

Clear Creek AME Church is a modest wooden building located in a peaceful setting on a country road in East Feliciana Parish. The small church is set back from the road in a clearing in the woods, and is screened from the road by a stand of trees. To the north, although not visible from the church, is Clear Creek. The congregation was founded, according to church history, in 1865. The present building is early twentieth century. For the purposes of this nomination, it is being given a date of circa 1910. As was typical in Louisiana, the church also served as a school, which is the source of its Register eligibility. Alterations include modernization of the interior and replacement of the windows.

Clear Creek AME is quite typical of rural Protestant African-American churches in the South. The unassuming rectangular building features a pyramidal roof tower at the center of the façade. The front gable is articulated with gable end returns. The tower protrudes forward from the main wall plane to provide a small vestibule accessed via a wide doorway. The only attempt at decoration is sawtooth trim outlining the front gable at the eaves. All windows (replaced) are square head with plank frames. It is uncertain whether the lower height rear wing, which has a rather pieced-together look, is original or not, but it definitely appears to date from the historic period.

The interior has been fitted with plywood paneling and ceiling tiles (although the ceiling has not been lowered). The altar is set off with a balustrade featuring large turned balusters. The rear wing contains space for the choir at its middle with a small room to each side. These rooms were converted to bathrooms, the first for the church, in about 1980. The homemade plank pews are essentially benches with a back. Their date is unknown, but one church member knows they were there in the mid-1940s when she moved to the area and married.

Assessment of Integrity:

Despite the changed windows and interior modifications, Clear Creek retains most of its original character and would be easily recognizable to someone who had gone to school there during the historic period.

SIGNIFICANT DATES:	c. 1915-c. 1925
ARCHITECT/BUILDER:	Unknown
CRITERION:	A

Clear Creek AME Church is significant in the areas of education and ethnic heritage because it represents a major phenomenon in the development of educational facilities for African-Americans – “public” school held in a church. In the early twentieth century the building provided the only education available to children in the immediate area. Because it is very difficult to obtain a detailed and complete history of buildings such as this, the period of significance cannot be as precise as one might like. Given the recollections described below, a date range of c.1915 to c.1925 is being used. School may have been held there earlier and/or later, but it cannot be documented at present.

The Clear Creek school must be viewed within its historic context for a full appreciation of its significance. Firstly, it is important to understand that despite being held in a church, the school was not religious in nature. It represents a common and important phenomenon in late nineteenth and early twentieth century rural Louisiana – churches that assumed much of the responsibility for providing a public educational system. By way of background, Louisiana for the most part did not make significant progress in public education until the early twentieth century, whether for whites or blacks. The watchword among late nineteenth century politicians was retrenchment, and while provision for public education existed on paper, funding was woefully inadequate for even a single school system, let alone the dual system mandated by segregation. Another factor was the general lack of interest in public education. Private education was more desirable, with public education bearing the stigma of being “pauper” education. In short, its customers were those too poor to go to private schools. And in heavily Catholic South Louisiana, the church provided schools.

What developed in the post-Reconstruction years under the name “public education” was often a public-private system in which the state contributed some funding, with local sources providing the building and other necessities. Among African-Americans, churches played a prominent role. Across the state were so-called public schools being held in churches or church-owned buildings. As T. H. Harris, State Superintendent of Education from 1908 to 1940, reported in his autobiography: “In most cases Negro churches were used for schoolhouses and the only equipment in these churches were the benches used for church services.” These efforts were augmented with various private philanthropic funds aimed at improving African-American education in the South (for example, the Rosenwald Fund).

Although it has not been documented in school board records (if such documentation exists), Clear Creek must have been of the pervasive public-private partnership described above. The land in question was donated to the trustees of the church in 1872 by Miss Margaret Collingsworth and Mrs. M. E. Hodges solely “for church and school purposes.”

The only other documentation available on the school comes from interviews conducted for this nomination. And while they provided the necessary information to document the school's importance for purposes of the National Register, there are few people still alive who actually went to school there, and some of them have moved away.

According to the general oral tradition, school was held in the church from the very beginning (an earlier building). Mr. Alton Kelly (age 80) stated that his grandfather and two great uncles attended school there.

The earliest accounts in reference to the candidate are from the late 1910s and early 1920s, from people who went to school there or people whose relatives did. Mrs. Celestine Rogers (76) recounted that her husband Theo Rogers (born in 1918, deceased) had gone to school at the Clear Creek church as had his father and various family members.

Mrs. Clotile Williams Matthews (born in 1913) had fairly detailed knowledge of the school, for both she and her younger sister went there. She recalled six grades and one teacher and estimated there were 30 to 40 students. Children were taught in groups, according to their level or grade. The term, as was typical, accommodated the agricultural cycle, with classes beginning in October after the harvest. Also, as was the norm in the rural South, the school year was short – in this case, three months. But even when school was in session, children had plenty of work to do before and after classes. And, of course, they walked to school, in Mrs. Clotile Matthews' case about a mile.

As was typical, the school served a fairly small area. Given lack of money to buy automobiles and unpaved country roads, there tended to be some type of school (no matter how modest) every few miles. According to the interviewees, the closest other schools to Clear Creek were two Rosenwald schools, each about four miles away.

Exactly when the candidate ceased to serve as a school is not known, although we know from Mrs. Celestine Rogers that it was prior to the late 1940s. A former schoolteacher, she moved to the area in 1945. She taught in what was then the area's only school (also one room) in 1947 and '48.

Clear Creek AME services continued to be held in the building until 1998, by which time the active congregation had shrunk to a few members. Fortunately, over the years, the members had resisted the temptation to "improve" the building with brick veneer or tear it down for a new church. While church schools such as this were a "signature" of the period, very few survive, at least not in their original state. Because Clear Creek AME is the only known example of the phenomenon in East Feliciana Parish, local significance is being claimed for Register purposes. (There are also no known surviving Rosenwald schools in the parish.)

Today Clear Creek AME Church is under the watchful eye of six trustees. It is being used by Seventh Day Adventists and is called simply Clear Creek Church.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Act of donation to trustees of Clear Creek AME Church, November 14, 1872.

Interviews with Alton Kelly, Celestine Rogers, Clotilde Williams Matthews. Transcript in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.