

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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

1. Name of Property

historic name Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery
other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 7407 Steele Creek Road (N.C. Highway 160) not for publication
city, town Charlotte vicinity
state North Carolina code NC county Mecklenburg code 119 zip code 28210

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
		Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ structures
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ objects
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:
Historic and Architectural Resources of Mecklenburg County, N.C.
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

William S. Pinn
Signature of certifying official 1-3-91
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official _____
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

6. Function or Use Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, Mecklenburg Co., N

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION: religious structure

FUNERARY: cemetery

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION: religious structure

FUNERARY: cemetery

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

Gothic Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick

walls brick

roof slate

other stone

metal

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

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Continuation Sheet

Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, Mecklenburg Co., NC

Section number 7 Page 1

Located on a spacious, approximately 17-acre, tract southwest of Charlotte, North Carolina, Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery represent outstanding historical, artistic, and architectural symbols of the profound Scotch-Irish influence in Mecklenburg County. The setting reflects the area's historically rural ambience, though residential and commercial development to the south and east is graphic evidence of the county's recent growth and of the fragility of the rural character that still remains in this section of Mecklenburg County. To the north of the church grounds is Steele Creek Nursery, and to the west stand small, early 20th-century houses scattered on large lots. These properties help to reinforce the feeling of openness that the church grounds provide.

The Steele Creek Presbyterian Church property is visually dominated by the distinguished 1889 Gothic Revival Style church. Facing west, this building commands a rise of land shaded by mature oak trees overlooking Steele Creek Road (N.C. Highway 160). The winding Steele Creek Road is an historic stage route linking Salisbury, North Carolina with Camden, South Carolina. To the east of the church (and attached 1923 educational wing) stands a complex of three-brick-veneered, two-story buildings erected between the 1950s and 1989 for classrooms, offices, a chapel, and gymnasium. Although now attached to each other, these three buildings, erected separately, are counted in this nomination as three Noncontributing buildings. The complex is connected to the church and educational building by a covered walkway. A paved parking lot is located to the east of the complex of buildings and south of the church. Parking space is also located to the north and east of the church buildings, and farther east, shaded by trees, is a small playground. Neither the parking lots nor play area interferes with the architectural integrity of the church or the artistic integrity of the cemetery, and, therefore, are not classified in this nomination as Noncontributing. Bounded by a dry-laid fieldstone wall measuring about four feet high and one foot thick, the Steele Creek Presbyterian Cemetery stands northwest of the church buildings. A Contributing site in this nomination, the cemetery comprises approximately three acres and includes headstones dating from 1763 to the present.

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Section number 7 Page 2Church

The handsome Gothic Revival church represents the sixth house of worship built by the Scotch-Irish congregation at Steele Creek. In 1888, the congregation's 1858 church building burned to the ground, and the following year the present one was completed on the site. The bricks were made by members of the congregation. The building's brick walls, laid in a common bond, measured 80 feet long (six bays) by 52 feet wide (five bays). Today, the exterior of this well-executed building survives largely intact. Its Gothic Revival style is evident in the pointed-arched sash windows with textured glass in the over-lights, the pointed-arched entries, and steeply pitched roof parapet. Shallow buttresses define the five bays of the main facade as well as the six bays comprising the side elevations. Rising at the ends of the facade and originally signifying the building's two main doorways are a pair of crenellated entry towers with small copper caps and finials. A course of corbelled brick dentils accents the steeply pitched center gable, which features a circular vent surrounded by raised brick. Set directly below this vent and above the present main entrance are a pair of pointed-arched vented windows framed by segmental-arched brick corbelling. Situated directly below the vented windows, in the two bays flanking the central bay, are pointed-arched sash windows that light the sanctuary's balcony. The major alteration to the exterior was the replacement, in 1968, of the principal pointed-arched windows in the central bay by a third, main entranceway. At this time new panelled doors and matching panelled surrounds were added to the side entrances, and pointed-arched metal roofs and fascia installed.

The interior of the sanctuary underwent major renovations in both 1922 and 1951 (Historical Committee, 149-150). In 1922, the ceiling was lowered, and in 1951, new pews were installed and a choir loft was added behind the pulpit at the east end of the sanctuary. Surviving intact is the balcony at the west end.

Attached to the east end of the church is a two-story educational wing that was completed in 1923. Four bays deep (approximately 40 feet), this addition has common-bond brick walls and granite window sills and lintels. Slate shingles cover the hip roof. The original sashes have been replaced and the interior was modernized and partly integrated into the interior of the sanctuary in 1951.

Noncontributing Buildings

The noncontributing resources consist of three brick-veneered buildings joined together by later infill construction. They are arranged in a row facing west, several yards to the east and south of the 1889 building and rear 1923

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educational wing. Each is in good repair and serves its original function. At the north end of this complex is a Sunday School building completed in 1954. Joined to the 1923 educational wing by an arcade, it has a slate pent roof and stone-faced entrance. To the south is the church office building, representing the 1968 renovation and expansion of a community house (1926). This building, too, has a slate pent roof and is decorated with simple Gothic-inspired window and doorway treatment on the main facade. Directly to the south is the church's new chapel and gymnasium, dedicated in 1989. The gable-front chapel is treated with restrained Post-Modern elements alluding to the Gothic.

Steele Creek Presbyterian Cemetery

Steele Creek Cemetery comprises a remarkable collection of basically intact (though sometimes moss-covered) headstones, dating from 1763 to the present. There are approximately 1,700 headstones in the cemetery to date; and about 200 date between 1763 and ca. 1820. These earliest markers were crafted by local artisans, and notably by members of the Bigham family of headstone carvers. The Bighams, who lived nearby and donated land to the church, operated their workshop in this vicinity between about 1765 and 1820 (Gatza 1988; Little-Stokes 1982; Clark 1989). While generations of Bighams cut gravestones in the vicinity of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania as well as in the Carolina Piedmont, "the best and most varied collection of their work can be found in the cemetery next to the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church. . ." (Clark 1989, 37). Among the variety of traditional designs executed by the Bighams and evident in the Steele Creek cemetery are the Scottish Thistle, the Tree of Life, the Dove of Promise, rear-face decoration (11 examples identified), and family coats of arms (34 examples).

All of the gravestones in the cemetery are arranged in parallel rows running north-south, and they face east. The early stone markers are located primarily in the south half of the burial ground (south of the site of the first four churches) and were made from soapstone, granite, and marble. Those markers that post-date the work of the Bighams, and erected between the 1830s and turn of the century, often have traditionally restrained designs, with simple descriptions and flat, curvilinear, or occasionally pedimented tops. A number of them are marked with names of local and regional headstone manufacturers.

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Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, Mecklenburg Co., NC

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According to church tradition, the stone wall that surrounds the cemetery was constructed with slave labor during the antebellum period (Grier 1941). The wrought iron gates on the south and east entrances appear to be original, though the wall, in places, has been reconstructed and reinforced with cement mortar. In 1912, for example, stonemason Plato Price rebuilt part of the wall and may have been responsible for reconstructing the wall's north side (Grier 1941).

8. Statement of Significance Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, Mecklenburg Co., NC

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Art

Exploration/Settlement

Period of Significance

1763-ca. 1820, 1889

Significant Dates

1889

1763

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Norris, H. J. (contractor)

Bigam Workshop (headstone carver)

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

See continuation sheet

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Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, Mecklenburg Co., NC

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Summary

The Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery are outstanding historical, architectural and artistic symbols of the Scotch-Irish influence in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Situated on a tree-shaded rise of land overlooking Steele Creek Road, the 1889 Gothic revival sanctuary is architecturally significant under Criterion C for its handsome expression of this style. When erected at the end of the 1880s, it was the finest, most pretentious expression of church architecture in rural Mecklenburg. (See Associated Property Type 4 - Churches and Cemeteries.) The cemetery associated with the church contains the county's finest collection of headstones dating from late 18th and early 19th centuries. Bounded by a solidly built dry-laid stone wall with iron gates, this cemetery includes traditional gravestone designs reflecting the work of important local artisans - notably the Bigham family. The cemetery is therefore eligible under Criterion C. The cemetery is also eligible under Criterion A, because of its reflection of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church's role in the early settlement history of the county (See Context Statement - Early Settlement). It was one of the first seven churches established in the county by the early Scotch-Irish settlers.

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Historical Background

In 1764, a commission appointed by the Presbyterian Synod of New York and Philadelphia reorganized and adjusted the boundaries of the churches in North Carolina, and calls were sent out for pastors for Steele Creek, Providence, Hopewell, Centre (now in Iredell County), Rocky River, and Poplar Tent. Sugar Creek, to the northeast of Charlotte, already had a pastor. These were the first seven churches established in the county by the early Scotch-Irish settlers, and were sometimes known as the pre-Revolutionary "Pleiades", or "Seven Sisters."¹

In the first history of the church written by Rev. John Douglas (served 1866-1879), it was thought that a church was first established in the Steele Creek area as early as 1760, but later research suggests that a church was active there as early as 1745.² Another former pastor, J. W. Orr (served 1912-1920), who wrote a historical sketch in 1915, also suggests that there was preaching at the site twenty years before the church was officially organized in 1760.³

The early Scotch-Irish members of the congregation were farmers, whom Orr typified as "industrious, thrifty and upright...and...splendid citizens."⁴ (See Early Settlement and Agriculture contexts.) Before the church was formally organized, these farmers were served by travelling preachers. Among these early "circuit riders" were Rev. Hugh McAden, Rev. Elihu Spencer, and Rev. Robert McMordie.⁵ The first "settled pastor" was Rev. Robert Henry, who served both Steele Creek and Providence Churches from 1766 to 1767. In the latter year he died, and from that time until 1778, the church had neither a "settled" minister nor regular supply pastor until the Rev. James McRee took up the post and served from 1778 to 1797. Under his pastorate, the small church stabilized and gradually increased in numbers.⁶ His introduction of Watt's Psalms & Hymns, however, split the congregation and resulted in the loss of a number of members who left to form other churches in the township: Central Steele Creek (1794); Lower Steele Creek (1794) and Little Steele Creek (1800). These churches were the result of the unwillingness of several members of Steele Creek to compromise on the issue of singing hymns, not over dissension about doctrine.⁷

Rev. McRee left in 1797, and the church had no regular pastor again until 1804, when the Rev. Humphrey Hunter came, who served until 1827. He was succeeded by the Rev. Samuel Lytle Watson (1828-40).⁸ In the early 1800s, Steele Creek was considered large and important, even though it only had one hundred white and about twenty black members. But from the turn

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Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, Mecklenburg Co., NC

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of the nineteenth century to 1832, the congregation was "so infected with intemperance, infidelity, Universalism and Unitarianism that strife and erratic church attendance were frequent." In 1832, a wave of illness, (quite possibly the influenza epidemic of that year) and emigrations seemed to steady the congregation.⁹

The next major concern for the church came with the Civil War. Two hundred and four men from Steele Creek enlisted for service and one hundred and one are buried in the church cemetery. The minister during the war was Rev. Samuel Carothers Alexander (1861-1865), who was a native of Pennsylvania. There was continuous conflict between the minister and the congregation, such that the latter asked the Presbytery to dissolve his relationship with the church.¹⁰

After the war, it appears that the worst struggles for the church were over. The new minister, Rev. John Douglas (1866-79), wrote the first history of the church. His successor, Rev. J. T. Plunkett (1880-82) recruited 110 new members to the fold, which helped to make up for losses due to illness and the war. The Rev. A. P. Nicholson, who served from 1882 to 1886, is remembered as an austere and upright man; he had "no patience or place for modernistic views which became popular in some places at this time."¹¹

The end of the century also saw the enthusiasm with which the members of Steele Creek threw themselves into missionary and building programs. Missionary support began in the 1880s through the establishment of various church organizations: the Childrens Band of Earnest Workers (1898); the Ladies Aid Society (1880); the Young Ladies Missionary Society (1888); and the Gentlemen's Foreign Missions Society (1896).¹²

Exactly how and when the land was assembled for the church in its present configuration cannot be determined from the deed records. The first known mention of the property is in a deed dated January 7, 1771, in which William Bigham and his wife, Sarah (see Bigham family, above), sold 300 acres to a Robert Brownfield. In the description of the land, the following appears: "(Four acres of said land including the Old and New Meeting Houses the grave yard and spring on the North side of said Meetinghouses Only Excepted and Exempted in the Deed for the use of Congregation)."¹³ The next recorded deed was the acquisition of an adjoining 9-3/4 acres in 1837,¹⁴ and in 1858, they bought another adjacent 6-3/4 acres.¹⁵ In 1883, the trustees added another 2-1/2 acres.¹⁶ By the descriptions in the deeds, however, it is not possible to determine exactly how these parcels fit together.

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The "new meeting house" at Steele Creek was made of logs, "like Solomon's temple...paved with love, but had no silver pillars or coverings of purple." About 1780, it was reconstructed as an octagon. Soon after the arrival of the Rev. Humphrey Hunter as pastor, about 1804, a fourth church was built a few paces south of the old church. It was sixty-five feet long and forty feet wide, made of wood frame and weatherboards, hip roof, wood shingles, and eventually had a gallery put in for slaves.¹⁷ These early churches were within the boundaries of the present cemetery.

Around 1858, the congregation put up a fifth church about 175 yards southeast of the previous one, which is the site of the present church. The fifth church burned on January 24, 1888, and four days later, the congregation determined that they would build a new church on the same site. A building committee was formed, and H. J. Norris was hired as the contractor. The sixth church was, for the first time, built of brick, which was made from clay at the bottom of a hill near the church. The new sanctuary measured fifty-three by eighty feet, had a gallery across the front, a twenty-four foot ceiling, and could seat about 1,000. The women furnished the new church with carpets, chandeliers, and indeed, everything but the pulpit, which was a gift of the twelfth pastor, Rev. W. O Cochran (served 1887-1889). The students of Davidson College supplied a Bible, Minnie Robinson Price (Mrs. P. D. Price) provided a hymn book and the Sunday school class led by Maggie Whiteside provided a baptismal bowl and Sunday school bell. The new sanctuary was completed in March, 1889, and the dedication service took place on the following April 7th.¹⁸

Plans for a building expansion program began in the early twentieth century. The Rev. J. W. Orr indicated in a 1915 pamphlet that there was a great need for a Sabbath School building. In that year, the push for financial support for the project began under the "every Member" plan in which every member contributed to the church on a weekly basis.¹⁹ The result was the completion of a two-story educational building in 1923 and a community house in 1926 (which was given a brick veneer and completely renovated for offices in 1968). The sanctuary was renovated and given its present form in 1950, a Sunday school was added in 1954, and in 1989, a new chapel and gymnasium were added to the south of the office building.²⁰

The church cemetery has some of the oldest graves in Mecklenburg County. Among them are to be found the names of many pioneering families of that part of the county: Allen, Bigham, Davis, Grier, Hart, Herron, McDowell, Neely, Porter, Sloan, Tagart, and Vance. Thirteen veterans of the Revolutionary War are buried there, and a number of families who buried

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Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, Mecklenburg Co., NC

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members as far back as 1763 still attended in the 1970s, and thus span seven generations: Berryhill, Bigham, Cathey, Clark, Freeman, Grier, Herron, Knox, Mitchell, McDowell, Neel, Neely Porter, Price, Sloan, Spratt, Stilwell, Whiteside and Wilson.²¹ The cemetery has four sections: the eastern quarter was the original burying ground; the western quarter was used after 1840; the middle between the two was opened in 1884; and the north side was added in 1884.²²

The Steele Creek Presbyterian Church is an excellent example of the founding Presbyterian churches of the early Scotch-Irish settlers in the county and the role it played as the center of that rural community.

¹The History of Steele Creek Church 3rd Ed. (Charlotte: Steele Creek Presbyterian Church, 1978), p. 23.

²R. E. McDowell, Historical Committee, Steele Creek Church, "Historical Summary of Steele Creek Church," dated October 14, 1980.

³J. W. Orr, "Historical Sketch," 1915.

⁴Ibid.

⁵The History of Steele Creek Church, p. 21.

⁶Ibid., pp. 24-31.

⁷Ibid., p. 53.

⁸Ibid., pp. 39ff.

⁹Ibid. p. 48

¹⁰Ibid., p. 62.

¹¹Rufus Grier, "Steele Creek Presbyterian Church: A Historical Sketch," 1935, p. 4.

¹²Ibid., p. 6.

¹³Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5, p. 328.

¹⁴Ibid., Book 24, p. 441.

¹⁵Ibid., Book 3, p. 869.

¹⁶Ibid., Book 34, p. 247.

¹⁷History, pp. 144-5.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 78 and 148.

¹⁹Orr, cited above.

²⁰"Historical Summary," cited above. History, pp. 149-150.

²¹History, pp. 197ff.

²²Ibid., p. 203.

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Section number 9 Page 1

Clark, Edward W. "The Bigham Carvers of the Carolina Piedmont: Stone Images of an Emerging Sense of American Identity." In Richard E. Meyer, ed, Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1989.

Gatza, Mary Beth. "Architectural Inventory of Rural Mecklenburg County." 1987. On file at North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

Grier, Sadie. "Stones in Steele Creek Graveyard." 1941 article in Charlotte Observer, not otherwise identified.

Grier, Rufus. "Steele Creek Presbyterian Church: A Historical Sketch." 1935.

The History of Steele Creek Church. 3rd edition. Charlotte: Steele Creek Presbyterian Church, 1978.

Little-Stokes, Ruth, ed. "Southern Tombstones." Newsletter of the Association for Gravestone Studies. Special Issue. 6(1982): 2-10.

McDowell, R. E. "Historical Summary of Steele Church." October 14, 1980.

Mecklenburg County, N.C. Deed Books.

Orr, J. W. "Historical Sketch." 1915.

9. Major Bibliographical References

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 # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

Survey and Planning Branch, N.C.
Division of Archives and History,
Raleigh

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property approx. 17 acres

UTM References

A

1	7
5	03
7	3
0	
3	89
3	38
0	

B

1	7
5	04
1	0
0	
3	89
3	38
0	

C

1	7
5	0
4	1
0	0
3	89
3	10
0	

D

1	7
5	03
9	6
0	
3	89
3	10
0	

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery is indicated on the map of this district accompanying the nomination. The map is entitled "Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery."

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes 1889 sanctuary and attached church complex, and stone-walled cemetery which includes early headstones made by local craftsmen, notably the Bigham family of stonemasons. The boundary is drawn to eliminate church property acquired after the periods of significance.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Richard Mattson and William Huffman
organization _____ date July 1990
street & number 422 Rensselaer telephone 704-375-4236
city or town Charlotte state N.C. zip code 28203

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Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, Mecklenburg Co., NC

Section number Photos Page 1

IDENTIFICATION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery
7407 Steele Creek Road (N.C. Highway 160)
Charlotte vicinity
Mecklenburg County, North Carolina
Photographer: Richard Mattson
6-20-89

North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh

1. Cemetery and north and west (front) facades of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church, looking southeast
2. Cemetery, including stone wall, looking west from southeast corner
3. Cemetery, looking south
4. Headstone with coat-of-arms motif, looking west
5. South and west (front) facades of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church sanctuary, looking northeast
6. Front (west) facade of church sanctuary, looking east
7. North facades of sanctuary and Sunday School building, looking southeast
8. Front facades of chapel and gym, looking southeast
9. East (rear) facades of church office building, chapel, gym, looking southwest
10. Interior of sanctuary, looking east to alter

Mecklenburg County, NC

Scale - 1" = 200'

APPROX. 17 ACRES

Steele Creek Presbyterian Church
and Cemetery

Contributing Building

A - 1889 Sanctuary

Contributing Site

B - Cemetery

NonContributing Buildings

C - 1954 Sunday School

D - 1968 office Building
(renovated 1926
community house)

E - 1989 chapel and gym



