

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Bethel Baptist Church
Other name/site number: NA
Name of related multiple property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 2849 County Rd 2608
City or town: Tennessee Colony State: Texas County: Anderson
Not for publication: Vicinity: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
(nomination request for determination of eligibility) meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the
National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my
opinion, the property (meets does not meet) the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:
 national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C D

 Chief Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer
Signature of certifying official / Title Date 11/4/2025
Texas Historical Commission
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
Signature of commenting or other official Date
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the 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

Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

5. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private

Category of Property: Building

Number of Resources within Property

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

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions: Religious: religious facility (church)

Current Functions: Religious: religious facility (church)

7. Description

Architectural Classification: Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals: Gothic Revival

Principal Exterior Materials: Brick

Narrative Description (see continuation sheets 7-7 through 7-10)

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria: A

Criteria Considerations: Criteria Consideration A (Religious Properties), Criteria Consideration G (Recent Past)

Areas of Significance: Ethnic Heritage/Black (*local level of significance*); Social History (*local level of significance*)

Period of Significance: c.1899-1984

Significant Dates: 1899, 1959, 1984

Significant Person (only if criterion b is marked): NA

Cultural Affiliation (only if criterion d is marked): NA

Architect/Builder: NA

Narrative Statement of Significance (see continuation sheets 8-11 through 8-22)

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography (see continuation sheet 9-23 through 9-25)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. Part 1 approved on (date)
- 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 (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: Bethel Baptist Church Records

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): NA

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: 2.25 acres

Coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

Latitude: 31.893170° Longitude: -95.916749°

Verbal Boundary Description: A0685 RAMPY, JOHN BLOCK 1931 TRACT 9 as recorded by Anderson County CAD (Property ID# 45994, accessed September 10, 2024) and shown on Map 3.

Boundary Justification: The boundary includes all the property historically and currently associated with the nominated church.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Conor Herterich
Organization: Preservation Texas
Street & number: P.O. Box 3514
City or Town: San Marcos State: Texas Zip Code: 78667
Email: conor@preservationtexas.org
Telephone: 903-746-2757
Date: 10-30-2025

Additional Documentation

Maps (see continuation sheets MAP-26 through MAP-33)

Additional items (see continuation sheet FIGURE-34)

Photographs (see continuation sheets PHOTO-35 through PHOTO-59)

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Photograph Log

Name of Property: Bethel Baptist Church
City or Vicinity: Bethel/Tennessee Colony
County: Anderson State: Texas
Photographers: Jessica Reid
Date Photographed: March 12, 2024 (unless otherwise specified)

- Photo #01 Site view, camera facing north.
- Photo #02 Site view, camera facing south.
- Photo #03 West elevation, camera facing east.
- Photo #04 Southwest elevation, camera facing northeast.
- Photo #05 South elevation, camera facing north.
- Photo #06 Southeast elevation, camera facing northwest.
- Photo #07 East elevation, camera facing west.
- Photo #08 Church sign (new), camera facing south.
- Photo #09 Northeast elevation, camera facing southwest.
- Photo #10 North elevation, camera facing south.
- Photo #11 Northwest elevation, camera facing southeast.
- Photo #12 Bell tower on northwest corner of the sanctuary, camera facing southeast.
- Photo #13 Cornerstone on the west elevation, camera facing east.
- Photo #14 Front of the sanctuary, camera facing east.
- Photo #15 1984 church sign located southeast of the building, camera facing west.
- Photo #16 Crawl space access opening. Original brick pier to left, 1984 brick veneer to right with steel lintel above.
- Photo #17 Inside the bell tower on the northwest corner of the sanctuary, camera facing up.
- Photo #18 The bell tower from inside the sanctuary, camera facing northwest.
- Photo #19 View down the center aisle with the altar in the background, camera facing east.
- Photo #20 North addition, north and south dining rooms, camera facing southeast.

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- Photo #21 Crawlpace entrance located in the south dining room.
- Photo #22 Sanctuary seating with view of the primary entrance to the sanctuary, camera facing west.
- Photo #23 The cross on the apse wall, overlooking the altar, camera facing southeast.
- Photo #24 A scroll depicting the church covenant for Bethel Baptist Church, camera facing north.
- Photo #25 Panel covering original side door to the rear of the sanctuary, camera facing north.

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.

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Narrative Description

Constructed c.1899 by the congregation, Bethel Baptist Church is a one-story wood frame building with a modified cross-axial plan and corner tower that stands as a vernacular expression of modest Late Gothic Revival ecclesiastical style.¹ The church is located on a cleared site in rural northwestern Anderson County at the intersection of two county roads. The church was originally sided with wood clapboards but was encased in brick during a remodel in 1984. On the northwest corner of the building is a wood frame bell tower, sided with corrugated plastic panels, that still contains the original church bell. The windows are non-original, single hung 2-over-1 aluminum units. The interior flooring is pine tongue and groove boards covered with red carpet. Since its original construction, the small self-supporting congregation has made numerous improvements. In 1959, a one-story addition was added to the east side of the sanctuary building. This was the first major improvement to the building and is recorded on the cornerstone which was also added at this time (Photo #13). In 1975, the congregation moved a single-story building onto the site, which connected to the east addition via a breezeway, and added a vestibule to extend the main sanctuary entrance. In the 1980s, the congregation enclosed the breezeway, built brick signage (Photo #13), installed new windows, and encased the building in brick. The sanctuary floor was covered with red carpet (Photo #17), and glass doors and a ramp were added to the front entrance in the 1990s. The building remains easily identifiable as a church and retains integrity through the preservation of its form, scale, and materials.

This project was funded through the Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Grants Program from the National Park Service that enables the rehabilitation of rural historic properties.

Setting

Bethel Baptist Church is located in the northwest corner of Anderson County, Texas about twenty miles northwest of the county seat of Palestine. The church was named after the unincorporated community of Bethel (Cayuga ISD) located two miles north. The terrain in western Anderson County, known as the Timberlands, ranges from nearly level around the drainage basin of the Trinity River to steep and hilly in the upland areas. The economy of the area has historically been agricultural, but major oil discoveries in the 1940s provided an economic boost with increased employment opportunities and mineral royalties. As a result, oil and gas infrastructure, including wells, storage tanks, and processing facilities dot the landscape of the area. There are two energy facilities near the church, the closest being Atmos Energy, which is a natural gas processing facility only 200 yards south of the church.

Site

The property is an open, 2.5-acre parcel situated on the northwest corner of the intersection of County Roads 2706 and 2608 (Photo #01). Historic maps and aerials show that CR 2706 originally looped around the property to the west, placing the church on the east side of the road (See Maps 3 through 8). The old, unpaved county road is still clearly visible and runs through the property functioning as a driveway (Photo #02). The CR 2608 was improved and routed to the east of the property in 1962 which is why the church is currently situated west of the road. The parcel includes the church building, a dirt parking lot, two church signs, and empty field space with scattered trees. One of the signs is about 3' tall and made from brick. It was built in 1984 using leftover bricks from the project that encased the church.

¹ Mark Thacker, "Bethel Baptist Church: Preservation Master Plan, 2019. Preservation architect Mark Thacker investigated and documented existing building conditions as part of a 2019 preservation master planning document. During his investigation he found materials with previous nail holes indicating salvage and reuse. Although the congregation claims that the building was constructed in 1872, the estimated date of construction provided in the architectural report is 1919 and is based on the physical evidence found throughout the sanctuary building. Archival research has revealed that the property has been used as a church since at least 1899 but is unable to substantiate a date of construction for the present building. This nomination proposes circa 1899 as the best date of construction based on available evidence.

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This object is located near the southeastern corner of the parcel and is considered non-contributing. A second modern church sign is smaller in scale and therefore not counted as a resource.² Partially buried wood posts outline the parking lot along the north and west part of the building. A ramp walkway leads to the main entrance and concrete stairs are at each additional side entrance. The site is flanked by county roads on the north and east sides but is surrounded by woods in all four directions. The closest manmade structure, which is not visible from the property, is an Atmos Energy facility 200 yards to the south.

General Building Description

The Bethel Baptist Church sanctuary is a single story, cross-shaped frame building with two single story additions that extend east and north of the original sanctuary. These additions will be described apart from the Sanctuary. The front gabled roof is clad with composition shingles. There is a bell tower on the northwest corner of the sanctuary, and a metal steeple located on the center of the roof. While the church was originally clad in wood siding, the building was encased in brick walls during a 1984 remodel. The building is oriented east/west with the primary entrance on the west elevation. The primary entrance is through the sanctuary vestibule (added in the 1970s) which has an aluminum commercial storefront door. This orientation, which allows the congregation to face east during service, is common in Baptist Church design and symbolizes their readiness for the second coming and resurrection of Christ. There is a total of twelve windows, two on the front (west) and five on each of the side elevations (north/south). The windows are single hung aluminum and with clear glass. A 1959 addition extends to the east of the sanctuary to create two offices and restrooms. A second building, moved onto the site in 1975, connects the offices to a room, a kitchen, and a fellowship hall to the north (originally detached). The church remains on its original site but was subjected to significant renovations and alterations in 1959, 1975, and 1984.

Sanctuary West Elevation

The west elevation features the front gable roof of the sanctuary, the steeple, the entrance vestibule, and the bell tower (Photo #01). The bell tower in the northwest corner of the sanctuary projects slightly forward from both the west and north elevations and was originally sided with wood but is currently clad in corrugated plastic sheets (Photo #10). Continued water infiltration from leaks in the bell tower has severely deteriorated the wood framing and the bell chamber is inaccessible, though it still holds the original bell (Photo #015). The gable roof of the sanctuary has a broken hip design and meets the bell tower to the north. The tower roof is pyramidal and slightly taller than the main gable. Both roofs are made of composition shingles. The vestibule in front of the main entrance has a double glass door, a gable roof of composition shingles, and is clad in brick veneer with wood siding used to infill the area around the door. (Photo #012). Above the door are white bricks embedded in a pattern to form a cross. To the south of the entrance is a cornerstone that states the church organization date, remodel date, and a list of past deacons and trustees (Photo #011).

Sanctuary North Elevation

The north elevation runs perpendicular to County Road 2706 and shows the side of the sanctuary and the bell tower (Photo #08). The brick veneer covers the original wooden siding except for in a few spots including on the top half of the bell tower (Photo #10). Near the center of the elevation a gabled wall projects out to form the arms of the cross-axial plan. There are four aluminum windows along the façade. Located near the rear of this elevation is the original side entry, however, it is boarded up on the inside. (Photo #23). The east end of the north elevation connects to the rear church addition, added in 1959, which has a lower roof height. To the north of the building, twelve posts in a line parallel to the sanctuary act as a parking lot guideline. A telephone wire is also visible going from an external post to

² National Park Service, *National Register Bulletin: How to Complete the National Register Registration Form* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1997) 17.

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the church, connecting to the north addition.

Sanctuary East Elevation

The east elevation runs perpendicular to County Road 2608. The original back wall of the sanctuary is mostly obscured from this elevation due to the east addition (Photo #05). The addition's roofline is lower than the sanctuary roof so some of the original lap siding on the sanctuary's gable end is visible (Photo #04).

Sanctuary South Elevation

The South Elevation shows the side of the Sanctuary (Photo #03). Near the center of the elevation a gabled wall projects out to form the arms of the cross-axial plan. There are five window openings along this elevation, and the window closest to the belltower has been infilled with a window A/C unit and plywood. The steeple is visible, but has fallen into disrepair and is crooked, tilting eastward. There is an exterior door on the east end that is still used unlike the exterior door on the north elevation that has been infilled with brick.

Additions

The church building has been altered by two major single-story additions, east and north. The additions are covered in the same brick masonry as the sanctuary and feature similar gabled roofs of composition shingles that are dropped in height compared to the sanctuary roof. The rear addition (on the east side of the sanctuary) was completed in 1959 and consists of two offices separated by restrooms. (Photo #04). In 1975 the congregation moved a building onto the property to serve as a fellowship hall (north dining and kitchen). This building was originally connected to the east addition with a breezeway, but that was enlarged and enclosed with brick in 1984 to become the south dining room (Figure 2). A white brick cross pattern is inlaid on the east exterior wall of this room, facing CR 2607 (Photo #05). There are three windows on the east addition, and five windows on the north addition with a single-entry door on the west side (Photos #04 to #09). There is also a crawl space on the floor against the east wall of the addition which allows for access to the foundation (Photo #019).

Interior

Bethel Baptist Church's interior is designed with a traditional sanctuary that is entered through the double, hollow panel wood doors of the entry vestibule. The sanctuary historically and currently occupies the church's footprint circa 1899. The pine tongue and groove board floor is covered in red carpet, and the walls are clad in MDF paneling. The vaulted and popcorn-textured drywall ceiling has been dropped, and two light fixtures and a fan are hung from the centerline. The sanctuary is open, lacking columns or posts to support the roof (Photo #22). A center aisle is created using unattached, blue cloth chairs that face a raised platform altar at the east end of the room. A lectern and piano are arranged in front of the altar (Photo #19). The rear altar wall is wood paneled, setback, and adorned with a large wood cross that is partially illuminated (Photo #23). The wall meets the centerline of the vaulted ceiling above.

Integrity

The Bethel Baptist Church building has been actively used by freedmen and their descendants since the late nineteenth century. It is a pillar of the community, with many people growing up in the church and remaining active and engaged members throughout their lives. As a result, the building has not remained static, and two additions and numerous improvements have been made throughout the years. Thousands of dollars earned from oil and gas leases were spent to continuously improve the church to make it a comfortable and functional gathering place for the community. Built near the Jackson plantation where many of the original members were originally enslaved, the church served as a common bond and shared social space for formerly enslaved people to gather, worship, and learn. The layout of the sanctuary

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and orientation of the church point to the building's original design based on traditions used at the time. Although the building does not retain a significant amount of material or workmanship integrity because the original wooden siding has been covered and the original windows have been removed, these changes were undertaken by a congregation with limited resources who were determined to adapt and modernize the historic church so it could remain a viable and active place of worship. Rather than detract from the integrity of the building, these alterations showcase the continuity of use by the congregation over time and highlight the significance of the building to the rural Black community. The building remains on its original site and has been utilized as a Baptist church since its construction in the late nineteenth century and retains integrity of design, feeling, association, setting, and location.

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Statement of Significance

Bethel Baptist Church was built circa 1899 and is the place of worship for an African American congregation that was established about 1870.³ Located in rural Anderson County, Texas, Bethel Baptist church represents the success of institution building by emancipated Black men and women during the Reconstruction Era in the face of violence and intimidation. The decentralized, independent nature of Baptist congregations "were well-suited to the rural South and could encompass the exuberant and spiritual practices to which many former slaves were accustomed."⁴ The church building is the principal surviving 19th century artifact of the Reconstruction-era Bethel Freedom Colony, which included a school and lodge hall (no longer extant), and was one of four Black Baptist churches founded by the Reverend Nathan Ogg. Beyond its role as the spiritual anchor for the Bethel community, the church was the preferred location for social gatherings and community events, a safe, shared space integral to community lifeways. Bethel Baptist Church is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the areas of Social History and Ethnic Heritage: Black at the local level of significance. The period of significance begins c.1899, corresponding with the earliest documented reference of the building's existence, and ends in 1984, the documented year of a substantial project to sheath the exterior wall of the church in brick. The period of significance appropriately extends through 1984 to encompass important material changes, which best illustrates the community's endurance despite demographic dispersal, and their desire to improve the church. With the additional support of contemporary scholarship, the property meets Criteria Consideration G (Recent Past). Bethel Baptist Church derives its primary significance from its historical associations, and thus satisfactorily meets Criteria Consideration A (Religious Properties).

Anderson County, Texas

Bethel Baptist Church is located in Anderson County, which was organized in 1846. The church sits between the Bethel Community, settled during the Republic of Texas era in the early 1840s, and Tennessee Colony, which was founded after statehood in 1847. As a largely agricultural county, the region developed relatively late in the antebellum period, though this did not preclude the arrival of a significant number of enslaved laborers. While, in 1850, Anderson County's 2,884 residents included 600 enslaved people (21%), by 1860 the population had grown to 10,398, of whom 3,668 were enslaved (35%). After Emancipation in 1865, many white residents left, and the population declined to 9,229, of whom 48% were Black, reflecting in-migration and growth of the Black population during the postwar 1860s.⁵

Anderson County was overwhelmingly secessionist during the Civil War, and during the Reconstruction era it was the site of many acts of racial violence challenging the efforts of Black citizens to organize socially and politically. Many Blacks joined the Loyal League, active from 1867 to 1872, which served as an organizing arm of the Republican Party.⁶ In Anderson County, whites organized the "Defensive League" and sought to disrupt Loyal League meetings, such as when 30 Defensive League members intimidated a mile and a half long procession of Loyal League men "on horseback, muleback, in buggies, wagons and afoot" headed to a meeting in Mound Prairie.⁷

Tennessee Colony

Bethel Baptist Church is located seven miles northwest of Tennessee Colony, an unincorporated community which was home to many of the county's slaveowners, and which remains the largest community near the church today. Tennessee

³ Palestine Negro Business and Professional Women's Club, *Profiles of Faith: A History of Black Churches in Anderson County*, 1986, 6.

⁴ National Park Service (NPS). *The Era of Reconstruction, 1861-1900: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study*. 2017, 27.

⁵ Georgia Kemp Caraway, "Anderson County." Handbook of Texas (online), updated 2021.

⁶ Carl H. Moneyhon, "Union League." Handbook of Texas (online), updated 2021.

⁷ Pauline Buck Hohes, *A Centennial History of Anderson County Texas*, San Antonio: The Naylor Company (1936), 52-53.

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Colony was established fifteen miles northwest of the county seat of Palestine in 1847 by settlers from Tennessee and Alabama; "practically all brought negro slaves with them."⁸ The institution of slavery inherently increased racial tensions in Anderson County and created distrust between communities—often leading to violence. In 1860, Black "runaways" supported by two white men were said to have plotted to poison the drinking water of white enslavers. When the plot was uncovered, the two white men were hung, the enslaved men were whipped, and others were forced to leave the area. Additional examples of post-war racial tensions include the 1869 expulsion of a "man named Seymour" in Tennessee Colony "whose expressed mission was to organize a negro school." Even a prosperous planter such as "Major Porter" was "forcibly persuaded to leave Tennessee Colony." Despite enslaving over 100 people, Porter was considered suspect with a "corrupt character" because he supported Black education.⁹

Bethel Community and the Jackson Plantation

More immediate in proximity to Bethel Baptist Church was the Bethel Community, an unincorporated community located two miles to its north that was settled by 1852 when a post office opened there. Later, in 1859, a church and cemetery were established there for use by Baptists, Methodists, and Cumberland Presbyterians alike. Early settlers of Bethel Community were Henry Rampy and Charles Gilmore, who donated land to build a church and school. They began the Judson Baptist Church near Gilmore's home in 1854, which became one of the first congregations in the county. At its peak in 1860, the community had 300 residents, but the population continued to dwindle after the Civil War and the post office was shuttered in 1914.¹⁰

Among Bethel Community's most prominent citizens was Frederick Stith Jackson. After bringing his family to Anderson County from Alabama in 1854, Jackson "became one of the most extensive planters and largest slave owners in Anderson County."¹¹ He died in 1863. In 1860, Jackson gave his son, Benjamin, part of his land near Bethel totaling 575 acres.¹² This land encompassed the Jackson Plantation, which was located roughly a mile south of the Bethel Community. The 1860 census recorded Benjamin as age 25, owner of real estate valued at \$4,500 and personal property valued at \$45,000.¹³ He enslaved 44 people living in eight houses.¹⁴ The enslaved men and women who worked the Jackson plantation harvested cotton and corn that was shipped out on the Neches River.¹⁵ Benjamin would move to Mexia after 1870 and Dallas after 1900, but he retained absentee ownership of the property until his death in Dallas in 1914¹⁶, with the exception of a small parcel that contained the Jackson Quarters Cemetery that he sold in 1899.¹⁷ It was uncommon across the South for former plantation owners to sell land to Freedmen, and it was only after Benjamin's death that his sons, Walter and Douglas, began to sell small parcels of the family land to Black farmers. Although descendants of Benjamin Jackson gradually sold off parcels of land located on the northern and southern portions of the original plantation, the core acreage, including where the old home place was located, still remains in possession of the family.

⁸ Hohes, page 235. "The fertile valleys, blooming slopes, plentiful wood and water supplies ... pleased [the settlers] most." Families included Avant, Hanks, Saegler, Tucker, and Wolverton.

⁹ Hohes, 235-236.

¹⁰ Michael J. Vaughn, "Bethel, TX," Handbook of Texas (online), updated 1994, accessed September 6, 2024, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/bethel-tx-anderson-county>

¹¹ Hohes, 504. The family was recorded in Alabama in the 1850 census.

¹² Anderson County Deed Records Volume K, Page 281.

¹³ 1860 U.S. Census, Anderson County, Texas. Dwelling No. 1229, Household No. 1235, B. W. Jackson. Ancestry.com

¹⁴ 1860 U.S. Slave Schedule, Anderson County, Texas, B.W. Jackson, page 45. See also Anderson County Probate Record, 1863. Record #36, F. S. Jackson.

¹⁵ Sarah Elizabeth Loftus, "Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture: The Bethel Community and the Benjamin W. Jackson Plantation," Syracuse University, 2015, Dissertations - ALL. 395. <https://surface.syr.edu/etd/395>, page 55.

¹⁶ Texas State Board of Health. Death Certificate of Benj. W. Jackson, 5 April 1914. Ancestry.com . It gives his birthplace as Tennessee, born 16 Sept. 1835, and his parents as Fred and Louise (Gee) Jackson. He died at his home at 3711 Swiss Avenue in Dallas.

¹⁷ Anderson County Deed Records Volume 65, Page 221.

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Bethel Freedom Colony

A separate Freedom Colony, also known as Bethel, was established in the vicinity of the Bethel Baptist Church after Emancipation, populated principally by Freedmen from the adjacent Jackson Plantation. Many of those formerly enslaved men and women on the Jackson Plantation remained in the area after Emancipation, working the plantation as tenant farmers and slowly accumulating small parcels of their own adjacent to it.¹⁸ Ben Knox Cummins and his sister Caldonia Jackson were among the earliest Black citizens of the Bethel community to purchase land from the Jackson descendants beginning in 1901. Over the ensuing years, the siblings developed a successful farming enterprise on the property. By 1916, “the family had secured 318 acres of farmland, a significant amount of land for a small farmer in east Texas.”¹⁹

As Freedmen of Bethel Community acquired land, they came to establish what would be known as a “Freedom Colony” under the same name of Bethel. The Bethel Freedom Colony was only about 1.5 miles south of its namesake and was linked to the Bethel community by FM 2706 since at least 1936 but likely even decades before that as the two communities would have exchanged goods and labor (Map 8).²⁰ Defined by scholars Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, a Freedom Colony was a community:

unplotted and unincorporated, individually unified only by church and school and residents' collective belief that a community existed... Most established themselves on pockets of wilderness, cheap land, or neglected land previously untouched by cotton agriculture... Most of them never developed past the "settlement" level of organization, remaining dispersed, poorly focused places where a passing stranger might not see a community at all, only scattered farmsteads with perhaps a remote church or school.²¹

The Bethel Freedom Colony reflected these characteristics, and in addition to the Bethel Baptist Church established about 1870, the community would come to include the Cayuga Negro School, (sometimes referred to as Bethel Colored School) and a lodge hall built for the Green Oak Lodge No. 379 A.F. & A.M. after 1914²², which were both located across the road from the church, neither of which remain standing. Historic aeriels reveal that the lodge was standing in 1960 but no longer extant in 1976.²³ The Bethel School and lodge hall were both constructed across the road from the church. The 1936 highway map of Anderson County reveals that the original main road south out of the original antebellum community of Bethel led to the Bethel Freedom Colony; Bethel Baptist Church was built oriented to the west to front this road (Map 6).²⁴ About 1962, FM 2706 was paved and rerouted east of the church placing it behind the building.²⁵

The land for both the school and the lodge was deeded by Ben Knox Cummins, who graduated with a teaching certificate from Summer Normal Institute. Cummins was the first teacher/principal of the Bethel Colored School.²⁶ The Bethel Colored School served as a replacement for the community’s first African American school, the Green Street School,

¹⁸ Michael J. Vaughn, *The History of Cayuga and Crossroads, Texas* (Texian Press: Waco, Texas, 1967).

¹⁹ Loftus, “Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture,” 74.

²⁰ State highway maps of Anderson County produced in 1936 and 1961 (Maps 6 & 8) show the Bethel community and the Bethel Church and school linked by what is now FM 2706.

²¹ Sitton, Thad and James H. Conrad. *Freedom Colonies*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005, pages 2-3.

²² Anderson County Deed Book 117, page 33. The Green Oak Lodge purchased land for their lodge hall on April 29, 1914.

²³ Collapsed structural ruins are visible although overgrown, and the site likely retains undisturbed archaeological resources. For historic aerial photos see: <https://www.historicaerials.com/viewer>. (Search term: “2849 County Rd 2608, Tennessee Colony”)

²⁴ 1936 Highway Map of Anderson County, Texas State Library and Archives.

²⁵ The church granted a 0.18-acre easement to the Texas State Highway Department in August 1962. See Anderson County Deed Book 650 page 118.

²⁶ African American Roots of Anderson County (Organization). *African American Roots: Traveling the Boundaries of Anderson County*. African American Roots, TX. 2007, p. 73.

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which was located at the northeast corner of the former Jackson Plantation.²⁷ It operated until integration dictated that black children attend school in Cayuga in the early 1967.²⁸ At the time of integration, the Bethel Colored School had three teachers and 78 students.²⁹ The Green Oak lodge, also referred to as the Order of the Eastern Star, served as a fraternal organization for local African Americans and included hundreds of area members during the early-twentieth century. One former resident, Mrs. Johnson, recalled that “people lined up all the way to Bethel Church to attend the meetings.”³⁰ Because Freemasonry often emphasized fellowship and mutual aid, Freedmen often incorporated these social organizations alongside churches as they established their settlements. “As autonomy and personhood was granted to formerly enslaved individuals, the establishment of Freedom colonies allowed for groups of disenfranchised individuals to not only rely on and support each other internally, but to also create a ‘haven’ to build their collective identities as Freedmen.”³¹

The National Park Service has recognized the critical role that institutions like churches, schools, and fraternal organizations collectively played during the Reconstruction-era:

The institutions that African Americans established during the early years of Reconstruction served to stabilize communities and provided them resources crucial to their survival. As the political winds shifted and Republicans lost power in the states, black community institutions persisted. Black families continued to nurture their children, and communities—however strapped—did what they could to promote the well-being of all people. Black institutions continued as foundations of community life, despite increasingly effective efforts by many white Southerners to secure a system of racial apartheid.³²

These institutions, and the close-knit ties they promoted, were also essential for security and survival in the context of extreme racism from the Reconstruction era through the Jim Crow era. As late as 1910, the Slocum Massacre in southeastern Anderson County saw the murder of as many as 100 Black Texans at the hands of a mob of up to 300 White men, evidence that racial hostility and violence persisted in the county decades after the formal end of Reconstruction in the 1870s.³³ Bethel residents today continue to recall the painful history of the old oak tree near the entrance to the old Jackson Plantation which served as a “hanging tree.”³⁴

The Founding of Bethel Baptist Congregation (circa 1870) and Construction of Present Church (between 1886 and 1899)

In general, Southern Baptist churches were known to have been more open to the evangelization of enslaved people than other denominations. After emancipation, many Freedmen already identified as Baptists. This fact, coupled with the loose organizational structure of Baptist churches that did not require formally trained ministers, encouraged the rapid growth of Black Baptist congregations during the Reconstruction era. There were eleven Black Baptist congregations established in Anderson County before 1880.³⁵ Bethel was the seventh oldest, established about 1870 by the Rev. Nathan Ogg. The

²⁷ Loftus, “Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture,” 70, 85.

²⁸ African American Roots of Anderson County, *African American Roots*, p. 73.

²⁹ Michael J Vaughn, *The History of Cayuga and Cross Roads, Texas*, Waco: Texian Press, 1967.

³⁰ Loftus, “Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture,” 85-86.

³¹ National Register of Historic Places, Ethiopian Star Lodge #308, Snook, Burleson, Texas, 2025, pp. 10-11.

³² NPS, page 36.

³³ African American Roots of Anderson County, *African American Roots*, p. 4.

³⁴ Loftus, 90.

³⁵ For individual church histories, see *Profiles of Faith*. The earliest Black Baptist church was established in 1861, prior to emancipation, at Beulah, and founded by Rev. John Brisco. After emancipation, Rev. Curtain Dow established Mt. Olive Baptist Church near Tennessee Colony in 1865; it was constructed from logs hauled out of the river bottom and later covered with boards. That same year, Rev. Nathan Ogg founded Providence. Other early Black Baptist churches in Anderson County were Evans Spring (1866), St. James (W. M. Jasper, 1867), Brown Springs (Rev. Brisco and Johnson, 1868), Jerusalem (Rev. Ogg, 1870, with charter

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Church's own historical account provides a founding date of 1869 while other publications cite a date of 1872, although the earlier date is probable.³⁶

Bethel Baptist's oral history holds that the earliest church services were held under a brush arbor near the Jackson Quarters Cemetery and that after the arbor was burned in 1872, the congregation constructed a new church building at the present site which has stood since that time.³⁷ However, no definitive evidence for the original date of construction of the present Bethel Baptist Church has been located. The earliest deed referencing the church is dated October 30, 1899, when a neighboring property owner, W. L. Derden, purchased 260 acres for \$1,690 in the John Rampy and Henrietta Kling Surveys from J. A. and Viola Curry, "save and except the negro church lot" of approximately one acre.³⁸ Curry had originally purchased the tract in 1896 for \$1,475, but that deed made no exception for a church lot, which is strong evidence that Bethel wasn't constructed on the present site until after 1896. It is likely that after the brush arbor was destroyed or abandoned, the congregation continued to meet in member homes, nearby churches, and other donated spaces until they were able to acquire resources to purchase a lot and build a church of their own. Unfortunately, no deed has been found formally conveying land to the church, and any records of title searches that would have been prepared by the Pure Oil Company and other oil field investors in later years, verifying the fee simple ownership of the land and minerals by Bethel Church, have not been located.³⁹

Leaders of Bethel Baptist Church

Leaders of Bethel Baptist played a fundamental role in the church's success from its inception and are recognized in sequence in the church's official unpublished history in sequence. **Rev. Nathan Ogg** (c. 1827-1896) is recognized as the local founder of Bethel Baptist Church. Ogg (sometimes referred to as Oggs) had the support of the local community of emancipated men and women, many of whom had been enslaved on the neighboring Jackson Plantation.⁴⁰ Born about 1826, Ogg was a farmer who moved to Anderson County in 1855, and on August 6, 1867 he registered to vote there.⁴¹ In 1870, at the age of 44, Ogg was a farmer, owner of real estate valued at \$250, and was living with his wife, Ellen, 28, born in Tennessee, and three children: Martha, 11; Lon, 3; and James, 1. Neighboring households of Bethel Colony were headed by Nathan Barber, 37, a schoolteacher, and Chester Ogg, 42, a miller. Other neighbors bore the Wolverton surname and were both Black and white.⁴² In 1880, at the age of 53, Ogg was still living in Anderson County and serving as a minister. His wife, Ellen, was 38, and his sons James, 12, and Samuel, 8, were living with them. Neighboring households were all Black farm families.⁴³

Rev. Ogg served as a community leader in northwest Anderson County broadly, and he played a foundational role in establishing three other Baptist churches in said county: Providence (1865), Jerusalem (1870), and New Hope (1873). According to a history of New Hope Baptist Church, that church was founded by Rev. Ogg and members of Bethel

members coming from Providence), Mt. Pilgrim (Sam Smith, 1872); New Hope (Rev. Nathan Ogg, 1873), and Mt. Zion (Charlie Tubbs, 1876). This analysis did not consider other denominations. Despite the establishment of a very early Primitive Baptist church near Elkhart in 1839, its first Black congregation wasn't organized in Anderson County until the founding of Mt. Olive Primitive Baptist Church in 1880.

³⁶ Beverly Smith, *Bethel Baptist Church & Community: Up from Slavery*. 2010. See also *Profiles of Faith*, 6.

³⁷ *Up from Slavery*, 1.

³⁸ Anderson County Deed Book 65, page 256.

³⁹ Anderson County Deed Book 57, page 323. Oil companies are particularly careful to check titles to land before leasing them, and the execution of leases beginning in 1927 is evidence that the church was found to have clear title.

⁴⁰ *Profiles of Faith: A History of Black Churches of Anderson County*. See "Bethel Baptist Church," page 6.

⁴¹ Anderson County Voter Registration List [1867], page 15. Ancestry.com. He indicated that he had lived in Texas for 12 years and all that time in Anderson County. He indicated that he was born in Alabama, and he could not sign his name. Conflicting census records also give his birthplace as Georgia and Florida.

⁴² 1870 U.S. Census, Anderson County, Texas. Household #329, Nathan Ogg, page 45.

⁴³ 1880 U.S. Census, Anderson County, Texas. Dwelling #336, Household #347, Nathan Ogg, page 184A.

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Baptist because of bad roads. It seems unlikely that if Bethel was founded in 1872, the congregation immediately broke apart the following year. More likely, as the community grew and prospered, church members who lived on the opposite side of Catfish Creek resolved to build a new church after several years of suffering with eight miles of travel, which "would take roughly more than one hour each way."⁴⁴ Members of New Hope wanted to remain associated with Rev. Ogg in their new church, but long remembered "Old Bethel" as their "Mother Church."

Ogg's leadership in establishing churches in Anderson County reflects the important role that he played. As noted by the National Park Service's *Reconstruction Era National Historic Landmarks Theme Study*, "church leaders adjudicated disputes within communities, resolving problems within an institution that many Black southerners trusted far more than local law enforcement officials."⁴⁵ Ogg was also politically active, and in 1882 he was appointed as the Republican Supervisor of Elections for Precinct 11 in Anderson County by the United States District Court.⁴⁶

Rev. Richard Henry Boyd (1843-1922) was also a key figure associated with the founding of Bethel Baptist Church. Born in Mississippi, Boyd came to Washington County, Texas in 1859. Boyd learned to read after Emancipation and attended Bishop College in Marshall in 1869. Boyd founded numerous churches in East Central Texas, assisting in organizing both Bethel (c. 1870) and New Hope (1873); both churches became founding members of the Zion Hill District Baptist Association Boyd founded in 1873, and Bethel remained a member until the district dissolved in 2010.⁴⁷ In 1884, the American Baptist Yearbook identified ordained ministers in Anderson County including Boyd in Palestine and Ogg in Tennessee Colony.⁴⁸ Boyd became a national Black Baptist leader after moving to Nashville in 1896 where he founded the National Baptist Publishing Board in 1897. The Board published "the first series of Baptist literature for Blacks ever published."⁴⁹

Rev. Emanuel M. Griggs led Bethel from 1898 to 1900, after serving as the second pastor of New Hope Baptist Church from 1891 to 1898. Educated at Bishop's College, he was involved in multiple churches across Texas, holding various leadership roles, including District Secretary of the National Baptist Convention and President of the African American Farmers and Citizens Savings Bank in Palestine. He was later the founding pastor of New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church (1916).⁵⁰

In addition to Revs. Ogg, Boyd, and Griggs, other early ministers associated with Bethel Baptist Church include Rev. Sanda; Rev. Johnson (founder of Brown Springs Baptist Church, 1868); Rev. Sam Smith (founder of Mt. Pilgrim Baptist Church, 1872); and Rev. Charlie Tubbs (founder of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, 1876).⁵¹ These leading religious figures in 19th century Anderson County helped shape the religious and community life of Bethel Baptist Church and the Bethel Freedom Colony through their leadership and organizational efforts, contributing significantly to the establishment of independent Black congregations during the post-Civil War era.

Establishment of New Bethel Baptist Church (1916)

⁴⁴ New Hope Baptist Church. A Historical Profile of the New Hope Baptist Church. Texas Historical Marker Application, 2012, p. 1.

⁴⁵ NPS, page 28.

⁴⁶ *Galveston Daily News*, 5 November 1882, page 4. There were 17 precincts in Anderson County, and each had both a Republican and Democratic supervisor.

⁴⁷ See *Up from Slavery*, page 1 and 11, and *New Hope*, page 5.

⁴⁸ *American Baptist Yearbook* (1884).

⁴⁹ Nolan Thompson. "Richard Henry Boyd." Handbook of Texas (online), updated 2020.

⁵⁰ Palestine Negro Business and Professional Women's Club, "Palm Branches and Laurel Wreaths: A Book of Biographical Sketches," Crockett, Texas, 1976, p. 73.

⁵¹ A list of ministers of Bethel in *Up from Slavery* has been correlated with the history of other Baptist churches in Anderson County in Profiles of Faith to identify these men.

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In October of 1916, some members of Bethel Baptist Church broke off to organize New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church due to “a difference of opinion on how the church should operate.”⁵² Charter members of New Bethel included B. H. Malone, Tillus Washington, and Grant Mitchell; the first pastor was Rev. E. M. Griggs.⁵³ A church sanctuary was constructed on a two-acre lot purchased from Caldonia Cummins Jackson on February 25, 1918. Church trustees named on the deed were J. G. Glenn, B. H. Malone, and Tillus Washington.⁵⁴ This new church is located just one mile west of Bethel Baptist Church, which afterward has been informally referred to as “Old Bethel.”⁵⁵

Bethel Baptist Church, Economic Landscapes, and Oil

The African American community of Bethel Freedom Colony thrived during the first half of the twentieth century thanks to its residents’ continued efforts to acquire land, develop infrastructure, and create informal exchange economies. Mutual exchange could be observed in daily life throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when monetary wealth was scarce. Families in Bethel would often specialize in certain commodities (such as sweet potatoes or milk), and labor (such as well-diggers or blacksmiths), and provide for each other. Caldonia Jackson herself exemplified this ethos as a midwife who provided medical needs for other families. As one resident put it, “you knew your own family’s needs and you could also anticipate what other families needed.”⁵⁶

Throughout the twentieth century, oil, natural gas, and coal explorations significantly impacted the economic landscape of Bethel Freedom Colony. Much of the community farmland began to be bought and sold for mineral rights alone. Today, massive energy related infrastructure, pipelines, and pumping stations have replaced what was once mostly an agricultural landscape. During the second half of the twentieth century Bethel Colony saw a demise and shift away from the small farming and tenancy patterns, and the informal economies, which bound the small rural community together. This demise owed to rapid mechanization, industrialization, cheap, mass-produced goods, and the burgeoning oil and gas industry.⁵⁷

While facing external and financial pressures, residents of Bethel also actively utilized profits from oil concessions to stabilize and improve their church over time. Few records survive for Bethel Baptist Church during the early 20th century, however several oil leases recorded in Anderson County are evidence that the church was actively participating in regional oil field development to support church operations and improvements. In 1927, a salt dome was discovered about 1,000 feet southeast of Bethel Baptist Church at what is now the northeast corner of FM 2706 and Anderson County Road 2504.⁵⁸ Salt domes are massive underground salt deposits, and those concentrated in areas of East Texas including Anderson County are known as the “East Texas Basin.”⁵⁹ As reported at the time in the *Waco News-Tribune*, “the discovery of a new salt dome in the Bethel community has sent leases skyrocketing and many of the big oil companies are scouring that section for leases, and it is said a test well will be started within the near future in that dome.”⁶⁰ As a consequence, the church was able to enter into a five-year mineral lease with the Pure Oil Company on May 2, 1927, signed by trustees Austin Hunter (died 1932) and Allen Coleman.⁶¹ This lease expired in 1932.

⁵² Loftus, “Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture,” 84.

⁵³ *Profiles of Faith: A History of Black Churches in Anderson County*, 36-37.

⁵⁴ Anderson County Deed Book 120, page 563. Caldonia Jackson to New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church.

⁵⁵ Confusingly, many topographical maps label New Bethel as Old Bethel and vice versa. Deed and tax records make it clear that these maps are incorrect.

⁵⁶ Loftus, “Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture,” 88.

⁵⁷ Loftus, “Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture,” 89-90.

⁵⁸ This dome is presently the site of the Atmos Energy New Leach Facility, which uses compressed air to generate electricity in the salt dome.

⁵⁹ Jeff Miller. “The Salty History of East Texas Lies Underground.” *Texas Co-op Power*, April 2021.

⁶⁰ “Largest Tract of Land Leased in Anderson County.” *Waco News-Tribune*. May 4, 1927, page 2.

⁶¹ Anderson County Deed Book 171, page 403.

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On March 3, 1934, the Tidewater Oil Company discovered oil in Cayuga, six miles northwest of Bethel Baptist Church, renewing interest in oil exploration in the area. Four days later, on March 7, 1934, Bethel Baptist trustee Coleman was joined by A. Alexander in signing a ten-year mineral lease with wildcatter F. W. Williams.⁶² A third mineral lease was signed on November 29, 1948 with H. M. McMahan for the "Bethel Colored Church Lot," also for a ten year term. Church trustees on the agreement were James Davis, Silas Henderson, and Robert Nolley.⁶³

Later 20th Century Church History and Improvements to the Sanctuary

The profits that Bethel Baptist Church obtained through oil and mineral concessions, as well as the church's own growth and internal funding would spur a series of building improvements in the latter half of the twentieth century. Resources were limited, and projects were often crowd-funded to purchase materials while much of the labor was completed by church members on weekends and holidays. These efforts were undertaken entirely by the congregation over decades and call attention to a shared sense of devotion to maintaining the sacred space in their community—Bethel Baptist Church.

Records are scarce for Bethel Baptist's history until 1959, when the church sanctuary was remodeled during the pastorate of the Rev. H. A. Rogers. The church funded the work with a loan from Builders Loan & Investment Corp. in March 1959.⁶⁴ The cornerstone was laid by Worshipful Master W. Roosevelt Hunter (1905-1980) of the adjacent Green Oak Lodge.⁶⁵

BETHEL CHURCH
Organized 1872 Remodeled 1959

PASTOR DR. H. A. ROGERS

<i>DEACONS</i>	<i>TRUSTEES</i>
<i>Z. R. Rogers</i>	<i>J. S. Davis</i>
<i>F. M. Morgan</i>	<i>S. H. Henderson</i>
<i>L. D. Davis</i>	<i>W. D. Dawson</i>
<i>E. L. Malone</i>	<i>E. L. Malone</i>
<i>N. E. Franklin</i>	<i>F. M. Morgan</i>
<i>S. L. Douglas</i>	<i>Walter Allen</i>
	<i>S. L. Douglas</i>

Stone Leveled by
Green Oak Lodge
W. R. Hunter, W. M.

Shortly after these improvements were made, in 1962, the Texas Highway Department constructed FM 2706 to the rear (east) of the church, rendering the historic road at the front (west) side of the church obsolete. A remnant of this road serves as the church driveway off of FM 2608. In conveying land for the new road, the church was required to remove a privy.

Later improvements to Bethel Baptist Church were recorded in a c. 2017 church history, *Up from Slavery*, which also identifies its ministers. An excerpt of this history, which is not in print, and for which copies are rare, is presented below:

⁶² Anderson County Deed Book 237, page 227.

⁶³ Anderson County Deed Book 403, page 577.

⁶⁴ Anderson County Deed Book 11, page 488.

⁶⁵ The cornerstone remains on the west facade of the building.

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Rev. Edward Ingram (1932-2021) served 1965-1971. He was born in Tennessee Colony and attended Wiley College and the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.⁶⁶ During his tenure, church debts from the 1959 remodeling were paid off and new pews were added to the sanctuary.

Rev. Kenneth B. Clater (1941-2023) served 1972-1981. He was born in Gholson, Texas and in addition to being a minister he was a barber.⁶⁷ During his pastorate, the church sanctuary was enlarged with the addition of restrooms, a pastor's study, and a finance room.⁶⁸ A frame structure was relocated to the property to be used as a cafeteria and air conditioning was added, financed by a \$2,500 note recorded in November 1975.⁶⁹

Rev. Julius Session served 1981-1986. In addition to the construction of a physical connection between the church sanctuary and the cafeteria relocated in 1975, the entire building was encased in brick in 1984. This project was undertaken entirely by church volunteers, one of several efforts made by the congregation to update and improve their beloved building over the years. The brick, which was slowly acquired over several years by church member N.F. Frankling, was supplied at a discount by the Texas Clay Products Company in Athens. A loan used to finance these improvements was paid off using proceeds from an oil lease to Texaco on church property. It was at this same time that a church member, Brother McGriff, repaired the leaning bell tower. A brick sign was also constructed at the rear of the church facing FM 2706.⁷⁰

Rev. Preston Cook served 1986-1989.

Rev. D. E. Smith served 1989-1992, a period when the building was re-roofed by brother John Hicks and the interior was updated with the addition of new pews. He was followed by his son, **Rev. D. E. Smith, Junior**, who served 1992-1996, and his other son, **Rev. Lamont M. Smith**, who served from 1996-1999. It was during this period that the red carpet was installed in the sanctuary as well as glass doors at the front of the church.

Rev. Bertha Averhart Parks served 2000-2002 and was the first woman pastor of Bethel and the only woman who served any church in the community. She was a native of Fairfield, Texas.

In 2010, the Zion Hill District Baptist Association dissolved and proceeds from the sale of its assets were dispersed among its members. Bethel received \$15,000 and used the money to remodel the kitchen, breezeway, and electrical work in the sanctuary.⁷¹

The Social Significance of Bethel Church to the Bethel Freedom Colony Community

The Bethel Freedom Colony took shape around the turn of the twentieth century when the church, lodge hall, and school were constructed on a site adjacent to the intersection of County Roads 2706 and 2608. This location is just one mile southeast of Jackson Quarters Cemetery which contains the graves of people who were enslaved at the nearby Jackson Plantation and is where many of their descendants, members of the Bethel community, are also interred. The Bethel Freedom Colony gave Black farmers living and working in the vicinity an insulated space with a degree of autonomy that generated social, economic, and cultural opportunities for its members. Although the Bethel Baptist congregation had formed almost thirty years prior in 1872, the congregation was transient, meeting in other churches or in the homes of

⁶⁶ "Rev. Edward Ingram." *Findagrave.com*. He was buried in Cedar Hill Memorial Park, Arlington, Texas.

⁶⁷ "Obituary for Pastor K. B. Clater." *Articobits.com*.

⁶⁸ *Up from Slavery*, 2.

⁶⁹ Anderson County Deed Book 842, page 434.

⁷⁰ *Up from Slavery*, 3-4.

⁷¹ *Up from Slavery*, 11.

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parishioners. The congregation found a permanent place of worship when the Bethel church was constructed on its current site c. 1899. In 1914 Ben Cummins, a local Black landowner, sold two parcels beside the Bethel church to the Anderson County School Board and Green Oak Lodge No. 379 A.F. & A.M.—thus establishing the institutional nucleus of the freedom colony.⁷²

The Bethel Freedom Colony community consisted primarily of Black farming families who lived in the vicinity. Members of the community attended services at Bethel Baptist Church, enrolled at the Bethel Colored School, and were initiates of the Green Oak Lodge Hall. It wasn't unusual for community members to be involved with more than one of Bethel's institutions. Mrs. Mary Williamson, the wife of Bethel school principal Professor C.E. Williams, was both a teacher at the school and a music instructor for the Bethel church choir.⁷³

The Bethel Baptist Church was the center of gravity for the Bethel Freedom Colony and hosted many important community social events, however, these events were not usually advertised or published. Only a few examples are found in the archival record, primarily in Black newspapers such as the *Dallas Express* or *Houston Informer*. In 1917, local Black farmers invited agents from the Texas A&M Agricultural Extension Agency to visit their community and provide instruction on crop diversification and other farming matters. Although both the school and lodge buildings were only a few years old at this time, the meeting was held at the Bethel church where there was “quite a number present.”⁷⁴ This event led members of the Bethel community to establish a farmer's club and pledge to diversify their crops, with several opting to grow tomatoes. Around Christmas of 1936, Bethel Baptist Church was expecting a visit from D. Jackson, the president of the historically Black Butler College, however he failed to arrive.⁷⁵ In 1941, an advertisement in the *Dallas Express* invited people to Bethel on the eve of Easter where entertainment was promised.⁷⁶ The Bethel congregation likely continued to gather at the church for secular and religious activities in the latter half of the twentieth century despite scarce records. Though beyond the period of significance, the 1984 project to encase the church in brick veneer speaks to the ongoing importance of the church as an anchor of the community. The project was undertaken over time and with the aid and resources of community members who gathered on weekends to build the façade as well as the concrete wheelchair ramp that leads to the front door.⁷⁷

African American evangelical churches in the South were often the first institutions that freedmen took ownership of after emancipation and consequently served a complex set of community needs. Churches were more than just religious institutions; they served as forums for addressing educational, religious, social, health, and work-related challenges, and they were integral to the struggle for racial equality. They often served as political institutions that “drew no clear distinction between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the political.” In addition to Biblical education, newspapers were read, and current events were discussed and debated within the church setting.⁷⁸ Many churches served the community by establishing schools, daycare centers, and food pantries, and by donating money for burials and headstones. The multifaceted role of the church in Black communities makes it difficult to differentiate between religious and secular activities. Though few secular and social functions of the Bethel Baptist Church have been documented, the few examples of community events, and the overall inter-relationship between the school, the lodge, and the church, speak to the complex amalgam of secular and religious activities in freedom colonies. Bethel Baptist church contributed significantly to the history of the Bethel freedom colony both as a physical place of worship and a center of social activity.

⁷² African American Roots of Anderson County, *African American Roots*, p. 73.

⁷³ *Dallas Express*, 21 March 1925, 5.

⁷⁴ *Palestine Daily Herald*, 12 April 1917, 2.

⁷⁵ *Houston Informer*, 26 December 1936, 10. (“D. Jackson” likely refers to Isaiah Jackson Jr.)

⁷⁶ *Dallas Express*, 5 April 1941, 12.

⁷⁷ Loftus, “Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture,” 83. Loftus interviewed two longtime congregation members who, at the time, were in their late 80s and early 90s.

⁷⁸ Gregg Cantrell, *The People's Revolt: Texas Populists and the Roots of American Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 154.

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Conclusion

Bethel Baptist Church is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places for its significance under Criterion A in the areas of Ethnic Heritage: Black and Social History as the sole religious and socio-cultural institution historically associated with the Bethel community for the period c. 1899 to 1984. This extended period is justified because the church's continuing role as a community anchor is essential to understanding the historical development and social fabric of this small Black enclave.

Since its original construction c. 1899, Bethel Baptist Church has been continually maintained and adapted by its self-supporting congregation. Additions, interior alterations, and routine repairs reflect the evolving needs of its members and demonstrate the church's uninterrupted use as a house of worship and gathering place.⁷⁹ The 1984 installation of brick exterior sheathing over the original walls is the most substantial modification; however, this work illustrates the congregation's ongoing investment in sustaining the building's function and presence as the center of community life. These changes, while modern in date, are significant contributors to the property's ability to convey its long and active history.

Physical documentation of the Bethel community is limited due to the lack of surviving local records, such as newspapers. There is an abundance of contemporary scholarship, however, that documents the central role churches, like Bethel Baptist, played in the social, civic, and spiritual lives of African Americans. Sources, like C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, confirm the difficulty of documenting rural Black churches and the decline of associated rural communities through the late 20th century in southern states.⁸⁰ There is a consensus among historians from W.E.B. DuBois and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., which sociologist Shaonta' E. Allen documented in 2019, that the Black church has long been a space of social refuge, a cultural incubator, mobilization center; a critical source of support for other Black institutions (like schools, businesses, and families), and has birthed Black consciousness.⁸¹ In short, "no other segment of the African American community represents such ownership and independence [as the Black church.]"⁸²

In this broader context, Bethel Baptist congregation's refurbishing efforts serve as the primary tangible expression of the property's lasting significance and the strong associative ties held by its now-dispersed descendant community. Because the church's continued use and preservation directly illustrate the community's endurance despite demographic dispersal,

⁷⁹ Integrity issues for sites associated with people of color and marginalized communities have been well documented. However, although the historic places may lose some integrity, the importance of these places to the marginalized communities is significant and strong. See National Council on Public History's History@Work blog post, "Repairing National Register Nominations: Underrepresented Communities and Integrity," available online at: <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/repairing-national-register-nominations-underrepresented-communities-and-integrity/>, 21 July 2020; National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Preserving African American Places: Growing Preservation's Potential as a Path for Equity," available online at: <https://savingplaces.org/equity-report>, October 2020; and the recent opinion by Sara Bronin, "How to Fix a National Register of Historic Places that Reflects Mostly White History," in the *Los Angeles Times*, available online at: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-12-15/historic-preservation-chicano-moratorium-national-register>, 15 December 2020 for additional discussion.

⁸⁰ See "In the Receding Shadow of the Plantation: A Profile of Rural Clergy and Churches in the Black Belt," in C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Duke University Press, 1990), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/utxa/detail.action?docID=1167646>.

⁸¹ Shaonta' E. Allen, "Doing Black Christianity: Reframing Black Church Scholarship," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 10 (2019): e12731, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12731>. A selection of scholarship includes: Andrew Billingsley and Cleopatra Howard Caldwell, "The Church, the Family, and the School in the African American Community," *The Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 3 (1991): 427-40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2295494>; Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty like a River the Black Church and Social Reform* (Oxford University Press, 2003); W.E.B. Du Bois, *Some Efforts of American Negroes For Their Own Social Betterment, The Souls of Black Folk, The Negro Church*; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song*; Adele Oltman, *Sacred Mission, Worldly Ambition: Black Christian Nationalism in the Age of Jim Crow* (University of Georgia Press, 2008).

⁸² *Ibid.*, 3.

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the period of significance appropriately extends through 1984 to encompass these material changes. With the additional support of contemporary scholarship, the property meets Criteria Consideration G (Recent Past). Bethel Baptist Church derives its primary significance from its historical associations, and thus satisfactorily meets Criteria Consideration A (Religious Properties).

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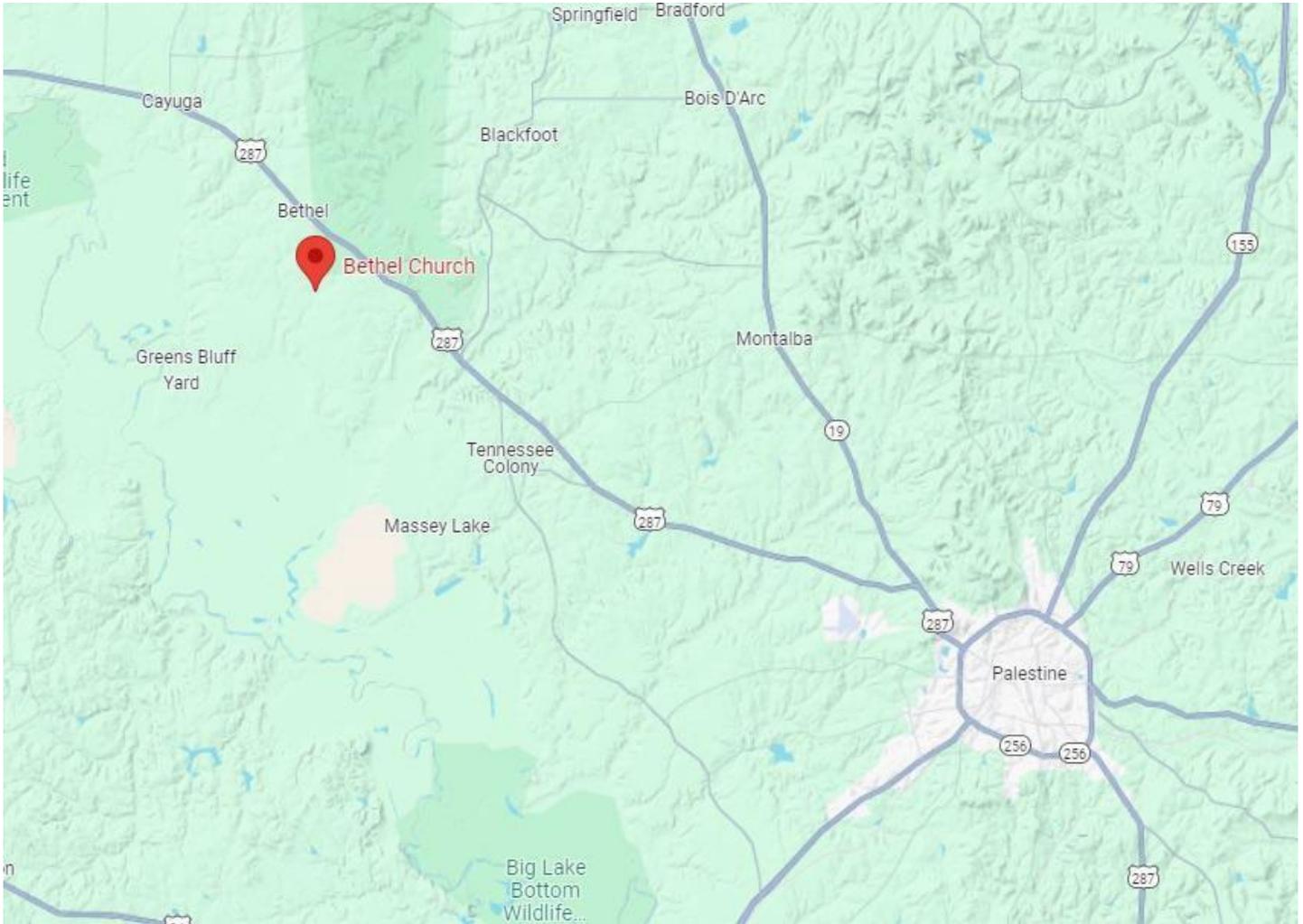
Maps

Map 1: Anderson County, Texas



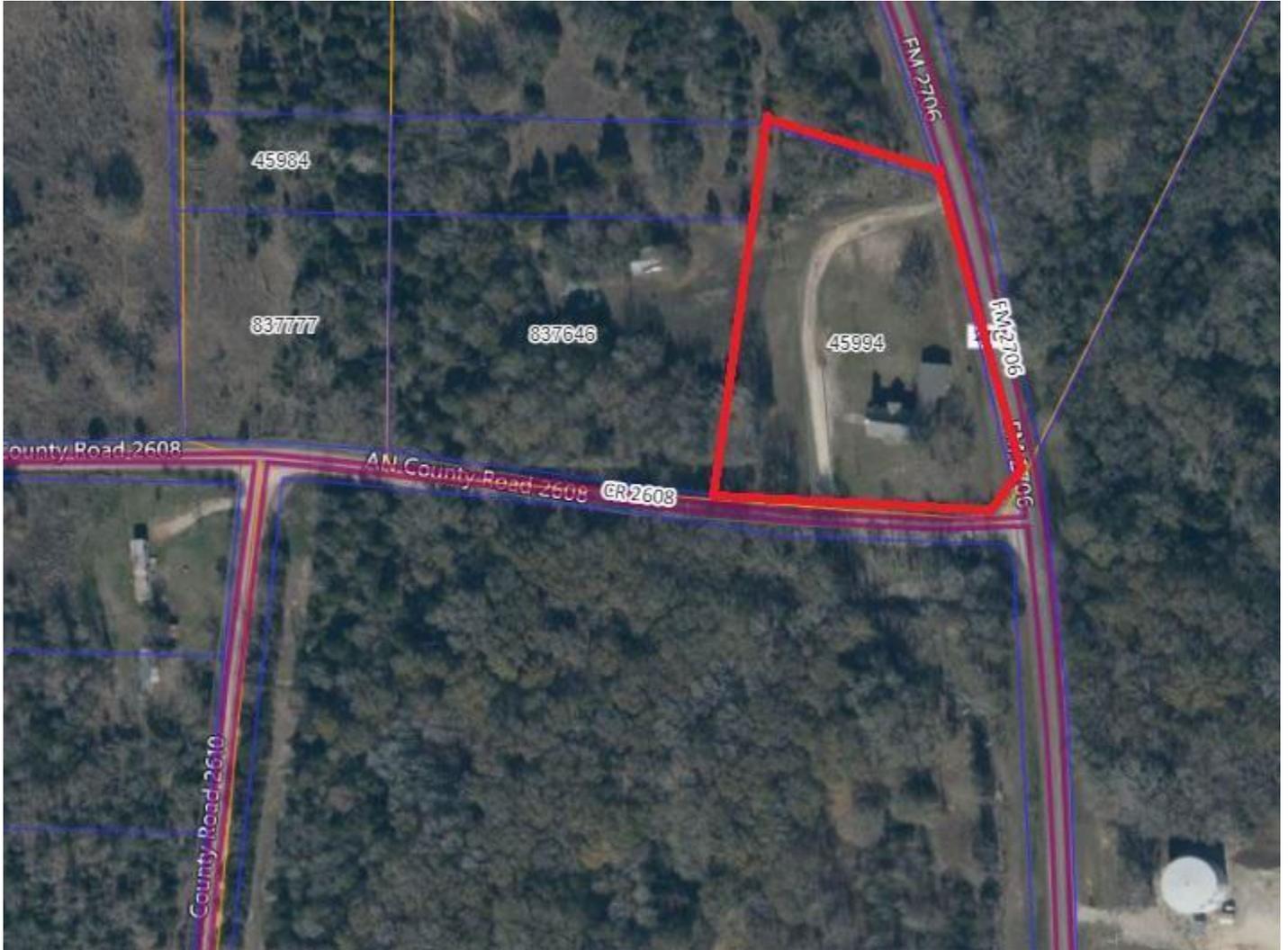
Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Map 2: Bethel Baptist Church location



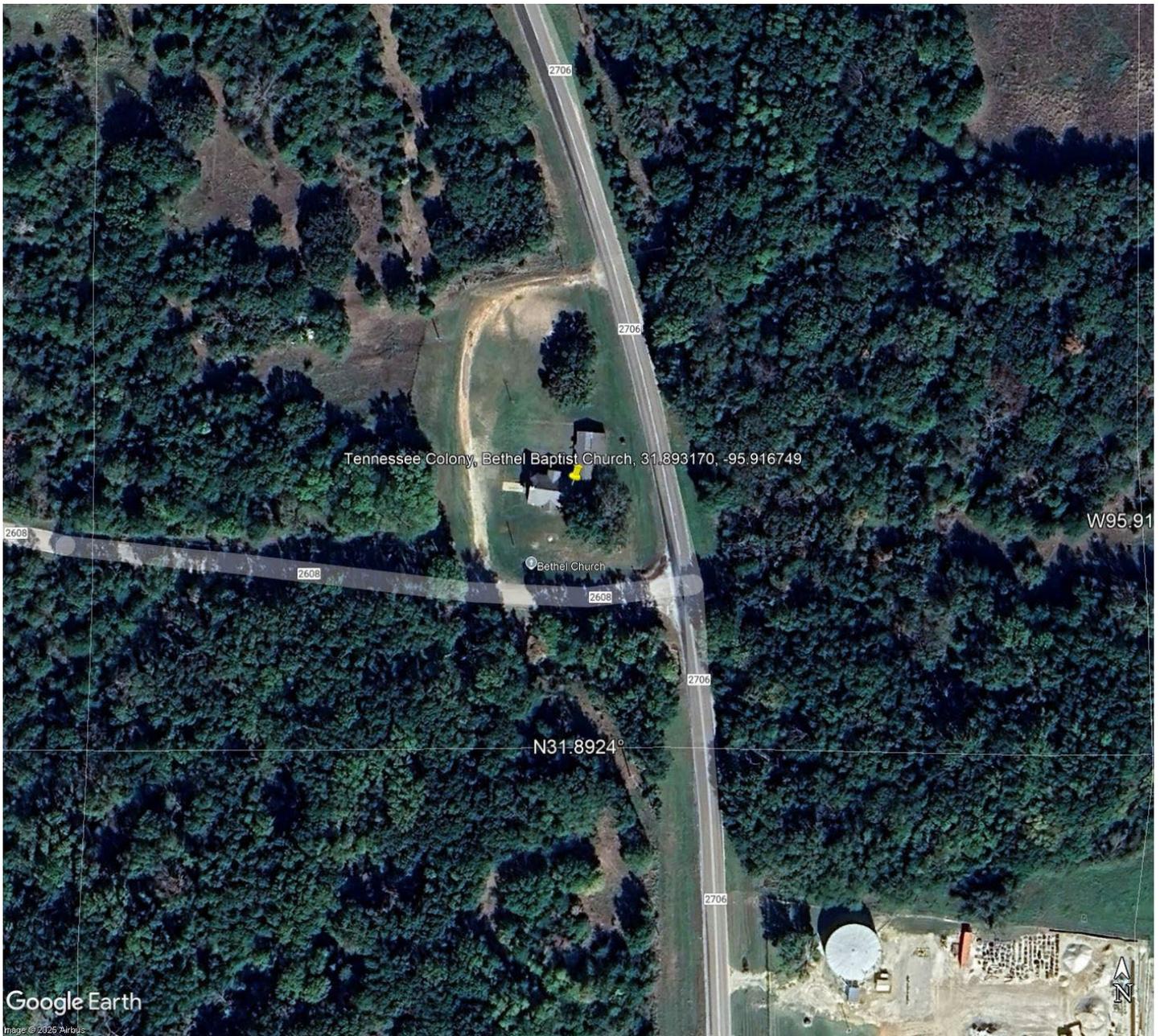
Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Map 3: Aerial View of Parcel outlined in red, Bethel Baptist Church 31.893170° -95.916749°
Google Earth, accessed February 16, 2024



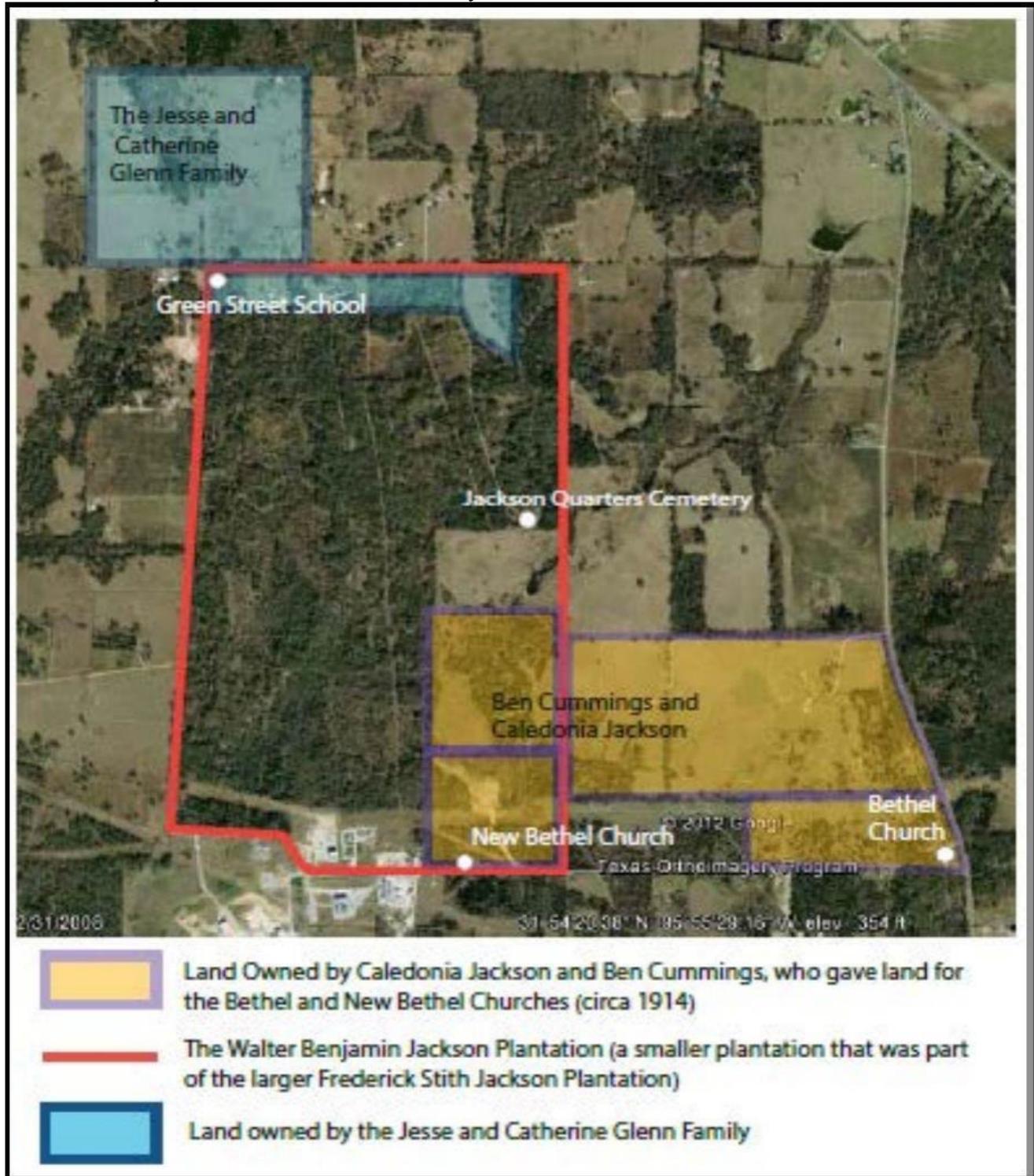
Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Map 4: Tennessee Colony, Bethel Baptist Church 31.893170°, -95.916749°. Source: Google Earth (accessed 5/14/25)



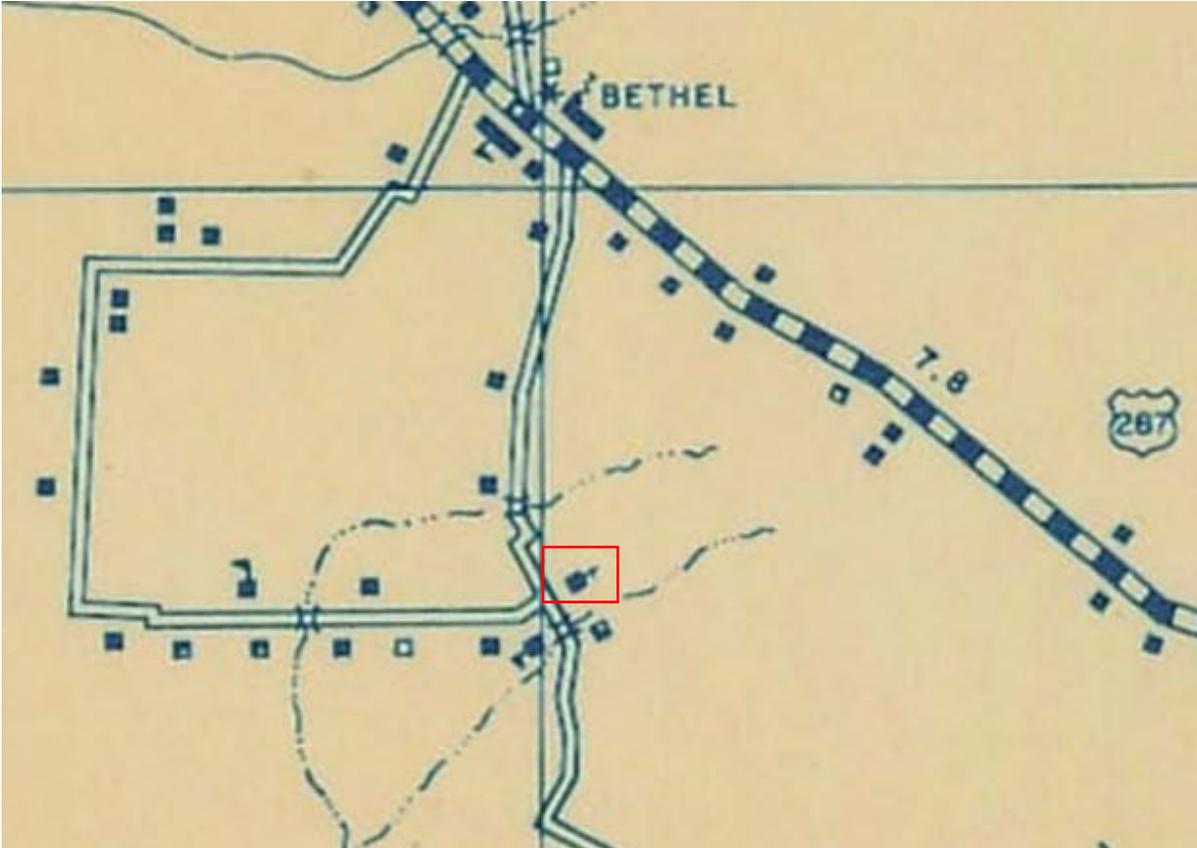
Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Map 5: “Lands owned by the Cummins and Glenn Families located on and around the former Benjamin Jackson Plantation (Drawing by S. Loftus, Anderson County Deed Records, Google Earth 2014)” – Source: Loftus, “Postemancipation Landscapes and Material Culture” Note, the map incorrectly attributes the 1 acre Bethel Church parcel as located on land deeded by Ben Cummins.



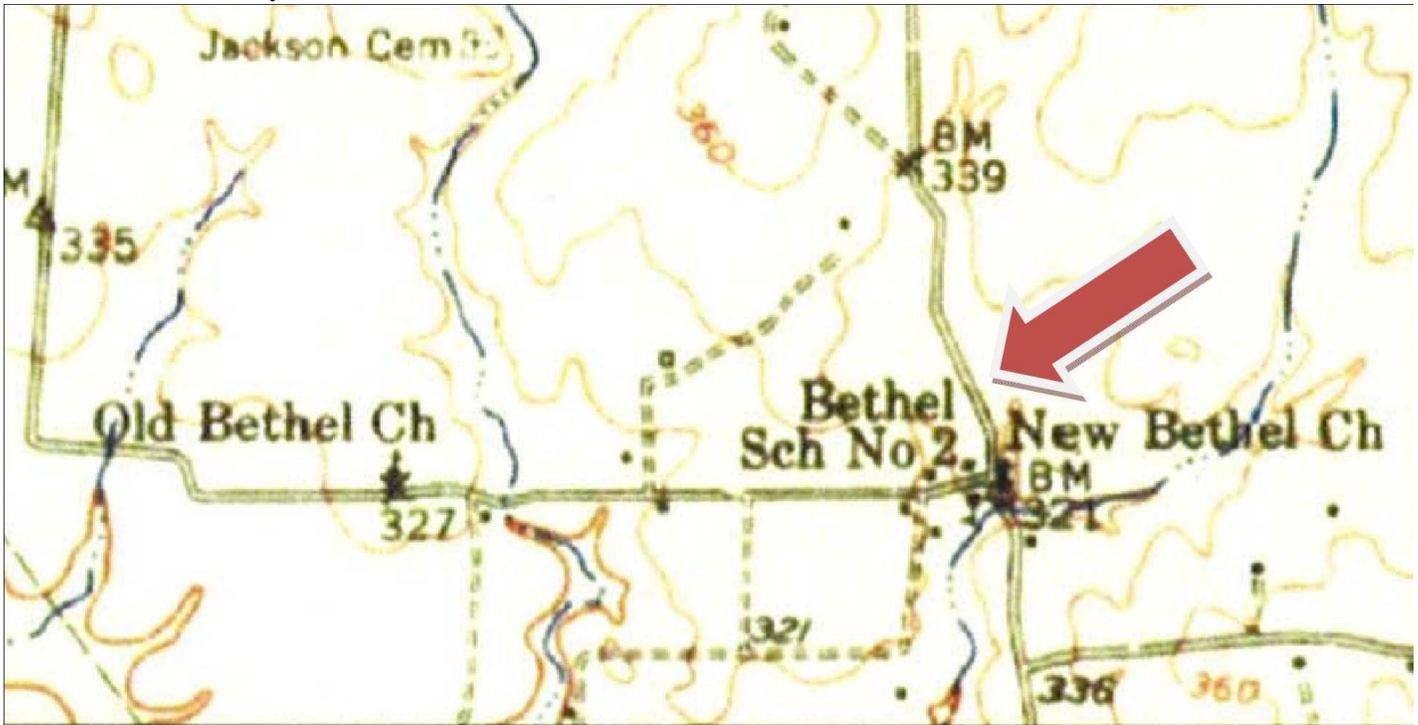
Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Map 6: 1936 Anderson County Highway Map. Bethel Baptist Church outlined in red. Note the road runs to the west of the building.



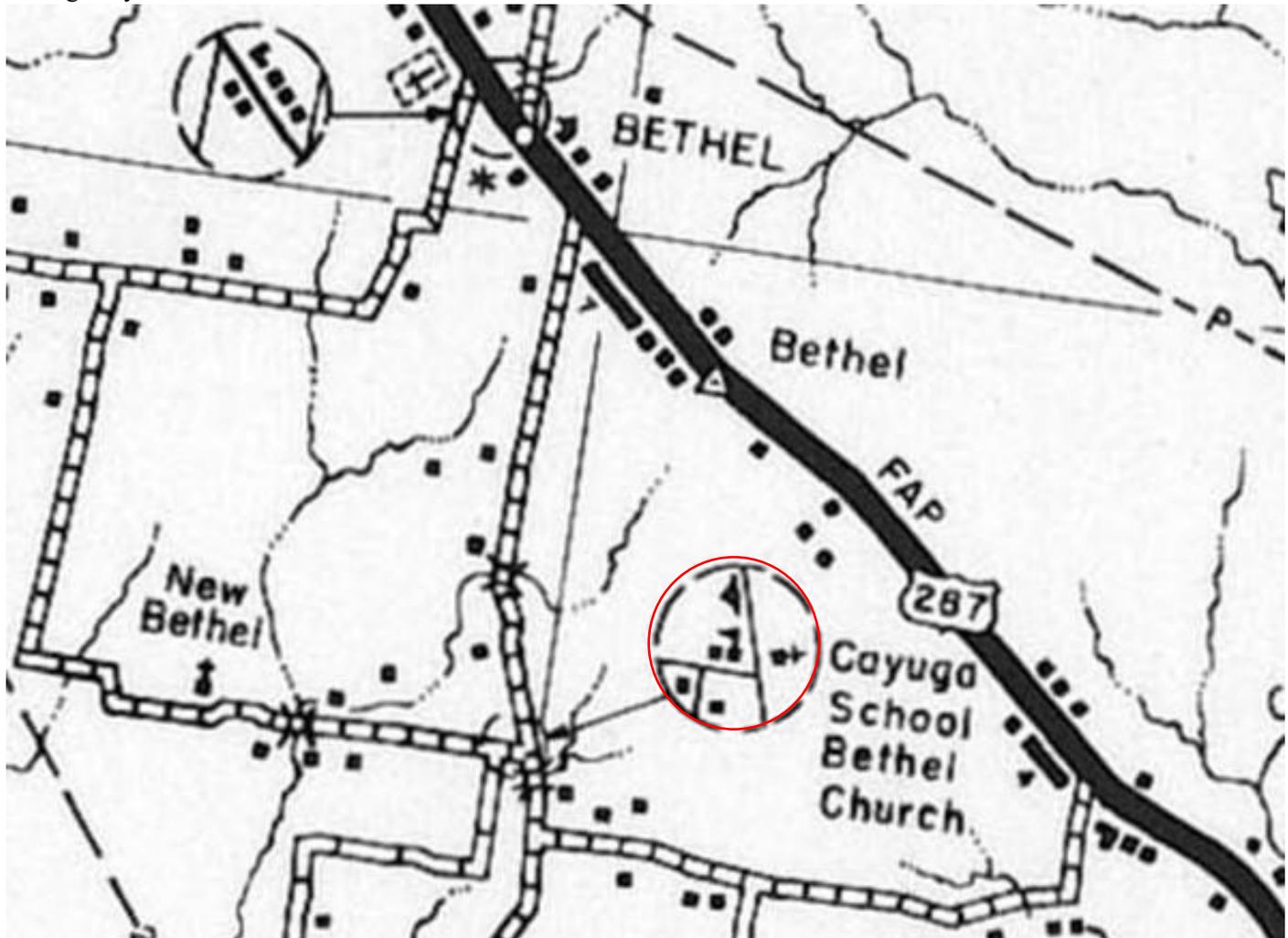
Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Map 7: Excerpt from the 1949 Tennessee Colony, TX USGS Topographic Map. Old and New Bethel churches are incorrectly labeled.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

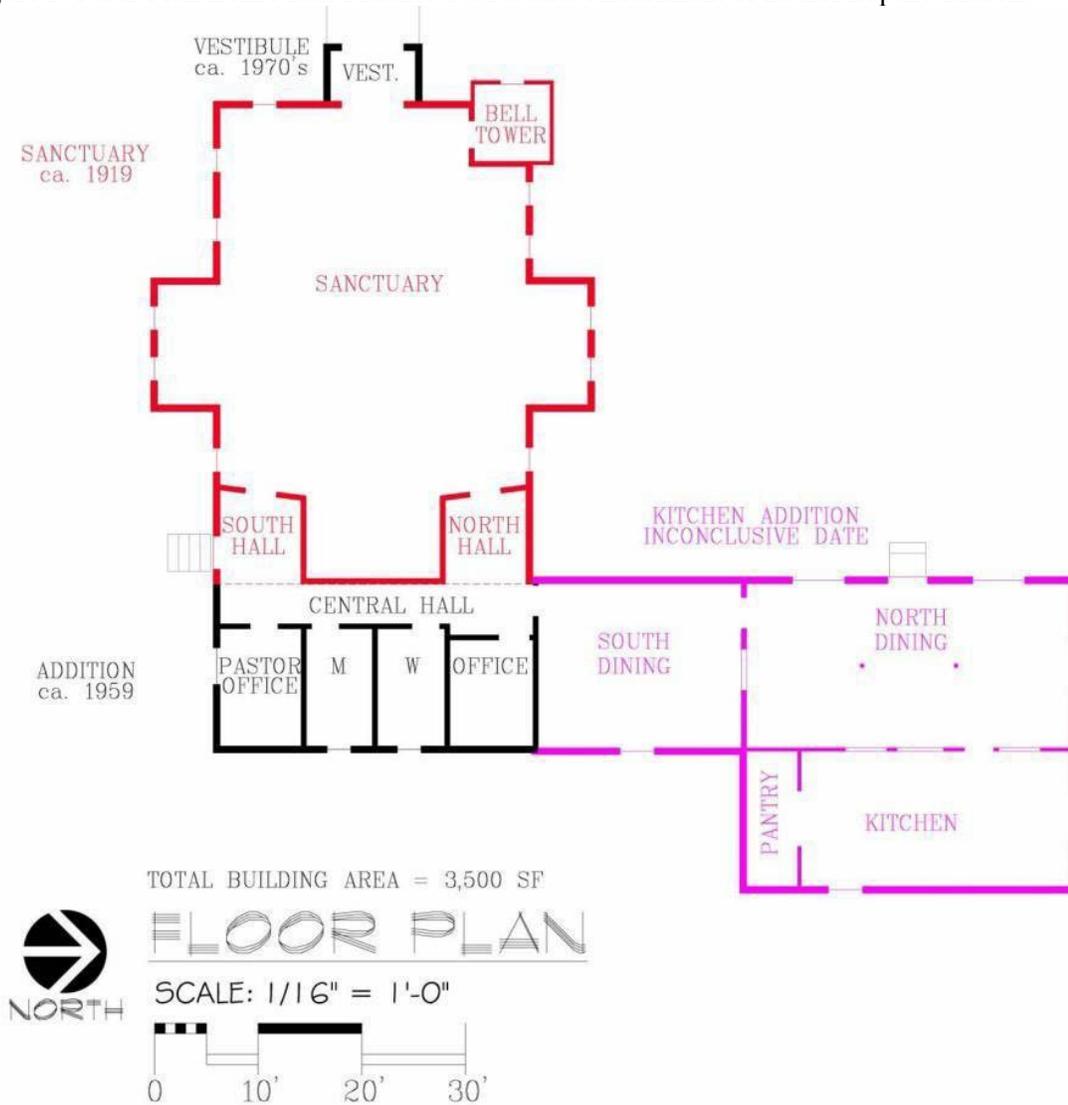
Map 8: 1961 Anderson County Highway Map. See depiction of Cayuga (Negro) School/Bethel Church
The illustrations in the bubble indicate that the Bethel Church is located east of the road, the Cayuga School is across the road to the west, and the Green Oak Lodge is north of the school. This is before the highway was rerouted to the east of the church in 1962.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Figures

Figure 1: Floor Plan from Mark Thacker's Structural Assessment of Bethel Baptist Church.



Floor plan showing estimated construction periods.

Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photographs

Name of Property: Bethel Baptist Church

City or Vicinity: Bethel/Tennessee Colony

County: Anderson State: Texas

Photographers: Jessica Reid, Conor Herterich

Date Photographed: March 12, 2024 (unless otherwise specified).

Photo #01 - Site view, camera facing north.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #02 – Site view, camera facing south.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #03 - West elevation, camera facing east.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #04 - Southwest elevation, camera facing northeast.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #05 - South elevation, camera facing north.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #06 - Southeast elevation, camera facing northwest.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #07 - East elevation, camera facing west.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #08 - Church sign (new), camera facing south. Photo taken June 1, 2023.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #09 - Northeast elevation, camera facing southwest.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #010 - North elevation, camera facing south.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #11 - Northwest elevation, camera facing southeast.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #12 - Bell tower on northwest corner of the sanctuary, camera facing southeast. Photo taken June 1, 2023.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #13 - Cornerstone on the west elevation, camera facing east.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #14 - Front of the sanctuary, camera facing east. Photo taken June 1, 2023.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #15 – 1984 church sign located southeast of the building, camera facing west. Photo taken June 1, 2023.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #16 – Crawl space access opening. Original brick pier to left, 1984 brick veneer to right with steel lintel above.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #17 - Inside the bell tower on the northwest corner of the sanctuary, camera facing up.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #18 - The bell tower from inside the sanctuary, camera facing northwest.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #19 – View down the center aisle with the altar in the background, camera facing east.



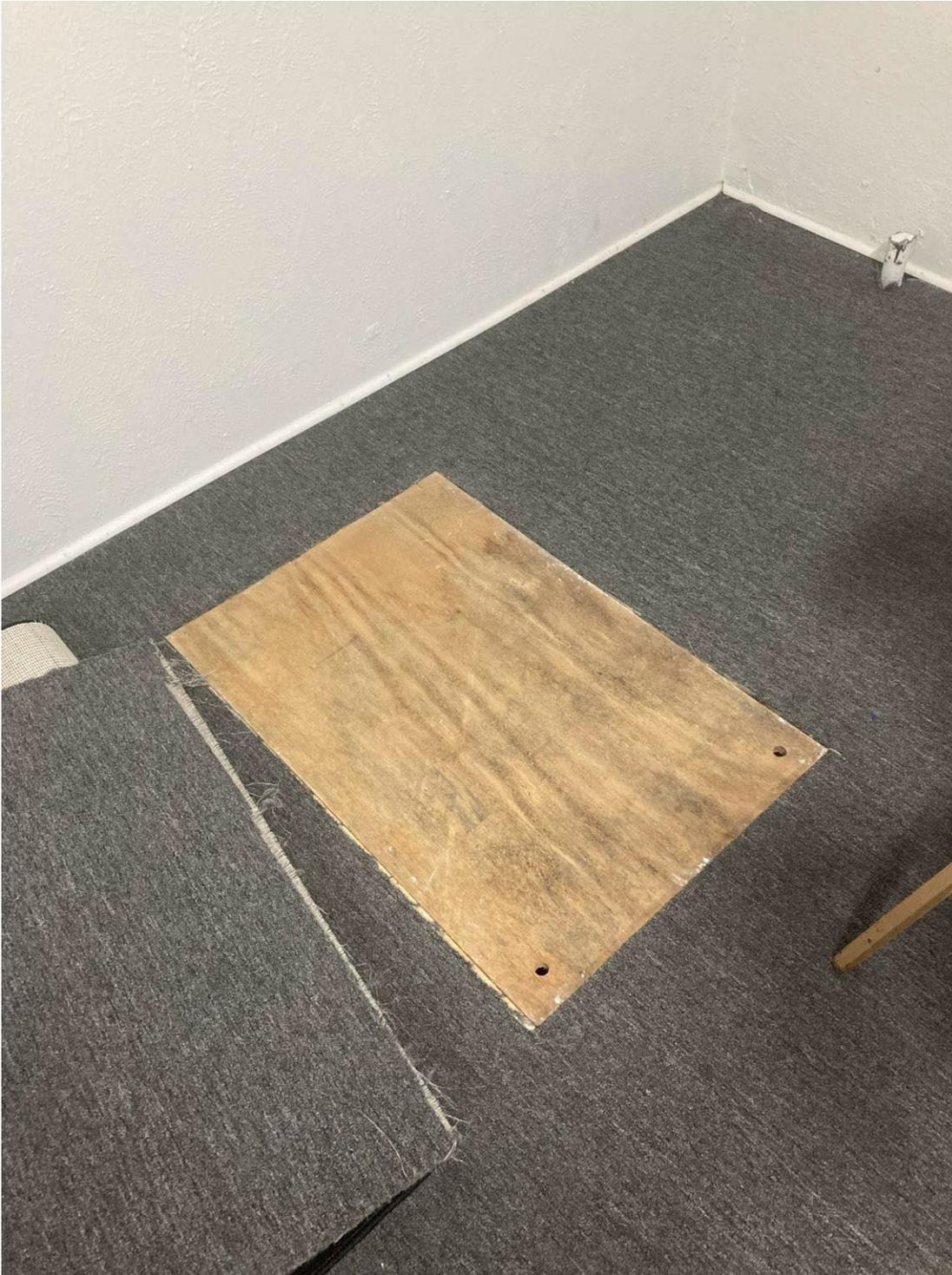
Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #20 – North addition. North and south dining rooms, camera facing southeast.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #21 - Crawlspace entrance located in the south dining room.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #22 – Sanctuary seating with view of the primary entrance to the sanctuary, camera facing west.



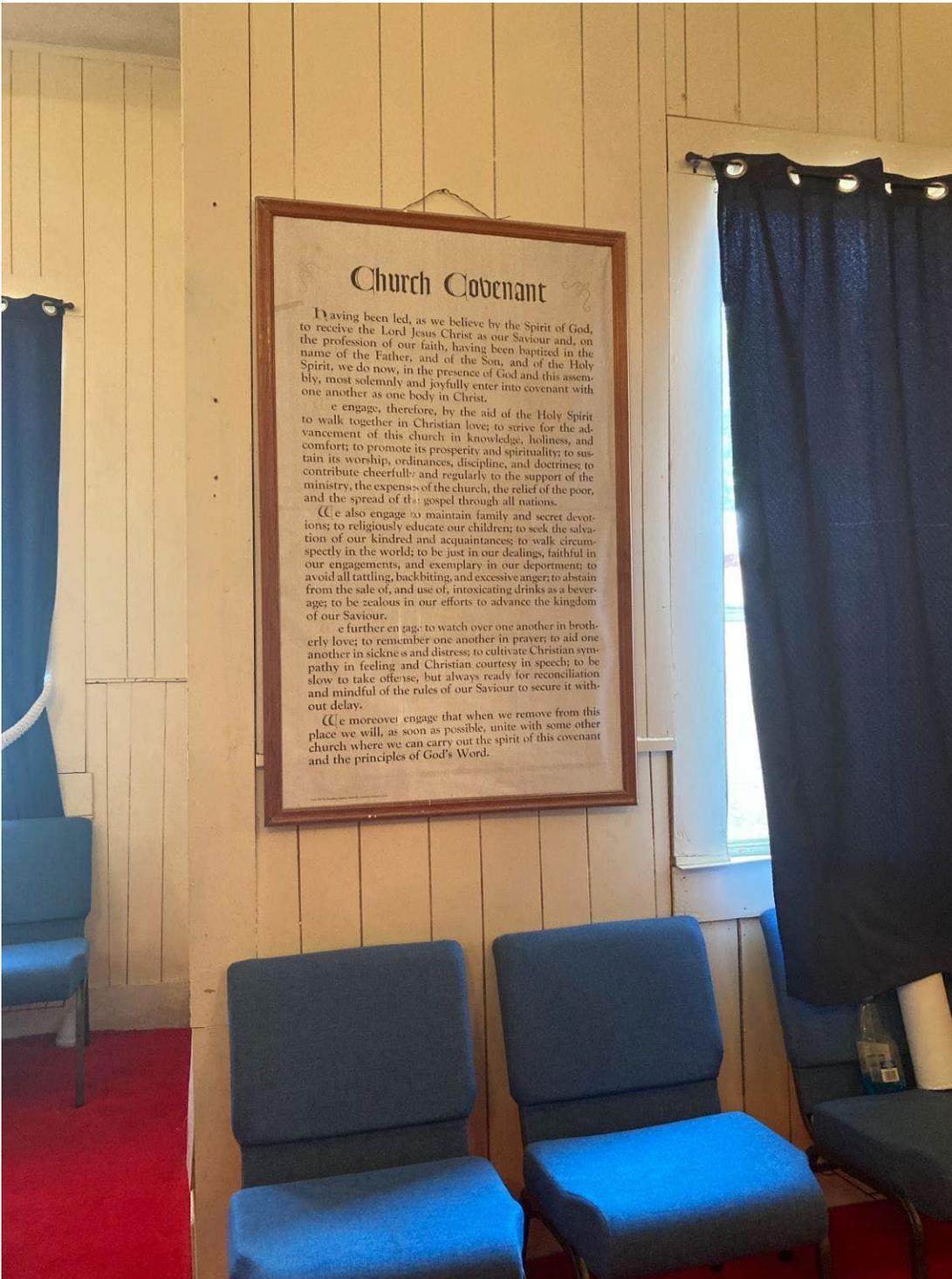
Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #23 - The cross on the apse wall, overlooking the altar, camera facing southeast.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #24 - A scroll depicting the church covenant for Bethel Baptist Church, camera facing north.



Bethel Baptist Church, Tennessee Colony (Palestine vicinity), Anderson County, Texas

Photo #25 - Panel covering original side door to the rear of the sanctuary, camera facing north.



- end -