

(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 Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number Northwest side SR 1001, .1 mile North of SR 1106 Junction.

not for publication N/A

city or town Bear Grass

vicinity N/A

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 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.)

Jeffrey Brown
Signature of certifying official/Title

3/9/05
Date

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

entered in the National Register.

See continuation sheet

determined eligible for the National Register.

See continuation sheet

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other,

(explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church
Name of Property

Marlin County, NC
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.)

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

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	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

foundation Brick
walls Wood: weatherboard

roof Metal
other _____

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.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1877

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.

Significant Dates

1877

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:

Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church
Name of Property

Martin County, NC
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1/2 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>18</u> Zone	<u>307597</u> Easting	<u>3960050</u> Northing	3	<u> </u> Zone	<u> </u> Easting	<u> </u> 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.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Penne Sandbeck
organization Penne Smith Sandbeck and Associates date November 29, 2004
street & number P. O. Box 6363 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. Vader Hodges
street & number 6743 Bear Grass Road telephone 252-792-4849
city or town Williamston 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.

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Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church
Martin County, North Carolina

Physical Description and Setting

Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church, its broad front-gable façade a local landmark for over a century, is situated on the northwest side of State Road 1006, the local thoroughfare to the county seat of Williamston, less than fifteen miles northeast. To the south of the church is Bear Grass' commercial center, a small block of one-and two-story early twentieth-century commercial buildings; to the north of the church is Bear Grass School, a 1925 brick consolidated school constructed in the Colonial Revival style. Across the road and slightly southeast is the Bear Grass Presbyterian Church, a front-gable brick veneered building erected between 1930 and 1931 in the shadow of the community's mother church. Around the Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church and its town companion buildings are pines, oaks, and sweet gum trees.

The 1877 church is a front-gable, two-bay frame building, its dimensions forty-two feet, two-and-three-fourths inches wide at each gable end and sixty-four feet, four-and-a-half inches deep at its north and south elevations. Church history maintains that parts of the earlier building are incorporated into the current edifice. Its circular-sawn joists and sills rest on hand-molded brick piers, and the foundation itself is not enclosed.¹ Window and door surrounds, as well as the building's cornerboards, are unembellished except for applied raised molding and, in the case of doors and windows, an overhead drip cap. The original louvered wooden shutters were in bad condition and so were replaced with identical ones in the 1990s, but even they are understated. Although the church's three doors are six-paneled and early twentieth-century replacements, they still hang from original butt hinges; the west entrance also retains a late nineteenth-century carpenter lock. The twelve-over-twelve double-hung sash windows lighting the church are also original, and have clear glass. Sole decoration might be said to be the wide box cornice and raking cornice of the roofline, which terminates at either end with broad returns. Yet even the gable returns are simple, as is the large rectangular louvered ventilator at the front elevation. Above these is the roof, some of whose early cypress shingles are in place beneath the replacement raised seam metal covering. A small brick flue chimney is located at the approximate center of the roofline's ridge. Except for a small weatherboarded and gabled rear extension, where bathrooms are located, there have been no additions to the building.

A few small concessions to modern times have been made, beginning with the 1940s concrete steps at each front entrance, which also have metal rails. The south entrance, sited near the elevation's west end, has a small wooden ramp. Then there are the men and women's rest

¹ Architectural Historian Peter Sandbeck and Fred Harrison (President of the Martin County Historical Society) examined a group of the Martin County church buildings with me in July 2003, and Peter identified the brick as hand-molded, probably in the 1870s. He also pointed out that the southernmost of the two inner girders running front to back of the building's underside was hewn. However, given that many later nineteenth-century buildings in eastern North Carolina utilized old and newer technologies simultaneously, it was not conclusive that the girder was pre-1877.

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Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church
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rooms, located at the west elevation of the church, that were added in the late 1930s; at that time access was made by a new doorway on either side of the pulpit and there also remains an outside doorway to each. Inside, each bathroom has sheetrock walls, a small six-pane window, and board stalls. Behind the church, the gable extension is approximately twenty-two feet wide and ten feet long. None of these additions detracts from the building's intrinsic character.

Through either front door, the interior view is the same—a large room, lined with wooden pews, with its walls and ceiling sheathed by unpainted tongue-and-groove pine boards. Unlike other churches of this period, two local examples being Spring Green Primitive Baptist Church and the nearby Church Crossroads Disciples of Christ Church (now a storage building), there is no wainscoting or chair rail punctuating the interior space, only small and plainly made pine baseboards. As with nearly all nineteenth-century Primitive Baptist churches seen in eastern North Carolina, however, a line of eight tall chamfered support posts run down the middle of the room from between the entrance doors to just behind the pulpit.

Snaking around two of the center posts is a metal stove flue supported from the ceiling by metal wires. The flue connects an early twentieth-century cast-iron wood stove near the south wall to another cast-iron stove along the north wall, patented by Isaac Shepherd of Baltimore in 1865.² The present four-inch-wide flooring, circa 1910, is above the earlier pine floorboards, which are approximately seven to eight inches wide; these can be seen within the corner closets, built at the turn of the twentieth century, at each end of the east wall. Centered along the west wall is the sanctuary, a raised wooden platform with a small lectern on either side of a large pine lectern, evidently the pulpit. Below the sanctuary are a low wooden bench and a small table with a wooden chair at each side. The only other piece of interior furniture associated with the sanctuary is a late nineteenth-century Empire Revival style table where the minutes box is kept. According to longtime church elder Theresa Ayers, the table was given to the church by the former Great Swamp Primitive Baptist Church in Pitt County, North Carolina.³

Nineteen rows of slat-back, pine pews extend down the room's center section, with smaller pew sections, also slat-back, on either side of the center section, creating two major aisles from each entrance to the sanctuary. The pews fall into two categorical periods of construction. Smaller slat-back white pine benches in the church, about six feet long, show earlier construction techniques, such as mortised seats and, at the base of the seating, sash saw marks; this, as typical of seating before the circa 1860-1870 widespread use of the circular saw in North Carolina, does

² In the 1828-1899 Bear Grass Church Minutes, the first mention of a wood stove is in September 1875, and it is likely that this is the first stove in the church. Before this, there are several entries where services were cancelled due to cold weather.

³ Theresa Ayers, Bear Grass, N. C., April 14, 2000, conversation with Penne Smith Sandbeck.

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Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church
Martin County, North Carolina

indicate these were probably the early church pews.⁴ Later pews, thought to be built at the time of the 1877 building, used nails instead of mortise-and-tenon joinery to secure the seats, and circular saw marks are clearly visible on their boards.⁵

Besides the congregational seating, there are also pews at a perpendicular angle on either side of the sanctuary dais; this placement is referred to as the “amen corner” in some Primitive Baptist churches and it was reserved for the church’s senior members.⁶ The sizable seating reminds one of how large and influential a role this church played with local society during the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, especially now that its congregation has dwindled to five members. One charming feature at Bear

Grass Church, which would surely be frowned upon by its earlier forebears, is the presence of individual seat cushions in the pews currently used, along with the late Mrs. Maggie Harrison’s handiwork of several afghan knitted blankets draped over the seats.⁷ Originally, men and women entered through the two separate entrances and sat on either side of the room, the large chamfered posts serving as a dividing line, but one longtime church member did not recall ever seeing this practice in her lifetime.⁸

Besides the corner closets and the bathrooms, the few alterations within the building include the two windows on either side of the center lectern, enclosed in the 1930s when the rest room extension was added. Then, sometime in the early twentieth century, the ceiling was lowered; an arched ceiling, sheathed with manufactured beaded board siding, extends across the room, covering the tops of the window surrounds. Another significant interior feature of change is the 1930s glass lighting fixtures, suspended from the ceiling by a small chain. There are no outbuildings associated with this church, and the only structure outside of the church is a low wooden fence-and-post rail at either corner of the front elevation to demarcate parking spaces from the church’s front lawn

⁴ Carl Lounsbury, “The Wild Melody of Steam,” in *Architects and Builders in North Carolina*, Bishir, et. al., eds. (The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 206. Also, Peter Sandbeck, Williamsburg, VA, conversation with Penne Sandbeck following on-site visit to Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church, November 9, 2003 (notes in file).

⁵ All bench seats have one flat edge, and one beveled edge; Peter Sandbeck offered the plausible theory that the beveled edge would have been the side facing the aisle, as it would have allowed for easier passage.

⁶ Drucilla H. York, National Register Nomination for Kehukee Primitive Baptist Church, Halifax County, N. C. (September 1993). In the case of the 1870s Memorial Primitive Baptist Church in northern Wayne County, however, this seating was for the congregation’s African American members; see J. Daniel Pezzoni and Penne Smith, *Glimpses of Wayne County, North Carolina* (Goldsboro: Wayne County Historical Association with B. Williams & Associates, 1998), p. 97.

⁷ Peggy Bailey, “Keeping Faith: Tiny Flock Loves Old Church.” *The Enterprise* (Williamston, N. C.), March 18, 1997, pp. 1A and 9A.

⁸ Ayers conversation, April 14, 2000.

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Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church
Martin County, North Carolina

Statement of Significance

A plain, unadorned building constructed in the nineteenth century to serve as a place of worship, the Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church has maintained this function and purpose to the present day with no alteration to its form or interior since 1935, and little 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 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. As such, it is eligible for listing under Criterion C for Architecture. The period of significance begins in 1877, the year that the church building was expanded to its present form and appearance. As a religious property, Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church meets Criterion Consideration A for its intact and significant architectural design and construction.

Background History

Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church's congregation initially belonged to the Skewarkey Baptist Meeting, founded in 1786 and located approximately fifteen miles northeast near the Roanoke River. The fifteen congregants who wished to form their own church lived and farmed near Bear Grass Swamp and by 1828 already had a meeting house intended to be a satellite of the Skewarkey Church.¹ 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.²

On August 23, 1828, Bear Grass' fifteen members sent a petition to Skewarkey Church, requesting "the privilage [sic.] of enrolling our names and answering to them at the Bargrass [sic.] Meeting House and for us to continue and be with you in every other respect." The

¹ Francis M. Manning and W. H. Booker, *Religion and Education in Martin County, 1774-1974* (Williamston, N. C.: Enterprise Publishing Company, 1974), p. 57. Also, the Bear Grass 1828-1899 Minutes, which Manning may have been privy to, imply a building being used for worship before their official establishment; see 1828-1829 minutes.

² 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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Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church
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fledgling church's first service on September 7, 1828, "opened by praise and prayer to almighty God" with two communicants baptized the following day at Daniel Biggs' nearby mill.³

In 1828, the word "Primitive" was not yet widely used to describe this branch of the Baptist faith. 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 Bear Grass 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."⁴ 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 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.⁵ Such evangelicalism would have been anathema to the humble farmers and millers in Bear Grass' small backwater, as well as the members of Skewarkey and Smithwick's Creek meetings.⁶

But in 1828 eastern North Carolina's Baptists were on the verge of 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?"⁷

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

³ Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church, Ledger One (Minutes, August 23, 1828-September 1899), August 23 and September 27, 1828.

⁴ Bear Grass Ledger One, "A Confession of Faith", ca. May 1829.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Sylvester Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, chapter 21. () Online www.primitivebaptist.org/writers/hassell/history/chapter21.asp

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Address, like the Kehukee Association's proscription, further eschewed the trend of becoming more evangelical and, as perceived by them, more commercially oriented.⁸ 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."⁹ 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.¹⁰

In the eyes of the Primitive Baptists, there was a place for acceptance of converts. In Bear Grass Church's "Decorum or rule of Conference", as with other 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.¹¹ 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 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).¹²

⁸ 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).

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Reid, p. 171.

¹¹ Bear Grass Ledger, "A Decorum, or rule of Conference," ca. May 1829, article 5.

¹² 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).

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Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church
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This shadowed the beginning of the Bear Grass Church, and no doubt made its congregation cling harder to the tenets and practices of their beliefs. That they considered themselves a part of the “elect” has already been mentioned. The twelfth article in the Bear Grass Church’s Confession of Faith (itself based upon written statements of belief in other Primitive Baptist churches) states their conviction that baptism of believers, and the “Lords supper”, or administration of the Christian sacraments of bread and wine, being “gospel ordinances.” Although foot-washing, which was taken from the New Testament as an exercise in humility and universal love, is not stated as a gospel ordinance in the church’s articles of faith, it is known that Bear Grass’ congregation engaged in the practice. 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.¹³ The practice of gender separation during worship was perpetuated at this particular church until approximately 1950.¹⁴

Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church’s first years were a time of growth and contemplation, as its members increased to twenty-three in its first year, at least one foot-washing service was observed, and rules of decorum were drafted. In May 1829 the Bear Grass Church petitioned and received official “dismissal” from Skewarkey and established a regular correspondence by winter 1830.¹⁵ Signers of the petition were Daniel Biggs, John Clark, Warren G. Bailey, Eliza Biggs, Mary Clark, King Harrison, Noah Gurganus, Thomas Whitley, Jonathan Reddick, Bethel Leggitt, Polly Gurganus, David Woolard, James Harrison, Abram Peal, Nancy Peal, Nancy Harrison, James Lanier, Harvey L. Whitley, Daniel Lilley, Levisa Lilley, Jinney Harrison, Sophia Harrison, and Ann Peal.¹⁶ One of the signers, James Harrison (1767-1840), had been a resident of the area for at least thirty-five years, having bought out John Swinson, Bear Grass’ earliest known resident, after the Revolutionary War. Harrison’s land holdings included a

¹³ Hayslette, pp. 14-25.

¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ Bear Grass Ledger One, January 24, 1829, and May 25, 1829. Also, Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church Minutes (1786-1861: Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, N. C.; on microfilm at Davis Library, UNC-Chapel Hill), February 13, 1830.

¹⁶ Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church Ledger, 1786-1861, June 9, 1829. Also, Bear Grass Ledger, May 2, 1829.

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grist mill southeast of Bear Grass that later passed to his son and daughter-in-law, John Biggs and Frances ("Fannie")

Harrison. King Harrison, another petition signer, and his wife Jinney came from Bertie County at the turn of the nineteenth century, and their coastal cottage remains in the Bear Grass area.¹⁷ John Clark's 1845 passing was noted in church minutes, where he was mentioned as "A Revolution Soldier."¹⁸

In following years, membership grew; the church received some new members from Tranters Creek Primitive Baptist Church to the southeast, and other churches struggling with the Missionary Baptist movement.¹⁹ In 1832 Elder Joseph Biggs who, with Jeremiah Leggett of Tranters Creek, had guided the young church, stepped down and John Ward took his place.²⁰ Early leaders of Bear Grass Church also included Noah Gurganus, who served as a clerk for many years, and William Whitaker, who was ordained at the church in 1838 and was its principal Elder until 1874.²¹

The church's minutes book describes many events, major and minor, taking place during its first quarter-century. Administering to congregants included rebuking a member, Bethal Leggitt, for attending a horse race in 1830 and admitting Aaron, a slave of Bryant Griffin's, to the church in 1833.²² There were occasional difficulties, such as when some members disagreed with the church's Articles of Faith in 1832 and refused to sign them; in these cases, Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church's elders were called in to mediate.²³ Skewarkey continued to be a mother church to Bear Grass, as it and the Smithwick's Creek meetings were part of the Kehukee Association's Skewarkey Union by August 1841.²⁴ Once a year, in time for the Skewarkey Union's annual meeting each summer, Bear Grass' members would gather at the meeting house (often referred to in early records as "this place") to make small repairs to the building.²⁵ By 1850 a steward, referred to in records as "Mr. Brown", was paid one dollar per year from church funds to keep the building in order; in 1857 a Mr. Rogers took over this duty. There was also a well on

¹⁷ Fred Harrison, Jr., Williamston, N. C. Written communication (e-mail) to Penne Sandbeck, November 14, 2003 (in research file). See also Butchko, pp. 128-129.

¹⁸ Bear Grass Ledger, flyleaf page, ca. 1845.

¹⁹ Bear Grass Ledger, March 2, 1833 ("Aaron... which was one of the members that withdrew from Tranters Creek on account of false doctrine"). Also, Manning and Booker, p. 57.

²⁰ Manning and Booker, p. 58.

²¹ Manning and Booker, p. 58; Bear Grass Ledger, July 19, 1838.

²² Bear Grass Ledger One, January 23, 1830, and March 2, 1833.

²³ Manning and Booker, p. 58. Skewarkey Church Ledger, January 1831.

²⁴ Skewarkey Primitive Baptist Church Ledger, n.d. "The Skewarkey Union Meeting" (faces entry for June 13, 1829)/

²⁵ Bear Grass Ledger One, July 23, 1831, July 21, 1832, August 7, 1833, July 20, 1839, August 14, 1841, and July 15, 1843. There are other entries for this practice, at least once a year.

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the premises, which was periodically maintained by member Daniel Lilley²⁶. By the 1850s, baptisms occurred either at “Biggs old mill” (Daniel Biggs having died in 1834), or at Gunners Bridge to the south, spanning Tranters Creek.

Services were held every third weekend of the month, with part of one day devoted to church business. Union and Association meetings were held annually. Usually in summer, these were very social, as well as religious, events; the men of the church would build a “preacher stand” out of plank for resident and visiting pastors, and the grounds and meeting house were scrupulously cleaned for the occasion. Bear Grass still has the stand used during the twentieth century in storage nearby.

During the Civil War several meetings were cancelled at church, mainly in 1864.²⁷ Between 1862 and 1863, cartographers working for the Confederate army, mapped the church at its exact site on the west side of what is now Secondary Road 1006, where it stands at the present day. But, unlike other Primitive Baptist churches—Skewarkey, Spring Green, Picot, and Smithwick’s Creek—Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church is not labeled on the maps, further raising the possibility that the church was infrequently used during the war.²⁸ At that time, there were only three buildings near the meeting house. It is not known if the church’s African American members stayed on during the war.

After the Civil War, relatively modern conventions—hymn books, wood stoves—are first mentioned in the church minutes. Because the Primitive Baptists do not believe in musical accompaniment, the hymns from the books ordered for the church in 1872 would have been (and continue to be) sung a cappella by the congregation. Before 1875, services were occasionally cancelled due to cold or inclement weather. September 1875 is the first written record that the Bear Grass church had a wood stove in the building.

In 1877 the congregation decided to enlarge the building. According to a descendant of Elder D. B. Harrison, the daughter-in-law of James Harrison, “Fannie”, had recently built a new sawmill, employing the use of a circular saw, which may have precipitated D. B. Harrison, William Bullock, and Kinchen Taylor forming a committee to investigate enlarging the meeting house in July 1877.²⁹ Within a month, the committee reported to the congregation that the “house is finished except cross-bracing the floor.”³⁰ Because no paintings, drawings, or photographs of

²⁶ Bear Grass Ledger One, 1850-1854, and February 14, 1857.

²⁷ Ibid, November – December 1861.

²⁸ Gilmer Map, ca. 1863, and Koerner Map, ca. 1862-1863. Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁹ Fred Harrison, Jr., Williamston, N. C. Conversation with Penne Sandbeck, July 17, 2003. Also, written communication (e-mail) to Penne Sandbeck, November 14, 2003; Bear Grass Ledger, July 1877.

³⁰ Bear Grass Ledger, August 1877.

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the older building survive, it can only be guessed that the new, or expanded, building was faithful in spirit to its predecessor; however, pieces of the older building—inner girders, joists, and studs—were reused. The chamfered center posts, smaller in scale than posts seen in regional Primitive Baptist churches built after 1829, may have been reemployed as well. Also, smaller slat-back white pine benches in the church, about six feet long, show earlier construction techniques, such as mortised seats and, at the base of the seating, sash saw marks; this, as typical of seating before the circa 1860-1870 widespread use of the circular saw in North Carolina, does indicate these were probably the early church pews.³¹ Later pews, thought to be built at the time of the 1877 building, used nails instead of mortise-and-tenon joinery to secure the seats, and circular saw marks are clearly visible on their boards.³²

Seven years after 1877, Bear Grass became a county township. Though still a rural section of southern Martin County, the Bear Grass community soon offered more social hubs in addition to the church, but the church continued to be an important local meeting site into the mid-twentieth century. The church's immediate surroundings gradually took the appearance of a village; the Harris and Cowan Store was a short distance southeast of the church by 1897, and the J. Rogers and Brother General Merchandise Store was built in 1908, a year before Bear Grass became an incorporated town.³³ No original title has been found for the church property, but it was at approximately this time that members began to deed additional land to the church. One-third of an acre was given in 1884, and a half-acre in 1919.³⁴ During this time of town development, the church was fortunate to have stability through long terms of its pastors, beginning with William Whitaker, who held his position for thirty-six years. After Whitaker's death, Levi Rogerson served as the church's pastor in 1884, and John N. Rogers was pastor by 1896; Rogers would serve until 1933, when he was succeeded by A. B. Ayers, who was pastor until 1957.³⁵ Another longtime figure in the church was Ben S. Cowin, an associate pastor from 1915 well into the 1940s. Cowin, a teacher as well as a church elder, is said to have preached 3,000 sermons at the meeting house between 1908 and 1950, the year of his death.³⁶

During A. B. Ayers' tenure, electric lighting was installed, as were the two bathrooms on either side of the sanctuary. According to a longtime member, there was a wooden privy located

³¹ Carl Lounsbury, "The Wild Melody of Steam," in *Architects and Builders in North Carolina*, Bishir, et. alia, eds. (The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 206. Also, Peter Sandbeck, Williamsburg, VA, conversation with Penne Sandbeck following on-site visit to Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church, November 9, 2003 (notes in file).

³² All bench seats have one flat edge, and one beveled edge; Peter Sandbeck offered the plausible theory that the beveled edge would have been the side facing the aisle, as it would have allowed for easier passage.

³³ Thomas R. Butchko, *Martin Architectural Heritage* (Martin County Historical Society, 1998), p. 119.

³⁴ Martin County Register of Deeds, Deed Book GG: 256 (1884), and Deed Book YI: 237 and 265 (1919).

³⁵ *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory*, 1884 (pp. 435-436) and 1896 (p.397). Also, Manning and Booker, p. 59. Two of Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church's four current members are direct descendants of both Levi Rogerson and B. S. Cowin.

³⁶ Butchko, p. 124.

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behind the church, with separate seating for men and women.³⁷ These new attached bathrooms had outside entrances as well as interior entrances, possibly to keep down on disrupting services. Today, the bathrooms have an unforeseen significance, as they indicate from their location where men (north side of building) and women (south side) originally sat.³⁸ Gender separation during worship continued until the late 1940s. One longtime church member recalled her first visit to Bear Grass during an Association meeting in 1948, when the room was entirely full of not only the congregation, but other Primitive Baptists from the eastern part of the state; men were still sitting north of the center chamfered posts and women to the south, but she remembered the atmosphere as being very cordial, and not one of exclusion.³⁹

Between 1953 and 2003, membership in Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church declined to four members, three of whom attend services regularly. As with the Kehukee Association's other Primitive Baptist churches with dwindling membership, services are held on a rotational basis throughout eastern North Carolina and members drive long distances to partake of them.⁴⁰ Presently, there are only eleven living members left in the Kehukee Association, which counted 1,590 members in their ranks nearly one hundred years ago.⁴¹ The Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church's challenge is now increasingly perceived as maintaining and preserving the building and site that served them for 174 years. Under Theresa Ayers' leadership, a new roof was put on the church in 1999 when the old one was leaking. Mrs. Ayers, who served as an elder from 1972 until 2001, also preserved the church records and was compiling a history of the church at the time of her retirement.⁴² The building is carefully maintained by Ben Harrison and, apart from worship every third Sunday of the month, is periodically open to visitors, many of whom are descendants of founding members.⁴³

³⁷ Mrs. Vader Harrison Hodges, Bear Grass, N. C., conversation with Penne Sandbeck, November 9, 2003.

³⁸ Hodges conversation, November 9, 2003. This was also confirmed on the same day by Mrs. Sadie Harrison, Bear Grass, N. C.

³⁹ Mrs. Sadie Harrison, Bear Grass, N. C., conversation with Penne Sandbeck, November 9, 2003.

⁴⁰ Hodges and Harrison conversation, November 9, 2003. Services are held in Martin and Johnston County for the Kehukee Association churches.

⁴¹ Hodges and Harrison conversation, November 9, 2003. Also, Nancy Van Dolsen, National Register Nomination for Red Banks Primitive Baptist Church, Pitt County, N. C. (July 2001), p. 8.4.

⁴² Peggy Bailey, "Keeping Faith: Tiny Flock Loves Old Church," in the *Enterprise* (Williamston, N. C.), March 18, 1997, pp. 1A and 9A. At the time I met Mrs. Ayers in April 2000, the roof had been installed and the ceiling still showed signs of considerable water damage. Mrs. Ayers mentioned her history compilation to me the day of our meeting, which was confirmed by Mrs. Hodges and Mrs. Harrison on November 9, 2003.

⁴³ The congregation has only very recently abandoned use of the wood stoves, and now has small heaters that are less trouble to operate. However, there is still a supply of wood in the north closet.

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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.⁴⁴ In the words of a Primitive Baptist, “This is a building; *we* are the church.”⁴⁵

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, the 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.⁴⁶ Benches were simple, and cushions were not seen in the building until the twentieth century. Walls were unpainted, or just whitewashed. There were no stained glass windows, no murals from the Old or New Testament, no choir stall with fancy molding, or any other features deemed nonessential or distracting.⁴⁷ At Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church, other interior features—corner entrance closets, 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.”⁴⁸

One telling piece of information as to how the Bear Grass congregation saw their meeting house is in their own records. In 1828 and 1829 the “Bargrass Meeting House” was almost always referred to as “this place”. This continued to be the predominant way the building was addressed, although “meeting house” “house” and, occasionally, “church” were also employed.⁴⁹ The care and attention members gave the building, however, specifies that these terms are expressions of priority; Primitive Baptists operated from spiritual, rather than physical, motives;

⁴⁴ Drucilla H. York, Kehukee Primitive Baptist Church NR nomination, p. 8.8.

⁴⁵ Ben Harrison, Bear Grass, N. C. , conversation with Penne Sandbeck, November 9, 2003.

⁴⁶ 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..

⁴⁷ James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), pp. 106-109. Peacock and Tyson’s description of a Primitive Baptist church in western North Carolina is quintessential of these meeting houses, and particularly Bear Grass Church. However, gender seating at the mountain church is opposite the seating plan at Bear Grass.

⁴⁸ Reid, p. 174.

⁴⁹ Bear Grass Ledger, 1828-1899.

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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.⁵⁰

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 as evidenced at Bear Grass, 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.⁵¹ These latter meeting houses were located in areas where there were larger antebellum farms and plantations—and more slaves—than in the yucca-strewn swampland of Bear Grass.

Comparable examples to Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church begin with the former Jamesville Primitive Baptist Church, constructed between 1865 and 1870. Although the interior was changed substantially when the former meeting house became the Jamesville Woman's Club in 1953, the exterior shares many features identical to Bear Grass Church. There is the handsome box cornice and raking cornice which, in addition to the simple cornerboards and large overhead louvered ventilator in the front gable, are the building's sole ornamentation. Comparable examples outside of Martin County include the 1893 Red Banks Primitive Baptist Church in Pitt County, recently listed to the National Register of Historic Places, as well as the circa 1849 Bethlehem Primitive Baptist Church (originally known as Soundside Church) in Tyrrell County and 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 .

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 agreed to deed them the church and lot.⁵² Presently, as they finish restoration of the building, the Spring Green group is entertaining a number of

⁵⁰ York, 8.8.

⁵¹ York, 8.9.

⁵² Martin County Register of Deeds, Book C-17:74 [Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association>Spring Green Preservation Fund, Inc., 1999].

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options, including that it may become a church for another denomination.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ The members of Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church wish to preserve their church as an artifact of the austere faith and passionate belief of their ancestors.

⁵³ Fred Harrison, Jr., Williamston, N. C. Conversation with Penne Sandbeck, April 13, 2003.

⁵⁴ Tim Mattimoe, Greenville, N. C. Written communication (e-mail) to Penne Sandbeck, June 6, 2003.

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Verbal Boundary Description

The one-half acre property on which Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church Stands is identified on Martin County (North Carolina) Tax Map #59, tract 1481.

Boundary Justification

The nominated property, located in Bear Grass Township, consists solely of the historic meeting house and its immediate surroundings which were historically associated with the meeting house.

- 1 .3048
- 2 .6096
- 3 .9144
- 4 1.2192
- 5 1.5240
- 6 1.8288
- 7 2.1336
- 8 2.4384
- 9 2.7432
- 10 3.0480

To convert feet to meters multiply by .3048
 To convert meters to feet multiply by 3.2808



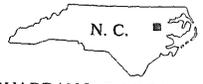
*Bear Grass
 Baptist Church
 16 (road)
 307597 N
 3960050 M
 Bear Grass
 Martin County
 Robersonville
 3959000m N
 East Quad*

306 ● INTERIOR—GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, RESTON, VIRGINIA—1982
 LEGGETTS CROSSROADS 9 KM 307000m E 77°07'30" 35°45'

ROAD CLASSIFICATION

- Primary highway, hard surface
- Secondary highway, hard surface
- Light-duty road, hard or improved surface
- Unimproved road
- Interstate Route ○ U. S. Route ○ State Route

*(OLD FORD)
 5555 II NE*



QUADRANGLE LOCATION

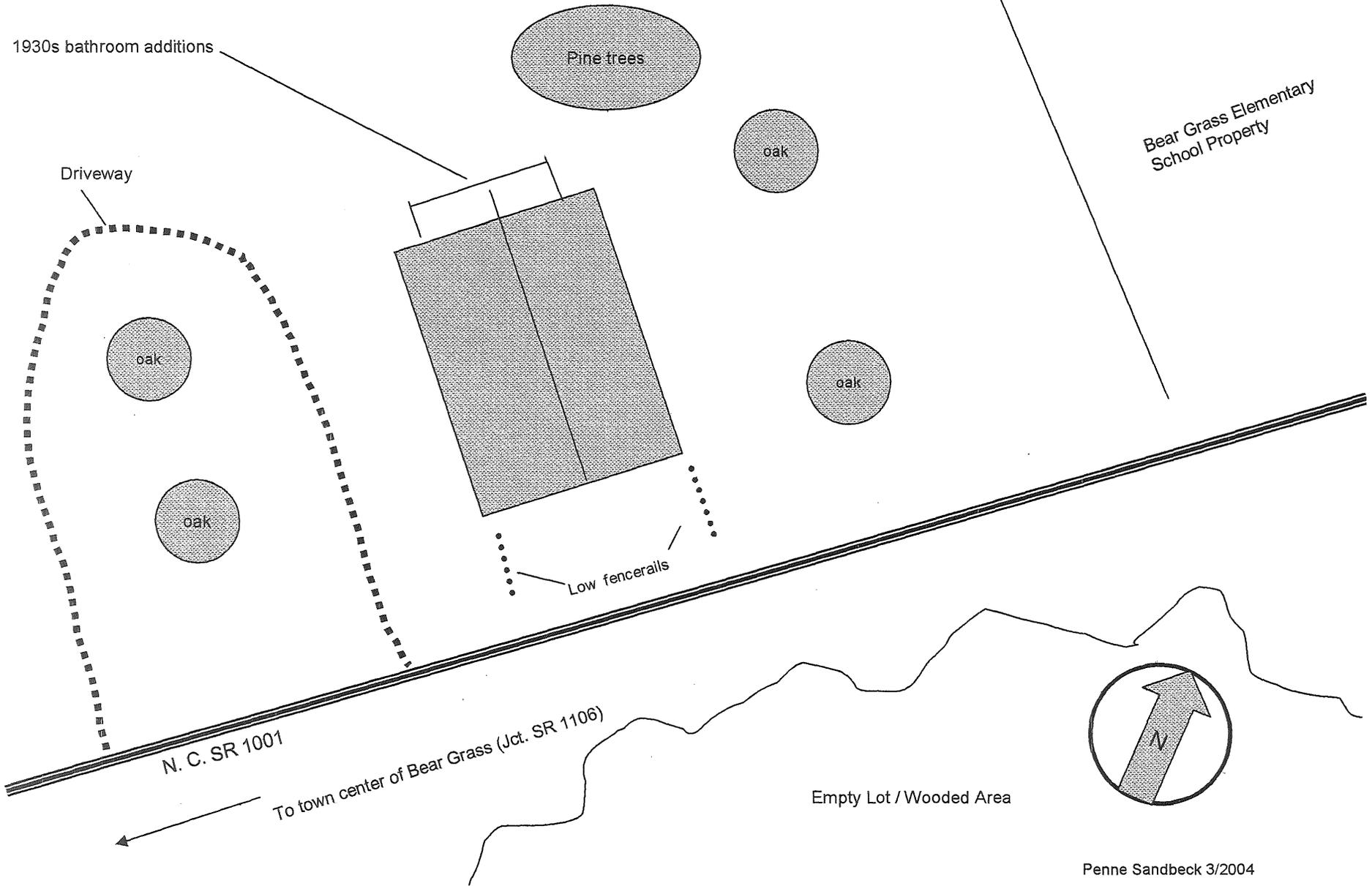
CONTOURS AND ELEVATIONS IN METERS

ROBERSONVILLE EAST, N. C.
 SW/4 WILLIAMSTON 15' QUADRANGLE
 N3545-W7707.5/7.5

1981

DMA 5555 I SW—SERIES V842

Bear Grass Primitive Baptist Church, Martin County, North Carolina Sketch Map of Site (NTS)



BEAR GRASS PRIMITIVE
BAPTIST CHURCH
MARTIN CO., N.C.

1" = 100'

2841
(13.3 Ac.)



59

7662

BEAR GRASS
COMMUNITY CENTER

6407

7339
1.0 Ac.

1481
PRIMITIVE CHURCH
(BAPTIST)



0275

EAST BEAR GRASS RD

SR 1007

BEAR GRASS
PRESBYTERIAN



2152

1061

5068
(6.4 Ac.)
5.8 Ac

SOUTH ROGERS ST

SR 1106

0972

1839

0868
0.3 Ac.

0834

9043
.6 AC

3751

58

CHERRY IN CD



BEAR GRASS
PRIMITIVE BAPTIST
CHURCH
ESTABLISHED 1899