1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Centennial Baptist Church

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: York & Columbia Streets Not for publication:__

City/Town: Helena Vicinity:__

State: AR County: Phillips Code: 107 Zip Code: 72342

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property		Category of Property	
Private:	X	Building(s):	X
Public-Local:	___	District:	___
Public-State:	___	Site:	___
Public-Federal:	__	Structure:	___
		Object:	___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	___ buildings
___	___ sites
___	___ structures
___	___ objects
1	___ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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 ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ Entered in the National Register
___ Determined eligible for the National Register
___ Determined not eligible for the National Register
___ Removed from the National Register
___ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic:	Religion	Sub:	Religious facility
Current:	Religion	Sub:	Religious facility

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals: Late Gothic Revival

Materials:

Foundation: Brick
Walls: Brick
Roof: Composition Shingle
Other:

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Centennial Baptist Church is located on the southeast corner of York and Columbia Streets in Helena, Arkansas. The 1905 church is a late example of the Gothic Revival style. The one-story brick building features square towers with bilaterally symmetrical wings, flanking a prominent central gable. The gabled roof of the church has a slight belcast curve. Centennial Baptist displays typical Gothic Revival elements such as tower entries, double-hung lancet windows with hood molds of soldier bricks, buttresses, and brick corbelling on the tower cornices and the central gable. The church occupies a prominent position in the oldest section of Helena, three blocks west of the Cherry Street Historic District.

Elaboration

The western, or front facade features two square towers flanking a large central gable. The square two-story belcast tower at the northwest comer contains a paneled double-leaf wooden door centered between two buttresses. A five-light ribbon transom beneath a two-light lancet transom topped with a hood mold of soldier bricks caps the door, which is reached by seven wide concrete steps. The ground level of the central gable is fenestrated by three bays of three stained glass lancet windows separated by buttresses. All are topped with stained glass lancet transoms with variations in the upper and lower sashes. The first bay to the north consists of two windows with stained glass upper sashes and frosted lower sashes. The third window in the bay has an arrangement of one-over-one frosted sashes. The second bay in the center of the facade contains a window composed of two sashes of frosted glass centered between two combination windows. The third bay contains two frosted windows while the last window is a combination of stained glass and frosted sashes. Three windows open into the basement in each bay. The square tower at the southwest corner of the church is one-and-a-half stories and contains a double-leaf entrance like that on the northwest tower. The upper story of the northwest tower contains a pair of lancet windows beneath a wide cornice of corbelled bricks, which create a horizontal line of recessed crosses that extends around the tower (four crosses on each elevation). Above the ground floor windows in the central gable are a pair of stained glass windows topped with a fanlight centered in the facade. Brick corbelling creates a vergeboard effect in the gable. The upper story of the southwest tower features a recessed panel in the brick containing three slightly projecting brick squares beneath a line of five blind lancet openings.

The southern elevation of the southwest tower contains a single frosted window topped with a stained glass lancet transom centered between two buttresses. Corbelling above the window creates a design of squares and arehes like that on the western facade. A single buttress beneath a corbelled design of squares adorns the eastern elevation of the tower. This south elevation is fenestrated by a row of four evenly spaced windows separated by four buttresses. The windows vary in distance from the ground, stairstepping up toward the west, resulting in the westernmost window occupying the highest position just beneath the eaves. At the southeast corner a wing extends approximately seven feet to the south. The western elevation of the wing is fenestrated by a single window between two buttresses. The southern elevation of the wing is composed of a large gable separated into three bays by four buttresses. The gable is fenestrated left to right by a frosted window, a single-leaf paneled door beneath a lancet transom adjacent to a slender brick exterior chimney, and a second frosted window. Corbelling of the bricks is used again to create a

vergeboard effect at the apex of the gable. A round window of four lights topped with a brick hoodmold lights the attic space above the centered door.

The rear, or eastern, elevation is divided into six bays by seven buttresses. From left to right the first bay contains a single paneled door beneath a stained glass lancet transom reached by six concrete steps. The second bay is fenestrated by a tall clear one-over-one window and a shorter frosted glass window placed higher in the wall adjacent to a buttress. The third bay features a single frosted glass window above a bricked-in window that formerly lit the basement level. The fourth bay contains a single window of stained and frosted glass. Beneath the window is a paneled basement door. The fifth bay is fenestrated by a short stained glass window beside a tall clear glass window. The sixth bay at the northeast corner contains a paneled door reached by six concrete steps. The lancet transom above the door is frosted. A weatherboard gable rises from the ridgeline in the center of the roof.

A gabled wing extends from the northeast corner of the north elevation. As on the southern face the wing is divided into three bays by four buttresses beneath corbelled detail. Five concrete steps access a double-leaf door in the center bay. The door is elaborated with a four-light ribbon transom topped by a two-light frosted lancet transom. Two windows in the east and west bays flank the door. The window to the east of the door consists of a stained-glass sash above a frosted sash while the window to the west is composed of two frosted sashes. A thin exterior brick chimney rises to the left of the western window. Two small openings beneath each window provide light to the basement. A cornerstone east of the door reads, "CENTENNIAL BAPTIST CHURCH/1876-1903/E.C. MORRIS D.D. PASTOR." A round frosted glass window is centered above the door in the gable.

The western elevation of the northeast wing is fenestrated by a stained glass and frosted window adjacent to a single buttress. Fenestration on the wall spanning the area between the northeast wing and the northwest tower mirrors the south. Four windows within bays created by five buttresses stairstep slightly up the wall toward the west. Three windows are a combination of stained glass and frosted glass while the last window in the row consists of two sashes of stained glass. The tower at the northwest corner contains a double-leaf entry with ribbon and lancet transoms matching those on the front (western facade); however, the lancet transom contains stained glass rather than frosted. A pair of small stained glass windows opens into the upper story of the tower just above the entrance.

Interior

The interior of Centennial Baptist is currently undergoing restoration efforts to reverse the effects of several years of deterioration, therefore much of the space within is filled with ladders and scaffolding. The sanctuary is very open and light due to the rows of lancet and large paired stained glass windows and fanlight at the rear of the room. The height of the tray ceiling with its exposed structural members is accentuated by the use of large arced braces elaborated with pendants. Two multi-globe chandeliers illuminate the rear and front of the sanctuary. Dark wainscoting beneath light plaster lines the room. Original wooden pews line the hardwood floors, leading the eye to the raised chancel and pulpit. The pulpit is centered on a paneled

platform outlined by a simple brass rail. The chancel and pipe organ are elevated slightly further and are surrounded by a low railing of turned spindles.

An ongoing restoration of the church began in 1994 with a Certified Local Government (CLG) grant from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, which provided for an emergency stabilization report and master plan. Restoration plans were put on hold for a period while the tiny congregation implemented fund raising efforts. The members of Centennial were able to raise funds earmarked for structural work, which was supplemented with a second CLG grant in 1995. This enabled the architects in charge of the project to begin Phase I of the restoration and stabilize the sagging foundation for the construction of scaffolding and strengthening of the building's trusses.

The main problem vexing the church was an overloaded roof, which caused the trusses to squat and bow the sidewalls out of plumb. A Historic Preservation Restoration grant was provided in 1998 to install six-by-six steel columns under each wooden truss to straighten the slumping sidewalls. This phase was completed in 2000 and with the provision of further state funds, Phase II is currently underway. A fifth truss and three-and-a-half trusses at the western edge of the transept are being shored up and general maintenance and paint jobs are taking place. Future grant funds will be used to address interior finishes.

A small room is situated in the northeast corner of the sanctuary flanking the chancel. Its plaster walls trimmed with wainscoting, which also appears in the interior, do not reach the ceiling of the sanctuary and are topped with a flat roof. Wide crown molding with a broad overhang surrounds the exterior of the room. A five-panel door opens into the west wall. A second five-panel door leads from the elevated chancel on the south interior wall to four wooden steps within the room. The surrounds of both interior doors are trimmed with bulls-eye corner blocks.

The east wall contains a single, double-hung, one-over-one window topped with a small, stationary lancet window and an exterior five-panel door topped with a clear glass lancet window. A small bathroom constructed of modern wood paneling was added in the mid-to-late-twentieth century in the northeast corner of the room. The north exterior wall is fenestrated with a double-hung, one-over-one stained glass window topped with stained glass lancet. This room historically served as Reverend Morris's office and was utilized in later years by subsequent pastors.

A second room in the southeast corner beside the chancel mirrors the configuration of the northeastern pastor's office. This room is also topped with a flat roof with wide overhang and contains two paneled interior doors in the northern and western interior walls. Five wooden steps lead from the northern interior door. A two-panel exterior door topped with a stained glass lancet opens into the southeast corner beside a bathroom partition running along the southern exterior wall. The room is lit by a clear, double-hung, one-over-one window and stained glass lancet next to the exterior door. This room was used as a ladies lounge for the women who sang in the choir.

The northwest corner of the sanctuary contains the vestibule to the original main entry. One set of double-leaf, six-panel doors opens from the south wall. The doors are topped with five

rectangular transom lights beneath a large stained glass lancet window. The western facade contains a double-leaf, six-panel door and five-light transom. The lancet above this door is clear with two lights. A double-leaf door of six panels gives entry to the sanctuary from the southern interior wall. Dark wainscoting lines the vestibule and part of a two-pronged brass wall sconce with fluted glass shade, remains on the south wall beside the sanctuary doors.

A second smaller vestibule is situated in the southwest corner of the sanctuary. Five-panel double-leaf doors open to the sanctuary from the interior north wall. Six-paneled double-leaf doors on the front western wall are the only exterior doors from this vestibule. Above the doors are a line of four rectangular transom lights. One panel appears to be missing its muntin, therefore the number of lights does not match those on the northwest vestibule. The frosted glass lancet window above the transom consists of two lights. The southern exterior wall is lit by a double-hung, one-over-one frosted glass window topped with stained glass lancet. Beginning in the 1950s this entry area was put to use as a Sunday School room for preschoolers.

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:
Nationally: X Statewide:_ Locally:_

Applicable National Register Criteria: A__ B X C X D_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A X B_ C_ D_ E_ F_ G_

NHL Criteria: 2

Criteria Exception: 1

NHL Theme(s): II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements
3. Religious Institutions

Areas of Significance: Religion

Period(s) of Significance: 1905-1922

Significant Dates:

Significant Person(s): Elias Camp Morris

Cultural Affiliation: African American

Architect/Builder: Henry James Price

Historic Contexts: XXXI. Social and Humanitatian Movements

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

Summary

Centennial Baptist Church is nationally significant for its association with Dr. Elias Camp Morris, who served as pastor from 1879 until his death in 1922. The period of his life from 1882 to 1922 was his most productive period with respect to his efforts on a national level to further the religious, political, and societal achievements of African Americans. Morris is nationally significant for his leadership of the National Baptist Convention, the largest African American organization in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The 1912 edition of *Who's Who Among the Colored Baptists* described Morris as having "reached the point where he can render the greatest service to his constituents and give to the world an exhibition of the true leadership for which such men as [William J.] Simmons, [Frederick] Douglass and Price stood unflinchingly and of which [Booker T.] Washington, [Richard H.] Boyd, [W.E.B.] Dubois and others are examples that now stand out pre-eminently." According to religious historian Quinton Dixie, as the "driving force behind the 1895 merger of three black Baptist organizations," Dr. Morris "indirectly inaugurated leadership patterns that persist today" within African American religious organizations. During Morris' presidency, Centennial Baptist Church "functioned as the headquarters of the National Baptist Convention," and it remains today as a symbol of his progressive efforts to provide African Americans with a self-directed religious organization during the Jim Crow era.[1]

Reverend Morris recognized the influence of the church and its power to fill the spiritual reserves of his congregation at the local, state, and national levels, enabling African Americans to deal with life during the most difficult of times. He dedicated his life to bringing attention to the need for African American religious autonomy at the national, as well as local level. As president of the National Baptist Convention (NBC) (1895-1922), the "largest deliberative body of Negroes in the world," Morris brought attention to the right of African Americans to establish independent religious associations. This organization allowed African American Baptists autonomy separate from the white Baptist hierarchy. By 1900, NBC represented over 60 percent of African American Baptists and over one-half of Sunday schools (over 18,000 schools). Morris was able to provide a voice for African American scholars through the Convention by aiding the establishment of the National Baptist Publishing Board devoted to the production of religious materials for African American congregations. In 1912-13, the publishing board had facilities in Nashville valued at over $350,000 and was one of the largest business enterprises owned and operated by African Americans in the first quarter of the twentieth century.[2]

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1 Quoted from Professor Quinton Dixie, Department of Religious Studies, Indiana University in a letter to the National Historic Landmarks Survey, October 2000. His dissertation is entitled: "The Business of Religion: Elias Camp Morris and the Formation of a Black Baptist Identity, 1880-1920." *Who's Who Among the Colored Baptists of the United States*, 1912.

2 E.C. Morris, *Sermons, Addresses, and Reminiscences*, (Nashville, TN: Townsend Press, 1993), 175; Linda T. Wynn, "National Baptist Publishing Board," < http://www.tnstate.edu/library/digital/nation.html> . See also "Richard Henry Boyd," < http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/print/BB/fbo60.html> and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "An Introduction to the Church in the Southern Black Community." < http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/introduction/html.>

Reverend Morris entered the political sphere as a delegate to the Republican National Conventions of 1884, 1888 and 1904. His work as a delegate served to strengthen his appeal as a leader and enabled him to expand his influence in the fight for African American rights beyond Arkansas. During World War I Morris pushed African American men to register for the draft in order to demonstrate to America that they were productive and supportive citizens, deserving of recognition by white society for their sacrifices.

Centennial Baptist Church was the "home base" for Reverend Morris during his varied career as a religious leader and statesman from 1905 until his death in 1922. The brick Gothic Revival church was designed by a member of Morris's congregation in 1905 to replace an earlier building that the membership had outgrown. The reverend assumed the pastorship of Centennial in 1879 and remained the leader of the church from the beginning of his career as a national spokesman for African American rights in 1882 until 1922. Although Morris traveled extensively in the fulfillment of his varied duties, he remained loyal to his congregation and community and maintained his home in Helena.

The Conservative and Progressive[3]

The 1890s brought about codified racial segregation in the form of "Jim Crow" laws, maintaining the lines that had been drawn during slavery with increasing violence and vituperation. The African American church and its leaders during the Jim Crow era were central to the lives of their congregants because they were not simply meeting spiritual needs, but were also responsible for providing unification and a social setting that allowed a respite from the oppression faced on the streets. Separate churches allowed African Americans to take control of their lives by worshiping God their way and being able to experience the freedom to speak as they wanted, expressing their feelings and aspirations in a safe environment. African American houses of worship were often utilized for political meetings to advance civil rights efforts and education. For those reasons the church was not immune to violent attacks by former slave owners or the Ku Klux Klan, who continued to be threatened by the thought of black independence. Bushwhackers attacked churches, terrorized the members and beat preachers. On a more subversive scale some white churches welcomed African Americans to their pews after emancipation but with the paternalistic idea that they would be "guided and controlled by their old and true friends."[4]

The African American minister exerted a great influence on his members and was described by W.E.B. DuBois as "a leader, a politician, an orator, a 'boss,' an intriguer, an idealist."[5] After emancipation some black clergymen advocated a reversal of the dependence visited upon African Americans during slavery and encouraged them to overcome their current situations by reaching their potential. At the same time some church leaders took an accomodationist stance and gave

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[3] Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921), 247-266. Woodson describes how the African American church was divided into two camps during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the conservatives and the progressives.

[4] William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: the African American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 75.

[5] Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1999), 380.

voice to white society's ideals of black submissiveness in order to escape the ongoing atrocities. But many who had been witness to church burnings and the violence, intimidation and murder visited upon their preachers continued to push for using the church as a political platform to further civil rights and education.

As the realities and challenges of the Jim Crow era developed, the African American church had "some difficulty in finding itself." Conservative elements in the church were satisfied with the traditional role and practices of the institution, while the first generation that came of age out of bondage, labeled as progressives or "the educated Negroes," questioned these assumptions in light of a new world of relative freedom.

> *During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, therefore, the conservative and progressive elements in the church unconsciously drifted far apart. In the course of time it was no longer a struggle between the old and young. The difference in age ceased to be the line of cleavage. It was rather a difference of ideas. These groups were widely differing in their interpretation of religion, in their ideas as to the importance of the church in the life of the community, in their attitudes as to the relation of the church to the individual, and in their standards of public conduct. On the whole, there was an effort to stand together; but in spite of themselves the line of cleavage had to be recognized and dealt with as a fact. As poverty is jealous of opulence, so is ignorance jealous of intelligence; and in this case the jealousy all but developed into caste hate.*[6]

The Baptist Church, because of its denominational structure, was able to weather the debate much more easily than the more structured Methodists. Dissatisfied "upper crust" Baptists could at any time leave a conservative congregation and establish their own following. This debate between the conservative and progressive sections of the African American church in the late nineteenth century was more than a local affair. At the national level, the appropriate relationship between the white-controlled denominations and the legitimate role of black church-goers within the larger groups was another divisive wedge between the conservatives and the progressives.

> *The best example of a situation which could not be thus handled is that of the repudiation of the white Baptists by the progressive Negro element of this church. The white Baptists, of course, had no actual control of the Negro communicants, but had some very strong moral claims on them. White missionaries of this denomination had distributed literature, organized churches, constructed edifices, and established schools among Negroes; and the boards supporting the missionaries had supplied some of the funds by which most of these institutions were maintained. To say anything derogatory to the policies of the management directing this beneficent work, therefore, seemed to the conservative Negroes all but blasphemous.*
>
> *The progressive Baptist element, however, had a different attitude. Thousands of Negro teachers and preachers whom these Baptist schools had trained had*

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[6] Woodson, *History of the Negro Church*, 249-250.

entered upon their life's work with the hope that they would figure conspicuously in the life of their people. When they faced the stern realities of the situation they too often found their way was blocked. White men, to be sure, did not aspire to the pastorate of Negro churches; but they undertook to dictate the policy of associations and conventions to retain their hold on the Negro Baptists. The conflict came when Negroes after being refused the privilege of participating in the management of the American Baptist Home Mission Society began to question the motives of its official staff. More fuel was furnished for the flames when, after having all but agreed to accept contributions of Negroes to its Sunday school literature, the American Baptist Publication Society, upon protest from Southern churchmen, receded from that position. The issue was then joined. The National Baptist Convention, a union of the Negro Baptists, was effected in 1886, and as the struggle grew more intense every effort was made so to extend it as to destroy the influence of white national bodies among Negroes.

The Negroes had a just cause for complaint. If under the leadership of the white Baptists their way to promotion would be blocked and their literary aspirations crushed, what hope was there for the race to rise and of what benefit would education be to the Negro, if it did not equip him to do for himself what the white man at first had to do for him? How could the motives of the white Baptists be lofty, moreover, if they did not believe that Negroes should rise in the church and school? To this the whites replied that they looked forward with the most pleasant anticipation to the day when the Negroes would be prepared to enjoy the good things for which they clamored, but that the time for the Negroes to dispense with the leadership of the whites had not then come. Many years of education and social uplift were still necessary before the Negroes could successfully set out to do for themselves.

This argument had little weight with the progressive Negroes and they were not wanting in logical speakers to place their case before the world. There was that courageous leader, Dr. Harvey Johnson, of Baltimore, who belabored his former friends as enemies of the race. Equally effective, too, was the eloquent Dr. Walter H. Brooks of Washington, who fearlessly took up the cudgel and dealt the white Baptists many a blow from which they never recovered. With the National Baptist Convention emerging as a common concern of Negroes under the organizing hand of Dr. E. C. Morris, and the National Baptist Publishing House extending the circulation of elementary literature throughout the country under the direction of the efficient Dr. R. H. Boyd, this self-assertion of the Negro Baptists became a factor to be reckoned with.[7]

The establishment of black controlled national church organizations played a significant role within African American culture during the advent of the restrictive Jim Crow era. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the rejection by white Baptists of a more extensive African American role within the church was just another example of how promises of American society remained unfulfilled. As the nineteenth century came to a close the leadership of the progressive

[7] Woodson, *History of the Negro Church*, 259-261.

segment of the Baptist leadership, including E.C. Morris, fought to establish a separate national church organization that equaled the segregated white conventions. The rise of the National Baptist Convention is an outward sign of the growing strength of the progressives within the church.

> *As to which faction was right, history alone will tell. Even at the present [1922], however, one can see a decided advantage in the independent Negro movement. Every one will admit that the Negro must eventually rely solely upon himself, and that not until he emerges from a state of dependency can he hope to secure the recognition of the other groups...The Negro home, church, and school must, as fast as possible, become sufficient unto themselves. The sooner they attain this stage in their development, the better will it be for the race. The Negro institutions which during the turbulent period have, in separating from the whites, learned to supply their own needs, have made a step far in advance of those dependent on the whites.*[8]

The Growth of the Negro Church[9]

Despite the divisions between the conservative and progressive elements, the African American church grew substantially at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1906, there were more than 36,000 church organizations with a membership approaching 3.7 million that held services in over 35,000 churches and 1,200 halls. Over 34,000 Sunday schools taught lessons to more than 1.7 million pupils.

> *Comparing these statistics of 1906 with those of 1890, one sees the rapid growth of the Negro church. Although the Negro population increased only 26.1 per cent during these sixteen years, the number of church organizations increased 56.7 per cent; the number of communicants, 37.8 per cent; the number of edifices, 47.9; the seating capacity, 54.1 per cent; and the value of church property, 112.7 per cent.*[10]

Within the church, the Methodists and the Baptists were the dominant affiliations. "Taken together, the Methodists and Baptists had 35,208 or 95.8 per cent [sic] of the total number of Negro organizations; 3,536,920 or 96 per cent of the total number of Negro communicants and $52,334,107 or 92.4 per cent of the total value of church property."

The movement toward separatism exhibited during the last quarter of the nineteenth century had borne fruit by the early twentieth century. Over 85 percent of the organizations, 87 percent of the membership, 83 percent of the Sunday schools, and 78 percent of the church property were controlled by black run organizations. From 1890 to 1906, among all black churches, "the National Baptist Convention . . . advanced from 50.4 per cent to 61.4 per cent in membership and from 33.9 per cent to 43.1 per cent in value of church property."

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[8] Ibid., 263.
[9] Ibid., 286-299. The following statistics are extracted from Woodson's summary.
[10] Ibid., 287.

Sunday Schools were a major activity among African American churches at the turn of the century—over 91 percent of the congregations held classes, as opposed to only 79 percent of the white churches. Within the black church, over 50 percent of the Sunday schools were associated with the National Baptist Convention, numbering almost 18,000 active schools.

The growth of Sunday schools under the National Baptist Convention is certainly due to its focus on the creation and diffusion of black-authored curriculum materials and lessons.

> *The Negro Baptists, having become enraged at the refusal of the white Baptists to recognize them as constituents of an all comprehending denomination, organized the National Baptist Convention, which accepted as one of its most important concerns the establishment of The National Baptist Publishing House.*[11]

Elias Camp Morris

Elias Camp Morris was born of slave parents on May 7, 1855, near Springplace, Georgia. After the end of the Civil War, his family moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, and then to Stevenson, Alabama, where Morris received a common education. Having lost both of his parents by age fourteen, he was unable to pursue higher education. He completed an apprenticeship with a shoemaker and supported himself with that trade until 1875, when he was called to the ministry. In 1877, Morris stopped over in Helena, Arkansas, on his way to Kansas and decided the possibilities and resources in Arkansas were significant enough to settle down. In Helena he continued his work as a shoemaker and preached on Sundays.[12]

Reverend E.C. Morris was embarking on an impressive career in 1879 when he accepted the pastorship of the fledgling congregation of Centennial Baptist Church in Helena, Arkansas. Having only twenty-three members in that year, the congregation would swell to more than one thousand during Morris's 43-year-long service, a testament to his leadership. Morris recognized that the state's African American Baptist churches in Phillips, Lee and Monroe counties needed to become more structured. Toward this end he organized and served two years as executive secretary for a district association in 1879, which provided classes in such subjects as stewardship, Sunday school teaching and choir management for those counties.[13] Soon after assuming the pastorate of Centennial, Morris became active in the Arkansas Negro Baptist Convention, being elected secretary in 1880 and president in 1882 (a position he held for twenty-seven years). It was Morris's firm belief that achievement and religious growth were tied to education. As an influential voice in the Convention, Morris could advance his beliefs by participating in the formation of one of Arkansas's foremost institutions of higher learning for blacks, the Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock, Arkansas. The college was voted into existence at the 1884 meeting of the Convention. The school provided training for African American ministers and teachers and was considered at the time to be the only institution of higher learning for African Americans not governed by a white administration. Reverend Morris served as chairman of the board of trustees at the college for twenty-five years.

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[11] Ibid., 297-298.

[12] A.W. Pegues, *Our Baptist Ministers and Schools* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970), 353-356.

[13] Calvin Smith, *A Memorial to the Past and a Glimmer of Hope for the Future: The Magnolia Cemetery, Helena, Arkansas* (Jonesboro: Arkansas State University Department of History, 1997).

Morris's leadership and organizational skills received broad based acknowledgment during his long career. "Dr. Morris is noted for his ability to organize and to direct in matters of public concern, and his advice is ardently sought by all his constituency." In 1912, Reverend White, a Methodist minister reporting on the National Baptist Convention in Houston, wrote that Morris was "a far-seeing statesman," a "manly man," and a "splendid substitute" on Earth for the leadership of Jesus Christ. White compliments Morris's recommendation that the National Baptist Convention sponsor an international study of the "condition of Negro peoples, and of placing them in a proper light before the civilized nations of the world." White also provided insight into Morris's character:

> *I saw his face livid with flame, his eyes flash defiance and his whole form stiffen with a righteous indignation of manly independence, when on the occasion of his election, certain politicians, by a little subtle arrangement, sought to make it appear that there was pronounced opposition to his retention in office. He indignantly flung back the election into their faces, and challenged, "If there are fifty representative Baptists in this convention, who will stand and be counted, as opposed to my election, I will not serve you as President." His friends remonstrated because he had ruled the motion out of order that had elected him by acclamation. He retorted that if they did not take their seats he would count them as part of the fifty. Only one stood for the count.*[14]

The National Baptist Convention

In 1880 the Foreign Mission Convention of the United States was established under a convocation of Southern Negro Baptist churches, associations and state conventions. The American National Baptist Convention and the Baptist Education Convention were founded in 1886 and 1893 respectively. Each of these conventions would meet annually in the same city and, although operating under three separate constitutions, working toward the same goals. By 1886 the three organizations had made an agreement to meet as one under the umbrella of the National Baptist Convention. The Convention functioned as the administrative arm of African American Baptist denominations. Delegates to the Convention from various Baptist organizations met annually for consideration of board and standing committee reports, and to receive contributions in order to distribute them to chosen causes.[15] As the president of the Convention from 1895-1922 Morris established the largest deliberative body of African Americans at its time. This organization allowed African American Baptists autonomy, separate from the white Baptist hierarchy.

By 1895 a unified National Baptist Convention of the U.S.A., formed from the three aforementioned organizations, emerged at Friendship Church in Atlanta, Georgia, during

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[13] R. M. Carver, Biographical Sketch, *Preacher's Magazine* as reprinted in Morris' *Sermons, Addresses and Reminiscences*. R.H. Boyd also gives a summary of Morris's career and character in *Sermons*. The description of the National Baptist Convention in 1912 is from White, Rev. J.T.S., "The National Baptist Convention as Seen Through the Eyes of an African Methodist," *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* 29, no. 2 (1912): 168-176.

[15] E.C. Morris, *National Baptist Catechism. Outlining the Work, Aim, and Objects of the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville: University Press, 1896).

sessions attended by hundreds of clergy from northern and southern black Baptist churches. Prior to 1895 the structure of the National Baptist Convention lacked cohesion and seemed to revolve around loose organizations with no true national influence. At the Atlanta meeting three boards were established to represent the interests of the previously separate conventions: the Foreign Mission Board formed to direct missions in Africa; the Home Mission Board for the direction of home missionary activities and the Educational Board for the promotion of black education and development of Negro seminaries. The National Baptist Convention of the U.S.A. was formed mainly in response to the issue of whether African Americans should establish self-sufficient religious and educational institutions that were free from white leadership. This issue gave rise to the question of whether African Americans should have their own publishing house to provide religious literature written by African American authors to the congregations. In 1898, when E.C. Morris delivered his annual address, the question of dependency upon white sponsorship as opposed to racial self-sufficiency threatened to split the young Convention. He emphasized in this address that white Baptists would have to acknowledge the National Baptist Convention as a viable group.[16] Morris emerged on the national scene advocating African Americans's right to establish independent religious associations and calling for recognition of the strong organization he led.

Early in his career Morris saw the need for talented African American authors to write for the African American Baptist audience. He met this need by establishing a forum for religious subjects written by African American Baptist scholars. Morris's first religious publication, the *Baptist Vanguard* (1882), became the model for African American religious literature throughout the country. Prior to the establishment of an African American publishing body, the congregations relied on white Baptist denominations to furnish newsletters, Sunday school lessons, and other religious materials. The northern Baptist Society, called the American Baptist Publication Society, had agreed to publish articles and Sunday school literature written by African American Baptists. Under pressure from southern Baptists, however, the white organization rejected the work of these scholars.[17]

Since 1891, African American Baptists had been enthusiastic about the idea of publishing denominational literature "from the pens of Negro Baptist authors."[18] In 1893 Morris gave a paper in demand for a "Negro Baptist publishing house" stating, "we must not be satisfied with subordinate things. We must take our place as thinkers and as writers."[19] At this time, whites were reluctant to encourage writing and publishing ventures among African Americans.[20] In 1896 Morris fully backed efforts by Reverend Richard Henry Boyd of Texas to establish a black Baptist publishing board. In that year the board of the National Baptist Convention appointed Morris to a printing committee as editor-in-chief to prepare and publish Sunday school literature.

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[16] J.H. Jackson, *A Story of Christian Activism: The History of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.* (Nashville, TN: Townsend Press, 1980), 83.
[17] Ibid., 92.
[18] Ibid., 93.
[19] Ibid., 94, 92.
[20] Bobby L. Lovett, *A Black Man's Dream: The First One Hundred Years* (Jacksonville, FL: Mega Corporation, 1993), 28-29.

By 1897 the first issue of the *Sunday School Teacher*, the earliest quarterly ever printed by African American Baptists, went to press. This publication was the result of efforts of the new Sunday School Publishing Board formed out of the National Baptist Convention, in cooperation with the white Baptist organizations.[21] The Home Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention allied closely with the publishing board by having their missionaries display publications and Sunday school materials.[22] This was a major achievement and only a small part of the success was enjoyed by the publishing board, but it was censured by some African Americans within the Convention and the American Baptist Publication Society. The strident efforts of the board caused no small amount of contention among many who felt that the endeavor was being used as a personal bank account for its organizer. In the early years of the board's existence Morris countered this criticism by throwing his support behind Boyd, holding multiple inspections of the operations and calling upon African Americans to unite in their efforts to escape white paternalism, not foster division.

Within a decade, however, the publishing board would jeopardize the Convention's very existence. Despite the continuous rancor concerning revenues and management, the National Baptist Publishing Board grew and prospered during its first decade. Soon it was able to purchase its own machinery and property to house its operations. By 1915 the board had grown more powerful than its parent organization ostensibly due to the fact that the board was legally incorporated and the convention was based only on "gentlemen's agreements." Morris emphasized to members of the boards and the convention that black Baptists should not forget that their strength lay in working together and at this point he, along with his cabinet and official board, attempted to gain control of board real estate that the convention considered its own. In 1917 and 1919 Morris tried to reinstate unity between the groups through the formation of Peace Commissions. The schism that had developed between the convention and those who sympathized with the publishing board could not be resolved by these meetings and resulted in court decisions that transferred the property the convention reportedly owned into the hands of the Publishing Board by 1920.[23] These decisions meant the National Baptist Convention had to begin again to establish a publishing arm of the organization. A new publishing board was elected as soon as possible after the split but a new publishing house in Nashville was not constructed until 1924, two years after Reverend Morris's death. The building, designed by the African American architectural firm McKissack and McKissack, was named the Morris Memorial Building in honor of the reverend.[24]

Morris's Political Career

Morris' stature in the church, which was in effect the center of the lives of many African Americans, led to widespread involvement in various endeavors at the local and national levels. He represented Arkansas' First Congressional District as a delegate to the Republican National

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[21] Jackson, *Story of Christian Activism*, 100.
[22] Lovett, *Black Man's Dream*, 71.
[23] Jackson, *Story of Christian Activism*, 109-13.
[24] Ibid., 147. The original National Baptist Publishing Board continues today with operations managed by R.H. Boyd's descendants and is the largest African-American publishing firm in the United States.

Conventions of 1884, 1888 and 1904. He also served the Arkansas State Republican Convention for nearly 40 years.[25] Morris fought against whites that sought to form a "Lily White" Republican Party by removing African American party members from leadership roles. A split in the Republican Party had appeared between one faction, a mixed or bi-racial group, called the "Black and Tans," and another all white group, who hoped to entice more whites to the Republican Party through patronage. The "Lily Whites" hoped to re-establish a two-party system in the South while limiting black control of the Republican Party.[26] In 1908, Morris began to break away from the Republican Party saying he anticipated that "before many years shall pass the Democratic Party will champion the rights of the black man." That year he successfully lobbied to have a plank in the state Republican platform removed on the basis that it was discriminatory. Morris demonstrated that it was designed to reassure whites that they should not fear African American domination if the Republicans won the election.[27] Again in 1914 and 1916, he fought the "Lily White" movement at the state level; and yet, its strength and persuasiveness was proven in 1916, the year that marked the first time in thirty-two years that no African American represented Arkansas at the National Republican Convention.[28] In 1920 Morris played a role in the confrontation between the factions at the state Republican convention.[29] He continued the fight on the convention floor in June 1920, representing the African American Republican committee from Arkansas, known as the Republican State Central Committee.[30]

In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt recognized Morris's appeal as a national leader by appointing him as an emissary to the Belgian Congo. Belgian King Leopold II was recognized as absolute ruler of the Congo Free State in 1885. Led by his desire for adventure and riches, Leopold controlled the Congo like it was personal property, ruthlessly exploiting the country to recoup his expenses. Roosevelt, along with European politicians, criticized Leopold's actions, and sent Morris to investigate claims of inhumane treatment of Congolese citizens. Reverend Morris confirmed the exploitation of the people of the Congo Free State when he reported to Roosevelt. Later in 1908, Leopold was forced by international criticism to turn over the Congo Free State to the Belgian Parliament for annexation as a colony.[31] Morris's work contributed to the removal of total control of the Congo from Leopold II.[32] His defense of the rights of an oppressed population was recognized by national leaders, with whom he worked successfully to influence international policy.

Morris's wish for unity of the races manifested itself in many ways. When the United States

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[25] Richardson, *Cyclopedia*, 101.
[26] Elbert Lee Tatum, *The Changed Political Thought of the Negro, 1915-1940* (New York: Exposition Press, 1951), 84-85.
[27] *Gazette*, April 29, 1908.
[28] *Gazette*, April, 1916.
[29] "Abstract and Brief for Contestants from Arkansas State Republican Convention E.C. Morris, et al., vis. H.L. Remmel, et al., John A. Hibbler and Thomas J. Price, Attorneys for Contestants," *Gazette*, May 8, June 3-4, 1920.
[30] *Encyclopedia Americana*, 493.
[31] The March 13, 1960, edition of the *Helena-West Helena World* featured an article on Dr. E.C. Morris and the Belgian Congo. C.M. Young, editor of the *Helena-West Helena World* reportedly saw a plaque in Morris's honor in Congo.
[32] Jackson, *Story of Christian Activism*, 96-97.

entered World War I, Morris encouraged African American men to participate in the draft. He believed that the war offered an opportunity for members of his race to demonstrate their worth. "Believing African Americans' full rights as citizens would be restored in exchange for their support of the war, Morris offered sermons and speeches from the pulpit at Centennial and at meetings of the Convention across the United States, encouraging registration, the purchase of war bonds, and food rationing."[33] Along with W.E.B. DuBois, Morris called for African Americans to fight for the "double victory" abroad and at home. While serving in Europe black veterans were exposed to a degree of racial equality. Their experience abroad, coupled with the reassurances of leaders like Morris led these men to expect less discriminatory treatment and new opportunities for advancement in return for their service. After returning home, however, many found their situations unchanged. Racial conflicts spread across the United States as a result of growing tensions. The Arkansas Delta was the scene of such a conflict, culminating in violence with far-reaching effects.

In September of 1919 hostility surfaced in Elaine, Arkansas, located near Helena. The Elaine Race Riot began with a fray between African American union members and white local officials.[34] The day following the outbreak of violence, Rev. E.C. Morris assured white people in Helena that they had nothing to fear from the African American population. Morris later wrote that he "never believed that the Negro at Elaine had planned to murder the white planters and take their lands," as many whites had feared. In the aftermath sixty-seven African Americans were sentenced to prison terms for their participation in a purported rebellion and twelve were condemned to death for the murder of five white people who died in the fighting. All the sentences were eventually overturned by the United States Supreme Court decision of *Moore v. Dempsey* (1923).

The national scope of racial unrest during the summer of 1919 was epitomized by the race riot at Elaine. In the face of the turmoil Morris still advocated his belief that the example of their service during the war entitled African Americans to recognition as citizens. He acted as a unifying force between the races during the Elaine riots, encouraging cooperation. Through his urging he influenced local events that reflected the national trend toward violent racial conflict. Morris's abilities as a mediator extended to both races. He furthered racial cooperation, but not at the expense of African American religious autonomy. While Morris believed a separate religious structure was in the best interest of African Americans, this view did not preclude his feeling that a peaceful working relationship with whites was necessary.

Morris did not stand alone as a great African American leader, but he was certainly on a par with the most well-known of those who labored to convince white America that Jim Crow was unjustifiable. When one considers the efforts of Booker T. Washington, R.H. Boyd, and W.E.B. DuBois, the list would not be complete without the inclusion of Reverend Elias Camp Morris. He was a man respected by white leaders as well as those of his own race. In 1900 Morris

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[33] Kieran Taylor, "We Have Just Begun: Black Organizing and White Response in the Arkansas Delta, 1919," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (Autumn 1999), 271.

[34] Arthur I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s: A Study in the Connections Between Conflict and Violence* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 146.

organized the Arkansas State Mission Board as a vehicle for cooperation between the National Baptist Convention and the white Southern Baptist Convention. In 1903 he helped organize the bi-racial General Convention of America and in 1905 assisted in the formation of the Baptist World Congress, serving as the only African American member of the executive committees of both. Morris's stature in the white community is further reflected by the fact that on the occasion of his death in 1922, the mayor of Helena declared that all the city's businesses, both African American and white, be closed for the funeral.

Morris and Centennial Baptist Church

Throughout his long and varied career Morris remained pastor of Centennial Baptist Church. As the membership grew during the early years of his pastorate so did the necessity of replacing the congregation's original house of worship. Morris's descendants tell the story that the clergyman saw a church building on his travels that impressed him, and he described it to a member of his congregation who had studied architecture, Henry James Price. Price had graduated summa cum laude from Howard University in Washington, D.C., and moved to Helena around 1900. Research has revealed little about Price despite the fact that his descendants still reside in Helena. The virtually unaltered building reflects traditional Gothic influences such as lancet windows and buttresses.

Centennial Baptist is a local landmark in Helena that bears national significance due to its association with the African American leader who was its pastor for more than forty years. Centennial Baptist is the only known example in Arkansas of a church designed by an African American architect for an African American congregation. More than that, through its link with Morris, the building is a symbol of the efforts towards racial and religious equality in Arkansas and the United States. By Morris's count Centennial Baptist hosted over five hundred African American speakers who delivered their messages of perseverance and progress to an audience made up of black and white alike. The speakers ranged from nationally known orators to county farm demonstration speakers. Booker T. Washington spoke at Centennial in 1908, stressing the need for African American education and moral structure.[35] In 1916 H.C. Ray of the Department of Agriculture spoke to the Baptists at Helena on "Dr. Knapp's Safe Farming Doctrines" to stimulate better farming ideas in the minds of Arkansas's African Americans.[36]

The church is the structure most closely associated with the productive period of E.C. Morris's life. Reverend Morris's house in Helena, which is no longer standing, was a two-story frame building at 401 Columbia. The house changed hands after his death in 1922 but remained a single-family residence until circa 1976. The Rogerline Johnson family bought the house and it was destroyed in 1977 for the construction of a one-story brick commercial structure housing a photography studio, which remains on the lot today.[37] The only other building known to be associated with Morris was constructed in his honor after his death. The Morris Memorial Building, completed in 1926 and named in honor of Dr. E.C. Morris, is a Neoclassical structure

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[35] "Booker T. Washington Visits Helena," *Phillips County Historical Review* 37, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring 1999), 27.

[32] "Movement to Aid the Negro Farmers Here," *Helena World*, March 1919.

[37] Rogerline Johnson, Jr., of Helena, AR, interview by Holly Hope, 19 June 2001.

located in Nashville, Tennessee. The National Baptist Convention of the U.S.A. suffered a contentious split with the National Baptist Publishing Board in 1915, resulting in the loss of their base of publishing operations in Nashville. A new publishing board was created under the legally indisputable ownership of the convention and by 1924 the new board's success enabled the erection of a building to house the Sunday School Publishing Board. Designed by African American architects McKissack and McKissack, it was constructed as a symbol of Morris's struggle to keep the sights of the convention and its boards on unification.[38]

[38] Jackson, *Story of Christian Activism*, 147.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

__ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

X 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):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: less than one acre

UTM References:	**Zone**	**Easting**	**Northing**
	15	721140	3822865

Verbal Boundary Description: The property is located in Helena, Arkansas, in Phillips County on Lots 394 and 393 of that part of Helena known as Old Helena. Excluded from this is the southwest part of Lot 393. To elaborate, beginning at the southwest corner of 393, proceed north 20 feet, then proceed east 80 feet, then proceed south 20 feet, then proceed west 80 feet to the point of beginning.

Boundary Justification: This boundary includes the Centennial Baptist Church that has historically been associated with this resource and the area immediately surrounding the building.

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