

Curtis Freewill Baptist Church
Harpers Ferry National Historical Park
Harpers Ferry
Jefferson County
West Virginia

HABS No. WV-278

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

ADDENDUM TO:
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ADDENDUM TO CURTIS FREEWILL BAPTIST CHURCH

HABS No. WV-278

NOTE: Please see the following historical reports for additional information regarding the history of Storer College:

Addendum to Storer College, Anthony Hall	HABS No. WV-277-A
Addendum to Storer College, Lewis Anthony Library	HABS No. WV-277-C
Addendum to Storer College, Cook Hall	HABS No. WV-277-E
Bird-Brady House	HABS No. WV-304

Location: Harpers Ferry Center, Harpers Ferry, Jefferson County, West Virginia

Present Owner: National Park Service, Harpers Ferry Center

Present Occupants: National Park Service

Present Use: Meeting hall and conference room for the Harpers Ferry Center

Historian: Mark Barron, University of Maryland, College Park

Significance: The Curtis Freewill Baptist Church served as both a religious building for students of Storer College and as its own congregational church for African American residents of Harpers Ferry and nearby Bolivar. Constructed between 1889 and 1896, the brick church was named for Silas Curtis, a prominent member of the Freewill Baptist denomination in New England whose family donated money in his memory to complete of the building. Upon its dedication, the church replaced the chapel in Anthony Hall as the school's primary religious meeting place. Located across Fillmore Street from the main entrance to Storer College, the church had a troubled history in finding money, congregants, and pastorship. At the time of Storer College's closing in 1955, the church effectively had no congregation and was only being used for school-related activities. Though originally envisioned by members of the Freewill denomination to be a self-sufficient church for local African Americans, it largely failed to accomplish that goal and functioned in that manner for fewer than sixty years.

Presently owned by the National Park Service (NPS), the building is remarkably intact and still conveys its historic past as a religious edifice. To this end, Curtis Freewill Baptist Church is able to project the roles that Baptist theology played in the education and religious practices of African American students. It also speaks to the paternalistic structure of Christian missionary work. With its historic roots in rural New England, the Freewill church spread its influence across the country by opening schools for minority students, many of which were controlled by trustee boards comprised mainly of white New Englanders who rarely visited the institutions

under their charge. Absent from the day to day activities of their schools and churches, yet still holding financial purse strings, the Freewill Baptist denomination likely alienated many African Americans, students and non-students alike.

PART 1: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: 1889-1896

2. Architect: Unknown

3. Owners: Ownership of Curtis Freewill Baptist Church is complicated by its historic existence as both a denominational religious building and as the church for Storer College. Grantors and grantees signed the original deed for the church property on February 1, 1890, with Storer College's trustees passing the empty lot onto the treasurer of the Freewill Baptist Church Conference for the sum of one dollar. Prior to the property being signed over to the Conference, the parcel was part of the original Storer College tract granted by the United States to the school's trustees in 1867.¹ The size of the lot is listed as 70'-6" x 154'-0". Though dated in 1890, the county clerk did not officially admit the deed into record with until March 15, 1894.²

Erection of the physical church building occurred between 1889 and 1896.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, the Freewill Baptist Church joined the Northern Baptist Convention, an act that affected the internal organization the denomination, as well as its financial responsibilities when it came to supporting missionary work. From 1911 to 1952, the question of who held ownership of Curtis church and its parcel was unclear. In 1952, the church finally resolved the issue by having Storer College's trustees reassume ownership of the building and land.³

When the National Park Service became interested in acquiring land along Camp Hill the agency's Design and Construction Division of the Eastern Offices completed a land status map for the Department of Interior. According to the map, Curtis Freewill Baptist

¹ Prior to the creation of Storer College, the War Department used the land as housing for armory personnel charged with overseeing the manufacture and storage of military armaments. Office of County Clerk, *Deed Book 4*, page 575, Jefferson County Courthouse, Charles Town, West Virginia.

² Copy of Property Deed, Jefferson County Clerk's Office, 15 Mar. 1894, folder HFD-00669, library and archive of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (hereafter **HAFE**).

³ Harry S. Myers to L. D. Johnson, 2 August 1951 (HAFE-HFT-00063). A general overview of the church's deed controversy is in Mary Johnson, "Park Building 75 (Curtis Freewill Baptist Church), Fillmore and Jackson Streets, Camp Hill, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park: Final Report," unpublished, Harpers Ferry National Park (Dec. 1995): 27-28.

Church is highlighted as a property that NPS wanted to purchase.⁴ In 1960 Storer's trustees agreed to sell the campus and church to the government and two years later in 1962, the Secretary of Interior signed the property over to NPS control.⁵

4. **Original and Subsequent Occupants:** The Curtis Church was constructed as a Freewill Baptist Church. Its original occupants included students and faculty of Storer College, as well as members of Harpers Ferry's and Bolivar's African American communities. Since 1962, the National Park Service, Harpers Ferry Center (NPS-HFC) has used the building as a meeting space. Though no longer used for religious purposes, the church building hosts an annual reunion of Storer College graduates every summer.
5. **Builder, Contractors, Suppliers:** The only documented supplier associated with the building of the church building is Carlisle Pope and Company who delivered windows to the site in 1895.⁶
6. **Original Plans and Construction:** Information regarding the planning and construction phases of the church building is extremely limited. The lack of detail in these areas is most likely attributable to funding problems experienced by Storer College and the Freewill Baptist Church.

According to correspondence between Reverend Nathan C. Brackett, who served as president of Storer College from 1867 to 1897 and as one of school's trustees, the cornerstone and foundation for the church building were laid on September 29, 1889 during a meeting of the Freewill Baptist General Conference.⁷ Between 1889 and 1893 it appears that the construction of the building progressed no further because the 1894 Sanborn map for Harpers Ferry indicates that the church was still only a foundation.⁸

In 1895, Ethan W. Porter began serving as the Freewill Baptist minister to Harpers Ferry, while also teaching biblical literature at Storer College.⁹ According to his writings, construction of the church was at first being performed by Storer College students. Unhappy with the progress and quality of workmanship, Porter hired a local African

⁴ Land Status Map, Design and Construction Division, Eastern Offices, National Park Service, Department of Interior, folder HFM-131, HAFE.

⁵ Office of County Clerk, "Declaration of Taking, United States v President and Trustees of Storer College et al.," 28 Aug. 1962, *Deed Book 256*, 55, Jefferson County Courthouse, Charles Town, West Virginia.

⁶ Information gleaned from "Correspondence and Business Papers," A&M 1322 (Reel #131, HAFE).

⁷ "A Journal on the Work at Harpers Ferry and Among the Churches in West Virginia," A&M 1322 (Reel #131, HAFE).

⁸ Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, map of Harpers Ferry, 1894.

⁹ The exact date of Porter's arrival in Harpers Ferry is unclear; however, his first correspondence from Storer is dated 1895.

American mason to oversee the erection of the brick walls.¹⁰ As the building progressed over the next year, Storer College's industrial arts students under the direction of Hamilton Hatter, a school trustee and teacher, executed portions of the carpentry work.¹¹ At some point in 1895, Porter sent a payment for windows to Carlisle Pope and Company in the sum of \$163.70.¹² It is unknown if this payment refers to, or includes, the stained-glass windows that lined the sanctuary.

Porter also helped rectify the church's funding problems by soliciting donations from national members of the Freewill Church. In 1895, the estate of Silas Curtis donated five hundred dollars under the condition that the building be named in his memory. Upon being granted the honor of memorialization, the estate offered an additional three hundred dollars to the church building campaign. Other contributions included four hundred dollars from the General Conference, two hundred dollars from Susan Wyman of Boston, one hundred dollars from Jesse Blake of Tewksbury, Massachusetts, one hundred dollars from B.J. Cole of Lakeport, New Hampshire, and fourteen hundred dollars from various unnamed persons.¹³ These donations combined with the work of Storer College's student body and faculty helped bring the church to completion. On May 27, 1896, the church building was officially dedicated.¹⁴

7. **Alterations and Additions:** The Curtis Freewill Baptist Church has two distinct historical periods of use—its occupation as a religious building (1896-1955), and its operation as a classified structure owned and maintained by the National Park Service (1962-present).

During the church's occupation as a religious building, the most substantial alteration to the design of the interior sanctuary occurred in 1907, when the present organ was installed in the room's southwest corner. Donated by "friends" in Rhode Island, the organ had sat unassembled in the church since 1905. According to a March 1907 entry in Storer College's monthly publication, the *Storer Record*, the organ "stood in the Curtis Memorial Church uncompleted, partly because we had no funds with which to build it and partly because we were unable to secure services of one able to rebuild it. In all probability the organ will be ready for use on commencement Sunday."¹⁵ In its present location, the organ and pipes are contained in a box-like enclosure situated in the sanctuary's southwest corner.

¹⁰ Loose papers concerning Curtis Freewill Baptist Church," A&M 1322 (Reel #131, HAFE).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Office of County Clerk, "Deed of Trust, T. S. Lovett to A. Given, 3 July 1895," *Deed Book 79*, 266, Jefferson County Courthouse, Charles Town, West Virginia.

¹⁴ An account of the dedication can be found in an undated and unidentified clipping, A&M 1322 (Reel #131, HAFE).

¹⁵ *Storer Record* (Mar. 1907) A&M 1322 (Reel #122, HAFE).

In 1962, the National Park Service acquired the Curtis Freewill Baptist Church along with the rest of the former Storer College tract.¹⁶ From 1976 to 1987, NPS renovated the church building, changing its function from religious use to an auditorium with meeting space in the basement.¹⁷ During the building's tenure as an NPS-HFC structure, personnel have made several minor additions and alterations to the exterior of the building. These include the erection of a stair rail leading to the main entryway, the replacement of basement windows with aluminum fixed glass windows, the placement of semicircular galvanized steel window wells for openings at the basement level, and the addition of an HVAC system immediately to the west of the church's tower.¹⁸

One significant alteration to the interior sanctuary involves the placement of air ventilation openings along the ceiling. These openings allow for air to pass from the HVAC system into the room. The ventilation openings are constructed of wood, are circular in design, and feature radial arms that extend outward from a center point. Visually, the use of wood for the openings is sympathetic to the design and materials of the sanctuary room.

Alterations to the basement of the church include the placement of carpeting, the reconstruction of the vestry into a work space, and an updating of the kitchenette.¹⁹ More recent work by the craftsmen of the Historic Preservation Training Center (HPTC) include repairs to the tower masonry and sheet metal roof in 2004; repairs to the slate roof and chimneys in 2005; and repairs to the stained glass windows and exterior stucco in 2006.

B. Historical Context

Introduction

Once considered a major Protestant Christian denomination in the United States, the Freewill Baptists are now mostly recognized for their abolitionist views in the mid-nineteenth century; for their commitment to conducting missionary work that included the opening of schools for newly freed African American slaves in the years immediately following the Civil War; and for their early belief in establishing an interracial religious denomination. In order to understand the

¹⁶ Building history file for Curtis Freewill Baptist Church, Building No. 75, LCS# 03870, NPS-HAFE Maintenance Records.

¹⁷ Richard B. Hall, "Land and Buildings of Storer College and Four Privately Owned Properties," 15 Feb. 1962, Washington, D.C., Tract 106-06, HAFE.

¹⁸ The first heating and air system was installed in 1977; the handrail was installed in February 1981; and between 1983 and 1984 the slate roof was replaced by Milcar Construction Company of Hagerstown, MD. See Curtis Freewill Baptist Church, Building No. 75, LCS# 03870, NPS-HAFE Maintenance Records.

¹⁹ According to source information, the church used the large basement space for Sunday school classes. Adjacent to the large basement room was a vestry and kitchenette. Unknown publication clippings, (Reel #131, HAFE).

fervency Freewill Baptists displayed in their missionary and church building activities, the denomination must be placed within a proper historical context—one that explores the intersection of theology and practice.

At a national level, the Freewill Church helped dramatically alter the country's religious landscape in the two decades prior to the Civil War as Baptist churches split into northern and southern sects while debating the morality and ethics of slavery. At a local and regional level, the ideals of the Freewill Church were tested in the works of their missionary efforts after the war. In areas such as Harpers Ferry, isolated from the church's nexus in New England, Freewill Baptist educators, ministers, and missionaries often struggled with how to lead others to the faith and in how to maintain their own personal religious convictions. What began at Storer College as religious zeal rendered from the dual forces of the Second Great Awakening and the realization of emancipation brought about by four years of civil war, slowly declined as the founding Freewill Baptists aged and their descendants became less and less interested in carrying out missionary work. By the mid twentieth century, the Freewill Baptist denomination, though technically still overseeing the operations of Storer College, had all but abandoned the thought of an interracial church. To demonstrate the rise and decline of the Freewill Baptists in Harpers Ferry, this context will examine the historical origins of the faith, the organization of the church at Storer College, and the relationships formed between the school, the church, and the local African American population.

Origins of the Freewill Baptist Church

The rise of the Freewill Church is directly attributable to a religious schism that developed in Protestant Christianity during the seventeenth century between the followers of theologians John Calvin and Jacob Arminius. At its center, the debate between the two groups rested on whether human salvation—the election into Christian grace—was granted unconditionally by God or if it was something to be earned by choice. Those who agreed with the teachings of John Calvin, known as Calvinists, believed that humanity was a depraved creature, fallen from grace, and could only be “elected” into heaven through divine intervention. As practiced by later Protestant denominations, divine election helped form the basis of predestination, the concept that God has predetermined both the experiences of physical life and the spiritual renewal of salvation. The followers of Arminius, however, known collectively as Arminians, believed that individuals could practice faith, charity, and sacrifice to the ideals of the Christian church and could earn “election” into heaven.²⁰ The major difference between the two lines of thought was that the Arminians believed that people were free to choose whether they would participate in God's salvation and that acts of charity and faith were vehicles by which they could practice their choice. Though the debate originated in northern Europe, it quickly travelled throughout the Protestant Christian world and eventually came to divide churches in the American colonies at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

²⁰ An excellent overview of the debate between Arminians and Calvinists with a brief summation of their eschatological views can be found in Keith D. Stanglin, “Arminius and Arminianism: An Overview of Current Research” in *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe*, ed. Marijke Meij-Tolsma, Keith D. Stanglin, and Th. Marius van Leeuwen (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2009), 3-24.

The passions ignited by religious interpretation and practice during this time period is generally regarded as a major component of the Great Awakening, a Christian movement that swept through England and the Americas during the mid eighteenth century featuring large-scale revival meetings with impassioned sermons. In rural areas, revival meetings proved especially important to splintering Protestant groups, including a newly emergent gathering of self-proclaimed Arminians, who embraced the concept of “election” through faith and practiced a symbolic baptismal act rooted in the belief of being re-born into God’s grace.²¹ In this sense, the act of baptism reflected an individual’s choice to accept God and to enter into a congregation of other, like-minded persons. The combination of the Great Awakening and the tendency for Protestant churches to break apart based over concepts such as elected salvation helped lay the foundation for what would later come to be recognized as a belief in Christian free will.²²

Two particularly influential Protestant splinter groups beginning to operate in the Americas during this time period were Wesleyan Methodists and the Moravians, the former of which stressed a personal relationship between God and humanity, while promoting enlightenment concepts of mercy and justice, and the latter who preached the duty of performing missionary work to those they deemed in need of Christian charity. A basic tenet of both the Wesleyan Methodists and the Moravians was their shared belief in Arminian theology—that individuals had a choice whether to accept or reject God. Despite the presence of interpretive and practical differences among denominations, the ability of Protestant splinter groups to influence one another under an umbrella of Arminian thought reverberated for decades.²³

An example of the kinds of cross-pollination occurring among Protestant splinter groups can be found in Benjamin Randall (1749-1808), commonly accepted as being the eventual founder of the Freewill Baptist faith. Born in New Hampshire, Randall was the son of a sea captain and apprenticed at a young age to become a sail-maker, a skill that also allowed him to work as a tailor for additional income. Because of his trade, Randall often found employment in areas heavily trafficked by commercial shipping vessels and passenger ships arriving from England and the Caribbean. His access to major ports throughout New England put him in direct contact with traveling evangelical preachers of the Great Awakening who led large revival meetings in cities up and down the Colonial American coast. Randall, however, born into a conservative Puritan family with strong Calvinist beliefs, at first rejected the evangelists, especially George Whitefield, a co-founder of the Methodist faith and a purveyor of a more moderate line of Calvinism. Though not supportive of the concept of free election, Whitefield did embrace the belief that individuals could come to know God through personal reflection and the practice of charity. Much like the other famous preachers of the Great Awakening, Whitefield too, was

²¹ For a more detailed account of “election” and its relationship to Baptist thought see John J. Butler, “The Doctrine of Election” *Freewill Baptist Quarterly Magazine* vols. 1 & 2 (nd): 241-255.

²² The use of “Freewill” refers to the denomination known as the Freewill Baptist Church; “free will” relates to their general belief or faith. The Freewill Baptists were adherents to the free will faith as were other denominations such as Methodists and Moravians

²³ An excellent work recounting the efforts of Methodists and Moravians to evangelize their faiths in the Americas is Michael Shirley, *From Congregation Town to Industrial City: Cultural and Social Change in a Southern Community* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 5-30, 60-93.

recognized as an excellent orator whose skill rested in his ability to bring emotive religious responses from his congregants.²⁴ Randall, however, skeptical of preachers such as Whitefield, wrote in his personal papers that the new evangelists were “all delusion, and enthusiasm...turning the world upside down—breaking up churches—frightening the people.”²⁵

In 1770, Randall’s opinion of Whitefield changed dramatically upon hearing of the preacher’s untimely death following a revival meeting in Portsmouth. Writing again in his personal papers, Randall lamented: “The first thought, which passed through my mind, was, Whitefield is now in heaven; and I am on the road to hell. I shall never hear his voice any more. I have despised him—He was a man of God, and I have reviled, and spoke reproachfully of him. He has taught me the way to heaven; and I regarded it not.”²⁶

It is unclear what exactly prompted Randall’s sudden change in opinion concerning Whitefield’s brand of evangelical preaching, but American religion historian Scott Bryant theorizes that Randall’s subsequent conversion was almost certainly influenced by the unprecedented level of mourning witnessed throughout New England when news of Whitefield’s death emerged. “Comparing his own spiritual status to that of the esteemed evangelist proved too much for Randall to bear,” speculates Bryant, “his weeks of personal self-examination led him to conclude that his own sinfulness merited eternal damnation and separation from God.”²⁷

Not long after hearing of the evangelical preacher’s death, Randall left the Puritan Congregationalist church and entered the clergy of a New England Calvinistic Baptist sect. After serving in a New Hampshire militia unit during the American Revolution, Randall grew disenchanted with his church as he felt their acceptance of predestination was too fatalistic. Overtime, Randall came to acknowledge a personal conviction in the Arminian idea of free will.²⁸ It was after all, his belief that Whitefield had shown him the way to Grace but that he had initially rejected it. Randall increasingly placed his understanding of faith and his future preaching in terms of being able to choose salvation or damnation.

In New England’s port cities where Puritanism and Calvinism were strongly entrenched, the preaching of free will was not looked upon favorably. While it was true that Whitefield and other preachers had traveled across the region spreading their own interpretations of faith, theirs was, nonetheless, rooted in the showmanship of revivalism during the Great Awakening and

²⁴ Background information on Whitefield can be found in Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 91-95.

²⁵ The writings of Benjamin Randall are found in John Buzzell, “A Short History of the Church of Christ, Gathered at New-Durham, N.H. 1780,” in *A Religious Magazine: Containing a Short History of the Church of Christ, Gathered at New Durham, N.H. in the Year 1780* 2 (Feb. 1822): 207.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 212.

²⁷ Scott E. Bryant, “The Awakening of the Freewill Baptists: Benjamin Randall and the Founding of an American Religious Tradition,” diss., Baylor University, 2007, 85.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

rarely directly challenged the prevailing Calvinistic views of divine election. By the time Randall, a man with neither name recognition nor even a moderate following, began his preaching, the audience for hybrid or dissident religious theology had greatly dispersed within New England's larger cities. Unable to find a congregation of believers along the coast, Randall entered into the region's inland areas and into newly emergent towns along the coast to the northeast of Massachusetts.²⁹

In these more rural areas of New England, Randall found a more receptive audience to his ideas of free will and baptismal practice. Noted for their deeply religious convictions and a passionate belief in self-reliance, New England's frontier settlers, many of whom were small farmers, finally gave the upstart preacher a venue for extolling his personal religious views. The region's settlers were also regarded for their strong belief in personal and continual education, a belief that would shape free will congregants for generations. Occasionally academically trained or more often than not, self-educated, rural settlers often met to discuss politics, religion, or matters of general philosophy.³⁰ All of these factors probably contributed to the acceptance of Randall's nascent Baptist sect. American historian Nathan Hatch argues that alternative religious sects such as the Freewill Baptists and other denominations flourished in the north's rural areas precisely because of their tendency to offer intellectual presence while also playing to their internalized concepts of self-sufficiency and moral righteousness.

[Dissident Protestants] found traditional sources of authority anachronistic and found themselves groping toward similar definitions of egalitarian religion. In a culture that increasingly balked at vested interests, symbols of hierarchy, and timeless authorities, a remarkable number of people would wake up one morning to find it self-evident that the priesthood of all believers meant just that – religion of, by, and for the people.³¹

At his death in 1808, Randall had helped establish Freewill churches throughout New England and directly influenced Baptist churches as far away as Georgia and North Carolina. While "free will" faith was undoubtedly gaining in popularity, it was certainly not the only Protestant sect to make substantial additions to their congregational rolls, as Wesleyan Methodists, Moravians and other splinter Baptist and Anglican groups all vied for members in the years following the end of the American Revolution. As the young nation wrestled with balancing political conflict between an emerging industrialist system and a largely agrarian population, and as transportation networks began to extend into previously isolated areas, the groundwork for another religious revival in the form of a Second Great Awakening was laid. Unlike the previous religious revival which subtly flirted with free will so as not to incite the scorn of mainline Protestant churches, the

²⁹ Frederick Levi Wiley, *Life and Influence of the Reverend Benjamin Randall: Founder of the Free Baptist Denomination* (Boston: American Baptist Publication Society, 1915), 49-62.

³⁰ The importance that Freewill Baptists placed on education in religious and daily life is evidenced in the section labeled "Education Society, in Albert Burgess and John T. Ward, *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia: Historical and Biographical* (Chicago: The Women's Temperance Publication Association, 1889), 180-182.

³¹ Nathan O. Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," *The Journal of American History* 67 (Dec. 1980): 547.

new revival movement fully embraced Arminianism and its often passionate displays of rhetorical excess.

Throughout the early nineteenth century, large-scale camp meetings, week-long revivals, and mass baptisms occurred in rural areas and small communities alike. The spread of Baptist theology also reignited itself across the American South, where a generation before a young preacher named Paul Palmer tried unsuccessfully to establish his own interpretation of free will Arminianism. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Freewill Baptist churches existed in both New England and the American South. Though the two free will groups only participated in theological discussions on a limited level, they, along with several other Baptist sects, considered themselves linked together by their general acceptance of Arminianism and in a shared belief in the restorative powers of adult baptism. By the early 1830s, and in spite of a few lingering theological differences outside of their belief in free will, Baptist churches across the United States—including New England, the South, and parts of Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa—joined the Home Mission Society and the Foreign Mission Society, two organizations dedicated to preaching the Protestant Christian Gospel and to building churches.³² Freewill churches that agreed to participate in the societies also agreed to send delegates to a national Freewill Baptist General Conference.³³

The Second Great Awakening and the spread of Freewill Baptist theology across the country had profound effects on the church in New England and even helped, in some part, to help shape the religious landscape of the country. Filled with a spirit of renewal and regeneration from extended revival meetings, the northern churches began to codify its principles of belief. Primary among these—and the one that would reverberate across the country—was the position that slavery was immoral and was a sacrilege upon the basis Christianity. By 1834, a group of Freewill Baptists in New England even started an antislavery society and were so successful in their arguments for abolition that, by 1837, the Freewill Baptist General Conference resolved “that slavery is system of tyranny...more cruel and wicked than the oppression and wrong practiced by any other civilized nation in the known world.”³⁴ Upon hearing the declaration, many southern churches left the conference immediately, while others remained, perhaps still believing in the overall righteousness of their shared missionary work.³⁵

Debates over slavery continued to dominate the general conference and the work of the mission societies until 1845, when Baptist churches in the American South officially left the conference to form the Southern Baptist Convention.³⁶ The issue of slavery is reflective of the conflict

³² The Freewill Baptist Church’s primary involvement with the Foreign Mission Society centered on the missions to India. Burgess and Ward, 414.

³³ Information regarding the conflicts between delegates in the general conference is discussed in Burgess and Ward, 20.

³⁴ As transcribed in Burgess and Ward, 20.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ For background on the Southern Baptist Convention, see Noll, 487-488.

found at the intersection of politics and religious theology. Though the issue finally managed to formally divide Baptist sects that had, up until then, believed in the unity that free will faith offered, the problems of enslavement had hounded American religious discourse since the eighteenth century. Even George Whitefield, who on one hand influenced and invigorated people like Benjamin Randall and his free will followers, often found himself under attack for being an unrepentant slaveholder.

No longer burdened by internal debates over the morality of slavery, the Freewill Baptist Church engaged more actively in promoting abolitionism and the education of free persons of color. Two clergymen who heavily impacted the church's stand against slavery were John Chaney and Silas Curtis. Chaney, a preacher from Farmington, Maine was instrumental in writing the state's first antislavery resolution, while Curtis, of Concord, New Hampshire was a treasurer for the Home Mission Society, where he promoted the education of free persons.³⁷ Together with other like-minded persons within the northern churches, Chaney and Curtis helped persuade congregations to fully support abolition efforts. In 1861, a number of Freewill Baptists, inspired by Chaney and Curtis, joined the ranks of the Union Army as either soldiers and as chaplains. Many other church members, who did not join the army due to advanced age or physical condition, travelled to areas secured by northern forces during the war such as Tennessee and the Carolina coasts to open schools and churches for newly freed slaves.

While the Freewill church sought to build schools for all newly freed slaves, they also strove to educate freed African American men to become ministers within their faith. The inclusion of persons of color into denominational clergy was not unheard of by the mid nineteenth century, but the fervency with which Freewill Baptists took to train freedmen was certainly noteworthy. In the years following the close of the Civil War, numerous African American men were preaching in Freewill churches with largely white congregants in parts of New England and the upper Midwest. Perhaps in keeping with the egalitarian principles of early Baptists or done so as to have African American preachers ready to export into the South following emancipation, the Freewill church's acceptance and ability to place African Americans in positions of power within the church's hierarchy was atypical of many denominations, even those who also carried a banner of missionary work. From the years just prior to the Civil War through to Reconstruction, white and black Freewill Baptists appeared to have negotiated shared spaces within the faith's religious organization.³⁸

From 1863 to the end of the war in 1865, the church continued to focus a great deal of attention on the cause of the freedmen. "The denomination, true to its well-known friendship for the oppressed, did not neglect the providential call," recalled Reverend Gideon Burgess years later in the *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia*.³⁹ While the majority of congregants remained in relatively rural

³⁷ Burgess and Ward, 109, 146.

³⁸ The *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia* is the best reference to understanding the faith's outward opinion of race and religion in the late nineteenth century. Interestingly, the work does not identify anyone by race; instead, it reinforces the idea of Baptist brethren. While formal publications indicate the equality of race within the Freewill worldview, private letters often indicate other ideas.

³⁹ Burgess and Ward, 275.

areas of New England, the work of the church veered more and more to areas outside of their immediate domain. It was within this chain of events that immediately following the end of the Civil War, two Freewill Baptist clergymen Alexander Morrell, a prominent evangelist of the faith, and Nathan C. Brackett, an educator and former chaplain in the Union Army, arrived in Harpers Ferry to conduct missionary work on behalf of the Freewill denomination and in conjunction with the Home Missionary Society.⁴⁰

Personal letters from missionary workers at the time reveal that the Freewill Baptists faced great hardships working in former slave-holding states as they were routinely targeted for harassment by locals and had to deal with a federal government largely unprepared for the bureaucratic challenges brought on by emancipation. Along the Carolina coasts and in much of the Deep South, Freewill missionaries abandoned their religious and educational plans in the face of belligerent anti-northern sentiment and entrenched local racism. While writing of the difficulties he, as a former Union officer, faced from some of the Harpers Ferry locals, Brackett also acknowledged that there were far more hostile areas where one could be working.⁴¹ Cognizant of the challenges ahead and the need to focus their energies, the denomination reorganized their missionary work into two divisions: the Shenandoah Mission headquartered in Harpers Ferry, which handled most of the mission work along the east coast, and the Cairo Mission, based in Cairo, Illinois, which oversaw operations in Kentucky and Tennessee.⁴²

In 1865, as Brackett scouted the Harpers Ferry area for a suitable location upon which to base their missionary enterprise, the mission soon turned its attention to Camp Hill, a highpoint of land overlooking the town. Prior to the Civil War, several former buildings associated with the United States Armory were located along the hill. In various stages of disrepair following the damage done by years of military conflict, the buildings nonetheless enticed the two missionaries to inquire about possibly retaining the vacant buildings and land for use as a normal school. Brackett, who incidentally held two positions, one as a missionary with the Freewill Baptist Church and the other with the newly formed Freedmen's Bureau, used his influence with both to secure Camp Hill and its buildings from the War Department and to begin populating a school with the help of the church.⁴³ Had Brackett not been in favor with the army, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the Freewill church, it is highly possible that the future Storer College would never have materialized.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Jared Maurice Arter, *Echoes from a Pioneer Life* (Atlanta: A.B. Caldwell Publishing Company, 1922), 24-25.

⁴¹ Brackett letters in folder HFT-00066, HAFE.

⁴² Burgess and Ward, 275.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 625.

⁴⁴ More information concerning the beginning and growth of Storer College can be found in Heritage Landscapes, LLC, for the National Park Service, "Camp Hill Cultural Resource Landscape Report, Harpers Ferry National Park," unpublished report, Harpers Ferry National Park, June 2009. See also: Horizon Research Consultants, Inc., Gloria Gozdzik, Principal Investigator, "A Historic Resource Study for Storer College, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia," unpublished report, Morgantown, West Virginia, 2002; and Dawne Raines Burke, "Storer College: A Hope for Redemption in the Shadow of Slavery, 1865-1955," diss., Virginia Polytechnic Institute &

Organizing a Church in Harpers Ferry

An important distinction to make concerning the organization of Protestant churches is to recognize that a church, itself, is not necessarily tied to a specific place. Instead, a church is a gathering of congregants under a shared denominational or sectarian belief. From this perspective, a church can exist several years or more prior to the construction of an actual physical building. In Harpers Ferry, the earliest meetings of Freewill congregants can be traced to efforts made by Nathan C. Brackett and Alexander Morrell to establish Storer College in the years following the war. Having secured the former armory buildings on Camp Hill for use as a school in 1867, the first meeting of Freewill Baptists occurred on November 12 of that year.⁴⁵ From 1867 to 1881, church meetings were held in various buildings on Storer's campus, usually in what are now recognized as the Brackett and Morrell Houses. Upon completion of Anthony Hall in 1881, church services were held in the chapel located in the south wing of the building.⁴⁶

From 1867 to 1880, the Harpers Ferry congregation belonged to what was known as the Virginia Free Baptist Association. After 1880, it was renamed the Virginia and West Virginia Free Baptist Association to reflect the denomination's congregational expansion. The association was further divided into three main member groups: Winchester, James River, and Harpers Ferry. In 1880, Harpers Ferry included seven churches: Harpers Ferry, Martinsburg, Charles Town, Smithfield, Sheperdstown, Kerneysville, and Pleasant Valley. By 1889, Harpers Ferry expanded into Maryland with a church each in Hagerstown and Baltimore and into Virginia with a church in Lovettsville. The 1889 total membership for Harpers Ferry's ten churches was six hundred and forty one.⁴⁷

The idea for erecting a separate church building in Harpers Ferry was most likely born in the summer of 1887, when a granite monument to Reverend Alexander Morrell was placed "in front of the Lockwood [building]."⁴⁸ An early sponsor of the Shenandoah Mission and a leading proponent for the creation of Storer College, Morrell was also plagued with poor health, a condition that eventually facilitated his departure from Harpers Ferry soon after the school formed. When Morrell passed away in 1885, Storer's trustees felt obliged to honor his memory with the erection of the granite obelisk, funded mostly through private donations.⁴⁹ Though his time of service at Storer was shortened by his health concerns, Morrell was still remembered for his dedication in helping organize the first gatherings of Freewill Baptists in Harpers Ferry along

State University, 2004, 406. This work was later edited by Michael Slaven and privately published as: *An American Phoenix: A History of Storer College from Slavery to Desegregation, 1865-1955*.

⁴⁵ Though the Freewill Baptists officially met for the first time on November 12, 1867, Nathan C. Brackett had held Sunday school classes on Camp Hill since 1865. Burgess and Ward, 631.

⁴⁶ For background information concerning the early years of the Harpers Ferry congregation and its meeting locations, see Burgess and Ward, 594.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 687.

⁴⁸ The Morrell Monument would later be moved to the lawn of Curtis Freewill Baptist Church at an unknown date. *Pioneer Press* n.v. (Jun. 1887).

⁴⁹ "Storer College Book No. 1," A&M 1322 (Reel #131, HAFE).

with Reverend Nathan C. Brackett. Perhaps swayed by the memorialization of Morrell and enduring the limitations of having met in the chapel of Anthony Hall for the previous six years, trustees and school officials agreed that the time had come for Harpers Ferry to have its own separate Freewill Baptist church building.⁵⁰

On September 29, 1889, during a meeting of the general conference held in Harpers Ferry, a cornerstone and foundation for the church building were placed on land near the intersection of Jackson and Fillmore streets, just a short distance from the main gates to Storer College.⁵¹ Work on the church proceeded very slowly and was often marked by financial problems and periods of poor planning. The Reverend Ethan W. Porter, who served as both an early pastor to the church and as a teacher at Storer, found the setbacks particularly troubling. “A church needs a building and facilities,” Porter told the congregation still holding services in the chapel of Anthony Hall. Noting that many of Storer’s student body were leaving the Freewill church for other denominations with actual buildings and formal programs, Porter warned that the unfinished church building across the street might eventually lead to the “religious demoralization” of the campus.⁵² Even though Storer College had a small chapel in Anthony Hall and the curriculum included religious studies, both of which were overseen by Freewill Baptist ministers, the school did not have a formal building from which the Baptists could evangelize their faith. This situation was certainly not lost on Brackett when he noted that the large number of African American residents in Harpers Ferry and Bolivar could be well-served by an actual Freewill Baptist church and that the denomination could add to its membership roles.

The delays encountered in building the church were representative of the financial troubles that affected Storer College throughout its operation. The relationship between the Freewill Baptist Conference and the school was often hampered by the hierarchical nature of formal religious organization and the educational requirements and financial limitations of the college. The conference, which was dependent upon tithes and donations for its day to day operations, often saw its monies pass through a number of different organizations and departments within the church itself, including mission societies, education societies, and various associations. Likewise, Storer College, whose operation was overseen by a group of Freewill Baptist trustees and whose funding came through many of the very same societies and associations, was unable to accrue financial debt to contribute to the completion of a church building even though it was to be the prime benefactor of its eventual construction. By 1895, nearly six years since the cornerstone was first erected, an exasperated Porter wrote to members of the Freewill denomination: “If there are friends away who are holding some of the lord’s money, and want to aid the friends here, and thereby contribute to one of the most important interests in our home missionary work, now is the time, and the Harpers Ferry F.B. [Freewill Baptist] Church building is the worthy object.”⁵³

⁵⁰ A recollection of Alexander Morrell and his time at Harpers Ferry can be found in Arter, 26-27.

⁵¹ “A Journal on the Work at Harpers Ferry and Among the Churches in West Virginia,” A&M 1322 (Reel #131, HAFE).

⁵² “Ibid.

⁵³ The quote is attributed to Reverend E.W. Porter from an unidentified newspaper clipping dated 1895. The word “Star,” however, is vaguely recognized on the header and the paper may be the *Morning Star*, the

Later that year, the estate of Silas Curtis donated five hundred dollars to the completion of the Harpers Ferry church, but on two conditions. The first was that the church be named Curtis Freewill Baptist Church, and second that if the church ever ceased to be associated with Freewill Baptists that the sum donation be distributed to their other churches in West Virginia and Virginia.⁵⁴ After the trustees and conference agreed to the terms of the estate, other donations were received and the church building was finally completed by the spring of 1896.

Per the agreement the church building was dedicated to Silas Curtis, a prominent member of the Freewill Baptist convention. Born in Concord, New Hampshire in 1804, Curtis converted to the Freewill denomination in 1821 and became an ordained minister in 1827. During his career as a minister, Curtis preached throughout New England and headed congregations in Augusta, Maine and Lowell, Massachusetts. In addition to his ministerial duties, he was a founding member of the Freewill Baptist's educational society and served sixteen years as treasurer for the denomination's Home Mission Society. Both the educational and mission societies played important roles in helping organize and fund secondary schools and normal colleges for African American students.⁵⁵ Silas Curtis, along with John Chaney and the memory of the faith's early missionary and charitable works, dominated the church's internal history.

Curtis Freewill Baptist Church, Storer College, and the African American Community

Though legally separated by title and deed for most of their histories, Curtis Church and Storer College existed in a reciprocal relationship based on their association with the Freewill Baptist faith. Located directly across from the college's main gates on Fillmore Street, the church building was designed to cater to the religious needs of Storer College's students and to bring in new members from the surrounding African American communities. Though Storer was founded by Freewill Baptists and its board of trustees was also comprised of members from the denomination, the school's original charter was written to downplay the role the church had in day to day affairs. The reason for this was that the federal government was reluctant to grant land such as that found on Camp Hill to religious denominations, which may have in turn, alienated the very populations they were tasked to help because of their dogmatic approaches to religion and education.⁵⁶

Trying to balance the needs of Storer College with the desire to reach a larger segment of the local community would become an enduring problem for the church. Following the departure Porter, who was performing two tasks as pastor and instructor at Storer, the responsibility to prepare Sunday worship services fell to other faculty members of the college, particularly to

newspaper of the Freewill Baptist Church in New Hampshire. Within the article, E.W. Porter is listed as being the pastor of the Harpers Ferry church. A&M 1322 (Reel #131, HAFE).

⁵⁴ "Conditions of M.B. Smith and J. Howard Gruby," A&M 1322 (Reel #131, HAFE).

⁵⁵ Burgess and Ward, 145-146.

⁵⁶ Information on the founding of Storer College and the church's plans to educate African Americans can be found in Kate J Anthony, *Storer College: Brief Historic Sketch, 1867-1891* (Boston: Morning Star Publishing, 1891), 1-14; "A Talk with a Southern Educator," folder HFT-00066, HAFE.

either Storer president Henry T. McDonald (active 1899-1944) or to other teachers who happened to be trained ministers such as John Newcomer.⁵⁷ For a church that hoped to reach out to the community and bring in new members, the presence of Storer faculty in the pulpit only reinforced the idea that the Curtis church was run by and for the college.

Only once during the history of the church was the congregation led by someone not directly tied to the college. Reverend Jared Arter, born into slavery on a plantation near Charles Town, West Virginia, and an early graduate and former instructor of Storer College, returned to Harpers Ferry in 1916 to assume pastorate of the church. According to the letters of Storer's president, Henry McDonald, Reverend Arter was to receive fifty dollars per month, to be paid from the donations of the school's faculty and from tithes of the church's twenty members.⁵⁸ McDonald also asked that the Home Mission Society, which had originally supported the founding of the church, contribute to the Arter's salary.⁵⁹

The retention of Arter as pastor allowed Storer faculty to attend to the educational needs of the students and helped foster a "revival" type atmosphere for the church that benefited both the school and the local African American community. Elizabeth McDonald, the wife of Henry McDonald, recalling the large crowds of townspeople and students at Arter's first weeklong church meeting, wrote:

in a school like this it is not merely a matter of saving souls, but it is saving leaders who are going out to powerfully touch for weal or woe the other souls in their community. And so when our best singers, football and baseball players, our strongest students in all departments, put themselves on the right side, it means that just so many more safe leaders are given to the colored race and to humanity.⁶⁰

For a denomination that had sought, since the mid nineteenth century, to include African Americans as members with its ranks, the placement of Arter as the pastor in Harpers Ferry must have appeared to be a fulfillment of the promises of Silas Curtis and John Chaney.

The air of goodwill between the church, the community, and the school, however, only lasted for a few short years. As noted in his autobiography, Arter acknowledged that "in the early summer

⁵⁷ Information regarding the religious training of Storer's faculty is from "Biographical Sketches of Storer Faculty," folder HFD-1099, HAFE.

⁵⁸ A discussion of the financial agreement between the church and Reverend Arter is in Mary Johnson, "Park Building 75 (Curtis Freewill Baptist Church), Fillmore and Jackson Streets, Camp Hill, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park: Final Report," unpublished, Harpers Ferry National Park (Dec. 1995): 24-26. The primary source citation from the Johnson report is identified as "Henry McDonald to Henry L. Morehouse," 11 Jul. 1916, A&M 1322, folder 1916, Box 1, Storer College Collection, West Virginia and Regional Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Johnson theorizes that the Home Mission Society balked at paying Arter's salary as it is not listed within their accounting records. See "Statements of Salaries, 1911-1920 (Reel #131, HAFE).

⁶⁰ Elizabeth McDonald, wife of President McDonald to the Home Mission Society in 1916, quoted in Arter, 64.

of 1921 the harmony between the church and school that had been so cordial in relation to the pastor was now becoming disturbed and discordant. It was evident in the interest of peace, harmony and good-will, that a separation between church and pastor should take place.”⁶¹ The reason for the split between Storer College and Arter are unknown as the pastor does not elaborate, but it may rest in the same problem that stunted the completion of the church in the first place—the general disorganization of the Freewill denomination.

For most of its existence prior to the twentieth century, the Freewill church remained a rural-based entity strongly dedicated to its missionary societies. In 1911, however, the Freewill Baptist denomination joined the Northern Baptist Convention, an organized group of Baptist churches that had, since the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, remained independent of one another due to theological differences dating back to the debates between Arminians and Calvinists. The reconciliation between the Freewill church and the convention led to a great deal of confusion over just what was owned by the denomination. Though Freewill churches continued to operate under their historic name, they were bound by the organization of the new convention to act in financial concert with other Baptist churches. Missionary work and the disbursement of funds was one such example. In spite of holding different denominational names, churches that entered into the convention needed to demonstrate financial well-being. Complicating matters was the fact that the Freewill denomination kept intact its internal councils, associations, and general conference, along with its historical affiliation with the Home Missionary Society.

It was in this confusion that questions arose as to who owned title of ownership for the Curtis church building and its parcel. In a June 6, 1913 letter, Alfred W. Anthony, the Secretary of the General Conference of Freewill Baptists, encouraged the trustees of Storer College to reassume title of the deed for the church and its associated land lot. “The church,” Anthony stated, “should not hesitate to let the college become the custodian of the property.”⁶² From July to August of that year, correspondence between Anthony and Storer president Henry T. McDonald indicates that the General Conference approved of the transfer and states that a new deed should be filed with the clerk’s office in Jefferson County.⁶³

In 1950, the Northern Baptist Convention changed its name again and reorganized as the American Baptist Convention, reflecting the convention’s growth outside of the northern United States. Within a year, likely in response to the new convention and the auditing of finances, Freewill conference leaders once more raised the issue of ownership relating to Curtis church. Inexplicably, the school never filed the deed mentioned in 1913. In a letter dated August 2, 1951, Harry S. Meyers, acting on behalf of the Secretary for United Stewardship Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States and Canada, a part of the Freewill general conference

⁶¹ Arter wrote his autobiography shortly after departing Harpers Ferry. Upon leaving Curtis Church, he accepted a job as head of the ministerial department at Simmons University in Kentucky. Before beginning his new position, Arter became very sick; it is unknown if he recovered from his sickness and resumed his ministerial work. Arter, 68-71.

⁶² Alfred W. Anthony to H.H. Winters, 6 Jun. 1913, folder HFT-00064, HAFE.

⁶³ Anthony to Henry T. McDonald, 19 Aug. 1913, folder HFT-00064, HAFE.

that oversaw finances and educational funding, wrote to L.D. Johnson, the acting president of Storer College, inquired about the transfer of the deed. He noted that such an action would, once again, require the approval of the council's board.⁶⁴

On January 16, 1952, the deed for the church formally passed back to Storer College. According to the deed, the church property had originally been granted to the Freewill Baptists in the 1890s so that it could serve both the school and the larger community. As the general conference notes, however, by 1952 the local congregation "ceased to hold religious meetings in said building and disbanded."⁶⁵ Ultimately, the transfer of the church back to Storer College had little impact, as the college closed its doors in 1955.⁶⁶ For Freewill Baptists, the twentieth century was an era of transition. Still comprised of rural churches in New England and the Mid-West and still funding schools such as Storer College, the church was finding itself increasingly caught up in the bureaucracy of an expanding national convention.

The loss of personal connectedness between the Freewill church and its missionary activities in the twentieth century also may have affected the dedication church members once had for the cause of racial integration. While underexplored in terms of historical scholarship, it appears that after 1911 formation of the Northern Baptist Convention, Freewill Baptist churches in the north, especially in New England, continued to serve majority white congregations, while Freewill churches in the South became almost entirely associated with African Americans. In her recollections of living in Harpers Ferry, Mary Louise Newcomer Moore, the daughter of Storer teacher Celeste Newcomer and Freewill Reverend John Newcomer recalled that her family attended services at the Methodist church near the school during the mid to late 1920s. Curtis church, she noted, was attended only for "special services and it was the student church, of course, but I think some people in the community, colored people in the community, attended it too."⁶⁷ When asked if whites were members of Curtis, Moore responded: "no, there were no white people attending the black church."⁶⁸

For a school founded by the Freewill church and overseen for decades by people trained as ministers within the denomination, it is interesting that the families of white Freewill Baptist ministers attended other churches instead of joining services at the actual Freewill church in Harpers Ferry. The racialization of Harpers Ferry's Freewill Baptists into a black church opens a window into the inner workings of the faith. In spite of the egalitarian and racially tolerant

⁶⁴ Harry S. Meyers to L.D. Johnson, 2 Aug. 1951, folder HFT-00064, HAFE.

⁶⁵ The quote is found in Mary Johnson, "Park Building 75 (Curtis Freewill Baptist Church), Fillmore and Jackson Streets, Camp Hill, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park: Final Report." Unpublished, Harpers Ferry National Park (Dec. 1995): 27-28. The primary source citation from Johnson's report is identified as General Conference of Free Baptists to the President and Trustees of Storer College, 16 Jan. 1952, folder "Deed-Curtis Baptist Church 1950," Box 46, A&M 1322, West Virginia and Regional Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.

⁶⁶ "A Negro College Decides to Close," *New York Times* 7 Jun. 1955.

⁶⁷ Mary Louise Newcomer Moore interviewed by Patricia Chickering, 10 Oct. 1991, 23-25.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

principles espoused by earlier members of the Freewill church, the next generation was willing to accept if not produce in their own right, segregation of religious study on the basis of race. By having white Freewill ministers act as leaders of a black church, which their own families did not attend, certainly may have propagated a sense of paternalism that alienated the local African American community and possibly even the students of Storer College.

Conclusion

The continual difficulties faced by Curtis church—from financial issues to problems finding members—reflect the rise and eventual decline of the Freewill church as an independent Baptist denomination. Once affected with a missionary zeal through the First and Second Great Awakenings, the faith, as it grew older, failed to maintain its evangelical spirit. By the 1920s the newer generations of Freewill Baptists, whose familial and historic roots were in New England or the upper Midwest, often appeared either disinterested in the Harpers Ferry church or perhaps just lacked the commitment of earlier supporters. The faith, which once argued so passionately for equality between all persons and whose staunch abolitionist views helped split the Baptist church into regional sects before the Civil War, had come by the early twentieth century to embody religious segregation with white congregations in the North and black congregations in the South. Once the Freewill denomination reconciled with its northern Baptist brethren in 1911, standalone Freewill churches in New England and the upper Midwest continued to be associated with white, largely rural populations. In the South and Mid-Atlantic, however, Freewill churches often became “free will” by historical footnote only, having joined predominately black Baptist denominations such as the National Baptist Convention, USA, or the Church of God of Christ.⁶⁹

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

- 1. Architectural character:** The linear body of the Curtis Freewill Baptist Church is positioned on an east-west axis, a common architectural footprint for Protestant churches.⁷⁰ The exterior structural elements of the building include brick walls with a shale foundation. Located at the southeast corner of the building, the church tower incorporates elements of Gothic Revival architecture as evidenced in the battlemented parapet and arched entryway. The topography of the site features a slight slope dropping from north to south. This change in grade allows two separate entrances into the building’s basement.

- 2. Condition of Fabric:** Good.

⁶⁹ An excellent overview on African American churches in the United States is Charles Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 20-48.

⁷⁰ Herbert Gottfried and Jan Jennings, *American Vernacular Buildings and Interiors, 1870-1960* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985), 267.

B. Description of Exterior

1. **Overall dimensions:** The exterior of the church building is approximately 37'-0" x 58'-0".
2. **Foundations:** The foundation walls are constructed of mortar set, random-coursed shale and whitewashed. The foundation walls on the east and south elevations are covered in stucco. On the south elevation, the stucco finish is struck to resemble cut stone. Both the south and east elevations face public areas, the east side of the building is adjacent to Jackson Street. The south elevation also serves as the main entrance.
3. **Walls:** The walls of the church building are load-bearing brick set with a flush mortar joint. Brickwork on the main body of the church building (the sanctuary portion) can be divided into three sections: the area below the window opening, the area between the window openings, and the area above the window openings. Brickwork below the windows is in a common bond pattern. Between the windows, brick pilasters are used as a decorative feature and a running bond is utilized. Above the windows, brick arches cap the openings. The arches are connected by a course of brickwork set in a basket weave pattern. A course of brick dentils is present just underneath the eaves.
4. **Tower:** With the exception of the upper portion of the tower, the tower's brickwork is similar to that found on the church's main body. At the upper portion, the brickwork recesses where the louver vents are located. Above the vents, the brick is patterned into a saw tooth design. The tower is capped by a brick battlement, which is flashed with metal and surrounds a low sloping, pyramidal, sheet metal roof. A sandstone marker located above the main entrance reads "Curtis Freewill Baptist Church 1894." In 2004, the park, assisted by the Historic Preservation Training Center (HPTC), stabilized the tower masonry interior and installed a new sheet metal roof and flashing.
5. **Structural systems, framing:** The load bearing brick walls support the building's truss and rafter system. The shale foundation supports the floor joists for the sanctuary.
6. **Openings:**
 - a. **Doorways and doors:** In contrast to the rest of the Gothic Revival design features of the church tower, the main entryway is more reflective of Colonial Revival style. The recessed entry follows a three part plan comprised of two doors capped by a fanlight. Each door is symmetrical to the other and has four raised panels bound by compound molding. The molding detail is attached to the door with finishing nails. The exterior locking mechanism appears original to the entry and consists of one turn

knob with a key hole underneath. The locking mechanisms on the interior side of the entry doors are notable for their intricate engraved design work. The front steps are quarried limestone.

Two exterior doors leading to the basement are also located on the south elevation. The first door is immediately west of the church tower and is defined by a single raised panel on its lower half and a single light glass on its upper half. The second door is located at the western end of the south elevation and is recognized as a six panel steel door. A shed roof shelters each doorway. Though the doorways are part of the historic design of the building, neither of the basement doors is original to the church building.

- b. Windows:** Window openings for Curtis Memorial Church are found on four distinct sections of the building: basement, sanctuary, gable, and tower.

There are eleven window openings for the basement section of the building. Three double hung windows with six-over-six lights are found on the façade (south elevation) of the building. The north elevation features five double hung windows with six-over-six lights. Two small fixed window lights are found on the east elevation, while one six-over-six light window is present on the west elevation. All eleven of the basement windows are of aluminum construction, most likely installed in the 1990s.⁷¹ Concrete lintels and sills frame the double hung windows found on the east and west elevations.

There are a total of eleven distinct window openings for the sanctuary section of the building and one tripartite window configuration. The windows located on the sanctuary section of the building incorporate a mixture of stained and painted glass. The south elevation features four single-hung windows and the north elevation features five single-hung windows. Each opening on the north and south elevation consists of one fixed, multicolored stained glass light with a hung yellow tinted glass light underneath. Each multicolored stained glass light is imprinted with the name of another Freewill Baptist Church, which presumably donated the funds for the window.⁷² The east elevation contains two single-hung windows of the same construction as those found on the north and south elevations. The east elevation also features a tripartite window

⁷¹ Harpers Ferry Center work orders often list work performed to windows with mentioning what exactly was done. Based on field observation, the windows appear to date to the 1990s.

⁷² The lights read exactly as follows: A.F.C.E. Main St Lewiston, MI; Y.P. Miss. Soc.; Mt Vernon Lowell, Mass; C.E. Elmwood Ave Providence, RI; C.E. Portland, ME; A.C.F. Bangor, ME; Veney, Franklin; A.F.C.E. Lynn, Mass; C.E. Concord, NH; Y.P. Miss. Soc. Amesbury, Mass; C.E. Harpers Ferry, WV.

configuration consisting of two single-hung windows capped by a seven light yellow-tinted glass fan window. Wood archivolt surrounds openings on the east façade of the sanctuary section. Wood architraves surround all other openings on the sanctuary section. According to NPS-HFC building maintenance records, the stained-glass windows in the sanctuary were replaced, restored, and/or reglazed in mid-1980s by Shenandoah Studio of Glass, Inc. of Front Royal, Virginia.⁷³

Two end gables are located on the east and west elevations of the church building. One fan light and one diamond-shaped louver vent are located within the west gable. The east gable holds one diamond-shaped louver vent.

Located at the southeast corner of the building, the church tower features four diamond-shaped windows, each with four distinct lights. A fanlight is positioned above the church's main entryway at the tower's south elevation. The entryway fanlight has two a two part radial plan, one that holds six lights and a second that holds twelve lights. Another fanlight is present on the east elevation of the tower and features seven irregular shaped lights. All windows on the tower have the same yellow-tinted glass seen on the sanctuary portion of the building. A rectangular louver vent is located above each of the tower's diamond-shaped windows.

In 2005-2006, the stained glass and gable end windows were replaced by the HPTC as part of a commemoration project for the centennial of the second meeting of the Niagara Movement, which convened at Storer College in 1906.

7. **Roof:** The roof of the Curtis Church is a side gable type. The ridgeline follows the main east-west axis. Slate shingles cover the roof's sheathing. The majority of the shingles are square cut with the exception of four courses of octagonal patterned shingles that horizontally bisect the northern and southern roof slopes. Each end gable is covered in a mixture of squared or scalloped slate shingles. The slate roof with its chimneys, snow guards, gutters, downspouts, and flashings were heavily repaired during 2005 by the HPTC for the park as part of the Niagara Movement centennial commemoration.

C. Description of Interior

1. **Plan:** The church's sanctuary follows a side entry plan with center aisle. The basement portion of the building utilizes an open floor plan. The seating section consists of fourteen pews on each side of the center aisle. The pews are slightly angled towards the altar to ensure a direct sightline to the pulpit. The altar and

⁷³ Curtis Freewill Baptist Church, Building 75, LCS# 03870, NPS-HAFE Maintenance Records.

pulpit areas of the sanctuary do not appear to be original to the church building. It is probable that Storer College's trustees removed both before NPS assumed ownership of the property.

According to documentation found in faculty minutes, the seating arrangements of college functions inside in the church followed a special set of prescribed rules, deferring to academic status and gender. Storer College faculty members sat in the front of the church towards the pulpit, while college students sat behind them. The rear portion of the sanctuary was reserved for high school students and no empty seats or pews were to be left between the college students and those from the younger grades. School rules also dictated that boys sit on the right side of the sanctuary and that girls sit on the left.⁷⁴

2. **Flooring:** Within the sanctuary, the floor is composed of tongue-and-groove pine planks 3 ½ "wide. Carpet covers the aisles between the church pews and areas at the altar and at the choir section. The basement portion of the building is carpeted.
3. **Wall and ceiling finish:** The interior walls of the sanctuary feature bead board wainscoting capped with chair rail trim. The surface area above the wainscot is smooth plaster. Pine boards form the ceiling of the sanctuary.
4. **Doorways and doors:** The only interior doors located within the building are in the basement section. These are modern doors installed during NPS renovations when the basement was converted to a meeting space with a kitchenette.
5. **Trim and woodwork:** Window and door trim is marked by the use of ogee and bead detail. Bulls-eye medallions form the intersection of the trim work. Both the trim and medallions are common, stock architectural items for the period.
6. **Mechanical:** Few original mechanical system artifacts remain extant in the church building with the exception being the heating registers located periodically across the pine flooring. An excerpt from the Storer Record indicates that electricity was installed in the church in 1907:

The Curtis Memorial Church has been lighted Sunday nights by electricity since the beginning of the new year, through the generosity of the Harpers Ferry electric company. Two Fine wood posts at either side of the pulpit supporting fine ground-glass lights were turned in the industrial building by J.W. McKinney and presented to the church by the college.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ "Faculty Minutes, 1922-1940" (Reel #131, HAFE).

⁷⁵ *Storer Record*, Mar. 1907 (Reel #131, HAFE).

The glass lights and turned wood posts are no longer present in the church. Three ceramic electric insulators, however, are still affixed to the east side of the church tower.

Since the 1970s, NPS-HFC has continued to update the building's heating and air conditioning systems, plumbing connections, and electrical wiring. One of the more visual additions to the sanctuary's mechanical equipment concerned the installation of suspended canister light fixtures with cut-out crosses on the ceiling.⁷⁶

PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Archives and Government Collections

Harpers Ferry National Park (HAFE). Archives and Collections

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⁷⁶ According to Harpers Ferry National Park maintenance records, Sam Gonzales, Inc. of Springfield, Virginia installed the light fixtures at the church in 1983. See "Contract 25," Aug. 1983, CX-3000-2-0041.

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PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of the Curtis Freewill Baptist Church was undertaken in 2010 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) under the direction of Richard O'Connor, Chief, Heritage Documentation Programs. The project was cosponsored by HABS, Catherine C. Lavoie, Chief; Harpers Ferry National Historical Park (HAFE), Rebecca Harriet, Superintendent; and the Harpers Ferry Center (HFC), Don Kodak, Director, all of the National Park Service (NPS). Project planning coordinated by Catherine C. Lavoie and Michael Alvarez, Deputy Associate Manager of the HFC. The project leaders were architect Mark Schara and historian James A. Jacobs. The project historian was Mark Barron (University of Maryland) and the large-format photography was produced by HABS photographer Renee Bieretz. Assistance provided by Peter Dessauer, historical architect, HAFE, and Doug Hicks, exhibit specialist, NPS, Historic Preservation Training Center.