

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

## 1. Name of Property

Historic name Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery  
Other names/site number N/A  
Name of related multiple property listing Historic Rural African American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970  
(Remove "N/A" if property is part of a multiple property listing and add name)

## 2. Location

Street & Number: 387 Airport Road  
City or town: Portland State: TN County: Sumner  
Not For Publication: ☐ N/A Vicinity: ☐ N/A Zip: 37148

## 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 level(s) of significance:

☐ national ☐ statewide ☒ local

Applicable National Register Criteria: ☒ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

Signature of certifying official/Title:

Date

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee 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 Official:

Date

Title:

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

#### 5. Classification

##### Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

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

##### Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

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

##### Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
2	1	buildings
1	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
3	1	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_ 0

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## 6. Function or Use

### Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

FUNERARY/cemetery

### Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

FUNERARY/cemetery

## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Colonial Revival

**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property:

BRICK; ASPHALT; CONCRETE; STONE

### Narrative Description

Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery are located in a rural area on the eastern outskirts of Portland, Sumner County, Tennessee, seven-tenths of a mile north of Tennessee Highway 52. Constructed in 1956 and clad with a brick veneer in 1970, the gable-front wood-frame church building exhibits restrained Colonial Revival influence in its door surround, particularly in the broken pediment above the main entrance, and the general symmetry of the building's façade and side elevations. To the north of the church building is the concrete block, gable-front Fellowship Hall (c. 1970, contributing) that replaced the community space lost with the closing and demolition of an adjacent Rosenwald School. South of the church building is the church cemetery, which dates to at least c. 1885 but may be earlier since there are numerous unmarked grave depressions in the oldest part of the cemetery. Many extant historic grave markers from c. 1885 to 1971 remain. Approximately two dozen markers were handmade by local craftsman and Parker's Chapel congregant, Joe Cornelius Coakley (1891-1962). There is one noncontributing building: a small, rectangular wood storage shed built c. 1990.

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The property retains its integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, association, and feeling, all of which lend credence to its significant association with local African American history. It meets the registration requirements of the Rural African American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970 Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF), specifically those for Church-Based Historic Districts.

## Site and Setting

The Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church faces west, fronting Airport Road. There is a brick sign with the congregation's name and service information a short distance northwest of the church building. The Fellowship Hall also faces west and sits to the north of the church building. Bushes planted several feet apart form a ring around the concrete block building. There is an unpaved driveway that leads east from Airport Road and forms a loop between the two buildings. The congregation uses this and adjacent green space for parking. There is a sidewalk that leads from the back door of the concrete building to the driveway loop. The noncontributing storage shed is located behind (east) of the Fellowship Hall. The cemetery is located south of the church building, with a large number of pre-1971 graves arranged in rows adjacent to the church building. Later twentieth century burials are at the rear of the cemetery and wrap around the southeast corner of the lot and run northward along the east property line. There is a row of bushes planted in a line that runs between the modern grave markers and the chain-link fence erected by the adjacent Portland Municipal Airport to mark its property line. The Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church has several mature trees scattered throughout the property. Some of these are clustered together to shade informal gathering areas such as the greenspace and sidewalk between Airport Road and the main entrance to the church building.

The Portland Municipal Airport owns the land that borders the Parker's Chapel property to the north, east, and south. The airport was initially constructed in 1968. The airport's land is open and manicured. The empty lot that borders the Parker's Chapel property to the north was the site of the c.1923 non-extant Parkers Chapel Rosenwald School; the fellowship hall now sits at the south end of this parcel. In the 1970s, the airport's runway was extended south to its current terminus, just northeast of the Parker's Chapel property. A chain-link fence erected by the airport borders the church property to the east. The lot to the south of the Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church Cemetery is grass-covered and undeveloped. Airport Road borders the property to the west, across which there are single family homes built from the mid-to-late-twentieth century. Some residential neighborhoods of single-family homes developed to the south and east beginning in the 1980s. The most recent residential neighborhood developed in the early 2000s, located to the southeast of the church building on the other side of large open fields.

### 1. Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, 1956, 1970, 1977      Contributing building

The Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church is a gable-front, wood-frame, one-story rectangular brick building with a brick foundation and metal gable roof. The building was originally clad in asbestos siding but was renovated to the current brick veneer in 1970. A small spire rises from the roofline of the church, near the west façade. Centered on the west façade is a projecting foyer section with a Colonial Revival style entrance, with a wood door surround featuring a broken pediment and urn. The entrance doors are metal and glass double doors. The doors date to c. 1970. A central concrete staircase with decorative metal railings, covered in green turf carpet, lead to the concrete landing at the entrance. A decorative carved dedication marker, painted in white and black, is north of the projecting entrance on the main part of the building. The

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marker reads: "PARKER'S CHAPEL BAPTIST CHURCH BUILT 1956 REV. JC. JONES, PASTOR JC. COAKLEY, CHAIRMAN BERRY SMITH, CLERK." Local African American carpenter and contractor Joe Cornelius Coakley carved the dedication marker, as its design and inscription style are similar to many of the grave markers he made for those interred in the cemetery. He is also the builder of the church building.

The north elevation has six double hung sash six-over-six wood windows, one of which lights the foyer section while the rest are placed on the main section. Storm windows, installed c. 1977, are located over each window. The easternmost window lights the rear c. 1977 addition. Though the addition is flush with the original section of the building and the bond pattern is the same, there is a visible difference in the shade of brick and mortar, making the addition easily identifiable. There is an HVAC system located near the west corner of this elevation.

The east elevation is the rear of the church and is part of the c. 1977 addition to the building. There are two single-leaf six-panel doors with storm doors protecting them on this elevation. The pastor's office and baptistry are in this end of the church. The gable is covered in vinyl siding, while the rest of the elevation is brick.

The south elevation faces the cemetery. It has six double hung sash six-over-six wood windows. Storm windows, installed c. 1977, are located over each window. The windows are arranged in a formation that mirror the north elevation.

The interior of the church has three primary spaces: the foyer, the nave, and rear offices. The foyer has a central aisle flanked by restrooms, updated c. 1977. Double wooden doors with crosses serving as windows separate the foyer from the nave, which is also organized around a central aisle, flanked by equal sets of church pews, leading to the raised platform of the pulpit. Wood wainscoting wraps around the nave. The nave largely retains its 1956 appearance, except that carpet was installed c. 1977. Behind the pulpit are three rows of pews for the choir in the chancel, which is part of the c. 1977 addition to the building. Behind the choir seating is the baptistry at the rear of the south wall. A dropped ceiling was installed c. 1977 when a HVAC system was installed but the nave also includes the original 1956 light fixtures.

The final interior section dates to c. 1977. Open doors on either side of the nave lead to the pastor's office, a small restroom, and an office/storage space where the choir robes are kept and on Sundays serves as a place where choir members can change into their robes.

## 2. Cemetery, c. 1885-present

### Contributing site

Located directly south of the church building is the historic cemetery. The cemetery contains headstones from some of the earliest settlers of this African American community, including graves from the Coakley, Dye, Gibbs, Perdue, Smith, and Johns families. Many of the stones have birthdates from the early to middle nineteenth century, indicating many of the interred were likely born enslaved. The earliest marked burial is Abraham Perdue, whose stone states: "son of Lucy Perdue died 11 Aug 1885 age 25 years 10 mos 3 days." There are nearly one hundred markers dating to the early-to-mid-twentieth century located in loosely organized rows. A section located along the eastern border of the property, and somewhat set apart from the older burials, contains graves dating from c. 1977 to 2021.

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Various styles of grave markers are located throughout the cemetery, including upright, flat, handmade, and manufactured. Some of the historic stones appear hand stamped, such as the markers of the Buntin family, while at least twenty-eight of the markers are carved in a distinctive style identified from the hand of Joe Cornelius Coakley. The date range for the markers made by Coakley are 1910s to 1962. His personal style is identified by distinct block-style letters and numbers, and many of his markers also have individual shapes such as stars, hearts, and triangles located within the inscription of the marker. This same style of lettering is also found on the church building's dedication stone, which also contains a star that matches the style of individual stars found on a few of the grave markers Coakley made.

Other historic grave markers in the cemetery include those that were manufactured and more elaborately embellished, such as Sam Groves' slender, upright marker from the 1920s with its pointed arch at the top and images of leaves and flowers in shallow relief. The marker of adolescent Hattie Lee Johns contains typical iconography used to mark the graves of children. The upright marker is heart-shaped with images of ivy vines below and a dove that sits atop the heart. Many of the markers in the non-historic section along the property's eastern border are typical modern markers that are either upright on a base, beveled, or flat.

In addition to grave markers with inscriptions, there are a few fieldstones set upright in the ground, indicating burials. There are also several unmarked grave depressions; dates of these unmarked burials are currently unknown. The terrain is flat and half a dozen large mature trees and smaller vegetation (shrubs and bushes) are scattered throughout the cemetery. It is unknown whether this vegetation was intended to mark graves, in keeping with some African American funerary traditions, but it is possible.

### **3. Fellowship hall, 1970**

#### **Contributing building**

Located north of the church building is the west-facing gable-front, concrete block fellowship hall, which has a concrete foundation and metal gable roof. Its façade has a central six-paneled entrance door covered by a glass storm door. It is sheltered by a projecting gable roof supported by two metal posts flanked by two two-over-two metal windows. The north and south side elevations each have two two-over-two metal windows. The rear, east elevation has a single wood door and a two-over-two metal window.

### **4. Storage shed, 1990s**

#### **Noncontributing building**

Behind the fellowship hall, there is a non-contributing, prefabricated storage shed that dates to the 1990s. It has a gambrel-shaped roof and double doors in the gable end that faces south. The congregation uses the shed for miscellaneous storage. The building is non-contributing due to date of construction.

### **Integrity**

Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery has a high degree of integrity of location, materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and association. The resources are at their original locations. The cemetery retains a large number of historic graves and markers with new graves located in a different area at the rear (east side) of the property. The church building has experienced few non-historic changes. The c.1977 changes include new carpet in the nave, installation of removable storm windows, updates in the restrooms, and the rear addition. The contributing Fellowship Hall is unchanged. The setting has experienced some changes, though some began during the property's Period of Significance. The Portland Municipal Airport's establishment in 1968 slightly changed the property's rural setting, which was further impacted by the extension of the runway in the 1970s, though the flat terrain of the property helps minimize the visual intrusion of the runway. Some residential development has occurred in the last two decades to the

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south and east, but the distance from the church has helped to minimize the impact to setting. Undeveloped land to the to the immediate north, east, and south of the church property has allowed the property to maintain a rural feeling. Combined with the high degree of its other aspects of integrity, the property retains enough of a rural feeling to be considered eligible for listing under the Rural African American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970 Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF).

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

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

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

☐

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.           |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | B removed from its original location.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | C a birthplace or grave.   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | D a cemetery.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | F a commemorative property.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years. |

### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ETHNIC HERITAGE: AFRICAN

AMERICAN/BLACK

SOCIAL HISTORY

ART

### Period of Significance

c. 1885 – 1971

### Significant Dates

1956, 1970

### Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

### Cultural Affiliation

N/A

### Architect/Builder

Coakley, Joe Cornelius

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### **Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph**

Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery, located in Portland, Tennessee, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its local significance in the areas of African American Ethnic Heritage and Social History for its role serving the religious and social functions for African American residents of Portland. The property meets the registration requirements of the Historic Rural African American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970 Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF), specifically the requirements for the Church-Based Historic District property type. Formerly enslaved people from neighboring Robertson and Smith Counties established the church and community known as Parkers Chapel soon after the Civil War. Many of these founding members were buried in the Parker's Chapel cemetery beginning c. 1885, though possibly earlier. The nominated church building was built in 1956 as the fourth church building to serve the Parker's Chapel congregation. The 1956 brick church provided a modern facility for congregation members to worship and conduct community events, including community gatherings related to desegregation and voting issues. A c. 1970 Fellowship Hall further facilitated the property's role as a center of the community's social life. The Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church Cemetery is also locally significant under Criterion C in the area of Art due to its association with the craftsmanship and art of Joe Cornelius Coakley (1891-1962), a carpenter and building contractor active in the area from the late 1910s to his death in 1962. Coakley carved many handmade grave markers in the cemetery; this property retains the highest concentration of his work still extant in Sumner County. The property's period of significance ranges from the earliest known cemetery marker c. 1885 to 1971, due to the congregation's continuation of community events into the late twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The property meets the requirements of Criteria Consideration A because the property is owned by a religious organization, but it is nominated for historic and artistic significance. The cemetery is an integral part of the property's significance and meets the requirements of Criteria Consideration D due to its artistic importance and its role conveying the property's early social history, prior to the construction of the current church building.

### **Narrative Statement of Significance**

#### *Historical Background*

The oldest white settlement in northern Sumner County was known as Fountain Head, which was settled in 1792 by James Gwin. Whites who settled the area brought the African Americans they enslaved with them, but free Blacks were also present. Before the Civil War, local white residents sought to expel freed Blacks from the county with an 1833 petition by the Sumner County Colonization Society to the Tennessee State Legislature recommending the "removal of free black people to Africa."<sup>2</sup> The 1860 Sumner County census lists the numbers for residents as 14,227 whites, 103 free African Americans, and 7,700 enslaved African

<sup>1</sup> Gwin Smith and Vanesse Smith, "Parker's Chapel Story," accessed September 12, 2020, <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~tnsumner/sumnpkch.htm>. The spelling of Parker's Chapel varies throughout the literature surrounding the church and community. The congregation chooses to use Parker's Chapel in its literature, but Parkers Chapel is also commonly seen when discussing the area; "History and Beginning of the Parker's Chapel Church," 2018, Sumner County Archives; Anne-Leslie Owens, "Parker's Chapel," *Tennessee Encyclopedia* online, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/parkers-chapel/>.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Robb and R. M. Boyers, "The Sumner County Colonization Society Recommends the Removal of Free Black People to Africa," October 26, 1833, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001542-013-0395&accountid=4886>, accessed November 12, 2020. Module: Slavery and the Law; Collection: Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series I: Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1777-1867; Folder Title: 11483323.

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Americans, meaning enslaved and free African Americans made up about fifty-five percent of the total population in the decade prior to the start of the Parker's Chapel community.

### **Criterion A: African American Ethnic Heritage and Social History**

Formerly enslaved people Sam and Lucy Coakley were the founding members of the Parker's Chapel community, along with several other families such as the Dye, Hobdy, Gibbs, Groves, and Purdue (also spelled Perdue) families. The land on which they settled was originally called "Taylor's Old Field" or "Old Field." The original founders were farmers, focused on strawberry and dark-fired tobacco crops. Many raised gardens and owned their own property. They also began to build homes where they reportedly began to soon meet for prayer and singing which "gave them the idea of establishing the church."<sup>3</sup>

The early congregants organized Parker's Chapel as a Missionary Baptist Church, a denomination common among formerly enslaved people who formed communities after the Civil War. The Baptist faith is one of the leading denominations among African Americans, as they were exposed to its doctrine throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and recognized in it a "spiritual experience that spoke to their African heritage."<sup>4</sup> In addition to the similarities between Baptist Christianity and African religions, the Baptist doctrine's "message of eventual salvation gave them hope past their current life of enslavement" as well as the harsh periods of violence and discrimination that followed Emancipation.<sup>5</sup> Though there are other branches of Baptist doctrine, Missionary Baptists make up the majority of African American Baptists in Tennessee.

According to Berry Smith, the great-grandson of Sam and Lucy Coakley, the community initially built a log cabin church by 1870, on the same site as the present-day Parker's Chapel church building. The descendants also indicated that timber from the property was used to construct this first building. They named the church Parker's Chapel, after Reverend James Parker, and soon after renamed the community Parker's Chapel. The congregation still used this log church building when members began the community tradition of a "homecoming" in July 1884, encouraging former residents who had moved away to larger towns and cities to return for a community picnic, games, and music. This summertime commemoration and social event continues today.

Deceased members of the church and Parker's Chapel community were buried on the church property. The earliest extant grave marker dates to 1885. It is unknown whether any earlier burials exist; early African American cemeteries in Tennessee often lack extant markers for the earliest burials and Parker's Chapel cemetery has unmarked grave depressions, but there is currently no known documentation for burials before 1885. Many burials retain a variety of markers, including some hand-made by local craftsman Joe Cornelius

<sup>3</sup> "History and Beginning of the Parker's Chapel Church"; Owens, "Parkers Chapel"; Berry Smith, "Parker's Chapel, Scattersville Community History Reflected," *The Portland Leader*, January 30, 1986, sec. A, Sumner County Archives; "History and Beginning of the Parker's Chapel Church." The current descendants of the Parker's Chapel community tell stories of getting out of school in the afternoons to pick strawberries and cucumbers as children.

<sup>4</sup> Carroll Van West, "Historic Rural African American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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Coakley. Numerous members of the founding families and their descendants are buried in the cemetery along with multiple members of the Smith, Rogan, Rippy, Padgett, and Johns families, as well as other individuals. Collectively, these burials stand as an important reflection of the social history of the African American Parker's Chapel community from the post-emancipation era to the twentieth century.

In 1895, the second iteration of the Parker's Chapel church building was built on the same land as the first building. It was a "small, frame flat-topped building."<sup>6</sup> It was described as a "white frame [building] that included the sanctuary only. A pot-bellied stove, pews, and a piano were the only furnishings. Kerosene lights were used for night services and other activities."<sup>7</sup> The third iteration of Parker's Chapel church was erected in 1917 by Joe Cornelius Coakley and Gilmore Coakley, who constructed the new church building to accommodate the growing congregation.<sup>8</sup>

Parker's Chapel nurtured a growing rural African American community in rural northern Sumner County. The church building during the week served as a local school. Lucy Coakley served as the first teacher. Though the construction date is unclear, parishioners built a small one room school adjacent to the church building, which was destroyed by a storm in 1921. Formal education returned to the church building until a one-teacher Rosenwald school was built on two acres adjacent to church property in 1922-23.<sup>9</sup> The total cost of the building was \$2275, with \$633 coming from the Black community, \$1,112 from Sumner County, and \$500 from the Rosenwald Fund. The building served grades 1-8 from 1923 to 1960. It is not extant.

The church, cemetery, and adjacent school served as a center for community life for African Americans in northern Sumner County. In addition to the annual "homecoming," sporting events, community gatherings, and other social events happened at the Parker's Chapel property during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women residents in the 1940s established a flower and garden club and a community improvement club, which met at the church.<sup>10</sup>

The construction of the nominated church building in the mid-1950s aligns with the larger societal changes happening in the nation and specifically the South. The mid-1990s Rural African American Churches in Tennessee Survey found that "from the histories of the churches surveyed in the Tennessee project, it is clear that the years of 1945 to 1970 were important years of change and improvement. According to the survey numbers at least sixty-seven African-American churches were either built or remodeled significantly between 1945 and 1960."<sup>11</sup> The 1956-1957 construction of the new Parker's Chapel church building is certainly situated into this time frame and social circumstance. The report goes on to state that when the years 1960 to 1970 are added to that total, the number increased to a total of 137 of the 343 churches surveyed. Research into church records indicated that the vast majority of this new construction resulted in a

<sup>6</sup> "History and Beginning of the Parker's Chapel Church."

<sup>7</sup> "Parker's Chapel Story."

<sup>8</sup> "History and Beginning of the Parker's Chapel Church"; Owens, "Parker's Chapel."

<sup>9</sup> "Teachers Named in Sumner County," *Nashville Banner*, April 17, 1954.

<sup>10</sup> Owens, "Parkers Chapel," *Tennessee Encyclopedia online edition*.

<sup>11</sup> West, "Historic Rural African American Churches."

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brick building, with indoor plumbing and electricity, which replaced a frame building that had neither indoor plumbing or electricity, as was the case at Parker's Chapel. As the survey notes:

Better church buildings became possible with the challenge and eventual smashing of Jim Crow segregation. This intensified period of church building and modernization is further associated with demographic change in rural communities and towns, where the expectations of World War II veterans, the rising number of professionals, and the expansion of a Black middle class combined to provide the leadership and financial infrastructure for the push for civil rights.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, while the modern, mid-twentieth century church building differs greatly from the early, non-extant buildings in which the first generations of the Parker's Chapel community worshipped, the extant building represents the continuous presence of an Emancipation era congregation and community, reflecting the evolution of these communities alongside social change as well as infrastructure modernization.

Community gatherings regarding issues of desegregation and voting rights took place at the church in the 1950s and 1960s because the public school building, controlled by the white school board, was off limits. Lauretta Young was the teacher at residence at Parker's Chapel when the *Brown v. Board of Education* was announced in 1954. The Rosenwald school associated with Parker's Chapel closed in 1960. From 1960 to 1965, until schools in Portland desegregated, the Parker's Chapel students were bused to Gallatin. Around 1965 the Portland Municipal Airport purchased the land adjacent to the church, including the land on which the school stood, and demolished the school. The congregation also has supported the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since the creation of a Sumner County chapter in 1969. The congregation built the concrete-block fellowship hall c. 1970 to replace the school's use as a community center. This building has continued to house the congregation's varied social and community events.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the South, churches founded during the post-Civil War era provided the backbone for close-knit African American communities. As a result, church buildings and the land around them served more than religious functions. Historian Carroll Van West stated that African American churches "possess a setting within the larger landscape of settlement that helps to clarify that this place may be of significant symbolic importance to the African American community. This landscape pattern of the symbolism inherent in the placement of African American churches within the larger settlement landscape is most clearly seen in small towns and villages across Tennessee."<sup>14</sup> The Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery serve as excellent physical representations of the significant social life of the Parker's Chapel African American community from the post-emancipation era to the present.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "Parker's Chapel School," Fisk University Rosenwald Database, accessed October 21, 2020, [http://rosenwald.fisk.edu/?module=search.details&set\\_v=aWQ9NDEzMQ==&school\\_county=Sumner&school\\_state=TN&button=Search&o=0](http://rosenwald.fisk.edu/?module=search.details&set_v=aWQ9NDEzMQ==&school_county=Sumner&school_state=TN&button=Search&o=0); "Parker's Chapel Story"; Owens, "Parker's Chapel." The Tennessee Encyclopedia entry states that the Rosenwald school was a two room plan, as does Parker's Chapel Story website. The Fisk database lists the school building as a "one-teacher type school"; Berry Smith, "Parker's Chapel, Scattersville Community History Reflected."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

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### Criterion C: Artistic Significance of Handmade Grave Markers in Parker's Chapel Cemetery

The Parker's Chapel cemetery is significant under Criterion C due to its grave markers handmade by local African American artisan, carpenter, and building contractor Joe Cornelius Coakley. A grandson of the early Coakley settlers, he was one of Parker's Chapel's first deacons in the beginning of the twentieth century and had become an integral church leader by the mid-twentieth century. According to oral tradition, he was responsible for building several homes in the community, as well as crafting many of the grave markers located in the cemetery adjacent to the church building. His name is listed as a chairman on the cornerstone of the current building, indicating the importance that Cornelius played in the church community. This dedication stone was likely created by Coakley himself upon the completion of the church building. As Carroll Van West notes in the Historic Rural African American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970 Multiple Property Documentation Form, "some dedication stones exhibit a high degree of craftsmanship and are a significant folk art form as well as a historical document."<sup>15</sup> Coakley's dedication stone and grave markers exhibit a significant example of African American folk art, and the Parker's Chapel property contains the highest concentration of Coakley's work in Sumner County, Tennessee.

Coakley's personal style can be identified by the distinct block-style letters and numbers, and many of his markers also have individual shapes such as stars, hearts, and triangles located within the inscription of the marker. This same style of lettering is also found on the church building's dedication stone, which also contains a star that matches the style of individual stars found on a few of the grave markers Coakley made. Nanmon Coakley, Ethel Johns, and Harry Groves have stars on their gravestones, similar to the dedication stone on the church. Bill Coakley and Millie Hobdy have stylized hearts that look similar to the stars of the other graves. Several other grave markers have similar letter style.<sup>16</sup> The time frame for Coakley's craftsmanship ranges from his earliest grave markers in the late 1910s (when he was a teenager) to the early 1960s before his death in 1962.

Coakley's distinctive markers in the Parker's Chapel Cemetery lend credence to historian John Michael Vlach's assertion that African American cemeteries were places "where an overt black identity could be asserted and maintained."<sup>17</sup> Not only do the grave markers showcase the artistic talent of a Parker's Chapel community member, they indicate the community's ability to obtain practical services from within their own community, thus strengthening their identity and ability to maintain it. In a world where African Americans often had to somewhat accommodate, or appear to accommodate, whites' worldview and preferences, having control over who made the artifact symbolizing the end of earthly life of themselves or a loved one was a powerful way to assert individual and collective identity. As Vlach notes, grave markers were "significant item[s] in an important set of funeral rituals that included a wake, church services, burial observances...in

<sup>15</sup> West, "Historic Rural African American Churches."

<sup>16</sup> "Sumner County, Tennessee Genealogy," accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.tngenweb.org/sumner/>. The other stones that are likely created by Cornelius Coakley are: Mary Dye, Frank Dye, Anner May Coakley, Jimmy Duval, Lucy Dye, Nannie Lee Johnson, William Bratton, and Vivian Smith.

<sup>17</sup> John Michael Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 109.

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addition to the marking and decorating of a grave," thus the aesthetic and artistic value of Coakley's grave markers are inextricable from the artifacts' roles in community identity and events.<sup>18</sup>

#### Registration Requirements & Integrity

Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery meet the registration requirements of the Historic Rural African American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970 MPDF. Located in a rural area on the outskirts of Portland, Tennessee, the property retains a 1956 historic church as well as an associated cemetery and fellowship hall. This collection of resources meets the MPDF's definition of the 'Church-Based Historic District' property type. The resources retain their integrity to convey their significance as indicated by their original location, historic materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and association with the African American community historically known as Parker's Chapel. The Parker's Chapel property represents the patterns identified in the MPDF, such as the presence of a cemetery representing the church and community's earliest history, a modern church built during the twentieth century to meet the modern needs of congregations, and associated fellowship hall that served the community's social needs, though the church building also fulfilled that need for many decades. The property's only major detractor in integrity is its setting, which includes the Portland Municipal Airport. The airport was originally built in 1968, but its runway was not extended into the church's vicinity until sometime during the 1970s. While this is an intrusion to the property's historic rural setting, the MPDF notes that it is not unusual for African American churches to be in the vicinity of industrial or infrastructure development due to the effects of segregation and discrimination. Taking all factors into account, Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery is able to convey its significance in African American history as related to Social History under Criterion A and Art under Criterion C and therefore meets the registration requirements of the Historic Rural African American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970 MPDF.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 112.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):		Primary location of additional data:	
preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)	X	State Historic Preservation Office	
previously listed in the National Register		Other State agency	
previously determined eligible by the National Register		Federal agency	
designated a National Historic Landmark	X	Local government	
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #		University	
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #		Other	
recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #		Name of repository: Sumner County Archives	
Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): SU-1579			

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property** 2.33 **USGS Quadrangle** Fountain Head 312-SW

### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: N/A

A. Latitude: 36.585269 Longitude: -86.480404

B. Latitude: 36.586230 Longitude: -86.480191

C. Latitude: 36.586116 Longitude: -86.479322

D. Latitude: 36.585960 Longitude: -86.479356

E. Latitude: 36.585927 Longitude: -86.479163

F. Latitude: 36.585240 Longitude: -86.479336

### Verbal Boundary Description

The property is bounded to the west by Airport Road. The south and east boundaries correspond with the legal parcel lines of Sumner County Parcel 033 019.00 000. The north boundary partially follows the northern parcel line of that parcel and partially follows an imaginary line located approximately 50 feet to the north of the aforementioned parcel's northern parcel line. The imaginary line extends eastward from Airport Road and ends at a non-historic fence that separates the church property from the Portland Municipal Airport. The boundary then proceeds southward along the fence to meet the aforementioned parcel's northern parcel line. These boundaries are depicted on the enclosed boundary map. The latitude/longitude coordinates noted above correspond to the vertices of these boundaries.

### Boundary Justification

These boundaries were chosen to include the resources historically associated with Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery during its Period of Significance.

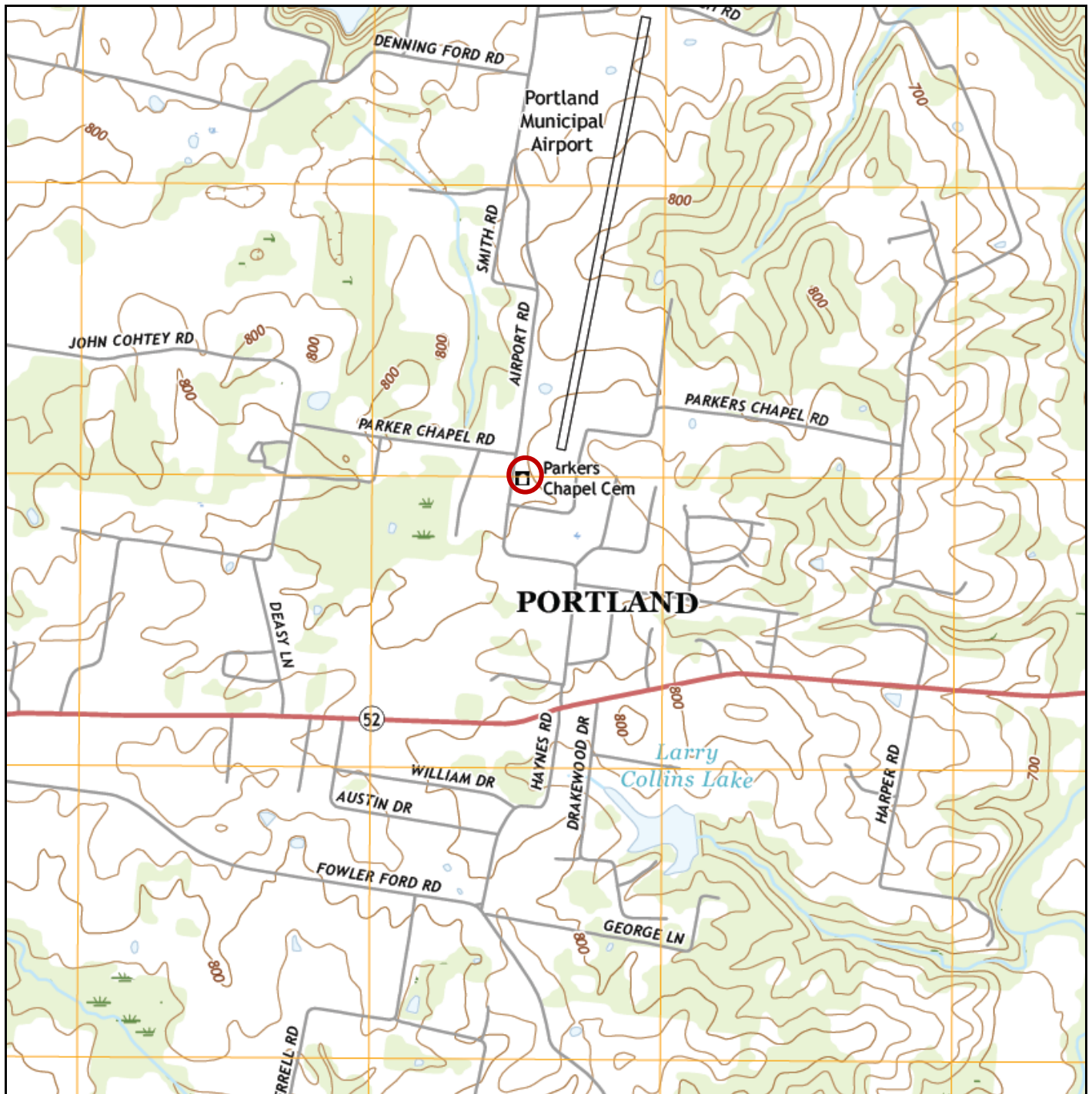
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### USGS Topographic Map



Location of Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery is indicated by the red circle ↑  
Fountain Head 312-SW Quadrangle, Original Map Scale 1:24,000 N

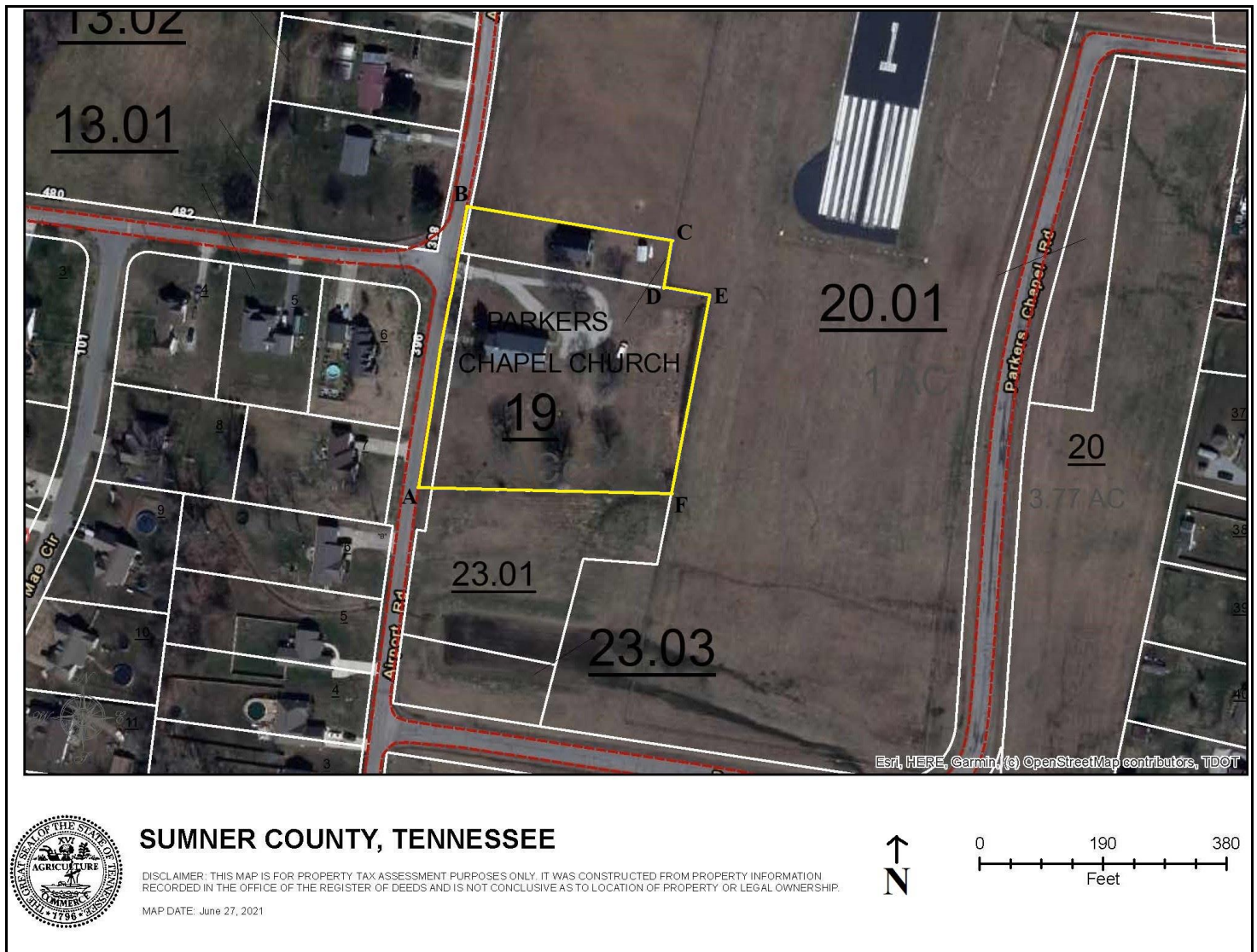
Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church  
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### Boundary Map



Imagery Courtesy of Sumner County Property Assessor. Boundary Indicated by Yellow Line and the vertices correspond to the coordinates noted in Section 10.

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## 11. Form Prepared By

Name Meggan McCarthy (CHP graduate research assistant) and Savannah Grandey Knies  
(CHP fieldwork coordinator)

Organization Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University

Street & Number 1301 E. Main Street, Box 80 Date February 2021

City or Town Murfreesboro Telephone 615-898-2948

E-mail Savannah.grandey@mtsu.edu State TN Zip Code 37132

### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to map.
- **Photographs** (refer to Tennessee Historical Commission National Register *Photo Policy* for submittal of digital images and prints)
- **Additional items:** (additional supporting documentation including historic photographs, historic maps, etc. should be included on a Continuation Sheet following the photographic log and sketch maps)

**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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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery
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### Photo Log

Name of Property: Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery

City or Vicinity: Portland

County: Sumner

State: Tennessee

Photographer: Savannah Grandey Knies, Meggan McCarthy, Carroll Van West

Date Photographed: July 16, 2020

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 23. Façade. Photographer facing east.
- 2 of 23. Northwest oblique of church building. Photographer facing southeast.
- 3 of 23. North elevation of church building. Photographer facing south.
- 4 of 23. Northeast oblique of church building. Photographer facing southwest.
- 5 of 23. East elevation of church building. Photographer facing west.
- 6 of 23. South elevation of church building. Photographer facing north.
- 7 of 23. Southwest oblique of church building with fellowship hall in the background. Photographer facing northeast.
- 8 of 23. Dedication stone on the façade of church building. Photographer facing east.
- 9 of 23. Southwest oblique of fellowship hall, noncontributing shed in background. Photographer facing northeast.
- 10 of 23. Northeast oblique of fellowship hall. Photographer facing southwest.
- 11 of 23. Overview of cemetery in relation to church building. Photographer facing northwest.
- 12 of 23. Older section of cemetery. Photographer facing northeast.
- 13 of 23. Overview of newest section cemetery in background. Photographer facing northeast.
- 14 of 23. Grave marker of Harry Groves, made by Cornelius Coakley. Photographer facing east.

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National Park Service

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- 15 of 23. Row of historic grave markers. Photographer facing southeast.
- 16 of 23. Grave marker of Anner May Coakley, made by Cornelius Coakley. Photographer facing east.
- 17 of 23. Handmade grave marker of Lal Coakley. Photographer facing east.
- 18 of 23. Hand stamped grave marker of John Buntin. Photographer facing east.
- 19 of 23. Grave marker of Hattie Lee. Photographer facing east.
- 20 of 23. Fieldstone grave marker. Photographer facing southeast.
- 21 of 23. Noncontributing shed. Photographer facing northeast.
- 22 of 23. Foyer of church building interior. Photographer facing east.
- 23 of 23. Nave of church building interior. Photographer facing east.

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Continuation SheetSection number Photos and PlansPage 24Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church and  
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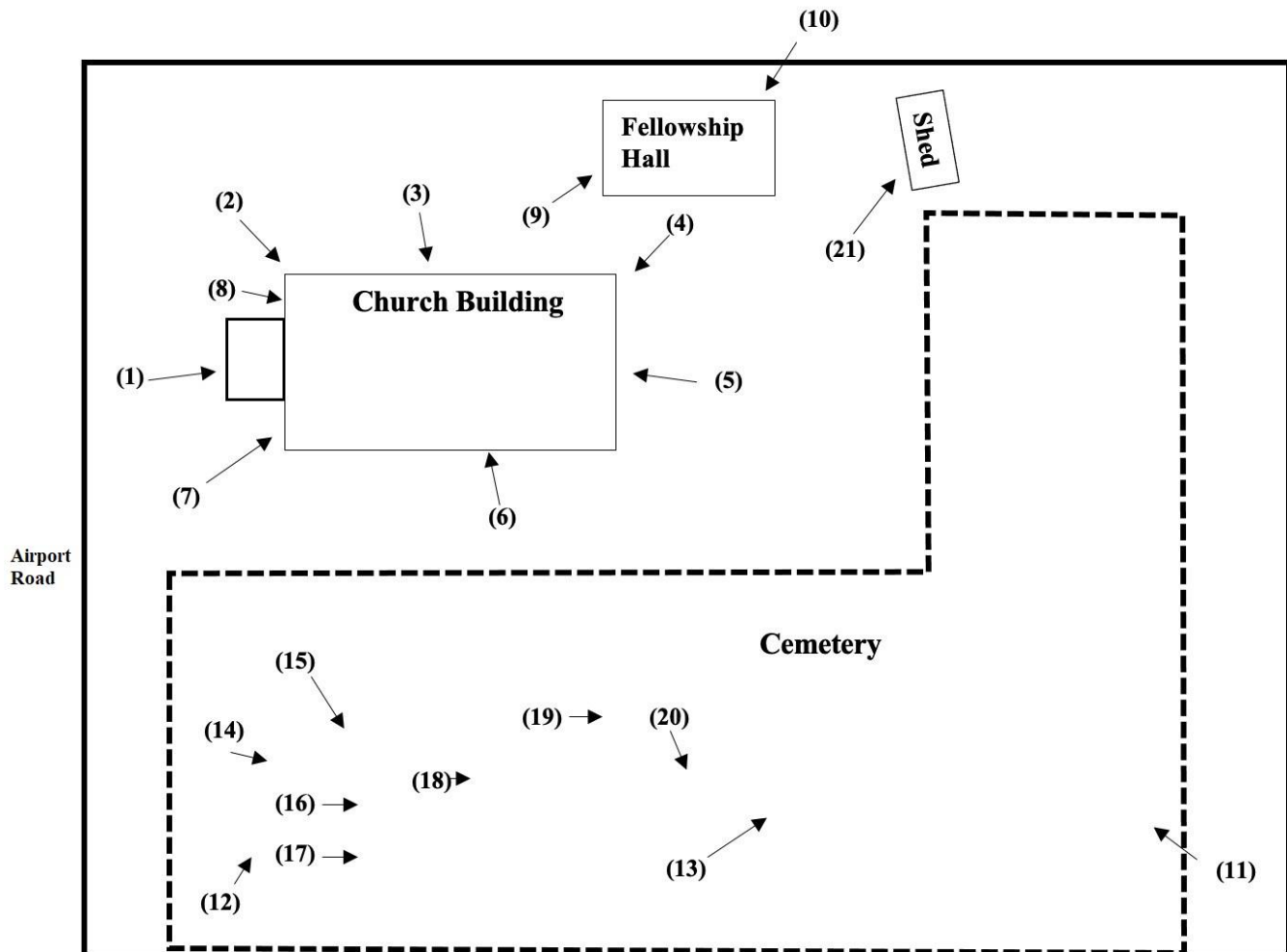
Sumner County, Tennessee

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## Site Plan

Site Plan of Parker's Chapel Missionary  
Baptist Church and Cemetery

Church building (C)

Cemetery (C)

Fellowship Hall (C)

Shed (NC)

\*not to scale

10/29/2021

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National Park Service

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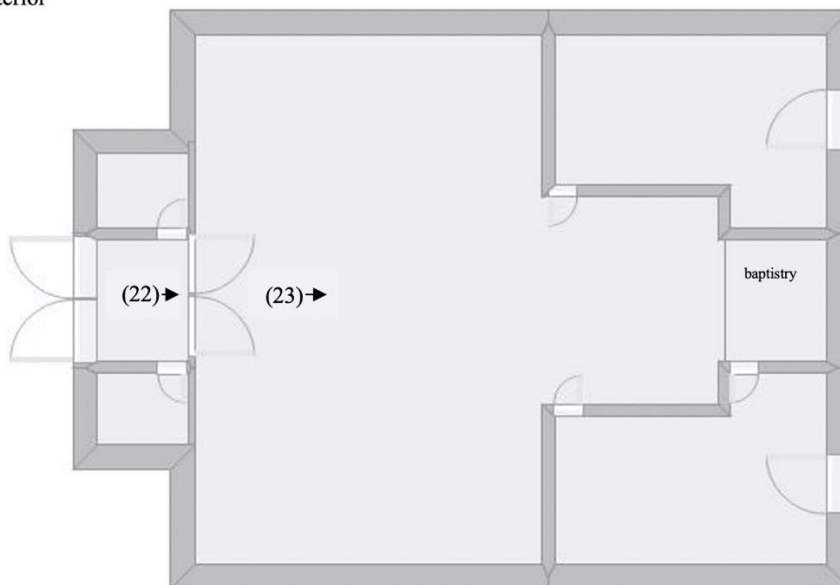
Historic Rural African American Churches in  
Tennessee, 1850-1970

Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

### CHURCH BUILDING FLOOR PLAN

Parker's Chapel  
Missionary Baptist Church  
floorplan with interior  
photos keyed

\*not to scale



**Property Owner:**

(This information will not be submitted to the National Park Service, but will remain on file at the Tennessee Historical Commission)

---

Name	Parker's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church c/o Pastor Brown		
Street & Number	P.O. Box 526	Telephone	615-325-7273
City or Town	Portland	State/Zip	37148

Name	City of Portland, c/o Mayor Mike Callis		
Street & Number	100 S. Russell Street	Telephone	615-325-6776
City or Town	Portland	State/Zip	37148



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