

OM's File # 100-1113
EXP. 10/31/84

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only
received **SEP 16 1982**
date entered

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

1. Name

historic Byrd's ~~African Methodist Episcopal~~ ^{A.M.E.} Church

and/or common

2. Location

street & number Smyrna Avenue NA not for publication

city, town Clayton vicinity of congressional district

state Delaware code 10 county Kent code 01

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<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	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

(confirmed 5/21/82 at Kent County Board of Assessments)

name Byrd's A.M.E. Church

street & number Smyrna Avenue

city, town Clayton vicinity of _____ state Delaware

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Kent County Recorder of Deeds

street & number Kent County Administration Building

city, town Dover state Delaware

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Del. Cultural Resource Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1981 federal state county local

depository for survey records Bureau of Archaeology & Historic Preservation

city, town Dover state Delaware

7. Description

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

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Byrd's A.M.E. Church is a small frame structure located at the eastern edge of Clayton on a quiet side street, Smyrna Avenue; its environment is the Smyrna-Clayton road and the railway tracks to the north, open fields to the south, and open, early residential development on either side. The church faces south on a slightly elevated parcel of land. It retains its earthen yard, trees, and considerable space on the deep lot behind its kitchen wing. The original main block is cornerstone-dated 1894. It is clapboarded and corner-framed, with a tall, broad front-facing gable and a picturesque offset entry "tower." To the rear is a much lower-pitched clapboarded kitchen wing, which was the principal element of the 1958 rebuilding also referred to on the cornerstone. The kitchen surrounds the small beveled apse which once emerged from the rear of the building, and which is still visible from within. Except for this relatively inconspicuous and compatible rear addition, and the remodeling of the stoop with metal hand rails and concrete, the exterior of the church is in virtually unaltered condition. The interior has been more extensively altered, but retains a number of original features intact and exposed, and others intact under modern veneer.

The body of the church, containing the single large room that serves as a sanctuary, is lighted by three narrow one-over-one light sash windows across the front, and three two-over-two light sashes on the east side. The west side is two bays deep behind the joining of the outset tower. The upper window trim is simple strips set edgewise over ogee molding; the molding is missing on the front windows, which are glazed with plain tinted glass. The upper surrounds of the narrow front windows are cut to form shallow segmental arches. Most of the decorative emphasis, however, is on the entry tower. A band of shaped shingle, four courses deep, circles the tower where it springs free of the main gabled roof. Above this rises a steep, tent-on-hip roof, presently asphalt-shingled and missing a finial. The wall of the tower has a slightly battered profile on its free, left side; the resulting irregular strip of wall to the left of the door is emphasized by infilling with diagonally set strips. Above the double entry doors, which are quite plain, is a shallow, two-light, clear glass transom, trimmed with spandrels of sawn wood.

The interior has been considerably renovated, but most of the changes were superficial and much original material remains. The sanctuary is a single large open space, rectangular except for the outsetting, behind a broad screen arch, of the beveled three-sided apse. The apse has a window on either side, and an unbroken rear wall. The space within it accommodates the altar and pulpit, on a raised dais that extends back into the sanctuary. The ceiling of the sanctuary is open from the springing of the roof about half way up to the ridgebeam, and the sloping surfaces are plastered continuously with the walls. Light acoustical tiles have been applied to the narrow width of ceiling, screening the original wood. Similarly, modern plywood veneer has been applied to the wainscoting, but the original material is said to survive underneath it.

(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 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 type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) local history
Specific dates	1894	Builder/Architect	Unknown	

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Byrd's A. M. E. Church was built on the outskirts of Clayton in 1894, by a local Black community whose members had previously then been walking several miles out in the country to worship. The small, picturesque, little-altered Queen Anne-style church stands today as an evocative architectural image of one of the major community experiences of Black Delawareans in the Clayton area. Indeed, since even after the abolition of slavery Blacks were subject to discriminatory policies and practices which prevented their equal participation in the wider society, Black churches became institutions not only of major but of unparalleled importance. They were virtually the only extra-familial, extra-local institutions of which Black people were in control. Therefore, among the early buildings of a Black community a nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century church will always be a building of unusual associative power. In Clayton, Byrd's Church holds this position. Further, it has the stylistic ambition of a building as beautiful as a people of modest financial means could make it. Because of the degree of integrity with which this original style and its setting have survived, it is a particularly effective carrier of its associations both with the wider A. M. E. movement, and with the particular historical needs and personalities that brought his local church into being. These qualities render it significant in terms of National Register criteria A and C: that is, for its association with events which made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of the local past, and for its embodiment of the distinctive characteristics of a type and period. Because its primary significance rests on these qualities, it is nominated to the National Register as an exception to the usual ineligibility of properties owned and used by religious organizations.

The origins of Black American Methodism are complex and subject to debate. A recent dissertation argues convincingly, however, that the first "completely separate and independent movement to assume organized connectional form in America," was incorporated in Delaware in 1913, by Wilmingtonian Peter Spencer. Spencer's Union Church of African Members underwent schisms, after his death in 1843, that produced the present-day African Union and Union American M. E. churches. But it was the African Methodist Episcopal Church which proved to be the main branch of Black Methodism in America. This denomination grew from an incorporating conference held in 1816 under the principal inspiration of Philadelphian Richard Allen. In 1822, the two districts of the A. M. E. had 6,000 members. Sixty years later the denomination had 34 districts, a publishing house, a university in Ohio and several smaller schools in the south, and a membership reported at 400,000.

(see continuation sheet)

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Intact interior material includes the simple molded surrounds of the windows and doors, and the heavy curved altar rail with its turned balusters; the random-width board floors, bare except for light carpeting laid in the rear and center aisles and around the altar; and the two ranks of pews, each hand-carpentered from five pieces of wood: two long planks for back and seat, a wooden underbrace, and end pieces embellished with flat semi-circular terminations and trefoil cutouts at the base.

Justification of Boundaries

The boundaries of the nominated property were set at the boundaries of the 50' X 207' legal parcel on which Byrd's A.M.E. Church stands. Since these were the dimensions of the lot purchased by the Church's trustees in 1894, and since they have persisted unchanged, this appeared to be the logical definition of the boundaries of this historic resource.

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Byrd's AME Church

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In the early 1890s, the Smyrna-Clayton area of Delaware boasted two A. M. E. churches: Bethel Church on the eastern outskirts of Smyrna, and Mt. Friendship Church in the countryside west of Clayton. The churches were about equidistant from Clayton, and members of the Black community there, many of them railroad workers on the lines that branched at Clayton, generally walked out the Kenton Road to Mt. Friendship, rather than through Smyrna to the older and larger Bethel Church. Within a decade after the 1886 raising of Mt. Friendship, the needs of the Clayton-area residents led to the construction of Byrd's Church.

The two congregations maintained very close ties. Mt. Friendship was called the Home Church by Clayton members. Reverend E. Byrd, for whom the Clayton church is named, served as pastor to both. The two congregations cooperated in the purchase of a camp meeting ground in 1907, and cooperated as well in the annual ten-day tent meeting that raised money for the churches and provided an inspirational vacation for members and friends.

The early records of Byrd's Church have been lost, but the building was probably raised by the members. An older member of the congregation remembers Button Garner, John Murray, and Andrew Briscoe as probable leaders in that effort. John Murray was first and only specifically named trustee of the Clayton A. M. E. Church on the 1894 deed for a \$100 lot on Smyrna Avenue, south of the Baltimore and Delaware Bay Railroad.

The church erected in that year is a modest essay in the Queen Anne style, which enjoyed its brief popularity in Delaware in the years around the turn of the century. The cardinal traits of that style are picturesque asymmetry, mixed texture, and eclectic allusion. Byrd's A. M. E. Church exercises these options in the offsetting of the tower and the picturesque lines of the tower roof; in the contrasting textures of clapboards, shaped shingles, and diagonally laid trim board; and in the various arch forms, segmental in the front windows, pointed in the pews.

The Queen Anne, among all nineteenth-century styles, is the one perhaps hardest to pin with ideological or symbolic meaning. What it seems most to represent is a love of decoration, a desire to beautify and make fancy. In this context the style of Byrd's Church perhaps represents only the desire to make the new building as up-to-date and lavish as possible, in keeping with its importance. Its somewhat older neighboring churches had been built, probably for the same reasons, in somewhat earlier styles; Gothic Revival at Mt. Friendship in the 1880s; a kind of hybrid Gothic-Greek at Smyrna in the 1860s.

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But like these other churches, Byrd's A. M. E. makes clear references throughout to its function as a church. The narrowing and arching of the front windows, the tinting of the glass; the vaulting of the ceiling; even the Gothicizing, trefoil cutouts on the plain end panels of the pews; all these are references to a traditional vocabulary of forms associated with Christian religious practice, executed by hand in a local setting. These architectural forms are the record of a minority people's assimilation in faith if not in social or economic practice, and of their experience in turning assimilation to their own purposes in independent community institutions.

Level of Significance

The level of significance checked in Item 10 is local. The institutional and historical significance of Byrd's church in its immediate locality is manifestly present. Its architectural significance in the wider Smyrna-Clayton area is also demonstrable, not only because it is an independently stylish and attractive building, but because it has maintained greater integrity of fabric and mass than either of the two neighboring A. M. E. churches. Both Mt. Friendship and Bethel have had enclosed front vestibules added, which blur their historic architectural features; Bethel's original brick exterior has been stuccoed. The use of the Queen Anne style is unique in the area and is probably unusual in the state. However, comparison on this level should await collection and evaluation of survey material from a much broader sample of Delaware A. M. E. churches.