



Name of Property:	Tolson’s Chapel and School
City, State:	Sharpsburg, Maryland
Significant Dates:	1866-1899
NHL Criterion:	1
NHL Criterion Exception:	1
Theme:	II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements 3. Religious Institutions III. Expressing Cultural Values 1. Educational and Intellectual Currents
Previous Recognition:	2008 National Register of Historic Places
National Historic Context:	VII. Political and Military Affairs, 1865-1939 A. The Reconstruction Era, 1865-1899 B. The Republican Era, 1877-1900 XXVII. Education B. Elementary, Intermediate, and Secondary Education 1. Development of the System 5. Development of Equal Educational Opportunity

XXXI. Social and Humanitarian Movements
B. Civil Rights Movements

NHL Significance:

- Tolson's Chapel and School is an exceptionally well-preserved example of a post-Civil War African American church, cemetery, and school. The property 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).
- When African American Methodists built Tolson's Chapel in Sharpsburg in 1866, they were part of a broader historical trend of African American church-building in the former slaveholding states during Reconstruction. The modest log-and-frame church stands as a testament to African Americans' dedication to forming churches where they could worship independently from whites and hold positions of leadership. Churches such as Tolson's Chapel also served as springboards for political organization and for establishing other institutions, including cemeteries and schools.
- Many rural African American churches, Tolson's Chapel among them, expanded their role as community institutions by creating their own cemeteries. Established on land that the congregation purchased in 1883, the Tolson's Chapel cemetery demonstrates the continued development of African American institutions in the context of increasing racial segregation in the late nineteenth century.
- Tolson's Chapel is strongly associated with African Americans' nationally significant campaign to build schools during Reconstruction. In the late 1860s, the African American community in Sharpsburg organized and supported a school for children and adults, sacrificing their time and scant resources to send children to school. They sought and supported teachers from the North, and taught the children themselves when trained teachers were not available. In 1868 and 1869, they successfully secured teachers from Northern benevolent societies and from the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency established in part to assist former slaves.
- Reconstruction-era schools such as the one in Tolson's Chapel laid the foundation for public education throughout the southern and border states, transforming education in the region for both blacks and whites. As voters, legislators, and citizens, African Americans persistently advocated for public schools, claimed education as one of their rights as citizens, and motivated whites to support public schools if only to avoid falling behind blacks who steadfastly sought opportunities for education. Tolson's Chapel housed the public school for African American children in Sharpsburg from 1872, when the state mandated one black school in each district, until 1899, when the county erected a purpose-built schoolhouse nearby.

Integrity:

- Tolson's Chapel and School possesses a high degree of integrity, and the building retains the physical features that best convey its historical significance as a Reconstruction-era church, school, and cemetery.
- Situated in the Sharpsburg Historic District (NRHP, 2008), Tolson's Chapel and School retains integrity of location as well as a high degree of integrity of setting. The property continues to be located at the edge of Sharpsburg, and the surrounding area remains rural, thanks in part to easements designed to protect the historic character of nearby Antietam National Battlefield. The size of the 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.
- 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 the finishes and keeping historic materials in place whenever possible and replacing them in kind when necessary. The reconstructed belfry was based on physical and documentary evidence. As a result, the restored exterior 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.
- The interior of Tolson's Chapel also 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 were when the building functioned as a church and school during the period of significance. The congregation expanded the chancel platform and added beadboard wainscoting after the end of the period of significance, but these features are consistent with the building's historic function as a church and school, and do not substantially detract from the overall integrity of the interior.
- Tolson's Chapel is notable among comparable properties for preserving physical evidence of its historic use as both a church and school. The pulpit and pews reflect its history as a church, while the liquid slate blackboards located on the side walls convey its association with African American education during Reconstruction.

Owner of Property: Friends of Tolson's Chapel

Acreage of Property: 0.23 acres

Origins of Nomination: The Friends of Tolson's Chapel initiated the project and the NPS National Capital Area's NHL Program funded the nomination project using Fiscal Year 2017 program funds (National Recreation & Preservation fund). NPS partnered with the Organization of American Historians to hire a qualified historian to conduct the research and evaluation for Tolson's Chapel and School. Friends of Tolson's Chapel provided support, reviewed drafts, and collaborated on the final draft nomination.

Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: The nomination of Tolson's Chapel will be the first to be prepared using the Reconstruction Era NHL Theme Study



completed in 2017. The project aligns with national initiatives including the congressionally authorized African American Civil Rights heritage initiative and the African American Civil Rights Network Act of 2017. The project realizes a goal of the Friends of Tolson's Chapel that has worked to restore and interpret Tolson's Chapel since 2006. The NHL designation will raise the profile and allow the friends group to raise funds and apply for outside grants to continue their preservation and educational work.

Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: None known.

Public Comments Favoring Designation (as of November 5, 2020):

- Mark P. Brugh, President, Friends of Tolson's Chapel – 10/30/2020

National Historic Landmarks Committee Comments:

- Requested information on why the Black population in the area declined by the 1950s so that the Church closed.
- Rethink how the terms African American, black, and white are used in the nomination.

National Historic Landmarks Committee Recommendation:

The Committee recommends that the National Park System Advisory Board recommend to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the Tolson's Chapel and School in Sharpsburg, Maryland, as a National Historic Landmark, with any additions and corrections as noted by the Committee being made prior to the nomination being forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for action.

Advisory Board Recommendation: