

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any 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.

1. Name of PropertyHistoric name: Watkins Chapel AME Zion ChurchOther names/site number: Hills Chapel AME Zion Church

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

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

2. LocationStreet & number: 505 Cascade StreetCity or town: Mooresville State: NC County: IredellNot For Publication: Vicinity: **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 forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property x meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

 national statewide x local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

x A B x C D**Signature of certifying official/Title:****Date**North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural ResourcesState or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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

Signature of commenting official:**Date****Title :****State or Federal agency/bureau
or Tribal Government**

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

- Private: ☒
- Public – Local ☐
- Public – State ☐
- Public – Federal ☐

Category of Property

- Building(s) ☒
- District ☐
- Site ☐
- Structure ☐
- Object ☐

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	structures

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0

0

objects

1

2

Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use
Historic Functions

RELIGION: religious facility

Current Functions

RELIGION: religious facility

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

LATE VICTORIAN: Romanesque

Materials:

foundation: BRICK

walls: BRICK

roof: METAL

Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

Watkins Chapel AME Zion church (1942) is the second iteration of a church building on this site, in a traditionally African American section of the Town of Mooresville. In close proximity to modest residences and west of an expansive African American cemetery complex, the current church building and 1964 education wing share a roughly 1.4 acre parcel with a paved parking area, a small storage shed, and a pre-fabricated carport. The church faces west towards Cascade Street. The Romanesque Revival-style church is clad in brick veneer. Imposing twin crenellated entrance towers flank the front gable on the facade. The roof is clad in metal. The south tower appears to be slightly taller than the north, by approximately two feet. Arched masonry openings with stone springers and keystones house stained glass windows with clear exterior storm windows on all elevations. A concrete block education wing addition with brick-veneered facade is set northeast of the church building. The church interior has three rows of pews alternating with two interior aisles that lead to a chancel set off by a curved railing with turned balusters. Within the rail is wooden ecclesiastical furniture including an altar, lectern, and heavy wooden chairs. A central arched opening behind the chairs and a low partition contains risers for choir and musicians, with a large stained glass window centered behind them.

Narrative Description

Setting

Watkins Chapel AME Zion church sits on an approximately 1.4 acre parcel on the east side of Cascade Street near its intersection with West Statesville Avenue, and West Statesville Avenue's intersection with North Broad Street, NC115. The area is close to a railroad crossing of two lines of the Southern Railway and is known locally as "the junction." While Broad Street is a major arterial road, the junction area continues to include older, small-scale residential development. East of the church property is a cemetery now owned and maintained by the town that was a segregated cemetery for African Americans. A portion of the cemetery is a grassy lawn, and a portion is wooded. It is not thought that this was directly associated with the church, but another

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burial ground slightly to the north may have been, when the church was thought to have been located on School Street prior to its relocation on the current site.

The church parcel includes a paved parking lot with a prefabricated carport to the south, and a grassy lawn to the east and north. A small shed stands east of the church. West of the church building is a concrete path that extends east from the sidewalk to a point in front of the building where it divides into two arched paths that stretch to the two tower doors. An intersecting path leads north to a point where the pastor's house once stood.¹ A brick monument-type sign with channel lettering stands north of the arched path. A series of rough stones approximately one foot square and painted white are aligned along the southern and western edges of the grassy area at the front of the church.

Exterior

Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church consists of a sanctuary that was built or re-built in 1942 and a 1963 education building. The original construction date of the church is unclear, but the congregation was organized prior to 1889, and the land on which the church now stands was purchased in December 1891.

It is thought that the current church was originally a wood frame building. A Sanborn map shows a frame church at this location with a single tower centered on the facade.² While at least one senior member of the congregation believes the church was entirely demolished and rebuilt, it may have been veneered, given the depth of the window reveals and the apparent lack of masonry on the east sides of the towers, where there would be no underlying masonry to support it. The twin towers replaced a single central tower when rebuilt. The facade is a gable front, framed by twin crenellated entrance towers. Each tower has an arched opening with a stone keystone and springers, where steps lead to double-leaf, wooden, glazed doors with a stained glass lunette window above. The doors are not original. A ca. 1948 photograph in a publication at the Moore County library shows paired wooden five-panel doors.³ The date of replacement is unknown. On their north, south, and west sides, the towers have arched openings with stone sills, keystones, and springers, that once housed louvered panels but have been infilled with vinyl siding. The south side of each tower is clad in vinyl siding. Between the towers, the facade has an arched opening with a stone sill, keystone, and springers, housing a stained glass window. Centered above it is a round masonry opening with four keystones, housing a stained glass bull's-eye window, and in the peak of the gable is a small triangular louvered vent of indeterminate material. A date stone, reading "WATKINS CHAPEL / AME ZION CHURCH/ ORGANIZED 1897 / REBUILT 1942 / REV. C. L. WILCOX, PASTOR,"⁴ is centered on the facade.

¹ NC HPO survey records per GIS note this as a ca. 1937 Minimal Traditional building; Google Earth aerials show it standing in 1993 but demolished by 1998.

² "Sanborn Insurance Map, Mooresville," June 1925-April 1950, Sheet 11.

³³ Tom Swann Post No. 1072, *VFW Service Record Book of Men and Women of Mooresville, N. C and Community*, 1948, in the collection of Mooresville Public library, p 184

⁴ The 1897 date on the stone likely references the year the church was renamed Watkins Chapel as the congregation itself pre-dates 1897.

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The south elevation has four bays, each housing a stained glass window in an arched opening with stone sills, keystones, and springers. A soldier course watertable that wraps the building is more evident on this elevation than the facade. An exterior brick flue is located between the third and fourth bays. The north elevation of the church also has four bays, each housing a stained glass window in an arched opening with stone sills, keystones, and springers. The east elevation of the church building features a large central arched opening with a stone sill, keystone and springers housing a stained glass window. Above it, in the peak of the gable, is a small triangular louvered vent of indeterminate material. South of the stained glass window is a small rectangular six-over-six sash window with a stone sill and lintel, and south of the sash window is a single-leaf, six-panel, replacement metal exterior door with a stone lintel and concrete steps with metal pipe railings that descend east from the door to grade. A shed roofed brick entrance to the basement is north of the steps and east of it is a concrete ramp that ascends to the north to a landing with a flat-roofed portico with metal supports sheltering a single-leaf, six-panel, replacement metal door to the education wing. The basement is currently inaccessible, but it appears to service only the church building, not the later wing. Concrete steps descend east from the portico.

The 1964 education wing is a front-gabled concrete block building connected to the church at the church's northeast corner. The wing is rectangular in footprint, with an asphalt shingle, gabled roof. The education wing's west elevation is clad in red and purple brick veneer. Double-leaf, wooden six-panel doors with double-leaf wooden exterior screen doors, are centered under the gable. Above the doors is a stone panel inscribed "ELIZA BURKE / CHRISTIAN EDUCATIONAL BLDG" flanked by glass and metal carriage lanterns, one of which is mounted, or has turned upside down. Flanking the doors are small rectangular stained glass windows with concrete sills and exterior storm windows. The entrance is accessed by poured concrete steps that ascend to the east to a stoop with metal railings. North of the steps is a stone inscribed A.M.E. ZION/ CHRISTIAN EDUCATIONAL / BUILDING / BUILT 1963 / REV. J. Q. MCMILLEN, MINISTER."

The wing's south elevation has three, three-light, wooden, horizontal pane windows, east of the previously described entrance. A second single-leaf entrance with a stoop and steps that descend to the west, and an exterior brick flue are between the easternmost and central window. The wing's east elevation has four, small, high-set, rectangular one-over-one sash windows set south of center, which service restrooms. Above them, the gable end is clad in vinyl siding and has a triangular louvered vent, likely also of vinyl. The original cladding material is not known. The wing's north elevation has four, evenly-spaced, three-light, horizontal pane windows to the east, and to the west a single, smaller, rectangular, one-over-one sash window.

Interior

The church can be entered by either tower, each of which houses a small vestibule. Double-leaf, wooden, swinging doors, each with a square light, lead from the vestibules to the nave. The ceiling has a flat central section with canted sections along the north and south, which appear to be plaster, or plaster skim coat on drywall. The floor is carpeted and pews are arranged in three

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sections with two aisles to the chancel. The carpet may not be original but installation date is unknown. Columnar pendant lights with brass fittings and frosted glass light the nave. Suspended above the chancel area is an illuminated, three-dimensional cross fashioned of brass and frosted glass inscribed IHS. Interior trim is simple with a chair rail, below which is molded plywood beadboard paneling. The paneling is likely not original but the date of installation is unknown. Windows have simple flat trim surrounds. The stained glass windows are milk glass. They generally have a field of light-colored, rectangular leaded pieces, with a multi-colored glass "frame" tracing the window shape with a glass shield motif in the top third of the windows and a multi-colored rectangular element in the bottom third that often houses dedicatory language which may be painted on the glass. All stained glass windows have wooden exterior storm windows.

The east interior wall has a large arched opening flanked by single-leaf, five-horizontal-panel doors. The wall itself is painted with the words "Praise Ye The Lord Praise Him All Ye Nations" in a gothic script on a curved axis over the arch and south of the arch is a representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd with attendant sheep. North of the arch is a representation of Christ ascendant with angels. The south door leads to a vesting room that has a small half bathroom and an exterior entrance on the east elevation. The north door leads to a passage to the education wing. Between them, the arched opening leads to a volume that houses the choir in wooden chairs with a large stained glass window behind them. An elaborate brass and glass pendant light fixture illuminates the choir area. The choir area is accessed by doors on its north and south walls and is set off by a low partition wall that is flush with the arched opening.

In front of the arched opening, the central chancel area is raised and enclosed by a semi-circular railing with turned balusters. Within the chancel is ecclesiastical furniture including a wooden altar, three wooden armchairs, a lectern, and an alms box.

A narrow hall leads from a small service area containing a small half bathroom at the northeast corner of the church, to the education wing. The hall services an exterior entrance to the south, an administrative office to the north, and a large fellowship room to the east. The hall between the church and the education wing runs parallel to a hall that leads from the exterior entrance on the wing's facade. This parallel hall services the administrative room to its south and a kitchen to the north. The fellowship room has three office and storage spaces along its north wall and two restrooms at its east. Floors are aqua linoleum tile throughout. Walls are paneled plywood in the halls and fellowship room, and elsewhere painted concrete block. The fellowship room has a flat ceiling with canted sides mirroring that in the church building.

Shed ca.2006 NC

East of the church building is side-gabled, frame shed, clad in T-111 siding with double doors. Constructed ca. 2006, after the end of the period of significance, it is a non-contributing resource.

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Carport ca. 1990 NC

Southeast of the church building is an open, gabled, prefabricated carport. It is a non-contributing resource. Constructed ca. 1990, after the end of the period of significance, it is a non-contributing resource.

Statement of Integrity

The church retains integrity of location, remaining on its original site. It retains integrity of design given a period of significance through 1964. Its setting has changed slightly with the demolition of the adjacent parsonage, but the cemetery to its east, the low-density residential development in the immediate vicinity, and the railroad crossing remain little changed. There have been some changes to materials, notably a limited application of vinyl siding and pressed beadboard paneling on the interior. Overall, however, a large amount of historic fabric remains, including stained glass windows, ecclesiastical furniture, chancel rail, and light fixtures. Likewise, its integrity of design and workmanship is high. All of these factors result in a high degree of integrity of feeling. It continues to be used as a church and education wing, resulting in a high degree of integrity of association.

Statement of Archaeological Potential

Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church is closely related to the surrounding environment. Archaeological deposits, such as structural remains of the first church building or of the former parsonage, filled-in privies and wells, debris that accumulated on the property during building episodes and use of the church and parsonage, remnant landscape features such as paths, and other remains which may be present, can provide information valuable to the understanding and interpretation of the property. Information concerning church culture and African American identity, the character of special events and community gatherings, the economic and cultural development of Mooresville's African American community, as well as structural details and the timing of construction activities, can be obtained from the archaeological record. Therefore, archaeological remains may well be an important component of the significance of the property. At this time no investigation has been done to document these remains, but it is likely that they exist, and this should be considered in any development of the property.

In addition, Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church is adjacent to a historic African American cemetery. Given this proximity, the eastern portion of the property has the potential to contain unmarked graves. Cemeteries and unmarked graves are protected by North Carolina General Statutes 65 and 70, and this should be considered in any development of the property.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

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

Criteria Considerations

- ☒ 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 old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance

ARCHITECTURE

ETHNIC HERITAGE: BLACK

Period of Significance

1942-1964

Significant Dates

1942

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1964

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Significant Person

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

unknown

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church is significant at the local level with a Period of Significance ranging from 1942, the year the church was re-built, until 1964, the date of construction for the education wing. It is significant under Criteria A and C in the categories of Ethnic Heritage: Black, and Architecture. It also falls under Criteria Consideration A however is eligible as it derives primary significance from architectural distinction and historical importance. Watkins Chapel AME Zion church is a congregation established during a period of explosive growth of the denomination in the south and particularly in North Carolina. Though aided by strategic employment of clergy resources, the growth is a more a testament to the response of emancipated African Americans—an expression not only of faith, but of freedom from the strictures and hypocrisy of white-dominated churches. Architecturally the Romanesque Revival-style building exemplifies several trends in early twentieth century African American churches, a plan adapted for services focused on music and preaching, two crenellated towers on a simple front-gabled form, and the tradition of rebuilding or cladding frame structures with brick as resources allowed.

Narrative Statement of Significance

In the mid-19th century, after the completion of the Atlantic, Tennessee and Ohio Railroad line between Charlotte and Statesville, John Franklin Moore donated land for a depot around 1863 and the eponymous Moore's Siding was developed and later incorporated as Mooresville in 1873. Its location on the railroad line spurred commerce, and the agricultural nature of the surrounding region supported development of mills, including textile mills. North of the city limits, between the downtown and where E. W. Brawley's Dixie Cotton Mills would be established in 1908, an African American community grew near "the Junction" of two lines of the Southern Railway. According to Mattson and Alexander's survey of Mooresville, the community, which was segregated under Jim Crow laws, stretched east to McNeely Avenue and southwest to West Moore Street and North Broad Street.⁵

⁵ Mattson, Alexander and Associates, Inc., *Mooresville Architectural Survey, Iredell County*, 2015-2016, <https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/historic-preservation-office/survey-and-national-register/surveyreports/MooresvilleSurvey-2016.pdf>, 12.

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In this community, along School Street in an area known as "Slabtown," Mooresville's first AME Zion church, originally known as Hills (variously Hill or Hill's) Chapel⁶ (renamed Watkins Chapel in 1897), was established. One of the earliest known references to the congregation comes from an article in *The Star of Zion* from March 1886 by Rev. A. M. Barrett, who had visited the various circuits in the district. He reported, "Mooresville Hill Chapel, Rev. M. S. Kell had only been with a part of his brethren, but they were well pleased so far. The former pastor left the people divided—We hope Bro. Kell can hover (sic) them soon."⁷ Later that year *The Star of Zion* reported on an event in Mooresville that included the publication's managing editor John Dancy. M.S. Kell and others arranged a two-day event with speeches and worship. The article noted, "A large festival was provided on Saturday and a good sum realized for the erection of a new church within the city limits,"⁸ which may refer to a building on the current site.

Much of what we know about Watkins Chapel AME Zion's early days comes from numerous interviews with Mary Eliza Jackson Burke Cofield (Eliza), for whom the education wing is named. Eliza's father, Samuel William (S.W.) Jackson, was an AME Zion elder. It is unclear whether Pastor Jackson had any formal ecclesiastical training. Mrs. Cofield, however, gave a great deal of credit for her father's turn to religious life to Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. In numerous interviews, Cofield noted that Samuel Jackson served Stonewall Jackson during the Civil War⁹ and S.W. Jackson took his surname from the general.¹⁰ ¹¹ Eliza asserted that General Jackson taught her father how to pray.¹² General Jackson's proselytizing to enslaved African Americans in Lexington, Virginia began in 1855 with a Sunday School which "likely violated state law in encouraging literacy among his students."¹³ His outreach, often cited by Confederate apologists, is a complex issue but his piety and desire to inculcate Christian ideals in others, black and white, is without question.

S. W. Jackson married Creecy (in some places spelled Crecie) Lucinda Sadler (in some places spelled Saddler) in 1865. Eliza was born in 1868, and she and her parents lived in the Steel Creek area of greater Charlotte. The 1870 federal census gives S. W. Jackson's age as then 27 and lists him as a farm laborer, living with Crecie Jackson. It is noted that he can read and write. The 1880 federal census lists Samuel (at 42 years of age, a discrepancy perhaps due to poor records for formerly enslaved persons), his wife and children still living in the Berryhill township of Mecklenburg County, but gives his occupation as preacher. Crecie died in 1884, leaving S. W. widowed with children.

⁶ "Mrs. Cofield Dies at 103," *Statesville Record And Landmark*, February 22, 1972, 2.

⁷ Rev. A. M. Barrett, "The Rounds of His Work," *The Star of Zion*, March 12, 1886, 1.

⁸ "A Visit to Mooresville," *The Star of Zion*, June 25, 1886, 2.

⁹ "At 102, She Shares Her Secret" *Afro-American* Sep 5, 1970, 21.

¹⁰ "Mary Cofield, Charlotte Native, Dies at 103," *The Charlotte Observer*, February 21, 1972, 8.

¹¹ Scholars at the Stonewall Jackson house in Lexington Virginia assert that according to their scholarship, the General did not own Samuel. It is notable that Stonewall Jackson's wife was from nearby Mecklenburg County, North Carolina and a connection may exist there.

¹² "At 102, She Shares Her Secret," *Afro-American*, September 5, 1970, 21.

¹³ Chris Graham, "Myths & Misunderstandings: Stonewall Jackson's Sunday School," <https://acwm.org/blog/myths-misunderstandings-stonewall-jacksons-sunday-school/>.

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Eliza said that her family lived in Charlotte, Rockingham, and Greensboro¹⁴ prior to coming to Mooresville and that her father established churches in each of those places.¹⁵ They moved to Mooresville sometime around 1889 when the Rev. Samuel William "S. W." Jackson was assigned to the Mooresville Circuit, which included Hills Chapel (later Watkins), Bethesda, and Sills Creek AME Zion churches.¹⁶ Eliza picked cotton to earn money to buy land for the church.¹⁷

On December 24, 1891, Isaac Hayes sold a parcel of land to Neel Burk (likely Eliza's husband), B. H. Templeton, and Jerry Reid, "trustees of AME Zion,"¹⁸ in order to construct a new church building to replace an older structure, which may have been on School Street. Eliza worked to build a frame church building and establish a regular Sunday School. "Eliza worked like a man then to square the lumber and put it in place. Then with grace and determination she started a Sunday school 12 months a year."¹⁹

Given the itinerant and impermanent nature of clergy assignment in the AME Zion denomination, Jackson was gone by 1894 when E. P Mayo was assigned the Mooresville Circuit, and he was in turn replaced in 1896 by D. Covington.²⁰ In 1897 the church changed its name to Watkins Chapel in honor of the Rev. S. K. Watkins, a presiding Elder of their district.²¹

According to a typescript history of the church, the current building was constructed in 1942 under the leadership of Rev. Clinton L. Wilcox, Sr. on the same parcel purchased in the nineteenth century. Wilcox appears to be the first permanent clergy assigned solely to this congregation. The ca. 1891 parsonage next to the church received a brick veneer around this time, but was demolished in the early 1990s.

The Eliza Burke Christian Education Building was completed and dedicated in 1964. It was named for Ms. Cofield, who started the first Sunday School for African Americans in Mooresville²² at what is now Watkins Chapel and worked to support the construction of the church building at its current site. Though Ms. Cofield left the area during World War I to live and work in Philadelphia and later Washington, DC, she returned to Mooresville and remained active in the church until her death in 1972 at age 103.²³ An article published at her death noted that "she had a dream for the advancement of religious education and the promotion of spiritual growth for young people in the community and the religious education building . . . stands as a memorial to her efforts through both the white and black citizenry of Mooresville."²⁴

¹⁴ "Central North Carolina Conference Appointments," *The Star of Zion*, December 20, 1888, 1.

¹⁵ "At 102, She Shares Her Secret," *Afro-American*, September 5, 1970, 21.

¹⁶ Anonymous, "Brief History of Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church," undated typescript.

¹⁷ "At 102, She Shares Her Secret," *Afro-American*, September 5, 1970, 21.

¹⁸ *Iredell County Deed Book* 22, 390.

¹⁹ Howard Covington, "At 99 She Works, Lives for the Lord," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 25, 1967, 4.

²⁰ Rev J. W. Thomas, "Men and Work of the Concord district," *Star of Zion*, July 6, 1896.

²¹ Anonymous, "Brief History of Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church," undated typescript.

²² "Prayer, Trust are Keys," *Statesville Record And Landmark*, August 23, 1968, 1.

²³ Pat Borden, "One of This Town's Best-Loved People," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 22, 1970, 6.

²⁴ "Mrs. Cofield Dies at 103," *Statesville Record And Landmark*, February 22, 1972, 2.

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The AME Zion Church as an expression of faith and Black Liberation

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion, or AME Zion, denomination was one of many with its roots in the Methodist Church. This relationship reflects the Methodists' uneasy relationships with race and slavery in the United States, which ultimately lead to schism between southern and northern believers as well as the creation of several African American denominations.

After the American Revolution and the disestablishment of the Anglican Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), an outgrowth of a movement within the Anglican (Episcopal) Church, was organized in 1784. Early leaders of the Methodist movement, notably John Wesley, condemned slavery and many African Americans joined the church. Though the early church disavowed slavery, growth and expansion in the slaveholding south caused the denomination to compromise on its anti-slavery stances. The church had welcomed black congregants and preachers. Scholar Henry Louis Gates in his book *The Black Church* notes that by "1790 there were nearly ten thousand black Methodists."²⁵

But by 1808, annual conferences were allowed to make their own decisions about slavery. While a strong abolitionist spirit persisted in some parts of the church, other parts proselytized among the enslaved while avoiding direct confrontation with slaveholders. Even in the north, however, whites maintained control of positions of church power and authority and churches often had segregated seating. Race and slavery finally divided the Methodists in 1844, when they split into southern and northern denominations that reunited after the Civil War.

In 1794, Richard Allen and number of African Americans withdrew from white-controlled Methodist parishes to start the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Philadelphia with the blessing of Methodist Bishop Asbury. The general conference allowed for the ordination of African American local deacons in 1800, and Richard Allen was the first to be so ordained. Continued struggle with the larger Methodist Church resulted in legal wrangling and soon after the courts awarded Allen and his congregation their church building in 1816, the AME Church began to organize as a separate denomination.

Similarly, a group of African American Methodists in New York City withdrew from the John Street Methodist Church in 1796 to form a congregation and a church called Zion, initially part of the Methodist Episcopal Church with white ordained clergy and some African American preachers. Founding members included William Hamilton, a well-known speaker and abolitionist. Zion church created several additional black Methodist congregations with white ministers. By 1800 the Zion Church had their own building.

A quasi-independent series of congregations that had their roots in the Zion church met in conference on June 21, 1821, in New York City. They rejected white control of their congregations and rebuffed union with the AME denomination. James Varick, Abraham Thompson, and Leven Smith were ordained by white Methodist elders to become deacons and

²⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church—This is Our Story, This is Our Song* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 40.

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then elders. Varick was ordained a bishop soon thereafter and rose to become the first General Superintendent of the new AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Zion denomination. The division with the Methodist Episcopal Church was completed at the 1824 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The AME Zion church created an administrative infrastructure similar to the Methodist's with churches in a state or region forming a conference with its own governing board, which in turn sent delegates to the overall General Conference. Growth in the denomination was largely centered in the northeast in the first half of the nineteenth century. Laws in Southern states enacted after the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia greatly restricted religious practices for African Americans, both enslaved and free.

Southern states also thwarted the evangelical outreach of the AME Zion church because of its strong association with the abolitionist movement. The denomination was known as the "Freedom Church," and boasted members including Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Frederick Douglass was licensed to preach in the AME Zion church. "These abolitionists were believers who framed their powerful arguments for freedom and equality in the language of scripture and an uncorrupted Christianity."²⁶ Scholar Charles Heatwole notes, "In Alexandria and Richmond, Virginia, leaders of incipient AMEZC churches were sent to jail and their local organizations broken up. Attempts to establish an AMEZC church in Baltimore were repeatedly suppressed due to the denomination's hostility toward slavery."²⁷

During and immediately after the Civil War the AME Zion church expanded rapidly, largely in the south. Membership in the denomination is estimated to have been fewer than 10,000 in 1864, but numbered roughly 400,000 by 1884.²⁸ This explosive growth is attributed to the efforts of missionaries such as James Walker Hood, who was sent by the New England Conference to proselytize in North Carolina. Hood arrived in New Bern in 1864 and began his work behind federal lines before the end of the war. By the end of that year a church conference in North Carolina was established under Bishop J. J. Clinton.^{29 30}

"At the first Conference the work reported covered only that small portion of the State which was then occupied by the Union forces, including Roanoke Island, New Berne (sic), Beaufort, and the small strip of country lying between New Berne and Beaufort. But the close of the war the following May opened up the whole State, and each of the ministers who attended the first Conference did what he could to spread the work."³¹

²⁶ Gates, *The Black Church*, 48.

²⁷ Charles Heatwole, "A Geography of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church," *Southeastern Geographer*, May, 1986, Vol. 26, No. 1 (May, 1986), 1-11, University of North Carolina Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44370785>, 5.

²⁸ Heatwole, "Geography," 5.

²⁹ Heatwole, "Geography," 6.

³⁰ J. W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (New York: AME Zion Book Concern, 1895), 289.

³¹ Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 297.

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In 1879 the Central North Carolina Conference was created, including the 25-county area between Raleigh and the Blue Ridge Mountains, and from that in 1891 the Western North Carolina Conference, which stretched from the Blue Ridge northeast to Forsyth and Southeast to Mecklenburg, was created. Hood describes the Western North Carolina Conference in his 1895 history of the denomination as "a splendid region of country . . . composed of active and intelligent men."³²

The church grew in North Carolina, with Hood actively supporting "itinerancy and circuit riding, two significant Methodist practices. The former involved periodic pastoral exchanges and the latter the regular and prescribed travel of preachers between congregations too small too isolated to merit a resident minister."³³ It was not just Hood's leadership and creative techniques for leveraging limited pastoral resources, however, that explain the explosive growth of the denomination in North Carolina and across the south.

Historian J. Carleton Hayden notes that African Americans who previously worshipped in largely white mainline Protestant denominations "flocked to churches where they would be free from white domination. Black churches made possible black leadership."³⁴ It is estimated that "by 1890 the A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion, C.M.E., and Baptist Churches claimed 9 out of 10 of all Negro Protestants."³⁵ Hood describes this phenomenon himself: "It was a movement by which a race, hampered, proscribed, regulated, and oppressed, gave a grand united exhibition of its determination to find in its own organizations that religious liberty which was denied it in the white Church."³⁶ Henry Louis Gates, in the introduction to his book, notes that "the Black Church" is not only a movement of faith but also "a journey for freedom and equality in a land where power itself—and even humanity—for so long was (and is) denied them."³⁷

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya confirm this relationship between the growth of black denominations and freedom in their landmark book *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. "This independent church movement of black Christians was the first effective stride toward freedom by African Americans. Unlike most sectarian movements, the initial impetus for black spiritual and ecclesiastical independence was not grounded in religious doctrine or polity, but in the offensiveness of racial segregation in the churches and the alarming inconsistencies between the teachings and the expressions of faith."³⁸

³² Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 66.

³³ Heatwole, "Geography," 7.

³⁴ J. Carleton Hayden, "After the War: The Mission and Growth of The Episcopal Church Among Blacks in The South, 1865-1877," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 42, no. 4 (December 1973): 403-427, 412.

³⁵ Robert A. Bennett, "Black Episcopalians: A History From The Colonial Period To The Present," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 45, no. 3 (September 1974): 231-245, 239.

³⁶ Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 7.

³⁷ Gates, *The Black Church*, 1.

³⁸ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 47.

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Watkins Chapel is a Romanesque Revival church, with characteristic masonry exterior, round-headed windows and towers. However, it is not significant for its style, per se but for several aspects of its evolution and form that are characteristic of older African American congregations in North Carolina and the larger south: the re-building of frame churches with masonry, the use of twin crenellated towers, and the auditorium style plan that reinforced the emphasis on preaching and music.

In the early 1980s, architect Richard Dozier articulated the significance of African American church buildings: "Church buildings, representing perhaps the single greatest investment by Afro-Americans in architecture, are often the most monumental structures in the Afro-American community."³⁹ And yet the continued dearth of scholarly publications on African American church architecture remains a challenge. Nicholas Adams laments this sparse documentation in an essay in the *Journal of Society of Architectural Historians* in 1996, during a rash of arson attacks on black churches:

[W]hat is striking about the rural churches of the South as they relate to architectural history is how little we know about them. There is no book or article to consult, and no expert has stepped forward to talk about their architecture. It takes a call to the pastor himself or a member of the congregation to learn anything at all about some of the churches and their history. Rarely is there a written congregational history, and the best resource seems to be the memories of the oldest members.⁴⁰

Adams does, however, note a common practice of the rebuilding of these churches. He notes, "Though many churches are less than fifty years old, some are the fourth or fifth buildings of historic congregations."⁴¹ Watkins Chapel AME Zion is thought to be at least the third iteration of the congregation's church building, from the School Street building, to a frame building at the current site, to the current brick building.

The aspect of change and reinvention is noted in another specific church that Adams describes: "these improvements had not maintained the integrity of the original structure from its period of significance, or even that of the second or third Little Zion."⁴² Often early African American churches were frame and built inexpensively to meet the immediate needs of new congregations that were not affluent and lacked the resources of churches with a long and established institutional history. The practice of reinventing the building as and when money allowed, particularly rebuilding in brick or adding a brick veneer, is a hallmark of many southern black churches.

³⁹ Richard K. Dozier, "Caretakers of the Past: Blacks Preserve Their Architectural Heritage," *History News* 36, No. 2 (February 1981): 16.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Adam, "Churches on Fire," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 55, No. 3 (September 1996): 236

⁴¹ Adam, "Churches on Fire," 236.

⁴² Adam, "Churches on Fire," 236.

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C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya conducted a survey of black churches in 1978. Though Watkins Chapel is within the Town of Mooresville, it would be considered by their categorization as a rural church. Referencing Ralph Felton's earlier 1950 study, *These my Brethren: A Study of 570 Negro Churches and 542 Negro Homes in the Rural South*: "A major change has occurred in the type of building which rural churches use for worship. In 1950 Felton observed that 87 percent of the 570 churches were "wooden frame" buildings. In this study only 19.9 percent, or 123 of 619, churches were frame buildings; and 76.6 percent or 472 were brick buildings . . . Brick buildings in rural areas carry prestige."⁴³

The replacement of frame churches with later brick ones, or adding a brick veneer to an existing frame building, is in itself a significant African American building tradition that challenges traditional evaluations of "architectural integrity."

A second typical architectural trope is the addition or inclusion of twin crenellated towers. "Versions of such twin-tower churches, varying greatly in scale and architectural execution, were popular choices among growing African American congregations throughout North Carolina in the early twentieth century."⁴⁴ Catherine Bishir notes the prevalence of towers in earlier Gothic Revival Style churches, "Combination of two unequal towers were familiar throughout nineteenth-century Gothic Revival church architecture, but the form was especially strong among black congregations, especially the A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion churches."⁴⁵ While these towers are generally considered a hallmark of the castellated gothic style that was popular from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Watkins Chapel lacks the lancet windows, pointed arch openings, drip molds, and other aspects of the Gothic Revival but instead combines them with more Romanesque Revival-style features such as arched masonry openings with stone keystones and springs.

The proliferation of the twin-towered form in African American churches has yet to be intensively studied. However, it is a form often used by African American architect Wallace Rayfield, who for a period beginning in 1909 was "designated the official architect for the A.M.E. Zion church in the United States and Africa."⁴⁶ There are ten known Rayfield church designs in North Carolina, but Watkins Chapel is not one of them.⁴⁷ His influence, through his position and his stock plan books, is a rich area for further study.

The interior plan of Watkins Chapel meets the description historian Peter Williams gives for an "auditorium church." In denominations where services emphasize preaching and music over liturgical rituals, Williams describes these interiors as featuring "a large stage with a central pulpit

⁴³ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 103.

⁴⁴ Mattson, Alexander and Associates, Inc., 41.

⁴⁵ Catherine Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005, p375.

⁴⁶ Christopher Scott Hunter, "Introduction of the Architecture of the early Southern African American Church Building 1880 – 1920," paper delivered at the Southeast Society of Architectural Historians 2016 Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 29, 2016, 10.

⁴⁷ Allen R. Dorough, *The Architectural Legacy of Wallace A. Rayfield, Pioneer Black Architect of Birmingham, Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 128.

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(and) seating for an extensive choir,"⁴⁸ though it lacks some aspects Williams suggests were employed by wealthier congregations, a sloping floor with curved tiers of seating.

In a seven-county region including Iredell, Catawba, Lincoln, Gaston, Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, and Rowan Counties, SHPO has surveys for 23 AMEZ churches including Watkins Chapel. Of those, four appear to be gone, leaving 19. Close to half of them are in Mecklenburg County, which may reflect the denomination's headquarters in the Mecklenburg County city of Charlotte. Watkins Chapel is the only AME Zion church documented by the State Historic Preservation Office in Iredell County.

Perhaps the best comparable is Moore's Chapel AME Zion Church in Lincolnton (LN0391), also known as Greater Moore's Chapel. It too was a nineteenth-century congregation with a nineteenth-century church that was rebuilt in 1941.⁴⁹ The church is brick and rendered in the Gothic Revival style as a front-gabled building, flanked by twin crenellated towers.

Architecturally, Watkins Chapel AME Zion church displays several hallmarks of building traditions for African American churches, namely the use of an auditorium plan reflecting a worship style where music and preaching are central; the incorporation of twin crenellated entrance towers; and the re-building or covering of an earlier frame church with brick.

⁴⁸ Peter W. Williams, *Houses of God: Region, Religion and Architecture in the United States* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 122.

⁴⁹ Lincolnton District Laymans Council, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Churches in the Lincolnton District of the Western North Carolina Conference*, 1982, 42.

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Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church

Name of Property

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North Carolina Historic Preservation Office GIS data

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=79ea671ebdcc45639f0860257d5f5ed7¢er=-8805200,4311130,102100&scale=18056514>

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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 # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

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Iredell, North Carolina

Name of Property

County and State

☐ State Historic Preservation Office

☐ Other State agency

☐ Federal agency

☐ Local government

☐ University

☐ Other

Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): ID0918

10. Geographical Data

Acres of Property 1.4

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

1. Latitude: 35.594660° Longitude: -80.806654°

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church is most of that Iredell County, North Carolina tax parcel #4667269263.000 as indicated by the heavy black line on the accompanying map entitled National Register Boundary Map.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes almost all of the property historically associated with the extant church building currently in the church's ownership, excluding roughly 350 square feet along the northern boundary of the tax parcel where an outbuilding of a neighboring parcel encroaches.

11. Form Prepared By

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date: June 10, 2021

Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church
Name of Property

Iredell, North Carolina
County and State

Photo Log

Name of Property: Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church
City or Vicinity: Mooresville
County: Iredell State: North Carolina

Photographer: Cam Ramey, Town of Mooresville
Date Photographed: August 2021
Aerial drone photo, Church, view to east
1 of 15

Photographer: Cam Ramey, Town of Mooresville
Date Photographed: August 2021
Aerial drone photo, Church, view to northwest
2 of 15

Photographer: Cam Ramey, Town of Mooresville
Date Photographed: August 2021
Aerial drone photo, Church, view to south
3 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: May 2021
Church, exterior, facade, view to southeast
4 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: May 2021
Church, exterior, facade, view to northeast
5 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: January 2021
Church, exterior, view to north
6 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: January 2021
Church and Christian Education Wing, exterior, view to west
7 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: January 2021
Christian Education Wing, exterior, view to northwest
8 of 15

Watkins Chapel AME Zion Church
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Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: January 2021
Christian Education Wing and Shed, view to north
9 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: May 2021
Carport, view to south
10 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: January 2021
Church, interior, nave, view to southwest
11 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: January 2021
Church, interior, nave and chancel, view to northeast
12 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed:
Church, interior, chancel, view to southeast
13 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: January 2021
Christian Education Wing, interior, fellowship hall, view to northeast
14 of 15

Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
Date Photographed: January 2021
Christian Education Wing, interior, kitchen, view to northwest
15 of 15

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 listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 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 Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.