

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 for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church

other names/site number St. James Place

### 2. Location

street & number 107 North Outerbridge Street

not for publication N/A

city or town Robersonville

vicinity N/A

state North Carolina

code NC

county Martin

code 117

zip code 27871

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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 for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Stephen Cron  
Signature of certifying official/Title

3/4/05  
Date

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the 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

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1910  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1910  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

Unknown  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**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

Name of repository:  
\_\_\_\_\_

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 7 Page 1Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church  
Martin County, N. C.**Physical Description and Location**

Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church (ca. 1910) stands at Academy and Outterbridge streets' southwest corner, its front elevation approximately thirty feet from Outterbridge Street's curb. Academy Street's widening to become part of U. S. Highway 64's business route notwithstanding, Outterbridge Street remains residential, tree-lined and a quiet setting for the weatherboarded church, located north of the wide avenue of Railroad Street and west of Main Street's commercial district. Its siting in downtown Robersonville, a once-booming regional railroad hub for Martin, Pitt, and Edgecombe counties at the turn of the twentieth century, is unusual in that, until the late nineteenth century, Primitive Baptist churches tended to be in the country or, in the case of Skewarkey (Martin County) or Tarboro (Edgecombe County), a town gradually expanded so as to be contiguous. Two mature cedars stand near the church building's northwest corner, but other than some small crepe myrtles and pruned boxwoods, there is little landscaping. There are no outbuildings or structures on this property historically connected to the building; the "St. James Place" sign at the property's northeastern corner, refers to the gallery within, established in 1993. Early twentieth-century signage, a painted board with the church's name, hangs over the entrance bay.

The church, fifty-four feet and three-and-a-half inches deep by a width of thirty-six feet, four inches, is of frame construction resting on low brick piers with latticework brick infill. The asphalt shingle roof covering was installed in 1992. The church's main block is in complete keeping with the other traditional Primitive Baptist churches in the county and region—a front-gable house of worship with four elongated six-over-six, double-hung sash lighting each side elevation. Exterior details, such as the trim cornerboards' rising to the wide cornice, deep soffits, and wraparound box cornice, are typical of such buildings. What is not typical initially seems innocuous, beginning with the three-stage center tower and enclosed entrance, its measurements being nine feet, two inches deep by twelve feet and six inches. Each stage is protected by a wide cornice and, above the first stage, pierced by louvered ventilators; a pointed cap crowns the belfry. Weatherboarded with the same cornice and cornerboard treatment, the tower's design, more Colonial Revival than Gothic Revival, seamlessly completes that of the main block's late meeting house form. However, the tower is remarkable for what it represents; first that it is clearly a worldly design at odds with earlier Primitive Baptist meeting houses. Second, there is the implication of its center entrance being a

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Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church  
Martin County, N. C.

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## Statement of Significance

A plain, unadorned building constructed in the early twentieth century to serve as a place of worship, Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church has, in its new capacity as an art gallery, remained intact with no alteration to its form or interior since 1935, and minimal to no alteration before that time. This church was a social and religious center for Robersonville and western Martin County's Primitive Baptist community into the mid-twentieth century, in addition to being a part of the historic Kehukee Association. Although a building with a traditional exterior and interior meeting house plan, this church's very form represents a significant shift in Primitive Baptist church design. First, its incorporation of a center tower was an unusual innovation and, although preceded by the mother church, Kehukee Primitive Baptist, adopting a center entrance tower in 1901, this is the first eastern North Carolina church in the Kehukee Association to consciously employ such a form at inception. Second, the entrance itself is remarkable, a center entrance that both men and women passed through, rather than the traditional paired entrances respectively for men and women used throughout the nineteenth century; Robersonville is the second of two Kehukee Association churches to initially devise a center entrance, rather than incorporating it later into an earlier building. The building's structural intactness and integrity are nevertheless exemplary of the traditional front-gable frame meeting house format espoused by the Primitive Baptists and other nineteenth-century Protestant groups in North Carolina and elsewhere in the South. Its intrinsic integrity has remained strong, however, where many other denominations' comparable buildings have either been augmented or cast aside. As such, it is eligible for listing under Criterion C for Architecture. The period of significance is 1910, the year that Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church was constructed. As a religious property, Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church meets Criterion Consideration A for its intact and significant architectural design and construction.

## Historical Background

Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church's two founding members, M. T. Lawrence and Stephen W. Outterbridge, were both active members of the Kehukee Association, northeastern North Carolina's consortium of Baptist meeting houses formed in 1765. M. T. Lawrence, the grandson of antebellum Primitive Baptist writer and elder Joshua Lawrence, enjoyed a prolific career in Martin County, serving as an elder respectively to Conoho Primitive Baptist Church and Hamilton Primitive Baptist Church (established 1889 and set down circa 1913) before becoming

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Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church  
Martin County, N. C.

The Kehukee churches generally shared the Calvinistic views of their eighteenth-century predecessors, the Particular Baptists. Particular Baptists, initially in England but brought to the southeast colonies largely through the efforts of the Philadelphia Association, was a sect of the denomination espousing predestination of the “elect”, the necessity of a personal and professed experience of grace for redemption, and baptism by direct immersion in water.<sup>9</sup> By 1910, many of the Kehukee Association’s confrontational issues—particularly, the 1820s-1830s schism that led to this branch being called Primitive Baptist—had been put to rest. Consequently, the Association and its satellite churches had enjoyed nearly eighty years of solidarity. Unlike Missionary Baptist churches or other variations of the Baptist persuasion, Primitive Baptists did not support mission societies, or Sunday schools, the latter of which became more powerful in the late nineteenth century and instigated many church design changes.<sup>10</sup>

However, the seeds of Primitive Baptist decline—as the Kehukee Association’s overall membership fell from 2,067 members in 1879 to 1,258 in 1919—were planted within the church’s most basic tenet: That the number of “men and angels” elected to eternal life was finite and preordained by the Creator.<sup>11</sup> This was compounded by technological advances of the mid-twentieth century, when a church Association picnic was suddenly no longer the social pinnacle of Martin County life, not when one could drive to Williamston or to Rocky Mount or Greenville with relative ease. As the world and the worldly came closer to Martin County, potential members of Primitive Baptist churches—particularly children who had grown up in the church—chose to join elsewhere.

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<sup>9</sup> Don Y. Gordon, *Like Drops of Morning Dew: A Concise History of North Carolina Baptists* (Winston-Salem, N. C.: North Carolina Baptist Historical Committee, 1999). In this work, Gordon describes the Particular Baptists’ North Carolina predecessors as being General Baptists, who were less Calvinistic in doctrine, believing in man’s free will (for better or for worse) but also that redemption was available for more than a select few. Paul Palmer, a General Baptist from New England, established the first Baptist meeting houses in North Carolina in the 1720s but these were a minor voice in the state by the 1740s and 1750s, when Particular Baptists from the Philadelphia Association and the more evangelical Separate Baptists became predominant voices within North Carolina.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 325, 327. Bishir discusses the innovation of the Akron Plan, whereby young adults and children were periodically separated from the service for Sunday School by partitioned alcoves. Then, there was the rise of separate or semi-attached annexes in the early twentieth century, where Sunday school was conducted out of earshot from the service, but this was not adopted by Primitive Baptists either.

<sup>11</sup> Bear Grass Ledger One, “A Confession of Faith”, ca. May 1829. Bear Grass’ Confession of Faith is identical to others seen in Primitive Baptist church records, including Skewarkey, Smithwick’s Creek, and associate churches.

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## Architectural Context

As few other denominations can claim, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century meeting houses established by Primitive Baptists throughout North Carolina, as well as other parts of the South and Midwest, convincingly connect form with function. Eschewing worldly things, a Primitive Baptist meeting house, with its plain, front-gable form and double entrances, is the outward and visible sign of an intrinsic practicality where, though loved for its connection to earlier generations and its place as a sanctuary, the building is, nevertheless, a means to an end.<sup>15</sup> In the words of a Primitive Baptist, “This is a building: *we* are the church.”<sup>16</sup>

This simplicity of form with little to no exterior ornament is echoed within the meeting house itself, where the focal point from every bench is the preaching stand at the entrance’s opposing wall. At their respective sides of the church, men and women listened intently to the elder’s message for them. Until the turn of the twentieth century, natural light from the tall double-hung sash windows was often sufficient by which to read the Bible or the small hymnals, and to observe the preacher at his stand.<sup>17</sup> Benches were simple, and cushions were not seen in buildings until the late twentieth century. Walls were unpainted, or just whitewashed. There were no stained glass windows, no murals from the Old or New Testament, no choir stall with fancy molding, no organ, no piano, or any other features deemed nonessential or distracting.<sup>18</sup> Other interior features—corner entrance closets, electric lighting, and cast iron woodstoves—were eventually incorporated, one imagines, with the judicious hesitation described by Melanie Sovine Reid whereby “they are made to everyone’s agreement, but not necessarily to everyone’s satisfaction.”<sup>19</sup> The care and attention members gave the building, however, demonstrates how Primitive Baptists operated from spiritual, rather than physical, motives. They did not overly invest in their meeting houses, but they faithfully maintained them and came to revere their very plainness.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> York, p. 8.8.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Harrison, Bear Grass, N. C. , conversation with Penne Sandbeck, November 9, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> York, 8.9.

<sup>18</sup> James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), pp. 106-109. Peacock and Tyson’s description of a Primitive Baptist church in western North Carolina is quintessential of these meeting houses.

<sup>19</sup> Reid, p. 174.

<sup>20</sup> York, 8.8.

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One local story as to how Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church assumed its sedately unorthodox appearance and form is that church members particularly admired St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Hamilton, Martin County.<sup>26</sup> Constructed between 1881 and 1882, St. Martin's, located approximately twelve miles north of Robersonville, is a Gothic Revival style, front-gable church with a three-stage center tower and belfry and a gabled apse. Designed by Norfolk architect P. C. Hull and built by local carpenters David L. and James H. Martin, the diminutively elegant St. Martin's Church could well have been a template for Robersonville residents who desired a more fashionable house of worship than the austere front-gable barns of Skewarkey and Bear Grass.<sup>27</sup> If so, a synthesis judged acceptable to the Kehukee Association was achieved at Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church in the following ways. First, Robersonville's center tower had broader proportions and a lower height, resulting in a less spire-like tower, with the belfry positioned just above the front gable's apex. Second, there was no Gothic Revival style decoration other than the pointed arches at the belfry's louvered vents and the pointed bell-cap tower roof; windows and doors had "regulation" plain surrounds and, in the case of the windows, clear, double-hung glass sash. Then, Robersonville's rear apse, now obscured by the 1930s bathroom additions, was rectangular and quite plain. St. Martin's interior, "featuring a surprisingly elaborate arched and vaulted ceiling having Gothic-arched trusses", would have probably never passed muster in a Primitive Baptist church, and the Robersonville church's interior was, apart from its center entrance, in keeping with its peers.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Jane Taylor, Robersonville, North Carolina. Conversation with Penne Sandbeck, July 26, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Butchko, p. 231; Donna Dodenhoff, Martin County Architectural Survey, file entry for Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church, ca. 1992 (Survey and Planning Branch Archives, North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, Raleigh, N. C.).

<sup>28</sup> Butchko, pp. 231, 475.

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Mattimoe, Timothy P. "Preserving the Rural Church: North Carolina's Historic Primitive Baptist Church House." [Sacred Places, "Preserving the Rural Church", Philadelphia, PA, 1989] [www.sacredplaces.org](http://www.sacredplaces.org).

Peacock, James L., and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr. *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge*. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.

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\_\_\_\_\_, and Penne Smith. *Glimpses of Wayne County, North Carolina: An Architectural History*. Goldsboro, North Carolina: Wayne County Historical Association, 1998.

Reid, Melanie Sovine. "Neither Adding Nor Taking Away": The Care and Keeping of Primitive Baptist Church Houses." In Camille Wells, ed., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture I*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1982.

"Singleton Primitive Baptist Church Founded in September 1891," in *Washington (N. C.) Daily News* (Tobacco Edition, Churches Section), August 19, 1952, p. 3.

Southern, Michael. "Educating Ourselves About Rural Church Preservation." [Sacred Places, "Preserving the Rural Church", Philadelphia, PA, 1989] [www.sacredplaces.org](http://www.sacredplaces.org).

Williams, Peter W. *Houses of God: Region, Religion, and Architecture in the United States*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

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Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church  
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## Verbal Boundary Description

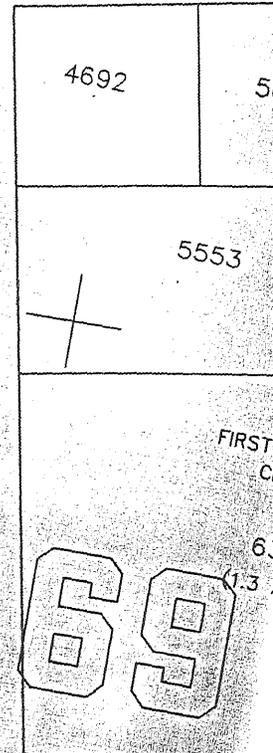
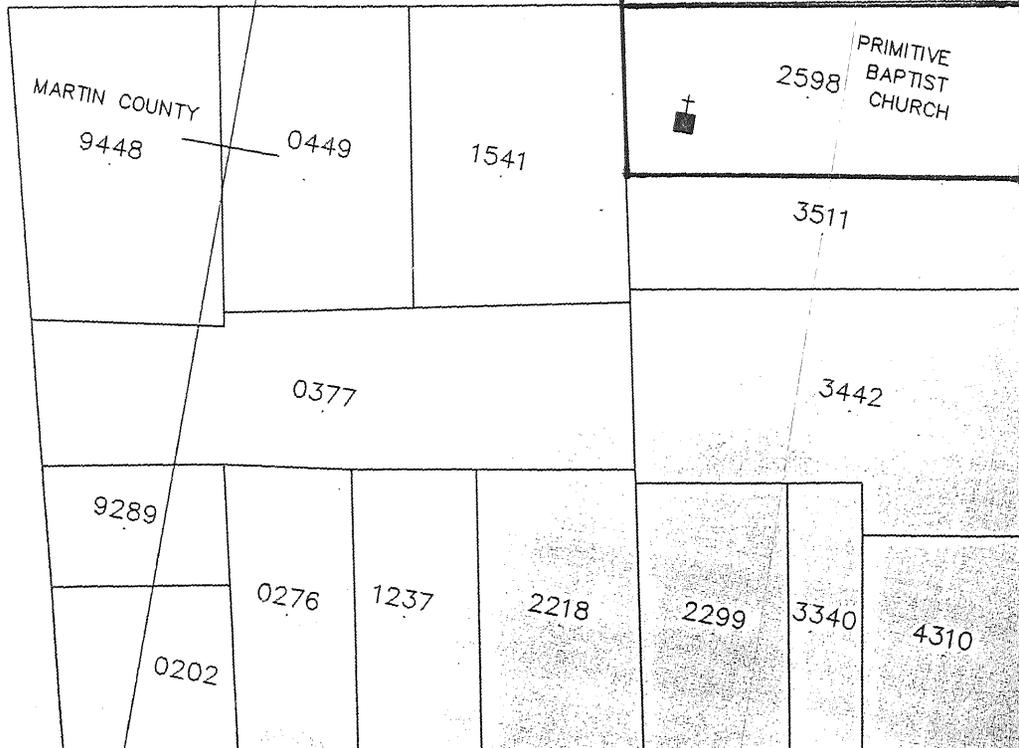
The one-half acre property on which Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church stands is the same tract as deeded to the congregation by W. E. and Mary C. Roberson (Martin County Register of Deeds, Book YYY, pp. 239-240, registered January 28, 1910), and is identified on Martin County (North Carolina) Tax Map 5175 (07), Tract Number 2598.

## Boundary Justification

The nominated property is a one-half acre parcel historically associated with the church.

ENITECOSTAL  
HOLINCSS  
CHURCH

U.S. HWY. 64 & 13

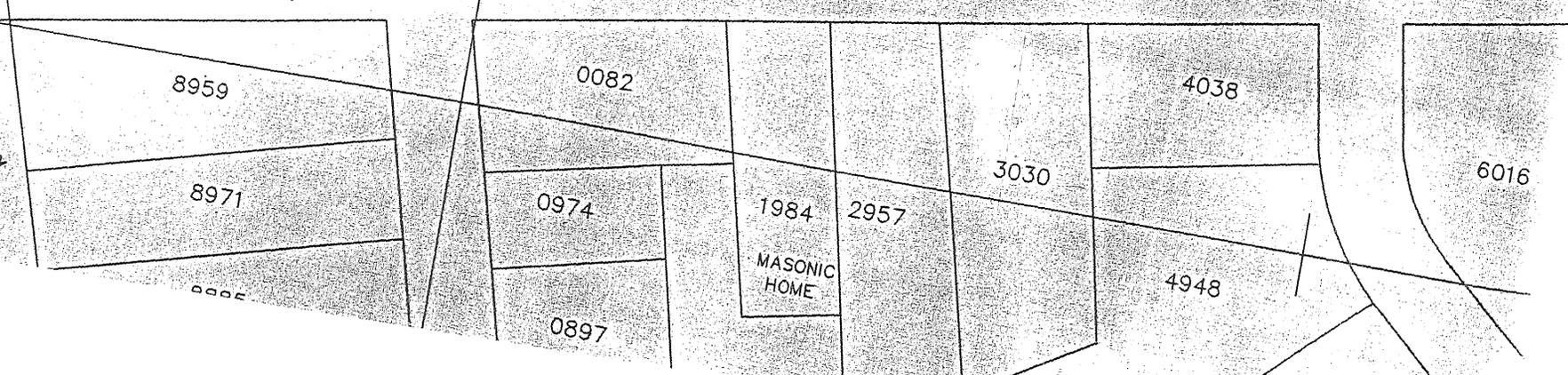


OUTERBRIDGE ST

BERSONVILLE PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH  
MARTIN COUNTY  
C.

SEABOARD COAST LINE RAILROAD

= 100'  
NORTH



ROBERSONVILLE WEST QUADRANGLE  
 NORTH CAROLINA  
 7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

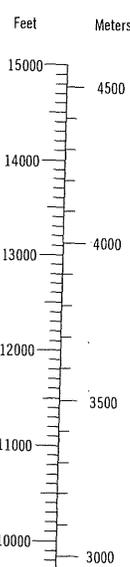
SE/4 PARMELE 15' QUADRANGLE

5555 (NW)  
 (HAMILTON)

17°30" 294 12 510 000 FEET 295 296 77°15' 35°52'30"



Robersonville  
 Primitive Baptist  
 Church  
 Martin Co, NC  
 Robersonville  
 West Quad  
 296020 E  
 3966640 N  
 Zone 18



GOLD POINT 3.1 KM  
 EVERETS 7.2 KM  
 WILLIAMSTON 17 KM

LINE



ROOSEBOURNEVILLE  
PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH