

NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
Office of Archives and History
Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Shelter Neck Historic District

Burgaw vicinity, Pender County, PD0040, Listed 12/10/2024
Nomination by Jennifer F. Martin, MdM Historical Consultants Inc.
Photographs by Jennifer Martin, May, 2024



Gazebo and chapel, view to the southeast



Shelter Neck School front corner, view to the northeast

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Shelter Neck Historic District
other names/site number Carolina Industrial School

2. Location

street & number 3707 Croomsbridge Road n/a not for publication
city or town Burgaw vicinity
state North Carolina code NC county Pender code 141 zip code 28425

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature]
Signature of certifying official/Title, State Historic Preservation Officer

10/30/24
Date

North Carolina Historic Preservation Office

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet

determined eligible for the National Register.
 See continuation sheet

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, explain:)

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
3	1	buildings
1	0	sites
1	1	structures
0	0	objects
5	2	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
N/A

Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register
N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION/school

EDUCATION/education-related

RELIGION/religious facility

LANDSCAPE

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Vacant/Not in use

WORK IN PROGRESS

LANDSCAPE

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: Greek Revival/Gothic Revival/Queen Anne influenced

OTHER: Greek Revival/Queen Anne Influenced

OTHER: No Style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK

walls WOOD

roof METAL

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

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

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

Criteria Considerations

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

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B** removed from its original location
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION _____
 SOCIAL HISTORY _____

Period of Significance

1900-1926 _____

Significant Dates

1900 _____
 1901 _____
 1902 _____
 1912 _____
 circa 1920 _____

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

 N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

UNKNOWN _____

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State Agency
 - Federal Agency
 - Local Government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository: _____

Shelter Neck Historic District
Name of Property

Pender County, North Carolina
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 39.14 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 _____
Zone Easting Northing
2 _____

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing
4 _____

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jennifer F. Martin
organization MdM Historical Consultants Inc. date July 13, 2024
street & number Post Office Box 1399 telephone 919/368-1602
city or town Durham state NC zip code 27702

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15-minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Universalist Convention of North Carolina Inc.
street & number 7305 Fiesta Way telephone 919-407-9559
city or town Raleigh state NC zip code 27615

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

Shelter Neck Historic District
Pender County, North Carolina

Introduction

The Shelter Neck Historic District, containing a chapel, school, and dormitory from the early twentieth century, occupies a 39.14-acre parcel at 3707 Croombsbridge Road in the Shelter Neck community in the northeast quadrant of Pender County, North Carolina. Pender County is mostly rural except along its Atlantic Ocean coastline where vacation communities like Topsail Beach and Surf City attract swarms of seasonal tourists. Parts of the county close to the coastal city of Wilmington are under intense development. Elsewhere, farms, small towns, and rural communities occupy a landscape characterized by open land, pine forests, swamps, and meandering rivers and streams. With its economy historically based on agriculture and forest industries, Pender County experienced a boost with the arrival of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad in 1840 and later, the Cape Fear and Yadkin Railroad. The arrival of an interstate highway and modern roads led to an upsurge in development in the mid- and late twentieth century. As of the early twenty first century, Pender County is one of the fastest growing counties in North Carolina.

Three buildings, a chapel, school, and dormitory, as well as a gazebo and modern shed, stand in a partially fenced, three-acre clearing on the west side of the parcel. An unpaved lane leaves the east side of the Croombsbridge Road and proceeds easterly through the property, stopping at the southwest corner of Dix House, a dormitory built in 1901-1902. Mostly oak and yellow pine trees grow on the far west side of the parcel where the property line parallels the road's right-of-way. Oak and yellow pine trees grow in a north-south line through the center of the three-acre portion and along the property's southern and northern edges. The parcel's remaining thirty-six acres to the east is heavily wooded.

Shelter Neck, the location of the settlement school established by Boston Unitarians starting in 1900, acquired its name for its location on the "neck," or dry land situated between the Northeast Cape Fear River and Holly Shelter Creek. Vast undeveloped and thickly wooded wetlands stand opposite Shelter Neck on the west side of Croombsbridge Road. A narrow strip of wetlands cuts across the northern tip of the parcel from east to west. The property is just outside the southwestern boundary of the 20,000-acre Angola Swamp.

The settlement school's location nearly surrounded by swamps, rivers, and streams, has made it particularly susceptible to flooding for almost its entire history. The first significant inundation came in 1908. More recently, storms in 1999 and 2018 have sent water rushing onto the property. Hurricane Florence in September 2018 produced catastrophic flooding of the site. As a result, portions of the plaster inside the school and chapel have been removed. In the dormitory, referred to as Dix House, most of the wallboard is missing on the first level, but the upper-level walls are intact.

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Shelter Neck Historic District
Pender County, North Carolina

Inventory

Landscape

1900

One Contributing Site

The 39.14 acres containing the Shelter Neck Historic District and its associated historic buildings and structures is level and framed to the west by the Northeast Cape Fear River and to the east by Angola Swamp. Croomsbridge Road, named for Crooms Bridge that crosses the Northeast Cape River Road northwest of the historic district, runs along the west edge of the nominated boundary. Three acres on the west side of the 39.14-acre parcel are mostly grass covered and ringed by oak and pine trees. This part of the campus was a focal point for activity at Shelter Neck. It served not only as a gathering place for students, staff and the greater community but as a playground and a venue for games and dances. An earthen driveway leaves Croomsbridge Road entering the property from the west and proceeds eastward terminating at the front of Dix House. Portions of a non-historic, wood picket fencing running north to south remain just west of the school. Documentary photos from the early twentieth century indicate most of the fences on the campus were the wood picket variety. A longer stretch of the fencing extends from just off the southeast corner of the school to the south property line; a break in that stretch of fence located just southwest of Dix House accommodates the path of the earthen drive. A photograph from the 1920s shows that the fencing in front of Dix House was metal. Additional wood picket fencing stretches east to west along the south property line.

The remaining approximately thirty-six acres is covered in forest. This area was the location of some of the school farm in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Other crops were grown in front of Dix House. Although some of the land would have been cleared for the fruit and vegetable crops grown by the staff and students, historically part of the land was tree covered. Around 1920, the Alliance for Unitarian Women described the school farm as “thirty acres under cultivation, about one-third of an acre in strawberries. Also there is much timber, mostly pine and oak.”¹

Chapel

1900

One Contributing Building

¹ Alliance of Unitarian Women and Other Liberal Christian Women, *Unitarian Work in North Carolina*, no publisher, circa 1920, 4.

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The simple chapel is typical of rural churches built in the coastal plain of North Carolina in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. The building faces west, occupies the parcel's southwest quadrant, and stands close to Croomsbridge Road. The one-story, gable-front frame building with weatherboard siding and a standing seam metal roof installed in 2006 rests on a brick pier foundation. Paneled corner boards with moulded caps, wide frieze boards, and returns at each gable end grace the otherwise unpretentious church and are a holdover from the Greek Revival style that remained popular in this part of eastern North Carolina into the early twentieth century. A square weatherboard belltower with louvered vents on four sides and non-visible bells remains perched on the roof's ridge close to the façade. A steel spire tops the belltower's metal-covered hipped roof. Gothic Revival-inspired lancet windows retain their double-hung sash on all elevations. On the west-facing façade, a diamond-shaped louvered wood vent with moulded wood surround is centered over the front-gabled porch supported by turned posts with scrolled brackets. The porch is just wide enough to shelter a double-leaf wood door crowned with a triangular multi-light transom. Double, wood-framed screen doors topped with a screened wood-framed panel allow for the wood doors to be opened to encourage outside air to flow in without allowing ever-present mosquitos access to the interior. A wood ramp extends from the porch, along the north side of the façade, and then alongside almost the length of the north (side) elevation.

Interior

Inside, a tongue-and-groove coved wood ceiling fitted with two modern hanging fans remains intact while portions of the plaster walls—mostly along the bottom one-fourth of each wall—have been removed, revealing sections of the wood framing. A simple horizontal wood peg rack extends along a portion of the walls. A slightly elevated chancel is located at the center of the interior's east end, between the two windows. Replacement wood floors are in good condition.

Dix House

1901, 1902

One Contributing Building

The two-and-a-half-story, gable-front, frame dormitory and dwelling with weatherboard siding and a brick pier foundation faces west and stands about fifty-five yards northeast of the chapel at the rear or east side of the three-acre clearing. A one-story hipped roof screened porch spans the façade of the two-and-a-half-story main block and shelters an off-center single-leaf wood door with a multi-light transom and paneled wood and multi-light sidelights. The porch ceiling is tongue and groove wood, while the wood floor is replacement. Originally, substantial turned wood posts with scrollwork brackets and a turned post balustrade graced the porch. The posts have been replaced with plain square posts and the brackets and balustrade were removed. The screen on the porch is a later addition.

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Shelter Neck Historic District
Pender County, North Carolina

The main block includes corner boards with moulded caps, wide frieze boards, and returns at each gable end, elements found on the chapel. A brick chimney rises from the building's center, just below the roof ridge.

An original one-story ell with enclosed porches on its south and north elevations and an interior brick chimney extends from the rear. A side-gabled 1902 wing attached to the north side of the main block housed the original school before the construction of the free-standing school in 1912. The school wing includes a shed-roofed porch spanning the south end of its façade. The rear porch has been removed. A brick flue originally located on the wing has been removed. A standing seam metal roof installed in 2014 crowns Dix House whose windows have been replaced with vinyl sash. Steel ladders serving as fire escapes remain on the façade and south and east elevations of the two-and-a-half-story block.

Interior

Throughout the interior of the two-and-a-half-story section, tongue and groove ceilings remain intact, as do wood floors and four- and five-panel wood doors. On the first floor, plaster walls have been removed to expose the wall framing. The interior follows a side hall plan with a straight-run stair flush against the north wall of the main passage. The original turned newel post and turned balustrade remain intact. The room to the south of the central passage was originally two rooms, but the wall between them was removed leaving the chimney at the center. Simple mantels are on the east and west sides of the fireplace.

A turned newel post anchors the top of the stairs where the turned balustrade continues along one side of the second-floor hallway. On this level, tongue-and-groove ceilings and walls, wallboard, and wood floors remain intact. The two bedrooms retain identical simple post-and-lintel mantels. An additional room on this level, located at the west end of the hallway, is small and used as a storage closet. A door to the north of the staircase leads to the attic for the 1902 school wing.

At the east end of the hallway, a winder stair with simple newel posts and railings made of two-by-fours leads to the attic, which contains two rooms. Walls, ceilings, and doors are tongue and groove wood. Floors are original wood.

The one-story, two-room ell contains a kitchen and dining room finished with tongue and groove wood walls and wood ceilings. The cladding on the lower third of the walls has been removed. Floors are temporary plywood sheets. A brick chimney is located between the two rooms. Porches on the north and south elevations have been enclosed. A small room at the northeast corner of the kitchen has louvered panels and wood walls and appears to have held a washing machine and dryer.

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The 1902 one-story, gable-roofed school wing retains original and replacement tongue and groove wood ceilings and wood floors. The wing was originally two rooms, but sometime later, an area in the southwest corner was framed to create a modern bathroom. All the plaster has been removed leaving just the framing.

Shed
2010
One Noncontributing Building

The front-gabled, weatherboard-clad building with wide overhanging eaves stands just behind and to the southeast of Dix House. A shed-roofed hood shelters the single-leaf centered front door. A rectangular, louvered wood vent pierces the top portion of the façade. On the rear, a shed-roofed hood shelters double doors. Two windows on the south (side) elevation contain one-over-one sash and provide light to the interior. A standing seam metal roof covers the building that rests on a brick foundation. A photograph from the 1910s in possession of the Pender County Public Library indicates that a one-story, front-gabled outbuilding like the current shed stood just behind Dix House.

Shelter Neck School
1912, circa 1922
One Contributing Building

The one-story, hipped-roof building on a brick pier foundation faces south and stands about seventy yards north of the chapel and seventy yards northwest of Dix House near the parcel's northern border. The building's western two-thirds that includes the porch and flanking triple windows dates to 1912. It contains the auditorium, library, and two large classrooms. In the early 1920s, the eastern third, containing two additional classrooms and a cloakroom, was built. At that time, new siding was applied to the exterior to unify its appearance.

Tuscan columns and pilasters support the hipped-roof porch sheltering the double-leaf screened doors with a transom fronting a pair of five-panel, double-leaf wood doors. Wide overhanging eaves crown a narrow, moulded cornice and wide architrave resting on the columns. The porch ceiling is sheathed in tongue and groove wood and the floor is painted two-by-fours. A wooden dogleg ramp extends from the east side of the porch. Simple moulded cornerboards with caps, like those on the chapel and Dix House, grace each corner. On each elevation, single and triple windows with simple moulded cornices contain replacement, vinyl units. The roof is standing seam metal. A single brick chimney remains on the west end. Ghost marks in the siding suggest the flue has been rebuilt. Three additional brick chimneys that were on the building in the 1920s have been removed. The standing seam metal roof dates to 2012.

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Interior

The interior follows an irregular plan with the auditorium at the west end and the entrance foyer and classrooms linked by a short east-west corridor occupying the remainder of the space. Wooden accordion doors between the foyer and auditorium allow the latter space to be closed off. A small stage or platform is at the north end of the auditorium. The corridor south wall was added around 1990.

Walls and ceilings throughout are tongue and groove wood. The wall cladding on the lower portion in most rooms—about three feet high sections—has been removed because of flood damage. Most of the doors have five horizontal panels and are topped by a glass transom. Wooden black boards and simple horizontal wood peg racks remain throughout.

Bell tower
Circa 1900 (bell); 1950 (tower)
One Contributing Structure

A simple tall wooden stand approximately six feet in height and located just off the southwest corner of the front porch provides a base for an antique cast iron bell. The structure does not appear in photographs of the school from the 1920s.

Gazebo/Well Circa 1915 Contributing Structure

The six-sided, open-air gazebo with a pyramidal, metal-covered roof originally sheltered the property's well. It stands ten yards from the east side of Croomsbridge Road almost halfway between the chapel and the school. It was later converted to a gazebo but retains the six tapered columns with necking and simple caps that support the roof. Slender steel brackets near the top of each column provide additional support. The ceiling is tongue and groove wood and the later decking is wide wood boards. Simple benches on the interior line the six sides. When the structure was built, it was dedicated to educator and philanthropist Emily A. Fifield (1840-1913), a member of the Alliance of Unitarian Women who traveled from her home in Boston to North Carolina to give lectures and oversee the work of the Unitarian church in eastern North Carolina.

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Pender County, North Carolina



*Figure 1. Students dancing in the clearing in front of the school, circa 1910.
Courtesy of Pender County Public Library Digital Archive*

Integrity Statement

The collection of buildings and structures that comprise the Shelter Neck Historic District retain sufficient integrity to convey significance as a mission established by the National Alliance of Unitarian Women in 1900 and continued to operate until 1926. The district retains integrity of location and setting. The buildings and structures have not been relocated and the district remains on two-lane Croombsbridge Road in rural Pender County between the Northeast Cape Fear River and Angola Swamp. The district retains its integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. Although walls in the first level of Dix House and portions of walls in the chapel and school have been removed due to flood damage, sufficient historic fabric remains to convey the property's significance in the areas of education and social history. The integrity of feeling is bolstered by the district's expression of the aesthetic of a rural mission established and operated in the first quarter of the twentieth century and the ability of the district's surviving features to express its historic character. The integrity of association remains intact because the historic resources are linked to the events that occurred at the property during the period of significance.

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Shelter Neck Historic District
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Statement of Archaeological Potential

The North Carolina Historic Preservation Office (NC HPO) requested the professional opinion of the North Carolina Office of State Archaeology (OSA) regarding this property's potential for archaeological significance. In response to the HPO's request, OSA staff member and Assistant State Archaeologist - Underwater, Stephen Atkinson, provided the following statement:

The property was previously reviewed archaeologically as part of the Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund under ER 21-1474, and determined to have no impacts on archaeological sites potentially eligible for the NRHP due to minimal ground disturbance which is largely additive, also likely disturbed from previous environmental and construction activity. National Park Service reviewers concurred with this assessment on July 2, 2024, stating, "No need to retain archaeological contractor services to perform testing at this time". As such, no archaeological sites have been recorded previously at this location, and it is unlikely that subsurface archaeological deposits related to the period of significance remain. As a result, I do not expect that intact archaeological resources associated with the period of significance can contribute additional information relevant to the property's history would be present. Therefore, I do not recommend a statement of archaeological potential for this property.

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Shelter Neck Historic District
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Summary Paragraph

Shelter Neck Historic District, containing a chapel, school, and dormitory built in the first decade of the twentieth century, is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places on the local level of significance under Criterion A in the areas of Education and Social History. The Boston-based National Alliance of Unitarian Women built the church in 1900 in rural Pender County, North Carolina, the first Unitarian building constructed in the state. Working side by side, educated urban women and male Unitarian ministers quickly established a school for day and boarding students in which a classical education was bolstered by industrial training that included handcrafts and instruction in agriculture, as well as exposure to the arts. Settlement schools like the one established at Shelter Neck were part of a social reform program inspired by the settlement movement that began in London in the late nineteenth century and spread to the United States in the early twentieth century with the founding of Hull House in Chicago. For the Alliance of Unitarian Women, the goal at Shelter Neck was to establish a school and church that would teach “the message of Jesus in all its simplicity and purity.”² For over twenty-five years, the Unitarian settlement school on the banks of the Northeast Cape Fear River enjoyed a stellar reputation for the education it offered local white children. Financial strains, changes in leadership among the Unitarians operating the school, and improvements in local public education and transportation led the Alliance of Unitarian Women to close the school in 1926. For a period, the Pender County Board of Education rented the school building for use as a public school. In January 1932, the General Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women, the successor name for the original organization, sold the four tracts making up the school property to the Universalist Convention of North Carolina. Since the 1930s, the Universalist Convention has used the property as a camp, retreat center, and meeting place. The period of significance for the Shelter Neck Historic District is 1900, the construction date of the chapel, to 1926, the year the Alliance of Unitarian Women closed the school. Although Shelter Neck School was owned by a religious institution, the property meets Criteria Consideration A: Religious Properties. Although the property was established by a faith-based entity and continues under the ownership of a religious organization, its significance stems from its role in educating local children and as a vehicle for social reform in a rural eastern North Carolina county.

Historic Background

Unitarianism originated in Boston in the years after the Revolution when a group of clergy broke from the Calvinist-centered beliefs of New England Congregationalists and instead embraced a belief in God as one being instead of a trinity. In the nineteenth century, Unitarians rejected the Calvinist belief that people were immoral and instead espoused reasoning and promoted liberal religious teachings. Unitarianism was

² Alliance of Unitarian Women and Other Liberal Christian Women, *Unitarian Work in North Carolina*, 11

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confined mostly to New England for most of the nineteenth century except that there were Unitarian churches in larger southern cities such as Charleston, New Orleans, and Louisville.³

In the late nineteenth century, Unitarians worked to spread the faith in the South by promoting their educational and social programs through the establishment of settlement schools. Unitarians from Boston had previously invested in the education of newly freed persons after the Civil War with monetary gifts going to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and Hampton Institute in Virginia, as well as to smaller schools in the rural South.⁴ Unitarian women found inspiration for their social reform programs in the settlement movement that began in London in the late nineteenth century and spread to the United States and led to the creation of places like Hull House in Chicago. Settlement schools in rural areas functioned as a method of social reform by not only providing a classical education, but also giving instruction in agriculture and the industrial arts and affording students access and participation in the arts.

In 1885, the American Unitarian Association (AUA) of Boston appointed Rev. George L. Chaney as the first Southern Superintendent, a move to promote the denomination in the South. Along with his wife, Caroline E. Chaney, Reverend Chaney helped establish new churches in several southern states. Caroline Chaney served as Vice President for the Southern States for the National Alliance of Unitarian and Other Christian Women, which had formed in 1880 in Saratoga, New York. In 1890, it became the National Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women, or simply, the Alliance.⁵

One of the ways Unitarians gained followers in the late nineteenth century was through circuit ministers who traveled the rural South under the support of the AUA, a male-led organization. Rev. Joseph G. Dukes worked the North Carolina circuit beginning in the mid 1890s. As he started his work, changes were occurring with the Alliance. In 1895, after the departure of the Chaney's, Abby A. Peterson joined the Alliance board as a director and later became chairperson of the Southern Work Committee. Abby Almira Wheeler Peterson (1855-1919) and her husband, Ellis Peterson, longtime supervisor of Boston public schools, were active members of the Jamaica Plain Unitarian Church in Boston.⁶

In early 1900, Reverend Dukes, who was familiar with eastern North Carolina through his circuit, recommended to the AUA and the Alliance that a chapel be built at Shelter Neck in Pender County. With

³ Much of the information in this nomination comes from Eunice Milton Benton's Master's thesis, "Shelter Neck's Unitarian School," University of Mississippi, 1994. The document, only available to the author in digital form, lacks pagination. <https://nwuuc.org/archive/shelter-necks-unitarian-school/>.

⁴ Benton, n.p.

⁵ Benton, n.p.

⁶ Benton, n.p.; "Women of the South," Unitarian Universalist Women's Heritage Society Worship Service, General Assembly 2000, Nashville, Tennessee, transcript at uuhhs.org/womens-history/uuwhs-publications/womensouth.

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backing from the Alliance, the Southern Work Committee recommended that funding to be put toward the construction of such a church. In the spring or early summer of 1900, Alliance President Harriet Elizabeth Edmands Dix sent Abby Peterson to scout the site in Pender County. On her return to Boston, Abby Peterson reported to the Alliance board that Shelter Neck seemed a suitable place and that area residents wanted a church. She added that she had secured commitments of lumber, land, nails and labor so that a relatively small amount of money would be required. The Alliance board authorized \$250 be appropriated to Abby Peterson for her to use at her discretion for the construction. The board also voted to allow Peterson to spend any additional money necessary to complete the building.⁷

On August 4, 1900, J. J. and Frances G. Newton, and Charles Sears bequeathed land to Alliance trustees Abby Peterson and Edith Dukes, wife of circuit preacher Rev. Joseph G. Dukes. The deed includes the terms “for the love of God and humanity and the sum of \$1.00.”⁸

The Alliance had the chapel built and dedicated it on November 16, 1900. AUA President Samuel Eliot and Alliance President Harriet Elizabeth Dix attending the dedication. While Unitarian congregations existed before the Civil War in eastern North Carolina and in places like Asheville and Highlands, Macon County, in the 1890s, the chapel at Shelter Neck was the first Unitarian building constructed in North Carolina.⁹



Figure 2. Chapel at Shelter Neck in 1902. Courtesy of Pender County Public Library Digital Archive

⁷ Benton, n.p.

⁸ Pender County Deed Book U, page 556, 1900, cited in Grantee-Grantor Index.

⁹ Benton, n.p.

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At the same time the Alliance's board considered the construction of the chapel, it also contemplated building a house for Reverend Dukes in the vicinity of the church. The board authorized Harriet Dix to spend one hundred dollars toward the construction of the parsonage, which was built in 1901 at a cost of \$1,150. When it was completed, the Alliance board voted to name the parsonage after Harriet Dix and afterward it became known as Dix House.¹⁰

In June 1901, Reverend Dukes, without financial support from the Alliance, built a wing onto the side of Dix House to be used as a school for area children who would otherwise be required to travel at least two



Figure 3. Abby Peterson, [n.d.].

Courtesy of Pender County Public Library Digital Archive.

miles to attend classes. Rev. William Key, a pivotal figure in Shelter Neck's history, described the wing, or annex as he sometimes referred to it, as "a room measuring 16x18 ft., with a wide entrance hall and door in the front. It also contained a closet. The whole well-lighted with five windows. There was also a door for entrance from a piazza at the back, and a third door leading into a smaller room built between the large room and the front hall of the Dix House; so that in all there were three entrances in the annex."¹¹

According to Edith Norton, who taught at Shelter Neck in 1924, Reverend Dukes requested teachers from the North. In 1902, Ellen Crehore of Canton, Massachusetts became the first teacher.¹² That same year, the Alliance allowed the State of North Carolina to use the Dix House ell as a school for two months. With the opening of the school, Dix House housed teachers and ministers.¹³

By 1903, the National Alliance of Unitarian Women had built three chapels in addition to the one at Shelter Neck. They were located at White Oak, Bladen County, North

¹⁰ Benton, n.p.

¹¹ Benton, n.p.

¹² "Dedication of School House" Interesting Exercises at Pender County School," *Wilmington Dispatch*, November 5, 1912, 4.

¹³ Benton, n.p.

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Carolina, Fanville, Georgia, and Bristol, Florida.¹⁴ Just three years later, Dr. Edward Everett Hale, an elder in the Unitarian church, declared at the group's annual meeting, "in North Carolina, the Alliance has begun one of [its] most significant projects."¹⁵

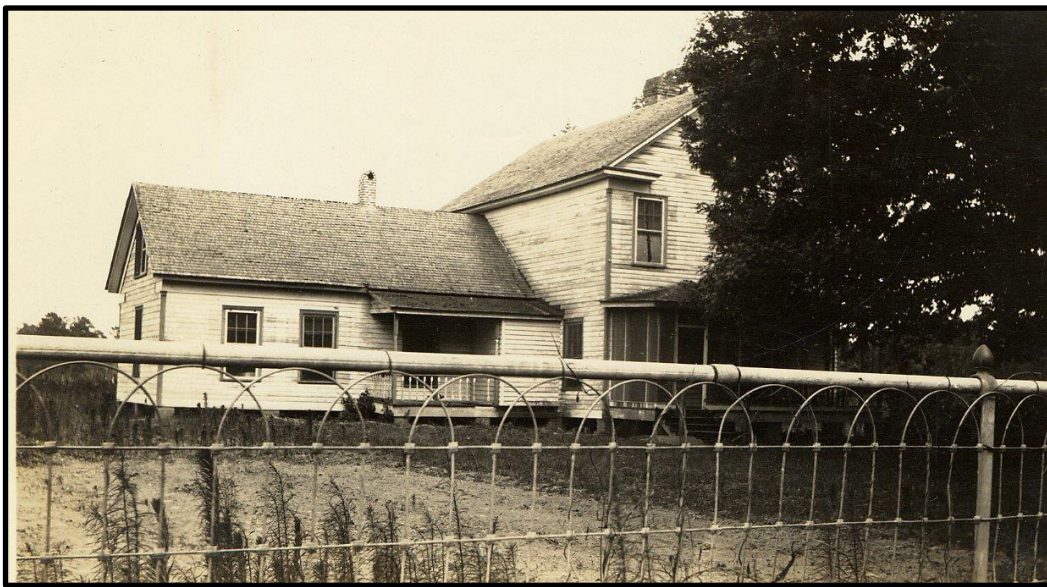


Figure 4. Dix House façade with school wing addition, circa 1920. Note the cultivated field and metal fence in front of the house. Photo from the collection of Universalist Convention of North Carolina.

On November 1, 1904, Reverend Dukes resigned and Abby Peterson, following the death of her husband earlier that year, relocated to Shelter Neck from Boston to supervise the school. At the request of Peterson, the Alliance hired Bostonian Rev. William Simpson Key to take over Dukes' position at Shelter Neck and as circuit minister for eastern North Carolina.¹⁶ Key was born in Blyth, England where he worked for several newspapers before immigrating to the United States around 1888. He studied for the ministry and served as an assistant under Rev. Edward Everett Hale, a prominent Unitarian, author, and historian. Around 1895, Key started an industrial school for young women in Alabama. His range of abilities, including his expertise in mechanics and farming, made him well suited to his role at Shelter Neck.¹⁷

¹⁴ It does not appear the White Oak Unitarian Church is still standing but that cannot be confirmed; "Women's Alliance Meets," *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 19, 1903, 2.

¹⁵ Benton, n.p.

¹⁶ "Dr. W. S. Key Preaches: Tells of Noted Unitarian Women Who Have Helped N. C.," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 26, 1919, 7.

¹⁷ "News at Kinston," *Wilmington Morning Star*, January 23, 1913, 6.

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*Figure 5. A teacher and students in front of Dix House, circa 1910, note the original porch posts and balustrade.
Courtesy of Pender County Public Library Digital Archive.*

In the fall of 1905, Abby Peterson invited Mrs. Everett and Mrs. Hawes to teach. According to Reverend Key, some area families hesitated to send their children to the school run by northern Unitarians. Baptist and Methodist were the predominant denominations in Pender County and most of eastern North Carolina, so suspicion on the part of local citizens would have been expected. But soon, the school gained a reputation for excellence and enrollment climbed. The term lasted six months beginning in October and ending in early April so as not to interfere with busy months on area farms. By January 1906, twenty-five students aged five to thirty-three attended the school. Two new teachers took over for the 1907-1908 school term and by the fall of 1910, the school enjoyed a stellar reputation across eastern North Carolina and the full support of AUA.¹⁸

While northern Unitarians established the school at Shelter Neck, it remained non-sectarian throughout its history. As historian Eunice Milton Benton contends, “the school’s ultimate focus became educational and social.” The curriculum followed state guidelines for public education offering standard coursework taught in schools across North Carolina. Courses in arithmetic, reading, and writing were sometimes

¹⁸ Benton, n.p.

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supplemented with French classes when a teacher proficient in the language was in residence. Music lessons were available to students who desired them.¹⁹

On July 25, 1907, Charlotte and Marshall B. Hanchey, Unitarians, gave the three-quarters of an acre that connected the Dix House with the main highway. In exchange for the land, Mr. Hanchey grew cotton on the land and gave the Alliance one-quarter of the value of his crop. He also cleared ditches and repaired fences on the Unitarian land.²⁰

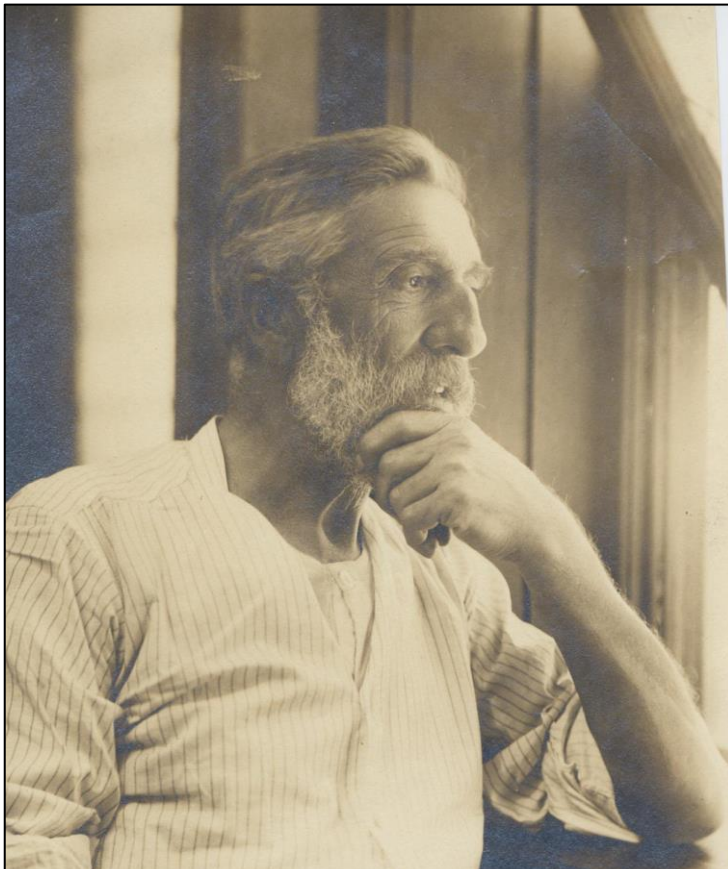


Figure 6. Rev. William Simpson Key, [n.d.]
Photo from the Unitarian Universalist Association. Minister files,
Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

The first major flood after the establishment of the chapel and school at Shelter Neck occurred in 1908 when the Northeast Cape Fear overflowed. The area around and including Shelter Neck stood submerged in water for two weeks leading to the deaths of many farm animals and the destruction of an unknown number of houses. Boys from the school assisted in the rebuilding of the surrounding community.²¹

The school at Shelter Neck continued to garner praise and positive attention into the first decades of the twentieth century. On November 7, 1909, the *Wilmington Morning Star* newspaper announced that “the [Dix] House school, Shelter Neck, Watha, Pender County, will begin its Winter session tomorrow, Monday, with a full attendance of pupils, male and female. There are now three Northern ladies resident at the [Dix] House as teachers. Their names and departments are as follows: Mrs. Taxon, housekeeping and domestic science; Mrs. Peterson, music and singing; Miss Bunker, academic. During the Winter session, [Mr.] W. S. Key will give

¹⁹ Benton, n.p.

²⁰ Benton, n.p.; “Marshall Buck Hanchey,” Find a Grave, findagrave.com.

²¹ Benton, n.p.

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lessons in the following subjects: the laws of hygiene, health, sanitation, and the chemistry of common life. He will also continue his very successful, instructive, and practical demonstrations in vegetable and fruit culture.”

In 1910, Alliance president Harriet Dix died in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Her obituary in the January 7, 1910, *Boston Globe* reported “she took much interest in the Unitarian mission work in North Carolina and Shelter Neck, NC, establishing the Dix school.”

In 1911, the Alliance incorporated the school at Shelter Neck and Emmerton School in Swansboro as the Carolina Industrial School. Abby Peterson founded Emmerton School in 1905, which included a school and Salem Cottage, a house for the minister and his family as well as teachers.” The Alliance described the Unitarian church in Swansboro as “similar to the Shelter Neck church and very pleasing both inside and out.”²²

Abby Peterson served as superintendent of both schools and she and Reverend Key lived at Dix House for most of the year except when they traveled throughout the country when school was not in session to recruit teachers and raise money for the North Carolina work.²³ In July 1911, at a meeting of the Alliance in Boston, Peterson reported on the men carrying out circuit in North Carolina: they “have been able not only to maintain preaching stations but to meet many sides of life among the people, show them how to do things in agriculture, assist some of the young people to industrial education, and give them advice, help, or object lessons in many ways.”²⁴

Incorporation signaled the beginning of a period of growth and prosperity for the school at Shelter Neck. In 1912, a separate schoolhouse containing two large classrooms, an auditorium, and a library was built just north of the chapel. In late October, “the large and handsome new school building recently erected and completed by the Carolina Industrial School at Shelter Neck, Watha, Pender County, was dedicated.” Abby Peterson presided at the ceremony held in the auditorium. The sixty students sang songs and led scripture readings. Neither Governor William W. Kitchin nor J.Y. Joyner, State Commissioner of Education, attended the dedication but both sent letters commending “the friends in the North, who are so deeply interested in the welfare of the young people of North Carolina.”²⁵

²² “A Unique Celebration: Easter Services in Unitarian Church in Swansboro—the Unitarian School Work in that Section,” *Wilmington Messenger*, April 26, 1906, 5; Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women, *Unitarian Settlements in North Carolina and Florida* (Concord, New Hampshire: The Rumford Press, 1915), 7.

²³ “Louisville Gets Unitarians,” *Houston Post*, April 4, 1914, 1; Benton, n.p.

²⁴ “The Evangelical Virgil: Women’s Alliance Meeting,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, July 15, 1911, 30.

²⁵ “Dedication of School House: Interesting Exercises at Pender County School,” *Wilmington Dispatch*, November 5, 1912, 4.

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Also in 1912, the Alliance acquired additional acreage and, thanks to a donation by Ellen Kimball, built what would become known as Kimball House.²⁶ In the fall of 1912, the first four female boarding students took residence in Kimball House. At the same time, two boys housed in Dix House became the first male boarding students. In a history of the school, Reverend Keys described girls being taught rug weaving on a loom located in one of the rooms in Kimball House, while one of the housekeepers taught the boarding students to bake bread and cook in the Dix House kitchen.²⁷



Figure 7. School at Shelter Neck, circa 1912. Courtesy of Pender County Public Library Digital Archive

Acy Taylor Tatum (1917-1999), who attended the school, contended that his father, Taylor Tatum, constructed the buildings at Shelter Neck and that Lewis Boney Saunders served as the brick mason. Saunders is listed in the 1910 census as a carpenter. According to the younger Taylor, the Unitarians provided the building plans.²⁸

Norma Rowe Sawyer (1907-1989), who attended the Carolina Industrial School from 1913 to 1923 recollected about her education in the May 1974 edition of the *Tar Heel Universalist*. She and her brother, also a student at the school, traveled the three miles to Shelter Neck in a wagon pulled by a mule or goat. Later they rode bicycles or walked. Ms. Sawyer recalled the school's extensive library and lessons in

²⁶ A portion of this additional acreage is part of the nominated parcel.

²⁷ Benton, n.p.

²⁸ 1910 Census of the Population, ancestry.com; Benton, n.p.

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French, literature, and history. When she became a teenager, Ms. Sawyer boarded at the school, living in the girls' dormitory (not extant) with other female students and three teachers, while male students lived on the second and third floors of Dix House, which also housed the minister, teachers, and a housekeeper. Students awoke at six a.m. to do chores then ate breakfast together in the dining room of Dix House. In addition to academics, the school offered instruction in music, daily devotionals, dances, poetry readings, and discussions of philosophy. Sundays were set aside for church in the chapel followed by Sunday school in the afternoon.²⁹

The school at Shelter Neck generated much interest among Boston Unitarians and other northerners curious and somewhat fascinated by the South and its culture. An October 13, 1913, article in the *Springfield Daily Republican* (Massachusetts) newspaper entitled "Rev. W. S. Key's Great Work: Teaching and Preaching Among the North Carolina Whites," reported that Keys went south in 1904 to visit the North Carolina field operations established by the Alliance. "He became the successor to the native white preacher there and has built a number of churches in the territory...from the Neuse River on the north to the Cape Fear River on the south, and from the Atlantic Ocean about 40 miles west, including some 11 counties." The article declared "the backwardness of the people was largely due to a lack of schools and some progress toward establishing them has been done by Unitarians as far back as 1902. Now, Shelter Neck and Swansboro schools are recognized as potent factors in upbuilding that section of North Carolina."

At the same time, praise for the school came from local sources aware of the work going on in rural Pender County. The *Raleigh News and Observer* commented in March 1915 that the Carolina Industrial School "has come to be recognized as one of the best equipped scholastic educational institutions for the rural population in the State of North Carolina, and is a product of the untiring energy put forth for now over ten years by a New England woman and an Old England man, whose names are household words from Maine to California, for the moral, social, intellectual and spiritual betterment of that obscure community."³⁰

In 1915, the Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women's Committee on Southern Circuit Work published *Unitarian Settlements in North Carolina and Florida*. The publication provided an overview of the activities at Shelter Neck and in Swansboro, but also included an appeal for more funding for the educational and religious work in North Carolina. The description of Shelter Neck includes details about the surrounding area as well as the campus:

²⁹ Norma Rowe Sawyer, "Reminiscing about Shelter Neck," *Tar Heel Universalist*, May 1974, shelterneckuucmamp.org.

³⁰ "Pender Plans for Forward Program," *News and Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina), March 22, 1915, 3.

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If you are going to Shelter Neck, the train on the Atlantic Coast Line will leave you at a little town called Watha, about thirty miles north of Wilmington, and then there is a seven miles' drive through pine woods to the hamlet. For Shelter Neck is not a village, nor has it the distinction of a post office.

The houses we pass are plain one-, two-, and three-room houses, but at length our guide points out a very attractive modern school-building with a flag-pole out front, from which fly the flags of North Carolina and the Union. A minute's walk from the school on the same side of the road is the church, a neat, cheerful-looking building; and between the two, past Fifield Memorial Well latterly given in memory of Mrs. Emily A. Fifield, the road leads to Dix House, a large, well-painted, hospitable looking home, the headquarters for all the activities of the settlement. Nearby is Kimball House, a dormitory for teachers and girl boarders. Here, too, some of the weaving and rug-making industries are carried on. Between the houses is the farm in a most excellent state of cultivation. This is the plant at Shelter Neck.³¹

Much of the attention on the school resulted from Reverend Key's efforts to showcase the crops, canned goods, and handcrafts produced by the students and staff. On farmland adjacent to the school buildings, the students and instructors produced a popular strain of strawberry they named "the Peterson," in honor of the school's superintendent. Each year, twenty to thirty varieties of vegetables and fruits were raised on the school's thirty acres. Reverend Key became known for "a few good pigs of a grade much superior to the hogs which frequent the North Carolina woods." In its assessment of the farm, the Alliance proclaimed, "the Agriculture Department [of the school] is, of necessity, expensive, at the same time, very essential to the maintenance of the school and the continued growth and expansion of the entire movement along the lines of social improvement."³²

In May 1916, the *News and Observer* called the school "one of the most unique as well as instructive" in North Carolina. The article described the school as offering academic coursework, but that "the pupils are also taught intensive methods of gardening and farming on a farm of twelve acres, handicraft trades, including blacksmithing, carpentering, shoe making, rug weaving, and basketing." The newspaper added that "at present, over twenty different kinds of vegetables are growing in the school garden."³³

Key became known for his instruction in canning to preserve food crops grown at the school and on area farms. In the summer when not traveling the country to raise money for the mission, Key oversaw the canning of large quantities of fruits and vegetables needed to feed students and teachers during the school

³¹ Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women, *Unitarian Settlements in North Carolina and Florida*, 3,6.

³² Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women, *Unitarian Settlements in North Carolina and Florida*, 12.

³³ "Unique School at Watha, Pender County," *News and Observer*, May 6, 1916, 7.

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year. According to the Alliance, the women of the surrounding community helped with the canning and took “the surplus product of the farm in return for their services.”³⁴

Reverend Key provoked attention for some of his other activities at Shelter Neck. In October 1918, the *Wilmington Morning Star* reported that he shipped a “wild cat by express” from Shelter Neck to the Boston Zoo. Key reported that before he shipped the animal, most likely a bobcat, it ate several squirrels, a chicken, a domestic cat, and several pounds of fresh beef. Previously, the newspaper reported, Key shipped alligators, bear, deer, rattlesnakes, otters, opossums, raccoons, and foxes from Pender County to the zoo in Boston.³⁵

In December 1918, fire devastated Kimball House. Abby Peterson reported to the Alliance that no one was injured but the blaze destroyed the boarding students’ clothing. She vowed in her letter to the Alliance to rebuild the house, which happened in 1920.³⁶ The Kimball House is now a private residence located just to the south of the Shelter Neck Historic District at 3853 Croomsbridge Road.

In April 1919, Abby Peterson, founder and principal of the Carolina Industrial School, died unexpectedly in a Wilmington Hospital. The *Wilmington Morning Star* newspaper noted that “all her life was deeply interested in industrial training and social settlement work...but that her heart, however, was most deeply interested in the people of Eastern Carolina.” The article went on to describe graduates from Shelter Neck and the Unitarian school she founded at Swansboro as “living monuments to her self-sacrificing and successful efforts.” The newspaper noted that graduates included men who served in the military, their sacrifice noted by a flag with nineteen stars that hangs in “the large auditorium of the new school building.”³⁷

Following Abby Peterson’s death, Reverend Key permanently returned to Boston in the winter of 1919-1920. Some surmised his departure was partially due to Ms. Peterson’s death, but it was likely also due to a lack of funds to support his work. The loss of Peterson and Key, the school’s most ardent champions, signaled the beginning of the school’s decline.³⁸

³⁴ Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women, *Unitarian Settlements in North Carolina and Florida*, 12.

³⁵ “Caught a Wild Cat: Fine Specimen Named ‘Kaiser’ Sent to Boston Zoo from Watha,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, October 26, 1918, 5.

³⁶ Benton, n.p.

³⁷ “Death of Mrs. Peterson: Founder of Carolina Industrial School Passes Away,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, April 22, 1919, 10.

³⁸ Benton, n.p.

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Soon after Peterson's death, Mary Nichols of Danvers, Massachusetts took over as superintendent, a position she remained in for only about a year. Rev. J. W. Heyes filled Reverend Key's position in 1920 but left the school in December 1920 after finding the work too demanding. In the fall of 1920, Jeanette B. Damon of Ashburnham, Massachusetts assumed the role of superintendent and would serve for many years.³⁹

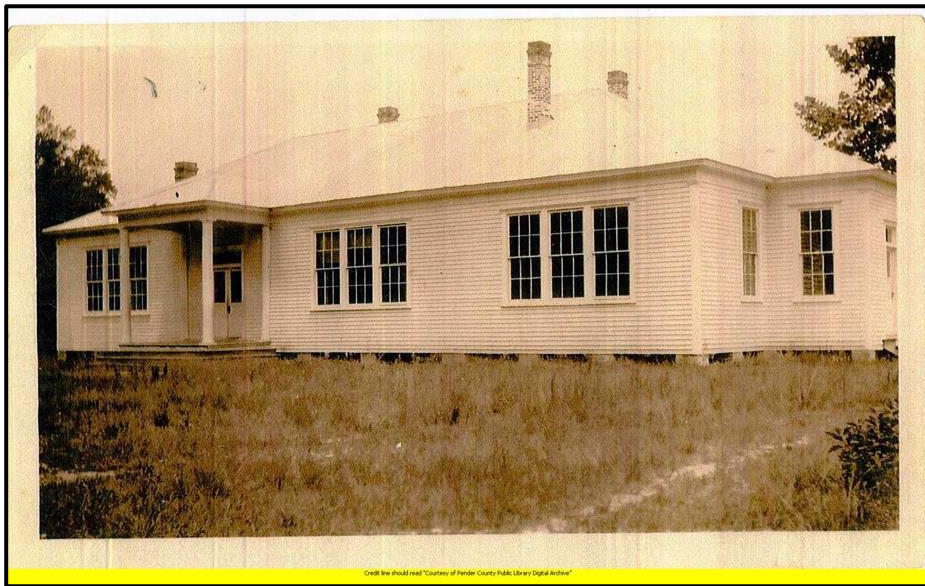


Figure 8. Pender Neck School in the early 1920s after the addition was built onto the east end.
Courtesy of Pender County Public Library Digital Archive,

In 1920, the Alliance published *Unitarian Work in North Carolina*, an eleven-page book focused primarily on the organization's work at Shelter Neck and Swansboro. The text indicates Jeannette B. Damon served as superintendent at Shelter Neck alongside four teachers, three women from Massachusetts and a pupil assistant from Burgaw. Jennie Shepard of Nashua, New Hampshire was the housekeeper and Owen Rivenbark is listed as the farmer. The Alliance described the school farm as "thirty acres under cultivation, about one-third of an acre in strawberries. Also there is much timber, mostly pine and oak." A "fine new barn, sheds, and other buildings used in farm work" stood on the property, but those buildings do not survive.⁴⁰

³⁹ Benton, n.p.

⁴⁰ Alliance of Unitarian Women and Other Liberal Christian Women, *Unitarian Work in North Carolina*, 4.

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Much of *Unitarian Work in North Carolina* is devoted to a request for financial support for the schools at Shelter Neck and Swansboro. It provides an overview of the conditions and needs at Shelter Neck: “Dix House must be repaired and enlarged. It is in bad condition and altogether inadequate to the needs of the school. There should really be a fine new dignified Administration Building with offices, a large comfortable airy living room, a convenient dining hall, a kitchen with the equipment needed for so large a family, good sized pantries and store rooms.” Of the school, the authors implored, “the school building must be enlarged to accommodate the increasing number of pupils. Plans have been drawn by one of the boys and the work ought to be done by the summer.” Sometime in the early 1920s, two classrooms and a cloakroom were added to the east side of the school. Little is known of the project or the source of its funding.⁴¹

In 1921, at the request of the trustees for the Carolina Industrial School, the Alliance took over day to day management. The Alliance struggled to financially support the school and fund building repairs. Whereas Abby Peterson worked without pay, the Alliance paid superintendent Damon \$1,000 per year. On top of covering the salaries of teachers, positions that had been voluntary in the school’s early history, the Alliance needed money to install running water, electricity, and heating sources to satisfy the expectations of employees.⁴²

In 1924, the Alliance announced that Rev. and Mrs. Stephen G. Palmer would move to Shelter Neck where he would become the school principal and fill the role of minister. After Jeanette Damon became ill in Boston, Edith C. North replaced her as superintendent. Three additional teachers worked at the school during this period. Money woes continued and in May 1924 at a meeting of the Unitarian Layman’s League in Greenfield Massachusetts, an appeal was made for financial assistance for the work at Swansboro and Shelter Neck.⁴³

A bulletin for the Carolina Industrial School for the 1925-1926 school year provides a thorough description of the Shelter Neck school and its operation. The school educated primary, intermediate, and high school students with an average enrollment of forty pupils per year. The school followed state education requirements in its course offerings and textbooks. In addition, the supervisor and housekeeper oversaw boarding girls in domestic duties while boarding boys worked on the buildings and farm. Each student was required to supply her or his own medical remedies but a \$60 tuition for boarding students covered room and board as well as certain incidentals.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Alliance of Unitarian Women and Other Liberal Christian Women, *Unitarian Work in North Carolina*, 8.

⁴² Benton n.p.

⁴³ “Liberal Laymen Hold Meeting,” *Greenfield Daily Recorder* (Massachusetts), May 17, 1924, 4.

⁴⁴ Benton, n.p.

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In January 1926, because of continuing financial strain, the Alliance closed the school at Shelter Neck. In its recommendation to the Alliance, the Unitarian Committee on Southern Work wrote, “the school enrollment is small. North Carolina is developing a system of good roads and giving free transportation to school children, and at the same time has raised its school standards. The attendance at church and Sunday school is very small, and it seems to the committee that our church has ceased to be a necessity. The buildings are out of repair, the farm is not being worked, a large sum of money would be required to put the place in order.”⁴⁵ The period when the school closed coincided with the establishment of several consolidation schools, including Burgaw High School and Atkinson High School, both built in the 1920s.⁴⁶

With the closing of the school at Shelter Neck, the Carolina Industrial School’s operations were consolidated at the Swansboro campus. The Committee on Southern Work posited that Swansboro possessed a good harbor and opportunities for fishing. Vocational training in areas related to maritime activities, the committee contended, would supplement academic courses for youth in Swansboro.⁴⁷

Just as the school was closing, Pender County school board minutes from January 1926 indicate that a group of citizens from Shelter Neck appeared before the body to ask for a school in their area. “The Board agreed to furnish a school in the Crooms Bridge end of the district in the house formerly used for the private school with the understanding that the county would not be charged over \$50 rent for six months.”⁴⁸ In March 1930, Eva Churchill, a member of the Committee on Southern Work, reported “the county has maintained a school at Shelter Neck ever since our school has withdrawn, and has paid us rent for our building.”⁴⁹

In 1930 or 1931, an arsonist set fire to the Swansboro Unitarian Church. Three days later, Salem Cottage, which housed teachers and students at Emmerton School as well as ministers, burned to the ground. These setbacks coupled with the demise of the chapel and school at Shelter Neck prompted the Committee on Southern Work to cease its work in North Carolina and divest itself of the Shelter Neck property. The committee offered the buildings and land as a gift to Pender County so that it could be used as a home for the elderly, a school for the disabled, or as a hospital but the county did not have the funds to implement any of those uses. Finally, the committee offered it to the Universalist Convention of North Carolina Inc., who agreed to take it. In January 1932, the General Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian

⁴⁵ Benton, n.p.

⁴⁶ Photograph of Burgaw High School, circa 1924, Pender County Public Library Digital Archive, <https://penderpubliclibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15239qs/search>; “Burgaw Will Build a New High School,” *News and Observer*, April 25, 1926, 20.

⁴⁷ Boston, n.p.

⁴⁸ Pender County Board of Education Minutes, microfilm, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina.

⁴⁹ Benton, n.p.

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Women sold the four tracts constituting the school property to the Universalist Convention of North Carolina Incorporated.⁵⁰

Beginning with its acquisition in 1932 and continuing to 2018, the Universalist Convention of North Carolina began using the property for a variety of events and meetings, turning the property into a retreat center. Among the gatherings held were young people's institutes, summer camps, denomination meetings, and in March 1956, a meeting of the Dixie Federation of Liberal Religious Youth, an event sponsored by the Unitarian and Universalist churches.⁵¹

In 1961, Unitarians and Universalists merged to create Unitarian Universalism. Unitarians and Universalists had significantly different development histories, but both movements espouse religious tolerance and work to promote social justice. While Unitarianism rejected the trinity as presented in the Nicene Creed, Universalism, which developed during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, disagrees with the idea of eternal damnation and instead upholds the idea of universal salvation. Their inclusive theology has led many Universalists to try to create a more just society. Horace Greeley, Clara Barton, and Dorothea Dix were among the prominent nineteenth century American Universalists. The merger of Unitarians and Universalists in 1961 created a non-creedal organization wherein members drew inspiration from secular and religious sources. They were bound together by a belief in how one acts is more important than what one believes.⁵²

Beginning with the first major flood to affect the buildings at Shelter Neck in 1908, the property has been prone to flooding, especially when Atlantic hurricanes have impacted inland Pender County. In 1999, Hurricane Floyd dropped over twenty inches of rain in the eastern regions of the state. In Pender County, the floodwaters rose above the 500-year flood stage level. In September 2018, flooding from Hurricane Florence covered the entire local area. Contaminated flood waters rose to over three feet above floor level inside the buildings at Shelter Neck. The flood waters were present for over a week, soaking all materials within six feet of ground level. In some areas, porous materials, such as drywall, wicked water several feet

⁵⁰ Benton, n.p.; Pender County Deed Book 211, page 267, dated January 22, 1932.

⁵¹ "Dr. Canfield to go to Eastern Session," *News and Record* (Greensboro), June 9, 1935, 2; "Universalist Women Will Hold Institute," *News and Observer*, June 19, 1938, 5; "Universalists Plan Session at Burgaw," *News and Observer*, June 13, 1947, 7; "Universalists Plan Summer Conclaves at Shelter Neck," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, June 3, 1959, 7; "Universalists Plan Parley Near Burgaw," *News and Observer*, June 5, 1950, 20; "Religious Parley for Youth Set," *News and Record*, March 28, 1956, 19.

⁵² North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, Recent blogs, <https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2024/01/23/inman-chapel-p-90>, July 23, 2016; "Unitarianism and Universalism," New Georgia Encyclopedia, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/unitarianism-and-universalism>, December 10, 2005, updated October 23, 2017.

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higher. Damage was like that from Hurricane Floyd in 1999 but extended about a foot higher within the buildings.

Education Context

The School at Shelter Neck was closely associated with the Emmerton School, which was established in a frame building in 1905 in Swansboro under Lucy Fessenden. In 1911, both schools were incorporated as Carolina Industrial School. Like the Pender County school, Emmerton School enjoyed a positive reputation among area residents. In April 1912, the *New Berne Weekly Journal* declared, “year after year the Emmerton School and its splendidly equipped corps of teachers makes good its ever-increasing usefulness to the entire community through its unique methods of training and educating not only children, but the young men and maidens of the town through the medium of musical entertainments, boys clubs, sewing circles, etc.”⁵³

In 1928, under the direction of Unitarian Rev. Margaret B. Barnard, a new brick building at 502 Church Street replaced the original frame schoolhouse. Also on the site was the Swansboro Unitarian Church and Salem Cottage, where teachers, students, and ministers resided. The school created the town’s first kindergarten as well as its first Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops. Vocational training in carpentry and mechanics, music, business, and home economics were offered.⁵⁴

The U-shaped school contained several classrooms and an auditorium. In 1930 or 1931, the Unitarian Church, located adjacent to the Emmerton School, burned. Days later, Salem Cottage was also destroyed by fire. The loss of buildings coupled with the economic constraints experienced by the Unitarian Women’s Alliance prompted the closure of the mission and school. The newly opened Swansboro Graded School helped to fill the void left by the shuttering of Emmerton School. The 1928 Emmerton School, which currently houses a church, is a contributing building in the Swansboro National Register of Historic Places Historic District (1990).⁵⁵

Before the advent of a public education system in North Carolina in 1840, private academies operated throughout rural eastern North Carolina. Most schools built in Pender County in the early twentieth century were public facilities. An exception was the private St. Joseph Catholic School Hugh MacRae built in the St. Helena farming colony in Pender County in 1914. St. Helena was the first of six rural colonies MacRae established to bring European farmers to eastern North Carolina to work abandoned farms using

⁵³ Benton, n.p.; “Closing Exercises at Emmerton School,” *New Berne Weekly Journal* (New Bern, North Carolina), April 30, 1912, 1.

⁵⁴ “Emmerton School 1910/1928,” Swansboro Historical Association blog, swansborohistory.blogspot.com.

⁵⁵ Daniel Pezzoni, Swansboro Historic District National Register Nomination, 1990, 7-11.

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progressive farming techniques. MacRae's intention was to settle Italian immigrants at St. Helena, but for various reasons those initial families left and were replaced by Hungarians, Serbians, Slovaks, Ukranians, and Russians.⁵⁶ A documentary photograph from around 1940 indicates a small, front-gabled, Gothic Revival-influenced chapel stood near the two-story concrete block school. Neither building remains standing.⁵⁷

In Pender County, several public schools from the early twentieth century remain. The former Burgaw School at 505 South Wilmington Street in Burgaw is a 1920s hipped-roof, weatherboard building with exposed rafter tails. Six-over-one windows and five-panel doors with transoms remain intact. Canetuck Rosenwald School (NR 2018) near Currie dates to 1921 and was built with partial funding from the Rosenwald Fund. The hipped-roof, two-teacher weatherboard building includes a center front-gabled wing containing oversized nine-over-nine windows typical of the property type. The design followed plan number 20 described as a "Two Teacher Community School to Face East or West Only." The school, which operated from 1921 to 1958, was listed in the National Register under Criterion A for its significance in the areas of education and Black Ethnic Heritage and under Criterion C for architectural significance. Nine of fifteen Rosenwald Schools built in Pender County remain standing.

In the 1920s, as in other counties, Pender County consolidated its white public schools. The school system abandoned its small frame schoolhouses and built large consolidation schools, usually brick. Improvements in transportation, namely buses, allowed students to attend classes outside their immediate communities. The Boney architectural firm of Wilmington designed four schools built in Pender County in 1924 and 1925 including buildings at Atkinson, Long Creek (not extant), and Topsail.⁵⁸

Social History Context: Settlement Schools in North Carolina

Settlement schools in North Carolina in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were generally founded by outsiders with the goal of educating students through classical education while including a curriculum of industrial, craft, and/or agriculture training. Developed during the Progressive Era, settlement schools, including mission schools formed by denominational boards, were meant to promote social reform in rural and isolated communities.

One of the earliest known settlement schools in North Carolina had its roots in 1844 in Valle Crucis, Watauga County, with the founding of the Valle Crucis Episcopal Mission (National Register, 1993). After

⁵⁶ Ed Turberg, "Historic and Architectural Resources of Pender County," Historic Architectural Survey Report, North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, 1997, 41.

⁵⁷ Photograph on the Pender County Public Library Digital Archive.

⁵⁸ Turberg, 48.

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decades of inactivity following the departure of the mission's founder, Bishop Levi Ives, in 1852, Bishop Joseph Blount Cheshire Jr. and Rev. Milnor Jones revived the school in the 1890s. In 1896, Reverend Milnor oversaw the construction of a mission house to accommodate a missionary, teacher, and several students. By 1911, additional buildings had been constructed on the 700-acre property and 100 day and boarding students in primary, grammar and high school grades were receiving agricultural and industrial training in housework, handcrafts, woodworking blacksmithing, and wagon making. Agriculture classes focused on progressive farming techniques and embraced a variety of crops and livestock. Financial difficulties forced the closing of the school in 1943, but the property remains under ownership of the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina and several buildings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain.⁵⁹

In 1912, Episcopal minister Rufus Morgan founded the Appalachian Industrial School, a coeducational grammar school in Penland, Avery County, North Carolina. The Diocese of Western North Carolina of the Episcopal Church sponsored the school that offered English, nature study, folk dancing, crafting, and sewing, among other courses. Children worked on the farm and learned cooking, housekeeping, animal husbandry, as well as how to work with wood, clay, and paint. In 1920, three years after Rufus Morgan left the school, he convinced his sister, Lucy Morgan, to become principal. With a background in weaving that she learned at Berea College in Kentucky, Lucy Morgan turned the school's focus to handicrafts and eventually started the Penland School of Crafts, which incorporated in 1938. The Appalachian School, as it became known, operated until 1964 and afterward its buildings became part of the Penland School of Crafts (National Register, 2003).⁶⁰ Among the buildings from the Appalachian Industrial School that survive are the Amy M. Burt House, a one-and-a-half-story log structure built circa 1923 and greatly expanded in the early 2000s, and the circa 1905 Wesley Connolly House, which served as a boys' dormitory.⁶¹

Conclusion

The Shelter Neck Historic District is an intact assemblage of early twentieth century weatherboard buildings constructed by the Boston-based Alliance of Unitarian Women as a rural mission aimed at educating local children and their families in rural Pender County. For twenty-six years beginning in 1900 with the construction of the chapel and continuing with the addition of a school and dormitory, Boston Unitarians carried out Progressive Era, mission-driven religious and educational programs to contribute to

⁵⁹ Katherine H. Richardson, Valle Crucis Episcopal Mission National Register of Historic Places nomination, 1993, 8/10-8/13; Catherine W. Bishir, Michael T. Southern, and Jennifer F. Martin, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Western North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 220.

⁶⁰ "Appalachian School, Episcopal-Owned, Doing Fine Job in Mountain Section," *Greensboro Daily News*, February 1, 1950, 22; Bishir et al., 233.

⁶¹ Clay Griffith, Penland School Historic District National Register Nomination, 2003, 7/4-7/6.

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the betterment of this part of eastern North Carolina. Despite repeated flooding due to its location between the Northeast Cape Fear River and the massive Angola Swamp, the buildings at Shelter Neck effectively convey the intent and activities of Unitarian mission workers.

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10. Geographical Data

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

A.	Latitude:	34.645912	Longitude:	-77.860614
B.	Latitude:	34.643240	Longitude:	-77.855336
C.	Latitude:	34.642784	Longitude:	-77.855727
D.	Latitude:	34.642661	Longitude:	-77.855975
E.	Latitude:	34.642513	Longitude:	-77.863549
F.	Latitude:	34.643573	Longitude:	-77.863913
G.	Latitude:	34.643367	Longitude:	-77.862795

Verbal Boundary Description

The eligible boundary is shown by a white line on the accompanying Pender County GIS map. The boundary encompasses the full 39.14 acres of the tax parcel containing the chapel, Shelter Neck School, Dix House, gazebo, and shed (PIN 3342-37-0330-000). The boundary follows the legal parcel lines on the north, east, and south sides, but on the west it extends to the edge of the pavement of Croombsbridge Road.

Boundary Justification

The nominated parcel is all the property currently and historically associated with the Shelter Neck Historic District. The buildings and structures occupy approximately three acres and the remaining thirty-six acres is wooded. Although some of the thirty-six acres was cleared farmland where students and teachers raised crops during the first quarter of the twentieth century, pine and oak trees were allowed to grow on part of the land, according to a description of Shelter Neck from the early 1920s. The 39.14 acres contributes to the overall property's significance in the areas of education and social reform. Without the full extent of acreage, the settlement school could not have carried out its mission related to agricultural education.

Photos

All photos by Jennifer Martin, MdM Historical Consultants Inc. P.O. Box 1399, Durham, NC. Date of photography provided for each image. Digital images located at the North Carolina SHPO.

1. Gazebo and chapel, view to the southeast, May 2024
2. Chapel, view to the south-southeast, May 2024
3. Shelter Neck School from the chapel, view to the north, May 2024
4. Chapel interior, view to the east, May 2024
5. Chapel interior, view to the west-southwest toward front doors, May 2024

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6. Shelter Neck School, view to the north, May 2024
7. Shelter Neck School front corner, view to the northeast, May 2024
8. Shelter Neck School front corner, view to the northwest, May 2024
9. Shelter Neck School front doors, view to the north, May 2024
10. Shelter Neck School front doors and auditorium, view to the southwest, May 2024
11. Dix House façade, view to the east, May 2024
12. Dix House rear corner, view to the southwest, May 2024
13. Dix House school wing front corner, view to the southeast, May 2024
14. Dix House center hall, view to the south, May 2024
15. Dix House attic room with view of door toward stair, view to the north, May 2024
16. Shed behind Dix House, view to the southeast, May 2024

U. S. Geological Survey Map
Pin Hook Quadrangle, 2016

Shelter Neck Historic District
3707 Croomsbridge Road, Watha vic.
Pender County, North Carolina
Location Map

Shelter Neck Historic District

Shelter Neck

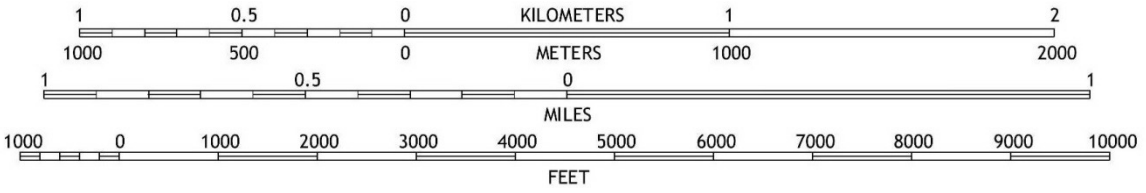
Angöta Swamp

RIVER OAKS RD

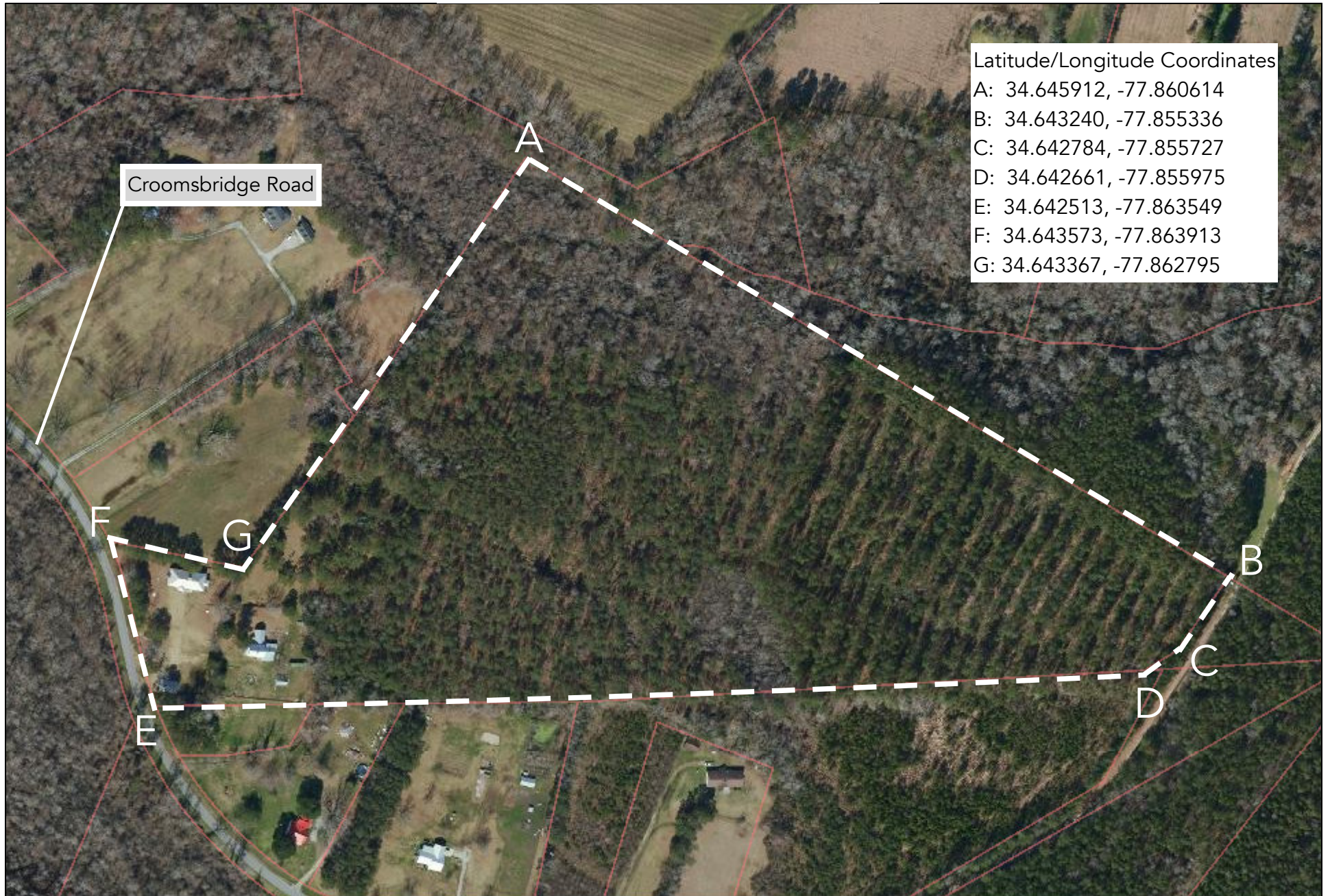
CROOMSBRIDGE RD

Northeast Cape Fear River

SCALE 1:24 000



Shelter Neck Historic District
3707 Croombsbridge Road, Watha vic.
Pender County, North Carolina

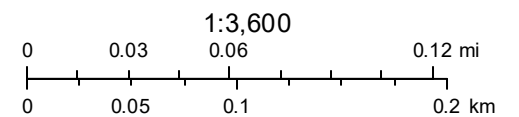


National Register Boundary Map

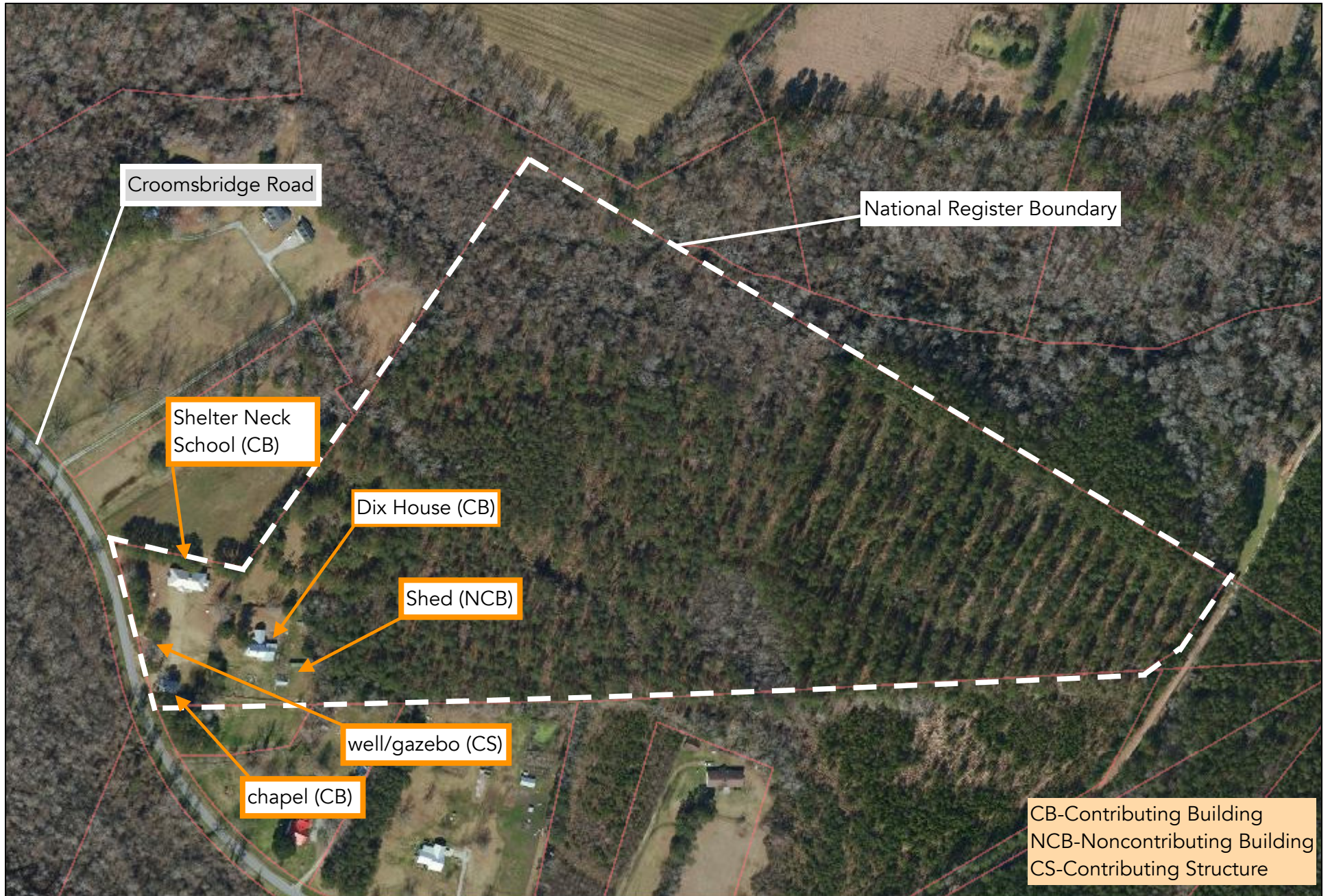
Base map: Pender County GIS, imagery date unknown

Map created by Jennifer Martin, MDM Historical Consultants, July 2024

North ↑



Shelter Neck Historic District
3707 Croombsbridge Road, Watha vic., Pender County, North Carolina

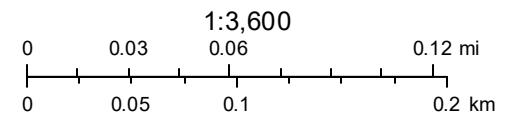


National Register Boundary Map

Base map: Pender County GIS, imagery date unknown

Map created by Jennifer Martin, MDM Historical Consultants, July 2024

North ↑



Shelter Neck Historic District
3707 Croombsbridge Road, Watha vic., Pender County, North Carolina



PHOTOGRAPH KEY

Base map: Pender County GIS, imagery date unknown
Map created by Jennifer Martin, MDM Historical Consultants,
July 2024

photo number
and direction of view (exteriors)
3 →

North ↑

