

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Webster Baptist Church

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Location

street & number Highway 116 and S.R. 1340  not for publication

city, town Webster  vicinity

state North Carolina code NC county Jackson code 099 zip code 28788

### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>1</u>	_____ buildings
_____	_____ sites
_____	_____ structures
_____	_____ objects
<u>1</u>	_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

### 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.  See continuation sheet.

William S. Fin  
Signature of certifying official

11/13/89  
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

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 and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Religion: religious structure

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Religion: religious structure

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Other: Vernacular Victorian

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone

walls weatherboard

shingle

roof metal

other wood

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Webster Baptist Church is sited at the top of a small hill on the south bank of the Tuckasegee River, facing the bridge on Highway 116. The church sits above an asphalt parking lot and is reached by a long, climbing flight of cement stairs and walkway. The building looks over the river and bridge into the town of Webster. A grassy lawn surrounds the church proper and a parking lot adjoins the lawn to the west.

The Webster Baptist Church is a rectangular building with a steep gable roof. The main entrance is in the gable end which it presents to the north, looking over highway and river. The building is sheathed in weatherboards with the exception of the gables, which are shingled. Cornices with returns are boxed, and cornice, frieze, and cornerboards are plain. The main feature of the building is an engaged bell tower which rises in three stages, the first weatherboarded and the remaining two shingled. The entrance itself, now containing modern double doors, has an original wooden lunette which is a tall rounded arch with keystone containing a round head over each leaf, a creative simulation in wood of medieval church windows. On the front facade, the second stage of the bell tower features a double vent with round head over each vent and a round-headed arch, without keystone, over the whole, echoing the main entrance fanlight. The top stage includes an open belfry with railing, brackets and basket arch on each of its four sides, topped by a tapered polygonal, "witch's hat" steeple.

The main facade of the church is three-bay, with tall round-headed windows flanking the bell tower. Each side elevation is three-bay, with tall narrow windows in each bay. The windows are one-over-one with Queen Anne block glass. Within the last three years, modern stained glass has been set within the colored borders of each window. The foundation is stone and the entire building is painted white.

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The church roof is of metal in corrugated sheets and the bell tower roof is of asphalt, installed after a recent storm. The asphalt shingles on the bell tower, the main entrance door and the stained glass inserts are the only exterior alterations to the main building.

On the interior, the original floor plan is unaltered. A vestibule in the bell tower opens into a hallway across the width of the church. From this hallway, two aisles lead to the communion rail. Windows on the interior feature round-headed surrounds, similar to the exterior windows. The pulpit and dais are set into a shallow apse behind the communion rail, and a molded arch decorates the rear wall of the apse. Original doors, tall and narrow with round-headed surrounds, lead from each side of the apse into the educational building.

The church is noted for its furniture, which was designed, built and donated by local master cabinetmaker Joseph Warrenton Cowan (1834-1917) and his son, Lawrence Cowan. The furniture was constructed for the opening of the building in 1900. The rail, table and pulpit are of oak and the pulpit has inset panels of walnut burl. Pews are of oak, purchased in Hickory, North Carolina, in 1900. The interior has been painted and repaired during the lifetime of the building, but the church retains an unusually high degree of architectural integrity.

Between 1950 and 1960 an education building of concrete block was erected at right angles to the south gable end, or rear, of the church. This building, one and one-half stories, is painted white and blends with the old building. It has little impact on the integrity of the sanctuary.

**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)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1900

Significant Dates

1900

Cultural Affiliation

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Cowan, Joseph Warrenton, builder  
Cowan, Lawrence D., builder

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Webster Baptist Church, a vernacular decorative frame sanctuary built in 1900, is eligible for the National Register under Criterion C because it is a significant example of church architecture in Jackson County, North Carolina, a sparsely populated mountain region of the state. The church building is weatherboard, with a gable roof, and is sited facing the Tuckaseegee River near Webster. The three-bay facade features a bell tower which is believed to be unique in Jackson County. The tower rises in two stages to an unusual open belfry with balustrade and basket arches supporting a conical roof. The interior of this church is notable for the original, hand-carved church furniture, including the altar and communion rail, made for the church by local master cabinetmaker Joseph Warrenton Cowan and his son, Lawrence. Because of the well-known devotion of the Cowans to the church, it is possible that father and son executed the decorative exterior trim and belfry as well. An educational and office building of painted concrete block was added about 1960 across the rear of the church building but its scale and design blend with the historic sanctuary.

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Architectural context: With its bell tower and gable end plan, the Webster Baptist Church is typical of first-generation rural churches built in Jackson County during the second half of the nineteenth century. Entrance to the sanctuary is made through the base of the bell tower, as is the case with the Webster Methodist Church (1887), John's Creek Methodist Church (c. 1900), Speedwell Baptist Church, (c. 1900), and Catherine's Chapel Baptist Church (1906). (1) However, the belfry of the Webster Baptist Church is one of the most elaborate in the county; the tower rises in two stages to an unusual open belfry with balustrade and basket arches supporting a conical steeple.

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Unlike many rural churches, the Webster Baptist Church had the services of a local master cabinetmaker for the interior furniture of the building. Joseph Warrenton Cowan and his son, Lawrence Cowan, also a cabinetmaker, designed and built the oak altar, pulpit, and communion rail. The pulpit has inset panels of walnut burl. The Cowans also designed the molded arch behind the altar. (2) Their work reflects a high level of skill and creativity, appreciated to this day.

Although no documentation remains, it is likely that the Cowans, father and son, also contributed their skills to the design and trim of the exterior of the building, especially the belfry. Joseph Cowan donated the land for the church building in 1896, and it is reasonable to expect that he took a real interest in the appearance of the building.

Historical Background: Baptist and Methodists were the dominant religious groups in Jackson County in the nineteenth century. (3) Initial western North Carolina religious congregations met in homes or public buildings, and were led by itinerant preachers who traveled from place to place. Church members themselves traveled to "preaching points", often by foot, and often many miles.

Before 1854, those of Baptist faith who lived in the Webster area of Jackson County walked four miles each way to the Old Savannah Church, located on what is now Highway 441. In December, 1854, a group of fourteen Baptists established a Baptist church in the new town of Webster, and called a pastor, Brother Thomas Henson, in February, 1855. The congregation of approximately 32, including several slaves, met in private homes or in the county courthouse, and appointed a committee to consider the erection of a "meeting house." (4)

By 1869, no meeting house had been constructed and the congregation continued to meet at the Little Savannah Schoolhouse or the "schoolhouse by Love's." That year, however, the Baptist congregation joined the Methodists and Presbyterians in the erection of a church and school building in Webster, on the site of the present Hedden house. (5) There the congregations took turns having Sunday services in the building. But hope for a meeting house of their own continued to occupy the Baptist congregation. In 1880 a board of five trustees was appointed to select a building site, and on July 23, 1883, the trustees purchased the River Hill School property, on a high hill between the Tuckaseegee River and

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the Little Savannah Road. The trustees for the purchase, who paid \$65.00 for the school building and land, were Joseph Cowan, the cabinetmaker, and his wife Sarah; Mrs. Margaret Dills; L. Coleman Hall, a prosperous farmer; J. D. Buchanan, one of the first commissioners of Jackson County; and J. F. Stillwell. (6) In October of that year, a committee was appointed to raise funds to renovate the River Hill School building for church use. After considerable struggle, the task was completed in December 1886. A bell was ordered for the new church building and a team of horses and a wagon were driven to Asheville to meet the train carrying the bell. Considered to be the first bell in the town of Webster, this is the same bell which hangs today in the church bell tower. (7)

The Baptist congregation at the River Hill Church was an active one. In 1885 a Sabbath School was begun, and a revival was held at least once a year. Often the entire church acted as judge and jury when members brought charges against other members for lapses of conduct or character. Candlelight services were held frequently at dusk. (8)

In November 1894 the board of trustees passed a motion to erect a better church building, and on November 8, 1896, Joseph Warrenton Cowan, cabinetmaker and dedicated Baptist, sold a lot from his property on the Tuckaseegee River to the trustees of the church. Cowan sold the lot for \$35.00, which sum he immediately returned to the church, making the "sale" a donation. (9) The lot was situated at the south end of the Tuckaseegee River bridge and fronted on the River Road from Old Savannah to Cullowhee. The River Hill property was sold back to the trustees of the school, but to this day, the Webster Baptist Church is occasionally called the "River Hill church" because of its former location. (10)

Local saw mills provided lumber for the new church building, and other materials including the pews, were ordered from Hickory, North Carolina. Lamps were purchased and the bell was moved from the River Hill building to the new structure, which was completed in 1900. (11)

Joseph Warrenton Cowan, who had contributed land for the new building, also contributed his skilled craftsmanship. He and his son, Lawrence, made the altar, communion rail, and pulpit for the church, designing and installing the furnishings themselves. It is probable that they designed and installed the decorative exterior trim of the building as well. Joseph Warrenton Cowan (1834-1917)

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was born on his family's Webster property when that area was a part of Macon County, and married Sarah Melvina Allman in 1860. Cowan eventually owned approximately 200 acres of land on the south side of the Tuckaseegee River extending from the top of River Hill Ridge to the property now known as Cowan Valley Estates. He built a sawmill near the river and cut, sawed, dried and furnished lumber for an eight room house which he built nearby. Cowan did not consider himself a farmer; his main interest and means of livelihood was making furniture. He built a "shop" for himself and made furniture on order, using lumber from his own land and handmade tools. Much of the furniture he made is still in use in Jackson County. Joseph Cowan's son Lawrence (1870-1946) grew up in the furniture shop and learned to design and make furniture also, later turning to finishing work such as decorative doors, mantels, stairways and cabinets. He worked in Asheville and Florida. (12)

The Tuckaseegee Baptist Association reported in its annual meeting of 1900, "The church at Webster has completed their new and beautiful House of Worship, which is a credit to them and an honor to the Denomination." (13) (The Tuckaseegee River has been spelled in various ways until the second quarter of the twentieth century, when it received an official spelling.) The congregation continued to prosper in their new building. In 1920 electric lights were installed and a water line was provided in 1930. Several classes for young people were established and the Sabbath School continued to thrive. Between 1950 and 1960, an educational building was constructed of concrete block across the rear of the old building, allowing space for twelve classrooms, a pastor's study and a fellowship hall. New lighting was installed at that time in the sanctuary and the interior was painted. At present there are approximately 150 members of the congregation, which has been served by forty-four ministers during its 130-year life. (14)

There is no cemetery on the Webster Baptist Church property. Deceased members of the congregation have been buried at the nearby Stillwell Cemetery, which adjoins the River Hill School property, or at the Webster Cemetery on Buchanan Loop.

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### FOOTNOTES

1. Historic Properties Survey for Jackson County, unpublished. (Asheville: Western Office of Archives and History, 1979).
2. Webster Historical Society, Historic Webster, Vol. XI, no. 2, Summer 1985.
3. Williams, Max R., ed., The History of Jackson County, p.255.
4. Webster Historical Society, Historic Webster, Vol. VI, no. 1, Winter 1978.
5. Webster Historical Society, Historic Webster, Vol. I, no. 5, Fall 1974.
6. Webster Historical Society, Historic Webster, Vol. I, no. 4, Summer 1974.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Webster Historical Society, Historic Webster, Vol. XI, no. 2, Summer, 1985.
10. Webster Historical Society, Historic Webster, Vol. I, no. 4, Summer 1974.
11. Ibid.
12. Webster Historical Society, Historic Webster, Vol. XI, no. 2, Summer 1985.
13. Tuckasiegee Baptist Association, Minutes, Annual Meeting 1900, page 9.
14. Webster Historical Society, Historic Webster, Vol. I, no. 4, Summer 1974.



**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Historic Properties Survey for Jackson County, unpublished. (Asheville: Western Office of Archives and History, 1979).

Jackson County Register of Deeds, Jackson County Courthouse, Sylva.

Tuckasiegee Baptist Association, 71st Annual Session, Minutes, 1900, Skyland Baptist Printing Company, Mars Hill, NC, 1900.

Webster Historical Association, Historic Webster, Vol. I, no. 4; Vol. VI, no. 1; Vol. XI, no. 2; Vol. I, no. 5.

Williams, Max R., ed., The History of Jackson County, Jackson County Historical Association, The Delmar Company, 1987.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- 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 approximately 1 acre

UTM References

A 

1	7	2	9	7	6	0	0	3	9	1	2	7	6	5
Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

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B 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D 

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The Webster Baptist Church property is designated as parcel #8433 on the orthophoto map of Jackson County, North Carolina, inventory of Real Property, as distributed by the Jackson County, NC, Department of Planning.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The Webster Baptist Church sits on the entire parcel purchased by the Trustees of the church from Joseph W. Cowan on November 17, 1896, as recorded in Jackson County Deed Book 22, page 455.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Carolyn A. Humphries for the Webster Historical Society

organization Preservation Consultant date December 1, 1988

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city or town Highlands, state NC zip code 28741

