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  Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church
   other names/site number ________________________

2. Location

   street & number  West side US 17, .04 mile South of US 64 Junction
   city or town  Williamston
   state  North Carolina  code  NC  county  Martin  code  117  zip code  27892

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

   As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this "x" 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.)
   ____________________________  ____________________________  ____________________________
   Signature of certifying official/Title Date

   North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources
   State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

   I hereby certify that the property is:
   ____________________________  ____________________________  ____________________________
   □ entered in the National Register.  Signature of the Keeper Date of Action
   □ determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet
   □ determined not eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet
   □ removed from the National Register.
   □ other, (explain:)

   ____________________________  ____________________________  ____________________________
Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church

5. Classification

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<th>Ownership of Property</th>
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Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
N/A

6. Function or Use

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7. Description

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<tr>
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<td>walls Wood: weatherboard</td>
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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.
- [x] 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
  - 1859
- Significant Dates
  - 1859
- Significant Person
  - N/A
- Cultural Affiliation
  - N/A
- Architect/Builder

### 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:
- [x] State Historic Preservation Office
- [ ] Other State Agency
- [ ] Federal Agency
- [ ] Local Government
- [ ] University
- [ ] Other

Name of repository:
10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 4.9 acres

UTM References  
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

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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.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Penne Sandbeck / Nomination Preparer
organization Penne Smith Sandbeck & Associates
street & number P. O. Box 6363
city or town Raleigh

date November 28, 2004
telephone 919-832-7935

city or town Raleigh

state NC

zip code 27682

Additional Documentation
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.)

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

name Mrs. Judy D. Raynor, Eastern Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association
street & number 2007 Price Road

city or town Williamston

date November 28, 2004

telephone 252-792-1968

state NC

zip code 27892

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.
Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church is a one-story, front-gable timber-frame house of worship constructed between 1858 and 1859 for farmers and merchants whose forebears had settled on the south bank of the Roanoke River roughly one hundred years prior. Framed by two century-old oak trees, the church is the oldest ecclesiastical building in the county and, with neighboring Washington County’s Rehoboth Methodist Church, a superlative example of simply rendered Greek Revival style. Located just within the county seat of Williamston, Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church stands on a two-acre tract given to the congregation by Joseph Biggs in 1857.

As with many a religious building whose existence has outlived that of its original members, there remains little original or earlier landscaping other than the two handsome oaks and that the surrounding tract has remained undeveloped, but this does not detract from the church’s sense of place. Beside the church’s east and west elevations stand mature crepe myrtles, approximately fifty years old or older, planted by the congregation. Behind the church are tall pine trees, and the church cemetery, where two cedar trees planted in the late nineteenth century have sunk their heavy roots well into the Hassell family plot. In front of the church, a lawn extends to the busy thoroughfare of U. S. Highway 64’s business route.

Skewarkey Church, its tract known as “Piney Point” in the nineteenth century, stands at the junction of two regional roads that played a vital role in Williamston’s development and thereby the prosperity of this church’s nineteenth-century congregation. First is U. S. Highway 64, which runs along the Roanoke River’s south bank before roughly paralleling the Tar River’s course westward to Tarboro and Rocky Mount. Then there is U. S. Highway 17, known for two hundred years as the “Washington [N.C.] Road”.¹ The Washington Road was, and continues to be, an important coastal route; its branches connected Williamston to the ports and markets of New Bern, Washington, Edenton, and on to Virginia. The church’s verdant setting between these two bustling roads evokes a peaceful oasis.

Positioned on the west side of U. S. Highway 17 South, 200 feet east of the church, is a North Carolina Historical Commission Marker placed on the grounds in 1975. Titled “B-40”, this is one of hundreds of cast-iron markers commemorating North Carolina history throughout the state. The North Carolina Historical Commission, a component of the state’s Division of Cultural Resources, commemorates Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church thus: “Baptist congregation formed about 1780. Primitive Baptist since 1830’s. Church here was built in 1853.” However, the church’s account books show that the building was constructed between 1858 and 1859. There is also a U. S. Department of the Interior Geodetic Survey Marker on the church grounds. A metal

¹ Skewarkey Baptist Meeting House Record Book, 1785-1864 (microfilm, UNC-Chapel Hill, Davis Library; original document in Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University), Saturday, 9 May 1857.
Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church's physical dimensions, just over sixty feet long and forty feet wide, are the largest of the five extant denominational county churches built between 1858 and 1915. The building rests upon low handmade brick piers, with twentieth-century brick infill between each outer pier. Slim corner pilasters frame the weatherboarded elevations of the building, each pilaster rising to join a simple box cornice and equally unadorned rakeboards at the gable ends. It is a plain edifice, but the three large nine-over-nine double-hung sash windows at each side elevation, the two windows of corresponding size at the south (rear) elevation, and the front elevation's fenestration declare the building's role as an assembly space. The front elevation has two symmetrical entrances, each retaining an original vertical two-panel door; positioned above each door is a generously-sized six-over-six, double-hung sash window, indicating the upstairs gallery. The gallery, where enslaved members initially sat and later African American members sat for many years, was accessed by the west elevation entrance, which also retains its original two-panel door. There is a small brick flue at the roof ridge, about two-thirds of the distance from the rear to the front gable.

Exterior finish and features are spare, and yet their presence, along with the building's fenestration proportions, give the church its vernacular Greek Revival style character. Louvered wooden shutters that once hung from each window were removed after the 1970s, but the iron pintles from which they hung are still in place. Their absence makes the church's exterior appear even more austere and imposing. But a close examination of the corner pilasters, rakeboards, and door and window surrounds reveal that there is little decorative or imposing about the building other than a monumentality resulting from its very lack of decoration. With the cornerboards as well as door and window surrounds, the facing is a plain board with equally plain raised trim on either side. Shadows occasionally cast by the raised trim create a relief effect that is only a whisper of what a more embellished Greek Revival style edifice, such as the First Presbyterian Church in Goldsboro (Wayne County), would convey. Weatherboards are plain with no beaded edges.

Skewarkey Church's exterior simplicity is echoed and affirmed by that of its interior. Through either front entrance, one of which still has an interior iron bar, one walks beneath the shelter of the gallery's floor into the open sanctuary, more like a meeting house in plan than a traditional church with a nave, an altar, and an apse. Three

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2 According to longtime Skewarkey Church member Judy Raynor, the west door is now nailed shut, and the interior stair to the gallery is no longer accessible. Documentary photographs taken in the 1970s by NC-HPO staff show that it is (or was) a straight-run stair with simple handrail supports and no balustrade or newel post.
sections of pews divide half of the open room into two aisles, at the center of which are three tall unchamfered posts set into a center beam running from each gable end. The posts served a dual function, that of structural support and also of gender separation, as it was originally the division between male and female seating within the church. At the sanctuary’s south end is an arrangement of four wooden pews perpendicular to the room’s other section; this is often known as the “amen corner” where older church members or officials would sit. At the center of the south wall, lit on either side by the large nine-over-nine sash windows, is a raised wooden dais, accessed by steps on either side, and its front façade decorated by simple raised molding. Below the dais is a communion table and chairs for church elders. The sanctuary’s plain character and most of its original elements remain, from the ten-inch-wide pine flooring to the overhead wide ceiling boards; the interior’s original plaster walls have been largely replaced but remain in some parts of the interior. Unlike most other regional Primitive Baptist churches, Skewarkey Church does not have wainscoting or a chair rail along its walls, although it does retain a plain baseboard with no molding or shoe trim. The hanging kerosene glass lamps running along either side of the center beam are now wired for electricity although later kerosene glass lamps hang from the gallery’s support posts. Above, the gallery is simply finished; a plain board with minimal molding runs across the space, and the upper support rails are square with no chamfering or other decoration. Unlike nearby Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church, which retains its unpainted heart pine walls, Skewarkey Church’s interior is painted entirely white.

Interior furnishings, typically, are also spare. The heavy wooden pews in place are not original to the church, but date to the nineteenth century. Two cast iron wood stoves, resting on raised sand beds for safety, are situated near the church’s center and only in the past five years have been retired from service. Yet the stoves, their beds, and the overhanging metal pipes, rising from each stove and then, from the center support post to the brick flue, remain untouched. Other furnishings include pine spittoon boxes located near the dais steps.

There have been few twentieth-century alterations to this building. What few have taken place are the brick steps at each front entrance with metal rail supports, some replacement sheetrock siding within, and two interior bathrooms on either side of the entrances. Otherwise, the building remains as it was; even the electrified lamps are a minor augmentation. The two greatest concessions to modern times are individual seat cushions seen in some of the pews and the small electric heater near the communion table.

At the south end of the church’s tract is a small cemetery, informally organized, though part of it is separated into family plots by metalwork fencing. According to church history, the congregation in February 1859

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3 Church minutes indicate that earlier seating were backless pine benches, later changed to slat-backed pine benches, comparable to those at Smithwick’s Creek Primitive Baptist Church and Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church.
The earliest burial date seen is for Eli Cherry, a thirty-one year-old man who died in October 1859; the most recent burials date to the 1960s, and few have been interred since that time. Many of the decedents’ surnames—Manning, Daniels, Whitley, Taylor, Moore, Wynne, Parker, Hassell, and Gurkin—are historic to the county, and their descendants remain in the vicinity. There are approximately fifty burials in the cemetery. Between the cemetery and church, a small grove of longleaf pines have been cultivated during the twentieth century, but plantings are few at the burial ground except for two mature cedars, scattered azaleas and boxwoods, and smaller flowering trees.

Notable personages buried here include Skewarkey Church’s dynamic and dedicated member, Cushing Biggs Hassell (1809-1880), who served the church from 1840 until his sudden death in 1880. C. B. Hassell, officially ordained in 1843, was also a force in the inception and design of the Skewarkey Church building. His life’s work, *History of the Church of God from the Creation to A. D. 1885*, was co-authored by his son, Sylvester (1842-1928), who in turn served Skewarkey Church and other regional Primitive Baptist churches as an elder and moderator for forty-eight years of his life. According to Martin County historian Francis Manning, the combined father-son dynasty of C. B. and Sylvester Hassell extended for eighty-four years.5
Statement of Significance

A plain, unadorned building constructed in the nineteenth century to serve as a place of worship, Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church has maintained this function and purpose to the present day with minimal to no alteration to its form or interior since 1935, and little alteration before that time. This particular church was an important social and religious center for Martin County citizens during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in addition to its active role in the Primitive Baptist Kehukee Association. Through the thorough documentation seen in its church records and history, Skewarkey Church’s African American heritage and role in African American Primitive Baptist churches proliferating in Martin County, is also known. Furthermore, Skewarkey Church enjoyed a long and fruitful affiliation with Primitive Baptist historians Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell between 1840 and 1928. The meeting house’s structural intactness and integrity are 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 integrity has remained strong, however, where many other denominations’ comparable buildings have either been augmented or cast aside, including Primitive Baptist houses of worship. As such, it is eligible for listing under Criterion C for Architecture. The period of significance is 1859, the year that construction was completed on the present Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church. Furthermore as a religious property, Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church meets Criterion Consideration A for its intact design and construction.

Background History

Skewarkey Church takes its name, as do many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant churches, from a geographical feature; in this case the feature is Skewarkey Gut, a creek that flows into the Roanoke River. In 1779, the town of Williamston was founded from Thomas Hunter’s plantation, Skewarkey (also spelled “Squhawky”), located on the south bank of the Roanoke River. One of Skewarkey’s inhabitants was John Page, then a pastor of Flat Swamp Baptist Meeting House in Pitt County, the oldest established Baptist church in the immediate area. In 1785 Page and forty other members worshipping at Flat Swamp established a branch of the church closer to home, approximately two-tenths of a mile southeast of Skewarkey Church’s present site. Their first

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7 Thomas R. Butchko, Martin County Heritage (Williamston: Martin County Historical Society, 1998), p. 5.
Skewarkey Meeting House's early years were spent conceptualizing basic tenets of faith and rules of decorum, as well as officially establishing itself within the community. In 1789 Skewarkey Meeting House was finally able to prove and register a deed for its church tract. Between 1788 and 1789 Winburn Jenkins, John Ward, and Joseph Biggs, Jr., enlarged the building to accommodate its new members. As its elders and congregation probed and discussed procedure—should foot washing be resumed, and at what sort of service, or what should constitute a covenant—Skewarkey Meeting House assumed a mantle of authority for smaller congregations in the region between the Roanoke and Tar Rivers. It quickly became a strong voice in northeastern North Carolina's consortium of Baptist meeting houses known as the Kehukee Association, which was formed in 1765. These Kehukee churches generally 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.

Skewarkey Meeting House as the regional "mother church" mentored several fledgling Baptist meeting houses, beginning with a Tyrrell County congregation in 1787, and then at nearby Smithwick's Creek in 1803.

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8 Manning and Booker, p. 69; Skewarkey Baptist Meeting House Record Book, 1785-1864 (microfilm, UNC-Chapel Hill, Davis Library; original document in Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University), p. 1.
9 Manning and Booker, p. 71. Note: Skewarkey is referred to as a meeting house, not a church, into the mid-nineteenth century, so I am adopting the record book's terminology for the most part until it is referred to as a "church", which occurs in the record book during the nineteenth century's third quarter.
10 Manning and Booker, p. 70; Skewarkey Record Book, July 1788, June 1789, August 1789, December 1789, and May 1790 (most of the record book's pages are not numbered, so that I will be referring to monthly dates). As it turned out, Skewarkey's congregation was not entirely happy with the final product; the May 1790 minutes states "An Enquiry was made whether the Church [i.e., congregation] thinks the Seats in this Meeting to be done Workman like. Answered unanimously that they are not." Members Jacob Tice and James Powers were then asked to build two pews as models, by which to repair and rebuild the deficient pews.
11 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 and the more evangelical Separate Baptists became predominant voices of the Baptist persuasion.
This mentoring expanded and shrank Skewarkey’s congregation accordingly; in 1802, for example, there were seventy new members but thirty-four members left the following year to join the new church at Smithwick’s Creek. Four members left in 1810 to join Conoho Log Chapel in the northwestern part of the county. In spite of the periodic comings and goings of members, Skewarkey Meeting House continued to grow, enough so that a new meeting house was constructed in 1822 near the same site. However, the new meeting house was to send several more members out to establish new congregations; fifty members left in 1827 to form Picot Meeting House, located near present-day Jamesville, and twenty-three members left in 1829 to form Bear Grass (sometimes spelled “Bargrass”) Meeting House.

The word “Primitive” was not used to define this branch of the Baptist faith until the mid-nineteenth century. Beforehand if pressed, these austere Protestants might have described themselves as Particular Baptists, rather than the “General Baptists” who believed in redemption for all people, not just the elect. In contemporary written Confession of Faiths within Kehukee Association churches, one 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.” These Particular Baptists would also have explained 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, a New Englander who, transformed by hearing George Whitefield preach in the 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. Such evangelicalism would have been anathema to many of these farmers, small merchants, and millers who toiled quietly in Martin County, waiting for their eternal reward.

But in 1828 eastern North Carolina’s Baptists were on the verge of a profound schism that would define

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12 Manning and Booker, p. 71.
13 Ibid.
14 Manning and Booker, pp. 38, 72-73.
15 Bear Grass Ledger One, “A Confession of Faith”, ca. May 1829. A transcription of Skewarkey Meeting House’s Confession of Faith, nearly identical to Bear Grass, is in Manning and Booker, pp. 74-76.
16 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.
the various groups sheltered under a “Baptist” umbrella more distinctly. As early as 1803 the Kehukee Association had been debating a question submitted by Martin Ross, Skewarkey’s early pastor. 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?”

The Kehukee Association’s ultimate answer, as well as 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; this occurred in 1827. Later Primitive Baptists hailed the 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. 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.” 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.

In the eyes of the Primitive Baptists, there was a place for acceptance of converts. In the Primitive Baptist “Decorum or rule of Conference”, 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. It was a careful, exacting process contributing to there being few in number.

The Missionary Baptist movement and the Disciples of Christ movement claimed many Primitive or Old

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19 Hassell, chapter 21, page 2 of 20; “The Black Rock Address”, reprinted online at 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).
20 ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 171.
22 Bear Grass Ledger, “A Decorum, or rule of Conference,” ca. May 1829, article 5.
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). Martin Ross, by now an old man, left the Primitive Baptists to foster Missionary Baptist congregations in Bertie and Perquimans counties. However, because of their strong roots in Martin County, Skewarkey, Bear Grass, Spring Green, and other congregations weathered the storm and managed to prosper during the mid-nineteenth century. The Skewarkey Union, a regional subdivision of the Kehukee Association, was revived in 1841, with Bear Grass and Smithwick’s Creek as members, and Spring Green and Picot Meeting Houses infrequently cited as members.

It could be argued that the schism made the Primitive Baptists cling ever more tightly to their tenets, particularly gender separation during services. 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.” At footwashing ceremonies, emulating the agape of Jesus and his disciples, the record dictated that “each Brother should wash one anothers (sic.) feet...and the Sisters in like manner to do the same of one another.” This separation by gender necessitated the two front doors, whereby men and women entered separately and sat separately, the tall 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. The practice of gender separation during worship was perpetuated at this particular church until approximately 1950.

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23 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).

24 Manning and Booker, pp. 10-13.

25 Manning and Booker, 73. Manning does not mention Picot, but it is mentioned in the Skewarkey Record Book.

26 Skewarkey Record Book, July 1788.


28 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.” Judy Raynor, Skewarkey Church’s warden, said in May 2000 that gender separation ended there at approximately the same time. The Harrisons felt that the conditions of the Second World War, when men and women often worked side by side in factories and government agencies, may have spurred the move toward ending gender separation, but it is just as likely the practice had been fading for some years beforehand.
A perusal of Skewarkey Meeting House’s records in these tumultuous years, however, reveals that the congregation, having decided against “the new thing” (future pastor Cushing Biggs Hassell’s term for the mission effort), did not let the resulting fallout concern them much. Other than regular matters of business, the record book discussed concerns about its African American members, nearly all of whom were slaves, not being regular service attendees. One proposed solution was to build an upper balcony, or gallery, in the meeting house, a solution that was dismissed in favor of adding a shed “at the end of the house for the Blacks.” In the end, nothing was done to further accommodate enslaved and free African American members until the new meeting house was built in 1858. But repairs to the meeting house, new interior plans for the meeting house, and the movement for a new meeting house entirely, is a continual theme in Skewarkey’s records from the late 1820s until 1857. Between 1841 and 1842, the congregation voted to relocate the meeting house’s pulpit and add backs to their seats, evidencing a move away from earlier austerity. The appointed committee included Cushing Biggs Hassell, Joseph D. Biggs, and Stanley Duggan, who would later steer the 1857 meeting house’s design and construction. Hassell, a Williamston merchant who was ordained the following year at Skewarkey, moved to Louisburg in Franklin County in 1845, but continued to serve the church from afar until his return in approximately 1847. Enhancements during this time included a cast iron stove, ordered in 1847, the first known heating unit for the Skewarkey Meeting House; a steward, America Gilbert, was also appointed to open and lock the church, in addition to minding the stove during services.

Momentum for building a new meeting house, which had sputtered off and on for decades, accelerated in February 1857 when Skewarkey’s congregation voted for a committee “to confer with Brother Joseph D. Biggs with regard to securing more Land for the use of the Church.” Two months later, Biggs agreed to donate two acres of land, known as Piney Point, near the meeting house; this agreement was augmented by December 1858 so that

29 Skewarkey Record Book, 12 December 1829; August 1830; November 1830. In the 9 August 1850 minutes, there is a citation that “the Colored people have permission to add to the Meeting House under the direction of a committee to be composed of Brethren Samuel Rogers, William Rogerson, Standly (sic.) Duggan, and J. D. Biggs,” but there is no further record that such an addition ever happened.
30 Skewarkey Record Book, 9 June 1841, 10 July 1841, 13 November 1841, 12 March 1842, 7 May 1842. The pulpit’s relocation suggests that Skewarkey was moving away from earlier Baptist interior plans, and is further elaborated upon in the Architectural Context section of this nomination.
31 Ibid., 1843-1854. There are continual references in 1840s minutes to “make our Meeting House more comfortable” and C. B. Hassell was continually involved in such references (8 May 1847: “...Brethren Hassell and Thomas Biggs had made a calculation and referred to them, who stated that the cost would be about $250.00.”). See also Manning and Booker, p. 152.
32 Ibid., 9 October 1847 and 8 January 1848.
Biggs received the acreage Skewarkey then occupied, in addition to any timbers not used in the new meeting house. During construction and for at least seven years afterward, the new meeting house was referred to as “the Chapel”, possibly to differentiate between old and new.

Thanks to meticulous records kept by Cushing Biggs Hassell and recorded in the church minutes, much is known about the new Skewarkey Chapel. Subscriptions for the building were taken from the eighty-two member congregation beginning in 1857; construction began approximately in May 1858 and had more or less been completed in April 1859 when the new cast iron wood stove and its elbow ducts arrived, and William Melson painted the chapel’s exterior. Of its final construction cost of $1,784.12, Hassell had advanced $1,304.99; Joseph D. Biggs contributed shingles, Anthony Burroughs lathing and lumber; and Samuel Rogers and Alfred Moore provided sawyers, Miles, Ishmael, Daniel, and Alfred. Other supplies included bricks and lime, nails, plank nails, locks, red ochre for priming the weatherboards, and plaster for the interior walls. Bennett Burgess was the brick mason, which consisted of the foundation piers. From Hassell’s ledger it is known that the new meeting house’s white weatherboards were derived from white lead paint and, its green shutters from an amalgam of Paris Green; the roof’s shingles were painted black with a fire-retardant paint. The new chapel had an interior allowing for an upper gallery accessed from outside, and an imposing raised and paneled lectern lit by large nine-over-nine double-hung sash windows on either side; the original features of the chapel are all retained to the present day.

Distress over national division between Unionists and Secessionists, a harbinger of the 1861-1865 Civil War, was keenly felt by the new Skewarkey Chapel’s members in 1860. The congregation called for “a day of fasting and prayer to Almighty God” on the third Sunday of December, and to meet at Skewarkey that morning at eleven. Anguish over going to war softened some Primitive Baptist reserve; another day of fasting and prayer was requested in May 1861, “and that our neighbors and friends be invited to join with us and also that an invitation be extended to the Volunteer Soldiers who may be in encampment near.” Three years of records, apparently kept separate from the first record book, were missing after the war so many stories from that time will remain unknown.

33 Ibid., 7 February 1857, 11 April 1857, 9 May 1857, and 11 December 1858.
34 Butchko, pp. 453-454; Skewarkey Record Book, 9 April 1859. The sawyers were apparently slaves or free blacks who worked for Rogers and Moore.
35 Skewarkey Record Book, 9 April 1859.
36 Ibid., lists of members from 1858 and 1859. Slaves are listed first by their owners’ surnames, usually in a possessive case, such as “Duggan’s Primus” or “Slade’s Charlotte”.
37 Ibid., 8 December 1860.
38 Ibid., 11 May 1861.
After the war, some former slaves stayed with Skewarkey Church and some chose to leave. In 1866 the church allowed (the 1864 Emancipation Proclamation notwithstanding) former slaves to have surnames. Many assumed the surnames of their former masters; Williams King became King Williams, and Hassells Tempy became Tempy Hassell. Three African American members, Bennett Burgess (also known as Burroughs), Miles Rogers, and Aaron Griffin, were allowed to preach in public among their communities; Burgess is even listed in directories as a “colored” Primitive Baptist preacher. Skewarkey balked for many years, however, at losing its emancipated members. Answering an 1873 request from African American members who wanted to leave and form their own congregations, church elders said, “...it is best to remain as we are, and that churches grant no letters of dismission for that purpose.” But African Americans eventually forsook their niches in the gallery for churches of their very own; the first of these was Peter Swamp Primitive Baptist Church, which was fostered by Cushing Biggs Hassell’s son, Sylvester, in 1878. Peter Swamp petitioned to join the Kehukee Association in 1885, but was denied access. Then there was Hickory Grove Primitive Baptist Church, founded in 1898, and Sandy Point followed in 1900. The last African American member of Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church was Della Rogers, who had joined the church in 1879; Cushing Biggs Hassell, who died the following year, baptized Miss Rogers himself at Leggett’s Bridge, an inadvertent passing of the torch. Miss Rogers was a faithful church member for her remaining seventy-two years. According to a longtime member who, as a child in the 1940s, remembered Della Rogers as an old woman, Miss Rogers did not sit in the gallery but downstairs, close to the back row. Della Rogers died in 1951, probably the last living member baptized by the elder Hassell.

Cushing Biggs Hassell’s death in 1880 left Skewarkey Church at a crossroads. From his 1843 ordination, Hassell had been a powerful force not only at Skewarkey but also in the town of Williamston, having served as the...
county Clerk of Court, and on the boards of the Roanoke Steamboat Company and Williamston Academy. His life’s work, *A History of the Church of God*, was finished in 1885 by his son Sylvester, and remains a frequently-cited compendium of Primitive Baptist history and doctrine. Sylvester Hassell (1842-1928), became pastor after 1883, ministering to not just Skewarkey but helping to found Robersonville Primitive Baptist Church in 1910.

Sylvester Hassell’s passing was another crossroads for Skewarkey Church, as a quiet decline of membership began to be felt. After Hassell’s death in 1928, Benjamin S. Cowan took over as Skewarkey’s pastor. However, Cowan was also ministering to the Robersonville and the Bear Grass Primitive Baptist churches, attesting that few Primitive Baptist ministers were being ordained in the twentieth century. When Cowan died in 1950, E. C. Stevenson assumed the task of pastoral care for the Skewarkey and Robersonville Primitive Baptist churches until 1962; at that time, Skewarkey had thirteen members. Then Elder E. C. Harrison administered to Skewarkey from 1962 into the 1970s. By the mid-1980s Henry Jones was pastor to Skewarkey Church, which by then was part of the Eastern Kehukee Association. In 1999, Skewarkey was one of eight churches comprising the Eastern Kehukee Association, formed in 1983. The other members were Flat Swamp (Pitt County), Old Sparta (Edgecombe County), Skewarkey, Smithwick’s Creek, Tarboro (Edgecombe County), Providence (Dare County), Red Banks (Pitt County), and Hancocks (Pitt County). Only two pastors, Henry Jones and Joe Sawyer, served the entire association, and by 2001 three churches—Smithwick’s Creek, Red Banks, and Providence—had been set down. As of 2001, four members remained in Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church.

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,

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46 Butchko, pp. 401-402.
47 Manning and Booker, p. 143.
48 Ibid., pp. 59, 81, and 143.
50 Ibid., p. 81.
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. 53 In the words of a Primitive Baptist, “This is a building: we are the church.”54

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, or lectern, 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, daylight 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.55 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 or
distracting.56 At Skwarkey Primitive Baptist Church, other interior features—interior bathrooms, electric
lighting, and small aisle carpet runners—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.”57

Concern over “priestcraft” and the faith drifting toward more worldly denominations somewhat explains
the nomenclature employed by Skwarkey when discussing their meeting houses. Terminology was direct and
plain, referring to the earlier building as a “meeting house” and the 1857 building as a “chapel”. Usually in record
entries, the “church” referred to the congregation itself, a practice that has continued to some degree. The care and
attention members gave each building, however, specifies 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, one reason this particular building has remained as intact as it has.58

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. However, by
the mid-nineteenth century two variations of form were seen in Martin County and elsewhere in eastern North
Carolina. In addition to the more common one-story meeting houses, there was the form seen at Skwarkey,
Spring Green, and

53 Drucilla H. York, Kehukue Primitive Baptist Church National Register nomination, p. 8.8.
55 York, 8.9.
56 James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue
in western North Carolina is quintessential of these meeting houses.
57 Reid, p. 174.
58 York, 8.8.
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. These latter meeting houses were located in areas where there were larger antebellum farms and plantations—and more slaves. Comparable examples to Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church outside of the county are now rare, but Tarboro Primitive Baptist Church in neighboring Edgecombe County, although a more consciously stylish Greek Revival edifice, shares a comparable interior plan and external form. Access to the gallery was gained from the inside at Conoho and Spring Green (it is not known if such was the case with the pre-1878 Spring Green Church), but from the outside at Skewarkey. The Spring Green and Skewarkey galleries were very plain, the most decoration arguably devoted to the board façade and the windows that lit their small space. There is no indication of pews having existed within either gallery, but neither has chairs survived. And yet Skewarkey’s 1857 gallery would have been considered a step up from the lean-to shed additions previously accommodating African American members—if they were lucky; more often as not, records indicate free blacks and slaves crowded together at the entrance wall.

In spite of protested adherence to tradition, records show that Skewarkey took part in the Primitive Baptist version of the Great Vowel Shift, as it were; in this case, the crucial shift was the change to a gable-end plan, from the side-gable plan common to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses of worship. The Skewarkey pulpit’s relocation, documented in the 1840s, suggests that Skewarkey was moving away from earlier Baptist interior plans, where the lectern, or pulpit, was sited at the meeting house’s long end, rather than the gable end. Surviving examples of this earlier interior plan are few, but do include Hannah’s Creek Primitive Baptist Church (ca. 1830-1860) in Johnston County, and Laurel Glen Regular Baptist Church (ca. 1875-1899) in Alleghany County. The “Amen Corner”, the seating arrangement perpendicular to pews positioned parallel with the gable ends, is possibly a vestige of earlier interior seating plans.

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 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.

59 York, 8.9.
60 Skewarkey Record Book, 9 June 1841, 10 July 1841, 13 November 1841, 12 March 1842, 7 May 1842.
agreed to deed them the church and lot. 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. 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.” Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church’s few surviving members wish to continue use of their building, and, in so doing, continue the austere faith and passionate belief of their ancestors.

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63 Tim Mattimoe, Greenville, N. C. Written communication (e-mail) to Penne Sandbeck, June 6, 2003.
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Primary Sources

Martin County Register of Deeds, Williamston, North Carolina.

Martin County Tax Office, Williamston, North Carolina.

Baptist Historical Collection, Z. Smith Reynolds Library, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Skewarkey Baptist Meeting House Record Book, 1785-1864 (also on microfilm at Davis Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; special thanks to Heather Fearnbach for clear photocopies of Hassell’s 1857-1859 ledger for Skewarkey Chapel’s construction).

Secondary Sources

Published Works


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
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Hassell, Cushing Biggs, and Sylvester Hassell. History of the Church of God, From Creation to A.D. 1885. www.primitivebaptist.org/writers/hassell [this website has reprinted the Hassells’ Primitive Baptist History and placed it on the Internet].


E-mail communication to Penne Sandbeck, June 6, 2003.

Neuse Baptist Association. Minutes of the Neuse Baptist Association, Assembled at Hadnot’s Creek, Carteret County, October 14-16, 1815. Photocopied from a private collection, and placed in Hadnot’s Creek Survey File, North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, Raleigh.


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
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Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church
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Unpublished Works


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
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Martin County, North Carolina

Interviews and Documented Conversations


Verbal Boundary Description:

The property is identified on Martin County (North Carolina) Tax Map 5776 (10), lot number 5065, in Williamston Township, Williamston Municipality.

Boundary Justification:

The nominated property includes the two-acre parcel deeded to the Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Meeting House by Joseph D. Biggs in 1857, and additional acreage acquired later. This boundary includes the church and cemetery, providing an historically appropriate setting for the resource.