

(Oct. 1990)

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 Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church

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

## 2. Location

street & number North side SR 1106 at SR 1516 junction

not for publication N/A

city or town Farm Life

vicinity

state North Carolina

code NC

county Martin

code 117

zip code 27846

## 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.)

Cheryl A. Brown SHPO  
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:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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:)

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

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

Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church  
Name of Property

Martin County, N. C.  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-local       | <input type="checkbox"/> district               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-State       | <input type="checkbox"/> site                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal     | <input type="checkbox"/> structure              |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> object                 |

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

**Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Religion: Religious Facility  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Religion: Religious Facility  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: front-gable church  
Other: baptismal house  
\_\_\_\_\_

foundation Brick  
walls Wood: weatherboard  
\_\_\_\_\_  
roof Asphalt Shingle  
other Wood  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**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**

1892 (baptismal house)  
1897 (church)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1892 (baptismal house)  
1897(church)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**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:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church  
Name of Property

Martin County, N. C.  
County and State

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## 10. Geographical Data

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**Acreage of Property** Approx. 3.5 acres

### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>18</u>	<u>315690</u>	<u>3955100</u>	3	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	4	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>

See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

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## 11. Form Prepared By

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name/title Penne Sandbeck/Nomination Preparer  
organization Penne Smith Sandbeck & Associates Date November 20, 2004  
street & number P.O. Box 6363 Telephone 919-832-7935  
city or town Raleigh state NC zip code 27682

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## Additional Documentation

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

### Continuation Sheets

### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

### Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

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## Property Owner

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(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Russell Griffin  
street & number 112 North Biggs Street telephone 252-792-3085  
city or town Williamston state NC zip code 27892

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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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Martin County, North Carolina

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**Physical Description**

Sited in the heart of southeastern Martin County's Farm Life community, the circa 1897 front-gable, weatherboarded church is the last of three meeting houses built on this site by Smithwick Creek's Primitive Baptist congregation. Its location on the north side of Secondary Road 1106 near that road's intersection with Secondary Road 1516 is, as it has always been, rural with fields, swampland, and woods; however, the circa 1900 Smithwick's Creek School, a frame gable-and-wing building, still stands across Secondary Road 1106 cater-cornered from the church. No older trees or plantings are around the building except for two oak trees at its west elevation. Between the church's front elevation and the road are nine small circular-sawn and whitewashed posts, dating from the early-to-mid twentieth century, demarcating the boundary of the church's entrance and the small open space in front.

The meeting house building, forty feet and four inches wide and sixty feet, four inches deep, is elegant in its very plainness, as all materials were exactly and fastidiously fashioned and each window and door space created with a sense of symmetry and purpose. Covered by a replacement asphalt shingle roof, the building rests on regularly-spaced brick piers with honeycomb brick infill, above which a plain wood skirting, approximately one foot in height, wraps around all four elevations. Sills and joists beneath the building all appear to be circular sawn. The front elevation's sole decoration might be said to be the arched louvered vent in the gable's apex, as the cornerboards are very small and the two front entrances have unmolded door surrounds. Unlike other later nineteenth-century country churches in the vicinity, there is no gable return at the front or rear elevations and the side elevations have an open cornice, rendered in such a manner that it resembles a box cornice from a distance.

This simplicity continues along the other three elevations, pierced by ten tall nine-over-six double-hung sash windows with doors at the first and fifth bay of each side elevation. Each of the window surrounds retains metal hinges where louvered shutters once hung. Doors at the side elevations' southernmost bays are now of hollow plywood probably manufactured between 1955 and 1970, but the other doors are four-panel wooden doors with molded recessed panels commonly seen during the later nineteenth century. There is no door at the rear elevation. Fenestration at the rear elevation consists of a symmetrical arrangement of four windows, the outermost being identical to the tall windows at the east and west elevations, within which are two smaller nine-over-six double-hung sash, positioned at either side of the preacher's table. Above, the small brick flue with its small cap positioned at the roof ridge approximately two-thirds from the end gable is original. The paired brick steps at the front elevation and concrete steps at the church's east and west side, however, are mid-twentieth-century replacements.

Inside, the purpose behind the exterior's fenestration and arrangement is revealed. The interior, its walls and ceiling sheathed with narrow manufactured beaded board, is a large room with three large wooden chamfered posts affixed to a center beam running from each gable end. These posts divide the interior space into two halves and, previous to the 1940s, this denoted separate seating and worship spaces for men and women. One remnant of earlier gender separation is the corner bathrooms at the back of the church, built in the 1930s, with men at the east side, women at the west, not necessarily gender separation of itself, except for its evidence of where people sat.<sup>1</sup> As with

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<sup>1</sup> The location of each restroom indicates the former seating place of each gender.

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Martin County, North Carolina

other Primitive Baptist churches in the area, bathroom access could be gained from within or—as the exterior doors at the first bay attest—without. The outer doors are the later ones. Otherwise, except for suspended electric light fixtures dating from the late 1930s-early 1940s, concessions to modernity are few, other than the cushions resting on some of the church's many handsome nineteenth-century slat-backed pine pews. Two cast iron wood stoves, located between the congregation seating and the sanctuary, date from the late nineteenth century and were in constant use until 2001.

The pews' formation further divides the room's space; three sets of benches, nine along the wall and twelve in the center, are the congregation seating, while four benches on either side of the raised wooden platform at the north wall are placed perpendicular to congregational seating. These benches on either side of the preacher stand are often known as the "amen corner", where elders and older church members sat.<sup>2</sup> The preacher stand, a raised wooden platform situated between the rear elevation's tall windows, has the smaller windows as direct light sources for the elders, their cane-backed chairs lined up along the platform, and the preacher at the center lectern. Two small wooden posts, their capitals sufficiently wide to position a vase or communion receptacle, are affixed at the platform's southeast and southwest corners.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the cast-iron stoves, other interior features of the church dating back to its late-nineteenth-century roots include a wood box for firewood, located by the west stove, and a wooden spit box. Given that much of Primitive Baptist codification forbids the use of tobacco, this appears to be unusual, and yet spit boxes are also present at Skewarkey Church, a short distance northwest. Access to the roof remains via a wooden ladder at the southernmost wall.

## 2. Smithwick's Creek Baptismal House

1892; moved to site November 2003  
Contributing

Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church's former Baptismal House, a diminutive side-gable, weatherboarded building constructed in 1892, was located less than a mile east of the church until 2002. Originally the two-room building, where Smithwick's Creek congregants changed into baptismal robes for immersion into Hayes Swamp, was banked against that swamp's northern embankment, and hidden from roadside view by tall pines and overgrowth. Due to unchecked beaver activity, right-of-way taken for road improvements, and severe 1990s hurricanes, particularly Hurricane Fran in 1996 and Hurricane Floyd in 1999, erosion caused the swamp to encroach upon the Baptismal House. Hurricane Floyd, whose high winds caused a tree to fall on the building, damaging the

<sup>2</sup> James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience Among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), pp. 107-108. This seating at the front of the room has also been utilized in other Primitive Baptist churches, particularly Wayne County, North Carolina, for its African American members.

<sup>3</sup> Primitive Baptists observe the rite of holy communion and use wine during the sacrament.

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roof, further exacerbated this situation. A local contractor disassembled the building in 2001, securing it on the spot, and then lifted through the woods to a flat bed truck, where it was taken to his workshop for restoration. The contractor then moved the Baptismal House to the church in November 2003. Presently, the Baptismal House stands in the church lot's northwestern corner, and it will soon receive brick foundation piers comparable to its original counterparts. Although it has been removed from its original siting and context, the baptismal house is nevertheless an important and rare example of a Primitive Baptist practice. It is also the only such baptismal house to remain in eastern North Carolina, and the only one known to survive in the state.

In keeping with Primitive Baptist tradition, the Baptismal House is a very simple edifice. The building itself consists of two rooms, one for men and one for women, and one of the board-and-batten doors is still there. Each room was once lit by a four-over-four double-hung sash window (part of the sash is still present in the north room) and separated by a tongue-and-groove partition. The partition, windows, door surrounds, and narrow pine flooring were the only "finish" this building had; otherwise, the weatherboards and the frame ceiling were visible. Nails hammered into the partition were apparently where those to be baptized hung their clothes, either when they changed into their white gowns or, already having changed before coming to the "dipping hole", left their dry clothes; there is no evidence of any pegs. Some people signed their names on the partition. Apart from its relocation and noninvasive structural support, the building itself has not changed at all, its identity and function as a changing house for religious rituals still very apparent.

3. Privy  
ca. 1920  
Non-contributing

In bad repair, the church's former outhouse stands about one hundred feet north of the rear elevation. A humble building, the privy's framing and vertical board walls are all of circular sawn wood, and its shed roof has a standing-seam metal covering. Within each of the two entrances is a single stall, separated by a wooden partition. After the congregation installed the two bathrooms inside the church, the privy was abandoned but never moved. The church is planning to restore this building to show future visitors the privations of less than one hundred years ago.

4. Shed  
ca. 1935-1945  
Non-contributing

The weatherboarded shed sited approximately fifty feet north of the church's rear elevation is used for storage. Its single-pitch shed roof, with exposed rafter ends and standing-seam metal covering, is original as are the paired wooden doors, their narrow boards a twentieth-century variation of board-and-batten treatment. The building, its small cornerboards and skirting indicative of tidy craftsmanship, rests upon low brick piers.

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Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church  
Martin County, North Carolina

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## Statement of Significance

A plain, unadorned building constructed in 1897 to serve as a place of worship, Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church has maintained this function and purpose to the present day with no alteration to its form or interior since bathrooms were added in 1935; there was little to no alteration before that time. The meeting house's structural intactness and integrity are exemplary of the traditional front-gable frame meeting house format espoused by Primitive Baptists and other nineteenth-century Protestant groups in North Carolina and elsewhere in the South. Its 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. As a religious property, Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church meets Criterion Consideration A for its intact design and construction.

A frame baptismal house, an important and quite rare feature of Primitive Baptist practice, was moved to its mother church, Smithwick's Creek, in 2003 and now stands on the church tract, approximately one mile west of its original site. Built in 1892, the baptismal house retains its original appearance and form and meets Criterion C. It is the only such ritual-based building known to survive in North Carolina, and meets Criterion Consideration B for moved buildings.

## Historical Background

In 1801, Joseph Biggs, a landowner and active member of Skewarkey Baptist Church near Williamston, began visiting the Smithwick's Creek community, located southeast of Skewarkey, at least twice a year to conduct services. Skewarkey Church was itself part of the consortium of Baptist meeting houses in northeastern North Carolina known as the Kehukee Association, formed in 1765. These meetings shared the Calvinistic views of Particular Baptists, 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>4</sup>

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<sup>4</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 were a minor voice in the state by the 1740s and 1750s when Particular Baptists and the more evangelical Separate Baptists became predominant.

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Martin County, North Carolina

Many local farmers in this swampy, remote area south of Williamston—including Hardy Stallings and James Daniel—professed their faith at these services, held at neighbors' homes, and became members of Skewarkey Church.<sup>5</sup> The volume of new members from Smithwick's Creek necessitated Biggs coming to the area for two days every three months by 1802. Between November and December 1803, Biggs and these new members drafted a set of articles of faith and rules of decorum for the fledgling church, named Smithwick's Creek in December 1803. Biggs served as a moderator for some years, with Kader Biggs as the church's clerk. Original members included Abram Tice, Jesse Stallings, Henry Roberson, William Perry, William Campbell, Nancy Perry, Nancy Lanier, and Hardy Stallings and Noah Perry, who were the first deacons.<sup>6</sup> On June 8, 1804, the church tract was recorded as being sold to the congregation for two pounds, ten shillings, by William Perry and a meeting house was already in place; according to Martin County historian Francis Manning, this site was at Swain's Branch on the south side of SR 1106, across from the church's present location.<sup>7</sup> Smithwick's Creek Church was brought into the Flat Swamp Union, a satellite organization of the Kehukee Association, and member churches besides Skewarkey included meeting houses in Pitt, Edgecombe, Martin, and Washington counties, such as Flat Swamp, Cross Roads, Moratock, Conoho, Little Conetoe, Tranter's Creek, and Great Swamp.<sup>8</sup>

In 1804, the word "Primitive" was not used to describe this branch of the Baptist faith; it is a term that came to be employed after the mid-nineteenth century. If pressed, these austere Protestants might have described themselves as Particular Baptists, rather than "General Baptists" who believed in redemption for all people, not just the elect. In one local church's written Confession of Faith, the third article states, "We believe that God before the foundation of the world for a purpose of his own glory did Elect a certain number of men and angels to eternal life and that this Election is Particular, eternal, and unconditional on the Creator's part."<sup>9</sup> They would also have explained, probably, that they did not adhere with the Separate Baptists, yet another offshoot of the Baptist sect. The "father" of the Separate Baptists was Shubal Stearns, who, transformed by hearing George Whitefield preach in the

<sup>5</sup> Francis M. Manning and W. H. Booker, *Religion and Education in Martin County, 1774-1974* (Williamston, N. C.: Enterprise Publishing Company, 1974), p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Manning and Booker, pp. 46-47.

<sup>7</sup> Martin County Register of Deeds, Book D, p. 144 ("Baptist Church<William Perry"; "Smithwick's" penciled in margin); Manning and Booker, pp. 46-47.

<sup>8</sup> Manning and Booker, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Bear Grass Ledger One, "A Confession of Faith", ca. May 1829.

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1740s, established this branch of Baptists. The "New Lights", as they were also called, saw a religious conversion as the Holy Spirit directly entering a human's soul and sought to win more souls to God rather than letting converts come forward of their own, unsolicited, accord.<sup>10</sup> Such evangelicalism would have been anathema to the humble farmers and millers in Smithwick's Creek's small backwater, as well as the members of Skewarkey and Conoho meetings.<sup>11</sup>

But in 1828 eastern North Carolina's Baptists entered into a profound schism that would define the various groups sheltered under a "Baptist" umbrella more distinctly. As early as 1803 the Kehukee Association had been debating a question submitted by a well-respected Elder, Martin Ross. Ross' query was "Is not the Kehukee Association...called on to step forward in support of that missionary spirit which the great God is so wonderfully re-giving amongst the different denominations of the world?"<sup>12</sup>

The ultimate answer for the Kehukee Association, as well as for other Baptist associations who took a dim eye of missions and other forms of evangelical outreach, was to stamp out missionary societies within the Association in 1827. Later Primitive Baptists hailed this move as "a great decisive stand taken...against worldly institutions", and a decision predating Maryland Primitive Baptists' historic Black Rock Address by five years; the 1832 Black Rock Address, like the Kehukee Association's proscription, further eschewed the trend of becoming more evangelical and, as perceived by them, more commercially oriented.<sup>13</sup> It was around this time that the terms "Old School" or "Primitive" were first employed to describe these conservative Baptists. "Old School" was noted in the Black Rock Address as an outside term that they "were led to adopt...in our use of it we have reference to the school of Christ, in distinction from all other schools which have sprung up since the apostles' days."<sup>14</sup> The term "Primitive" came from a similar philosophy, more ideal in inspiration than pejorative. These Baptists, with their hardworking rural existence and few worldly pleasures, saw themselves as the continuance of the first Apostles, and thus "Primitive" was a conscious association with the early days of Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gordon, pp. 11-13. Stearns himself moved from Connecticut to what is now Randolph County, North Carolina, establishing a meeting house at Sandy Creek. His Separate Baptist, or "New Light" movement is considered the forerunner of the present-day mainstream Baptist denomination.

<sup>11</sup> Melanie Sovine Reid, "Neither Adding Nor Taking Away": The Care and Keeping of Primitive Baptist Church Houses," in Camille Wells (ed.), *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Volume I (Annapolis, MD: Vernacular Architecture Forum, 1982), p. 171.

<sup>12</sup> Sylvester Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, chapter 21. () Online [www.primitivebaptist.org/writers/hassell/history/chapter21.asp](http://www.primitivebaptist.org/writers/hassell/history/chapter21.asp)

<sup>13</sup> Hassell, chapter 21, page 2 of 20; "The Black Rock Address", reprinted online at [www.pb.org/pbdocs/blakrock.html](http://www.pb.org/pbdocs/blakrock.html). Melanie Sovine Reid offers the additional Primitive Baptist insight that the missionary movement was seen "as human devices to artificially increase the number of souls that might expect to gain entry into heaven," yet "no amount of human activity of persuasion could change the eternal destiny of a soul" (pp. 172-173).

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Reid, p. 171.

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Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church  
Martin County, North Carolina

Smithwick's Creek Church was touched by this schism in the 1830s when several congregation members came under the influence of Jeremiah Leggett, who periodically officiated as an elder although his own church was some miles south in Old Ford. In 1833 Leggett, excommunicated from the Kehukee Association, established what eventually became the Old Ford Disciples of Christ Church, taking some members of Smithwick's Creek with him; however members of Old Ford who disagreed with Leggett joined Smithwick's Creek.<sup>16</sup> The Missionary Baptist movement and the Disciples of Christ movement claimed many Primitive or Old School Baptists, including some of the congregations in the Kehukee Association's counterparts, such as the Chowan Association (located north of the Roanoke River) and the Neuse Association (located mostly south of the Tar River).<sup>17</sup> Smithwick's Creek, its congregation divided, went into what Cushing Biggs Hassell called a "low, cold state" for at least fifteen years before being fully reinstated in 1851.<sup>18</sup>

Some histories of the schism simplify the nature of it by saying Primitive Baptists accepted no converts. However, in the eyes of the Primitive Baptists, there was a place for acceptance of converts. In typical "Decorum or rule of Conference", found in Primitive Baptist churches, there is an article defining protocol for new members. "A door shall be opened when thought necessary," the article begins, "but none shall be admitted but by unanimous consent and shall first verbally relate their [experience] or give an account of the work of God on their souls and secondly of their faith and principles if the church shall require it." In addition to this, enquiries were made in the community regarding the moral standing of the convert, and only after these matters had been satisfied was the person welcomed as a new member and baptized.<sup>19</sup> It was a careful, exacting process contributing to there being few in number. In accepting this, Smithwick's Creek drafted a resolution in 1853 stating that their congregation adhered to the "Old School Baptists" and would only accept such as preachers.<sup>20</sup> This may have been in reaction to the tenure of Jeremiah Leggett, but there is indication in the church minutes that the congregation was growing; fifteen feet was added to the south end of the meeting house.

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<sup>16</sup> Manning and Booker, p. 48; Washington (N. C.) Daily News, August 19, 1952, p. 2; Hassell, History of the Church of God, Chapter 21 (published online at [www.primitivebaptist.org/writers/hassell/history/chapter21](http://www.primitivebaptist.org/writers/hassell/history/chapter21)).

<sup>17</sup> Hassell, chapter 21, p. 3 of 20. Sandra Hayslette in her Master's Thesis, "Missions, Markets, and Men: A Baptist Contest of Values in Tarboro, North Carolina, 1800-1835" (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, History Department, 1995), brings up the important argument that many Primitive Baptists who became Missionary Baptists did so because the rise in their socioeconomic status from their communities becoming commercial centers led them to believe that financial progress and religious progress (i. e., a dynamic missionary movement) were not mutually exclusive (p. 29).

<sup>18</sup> Manning and Booker, pp. 48-49.

<sup>19</sup> Bear Grass Ledger, "A Decorum, or rule of Conference," ca. May 1829, article 5.

<sup>20</sup> Manning and Booker, p. 47.

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Smithwick's Creek, by their 1853 resolution, chose to continue the tenets and practices of their beliefs. That they considered themselves a part of the "elect" has already been mentioned. In this sect, women were a subordinate presence in worship and business procedures, separated from their husbands during the service and admonished not to speak in meeting unless "in cases of conscience or such particular circumstances that the nature of thing may require it." This separation by gender necessitated the two front doors, whereby men and women entered separately and sat separately, the tall chamfered interior post supports serving as a dividing line. Separation by gender was not a new practice—Quakers and other denominations had practiced gender separation for generations. However, Primitive Baptists' adherence to this practice, where other churches were letting go of it, may have been reinforced by perceptions propagated by some that if women became more powerful in the church, as what seemed to be happening with Missionary Baptists and Methodists, they would subvert religious authority and procedure.<sup>21</sup> The practice of gender separation during worship was perpetuated at these particular churches until approximately the mid-twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

At the time of the Civil War, according to church minutes, there were African American members, several of whom were excommunicated for escaping to Union-occupied territory. After the war, as with Skewarkey, the minutes notes the new surnames of former slaves. At the end of the nineteenth century, two African Americans, William and Eliza Lane, left to found a nearby church. The name of their new house of worship is not known.<sup>23</sup>

In December 1896, fire destroyed the church. Smithwick's Creek members took immediate action, building a new meeting house within two months and meeting at "a publick District house for Worship" in the interim.<sup>24</sup> The building committee included local farmers such as David Hardison and Kader Lilley, who were mill owners, Noah Roberson, Simon Ward, and William H. Daniel.<sup>25</sup> The first meeting in the new church took place the fourth Saturday of February 1897, and official acknowledgment and thanks to "the people outside of the church for their Hospitality on building our house of worship," was given in April 1897.<sup>26</sup>

In 1927, nearly one hundred years after the Leggett incident that had divided the church for so long, another serious schism developed. Elder William B. (W. B.) Harrington, who had been a preacher at Smithwick's Creek since 1911, was the center of the argument, as other church elders expressed concern that the church was somehow "unsound." According to local history and written accounts, Harrington came under fire not only for using "expressions

<sup>21</sup> Hayslette, pp. 14-25.

<sup>22</sup> Ben and Sadie Harrison, Bear Grass, N. C., conversation with Penne Sandbeck, November 9, 2003. Mrs. Harrison recalled that men and women sat separately until "just after the Second World War."

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, *Martin County Heritage*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>24</sup> Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church Minutes, Vol. 3 (1878-1908), p. 102. Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.

<sup>25</sup> Smithwick's Creek Minutes, p. 102. Also United States Federal Census, 1880 Manufacturing Schedule for Dymond City Township.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 104.

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not in the Scriptures that are offensive to the brethren” but also for his progressive farming practices; at that time, Martin County was in the midst of a controversial program to eradicate all cattle ticks, and Harrington was on the side of science, not tradition.<sup>27</sup> For the next three years, the church was rife with dissension; elderly historian and Kehukee leader Sylvester Hassell was called to mediate the situation, during which a group of sixteen congregation members declared non-fellowship with Harrington and his faction, and demanded the church books and keys to the building.<sup>28</sup> The 1928 Thanksgiving church service was marred by a scuffle between the two factions, each of whom had shown up early to seize possession of the building. Harrington left the church, and, in 1930, Martin County Superior Court issued a restraining order against the malcontents.<sup>29</sup> The case was not resolved until 1934, when the opposing sixteen members withdrew and founded Hayes Swamp Primitive Baptist Church.<sup>30</sup> W. B. Harrington, who served at several Missionary Baptist churches in the region, including Piney Grove Church, was also actively involved with the Asa Manning Farm Life School before his death in 1959.<sup>31</sup> Following 1934, the church had a quieter existence for sixty years before being set down in 2000.

Besides the church, one important vestige of the congregation's history and practice has survived. According to longtime residents, the Baptismal House was constructed in 1892 at the “Hazy Swamp Dipping Hole” by and for Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church (approximately three-quarters of a mile east of the site), who had been using this part of the swamp as a baptismal pond since 1882.<sup>32</sup> Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church then used both the half-acre house and pond site until the 1930s. Erma Tice, who moved to Griffins Township when she married in 1934, remembered that the church was baptizing members there as late as 1936. According to Mrs. Tice, nearby African American churches had an understanding with Smithwick's Creek that they could use the swamp hole—and the Baptismal House—for baptisms. After 1936, when the land had reverted from Smithwick's Creek Church to the original landowners' heirs, the baptismal area was a popular swimming spot for local children for some

<sup>27</sup> Smithwick's Creek Minutes, Vol. 4 (1908-1935), pp. 207-212; Butchko, p. 197.

<sup>28</sup> Smithwick's Creek Minutes, Vol. 4, pp. 212-215.

<sup>29</sup> Martin County Superior Court Minutes, January 1930, pp. 2-3. Copy in Getsinger Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University.

<sup>30</sup> Manning and Booker, pp. 47-48.

<sup>31</sup> Butchko, p. 196; Hughes, pp. 271-272.

<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Erma Tice, Farm Life, N. C., August 2000 conversation with Penne Sandbeck; Martin County Register of Deeds, Book EE, p. 567 [Asa Peal > Smithwick's Creek Church].

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years. Because there are no other records of a Primitive Baptist baptismal house surviving in eastern North Carolina, this building is a tremendously important artifact of Martin County and state history, and its present survival is equally important.<sup>33</sup> Mrs. Tice, who owned the land the Baptismal House stood on by 2000, expressed her willingness to help move the house to Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church, where it would be more secure. The Baptismal House was moved off the site in 2001 and reassembled at Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church in 2003.

## Architectural Context

As few other denominations can claim, the 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>34</sup> In the words of a Primitive Baptist, "This is a building: *we are the church.*"<sup>35</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 or pastor's message for them. Until 1935, natural light from the tall double-hung sash windows was sufficient by which to read the Bible or the small hymnals, and to observe the preacher at his stand.<sup>36</sup> Benches were simple, and cushions were not seen in the building until the twentieth century. Walls were whitewashed. There were no stained glass windows, no murals from the Old or New Testament, no choir stall with fancy molding, or any other features deemed nonessential. At Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church, "modern" interior features—bathrooms, electric lighting, small aisle carpet runners, 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>37</sup> The care and attention members gave the building, however, makes clear that Primitive Baptists operated from spiritual, rather than physical, motives.<sup>38</sup> They did not overly invest in their meeting houses, but they faithfully maintained them and came to revere their very plainness, one reason this particular building has remained as intact as it has.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> There was another baptismal house in Martin County, constructed by Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church at Leggett's Bridge in 1880, but moved to Black Swamp twelve years later and no longer standing. One is said to be standing in Wilson County as well, at an unknown location (*see Kate Ohno's Wilson County survey*).

<sup>34</sup> Drucilla H. York, Kehukee Primitive Baptist Church NR nomination, p. 8.8.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Harrison, Bear Grass, N. C., conversation with Penne Sandbeck, November 9, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> York, 8.9. In the case of the Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church, the window behind the preaching stand is the west, not the east, window; this would only have provided light on the speaker if services were later in the day..

<sup>37</sup> Reid, p. 174.

<sup>38</sup> York, 8.8.

<sup>39</sup> York, 8.8.

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There was no definitive template for a Primitive Baptist meeting house, and the basic form—a frame, front-gable weatherboarded building with two front entrances—is employed by other rural churches. By the mid-nineteenth century two variations of Primitive Baptist meeting house form were seen in Martin County and elsewhere in eastern North Carolina. In addition to the one-story, front-gable meeting houses, there was the form seen at Skewarkey, Spring Green, and Conoho (demolished 1970s), a front-gable meeting house whose double-hung sash windows over each front door signify the presence of an interior gallery, where slaves and free blacks would have been seated.<sup>40</sup> These latter meeting houses were located in areas where there were larger antebellum farms and plantations—and more slaves—than in the cypress swamps surrounding Smithwick's Creek. No photograph survives of Picot Primitive Baptist Church, an antebellum house of worship located near Jamesville, but the former Jamesville Primitive Baptist Church, built circa 1865, is a comparable one-story, front-gable frame building with two front entrances, as is the 1870s Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church. This form continued to be popular into the 1930s. Nearby twentieth-century churches built using Smithwick's Creek as their example are Hayes Swamp Primitive Baptist Church, and Piney Grove Missionary Baptist Church.<sup>41</sup>

Comparable examples outside of Martin County include the circa 1849 Bethlehem Primitive Baptist Church (originally known as Soundside Church) in Tyrrell County, a plain front-gable frame building that has retained many original features, including its interior chamfered posts that once divided men from women; another comparable example is the 1897 Providence Primitive Baptist Church in Kitty Hawk, Dare County. Although a larger and much earlier meeting house, Hadnot's Creek Primitive Baptist Church in Carteret County (ca. 1815) is comparable to the Bear Grass meeting house in its unpainted austerity and accoutrements such as original pine benches. But the church that is probably the most similar to Smithwick's Creek is the 1893 Red Banks Primitive Baptist Church in Pitt County, recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Red Banks, with its small corner pilasters and prominent gable returns, has more exterior decoration than Smithwick's Creek. Its interior, from its incorporated bathrooms, slat-backed pine benches, and unadorned preacher's stand to the plain manufactured beaded board walls, is quite similar to the Martin County church.<sup>42</sup>

The number of Primitive Baptist churches still standing in Martin County—Bear Grass, Skewarkey, Spring Green, Smithwick's Creek, and Robersonville—is remarkable. But these buildings are nevertheless endangered cultural resources, and their vanishing congregations present these buildings with a dilemma as to what their function would become when they are no longer houses of worship. In the past, such buildings became barns or they were torn

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<sup>40</sup> York, 8.9.

<sup>41</sup> Photograph folder, Martin County Churches, Francis Manning Collection, Martin County Community College.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy Van Dolsen, photographs from National Register Nomination of Red Banks Primitive Baptist Church; NC-HPO, survey files for Jamesville, Bethlehem, and Hadnot's Creek Primitive Baptist Churches.

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down. Spring Green Primitive Baptist Church, set down in the 1980s, might have suffered a similar fate except that the church's last member formed the Spring Green Preservation Group and the Kehukee Association agreed to deed them the church and lot.<sup>43</sup> Presently, as they finish restoration of the building, the Spring Green group is entertaining a number of options, including that it may become a church for another denomination.<sup>44</sup> Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church, acquired by another member from the Kehukee Association, is now an art museum, a use that other Primitive Baptists have expressed ambivalence about; there is well-founded concern that some alternative uses "trivialize the real historic meaning of these buildings."<sup>45</sup> Surviving members of Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church have chosen to allow a small Disciples of Christ congregation to periodically use their church, which, historically, is exceptional given the conflict between the two denominations. On the other hand, this lease signifies that this building is still being used for its original purpose—worship and congregation.

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<sup>43</sup> Martin County Register of Deeds, Book C-17:74 [Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association>Spring Green Preservation Fund, Inc., 1999].

<sup>44</sup> Fred Harrison, Jr., Williamston, N. C. Conversation with Penne Sandbeck, April 13, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Tim Mattimoe, Greenville, N. C. Written communication (e-mail) to Penne Sandbeck, June 6, 2003.

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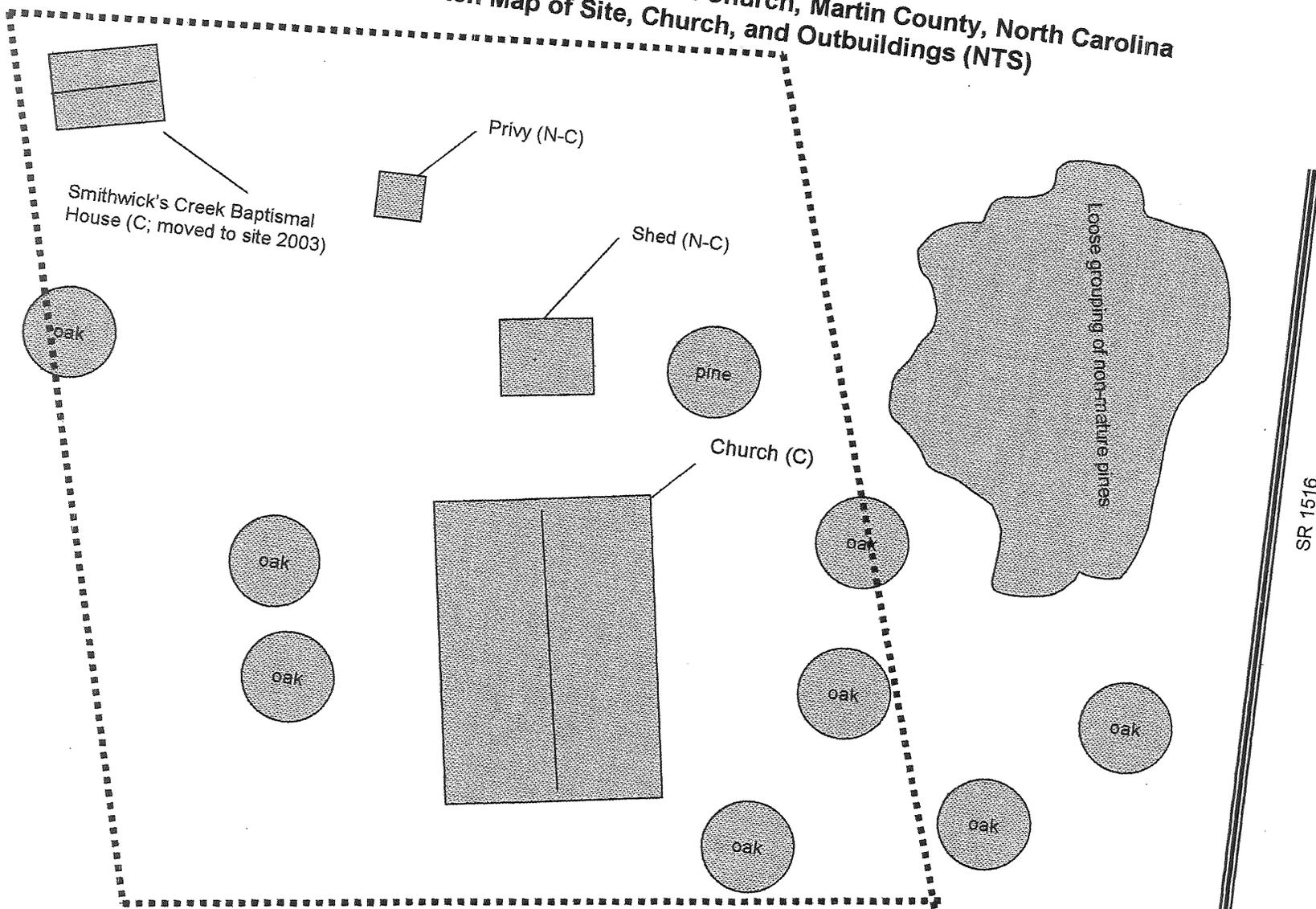
## Verbal Boundary Description

The 3.5 acre property is identified on Martin County (North Carolina) Tax Map No. 5782 as a portion of Lot No. 4358 in Griffin's Township, located on the north side of Smithwick's Creek Church Road (SR 1106.)

## Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes a 3.5-acre parcel historically associated with the church north of Smithwick's Creek Church Road (SR1106).

Smithwick's Creek Primitive Baptist Church, Martin County, North Carolina  
Sketch Map of Site, Church, and Outbuildings (NTS)

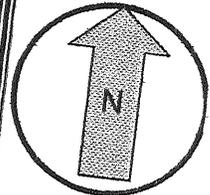


SR 1106 (Smithwick's Creek Church Road)

SR 1516

Proposed boundary for NR property

Penne Sandbeck 3/2004



SMITHWICK'S CREEK  
PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH  
FARM LIFE VICINITY, MARTIN CO., NC

SCALE - 1" = 100'

24



SR 1516

4358



SR 1106

MARTIN COUNTY  
TAX MAP 5782

OLD FORD QUADRANGLE  
 NORTH CAROLINA  
 7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)  
 NE/4 CHOCOWINITY 15' QUADRANGLE

5885 IV SW  
 (JAMESVILLE)



Smithwick's  
 Creek  
 Primitive  
 Baptist Church  
 Farm life vic.  
 Martin County  
 Old Ford Quad  
 Zone 18  
 315690E  
 3955100N

Zone 18  
 315690 E  
 3955100 N

