

A “Tearing Down” and the Aspiration to Something Greater: A Freedom Colony Church Falls in Vox Populi, Texas”

*By Michael O’Brien**

What caused the failure of the last vital cultural, educational, and spiritual institution in Vox Populi Texas, a freedom colony in Colorado County, Texas? Why were established balloon framing construction methods consistently compromised during the construction phases? Was this an example of faith over function? The wall failure which ultimately led to the abandonment of the South Point Baptist Church was investigated as part of a study of construction phasing and related compromises to the structural capacity of the structure in the context of balloon framing practices of the time from 1850 to 1920. This investigation was made possible by third-party theft/harvesting of interior sheathing and flooring which has exposed the improvisational wall and floor framing. Archival research on Vox Populi and the South Point Baptist Church was conducted at the Nesbitt Memorial Library, Columbus Texas. Digital models of the church construction phases were developed, and framing detail models constructed of key structural conditions to understand their modification and their possible role in the failure of the South wall which ultimately lead to the church’s abandonment and subsequent fall to ruin between 2011 and 2020. The use of an improvisational method of balloon framing was likely provoked by resource shortages at the time of the initial construction, likely 1900, and was compromised by later construction phases where the first phase (of 4 phases) meeting hall construction had its lateral resistance compromised to a point where the structure was no longer capable of transferring wind load from the roof and wall to the foundations. The resulting displacement of the South wall and subsequent openings in the roof and floor resulted in a deterioration of the roof, wall, and floor at the juncture of the phase 1 meeting hall and phase 3 rostrum additions. The required structural repair exceeded the capability of the congregation resulting in the abandonment of the South Point Baptist church in 2012. Demolition/harvesting of interior surfaces, the bell, and cornerstones by parties unknown began in 2016, has since stopped and the building stands precariously, some 136 years after its post-emancipation organization.

Introduction

As America continues to find its way to acknowledging the role of slavery and the critical contribution it made to the building of prominent educational facilities, government buildings, and the economic infrastructure many southern states benefit from today, reparations are being actively discussed.¹ One proposition for reparations is widespread reinvestment in African American communities. In this context we consider the town of Vox Populi, Texas, a freedom colony still intact

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1. R. Ray, and A. M. Perry, *Why we need reparations for Black Americans* (Brookings, 2020).

enough to be made legible as a part of the cultural landscape of the post-emancipation record in Colorado County, Texas.

Like many Freedom Colonies in Texas, Vox Populi, Texas is slowly turning to dust and rubble along Highway 71 in Colorado County, Texas. It has no recognition as a legitimate part of the historic landscape in county history, and like all Colorado County Freedom Colonies, is a memory historic accounts do not discuss with the same prominence as the county's role in the story of Texans 1836 retreat from the army of Santa Anna known as the "Runaway Scrape."



Figure 1. Cornerstones 1971 (Left) 1923 (Right)

Source: Michael O'Brien Image.



Figure 2. South Point Baptist Church, View from North 2014

Source: Michael O'Brien, Photo.

Vox Populi emerged as a parallel economy serving newly emancipated slaves in the early 1870's and grew to a bustling small town with stores, mills, community center, schools, cotton gins, two cemeteries and three churches. The South Point Baptist Church was the oldest, chartered in 1883, and cornerstone text confirm it was constructed and reconstructed at least three times. Visual evidence supports the thesis that at least the second and third constructions were made with physical parts of the community, if not the first church. That is, parts of the buildings that had established the town and the early church it is likely that "Tearing-Downs"² community gatherings organized to harvest and recycle building materials produced usable lumber, siding and windows, possibly from the first church building, for new constructions at South Point Baptist.

The "Tearing Down" was cited by George Rawick in the book *"The American Slave: A composite autobiography"* who, in the transcribed memory of John Sneed, included a first-hand account from a formerly enslaved person in Travis County, Texas. "We had a tearing-down dinner" "and didn't want to leave Marse Doctor. He talked to us and said as long as he lived we would be cared for, and we was. There was lots of springs on his place, and the married (couples) picked out a spring and Marse Doctor gave them stuff to put up a cabin by the spring. And they took what they had in the slave quarters to the new house. They wanted to move from the (slave) quarters, but, not too far from the Master."³

Frequently this lumber was not the size, or length needed to meet the new use. This seems to have been the case at South Point Baptist where the aspirations of the members exceeded the dimensions of the reclaimed lumber resulting in unusual innovations in balloon framing. This paper will present the evidence of Freedmen's "Tearing-Downs" and recycling lumber as seen in the current state of the South Point Church, the last community anchor of Vox Populi, and argue that the contemporary ongoing "tearing down" of the South Point Baptist Church driven by the influence of HGTV and its shiplap craze is putting these remote historic African American landmarks at risk for pilfering and destruction, resulting in the loss of history for all future generations.

Historians recognize that in post-emancipation Texas, new, small rural communities developed around schools and churches,⁴ in response to laws passed to restrict the rights of the newly freed slaves.⁵ Bill Stein, historian associated with the Nesbitt Library in Colorado County Texas notes that these communities, like the schools and churches they grew up around, were frequently segregated. Vox Populi, Texas, home to the South Point Baptist Church is one of these.⁶

2. T. Sitton, and J. H. Conrad, *Freedom Colonies: independent Black Texans in the time of Jim Crow*. 1st ed. by Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad; with research assistance and photographs by Richard Orton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

3. G. P. Rawick, *The American slave: A composite autobiography: supplement, series 2*. (Greenwood Press, 1979), Sneed, John account of freedom day p. 7-3703.

4. Texas Historical Commission, *African-Americans in Texas: A Lasting Legacy* (Texas Historical Commission, 2016).

5. Ibid, 7.

6. B. Stein, *Consider the Lily, the Ungilded History of Colorado County*, Part 9: 1878-1883 (n.d.).

Like many Freedom Colonies in Texas, Vox Populi, Texas is slowly turning to dust and rubble along Highway 71 in Colorado County, Texas. It has no recognition as a legitimate part of the historic landscape in the county history and seems to be a memory the county is reluctant to recognize or discuss in its history, deferring to the more-lively story of the county's role in the story of Sam Houston's "Runaway Scrape."⁷

Willard Robinson begins his book "Reflections of Faith" connecting the permanent structures used for worship as developing from "enclosures for protection and veneration of sacred trappings" to visual representation of the importance of religion in society.⁸ Robinson also notes that in Texas, the church was the vital center of community life accommodating worship, weddings, funerals, and also education. This remains especially true for African-American churches today, sadly, making them targets for vandals and arsonists. While some denominations in the late 19th century offered technical assistance to congregations seeking to build a church, many did not, and the local faithful were left to their own devices when designing and constructing their churches.

Context

This may have been especially true for the recently emancipated citizens building the South Point Baptist Church in the town of Vox Populi. The new town stretches along a quarter-mile of Highway 71 in Colorado County, Texas midway between the county seat, Columbus and the county seat of Wharton County to the south. The construction of Texas highway 71 was platted through the heart of the town of Vox Populi which was organized in the 1870's following the Juneteenth declaration of emancipation read by Major General Gordon Granger in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865.⁹ The town developed as what some have called a "convenience market" for former slaves, some argue that this was to minimize the longer journey to larger towns. It is my thesis that these "freedom colonies" were often self-isolated, located nearly midway between established towns to reduce the citizens exposure to the Jim Crow era indignities and violence regularly visited upon them by the members of the white communities.¹⁰ Vox Populi, like many rural freedom colonies operated as a parallel economy, offering schools (enrolling 200 pupils at one point), community center, cemeteries, stores,¹¹ cotton gins, and mills. Vox Populi also had its own post office from 1880 to the 1930's.¹²

7. C. Covington, *Runaway Scrape* (Texas State Historical Association, 2016).

8. W. B. Robinson, and J. M. Robinson, *Reflections of faith: houses of worship in the Lone Star State. Willard B. Robinson, with the assistance of Jean M. Robinson* (Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 1994).

9. Texas State Library and Archives Commission, *Juneteenth* (Texas State Library and Archives Commission, 2017).

10. Sitton, and Conrad, *Freedom Colonies: independent Black Texans in the time of Jim Crow*, 2005.

11. Stein, *Consider the Lily, the Ungilded History of Colorado County*, n.d.

12. Texas Escape, *Vox Populi, Texas* (Texas Escape, 2017).



Figure 3. *Vox Populi School*

Source: Image by Colorado County History.Org.

Today, Vox Populi stands as vanishing shadow of its former self as a freedom colony concentrated along Highway 71, slowly being consumed by the elements, and pressured from nearby extraction industries. Vox Populi is unique as a concentrated Freedom Colony and stands as a contrast to many of the more dispersed freedom colonies similarly established in Colorado County Texas of which there is little evidence of their existence today.¹³

South Point Baptist Church

Two churches “anchored” the town of Vox Populi, True Holiness Pentecostal Church on the North end, and South Point Baptist on the South end of the settlement. In between, some 20 structures including the post office, school, community center steam mill, cotton gin and store were found. Today only a dozen or so buildings survive, and each passing hurricane deteriorates more and more history.

The cornerstone for the South Point Baptist Church records 1883 as the date of organization, while the present building dates from 1923. During the 40 years between, it is likely an earlier church had been built, perhaps as a “single wall” construction type using 1x12 lumber as the load bearing wall such as is found at the nearby Pleasant Hill Baptist Church (1880) and the nearby Vox Populi school perhaps also dating from 1880.

Figure 3 of the Vox Populi school class shows the “single wall” or “box and strip” form of construction which helps establish the towns’ ability to produce

13. Stein, *Consider the Lily* (n.d.): Stein lists Rocky Chapel, Good Hope, Hill’s Chapel, Brownsville, Toland Chapel, Thompsonville, Jone’s Bend, Pleasant Grove, and Shaw’s Bend as schools for freed slaves in the 1870’s none exist today.

milled lumber, perhaps at the steam powered corn mill that was present near the time of the 1883 organization of the church. The single-wall method of construction required little in the way of materials, thin 1x12 planks made up the walls, and what very little 2-inch lumber was needed, was used for roof and floor framing.



Figure 4. Joint between Phase 1 Meeting Hall and Phase 3 Rostrum Roofs Showing Stains from previous use as the "First" Single-wall Church
Source: Image by Michael O'Brien.

It is possible that the 12-inch-wide ceiling boards found in the ceiling of the South Point church as it stands today, and some floor framing, may have been part of the "first" (1883) South Point Baptist church and were saved for reuse in the "second" church construction in 1923 as the community practice of the "tearing down" of the old and recycling pieces was known and documented by Sitton.¹⁴



Figure 5. Pleasant Hill Baptist Church Colorado County Tx. ca. 1880
Source: Michael O'Brien Image.

At South Point Baptist, framing used in the floor of the initial phase of the church shows signs of having been cut to frame a roof, (Figure 6) and much of the

14. Sitton, and Conrad, *Freedom Colonies: independent Black Texans in the time of Jim Crow*, 2005.

walls, and floor structure are constructed from shorter pieces of framing, nailed sided by side, “sistering” to make a longer piece of framing. The reuse of construction materials to build anew is documented by Thad Sitton in “Freedom Colonies.”¹⁵



Figure 6. *Floor Framing with Unused Mortise and Gable End Cut (Phase 1)*

Source: Michael O’Brien Image.

Phasing of Additions



Figure 7. *The Four Phases of Construction*

The character of the lumber and framing technique makes it appear the current South Point Baptist Church was built in multiple phases; the initial 1923 “meeting hall” structure, a one-room rectangular structure approximately 37 feet long by 25 feet wide, with a sidewall height of approximately 14’ to the top plate. A second phase consisting of the “westworks” bell towers and narthex but located on the meeting hall’s east side extending the full 25-foot width of the meeting hall projecting 7 feet from the meeting hall phase and being 22 feet to the top plate of the towers. The apparently newest additions, the rostrum and choir addition, consisting of a curved rostrum that projected into the meeting hall, and a three-tier choir riser with offices and restrooms flanking the choir/rostrum to the left and right. This rostrum/choir addition had a footprint of 14 feet deep by 33 feet wide centered on the meeting hall phase and roughly matching its sidewall height. A failure of some type occurred at the juncture between the rostrum/choir phase 3 addition and the meeting hall phase 1 addition which resulted in the wall framing and its associated sill piece being displaced to the west some 3 inches. The resulting sloping of the western wall likely contributed to the abandonment of the

15. Ibid.

church, which based on trophies visible in 2014, was still a vibrant congregation up through 2007. The sill/wall connection along the western wall shows evidence of extensive water and insect damage, perhaps leading to the rotting of the corner post base and sill connection, thus "freeing" the southern sill beam to move and the attached southern wall to lean precariously.

The Meeting Hall, Phase 1 1923

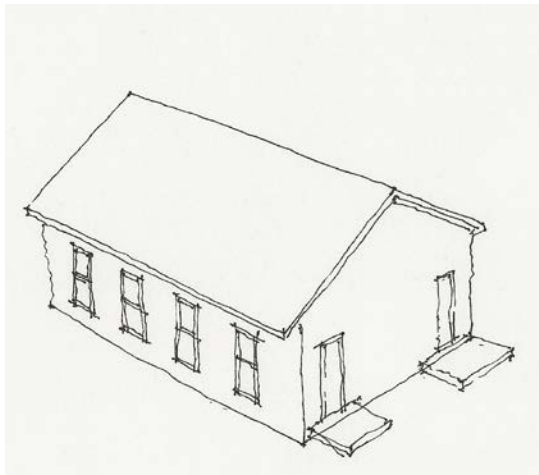


Figure 8. *Phase I Meeting Hall*

Source: Michael O'Brien Image.

The meeting hall phase, which makes up most of the existing building may not have been the original church building. While the cornerstone notes that the church was established in 1883, wood constructions from that time would have used square or rectangular headed nails stamped from nail plate. Virtually all the observed nails at the church today (are with the exception of one) are wire type nails¹⁶ perhaps dating it to 1923, the only other date on the first cornerstone. Lumber widths are very close to 2 inches thickness indicating lumber cut between 1900 and 1924 when the American Lumber Standards called for 1.75 inch-thickness.¹⁷ The current standard is of 1.5 inches. None of the lumber in Phases 1 and 2 possesses a grade stamp further indicating the lumber was milled, perhaps locally, prior to the common grading standards implemented by the Southern Pine Association in 1915.¹⁸

As a single-story building, the phase I church is balloon framed with framing members extending from the 4x6 sill to the top plate of the wall. Balloon framing would have been widely known and practiced by the 1923 build date estimate.¹⁹ The corners of the phase one meeting hall have not yet been fully exposed by the

16. T. Wells, "Nail Chronology: The use of technologically derived features," *Historical Archeology*, 32, no. 2 (1998): 78-99.

17. L. Smith, and L. Wood, *History of Yard Lumber Size Standards* (Madison, WI: Forest Products Laboratory, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1964), 10-16.

18. SPIB Team, *Lumber Grade-Marking History: 1915* (SPIB Team, 2018).

19. F. W. Peterson, *Homes in the heartland: balloon frame farmhouses of the upper Midwest, 1850-1920* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 1.

ongoing demolition/material theft but what is visible in both the northeast and southeast corners of this phase 1 construction shows not a solid corner post but a build-up of smaller framing members applied both side by side and on the west face of the corner. This would be consistent with the overall carpentry approach used in the phase 1 church which made extensive use of recycled lumber, possibly from the first church, perhaps from a “tearing down” of a nearby structure. The corner post is braced along the long axis wall with a “down brace” along both the long and short axis of the building. This “down brace” a continuous 2x4 extending from top plate to sill is a critical lateral bracing component that was common in balloon frame construction of this time.²⁰



Figure 9. Downbrace (Circled) in Southeast Corner at South Tower Door

Source: Michael O’Brien Image.

The connection between this post and the 4x6 sill is not visible, and other visible sill locations shows no evidence of timber joinery so perhaps this corner post to sill connection is a simple nailed connection as the southeast tower post/sill connection is.

The exposed framing of the meeting hall (phase I) shows that the lumber is less refined than that used in the rostrum/choir addition. Lumber in phase I has square corners, not eased, and has un-sanded surfaces, additional thickness, and shows circular mill saw marks (likely a secondary function of the local steam corn mill) and is greater than 2-inches in thickness, with some approaching 3-inch thickness.²¹ The exterior walls on the long axis of this meeting hall phase were originally punctured by four window openings measuring 36 inches wide by 68 inches tall. These windows are separated by sections of framed wall 60 inches in length. This 60-inch wall increment would be unusual today as most wall segments are modularized to fit the 16-inch on center stud spacing and structural sheathing

20. M. O’Brien, “Hybrids on the Way to the Western Platform Frame: Two Structures in Western Virginia,” *Preservation, Education and Research*, III (2010): 41.

21. M. Odintz, *Vox Populi, TX* (Texas State Historical Association, 1995).

dimensions. Applying contemporary wood frame thinking would produce a wall segment 48 inches wide with 3 stud spaces, or the next stud space increment 64 inches (4 stud spaces). The 60-inch space between windows in this phase 1 is only divided into two stud spaces, that is a single stud centered on the 60-inch wall, the equivalent of a 30-inch stud spacing, almost twice the spacing in use today, probably related to the ability of the 1 inch thick exterior and interior shiplap siding wall surfaces to span stud to stud and transfer wind load to the studs without excessive siding deflection.

It is likely that most of the lumber used to frame the walls and floor was not purchased or milled for the church project per se. There is evidence that the lumber was reused from another structure, perhaps the result of a "tearing down" wherein the community would disassemble one building to reuse the parts to build another.²² There are floor joists that show unused mortise cuts, and gable end cuts, indicators that the lumber had been reused. Significantly, virtually every wall stud does not extend continuously from the sill plate to the eave plate, depending on the practice of "sistering," where a framing element, like a stud or joist is reinforced by nailing another stud or joist adjacent to it (Figure 10). This practice is still in use in carpentry today, but typically only for damaged stud or joist members. In this case, the entire meeting hall wall and floor structure is made up of sistered members indicating that the members had been reused from another building, perhaps the original church that was not as tall in the sidewall or wide in the floor-span as the current building.



Figure 10. Phase 1 Walls, 8 and 10 Foot Stud "Sistered" to Make a 14'-6 Stud Height
Source: Michael O'Brien Image.

I believe it is important to consider this "sistering" approach in an aspirational context, one that placed a desire for space, light and height over the humble resources at hand. It is my conjecture that the original church, perhaps constructed with the "box and strip" method like that found in the nearby school building and the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church some 20 miles north in Colorado County. This

22. Sitton, and Conrad, *Freedom Colonies: independent Black Texans in the time of Jim Crow*, 2005, Location 371, 372.

conjecture is founded on the presence of extra-wide interior ceiling sheathing showing deterioration along their short axis as if they had been vertically in contact with the ground. In this conjecture I can see this “box and strip” church, built at the 1883 inception of the church, being disassembled as a congregational event, with the wall boards and roof framing being stacked for reuse. As these wide sheathing boards exist, they would represent a 9 to 10-foot wall height. Reasonable for this “box and strip” construction where wall height is limited by tree dimension, but low for a room as large as that planned for the meeting hall phase, necessitating the “sistering” of 8-foot wall studs to achieve a nearly 14-foot tall sidewall height. The aspiration to the 14-foot wall height drove a significant deviation from standard carpentry practices, and material availability, a triumph of aspiration over traditional practice.

The ceiling is sheathed in 10 to 12-inch-wide boards nailed to the underside of the roof joists as they meet the wall, and then a ceiling joist acts as a tension tie across the sloping roof joists. The net effect is that of a partial “cathedral” ceiling that slopes upwards for approximately four feet extension from the wall, on each side and is flat for the remaining 16 feet in the center of the space. The roof framing above is 2x lumber, informally trussed, perhaps on an “as-needed” basis to prevent excessive deflection in the ceiling joists. Above these trusses are 6-inch boards arranged as “skip” sheathing for a cedar shingle roof. Below the plane of the ceiling, and below the height of the top plate for the wall studs (approx. 14’) one finds six-3/4-inch steel rods with turnbuckles spanning across the space. The spacing of these tie-rods do not correspond to the wall stud spacing and only connect to the shiplap siding, not to studs or the top plate. The absence of disturbance to the interior shiplap sheathing indicates that these tie rods must have been original to the construction. The use of iron rods as ties in wooden constructions dates back to the 12th century and in America dates back to 1833 in bridges and mills,²³ so their use here, while uncommon in balloon framing, is not an unusual innovation.



Figure 13. Interior Demolition 28 Jan. 2017 Showing Tie Rods, Semi-Cathedral Ceiling

Source: Michael O’Brien Image.

23. J. I. Rempel, *Building with Wood* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 253.

The "Westworks"/Narthex Addition, Phase II

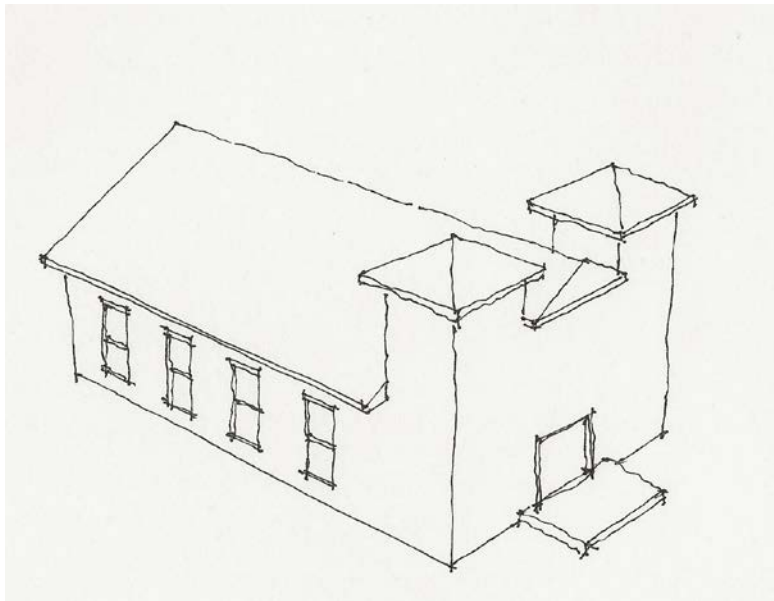


Figure 14. Phase II "Eastworks" Tower and Narthex Addition
Source: Michael O'Brien Image.

This second phase is approximately 21 feet floor to tower eave, seven feet deep and extends fully across the 25-foot width of the phase I meeting hall.

Lumber in this phase 2 addition is similarly milled to 2 inches or more in thickness, shows saw marks from the milling process, and is square edged. Easing or radiusing of the edges, common after the postwar period is not visible in this phase. Like the phase I meeting hall portion of the church, no structural panel materials were used as wall or floor sheathing and no framed bracing is visible making these towers dependent on the phase I downbraces for their lateral stability. The exterior 1" thick shiplap siding functioned both as the shear diaphragm of sorts and weather barrier. The towers remain plumb and true as of the date of this article.

The framing techniques used in this addition shares some characteristics with the phase 1 construction in that the framing members are built up, that is, doubled or tripled to achieve both the required cross section required for the 21-foot-tall eave height while being made up of shorter sticks of lumber. The continuity of the overlaps between pieces of spliced lumber differentiates this "building up" technique from the "sistering" technique used in the phase 1 meeting hall where the overlap between side nailed members is often 30 inches or less. Doubled 2x6 members supported the cast bell which was in place in 2010 but has since been removed during the current stripping/demolition of the church.

The addition of a pair of tower spires like those in phase II to flank the entry of a church structure was traditionally called the "westworks."²⁴ As was often the case, the sanctuary of the Southpoint Baptist Church established a "Liturgical East," which in this case, positions the sanctuary and rostrum to the west and the towers and nave facing highway 71 to the east.

24. H. Braun, *Cathedral architecture* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1972).

The evidence for these towers and narthex being a later addition includes: the corner braces in existence in the phase I corner on the west side of the towers. One would wonder why would a carpenter put a “corner brace” effectively seven feet away from the tower corner? My response would be that the presence of the braced meeting hall, but unbraced tower confirms that the carpenter placed the brace in this location because the phase two addition was not yet conceived, and the brace was required to anchor the corner post as traditional balloon framing practice would have it.



Figure 15. *Balloon Frame Process Dependent on Down Braces to Stabilize Corners*
 Source: From “Hybrids on the Way to Western Platform Framing”²⁵.

The second piece of evidence is the presence of a partially filled openings at the doorways in the wall between the southern tower and the meeting hall. These partially filled openings shares a common height with the exceptionally tall (7’6”) window heads in the phase 1 meeting hall and have been filled in to meet the door head height (6’8”) for the door between tower and hall. The act of filling in this opening required a cutting away of the downbrace in the southeastern corner, another example of faith over function. This may be a filled in opening for one of what may have been gender-specific entrances which were symmetrically arrayed adjacent to the downbraces on the buildings entry façade.²⁶ Gender-specific entrances were common in early U.S. protestant churches. The historic Van Wert Baptist Church in Polk County Georgia (1846) still features these gendered entrances²⁷. Historic accounts indicating the practice was fading in the late 1800’s²⁸. The final bit of evidence for the towers as additions concerns the thickness of the wall between the tower/nave addition and the meeting hall. The wall is exceptionally thick, 8 inches where the other walls in the building are approximately 4 inches. Examining the jamb of the opening between phase 1 and phase 2 one can observe a doubling of the framing, indicating that the wall of the meeting hall stood while a wall (and structure) for the towers was constructed adjacent to it.

25. O’Brien, *Hybrids on the Way to the Western Wood Frame*, Preservation, 2010.

26. B. Waugh, *Designing Churches – Entrance Doors* (Presbyterians of the Past, 2016).

27. Unknown, Van Wert Methodist, Historic Rural Churches of Georgia. Retrieved from <https://www.hrcga.org/church/van-wert-methodist/> 10 July 2019.

28. Sharon Center United Methodist Church, *Undated history of Sharon Center United Methodist Church*, “Who We Are.” (Sharon Center United Methodist Church).

The Rostrum Addition Phase 3: Faith over Function, the Elimination of Bracing and the Death of the Church

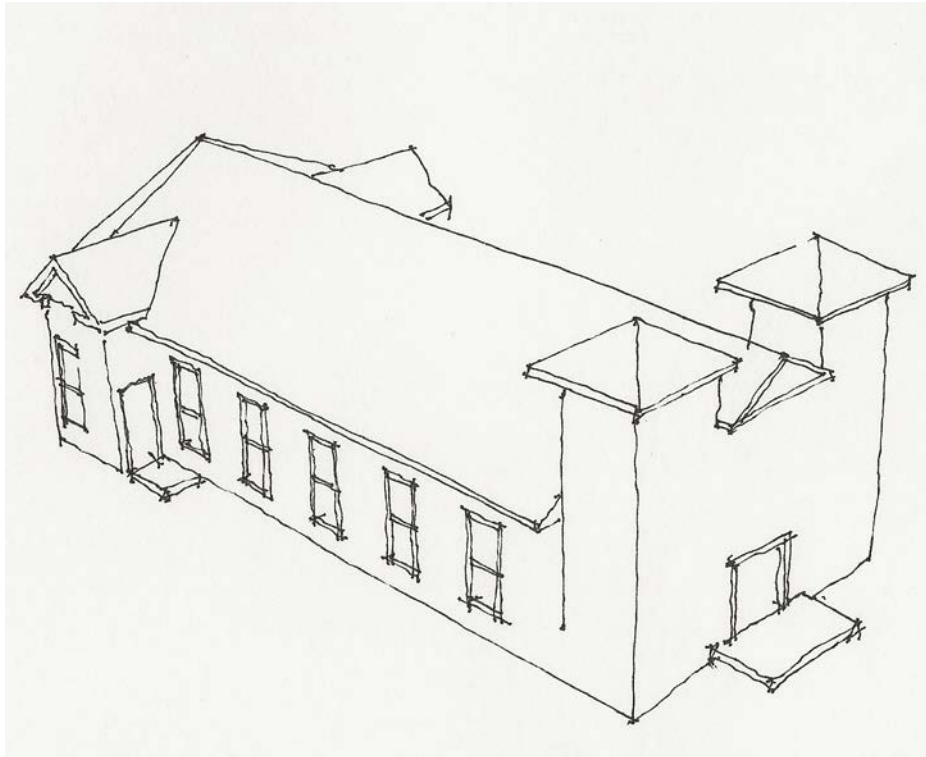


Figure 16. *Phase III Rostrum Addition*

Source: Michael O'Brien Image.

The specific design sanctuary wall of the meeting house phase is difficult to determine as it was completely removed when the rostrum addition was constructed. This act, which removed the downbraces for the southwest and northwest corners ultimately doomed the church. Without the downbraces or compensating framing, lateral forces exerted on the roof from the South levered the wall framing (buckling some sistered studs) and sliding the unrestrained sill to the outside edge of the foundation piers. This unrestrained lateral force resulted in the distortion of the South wall and in nearby roof and floor openings/leaks to the exterior.

One might conjecture, based upon the exposed framing of the subsequent choir addition, that a pair of tall windows may have been centered on the wall, subsequently moved to the back (west) wall of the rostrum addition and then to the back (west) wall of the choir addition where they were ultimately replaced by the current, shorter, steel framed windows. Short studs under the current windows and patched exterior shiplap seemed to confirm the window height change.

The third phase construction appears to be an addition expanding the overall width of the western end of the church and is a fairly contemporary addition, perhaps dated to the 1930's by its use of 6-inch clapboard for interior wall sheathing (in lieu of a structural panel) as well as exterior siding, the predominance of round-head wire nails, and the exclusive use of more "modern" lumber, machine sawn and finished to less than a true 2" dimension, eased corners and in full lengths (no

“sistering”). These characteristics clearly delineate this as a later phase construction than the meeting hall it extends. This 14’ x 33’ addition may date from a more extensive renovation conducted after the 1923 as noted on the older cornerstone as the “rebuilt” year. This addition saw the rostrum, and small offices, with a matching cedar shingles on skip sheathing roof installed. The cement asbestos siding installed on the south side of this third phase are likely from a 1940’s or later maintenance project.

The Choir Addition, Phase 4

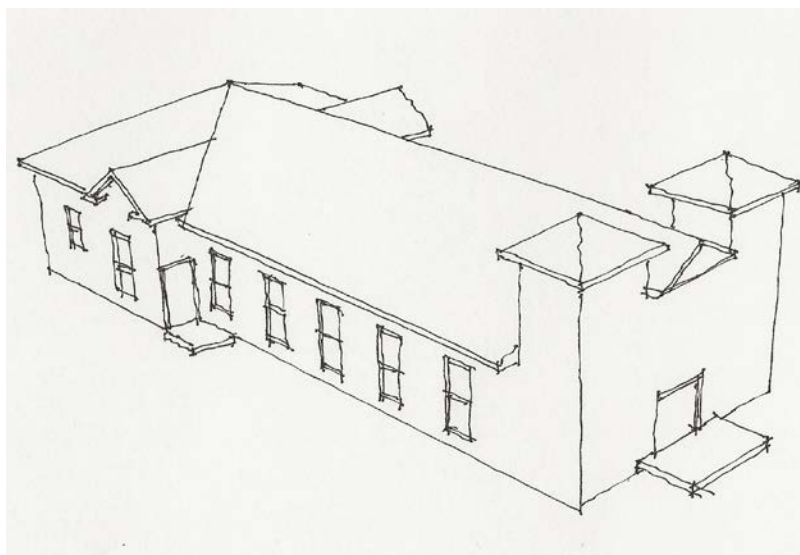


Figure 17. *Phase IV, Choir Addition*

Source: Michael O’Brien Image.

After, perhaps shortly after the 1923’s Rostrum addition, an extra 8’x33’ was added to the west wall of the rostrum. This addition included men’s and women’s toilets, and a rostrum-wide 3-riser choir space. The framing lumber and wall sheathing closely matches the rostrum construction but clear joints in the shiplap wall sheathing and distortions in the roof surfaces show that this was an independent addition installed following the 1923 rebuilding by Reverend A.E. Combs. The cement asbestos siding that covers the south, west and east sides of both the phase 3 (rostrum) and phase 4 (choir) additions were likely part of a later maintenance project, perhaps the project that replaced the 7’6 high windows with the current 6’6” high steel frame units, as the cement asbestos siding shows no indication of patching of a taller opening.

Final Phase: Window Replacements and Finishes

Perhaps the final phase of construction can be considered as a weatherization and refinishing project. The existing bell tower louvered opening was closed in, new carpeting and ceiling installed, the old windows were replaced with smaller steel framed windows with the space beneath the windows filled in with studs and

clapboard. The choir addition was covered with cement/asbestos siding on the west and north sides while the remaining church was covered in plywood.

A second cornerstone dated 1971 identifies Reverend Bennette Cortez as the elected pastor with deacons G. Farrow, J. Dancy, T. Johnson, G. Howard, and L. McCrew as "Successors." The presence of this second cornerstone may have indicated a re-dedication of the church leading to its active use through 2007. Reverend Cortez passed away in Houston, Tx in 2009 after becoming minister at the Greater Faith Baptist Church in the late 1990's.²⁹

Demolition by Parties Unknown

Parties unknown began removing the contents of the church, its cornerstones and much of the interior shiplap siding by July 2014. The unknown demolition crew installed temporary bracing to compensate for the removal of materials, and in the process exposed the construction of much of the interior walls which made observation of construction, and evaluation of phasing possible. As of February 2019, the church, in this partially demolished state, continued to stand. When South Point Baptist finally falls or is demolished, the last institutional anchor of Vox Populi will be gone and the noble aspirations of 124 years of residents will become little more than a brush pile along Highway 71



Figure 18. *South Wall of South Point Baptist Showing Distortion*
Source: Michael O'Brien Image.

29. C. Horswell, *Aces Homes pastor Bennette J. Cortez* (Houston Chronicle, 2009).

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