

TAVEAU CHURCH
State Road S-8-44
Cordesville vicinity
Berkeley County
South Carolina

HABS SC-389
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TAVEAU CHURCH

HABS NO. SC-389

Location: State Road 44, Cordesville vicinity, Berkeley County, South Carolina.

The coordinates for the Taveau Church are 79.939577 W and 33.106171 N, and they were obtained in September 2012 with, it is assumed, NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Significance: While listed on the National Register of Historic Places and acclaimed for the sophistication of its exterior design and construction, Taveau Church is perhaps the least known of the early churches and chapels along the Cooper River. Nonetheless, it is one of the most intact, early ecclesiastic structures in the South Carolina Lowcountry.

Description: Taveau Church is a single-story, one room wood framed building with clapboard siding constructed on low brick piers serving as the foundation. Proportionally, the building measures three bays across the front (west) façade by five bays deep with a gabled roof. The front façade, located on the west gabled end of the building, features a small pedimented portico supported by four slender wooden Doric columns. The foundations and steps of the portico are brick, although the area between the piers has been filled in with concrete block. The front façade has one step leading from the portico to a recessed panel double door, with a window centered to either side. The door is topped by a twelve light transom window. The window to the right-hand side of the front exterior door contains sixteen-over-sixteen lights. The window to the left-hand side of the front door is missing both sashes. Both windows have raised panel shutters. Both the north and south (side) façades feature a central, recessed panel double door flanked by two windows on each side. All of the windows contain sixteen-over-sixteen lights with paneled shutters and match the front façade windows. The door on each side façade is topped by a twelve light transom window. The rear (east) façade of the building contains a central door with a window centered to either side. The windows and door on the rear façade are identical to those on both side facades of the building. The existing roof is clad in five-V tin roof panels and features a square, pitched roof cupola near the front facade.

The original floor plan of Taveau Church was presumably a cross-aisle plan with pews on either side of the long aisle, evidenced by the entrances on three sides and chancel area at the rear. None of the original pews remain today. A small gallery is located directly above the front entrance, supported by four slender Doric columns. The gallery is approximately 4'-6" deep, runs the length of the west wall, and is accessed by a stairwell located in the northwest corner of the building. Molding profiles and installation details suggest that the gallery panels pre-date the church. These same details are evident in the heavily renovated pulpit located in the chancel area of the church. The chancel area contains two small rooms on either side of the

pulpit constructed with drywall partitions. While the pulpit is a historic remnant, the other changes to the chancel area date from the late twentieth century. The vaulted ceiling and all interior walls are sheathed in tongue-and-groove boards.

History:

Set amongst the complicated network of tributaries, creeks, and tidal marshes stretching north of Charleston on the upper branches of the Cooper River, sits Taveau Church. An unlikely survivor, this simple church surrounded by a landscape of mature trees in rural Berkeley County serves as an example of early ecclesiastic architecture of country parishes.

The important land located at the major split in the Cooper River – the “Tee” – originally settled by immigrant John Coming and his wife, was devised to his heirs within the Ball family. From this location, clans of Balls, Harleston's, and Gibbes' spread along the Eastern and Western branches of the river establishing the earliest plantation settlements and parishes in the Charleston Lowcountry. In *A Day on the Cooper River* (1932), Louisa Cheves Stoney notes that in an effort to ensure “that the gospel might be preached in the country”, Martha Carolina Swinton Ball Taveau, the lady of nearby Claremont Plantation and a devout Presbyterian, built the church ca. 1835 “in the midst of Episcopalians”. While the early history of Taveau Church is largely unknown, it is noteworthy for its sophisticated early nineteenth century ecclesiastic architecture seldom seen in rural areas. With its sixteen-over-sixteen double-hung windows, and side and front doors topped by twelve-light transom windows, the exterior of Taveau remains largely unaltered. The interior is similarly original, although with late nineteenth century alterations to the chancel area and sheathed in tongue-and-groove boards from the same time period.

The landscape surrounding the Cooper River transformed steadily in the nineteenth century, evolving into a unified district of rice plantations worked by thousands of slaves. Thus, the African-Americans on the Cooper River far outnumbered white residents. Following the death of Martha Taveau in 1847, Taveau Church presumed to have changed religious denominations, and converted from a predominantly white Presbyterian to an all African-American Methodist congregation.

With the end of rice culture by the turn of the twentieth century, the areas occupied by former plantations were redeveloped as tree farms and hunting reserves, often by Northern purchasers. In the 1930s, the land on which Taveau stood was purchased by the Luce family, publishers of *Life* and *Time* magazines, and years later merged with nearby Mepkin Plantation. The family donated the church and the surrounding cemetery land to the Cordesville United Methodist Church, whom continued to use the property until the 1970s. On February 14, 1978, the church was officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its “unusually” refined rural ecclesiastic architecture and African-American history.

Sources: National Register of Historic Places Nomination. "Taveau Church". Cordesville Vicinity, Berkeley County, South Carolina. National Park Service, 1978. NR #PH0690627.

Irving, John B. *A Day on Cooper River*. Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1842; 2nd edition, ed. by Louisa Cheves Stoney. Columbia: R.L. Bryan Company, 1932.

Hudgins, Carter L., Carl R. Lounsbury, Louis P. Nelson, and Jonathan H. Poston, eds. *The Vernacular Architecture of Charleston and the Lowcountry, 1670-1990: A Field Guide*. Paper presented at the Vernacular Architecture Forum annual conference, Charleston: 1994.