church and cemetery. It includes the church building and all historic buildings and features associated with it including the cemetery, baptismal pool, baptismal spring, and probable site of former church building.

11. Form Prepared By

State Historic Preservation Office

name/title Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr. , Historian
organization Historic Preservation Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources
street & number 500 The Healey Building, 57 Forsyth Street
city or town Atlanta **state** Georgia **zip code** 30303
telephone (404) 656-2840 **date** June 30, 1998

Consulting Services/Technical Assistance (if applicable) () not applicable

name/title Chloe Mercer, Intern (temporary position)
organization Northeast Georgia Regional Development Center
street and number 305 Research Dr.
city or town Athens **state** GA **zip code** 30610
telephone (706) 369-5650

(X-intern for) **regional development center preservation planner**

(X) other:

Bevelyn McCommons, church member
2650 Randolph Church Rd..
Union Point, GA 30669
(706) 486-2494

HPD form version 02-24-97)

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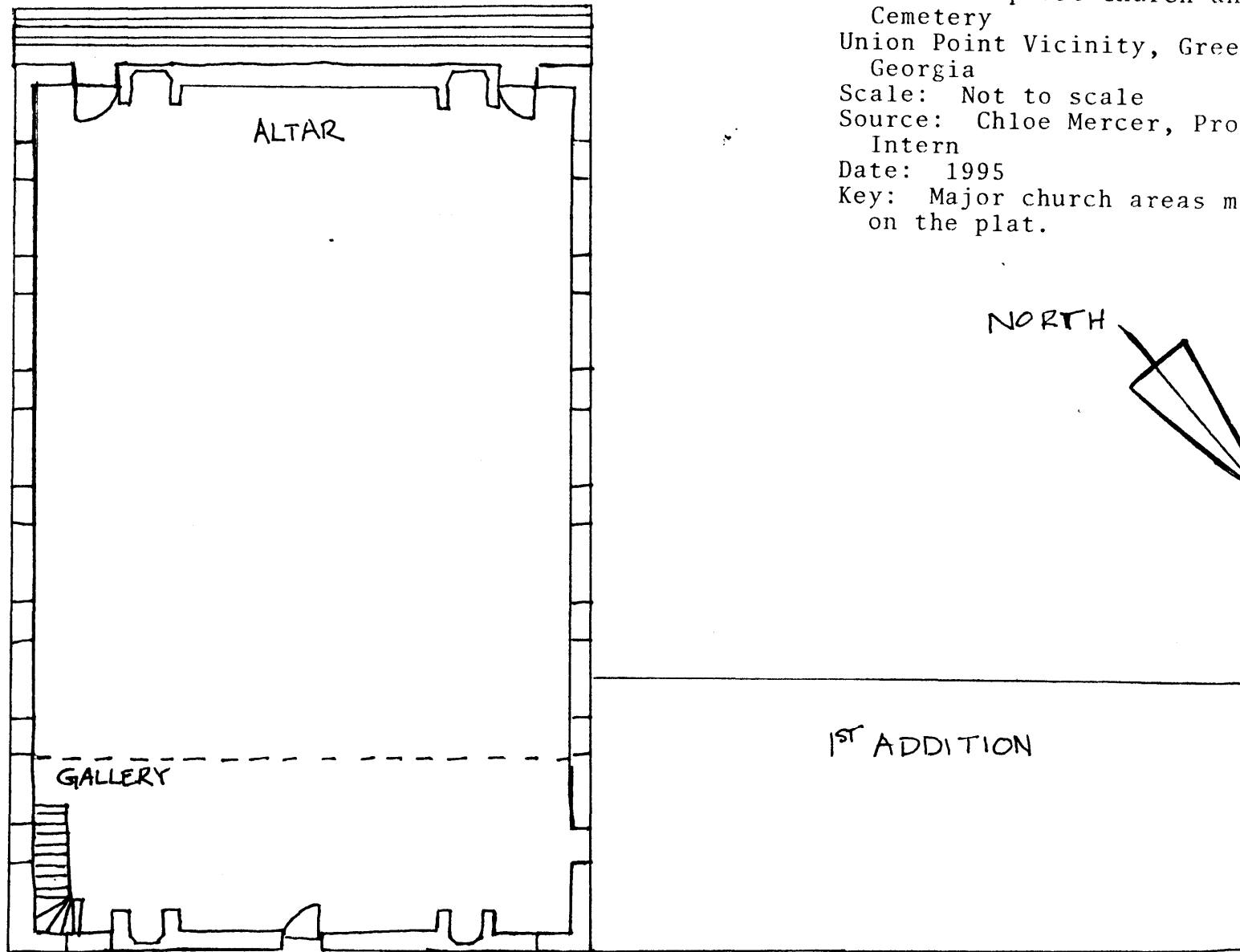
**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Photographs

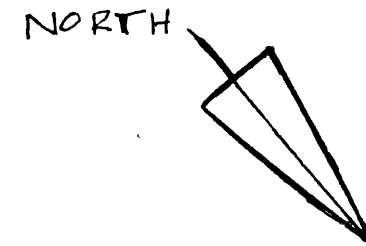
Name of Property: Bethesda Baptist Church and Cemetery
City or Vicinity: Union Point vicinity
County: Greene
State: Georgia
Photographer: James R. Lockhart
Negative Filed: Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Date Photographed: September, 1997

Description of Photograph(s):

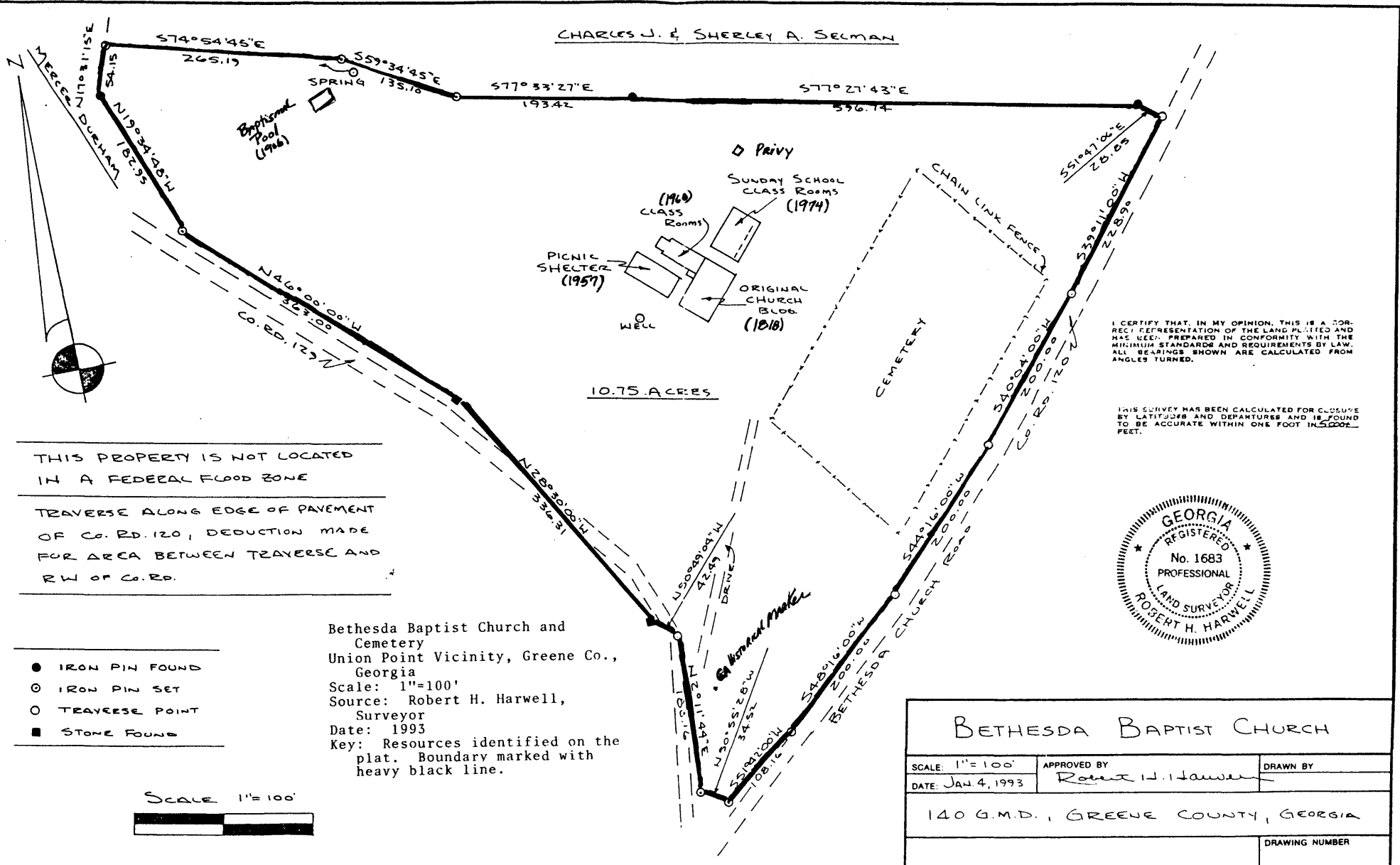
- 1 of 12: South and east facades, with picnic pavilion in left background; photographer facing north.
- 2 of 12: West and south facades with brick addition on the left; photographer facing northeast.
- 3 of 12: North and west facades with detached Sunday School building on the left and attached wing on the right; photographer facing east.
- 4 of 12: Detail of north entrance (main entrance); photographer facing south.
- 5 of 12: Interior, looking back at north (main) entrance with balcony; photographer facing northeast.
- 6 of 12: Interior, view from balcony looking toward altar; photographer facing west.
- 7 of 12: Interior, stairway under balcony; photographer facing northeast.
- 8 of 12: Interior, view of altar and fireplaces from sanctuary; photographer facing southwest.
- 9 of 12: Interior, fireplace to right of altar; photographer facing southwest.
- 10 of 12: Grounds, baptismal pool; photographer facing north.
- 11 of 12: Grounds, Georgia Historical Marker (state historical marker) and cemetery; photographer facing northeast.
- 12 of 12: Grounds, cemetery; photographer facing northeast.



Bethesda Baptist Church and
Cemetery
Union Point Vicinity, Greene Co.,
Georgia
Scale: Not to scale
Source: Chloe Mercer, Project
Intern
Date: 1995
Key: Major church areas marked
on the plat.



CHARLES J. & SHERLEY A. SELMAN



I CERTIFY THAT, IN MY OPINION, THIS IS A CORRECT REPRESENTATION OF THE LAND PLATTED AND HAS BEEN PREPARED IN CONFORMITY WITH THE MINIMUM STANDARDS AND REQUIREMENTS BY LAW. ALL BEARINGS SHOWN ARE CALCULATED FROM ANGLES TURNED.

THIS SURVEY HAS BEEN CALCULATED FOR CLOSURE BY LATITUDES AND DEPARTURES AND IS FOUND TO BE ACCURATE WITHIN ONE FOOT IN 5000 FEET.

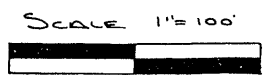


THIS PROPERTY IS NOT LOCATED IN A FEDERAL FLOOD ZONE

TRAVERSE ALONG EDGE OF PAVEMENT OF CO. RD. 120, DEDUCTION MADE FOR AREA BETWEEN TRAVERSE AND RW OF CO. RD.

Bethesda Baptist Church and Cemetery
 Union Point Vicinity, Greene Co., Georgia
 Scale: 1"=100'
 Source: Robert H. Harwell, Surveyor
 Date: 1993
 Key: Resources identified on the plat. Boundary marked with heavy black line.

- IRON PIN FOUND
- IRON PIN SET
- TRAVERSE POINT
- STONE FOUND



| BETHESDA BAPTIST CHURCH | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| SCALE: 1"=100' | APPROVED BY: <i>Robert H. Harwell</i> | DRAWN BY: |
| DATE: JAN 4, 1993 | | |
| 140 G.M.D., GREENE COUNTY, GEORGIA | | |
| | | DRAWING NUMBER |