

MOUNT CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH
South side of Route 738
Ivy
Albemarle County
Virginia

HABS VA-1418
VA-1418

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
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MOUNT CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH

HABS No. VA-1418

Location: South side of State Route 738, Ivy, Albemarle County, Virginia.

Significance: Mount Calvary Baptist Church is located in the western part of Albemarle County in the Ivy community. It is a wood structure and is owned by a black congregation, which was organized shortly after the Civil War. The congregation plans to replace the building with a new one in the near future. Local preservationists believed that the relative rarity of early African American churches in this part of the state made it necessary to document this building before it was destroyed.

Description: Although the congregation was established in 1869, the present Mount Calvary Baptist Church is not as old. Based on structural and decorative details, the building probably dates to ca. 1895-1915. Built in a swale that allows for a full basement beneath the sanctuary, the church faces north. The body of the original church measures 40 feet in length and is 27 ½ feet in width. Two relatively modern frame additions with concrete block or poured concrete foundations have been added to the south end of the building to accommodate an office, robbing room, restrooms, and a kitchen. The church is dominated by the north bell tower that terminates in a polygonal spire, which has a wood finial in the shape of an arm with the index finger of the hand pointed toward heaven. This carving is in fact a recent replacement. An earlier, and probably original, finial arm had been damaged (the thumb and index finger had split off), but has been saved and stored in the church. The sides of the tower are angled, giving it a trapezoidal shape. The other prominent features of the north façade are the projecting buttresses at each corner of the building. These small buttresses have angled sides as the west tower and terminate above the roof in turned finials.

Double doors in the center of the north wall of the tower lead into a vestibule. There was a small staircase in the northwest corner of the tower gallery that has been replaced by a pull-down ladder. This gallery has a decorative hatch in the center of its ceiling through which the bell rope hung down from the next stage of the tower, allowing a ringer to pull it while seated in the gallery. An angled opening that followed the shape of the raised sanctuary ceiling opened from the north or back wall of the sanctuary into the tower gallery. That feature has been closed in recent years.

The body of the church sits on a tall fieldstone foundation that forms a fellowship hall in the basement. The hall is lit by square light windows on each side and has an exterior door on the east side. Above the basement, the wood walls of the sanctuary are covered by vinyl siding, perhaps applied about a dozen years ago. Prior to this, the walls were weatherboarded and the eaves supported by a series of two-foot long carved brackets. The brackets (removed but stored in the church) have the two-dimensional profile of a

face with the eye shedding a large tear—both features of which are cut out. Four windows light each of the long walls of the sanctuary. Before the application of the vinyl siding, the exterior had decorative wooden architrave and stylized pediment. Because the sanctuary originally had a raised ceiling, there were no tie beams to anchor the lower chords of the common rafter roof. The roof has pushed the upper part of the side walls out of alignment, creating a noticeable bulge in the center of the side walls. The roof is now covered by a standing seam metal roof, but evidence in the attic suggests that the original roof was sheathed in wooden shingles.

Originally, the church terminated in the south end by a faceted projection, the preaching podium. This angled projection extended 4 ½ from the south wall. Evidence for this earlier feature survives in the crawl space beneath, which is accessed through a door in the south end of the basement hall. The south gable wall sill that sits in front of the polygonal projection appears to be a reused framing member. It is at least a foot square and is hewn with numbered mortises, some of which have tenons and pegs still inserted in them. This piece may be an element from the earlier church, and if so, it would have been a framed structure at least 27 feet in length.

The sanctuary has been remodeled in the past few decades. Entrance is from two sets of double doors set on pivot hinges that open from the north tower vestibule. There are two side aisles flanked by rows of modern six-foot long pews on the sides and in the center. These pews replaced earlier pews with sloped backs, shaped arms, and medallions attached to the bench ends, typical church pews from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries manufactured by firms specializing in church furniture. Three of these earlier pews survive in the north bell tower and another four or five are in the fellowship hall in the basement. A dropped acoustical tile ceiling covers the original beaded board ceiling that rises at an angle from the two long sides until it flattens out in the center of the sanctuary. That original ceiling was nailed to the underside of the collar beams and angled struts. The walls of the sanctuary are plastered and painted white. The four windows on each side have beaded board decorations forming a pediment with simple board architraves with slight beads.

At the south end of the sanctuary, a sixteen-foot wide arched opening, framed by angled pilasters, sets off a large preaching podium and baptismal pool. Originally, the pilasters demarcated the extent of the faceted apse, but the area was deepened and widened during a subsequent renovation. A set of steps at the two ends of the arch provide access to the two-foot high podium. The arch is decorated by scalloped beaded boards. All the furniture on the podium is modern; the pool just in front of the podium is about 10 feet long and four feet wide.

Doors on either side of the podium lead to spaces that were added to the original building. The first addition of ten feet squared off the south end of the building and allowed for a deeper podium. It also provided for a small storage closet to the west of the podium. An identical door on the east side of the podium once opened into a similar

space. That area now provides access to another addition, measuring 14 feet in depth and 20 feet in width. This second addition provided space for a robbing room and minister's study at the sanctuary level, and a kitchen and bathrooms at the fellowship level in the basement. A stair leads down from this addition to the fellowship hall.

Mount Calvary Baptist Church was constructed with circular sawn framing members that were nailed, not mortise and tenoned, at key joints with cut and wire nails. Corner posts are paired 2 by 4-inch studs that are spiked together. The roof frame consists of common rafters nailed to a ridge board at its apex. That ridge board extends through the sanctuary into the north bell tower indicative of the fact that the two elements of the church were built at the same time. In addition, the absence of nail holes in the north side of the north gable studs where they run against the stair tower also argue for the two features being contemporaneous. The use of circular sawn materials, beaded finish board sheathing, the mixture of cut and wire nails all suggest an early twentieth century date for the construction of the church.

At the back or south end of the property is a graveyard with a number of twentieth-century stones as well as more recent burials. It is set off from the parking lot by a rail fence and by bushes and other vegetation around its perimeters.

Sources/Site Visit: November 2, 2007. The site visit and investigation of the building by Carl Lounsbury and Edward Chappell of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation came at the request of the Piedmont Environmental Council and preservationist Gina Haney. Copies of the digital photographs, floor plan, and notes were then donated to the HABS collection.

Historian: Carl Lounsbury, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, November 6, 2007.

Appendix A: Illustrations

Fig. 1 Perspective view looking from the northwest.

Fig. 2 Detail view of the tower and finial (in shape of an arm with the index finger pointed up to heaven).

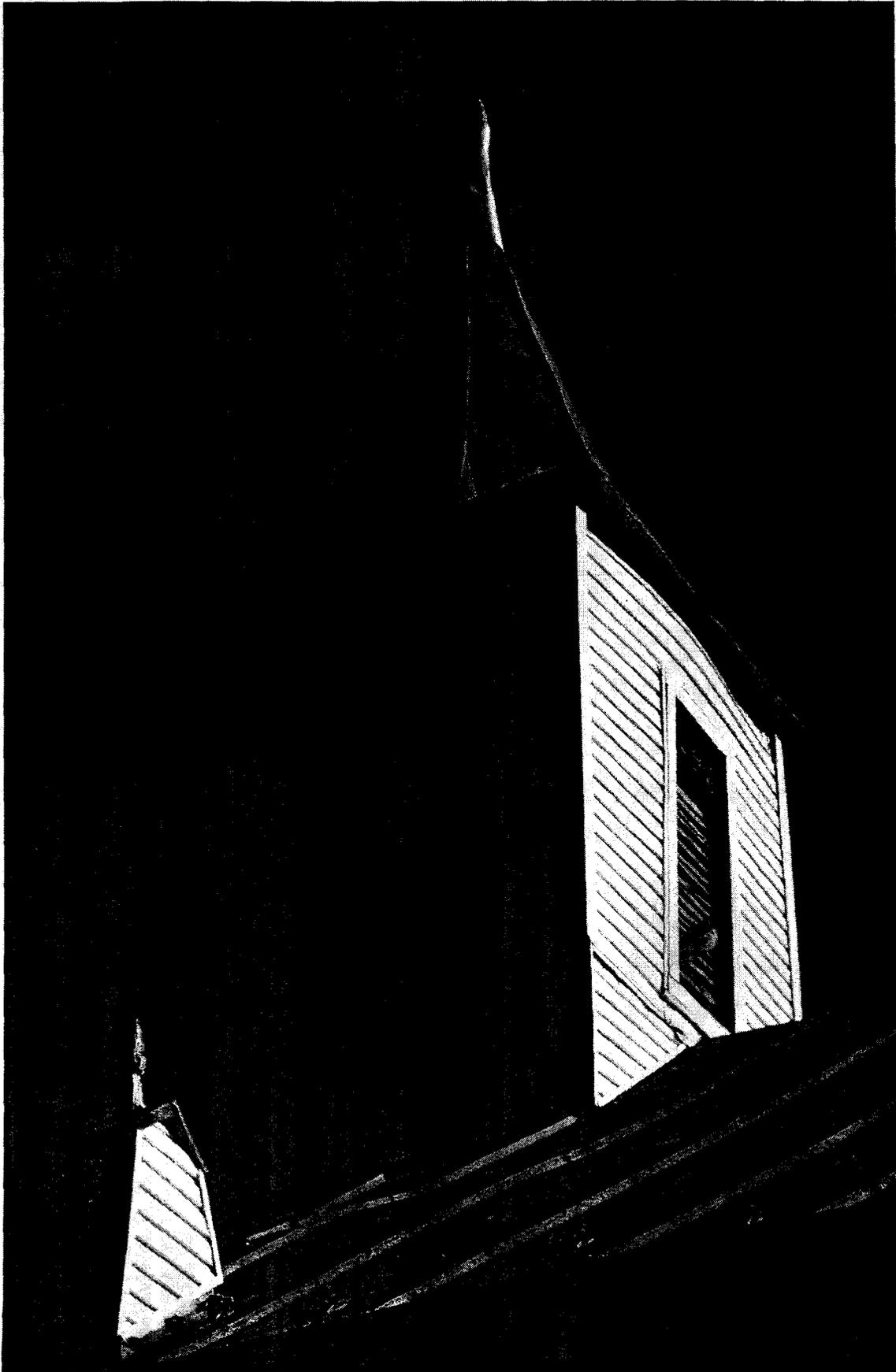
Fig. 3 Detail view of the original, 2' in length, bracket; note the bracket profile resembles a face with the eye shedding a tear.

Fig. 4 Interior view.

Fig. 5 Detail view of the interior, bench ends.

MOUNT CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH
HABS No. VA-1418
(page 4)







MOUNT CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH
HABS No. VA-1418
(page 7)





