

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-934 (Rev. 12-2015)

OMB Control No. 1024-0276 (Exp. 01/31/2019)

TOLSON'S CHAPEL AND SCHOOL

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Historic Landmarks Nomination Form

1. NAME AND LOCATION OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Tolson's Chapel and School

Other Name/Site Number: American Union School; Methodist Episcopal Church, Sharpsburg
(National Register Reference#: 08001012)(Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties #WA-II-702) (HABS MD-1202)

Street and Number (if applicable): 111 East High Street

City/Town: Sharpsburg

County: Washington

State: MD

2. SIGNIFICANCE DATA

NHL Criteria: 1

NHL Criteria Exceptions: 1

NHL Theme(s): II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements
3. Religious Institutions
III. Expressing Cultural Values
1. Educational and Intellectual Currents

Period(s) of Significance: 1866-1899

Significant Person(s) (only Criterion 2): Not applicable

Cultural Affiliation (only Criterion 6): Not applicable

Designer/Creator/Architect/Builder: Unknown

Historic Contexts: The Era of Reconstruction, 1861-1900

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement. We are collecting this information under the authority of the Historic Sites Act of 1935 (16 U.S.C. 461-467) and 36 CFR part 65. Your response is required to obtain or retain a benefit. We will use the information you provide to evaluate properties nominated as National Historic Landmarks. We may not conduct, or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. OMB has approved this collection of information and assigned Control No. 1024-0276.

Estimated Burden Statement. Public reporting burden is 2 hours for an initial inquiry letter and 344 hours for NPS Form 10-934 (per response), including the time it takes to read, gather and maintain data, review instructions and complete the letter/form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate, or any aspects of this form, to the Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 12201 Sunrise Valley Drive, Mail Stop 242, Reston, VA 20192. Please do not send your form to this address.

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3. WITHHOLDING SENSITIVE INFORMATION

Does this nomination contain sensitive information that should be withheld under Section 304 of the National Historic Preservation Act?

___ Yes

X No [is checked]

4. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

1. Acreage of Property: 0.23 acres

2. Use either Latitude/Longitude Coordinates or the UTM system:

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates (enter coordinates to 6 decimal places):
Datum if other than WGS84: not applicable

	Latitude:	Longitude:
A:	39.456697°	-77.746711°
B:	39.456729°	-77.746566°
C:	39.456163°	-77.746331°
D:	39.456120°	-77.746485°

OR

UTM References:

Zone	Easting	Northing
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3. Verbal Boundary Description:

The National Historic Landmark boundary encompasses Parcels 565 and 566 on Washington County, Maryland tax map No. 762. Both parcels were part of Lot 104 in the original plan of the Town of Sharpsburg, Maryland. East High Street forms the southern boundary of the nominated area, and unnamed alleys mark its western and northern edges. The eastern boundary is the property line separating Parcels 565 and 566 from the adjacent lot.

4. Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes all of the land that was owned by the Tolson's Chapel congregation during the period of significance. The property, which includes a church/school building and a cemetery, retains integrity to its period of significance.

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5. SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION: SUMMARY STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Tolson's Chapel and School in Sharpsburg, Maryland is nationally significant under NHL Criterion 1 for its outstanding ability to convey the history of African American institution-building during Reconstruction, one of six historic contexts identified in the National Historic Landmarks Theme Study, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1861-1900* (2017). As an exceptionally well-preserved example of a post-Civil War African American church, cemetery, and school, Tolson's Chapel stands as a testament to the determination of African Americans in the former slave-holding states to build independent institutions after the end of slavery. These institutions provided mutual support, aided African Americans' efforts to improve their economic fortunes, supported their participation in civic life, and declared their autonomy from whites. Moreover, the schools that African Americans established during Reconstruction laid the foundation for public education throughout the South and the border states, transforming education in the region for both blacks and whites.

Erected in 1866 by an African American Methodist congregation that formed the previous year, the modest log-and-frame church powerfully illustrates African Americans' dedication to forming their own churches where they could worship independently from whites and hold positions of leadership. Churches were vital institutions in African American communities after the Civil War and served as springboards for political organization and for establishing other institutions, including cemeteries and schools. Immediately after Emancipation, African Americans throughout the former slave-holding states demonstrated a strong desire for schools where they could learn to read and write, a privilege largely denied them before the Civil War. In Sharpsburg, the local African American community organized a school in Tolson's Chapel, and, in 1868 and 1869, secured teachers from Northern benevolent societies and from the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency established in part to assist former slaves. Liquid slate blackboards from this period remain on the walls of the church, attesting to its use as a school.

Tolson's Chapel's significance in the transition from slavery to freedom has special resonance because of its proximity to the Battle of Antietam (1862), which took place in and just north of Sharpsburg. The Confederate Army's retreat at the conclusion of the battle prompted President Abraham Lincoln to issue the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which defined ending slavery as a primary goal of the Civil War and set the stage for Maryland and other slave-holding states within the Union to abolish slavery.

The period of significance for Tolson's Chapel and School begins in 1866, when African Americans in Sharpsburg constructed the church, and ends in 1899, when the building ceased being used as a school. This period covers the span of time when the property's historical associations and physical presence exceptionally illustrate the establishment and development of African American institutions after emancipation. Criterion Exception 1 applies because the building was constructed and used by a religious group. The property meets the requirements of Exception 1 because its national significance derives from its historical association with educational and religious institution-building that embodied African Americans' claims to equality and autonomy during the era of Reconstruction.

The property was individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2008 at the state and local levels of significance. It is also a contributing building in the locally significant, National Register-listed Sharpsburg Historic District (2008).

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PROVIDE RELEVANT PROPERTY-SPECIFIC HISTORY, HISTORICAL CONTEXT, AND THEMES. JUSTIFY CRITERIA, EXCEPTIONS, AND PERIODS OF SIGNIFICANCE LISTED IN SECTION 2.

Historical Background

Slavery and Civil War in Sharpsburg, Maryland, 1860-1865

In 1860, African Americans accounted for approximately ten percent of the population of Washington County, Maryland, and a little less than half of the county's black population was enslaved. The small percentage of slaves reflects a broader pattern in the mountainous, western part of the state, where grain-based agriculture did not support extensive use of slave labor and there was a substantial minority of German-American migrants from non-slave-holding Pennsylvania, many of whom opposed the practice of human bondage. Slaveholdings tended to be small, with only one or two adult slaves in most slave-owning households. Most slaves in the Sharpsburg area performed agricultural labor, but some worked as ferrymen, blacksmiths, or masons.¹

The 1,435 free blacks who lived in Washington County in 1860 included African Americans who were born free, as well as former slaves who purchased their own freedom or had been manumitted. Census records indicate that most free blacks in the Sharpsburg area worked as servants, housekeepers, farm hands, or "laborers." Most had personal property valued between \$25 and \$50, and about ten free blacks owned real estate, including Samuel Craig, who would later donate the land for Tolson's Chapel. These African Americans had their freedom but did not enjoy the same rights, privileges, and opportunities as whites. Free blacks could not vote or serve on juries and could be sentenced to forced labor for minor crimes. Like other slave-holding states, Maryland restricted African Americans' economic and employment opportunities, religious gatherings, and ownership of firearms and dogs. Moreover, they frequently encountered opposition from whites when they attempted to purchase land or establish their own institutions.²

Despite being a slave state, Maryland did not join the Confederacy. During the war, federal troops were a regular presence in and around Sharpsburg because Union supply routes passed through the area. The fighting came to the town in September 1862, when Confederate General Robert E. Lee launched an offensive into western Maryland. On September 16, Lee's forces occupied Sharpsburg and prepared to confront the Union Army, which was advancing on the town under the command of General George B. McClellan. On September 17, the two armies clashed amidst the farms to the north and east of town along Antietam Creek. The Union succeeded in repelling the Confederate Army's advance into Maryland, and Lee retreated to Virginia on September 18. During the Battle of Antietam, the two armies together sustained over 23,000 casualties, more than in any other single day of fighting during the Civil War.

Emancipation and Reconstruction in the Southern and Border States, 1864-1870

¹ *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 214, <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/library/publications/1864/dec/1860a.html>; Edith B. Wallace, "Reclaiming Forgotten History: Preserving Rural African-American Cultural Resources in Washington County, Maryland" (master's thesis, Goucher College, 2003), 10-19.

² Wallace, "Reclaiming Forgotten History," 11; Dean Herrin, "Antietam Rising: The Civil War and Its Legacy in Sharpsburg, Maryland, 1860-1900" (prepared for National Park Service, Antietam National Battlefield Park, March 2002), 58; U.S. Population Census, 1860, Maryland, Washington County, Sharpsburg District, 191-249, in Ancestry.com. *1860 United States Federal Census* [database on-line] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009). On free blacks in Maryland generally, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 35-37, 63-89.

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Following the Union's success at the Battle of Antietam, President Abraham Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which warned the Confederacy of his intention to free all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states as of January 1, 1863. Although the proclamation had little practical effect, it had symbolic significance and signaled a fundamental change in the United States government's position on slavery. In its wake, the war was no longer simply about preserving the Union but was about ending slavery as well. Lincoln's proclamation explicitly did not apply to Maryland, Delaware, Missouri, Kentucky, and the area that would soon become West Virginia, all places that permitted slavery but had not joined the Confederacy. A general emancipation that included these states, Lincoln feared, would weaken their support for the Union or provoke secession. Nevertheless, the Emancipation Proclamation exerted pressure on these states to end slavery. Starting in 1863, the year that the Proclamation took effect, the United States government began recruiting African American soldiers and guaranteed freedom to slaves who completed their enlistments, further eroding slavery in the border states.³

As historian Eric Foner notes in his study of Reconstruction, "Freedom came in different ways to different parts of the South," a statement as true of the border states as it was of the states that seceded. Slaves throughout the Southern and border states claimed their freedom by escaping to Union encampments or to free states, and some slaves in the Confederate states gained their freedom during the war as a result of Union occupation.⁴ Among the border states, West Virginia adopted a gradual emancipation plan as a condition of statehood in 1863, but Maryland was the first border state to implement a general emancipation of slaves. In 1864, thanks in part to votes from Maryland soldiers in the field and loyalty oaths that barred supporters of the Confederacy from voting, Maryland voters narrowly approved a new constitution that abolished slavery.⁵ For the majority of enslaved individuals outside of Maryland, however, freedom came in December 1865, with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which outlawed slavery throughout the United States.

During and immediately after the Civil War, the Republican Party generally advocated for basic rights for people who had been enslaved and supported punitive measures for the states and individuals that supported the Confederacy.⁶ In March 1865, in anticipation of the end of the war and of slavery, the Republican-dominated Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, more commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau. Intended as a temporary agency, its overarching goal was to shepherd the South through the transition from a slave society to a free labor society. To that end, the bureau stationed agents backed by the U.S. Army throughout the former Confederate states, where they performed a variety of tasks aimed at assisting the freed people, white refugees, and white Unionists.⁷ Agents mediated employment disputes, challenged unfair labor arrangements, performed marriages, assisted the poor and infirm, helped establish schools, and worked to ensure legal protections for freed people and for white Unionists. However, neither the bureau's staff nor its budget was adequate to its far-reaching mission, which was itself contested, controversial, and at times

³ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom*, 117-130.

⁴ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, New American Nation Series (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 77 (quotation); Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1861-1900: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study*, National Historic Landmarks Theme Study (Washington, D.C.: National Historic Landmarks Program, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2017), <https://www.nps.gov/nhl/learn/themes/Reconstruction.pdf>, 3-4.

⁵ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom*, 131-132; Jean H. Baker, *The Politics of Continuity: Maryland Political Parties from 1858 to 1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 131-132. The Missouri state constitution that abolished slavery was passed by the constitutional convention in January 1865 but was not ratified until June.

⁶ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 241.

⁷ Initially, the Freedmen's Bureau did not operate in most of Maryland, including Washington County and Sharpsburg. However, in early 1866, it expanded operations into all of Maryland following reports that African Americans were being treated unfairly. Richard Paul Fuke, *Imperfect Equality: African Americans and the Confines of White Racial Attitudes in Post-Emancipation Maryland*, 1st ed., Reconstructing America Series, no. 2 (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 23-40.

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contradictory. Moreover, many agents brought racist and paternalistic attitudes to their work with African Americans and did not always act in the interest of advancing equality.⁸

African American men in the former Confederacy gained the right to vote in the late 1860s under new state constitutions that instituted black male suffrage. With the support of African American voters, black men were elected to political office, and the Republican Party controlled Southern state governments and Southern representation to Congress in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Southern Democrats, who opposed civil rights for African Americans and resented federal intervention in state policies and politics, regained control of the state governments in the mid-1870s by committing election fraud and by intimidating and attacking black voters.⁹

In the border states, however, Democrats either never lost control of state politics or re-took control soon after the end of the war. In Maryland, for instance, Democrats lost the legislature in 1861 but won a majority in the elections of 1866 by forming common cause with white Unionists in opposition to civil and voting rights for African Americans. Because Democrats in Maryland and other border states blocked efforts to institute black male suffrage, African Americans in the border states did not gain the right to vote until the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified in 1870.¹⁰

African American Churches and Cemeteries during Reconstruction: Tolson's Chapel and Cemetery, 1864-1888

When African American Methodists built their own church in Sharpsburg in 1866, they were part of a broader historical trend of African American church-building during Reconstruction. Churches were among the first institutions that African Americans organized after the end of slavery. Before Emancipation, whites generally insisted upon supervising religious gatherings of slaves and free blacks, and many white preachers presented Biblical arguments enjoining slaves to obey their masters. Despite restrictions on independent worship and white preachers who expounded proslavery interpretations of the Bible, black Christians cultivated distinctive worship styles and theology that comforted and strengthened them during enslavement and represented a form of resistance to white authority.¹¹

According to the National Park Service (NPS) Theme Study titled *The Era of Reconstruction, 1861-1900*, "After the war, black Southerners left white-led churches in droves, forming their own churches where they could worship as they chose, outside the supervision of whites who so often treated them disrespectfully." Most of the African American churches established during Reconstruction were Baptist or Methodist, in part because these denominations "provided the greatest opportunities for independent black institutions headed by black leadership." Opportunities for religious leadership were more readily available in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, and black Baptist associations than they were in the white-led Methodist Episcopal Church, but African American Methodists claimed what autonomy they could within the denomination. Organized in 1864, the Washington Conference, which included churches in western Maryland, was one of the first two all-black annual conferences established within the Methodist Church.¹² The conference conducted its

⁸ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 142-144; Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*, Reconstructing America (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), xiii-xxx.

⁹ Downs and Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 6-7, 45-46, 48-50, 80-81.

¹⁰ Foner *Reconstruction*, 421-423; Fields, *Slavery and Freedom*, 93, 110, 131-137; Baker, *Politics of Continuity*, 139-166, 171. Once in power, the Democratic majority in the 1867 Maryland legislature quickly repealed the loyalty oath requirements.

¹¹ Downs and Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 25-26.

¹² Downs and Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 26-27 (quotations, p. 26); Dwight W. Culver, *Negro Segregation in the*

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first meeting in Baltimore in late October of 1864, with the close of the meeting coinciding with the end of slavery in Maryland. Although the African American conferences remained under the authority of white bishops, these conferences had some degree of autonomy from white leadership, including the ability to appoint preachers.¹³

In 1865, the Washington Conference appointed John R. Tolson to the Hagerstown, Maryland circuit, which at that time included Sharpsburg. Tolson organized black Methodists in Sharpsburg into a congregation in 1865, and continued to serve the congregation until 1867, when he transferred to another circuit. In late 1866, the congregation laid the cornerstone for a church building on East High Street, at the corner of a quarter-acre lot owned by Samuel Craig, an African American who had been a free man and a landowner in 1860. The log-and-frame church was completed in late 1866 or early 1867 and was formally dedicated in the fall of 1867. In November 1867, Samuel Craig donated the portion of the lot where the building stood to the congregation, which acquired the remainder of the lot in 1883 for \$75.¹⁴ By 1875, the congregation in Sharpsburg had named the church after Tolson, who died in 1870 at the age of thirty.¹⁵

In the decade following Tolson's departure in 1867, the preacher assigned to Sharpsburg changed everyone to three years, a typical practice in the Methodist Church at the time. In the early 1870s, the church likely had somewhere between thirty and sixty regular attendees and had Sunday schools with as many as fifty-five students. Those who worshipped at Tolson's Chapel in the 1870s and 1880s included former slaves as well as those who had been free all their lives. Some congregants lived in the town of Sharpsburg, while others lived and worked on nearby farms.¹⁶ Because of the Methodist tradition of itinerant preachers, day-to-day leadership fell to lay persons. In 1868, white teacher Ezra A. Johnson described Samuel Craig as the "pastor" of the church, indicating that Craig was one of the lay leaders of Tolson's Chapel as well as one of its benefactors.¹⁷

The collective work of African American men and women built and sustained Tolson's Chapel and black churches throughout the former slave-holding states during Reconstruction. Despite limited economic resources and, in many cases, hostility from local whites, congregations worked together to acquire land and build church edifices, contributing time, materials, and money. African American landowners often played crucial roles in establishing churches, particularly when local whites refused to sell land to black congregations. Samuel Craig, who donated the land for Tolson's Chapel, was free before the war, and two of the other church trustees, David Simons and John Francis, are known to have been free before the war as well.¹⁸ Though excluded from the

Methodist Church (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 52-53; Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 176-178.

¹³ Edie Wallace and Paula S. Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, National Register of Historic Places Nomination (2008), Section 8: 3-4, 8; James S. Thomas, *Methodism's Racial Dilemma: The Story of the Central Jurisdiction* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abington Press, 1992), 45.

¹⁴ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:7-8.

¹⁵ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:8. The exact date when the church was named "Tolson's Chapel" is unknown, but several Sunday school hymnals found in the church have the inscription, "Sharpsburg T C 1875," suggesting that the name was in use by the mid-1870s.

¹⁶ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:8-9. As noted in the National Register nomination, the church in Sharpsburg changed circuits several times in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Until 1871, the conference minutes as published in the *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church* did not provide statistical information for individual churches (also known as stations) within each circuit, so it is difficult to track the Sharpsburg church prior to that date. The number of people who attended the church was likely greater than the number of members, since membership required more than regular attendance.

¹⁷ Ezra Johnson to Captain Brubaker, April 3, 1868 (Roll#5), Records of the Superintendent of Education and of the Division of Education, District of Columbia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, M1056, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) [hereafter cited as Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA].

¹⁸ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:7-8. Various primary sources give different spellings for "Simons" when referring to David Simons and his family. This nomination uses "Simons," the spelling that appears in the family Bible and on the family's gravestones in Tolson's Chapel Cemetery.

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ministry and formal leadership positions in the church, women organized events to raise funds to support the church's activities, purchase books, buy land, or expand buildings. At Christmastime in 1881, for instance, the women of Tolson's Chapel organized a "fair and festival" to benefit the church, selling supper and desserts. Nancy Campbell/Camell, a former slave who was manumitted in 1859 and was a member of both the Methodist Church and a Dunker congregation, donated a Bible to Tolson's Chapel in 1883 and bequeathed twenty dollars to the church.¹⁹

Not only places of worship, African American churches were venues for social interactions, cultural expression, and recreation. They also played an important role in African Americans' efforts to assert their rights as equal citizens during Reconstruction. Because African Americans owned and controlled their churches, they could use the buildings for political meetings and discussions without white interference. Ministers and lay leaders such as trustees and deacons were often community as well as religious leaders and adjudicated disputes among congregants in order to avoid the discriminatory, white-dominated court system.²⁰

Many rural African American churches, Tolson's Chapel among them, expanded their role as community institutions by establishing cemeteries. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Southern whites created municipal cemeteries to accommodate the populations of growing towns and either segregated the cemeteries by race or excluded African American burials altogether. In response, black churches, fraternal orders, and benevolent organizations created their own cemeteries as a means of ensuring access to proper burial places and respectful treatment of graves, neither of which was guaranteed in cemeteries operated by whites.²¹ The Tolson's Chapel congregation purchased the land surrounding the church for \$75 in 1883, perhaps not coincidentally the same year that the Town of Sharpsburg established a municipal cemetery on the outskirts of town. The first documented burial at Tolson's Chapel is that of Mehalay Thomas, who lived next door to the church with her son, William H. Gray, and his family, but the cemetery may have been in use for several years before that.²² The Tolson's Chapel cemetery illustrates the congregation's commitment to caring for their members in death as in life and the continued development of African American institutions during Reconstruction.

Epilogue: History and Preservation of Tolson's Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church, 1889-2018

The Tolson's Chapel congregation remained active through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They made several improvements to the building, held revivals and fairs, and established a chapter of the Epworth League (a Methodist youth group). Starting in the 1950s, however, the African American population of Sharpsburg declined and with it the congregation of Tolson's Chapel. By 1976, the church had only three members: Frances and Clarence Monroe and their niece, Virginia Cook, who was in her sixties. The United

¹⁹ Downs and Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 27-28; *Sharpsburg Enterprise*, December 23, 1881, p. 3 (http://mdhistory.msa.maryland.gov/msa_sc5195/msa_sc5195_scm12445/html/msa_sc5195_scm12445-0052.html); Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:9

²⁰ Downs and Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 25, 27-28; Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 464-471.

²¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1907; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Documenting the American South, 2000 [electronic edition]), 73, 131-134; Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 236.

²² Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:13; Edie Wallace, Paige Phifer, and Paula S. Reed, *Sharpsburg Historic District* (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 2008), Section 7:1, 28 and Section 8:71; Sharpsburg, Washington County, Maryland, 14D, in Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009

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Methodist Church closed the church in 1994 and deconsecrated the building in 1998, two years after the death of Virginia Cook, the last surviving member.²³

In 2000, Dr. Dean Herrin, National Park Service coordinator of the Catoctin Center for Regional Studies at Frederick Community College, identified the building as a historically significant property while conducting a study of Sharpsburg during and after the Civil War. Two years later, the Save Historic Antietam Foundation (SHAF) accepted ownership of the building from the United Methodist Church. Operating as a committee within the SHAF, the Friends of Tolson's Chapel documented and stabilized the building and cemetery. In 2006, the Friends of Tolson Chapel was established as a separate non-profit organization and purchased the property two years later. Since its formation, the organization has overseen the restoration of the church and cemetery and has received grant assistance from the Maryland Historical Trust and Preservation Maryland.

African American Schools during Early Reconstruction: Tolson's Chapel and Education in Sharpsburg, 1864-1869

During Reconstruction, African Americans throughout the former slave-holding states demonstrated a zeal for education that was intimately connected to their pursuit of freedom and equality. By establishing and supporting schools, they claimed their right to the education that most whites had denied them during slavery, and they asserted their intent to pursue opportunities beyond the menial jobs that white Southerners envisioned for them. The Freedmen's Bureau, Northern benevolent societies, and white teachers provided valuable assistance to some African American schools, but their help was intermittent and unreliable, and their goals often contradicted those of the local black community. African Americans' commitment to education as expressed through the establishment of local schools was a driving force behind the creation of public-school systems in the former slave-holding states.²⁴

As the home of a school for African American children and adults in the late 1860s, Tolson's Chapel is strongly associated with African Americans' nationally significant campaign to build schools during Reconstruction. The black community in and around Sharpsburg, including members of the Tolson's Chapel congregation, organized the school and sacrificed their time and scant economic resources to create and sustain it. The history of the school in Tolson's Chapel illustrates African Americans' struggles to find and support teachers, the limitations and inconsistency of the assistance that they received from the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern aid societies, and students' dedication to learning in the face of numerous obstacles.

African Americans and Education in the Post-Emancipation South

Southern African Americans' passion for education was rooted in their experiences before the Civil War, when white Southerners systematically endeavored to keep them illiterate as a means of justifying slavery and controlling slaves. Teaching slaves or free blacks to read or write was illegal in most of the slave-holding states during the antebellum era. Even in states such as Maryland where educating African Americans was legal, they had little or no access to formal schooling. Nevertheless, a small number of free blacks and an even smaller

²³ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8: 12, 14-16; Friends of Tolson's Chapel, "Timeline," <http://www.tolsonschapel.org/history/timeline/> (accessed June 2018).

²⁴ On the significant role that Reconstruction-era schools for African Americans played in establishing systems of public education in the South, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 4-32.

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number of enslaved people learned to read and write, demonstrating an appreciation for the value of education that would blossom during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Having been largely denied access to education because of slavery, they saw literacy as a means of resisting oppression and recognized that schooling was, as historian Eric Foner notes, “central to the meaning of freedom”.²⁵

Education was important to African Americans for more tangible reasons as well. Many wanted to be able to read the Bible or to record family events or personal experiences. Many others sought the ability to read, write, and do arithmetic in order to improve their economic circumstances and open up employment opportunities. Literacy also provided a measure of autonomy from whites and self-protection against fraud by enabling African Americans to read contracts and legal documents for themselves, rather than relying on potentially self-serving interpretations offered by literate whites. In civic life, the ability to read facilitated independent and informed voting. For African Americans starting a new life in a free society, education represented a powerful, and perhaps the most significant, tool in their quest for political, economic, and social equality.²⁶

White Southerners, too, recognized the power of education and as a result, generally opposed schools for African Americans. Prior to the Civil War, education in the South was a privilege reserved for planter-class and middle-class whites, who studied in private academies or with tutors. An educated black population threatened the traditional social order that was rooted in whites’ belief in their own racial superiority. As a result, the educational landscape of Sharpsburg after the Civil War was typical of rural towns throughout the South: there was one school that was for whites only. While the number of free schools proliferated in the Northern and Midwestern states in the three decades before the start of the Civil War in 1861, white Southerners displayed little interest in establishing public schools either before or after the war.²⁷ Southern whites also used violence and threats to discourage African Americans’ educational efforts. Incidents of whites burning freed people’s schools, intimidating and assaulting teachers, and threatening students and their parents were reported throughout the Southern and border states in the 1860s and 1870s.²⁸

During Reconstruction, African Americans in the South worked at both the state and local levels to organize schools. In the former Confederacy, black citizens and legislators were among the most passionate advocates for public education. The state governments that formed in the late 1860s, with support from African American voters, passed laws creating public schools for blacks and whites. The creation of Southern public-school systems that included schools for African Americans symbolized freed people’s aspirations to equality and laid the foundation for universal public education in the region. African Americans in Maryland had fewer opportunities to advocate for public education at the state level in the late 1860s since they did not get the right to vote until the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. Maryland’s 1864 constitution did authorize a statewide public-school system for both blacks and whites, but prior to 1872, the state allocated virtually no funding to African American schools and required localities to establish public schools for white children but not for black children. Even in the Southern states where African Americans had the vote before 1870, the establishment of the public school systems had little effect at the local level in the 1860s, especially in rural

²⁵ Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7-29, 69-72, 125; Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 16-18; Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 12-16; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 96-97 (quotation, 96).

²⁶ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 96-97; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 41-44, 69, 76-78; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 8-12.

²⁷ Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 4; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 178-179, 187; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 174-176; J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Western Maryland, Volume 2* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts, 1882; electronic edition on archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/historyofwestern02scha>), 1205-1206.

²⁸ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 154-162, 164-170; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 121-125, 149-150.

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areas, since school construction proceeded slowly due to lack of funding and opposition from white Democrats.²⁹

While statewide public education systems were slow to develop, African Americans throughout the former slave-holding states pursued their educational goals at the local level, holding informal lessons in homes and establishing community schools. Local African Americans took the initiative to create these schools and were their primary source of support. Despite having limited resources, freed people and African Americans who had been free before the Civil War donated land and buildings, supplied construction materials and labor, provided fuel, purchased books, and found and supported teachers. Although they sought and sometimes received limited assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau or northern benevolent societies, more often than not, the local black community bore the entire expense of these schools. In light of widespread and dire poverty among African Americans in the former slave-holding states during Reconstruction, their ability to create and sustain schools is a testament to the strength of their devotion to education.³⁰

To house the schools, African Americans constructed purpose-built schoolhouses or used privately owned buildings. Many schools were located in African American churches, since these were institutions owned and controlled by African Americans and the interior arrangement was well-suited for use as a school. This was the case in Sharpsburg, where the congregation of Tolson's Chapel offered the use of the church building, which the local community modified for dual use. Occasionally, the Freedmen's Bureau or Northern benevolent societies contributed to the cost of school construction or paid rent for school buildings provided by the community, but this was the exception rather than the rule.³¹ For example, only for a brief three-month period in 1869, when the Presbyterian Home Mission sponsored teacher John J. Carter, did the Tolson's Chapel congregation receive any compensation for the use of the building as a school. In addition to supplying the building, Sharpsburg residents also procured some books for the schoolchildren, and the Pennsylvania Branch of the American Freedmen's Union Commission (AFUC) sent additional schoolbooks in the spring of 1868, when white Philadelphian Ezra Johnson arrived in Sharpsburg to teach in the school in Tolson's Chapel.³²

Teachers in Reconstruction-Era African American Schools

The teachers in the earliest schools for freed people were usually literate African Americans from the local

²⁹ Williams, *Self-Taught*, 193-199; Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 18-23. On public education in Maryland, see Herrin, "Antietam Rising," 59-60; "Maryland State Department of Education: Origin," *Maryland State Archives*, September 29, 2015, <http://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/13sdoe/html/sdoef.html>.

³⁰ Downs and Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 30; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 3, 18-26, 30-40; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 4-5, 45-66, 105-106; Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 12-16; Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 88-104; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 98-99, 144.

³¹ Ezra Johnson to Captain Brubaker, April 3, 1868 (Roll#5), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA. In this letter, Johnson notes that when he arrived in Sharpsburg, the church was not yet ready to house the school, suggesting that the congregation made some modifications to the building in preparation for its dual use. On buildings used for freed people's schools, see Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 92-98; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 106-110; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 31-32. In support of this project, Ayla Mangold and Molly Ricks reviewed Freedmen's Bureau documents relating to school buildings and found that in most Southern states, the majority of school buildings were owned by African Americans.

³² "Schedule of Schools Under the Presbyterian Committee of Home Missions in the State of Maryland... for the Quarter ending Oct 1st, 1869," Schedules of School and Rental Accounts, Records of the Education Division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1871 (Roll#34), M803, NARA; Captain Brubaker to John Kimball, March 28, 1868 (Roll#5), John Kimball to Maj. Stuart Eldridge, March 31, 1868 (Roll#1), and Teacher's Monthly Report, April 1868 (Roll#17), in Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA; Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, April 20, 1868, in Emma J. Werner-Lapsansky and Margaret Hope Bacon, eds., *Back to Africa: Benjamin Coates and the Colonization Movement in America, 1858-1880* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 230-231.

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area.³³ Although written documentation of teachers in the Tolson's Chapel school exists only for the two teachers supplied by the Freedmen's Bureau, several pieces of evidence point to the existence of formal or informal schooling by and for African Americans in Sharpsburg before the first Freedmen's Bureau teacher, Ezra Johnson, began teaching there in April 1868. Johnson's first report to the Freedmen's Bureau, submitted during his first month of teaching, noted that eight of the sixteen regular students were able to read, indicating that someone was teaching black children in the town prior to his arrival. Similarly, there is no written documentation of a school in Sharpsburg between Johnson's departure in June 1868 and the arrival of John J. Carter, an African American teacher assigned to Sharpsburg by the Freedmen's Bureau, in July 1869. However, twenty of Carter's twenty-five students were able to read. The most likely teacher from within the African American community in Sharpsburg was David B. Simons. A free man before the Civil War and a trustee of Tolson's Chapel, Simons was able to read and write in 1860 and taught the public school for African Americans in Sharpsburg in the 1870s.³⁴

Most of the local African American teachers in early schools in the former slave-holding states had no training as teachers, and in some cases, their level of education was not far above that of their students. Moreover, because these teachers relied on tuition payments from an impoverished population, few could make a living solely from teaching, thus limiting the amount of time they could spend in the classroom. Recognizing the limitations of local teachers and of their own economic resources, African Americans throughout the South sought more qualified teachers through the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern missionary and benevolent societies.³⁵ General O. O. Howard, who oversaw the Freedmen's Bureau, strongly believed in the importance of educating freed people, but supporting schools was a small component of the mission of the chronically understaffed and under-funded agency. Lacking the resources to hire teachers directly, the Bureau worked with Northern aid societies to supply teachers to freed people's schools. The aid societies recruited teachers from the North, and the Freedmen's Bureau assigned them to schools in the South. Because the demand for teachers exceeded the supply and many Northern teachers left after only a few terms, the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern societies sent teachers intermittently and to only a small proportion of the African American schools in the former slave-holding states.³⁶

African Americans in Sharpsburg secured teachers from the Freedmen's Bureau in the spring of 1868 and the summer of 1869. In March of 1868, they approached Captain J.C. Brubaker of the Harper's Ferry office of the Freedmen's Bureau to request a teacher. Impressed by their enthusiasm for education, Captain Brubaker assigned Ezra A. Johnson, a white man from Philadelphia, to the town. Johnson taught from April until the end of May and dubbed his school the American Union School.³⁷ In May 1869, nearly a year after Johnson's departure, Samuel H. Ferguson, an African American farm laborer in his early twenties who lived with David and Margaret Simons, wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau to request another teacher. The handwriting on each of the three letters that Ferguson sent to the Bureau in May and June 1869 is different, suggesting that arranging for a teacher from the Freedmen's Bureau was a cooperative effort within the local African American

³³ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 4-6, 20-23; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 34-38.

³⁴ Teacher's Monthly Reports, April and May 1868 (Roll #17) and July and August 1869 (Roll #20), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA; Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:7-8. Carter had only fifteen students in July, his first month teaching, and of those, thirteen were no longer learning the alphabet. Ten students joined the school in August, and at least half of those were already able to read.

³⁵ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 26-27, 29-31; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 101-106.

³⁶ Downs and Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 30; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 144-148; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 31-37.

³⁷ Captain Brubaker to John Kimball, March 28, 1868 (Roll #5), John Kimball to Maj. Stuart Eldridge, March 31, 1868 (Roll #1), and Teacher's Monthly Report, April 1868 (Roll #17), in Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA.

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community, with multiple people penning letters under Ferguson's name.³⁸

In response to Ferguson's request, the Bureau assigned John J. Carter, an African American teacher from Pennsylvania and a graduate of Lincoln University, in southeastern Pennsylvania, to teach in Sharpsburg under the condition that the local community supply thirty students. However, the school never attained the required thirty students, and Carter was dissatisfied with his appointment to such a small school. After one term in Sharpsburg, he left to teach in a larger school in Virginia.³⁹ In the fall of 1869, the Freedmen's Bureau wrote to Samuel Ferguson asking if Sharpsburg was ready for a new teacher and offered to send an African American woman to teach in the school. However, the community expressed a preference for a male teacher, delaying the process and missing the opportunity get a teacher before the Bureau ended its support for freed people's schools in 1870.⁴⁰

Parents often paid tuition to teachers who came from within the local community but given the widespread poverty among freed people after the Civil War, many of these men and women taught for little or no pay. As a result, their work in the classroom was frequently a form of in-kind contribution to the schools. For teachers sent through the Freedmen's Bureau, the typical arrangement was for the Freedmen's Bureau to pay the cost of transporting teachers to the school, a Northern benevolent society to pay the teacher's salary, and local residents to supply room and board. This pattern prevailed in Sharpsburg during John J. Carter's tenure. The Freedmen's Bureau paid to bring Carter to Sharpsburg, the Presbyterian Home Mission paid him a salary of twenty dollars per month, and members of the local African American community housed and boarded him and provided laundry services.⁴¹

Although the assistance provided by the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern aid societies was helpful in supporting Northern teachers, these organizations' contributions could be unpredictable and plagued with misunderstandings, as the African American community in Sharpsburg discovered during Ezra Johnson's brief tenure.⁴² Johnson came to the Freedmen's Bureau on the recommendation of Benjamin Coates and R. R. Corson, white men who were active in Pennsylvania organizations supporting the freed people.⁴³ Before

³⁸ Samuel H. Ferguson to Captain Brubaker, May 8, 1869, May 18, 1869, and June 2, 1869 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA; Sharpsburg, Washington County, Maryland, 28A, in Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*. It is possible that Ferguson himself penned none of the three letters written in May and June, since a November 2, 1869 letter from Ferguson to the Freedmen's Bureau (Roll #6, Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA) displays a fourth and less elegant handwriting style. Ferguson was not listed as a free black in Sharpsburg in 1860 and may have been enslaved at that time.

³⁹ E.F. Hatfield to John Kimball, June 2, 1869 and July 31, 1869 (Roll #7), John Kimball to Samuel Ferguson, May 13, 1869 (Roll #1), Teacher's Monthly Report, July 1869 (Roll #20), and John J. Carter to John Kimball, August 13, 1869 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA; Schedules of School and Rental Accounts, Records of the Education Division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1871 (Roll #34), M803, NARA. Lincoln University was established in 1854 as the Ashmun Institute to provide collegiate education to African American men; in 1866, the school changed its name to Lincoln University in honor of assassinated President Abraham Lincoln. It supplied more teachers to freed people's schools during Reconstruction than any other university (Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 26).

⁴⁰ D.G. Swain to Samuel Ferguson, October 20, 1869 and December 3, 1869 (Roll #1) and Samuel Ferguson to D.G. Swain, November 2, 1869, Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA.

⁴¹ Williams, *Self-Taught*, 98; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 31-32; Ezra A. Johnson to John Kimball, April 6, 1868 (quotation, Roll #7), Ezra A. Johnson to Captain Brubaker, April 3, 1868 (Roll #5), and Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, April 7, 1868 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA.

⁴² Williams, *Self-Taught*, 83-92; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 32-34.

⁴³ Coates and Corson were both affiliated with the Pennsylvania Branch of the American Freedmen's Union Commission (AFUC), but explicitly stated that they were supporting Johnson as individuals rather than as agents of the AFUC, which had concerns about Johnson's character and loyalty to the Union. R.R. Corson to John Kimball, April 13, 1868 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA.

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Johnson left Philadelphia, Coates and Corson gave him sixty dollars that they intended as his salary for three months of teaching. Johnson, however, spent most of the money on clothing and travel before reaching Sharpsburg, mistakenly believing that local residents would pay his salary using rent money from the Freedmen's Bureau. Although the Freedmen's Bureau did sometimes pay rent to African Americans as a method of circumventing restrictions on its ability to pay teachers' salaries, this was not the case in Sharpsburg. Upon realizing there were no rent payments to fund his salary, Johnson repeatedly appealed to the Freedmen's Bureau, Corson, and Coates, but all refused to send additional funds. The teacher soon began charging tuition, but parents struggled to afford the payments. Within a month of Johnson's arrival, local residents complained to the Freedmen's Bureau office in Harper's Ferry, prompting a visit from Bureau officials. Although Johnson was willing to continue teaching in Sharpsburg, the Freedmen's Bureau ended its support for the school after one term, citing low enrollment, difficulties funding Johnson's salary, and "a little friction" between Johnson and the local African American community, which ended up contributing more than anticipated for Johnson's services.⁴⁴

As Northerners, Ezra A. Johnson and John J. Carter were in the minority of teachers in freed people's schools. Even among documented teachers, Southerners outnumbered Northerners. The names of countless Southern teachers, including those who taught in Sharpsburg before, between, and after the two Northern teachers, went unrecorded, so the proportion of Southern teachers is likely even higher. The majority of the Northern teachers, like Ezra Johnson, were white, and women outnumbered men in this group.⁴⁵ Many white teachers from the North, including Johnson, encountered difficulties finding lodging with whites in the communities where they taught and were socially ostracized by the white community. Before coming to Sharpsburg, Johnson attempted to open a school in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, but left because of threats from local whites and difficulties finding accommodations with a white family. Shortly after arriving in Sharpsburg, Johnson wrote, "... the [white] citizens would allow a coloured [*sic*] man to teach here, but if possible, they won't allow a white teacher to come here and teach the coloured [*sic*] people, and they have made up their minds to freeze me out with cold shoulders." Prior to Johnson's arrival, African Americans in Sharpsburg persuaded a local white family to board the teacher, but when Johnson arrived, the family unexpectedly rescinded their offer. In the end, local black families provided Johnson with lodging and meals.⁴⁶

Like most Northern white teachers in freed people's schools, Johnson taught for only a few terms. He taught just once before coming to Sharpsburg and did not teach again after leaving the school in Tolson's Chapel. The hostility that he and other Northern white teachers encountered from local whites contributed to their leaving after only a few terms, but the nature of their motivations played a role as well. Although Ezra Johnson's correspondence gives little indication of his reasons for teaching African Americans, most Northern white teachers journeyed south out of a sense of moral obligation or religious calling. As Northern whites' enthusiasm for the cause of freed people's education waned in the late 1860s, they turned their attention to other benevolent activities and religious missions. Accordingly, the number of Northern white teachers declined after 1866.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The story of Johnson's troubled tenure in Sharpsburg is based on correspondence among Johnson, Coates, Corson, and Kimball and Brubaker from the Freedmen's Bureau, April-May 1868 (Rolls #5-#7), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA, and on correspondence between Johnson and Coates in Werner-Lapsansky and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 230-231, 237-239. On the Freedmen's Bureau and rent payments, see Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 31-32.

⁴⁵ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 53-57, 79-81; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 98-99.

⁴⁶ Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 115-117; John Kimball to Maj. Stuart Eldridge, March 31, 1868 (Roll #1), Ezra A. Johnson to John Kimball, April 6, 1868 (quotation, Roll #7), Ezra A. Johnson to Captain Brubaker, April 3, 1868 (Roll #5), and Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, April 7, 1868 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA.

⁴⁷ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 20, 80-81, 85-88, 104-108, 113; R.R. Corson to John Kimball, April 13, 1868 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA.

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As the number of white teachers decreased, the number of African American teachers increased. Growing numbers of black teachers from the North went south to teach in African American schools in the late 1860s, and the number of qualified black teachers from the South steadily rose. Southern blacks exhibited a preference for African American teachers, whom they believed “would be good role models for children and less likely to harbor racial prejudices.” Though interested in assisting African Americans in the South, white teachers did not necessarily believe in racial equality and frequently adopted a paternalistic and condescending attitude towards their students.⁴⁸

African American teachers from both North and South demonstrated a strong and lasting commitment to educating the freed people that was rooted in racial solidarity and a desire to help advance African Americans towards political, social, and economic equality. Historian Ronald Butchart estimates that between 1861 and 1876, “Northern African Americans participated in the education of their race at a rate twelve to fifteen times greater than Northern whites.” Not only were African Americans more likely than whites to teach in freed people’s schools, they generally continued in the work for a longer period of time. The contrast between the two Northern teachers in the Sharpsburg school illustrates this broader pattern. Whereas Johnson taught only two terms, John J. Carter went from Sharpsburg to a school in Virginia where he taught until his death in 1888. Although Carter had more generous and constant support from Northern benevolent organizations while in Sharpsburg than did Johnson, black teachers overall were less likely than white teachers to receive such support. That they nevertheless taught for longer periods of time than whites illustrates the depth of African American teachers’ commitment to the cause of freed people’s education.⁴⁹

Students and Curriculum at Tolson’s Chapel, 1868-1869

The number of students who attended schools such as the one in Tolson’s Chapel and the sacrifices that they and their families made to attend school testify to the value that African Americans in the South placed on education in the years following the end of the Civil War. As historian Ronald Butchart notes, “The freed people’s demand for education overawed all efforts to accommodate it.”⁵⁰ In Sharpsburg, eighteen students attended the school in Tolson’s Chapel in the spring of 1868; most were former slaves. The number of students in the summer of 1869 ranged from fifteen to twenty-five; of these, between eleven and sixteen were “always present.”⁵¹ Although the Sharpsburg school was small, the students represented a significant proportion of the school-aged African American population in the area. In 1870, there were only about fifty-five school-aged children in the Sharpsburg election district, including roughly twenty-five who lived in Sharpsburg.⁵²

Distance and poverty were among the greatest obstacles to school attendance for African Americans in the late 1860s. Children and adults traveled long distances on foot to attend school. Soon after arriving in Sharpsburg in April 1868, Ezra Johnson reported that “one of the families has sent after their grandchildren nearly a hundred

⁴⁸ Downs and Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction*, 32 (quotation); Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 80, 118-119; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 152-161.

⁴⁹ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, xii (quotation), 19-20, 36-38, 43-44, 80; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 96-99; Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 100-103; Ancestry.com, *Virginia, Deaths and Burials Index, 1853-1917* [database on-line] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).

⁵⁰ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 3.

⁵¹ Teacher’s Monthly School Reports, April and May 1868 (Roll #17) and July and August 1869 (Roll #20), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen’s Bureau, M1056, NARA.

⁵² Sharpsburg District, Washington County, Maryland, in Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*. The number of school-aged children includes children ages five through eighteen who were described in the census as black or mulatto.

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miles up the [Chesapeake & Ohio] canal, to come here to attend school.”⁵³ Sending a child to school often required economic sacrifices, and families at times had to interrupt their children’s schooling so that they could work to help support the family. Johnson and Carter both taught in the warmer months of the year and predicted higher attendance during the winter, when there was less work on farms and on the canal. Broader patterns in attendance among Freedmen’s Bureau schools suggest that their predictions were likely correct, as the number of students typically peaked during the winter months.⁵⁴

Many African American adults sought education not only for their children but for themselves. In response, teachers in Reconstruction-era African American schools often taught night classes. Ezra Johnson taught night classes during his first month in Sharpsburg, but his reports to the Freedmen’s Bureau suggest that he discontinued them after a month. It is not clear whether Carter taught night classes, but he had eight students who were over the age of sixteen. The demand for adult education in Sharpsburg remained high after Carter’s departure. Writing to the Freedmen’s Bureau in November 1869, during a season when employment opportunities were at an ebb, Samuel Ferguson stated that there were twenty-six “young men and married men” who were ready to attend school.⁵⁵

The curriculum in African American schools in the late 1860s typically included reading, writing, spelling, grammar, mathematics, and geography, but the subjects varied by teacher. Information about the curriculum in the school in Tolson’s Chapel exists only for the two terms when Northern teachers provided instruction. Both Ezra Johnson and John Carter focused on reading and writing. Whereas all students had lessons reading and writing, only about one-quarter of the students were learning arithmetic. Ezra Johnson provided instruction in geography to one student.⁵⁶ Although some organizations published textbooks designed specifically for use in freed people’s schools, most teachers in the 1860s used standard textbooks. In 1868, Ezra Johnson brought some schoolbooks to the Sharpsburg school from the American Freedmen’s Union Commission, which favored using standard textbooks in schools for freed people.⁵⁷

African American students’ enthusiasm for education and their aptitude for learning challenged white teachers’ preconceived notions that blacks were intellectually inferior. Both of the Northern teachers at the Sharpsburg school were generally pleased with their students’ progress. Soon after opening the school, Ezra Johnson reported that he had “a very quiet, orderly, and interesting set of scholars.” Towards the end of the term, he boasted about a six-year-old boy who had started out knowing only three letters but was reading and spelling three-letter words after just one month in school. The more taciturn John J. Carter simply remarked, “They learn very fast.” When Johnson began teaching, eight students were learning the alphabet, but within a month, only

⁵³Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, April 20, 1868, in Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 230 (quotation); Williams, *Self-Taught*, 147-149.

⁵⁴Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, April 7, 1868 (Roll #6), Ezra A. Johnson to John Kimball, May 11, 1868 and 30 May 1868 (Roll #7), John J. Carter to John Kimball, August 13, 1869 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen’s Bureau, NARA; Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, April 20, 1868, in Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 230; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 141-147, 149; William Frank Troost, “Accomplishment and Abandonment: A History of the Freedmen’s Bureau Schools” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2007), 33; Fuke, *Imperfect Equality*, 101-102.

⁵⁵In his April 1868 report, Johnson stated that he taught day and night school, but the following month, he reported only operating a day school. Teacher’s Monthly Report, August 1869 (Roll #20) and Ferguson to Swain, Nov. 2, 1869 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen’s Bureau, NARA; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 167-171.

⁵⁶Teacher’s Monthly Reports, April and May 1868 (Roll #17) and July and August 1869 (Roll #20) and Ferguson to Swain, Nov. 2, 1869 (Roll #6), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen’s Bureau, NARA; Wallace and Reed, *Tolson’s Chapel*, Section 8:12; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 127-132.

⁵⁷Williams, *Self-Taught*, 134; Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, April 20, 1868, in Werner-Lapsansky and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 230-231. Johnson asked students’ families to pay for the books, but it is not clear from the correspondence whether Johnson left the books in Sharpsburg or returned them to the AFUC.

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three were still studying the alphabet.⁵⁸ At least one student who attended school in Tolson's Chapel in the late 1860s, James F. Simons, went on to become a teacher himself, returning to Tolson's Chapel during the 1878-1879 school year as a teacher in what had become Sharpsburg's racially segregated public school.⁵⁹

Freed People's Schools and Public Education in the South, 1870-1899

In the early and mid-1870s, outside support for freed people's schools dwindled and African Americans in the South continued to work at the state and local levels to expand the public-school systems. Congress ended the Freedmen's Bureau's educational initiatives in 1870, and Northern benevolent societies largely withdrew support for freed people's schools around the same time.⁶⁰ African Americans, meanwhile, continued to operate their own schools. After John J. Carter's departure from Sharpsburg in 1869, local residents and church members likely furthered their education through informal or formal instruction from more educated members of the community or in Tolson's Chapel's Sabbath school, which boasted fifty-five students in 1871.⁶¹ Particularly in urban areas, African Americans continued to establish and advocate for public schools, and the number of public schools for both blacks and whites steadily increased in the 1870s.⁶²

In the late 1870s, Southern Democrats re-took control of state governments in the former Confederacy by manipulating election laws, threatening black voters, and rallying whites under the banner of white supremacy. African Americans' persistent demands for education, combined with a largely illiterate poor white population, challenged Democrats' vision of white supremacy by raising the specter of African Americans being more educated than whites. In response, Southern Democrats left the racially segregated public-school system in place but cut spending on schools for African Americans. Part of a broader effort to institutionalize white supremacy, this strategy attempted to contain the threat of black education by ensuring that white schools were superior in facilities, supplies, teacher salaries, and curriculum.⁶³

⁵⁸ Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, April 7, 1868 (quotation) (Roll #6), Teacher's Monthly Reports, April and May 1868 (Roll #17), Teacher's Monthly Report, August 1869 (quotation) (Roll #20), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA; Ezra A. Johnson to Benjamin Coates, May 23, 1868, in Lapsansky-Werner and Bacon, *Back to Africa*, 237-238; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 128-130; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 152-155.

⁵⁹ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8: 11; *Report of the State Board of Education, Shewing the Condition of the Public Schools of Maryland for the Year Ending September 30, 1879* (Annapolis, Md.: W. T. Iglehart & Co., 1880; electronic edition at https://archive.org/details/report00mary_13), 268-269. The annual report on public schools in Maryland indicates that Simons taught during the 1878-1879 school year, but school commission records indicate that he was not confirmed as teacher until 1879. Simons is one of three school-aged African Americans in the town of Sharpsburg who are listed in the 1870 population census as having attended school within the previous year. He was likely the lone advanced reader reported by Ezra Johnson in 1868. Sharpsburg District, Washington County, Maryland, in Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*; Teacher's Monthly Reports, April 1868 (Roll #17), Records of the Superintendent of Education, Freedmen's Bureau, NARA.

⁶⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 448-454; Jack Salzman, David Lionel Smith, and Cornel West, eds., *Encyclopedia of African-American History and Culture*, 2nd ed., Volume 1 (New York: Macmillan Library Reference 1996), 358; Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 30; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 80. The Freedmen's Bureau was abolished in 1872.

⁶¹ Methodist church records show that the churches throughout the Washington Conference, including Tolson's Chapel, provided Sunday schools in the late 1860s. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1869* (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, n.d.; electronic edition at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433069134876>), 84-87 and *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1871* (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, n.d.; electronic edition at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433069134868>), 28; Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 12-15. The links for the electronic editions contain the minutes for the year cited as well as for the preceding year.

⁶² Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 6-7; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 366. Green notes that public schools in the South in the period between their initial establishment in the late 1860s and the funding cuts of the late 1870s and early 1880s has received little scholarly attention.

⁶³ Downs and Masur, *Era of Reconstruction*, 83, 85; Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 19-28, 31-32; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 178-200.

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Maryland took a different path towards racially segregated and unequal public schools than did the states of the former Confederacy, but the state's public-school system was similarly rooted in African Americans' commitment to education and whites' determination to maintain racial inequality. When black men in Maryland gained the right to vote in February 1870, the stark contrast between increasingly prevalent public schools for whites and a dearth of public schools for blacks took on political significance. During the 1871 elections, white Republicans in Maryland championed public schools for black children in order to attract African American voters.⁶⁴ When the Maryland legislature convened in 1872 with a mix of Republicans and Democrats, it increased funding for African American schools and passed a law requiring that counties provide one black school in each election district.⁶⁵

The effects of the 1872 education law quickly became evident in Sharpsburg. The Washington County school commissioners had appointed three black men (T. H. Sliner, George Hopewell, and Nathan Keller) as trustees for a black school in the Sharpsburg district in the spring of 1871, but the school did not open until the fall of 1872, several months after passage of the state law requiring one African American school per district.⁶⁶ Although the 1872 state education law led to an increase in the number of African American schools in Maryland, the schools remained under-funded compared to white schools. The fact that the Sharpsburg Colored School was located in Tolson's Chapel rather than a county-built schoolhouse illustrates the broader pattern of inequality.⁶⁷ In 1878, eighty-nine percent of the 127 white schools in Washington County were in county-owned schoolhouses, yet only four of the county's thirteen colored schools (thirty-one percent) were located in buildings owned by the county. Not until 1899 did the public school for African Americans in Sharpsburg move out of Tolson's Chapel and into a publicly funded, purpose-built schoolhouse located approximately one block east of the church.⁶⁸

Between 1872 and 1899, the years that the Sharpsburg Colored School was located in Tolson's Chapel, average attendance ranged from ten to twenty students, with between twenty and thirty-five different pupils attending the school in any given year.⁶⁹ The clergy and members of Tolson's Chapel were active in the operation of the public school in the church. Minister Jacob Gross taught the school in 1873-1874, and was appointed a school trustee in 1874, along with church member Hilary Watson, who lived nearby on East High Street. David Simons, one of the church's trustees, took over teaching duties in 1874, and his son James, who was also a church member, began teaching in 1878. James Simons remained in the post for most of the remaining years

⁶⁴ Margaret Law Callcott, *The Negro in Maryland Politics, 1870-1912* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 64.

⁶⁵ *Annual Report of the State Board of Education, Shewing the Condition of the Public Schools of Maryland...for Year Ending Sept. 30, 1873* (Annapolis, Md.: S.S. Mills & L.F. Colton, 1874; electronic edition at hathitrust.org, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015068319055>), 11, 13. Under the new law, state education funds for African American schools were distributed to localities based on the number of black students rather than the race of taxpayers.

⁶⁶ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8: 11; *Report of the State Board of Education Shewing the Condition of the Public Schools of Maryland...for the Year Ending Sept. 30, 1872* (Annapolis, Md.: L.F. Colton & Co., Steam Printers, 1873; electronic edition at hathitrust.org, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015068319071>), 227-228; *Annual Report...for Year Ending Sept. 30, 1873*, 272, 277.

⁶⁷ Downs and Masur, *Era of Reconstruction*, 85; Susan Cianci Salvatore, et al, *Civil Rights in America: Racial Desegregation of Public Education in the United States: A National Historic Landmark Theme Study* (Washington, D.C.: National Historic Landmarks Program, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2000), 28

⁶⁸ *Report of the State Board of Education...for the Year Ending September 30, 1879*, 258-269; Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:12.

⁶⁹ This information was gathered from the annual reports of the Maryland State Board of Education for the years 1872 to 1900. Electronic editions of these reports are available at hathitrust.org and archive.org. The school was definitely located in Tolson's Chapel in the fall of 1873, since Jacob M. Gross, the church's minister, served as the teacher that year. In 1872-1873, when Mary P. Williams was the teacher, the location of the school is not provided in official documents.

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that the school was located in Tolson's Chapel.⁷⁰ Hilary Watson, David Simons, and James Simons are all buried in the Tolson's Chapel cemetery.

The schools that African Americans created and sustained during Reconstruction had a lasting impact on Southern education and on the black community. As voters and legislators, African Americans established a precedent for state involvement in public education. As parents, students, and community members who steadfastly pursued education in the face of numerous obstacles, they claimed education as one of their rights as citizens, challenged whites' claims of racial superiority, and motivated whites to support public schools if only to avoid whites falling behind blacks. Thanks largely to African Americans' own initiative and their dedication to learning, the illiteracy rate among blacks in the South declined from ninety-five percent in 1860 to thirty percent in 1910. Schools such as the one in Tolson's Chapel nurtured the beginnings of an educated black professional class, and African Americans' demand for qualified teachers spurred the establishment of black universities, colleges, and normal schools.⁷¹

Comparable Properties

Tolson's Chapel and School stands out among other resources associated with African American institution-building during Reconstruction because of its extraordinary physical integrity and its ability to convey significant patterns in the development of African American community life during its earliest post-Emancipation phase. Tolson's Chapel uniquely embodies the importance and interconnectedness of three kinds of institutions: the church, the cemetery, and the school. Because of its well-documented history, its clear physical reflection of its uses, and its physical and historical setting within a larger national story of emancipation, freedom, and the question of citizenship, Tolson's Chapel exceptionally reflects and commemorates the development of community for freed men and women during a critical phase in America's history.

The list of existing National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) related to Reconstruction included in the National Historic Landmarks theme study, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1861-1900* contains no examples of churches, grade schools, or cemeteries that were built by African Americans and are located outside of urban areas or historic districts.⁷² Among the comparable properties within NHL historic districts, only the Penn School (Penn School Historic District, NHL, 1974) and the Second Street School (Waterford Historic District, NHL, 1970) are directly and primarily related to African American educational and religious institutions during this period. However, the two school buildings that survive at Penn School are associated with its operation during the Civil War, and the schoolhouse that was constructed in 1865 is no longer extant. The Second Street School is comparable to Tolson's Chapel because it reflects the same institution-building trends and housed an African American school as well as a church.⁷³

⁷⁰ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 8:7-8, 10. Little is known about George W. Smith, who taught the school from 1876 until 1878. All of the Maryland State Board of Education Annual Reports use an alternative spelling – Samons – for David and James Simons. See note 59 for discussion of the evidence for the date that Simons began teaching in Sharpsburg.

⁷¹ Williams, *Self-Taught*, 69-72, 174-178, 196-197; Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 26-27, 31, 238-245.

⁷² Some of the National Historic Landmarks that are associated with historically black colleges and universities (such as Swayne Hall at Talladega College and Jubilee Hall at Fisk University) provided elementary education in the early years of Reconstruction. Although these NHLs illustrate African Americans' commitment to education in the years after the end of slavery, they are primarily associated with the development of institutions of higher education.

⁷³ Founded with the assistance of white Quakers, the Second Street School was used as a church by a local African Methodist Episcopal Church congregation until 1891.

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The search for other comparable properties that functioned as churches, schools, and cemeteries began by focusing on schools because these were the least numerous of the three types of resources. In 2017 and 2018, Elizabeth Totten, Molly Ricks, and Ayla Mangold interns working with the National Historic Landmarks Program of the National Capital Region, National Park Service, conducted a preliminary survey of surviving African American schools erected between 1865 and 1875. Focusing on the states that permitted slavery at the start of the Civil War in 1861, they searched National Register of Historic Places listings, contacted State Historic Preservation Offices, consulted state-level African American heritage organizations and publications, examined historic contexts and surveys of African American historic resources, conducted internet searches, and reviewed academic studies of Freedmen's Bureau schools in individual states.

This survey confirmed Tolson's Chapel's rarity among surviving African American schools from this period in terms of its level of historic documentation, its historical associations, and its physical integrity. Many schools have been destroyed, moved, or significantly altered since 1875. While Tolson's Chapel's dual use is well-documented, some potentially comparable properties lacked clear documentation of their use as both a church and a school. While cemeteries are common at rural African American churches from this period, few surviving churches that were used as schools also have cemeteries associated with them. The survey indicated that most of the surviving Reconstruction-era schools are in the border states or the Upper South. More research is needed to determine why so few schools survive in rural areas of the Deep South, but possible reasons include higher incidences of racially motivated attacks on black institutions in the former Confederacy during Reconstruction (and later) and less sturdy construction methods utilized in warmer climates. Moreover, since a higher proportion of African Americans in the Deep South were enslaved than was the case in the border states, they had fewer resources to invest in school construction soon after emancipation. Lightly framed or makeshift buildings constructed immediately after the war were then more likely to be replaced later in the nineteenth century as black congregations and communities acquired the resources to do so.

From the list of surviving schools, the researchers identified four properties other than Tolson's that functioned as churches and schools during this period, were built by African Americans, and retain a good amount of integrity. These are Bowen's Chapel and School in Carroll County, Maryland (Maryland Historical Trust Inventory, CARR-1092); Stanley Institute in Cambridge, Maryland (NRHP, 1975, NRIS 75000888); Second Street School in Waterford, Virginia (contributing building in Waterford Historic District, NHL, 1970, NRIS 69000256); and Howland Chapel School in Heathsville, Virginia (NRHP, 1991, NRIS 90002206). The existing documentation for these four properties indicates that they have similar associations with African American religious and educational institutions. As was the case with Tolson's Chapel, the local African American community played a significant role in constructing the buildings and establishing schools at all four properties. In addition, all received support from the Freedmen's Bureau and from Northern benefactors or organizations. However, none of the comparable properties equal Tolson's Chapel in the strength of its associations with trends important in African American church, school, and cemetery building during Reconstruction; nor do they clearly display their dual-use in their extant features.

All four comparable properties are associated with African American churches that formed soon after the end of the Civil War. However, existing documentation suggests that that the connection between the local congregation and Howland Chapel School is not as strong as with the others. Notably, Massachusetts abolitionists, philanthropist and teacher, Emily Howland privately owned and managed the school until 1921, and it is not clear how involved the church was in the organization or management of the school, prior to and after it constructed its own sanctuary in 1892.⁷⁴ Howland School might better represent the involvement of

⁷⁴ Jeffrey M. O'Dell and Carolyn Jett, "Howland Chapel School!" National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1989 (NRHP)

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Northern benefactors who endeavored to create educational opportunities for African Americans in Southern states during Reconstruction rather than the homegrown efforts of the local African American community as is the case at Tolson's Chapel and School. Only the Stanley Institute has an associated cemetery. The Stanley Institute served as the community's church only until 1875 when the Christ Rock Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery was built across the street. The cemetery is not on the same property and was only established after the independent church building was operating.

Tolson's Chapel is most notable for preserving physical evidence of its historic use as both a church and school. None of the other examples physically illustrate both functions with authentic period elements. The original pulpit and pews at Tolson's Chapel reflect its history as a church, while the liquid slate on the walls illustrates its overlapping function as a school through 1899.

Bowen's Chapel and School ceased to be a school in 1892 after the construction of a new schoolhouse on the same property. After this, the sanctuary was remodeled, removing all vestiges of the educational function, thus affecting its integrity to the period when it was a school. While the historic educational use is readily apparent in the interior arrangement and fixtures in the other three buildings, there are no historic interior elements that also convey each building's historic use as a church.

While all four retain integrity, only the Second Street School in Waterford appears to retain its 1860s form and primary interior finishes. The exterior German siding and large, 5-panel slate blackboard are unusual elements that, if original, suggest that the Second Street School represents an unusually well-appointed African American schoolhouse of the time. Tolson's Chapel is likely a more typical example representative of the hundreds of modest schools/churches erected across the Southern and border states just after the Civil War. The use of liquid slate finishes in place of slate blackboards reflects the limited means available to most black communities at the time.

Tolson's Chapel & School combines clear associations with important historical trends with a physical presence well-suited to illustrating those associations. Thus, it meets National Historic Landmark criteria and stands as a testament to the determination of African Americans in the former slave-holding states to build independent institutions and assert their citizenship after the end of slavery.

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6. PROPERTY DESCRIPTION AND STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local:

Public-State:

Public-Federal:

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District:

Site:

Structure:

Object:

Number of Resources within Boundary of Property:

Contributing

Buildings: 1

Sites: 1

Structures:

Objects:

Total: 2

Noncontributing

Buildings:

Sites:

Structures:

Objects:

Total: 0

PROVIDE PRESENT AND PAST PHYSICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF PROPERTY

(Please see specific guidance for type of resource[s] being nominated)

Summary Description

Built in 1866 as a church, Tolson's Chapel and School stands on the north side of East High Street in Sharpsburg, a small town in western Maryland near the site of the Civil War Battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862). There is written documentation that the church also functioned as a school for African American children in 1868 and 1869, and again from the early 1870s to 1899; it likely functioned as a school at other times in the 1860s and early 1870s as well. The building stands close to the street, at the southern edge of a deep, narrow, 0.23-acre property within a historically African American residential block at the southern edge of town. Behind the church is a small cemetery that was in use by the late 1880s.

The church is a one-story, log and braced-frame building with board-and-batten siding. Its front-gabled roof is covered with wood shingles, and a belfry sits atop the roof peak near the front of the building. The entrance is a single, centered door in the south elevation. There are two windows on each side elevation and no windows on the rear elevation, where there is a small, shed-roofed, frame addition that was likely constructed in the late 1860s or 1870s. The undivided interior features built-in pews arranged on either side of a center aisle. The pews face north towards a raised chancel that incorporates a built-in pulpit on a dais, and an arched opening behind the pulpit provides access to an alcove that occupies the rear addition. A balcony with additional seating extends across the southern wall of the nave. The church has wood floors, and the ceiling and walls are plastered; beadboard wainscoting was added to the walls in the 1920s. Liquid slate blackboards associated with the building's use as a school are present on portions of the walls near the chancel.

Tolson's Chapel and School possesses all seven aspects of integrity and retains the character and feeling of a church, school, and cemetery from the Reconstruction era. The changes that have been made to the building and site are minor and do not detract from their ability to convey their historic use and significance.

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Location and Setting

Tolson's Chapel and School is located in Sharpsburg, Maryland, a town of approximately seven hundred residents. Founded in 1763, Sharpsburg lies in the Ridge and Valley geographic region between the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Appalachian Plateau. The Potomac River, which forms the boundary between Maryland and West Virginia, is less than two miles west of Sharpsburg. Adjacent to the town's eastern boundary is Antietam National Battlefield, and the surrounding area is primarily rural.

Since its construction in 1866, Tolson's Chapel has remained in its current location on East High Street, roughly in the middle of the block between South Mechanic Street and South Church Street, in a historically African American enclave. Immediately to the west is a grassy, vacant lot with scattered trees (Photo 2); this lot was also vacant during the period of significance.⁷⁵ The properties immediately to the east of the church contain a circa 1900 dwelling that faces East High Street and an auto repair shop that faces the alley. All but one of the buildings on the north side of the street are associated with the nineteenth-century African American community in Sharpsburg, including a mid-nineteenth-century dwelling at 117 East High Street and an 1899 school (119 East High Street) that has been converted into a residence. The houses on the south side of the street are outside the town boundary and were built after 1945.⁷⁶

Site

The Tolson's Chapel congregation acquired the 0.23-acre property in two parcels in 1867 and 1883, respectively, and the property size has not changed since 1883. Composed of two lots, the property is narrow and deep, extending approximately 53 feet along East High Street and 206 feet to a paved alley that forms the northern boundary. A gravel and dirt alley runs along the western edge of the property (Photos 2 and 4). The land slopes down to the north and west, and there are steep, grassy embankments along both alleys. A grassy embankment that is more gradually sloped runs along East High Street (Photos 1 and 2). The eastern boundary is demarcated by a stepped concrete block wall at the southern end and by a wood privacy fence at the northern end (Photos 4 and 6). One tree stands at the eastern edge of the grassy property, and trees line the opposite side of the west alley (Photo 6).

Situated at the southwest corner of the property, the church/school building is set back approximately fifteen feet from East High Street and five feet from the west alley. Concrete steps at the southern end of the retaining wall lead up to a grass and gravel pathway that replaced an earlier concrete sidewalk in front of the building. Between the gravel pathway and the street are two tree stumps and a metal sign. Installed in 2014, the sign is approximately four feet tall and displays the name of the church and the dates it operated (1866-1998). An interpretive wayside is located east of the chapel and roughly in line with its south wall. (See Photos 1 and 2.)

Several site features were removed after 1995, including two trees that stood in front of the building, a 1950s chain link fence along the southern edge of the cemetery, and a concrete sidewalk in front of the church. The frame, double privy that stood behind the church until the mid-1980s likely was not present during the period of significance, but there is not enough information available to determine its date of construction.

⁷⁵ Lake, Griffing, & Stevenson, *An Illustrated Atlas of Washington County, Maryland* (Philadelphia, 1877), 32.

⁷⁶ Edie Wallace, Paige Phifer, and Paula S. Reed, *Sharpsburg Historic District* (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 2008), Section 7:58-59. The fourth dwelling on the north side of East High Street was built in 1983.

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Cemetery (1 Contributing Site)

The congregation purchased the land behind the church as a cemetery in 1883, and the last burial took place in 1996. The congregation may have been using the land as a cemetery prior to 1883, but the oldest grave marker is likely that of Mehalay Thomas. Although her marker does not provide a date of death, documentary sources suggest that she died in 1888.⁷⁷ Most of the markers commemorate burials before 1960. Although there have been no burials since 1996, two markers were added in 2015-2017: one for Virginia Cook, who died in 1996 but whose grave was unmarked, and one for World War I veteran and church member John Ellsworth Monroe.

The cemetery contains roughly eighty to eighty-five burials and approximately fifty grave markers that are generally arranged in five north-south rows. The number and spacing of burials and markers vary by row, and most of the markers face west. The Jackson family plot near the northeast corner of the building is defined by corner blocks, but in most cases, family plots are not enclosed or marked. For example, in the northern quarter of the cemetery are groups of gravestones for the Simons family and the associated King and Beeler families. Some of the family groupings consist of individual headstones, while others have a family headstone with associated lawn-style markers. Although lawn-style markers are common, the majority of the grave markers in the cemetery are die-and-base headstones. Other marker types include military headstones, a tablet headstone, a pedestal, a pulpit, and a plaque. Most do not have any iconography, but among those that do, religious symbols such as crosses, heavenly gates, and crowns are present. Approximately one-quarter of the markers have associated foot stones.⁷⁸ (See Photos 3, 5, and 6.)

Church/School (1 Contributing Building)

Exterior (Photos 1-4)

Tolson's Chapel and School comprises a front-gable main block and a one-bay, shed-roofed addition that is centered on its north (rear) elevation. The main block measures approximately 21½ feet by 28 feet and rests on a limestone foundation with irregular coursing. Embedded in the foundation at the southwest corner is a sandstone cornerstone. Most of the inscription has worn away, but enough letters remain to suggest that it read: "[TO]LSON'S CH[A]PEL." A date was inscribed below the letters, but it is no longer decipherable. The structural system of the main block combines log and braced-frame construction. While not common, this method of construction has been documented in other Washington County buildings dating to the third quarter of the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ Hewn logs were mortised into the corner posts and placed around tall down braces at each corner. A summer beam running north-south supports the center of the building.

Wood, board-and-batten siding covers the exterior walls of the main block, and a wide, flat frieze with drip cap extends along the roof line. The gable ends are clad in wood drop siding and a flat fascia board. The moderately sloped, front-gable roof has wood shingles and boxed eaves; metal gutters are attached to the eaves on the side

⁷⁷ Edie Wallace and Paula S. Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, National Register of Historic Places Nomination (2008), Section 8:13.

⁷⁸ In 2013, the Friends of Tolson's Chapel contracted with the Chicora Foundation to conduct a survey of the cemetery using ground-penetrating radar (GPR). The survey revealed 82 burials, but the investigators noted that there may be additional burials not detected by GPR. Michael Trinkley and Debi Hacker, *Preservation Assessment of Tolson's Chapel Cemetery, Sharpsburg, Maryland*, Chicora Research Contribution 552 (Chicora Foundation, Inc., Columbia, S.C., May 1, 2013).

⁷⁹ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 7:1.

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elevations. A chimney that was located in the center of the roof was removed and covered before 1988, but evidence of the opening remains visible in the attic.

The belfry that sits atop the roof near the front elevation is composed of three parts: a frame base clad in wood drop siding; an open area framed by four chamfered wood corner posts; and a pyramidal roof with exposed rafters and wood shingles. (See Photos 1 and 2.) Installed in 2012, the belfry was designed based on physical and photographic evidence of an earlier belfry that was removed from the roof of Tolson's Chapel circa 1980.

A concrete stoop leads to a door opening that is centered in the south (front) elevation (Photos 1 and 2). The opening holds a single, four-panel, wood door and a transom that is filled with horizontal wood boards; a piece of molded wood trim separates the door and transom. Centered in the gable above the door is a six-over-three, wood window, and each of the side elevations has two six-over-six, wood windows with three-paneled, wood shutters. Narrow wood casing with a quirk bead is present on all of the door and window openings. The door and the side windows have drip caps, and the windowsills consist of flat, square-edged boards.

The rear addition (Photos 3 and 4), which houses the chancel alcove, was likely constructed in the late 1860s or 1870s and was certainly in place by 1922, when it was depicted on a Sanborn Fire Insurance map of Sharpsburg.⁸⁰ This centered, frame addition covers approximately one-third of the rear elevation and sits atop a concrete foundation. Clad in wood drop siding, the addition extends from the frieze band down to grade level, which is about three feet below the sill of the main block. The addition's corrugated metal shed roof has a raking cornice and boxed eaves. On its east elevation is a small, board-and-batten door that sits approximately level with the sill of the main block and opens outward on two hinges at the bottom of the opening. A larger board-and-batten door on the addition's west elevation provides access to an unfinished storage area at grade. The original exterior siding of the main block, including the battens, is visible from inside the storage area.

The church's present appearance and structural stability reflect a careful restoration overseen by the Friends of Tolson's Chapel between 2003 and 2010 and partially funded by grants from the Maryland Historical Trust and Preservation Maryland. Structural members, mortise-and-tenon joints, daubing, and the historic board-and-batten siding were retained wherever possible, but some elements of the building's structural system and exterior deteriorated in the late twentieth century when the church was infrequently used or vacant. The summer beam, two corner posts, and approximately twenty percent of the original logs were so severely deteriorated that they needed to be replaced. Replacement logs are marked with the date of installation (2008) in order to differentiate them from historic materials. When the mid-twentieth-century asphalt siding was removed, the boards remained but the battens were missing. All of the battens, as well as severely deteriorated boards, were replaced in kind to match the original siding. Similarly, new wood shingles were installed to match deteriorated, historic shingles that remained under the corrugated metal roof that was removed during the renovation. The brick chimney is scheduled to be reconstructed in the fall of 2018.

Interior (Photos 7-10)

Composed of an undivided nave, a chancel, and a balcony, the floor plan of Tolson's Chapel is typical of small, mid-nineteenth-century, rural churches. In the nave, pews flank a central aisle and face north towards the raised chancel, which incorporates a centered alcove that occupies the rear addition. Stairs in the southwest corner lead

⁸⁰ The use of cut nails in the structure of the addition suggests a pre-1900 construction date. The concrete foundation may have replaced an earlier frame support system.

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to a balcony that extends along the south wall. Throughout the interior, the flooring is constructed of tongue-and-groove pine boards, many of which are original boards attached with cut nails. The boards are generally standard widths but those along the west wall are wider than those along the east wall. In the twentieth century, the Tolson's Chapel congregation replaced the floorboards in the center aisle and in front of the chancel, and placed carpet runners over these areas. In 2010, the carpet runners were removed and placed in storage.

The door at the south end of the building has flat, wood trim, while the windows have narrow, wood trim with a quirk bead; the windowsills are flat and square-edged. The arched opening for the chancel alcove is surrounded by flat, wood trim with raised fillets at the base of the arch and a projecting keystone at the top (Photos 7 and 8).

The walls are lath-and-plaster with wood, beadboard wainscoting and a molded chair rail that were installed circa 1925; there is no wainscoting in the chancel alcove. Liquid slate is present on the east and west walls between the northernmost window and the north wall (Photos 7 and 8). An economical method of installing a blackboard, liquid slate was composed of a mixture of shellac, alcohol, lampblack, and a small amount of emery applied to a plaster wall.⁸¹ The liquid slate that extends approximately four feet above the wainscoting in Tolson's Chapel was exposed and restored in 2017; additional liquid slate remains behind the wainscoting. Paint analysis conducted in 2006 indicated that there are two layers of liquid slate, the earliest of which likely dates to the late 1860s.⁸²

The hipped, lath-and-plaster ceiling in the nave is unadorned. Two electric light fixtures with saucer-style, enameled tin reflectors hang from the ceiling. The church had electric lights by 1922, and the fixtures may have been in place at that time.⁸³ A non-functional stove pipe angles towards the roof peak near the center of the nave, connecting with a historic chimney opening that has been covered on the exterior. (See Photos 7 and 8.)

In the nave, there are seven rows of flat-backed, wood pews along each side of the center aisle (Photos 8-10). The pews feature curved ends and are constructed using cut nails, indicating that they likely date to the period of significance. The southernmost pew on the west side abuts the stairs to the balcony, while the southernmost pew on the east side stands against the south wall of the building. Two of the pews near the rear of the nave are built around the posts that support the balcony. On both sides of the center aisle, the two front pews are smaller in order to allow for access to the chancel. One pew near the center of the east wall was removed to accommodate a Heatrola stove that was installed in the 1950s, and a pew that faced west towards the chancel was removed in 2010 and placed in storage; ghost marks on the walls indicate the pews' former locations.

The chancel comprises a raised platform, a centered dais with pulpit, and an alcove behind the pulpit (Photos 7 and 8). The chancel platform stretches across the north wall of the sanctuary from the west wall to the eastern edge of the alcove. The step up to the platform is faced with single-bead, vertical beadboard. During the period of significance, the raised platform was centered on the north wall and had two rounded corners. The platform was extended to the west wall in the early twentieth century, but the historic configuration remains evident in patterns in the floor boards.⁸⁴ A turned-baluster chancel rail follows the curve of the platform's southeast corner and continues in front of the chancel; a remnant of the curved railing for the southwest corner was found in storage in the building. There is a gap between the chancel railing and the solid beadboard railing in front of the choir. The choir contains a single, south-facing pew and a piano.

⁸¹ Wallace and Reed, *Tolson's Chapel*, Section 7:3, citing a published recipe for "Liquid Slating" from the May 1870 issue of *The Manufacturer and Builder*.

⁸² Matthew J. Mosca, "Historic Paint Finishes Report: Samples from the Exterior and Interior of the Tolson's Chapel, Sharpsburg, Maryland" (prepared for Catocin Center for Regional Studies, June 5, 2006), 6.

⁸³ The 1922 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Sharpsburg indicates that the building had electric lights at that time.

⁸⁴ The floorboards and nails suggest the choir was added in the early twentieth century.

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The pulpit stands on a dais that extends across the front of the alcove and projects approximately three feet from the alcove opening (Photos 7 and 8). Both the dais and the alcove are floored with tongue-and-groove wood floorboards that are secured with cut nails. The dais is faced with horizontal boards set behind rectangular openings, a method of creating wood panels that was also used on the balcony railing. Although the pulpit is slightly off-center because the steps leading up to it are located at the eastern edge of the dais, it is nevertheless the focal point of the chancel. Flanked by two stands, the pulpit is nailed to the raised center portion of a platform that projects a few inches beyond the front of the dais. The wood, pedestal-style pulpit has a paneled base that is open at the back, revealing the use of cut nails in its construction. A square, flat-sided pedestal set atop the base supports an angled desk that is covered with velvet affixed with upholstery nails. The stands on either side of the pulpit are roughly the same height as the pulpit and have similar bases. Atop the base of each stand is a narrow, square pedestal with a flat top. The paneling on the two stands differs slightly from the paneling on the pulpit, suggesting that they may have been added later.

In the southwest corner of the building is a half-turn stair that leads to the balcony (Photo 10). The building's structural system is visible on the unfinished interior of the under-stairs closet, which has a door constructed of vertical boards secured by two horizontal battens; the door is situated above the back of the pew. The open-string stairs have no railing on the main level.

The balcony occupies the space between the windows and the south wall and is supported by two tapered, square posts (Photos 9 and 10). A metal bracket for an oil lamp is attached to one of the posts; a similar bracket once hung on the other post. The railing along the edge of the balcony consists of horizontal boards set behind a series of five rectangular openings, similar to the facing on the chancel dais. Two wood, straight-back pews with rectilinear pew ends are located on the balcony, and a bench is attached to the south wall. A square opening in the ceiling provides access to the attic and to the replacement belfry that was constructed in 2012. A rope coming down through the ceiling operates the bell, which was installed in 2016 and matches the original bell in age and style.⁸⁵

Associated Collections

The historic furnishings, architectural fragments, books, and other artifacts related to the church and school in Tolson's Chapel enhance its ability to convey the history and significance of African American institution-building during Reconstruction. Although the piano and many of the books relate to the history of the church after the end of the NHL period of significance (1866-1899), the collection includes items that are associated with the church and school during the period of significance as well. Among these are architectural fragments such as iron shutter hinges and a portion of the original curved chancel rail that provide clues about the appearance of the building before 1899. The pump organ and two wooden chairs were used in the church and may date to the period of significance as well. Hymnals and Bibles published in the nineteenth century were found in the church building, and in 2009, the Friends of Tolson's Chapel acquired a collection of books that belonged to Virginia Cook, the last surviving church member. Cook's collection included schoolbooks belonging to James Simons, who attended and taught in the school, and to Robert Levi Lee and Proshia Lee, who attended school in Tolson's Chapel in the 1880s. The Bible that Nancy Campbell/Camell donated to Tolson's Chapel is on display at Antietam National Battlefield.

⁸⁵ 2016 Easement Program, Change/Alteration Request, Friends of Tolson's Chapel Files. The original bell is owned by a local family that purchased it from the congregation in the 1970s.

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Evaluation of Integrity

Tolson's Chapel and School retains integrity of location, as well as a high degree of integrity of setting. Nearly all of Sharpsburg is included in the Sharpsburg Historic District (NRHP, 2008), which contains many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century buildings. The block where Tolson's Chapel and School stands continues to be located at the edge of Sharpsburg, and the area immediately surrounding the town remains rural, thanks in part to easements designed to protect the historic character of the land surrounding Antietam National Battlefield. The block also retains its historic residential character. Although twentieth-century houses line the southern side of East High Street, their size and scale are compatible with the historic character of the block.

The size of the Tolson's Chapel property has not changed since the end of the period of significance, and no buildings or structures have been added since the end of the period of significance. The few additions to the site are small-scale and include an interpretive wayside, a sign, a fence and wall along the eastern boundary, and a retaining wall and concrete steps along the western boundary. Although most of the grave markers in the cemetery were placed after the end of the period of significance, their arrangement and design are consistent with the character of late nineteenth-century church cemeteries.

Overall, the church/school building possesses a high degree of integrity and retains the physical features that best convey its historical significance as a Reconstruction-era church and school. Starting in 2002, the Friends of Tolson's Chapel preserved and restored the building's structure and exterior, retaining evidence of workmanship in the structure and finishes and keeping historic materials in place whenever possible. As a result, the building's footprint, fenestration, windows, shutters, door, siding, and roofing match their appearance during the period of significance, giving the exterior a high degree of integrity of design and feeling.

During the restoration, severely deteriorated architectural elements required that some original elements be replaced in kind so that they match the surviving elements that were present during the period of significance. While most of the historic structural members were retained or repaired, much of the historic board-and-batten siding and the roofing was replaced due to rot and insect damage. The restoration also included reconstructing the belfry that was removed circa 1980. The footprint of the reproduction belfry was determined by marks on the roof, and the design was based on a 1976 photograph and local examples from the same time period and building type. The replacement roof shingles, board-and-batten siding, and belfry diminish the integrity of materials on the exterior, but these are not unusual replacements for a building of this type and age. Although many of the comparable properties have historic siding, few buildings from this era retain nineteenth-century roofing materials. The number of lost belfries is more difficult to assess since evidence of an earlier belfry typically comes from historic photographs, which are rare, or physical evidence located on the interior or underneath non-historic roofing. Because all of the replaced elements on Tolson's Chapel were based on physical or documentary evidence and materials were replaced in kind, the exterior still retains a high degree of integrity of design, workmanship, and feeling, allowing it to convey the property's character and appearance during the period of significance.

Because the interior contains architectural elements associated with its history as both a church and school during the period of significance, the interior is of great importance to conveying the property's significance. The interior of Tolson's Chapel retains a high degree of integrity of materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and association. The floor plan, interior finishes, and built-in furniture remain much as they did when the building functioned as a church and school. The pews date to the period of significance, and largely retain their historic arrangement; only two pews have been moved or removed since 1883. The pulpit and the chancel alcove were present during the period of significance, and the balcony and stairs at the south end of the building

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have seen no major changes since the nineteenth century. Most of the interior finishes from the period of significance remain intact, including the chancel railing, the liquid slate blackboards on the walls at the north end of the building, and substantial portions of the floor boards and the lath-and-plaster walls and ceilings. Though added after the end of the period of significance, the expanded chancel platform and the beadboard wainscoting are in keeping with the building's historic function as a church; these materials cover rather than replace earlier materials. As a result, they do not substantially detract from the overall integrity of the interior. As tangible evidence of the period when Tolson's Chapel served as a school, the carefully restored liquid slate is particularly important to the building's integrity and to its association with African American education during Reconstruction.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

X Previously listed in the National Register (fill in 1 through 6 below) [is checked]

Not previously listed in the National Register (fill in only 4, 5, and 6 below)

- 1. NR #: 08001012
2. Date of listing: October 21, 2008
3. Level of significance: State and Local
4. Applicable National Register Criteria: A X [is checked] B C D
5. Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A B C D E F G
6. Areas of Significance: Ethnic Heritage: Black

Previously Determined Eligible for the National Register: Date of determination:
Designated a National Historic Landmark: Date of designation:
Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: HABS No.
Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: HAER No.
Recorded by Historic American Landscapes Survey: HALS No.

Location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office: X [is checked]
Other State Agency:
Federal Agency:
Local Government:
University:
Other (Specify Repository):

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