

Abstract:

**Exploring Baptist Temple Park in the Highlands: The Beginning of An Historical Archaeology Project in Oak Bluffs**

My name is Jeffrey Burnett, and I am an archaeologist and PhD student at Michigan State University. I grew up in Massachusetts, though not on the Vineyard, and been working to lay the groundwork for an archaeology project studying the history of Oak Bluffs since the summer of 2019. This project seeks to utilize archaeological investigations, mapping, and stories to explore the history of Oak Bluffs, focusing on its growth as a diverse resort community. Baptist Temple Park is an important part of this story, particularly of the East Chop / Highlands area, as Baptists groups held Camp Meetings and other events there from as early as the mid-1870 until the mid-1930s. Today the Baptist Temple and the revivals held there are seen as part of the story of why many families first moved to the area and as one of the core reasons there is now, and has historically been, a strong history of African American homeownership the Highlands and East Chop.

The preserved remnants of the Baptist Tabernacle built in 1878 sit in Baptist Temple Park, a large circular park located within the bounds of Church Ave. Archaeological investigations of the recent past can use material objects, archival documents, and stories to answer questions about places and people in the past. In Oak Bluffs it would be possible to use these data to uncover and share insights into how the community as a whole came to be and into the experiences of the people who lived here. An investigation of Baptist Temple Park that maps the remnants of the temple structure and may involve limited excavation of the park's wooded areas serves as a valuable research project in its own right and also serves as an entry point for introducing archaeology as a tool for investigating and preserving the past. This work would likely be performed in stages and early fieldwork could begin as soon as next year. As this project is still in the design phase, the final shape of the project is not yet determined. I am

writing this brief description to introduce the possible project to the members of the East Chop Association and to encourage the participation of any who are interested in helping to shape and inform the work.

Jeffrey Burnett  
[burne138@msu.edu](mailto:burne138@msu.edu)  
774-218-8919

655 Auditorium Dr  
Baker Hall, East Lansing, Michigan 48823

### **Exploring Baptist Temple Park in the Highlands: The Beginning of An Historical Archaeology Project in**

#### **Oak Bluffs**

##### Slide 1

- Introduce myself and thank the members of the ECA, the board, and especially Barbara Baskin, Craig Dripps, and Jim Richardson for inviting me to speak and to possibly study Baptist Temple Park.

In 2019 and this summer I am working to build the structure for my dissertation project. This project seeks to utilize archaeological investigations, mapping, and stories to explore the historical community of Oak Bluffs, focusing on its growth as a diverse resort community. Archaeological investigations of the recent past can use material objects, archival documents, and stories to answer questions about places and people in the past. In Oak Bluffs it would be possible to use these data to uncover and share insights into how the community as a whole came to be and into the experiences of the people who lived here. My goal is for the project to be grounded in the Oak Bluffs and Martha's Vineyard community, performing work that adds to the already extensive historic preservation work done by individuals and local organizations.

##### Slide 2 - *show map with location of park and photos*

An investigation of Baptist Temple Park that maps the remnants of the temple structure and may involve limited excavation of the park's wooded areas serves as a valuable research project in its

own right and also serves as an entry point for introducing archaeology as a tool for investigating and preserving the past. This work would likely be performed in stages and fieldwork could begin as soon as next year. As this project is still in the design phase, it's final shape is not yet determined. I am here today to introduce the possible project to the members of the East Chop Association and to encourage the participation of any who are interested in helping to shape and inform the work.

The Baptist Revivals and the Baptist Temple in the Highlands are intimately connected to the growth of the summer community area in many ways. Because the Vineyard Baptist Association owned the park and held their Camp Meetings there for many years, lots were sold to Baptist clergy and to lay residents who wished to be near the Temple and others were likely rented to visitors attending the weeklong revivals. Those attending the revivals were introduced to Martha's Vineyard and Oak Bluffs. Not all would have had the desire or means to stay, but many did. Today the Baptist Temple and the revivals held there are seen as part of the story of why many families first moved to the area and as one of the core reasons there is now, and has historically been, a strong history of African American homeownership the Highlands and East Chop.

The remnants of the Baptist Temple sit in the large park circled by Church Ave in the Highlands / East Chop area of Oak Bluffs. The remnants consist of a large asphalt open area where the foundation and footings of the Baptist Temple still stand and an outer, wooded area with several footpaths connecting the park to Church Ave. The Baptist Temple at one point in the past formed the physical and social center of the area. I will first introduce some of the history of the Baptist Temple and then discuss what an archaeological investigation could look like and what may be learned.

Slide 3 – map and deed

In 1869 Vineyard Grove Company purchased a large area of East Chop with the goal of developing a planned community they called the Vineyard Highlands. The Vineyard Grove Company

plotted hundreds of small lots and many park areas, including the circular park that is now BTP. At the time there was a possibility that the Camp Meeting Association may want to move to the Vineyard Highlands from Wesleyan Grove, but this did not happen. Still, many of the planned lots were sold during the early 1870s, however, this slowed down after the economic panic of 1873 and the development never took off as hoped.

As a result, in 1876 the Vineyard Grove Company sold what is now Baptist Temple Park and several lots bounded by Church Ave to the Baptist Vineyard Association for “one dollar and other valuable considerations”. These lots were joined with the planned park to create Baptist Temple Park as it is now. This agreement may have been an attempt by the VGC to find a new market in the Baptists and revamp their floundering investment.

Slide 4 – newspaper articles

Formed in 1875, the Vineyard Baptist Association may have held camp meetings in the Highlands as early as August of that year (Hough 1966:147). The temple structure was first used by the June of 1878<sup>1</sup> and was formally dedicated in August, likely during the revival<sup>2</sup>. The permanent temple in Baptist Temple Park was constructed a year before the iron Methodist Tabernacle in the Campgrounds.

Slide 5 – image of BT

Vineyard writer Henry Beatle Hough (1966:148) describes the Baptist Temple as being a substantial structure: It was octagonal with a monitor, or raised roof segment, topped with a flagpole that reached 140 feet off the ground. The main roof measured 120 feet across at its widest and rested on 20-foot pillars. While not as large as the Tabernacle in the Campgrounds, this wooden structure

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://vineyardgazette.com/news/1878/07/29/baptist-temple>

<sup>2</sup> <https://vineyardgazette.com/news/1878/08/23/baptist-camp-meeting>

reportedly would have held 2500 – 3000 people<sup>3</sup>. This image shows the cleared area surrounding that park.

It is possible that Baptist events at the Temple were integrated, including Black and white Baptists as there are known connections with Tremont Temple Baptist Church of Boston through Charles Shearer. Tremont Temple was opened in 1843 and is considered one of the first integrated churches in America. It is also possible that white and Black Baptists had separate events. I have reached out to the archives of the descendant organization of the Massachusetts Baptist Convention and hope to explore their records in Georgia sometime in the future.

Slide 6 – remnants of BT in TP

The Baptist Temple eventually fall into disuse in mid-1930s and in 1937 the park was sold to the Highlands Property Trust in 1937<sup>4</sup>. The temple was razed during this period. However, it seems that while the Baptists were no longer using the site in the 1930s, others were. Dorthey West, in her column in the Vineyard Gazette relates a story from Vineyard resident Bill Danby where the children of the Highlands would play in the crumbling temple, climbing the platform and reciting poems learned in school (Saunders and Shackelford 24:2001).

Slide 7 – why do the work and what will it look like

While an archaeological study of Oak Bluffs and Baptist Temple Park importantly connects to recent trends by academic historians to take seriously the history of African American resort communities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this investigation of Baptist temple Park is also novel and important work in itself. There has been very little archaeology done on sites of 19<sup>th</sup> century religious revivals, this work represents a chance to learn more about the temple structure, the park itself, the people who attended

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://vineyardgazette.com/news/1878/06/21/baptist-pavilion>

<sup>4</sup> <https://vineyardgazette.com/news/1937/03/12/baptist-temple-sold-highlands-property-trust>

the revivals, and how it relates to the Highlands and East Chop communities. A study of Baptist Temple Park also presents an opportunity to share this history more broadly and in new ways.

What that looks like exactly still has to be shaped, but it could mean creating an image or short pamphlet that shows the mapped footings and foundation, involving community members in mapping and clearing, or hosting public days at the park or elsewhere that encourage community members to come share stories, photos, or materials related to the park. Work like this is most effective when it balances sharing the history of a place like Baptist Temple Park and ensuring the preservation of the park and the remaining temple structure. I hope to work closely with interested members of the ECA and other groups on Martha's Vineyard to find the best possible system for the site.

A project like this also provides an introduction to archaeology for the area and residents that will share the history in new ways, ideally sparking interest in the history of the area and the importance of preserving that history and historic places. This project could be built upon in the future with some residents interested in archaeological investigations of other public areas or their homes, either ahead of construction or out of pure interest.

In conversations with members of the ECA board it has been asserted that all work should leave the park as it is now. As such, a major focus of this project would be on mapping the foundation ring, the footings, and paths used to enter the park, as well as digging in the outer areas. Mapping historic sites using global positioning systems is a common method of historical preservation that also provides a new way of looking at a site. By involving community members, including local homeowners and school children, mapping projects share history in a hands on way and teach methods of historical preservation and interpretation.

Slide 8 – map example

Using highly accurate GPS recorders, mapping will create a digital image of the temple structure, platform, and surrounding paths which will make it easier to visualize and to understand how it connected to other places in the area. One question this may answer is which footings were for the main structure and which may have been for other buildings or decorative accents.

#### Slide 9 – STP example

On the more intensive side, exploratory excavations could be performed in the wooded areas of the park, away from the preserved asphalt floor and the remaining foundation outline. Here small 50 cm / 20-inch diameter, hand dug holes would be used to sample the below ground resources. These “shovel tests” are easy to refill and leave little evidence of disturbance aside from dead grass / cleared areas. Additionally, this work could be combined with pre-survey brush clearing efforts as part of the project design, if desired and deemed beneficial to the park.

These excavations may reveal material remains of revivals and other events occurring within the boundaries of the park, such as gatherings away from the temple or items dropped or discarded by attendees or residents passing by.

#### Slide 10 - questions

The most likely remains would be physical objects like ceramic fragments, glass vessels, metal objects, and other durable items worn or used by past people. These objects could be used to tell researchers about the people who came to the events and used the park over time, providing insights into where they gathered, the ways they presented themselves, how they saw the world, and much more. This data could also be used to answer questions as to the use of the park such as:

- was the park used between the purchase in 1876 and the construction of the Temple structure in 1878? Was it, as some local historians write, used by Baptist even prior to its purchase? Was it used differently in these periods?
- Did people gather in the wooded areas around the park? For what purpose?

- Was the park used for non-religious purposes? Was the park used differently over time?
- How was the park used between the time the Baptists left and the structure was demolished?
- **Moving forward:**
  - Designing the project –
    - Working to identify what we want to do and the questions we can ask, how we perform the work and to answer those questions, and how we will share the results.
    - Receiving feedback on the plan from the ECA membership and working closely with members of the ECA who would like to have input on the design and analysis steps of the project. Throughout the process, in all steps, the goal is to encourage and accommodate all community members to participate in the ways they want.
    - Involving other groups with an interest in preserving the history of Martha's Vineyard – the MV Museum, the African American Heritage Trail, the Aquinnah-Wampanoag Tribal Historic Preservation Office, etc.
  - Myself applying for funding for the project and performing preparatory steps.