
Digging Into the History: The Baptist Temple, Oak Bluffs' Other Tabernacle

by JEFFREY J. BURNETT

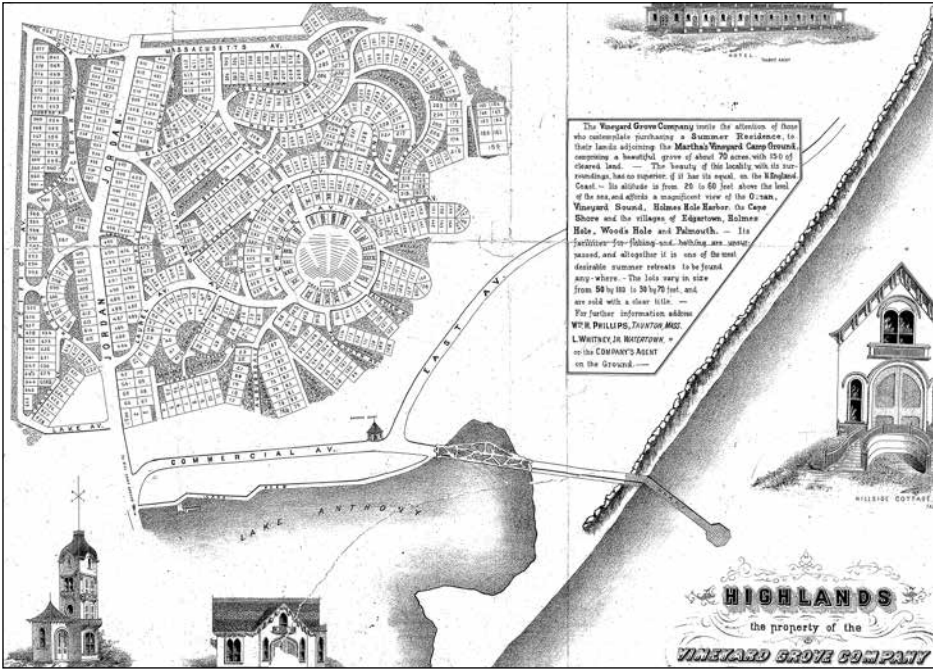
THE AREA KNOWN AS the Highlands and East Chop today was first purchased in 1868 as a roughly 300-acre parcel by the Methodist Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association.¹ The Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association (MVCMA), which organized yearly revivals in Wayland Gove, downtown Oak Bluffs, purchased the land as part of a possible move away from the growing commercial center. By 1869 however, the organization decided the move was not necessary and its leadership formed the Vineyard Grove Company (VGC) to develop the land as a planned community called the Vineyard Highlands.² The MVCMA sold the land to the VGC and hired a Methodist minister to sell the lots and "make sure they went only to the right people." Insight into the meaning of who the MVCMA considered "right" is provided by the ten moral, aesthetic, and economic conditions included in all of the early VGC property conveyance.³

The first condition, referred to here as the building clause, required grantees to grantee build a private home on the property within a set time, often twelve months; this condition was often left blank. Another condition gave the VGC final authorization over "the location, material, and style of architecture" of buildings and banned tents on the purchased property, without the consent of the VGC. Other conditions together required the land and buildings to be used "exclusively for domestic purposes," prohibiting trade, commercial, or mechanical activities on the property. Several conditions were explicitly moral, prohibiting the production or sale of alcohol as well as "lewdness, prostitution, or illegal gaming."

1 Dukes County Registry of Deeds [DCRD] 1868, B. 43, pp. 502-503 [book, page]; Henry Beetle Hough, *Martha's Vineyard, Summer Resort, 1835-1935* (1936), pp. 68-69; Arthur R. Railton, *The History of Martha's Vineyard* (2006), pp. 248.

2 DCRD 1869, B. 44, pp. 303-310; Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, pp. 64-73; Railton, *History*, pp. 243-249.

3 DCRD 1870, B. 47, p. 2; Railton, *History*, pp. 243-249; *Vineyard Gazette*, "Vineyard Grove Company," *Vineyard Gazette*, July 30, 1869.



Ca. 1870 Plan of the Vineyard Highlands showing the planned location of a camp meeting site, complete with preacher's stand, which would become Baptist Temple Park. Image courtesy of the Dukes County Registry of Deeds.

Conditions 9 and 10 required the grantee to abide by the rules and regulations of VGC and the MVCMA, including reference to an 1867 Massachusetts law which protected the right to have camp meetings. These conditions were intended to influence the style of buildings in the Highlands and to quickly establish a religious, residential community in the area that mirrored MVCMA. However, it is not clear how well these conditions were enforced or followed as there is no instance in the deed record where a property was taken for violating the building clause. Alternatively, we see many examples of lots purchased with a 12 or 24-month building clause where no home was built on the property for years or decades.

Unlike the nearby Methodist Campgrounds, the Vineyard Highlands community was not significantly shaped by the desires and vision of the early MVCMA leadership, the difference owing mainly to the fact that lots in the Highlands were sold rather than leased and that property sales plummeted following the depression known at the Panic of 1873.⁴ While the VGC maintained its holdings in the Vineyard Highlands until 1934, when the company conveyed all its unsold property to a developer group called the Highlands Property Trust, analysis of over 1,300 deed records

4 Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, pp. 146-147; Skip Finley, *Historic Tales of Oak Bluffs* (2019), p. 47.

in the Highlands shows that lots sales remained slow well into the mid-20th century. Indeed, the period before the Panic of 1873, just under three and a half years, accounts for 29% of the total property transactions from 1870 to 1900 (n = 640). The economic depression of the 1870s likely had an outsized impact on the total number of properties bought and sold in the Vineyard Highlands. This in turn impacted who resided, vacationed, and worked in the area and the communities they formed there.

Significantly, these factors also led to an agreement between the VGC and the Baptist Vineyard Association (BVA) to hold Baptist Revivals in the Highlands and the eventual construction of the Baptist Temple. While lot sales never fully recovered, the Baptist Camp Meetings brought thousands of summer visitors to the Vineyard Highlands, including Charles Shearer, who served as a deacon at the racially integrated Tremont Temple Baptist Church in Boston, and his wife Henrietta Shearer. Some of these visitors, like the Shearers, became residents who themselves introduced new visitors to the Island, helping to make the Highlands the community it is today.⁵

The Baptist Temple and Baptist Camp Meetings

The Baptist Vineyard Association (BVA) held the first camp meeting at Baptist Temple Park, then known as Wayland Grove, in August 1875. The Baptist association constructed the wooden Baptist Temple in the park in 1878 and continued to hold yearly conventions at the site for over fifty years.⁶ The last camp meeting at the Baptist Temple we have a record of was held in 1930 and local newspaper records suggest that the structure fell into disrepair in the 1930s and was sold by the Baptists to developers in 1937. The Baptist Temple was likely demolished by these developers in the 1940s and since then has remained a park.⁷ The site of the Tabernacle is now owned by the East Chop Association which manages other parks and natural resources in the Highlands and East Chop areas of Oak Bluffs.

The BVA, led by the Union Temple Baptist Church (now Tremont Temple) in Boston, MA, was established in 1875 to hold yearly religious meetings on Martha's Vineyard during the summer. The camp meetings were described as a "week of healthful recreation" to "promote fraternal love [among Baptists]" and "discuss plans and methods of Christian work." According to

5 Jacqueline L. Holland, "The African-American Presence On Martha's Vineyard," *Dukes County Intelligencer* (1991) Vol. 33, no. 1; Doris Pope Jackson and Lee Van Allen, "Doris Pope Jackson and Lee Van Allen, interview by Linsey Lee" (2005), p. 7. Manuscript and audio tape, Martha's Vineyard Museum.

6 *Barnstable Patriot*, June 22, 1875, p. 2; Baptist Vineyard Association [BVA], "Baptist Vineyard Association: Its Origin, Location, Purposes..." (1880), p. 14, (Baptist Vineyard Association Pamphlets, Shelf 60-D4, American Baptist Historical Society [ABHS]); Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, p. 147.

7 Rick Herrick, "East Chop Column: July 28," *Vineyard Gazette*, July 25, 2017.



Photo of the Baptist Temple. MV Museum, 6273.001 Z944.

the BVA, the goal of the organization to make “the vacation season . . . more conducive to physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual improvement.”⁸ The Baptist organization felt that, while “summer vacation [had] become so much of an institution”, it was largely inaccessible to less wealthy pastors and that they should take it on themselves “to purchase a few acres of land at some seashore” to vacation in a less expensive way.⁹

In July 1875 the Vineyard Grove Company granted the Baptist association a ninety-nine-year lease to hold camp meetings in the park. The organization quickly erected a preacher’s stand in the park for the first convention, but until 1878, the camp meetings were held in the open air, “with only nature’s canopy for a covering.”¹⁰ On June 26, 1876, the Baptist association purchased the park outright, on the condition that they hold at least two consecutive camp meetings at the site. In fall 1877, ahead of the third meeting after this purchase, the BVA voted to build a large wooden tabernacle at the center of the park.¹¹ While the Baptist Temple no longer stands, much was recorded about the building and has been preserved.

The Baptist Temple was designed by Henry M. Francis, an architect out

8 *Boston Daily Journal*, “The Baptist Camp Meeting,” July 14, 1875; BVA, “Baptist Vineyard Association: Its Origin, Location, Purposes...,” pp. 4-5; Hough, *Martha’s Vineyard*, p. 147.

9 BVA, “Origins” (1886), p. 5.

10 *Boston Daily*, “Baptist Camp Meeting,”; BVA, “Origins” (1880), p. 14; *Springfield Republican*, July 15, p. 6.

11 DCRD (1876), B. 63, p. 523; Eleanor Ransom Mayhew, “Guide Book: Martha’s Vineyard.” In *Martha’s Vineyard: A Short History* (1956), pp. 87-123.

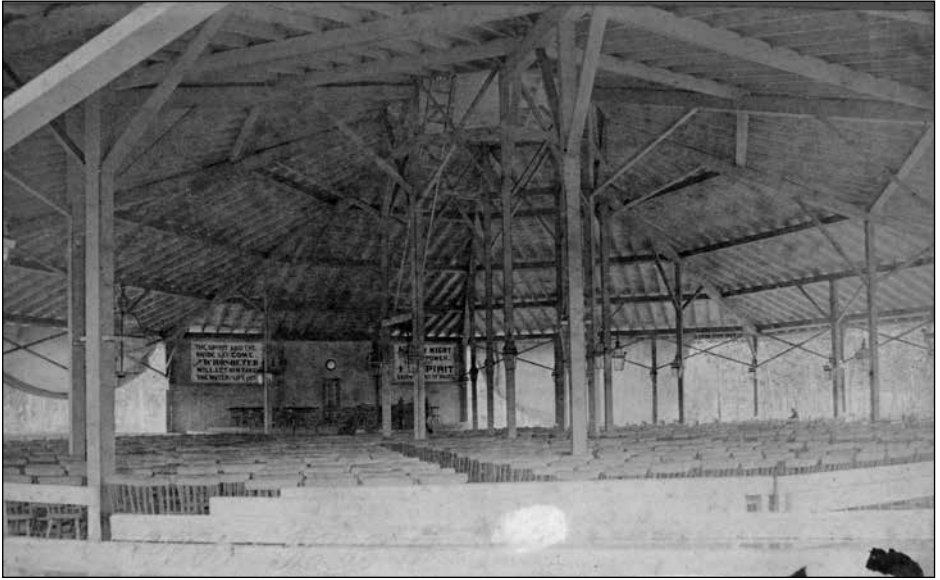


Photo of the interior of the Baptist Temple. MV Museum, I273.003.

of Fitchburg, MA, and the construction was supervised by Mr. J. F. Tilly, a contractor out of Hyde Park, MA. Construction was completed by July 1878, and Baptists began holding weekly religious services in the tabernacle on July 21, 1878. On Sunday, August 18, 1878, the BVA held a dedication service for Baptist Temple at the start of the camp meeting, around 2,000 people attended the service “despite the unpleasant weather” and daily attended averaged over 3,000 people.¹² In addition to the week-long camp meeting, the BVA also held regular services and a Sunday school in July and August. The organization hoped to capitalize on the thousands of summer residents and visitors who had “but three (and during August but two) other places of public worship” in Oak Bluffs in the late 19th century.¹³

Contemporaneous and historical state that the Baptist Temple was a large wooden octagonal, post-and-beam structure with an octagonal monitor roof and a flagpole with capacity for 2,500-3,000 people. The roof of the Baptist Temple was between 120 and 132 ft (36 – 40m) wide at longest measurement, supported by 20 ft (6m) tall. The monitor atop the roof was 16 ft (5m) wide and rose 60 ft (18m) off the ground. When the tabernacle opened, it had 1,500 chairs, all purchased from the Moody and Sankey Tabernacle in Boston.¹⁴ Attached to the back of the Temple, behind

12 Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, p. 148; *Vineyard Gazette*, “Baptist Tabernacle,” May 3, 1878, “Baptist Temple,” July 26, “Baptist Camp Meeting,” August 23.

13 BVA, “Origins,” (1880), p. 15.

14 BVA, “Origins,” (1880), p. 14; Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, p. 147; *Vineyard Gazette*, “Baptist Pavilion,” June 21, 1878.



In this photo postcard of the Baptist Temple, circa 1908, the Director's Room is visible on the right. MV Museum, 9273.006.

the preacher's platform, was the "Director's room," likely an office space, which had "commodious store-room" underneath, where the chairs were stored during the winter. There was also another building on the grounds of the Baptist Temple, referred to as the chapel. This building was likely built at the same time and was located "a few rods" (~ 15 – 25 m / 50 – 80 ft) northeast of the tabernacle. The chapel was described as "22x40 feet in size, used for prayer-meetings, Sunday-school, and other purposes connected with the [camp meeting] enterprise."¹⁵

In December 1929, after organizing camp meetings for fifty-four years, the BVA conveyed the Baptist Temple and Baptist Temple Park to its parent organization, the Massachusetts Baptist Convention and likely dissolved.¹⁶ The last camp meeting we know of at the Baptist Temple was held in August 1930, organized by the Massachusetts Baptist Convention, which held its own yearly meetings in October at various locations.¹⁷ Additionally, Oak Bluffs annual financial reports show that the BVA owned tax-exempt property, valued at \$4,250, in the town until 1932, but after that year, neither the BVA nor the Massachusetts Baptist Convention is shown owning tax-exempt

15 *Vineyard Gazette*, "Baptist Pavillion."

16 DCRD 1929, B. 179, p. 514

17 *Christian Science Monitor*, "Middleboro," October 22, 1910; *New York Times*, October 28, 1926.

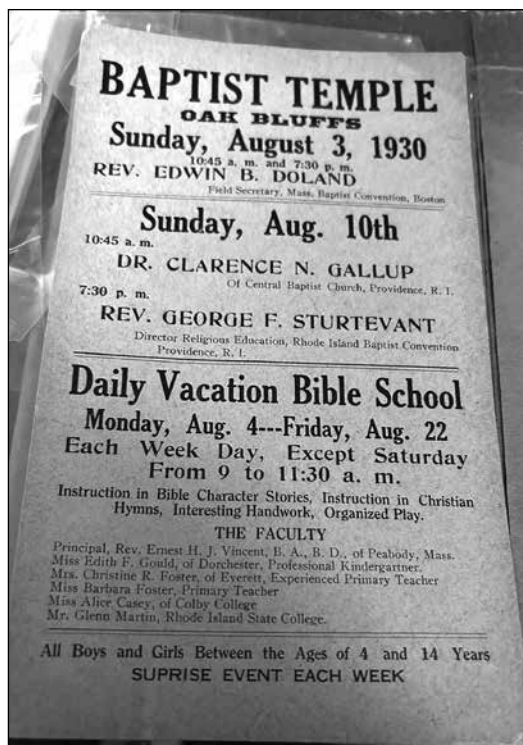
property in Oak Bluffs.¹⁸ While it is possible that, after 1930, Baptist Temple was still used for regular church services in the summer or by other organizations, the loss of tax-exempt status suggesting that, by 1933, the Baptists were no longer using the tabernacle building.

On January 15, 1937, the Massachusetts Baptist Convention sold the Baptist Temple and the park to the Highlands Property Trust, a local developer group which, in 1934, had also purchased all the unsold Vineyard Highlands lots and parks from the Vineyard Grove Company.¹⁹ The Baptist Temple and the chapel building are shown on the ca. 1923 Sanborn Insurance Company map of the Highlands but neither building appears on the updated ca. 1940 Sanborn map. Additionally, there was no mention of the tabernacle

or any other buildings on the property when the Highlands Property Trust sold Baptist Temple Park to the East Chop Association, its current owner, in 1975. It is highly likely that the Baptist Tabernacle was destroyed sometime between 1937 and 1940. However, there is no mention of the Baptist Temple being destroyed or removed in local newspapers or historic accounts after 1937, leaving a gap in the historical record.

Camping at the Baptist Camp Meetings: Old Questions, New Evidence

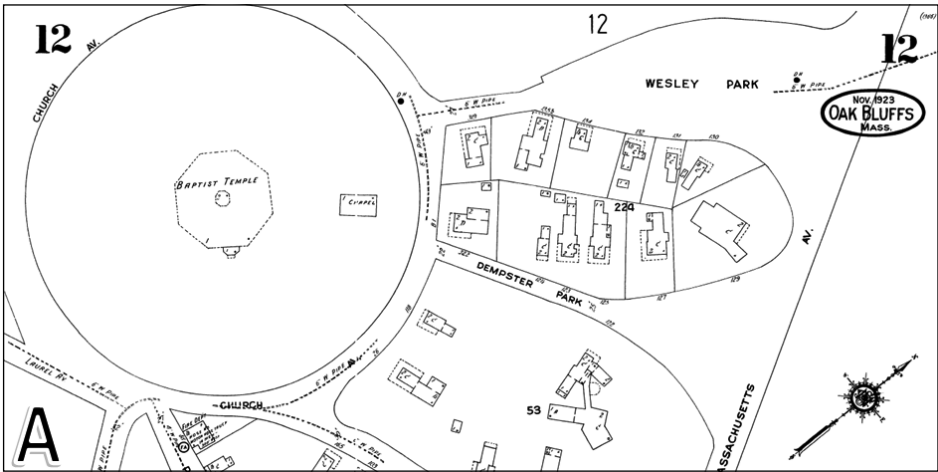
In the histories of Martha's Vineyard and Oak Bluffs, the Baptist Temple and the BVA camp meetings are commonly understood through the history of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association. This is useful and necessary frame because the historical record of the MVCMA is far larger and better preserved than what is currently available for studying the



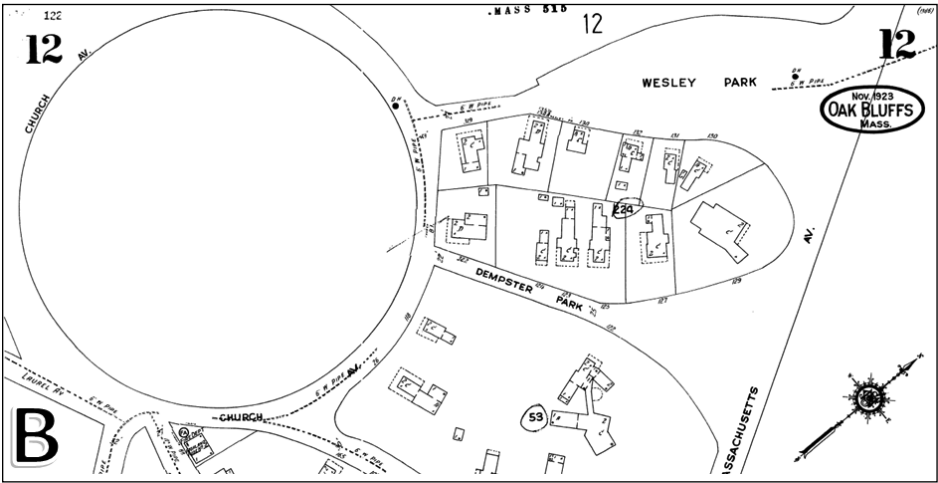
Original poster for the 1930 Camp Meeting at the Baptist Tabernacle in Oak Bluffs. Poster identified and photographed by Ed Zephir.

18 Town of Oak Bluffs, "Annual Financial Report and School Report of the Town of Oak Bluffs for 1930 - 1935," (1936); Town of Oak Bluffs, "Annual Financial Report 1936 - 1941," (1942).

19 DCRD 1937, B. 193, p. 393; *Vineyard Gazette*, "Baptist Temple Sold to Highlands Property," March 12, 1937.



Above, Ca. 1923 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oak Bluffs, MA showing the Baptist Temple and chapel building standing in Baptist Temple Park. Below, Ca. 1940 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Oak Bluffs, MA showing Baptist Temple Park with no structures. Images courtesy of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.



Baptist camp meetings. Primary and secondary sources reveal much about the early days of the Methodist camp meetings and may provide great insight into the experiences and material reality of the early Baptists revivals.

However, the reliance on this history as the framework for understanding the Baptist camp meetings has also constrained historical imaginations of what these events would have been like. Primary among these is the assumption that the vast majority of attendees to the Baptist camp meetings would not have slept outdoors in tents. This assumption is based largely on the fact that, although the Methodist campgrounds started out as a tent community, by the 1870s, almost of these were re-

placed by permanent wooden cottages and rooming houses.²⁰

Because of this, it has been reasonably assumed that, by 1875, attendees and organizers of the Baptist camp meetings would have preferred the larger and higher-quality lodgings provided by permanent amenities. This assumption is reinforced by the large number of lots available to purchase in the Vineyard Highlands at the time and the intentions of the VGC for those buying lots to build homes on them as well as Oak Bluffs' well-established tourist infrastructure. By the mid-1870s Oak Bluffs had been labeled America's "watering place" and boosted numerous hotels, inns, and rooming houses.²¹ There is also no visual evidence of tents on or around the Baptist Temple grounds in any historic photographs or sketches and no mention of tents in the brief historical summaries of the Baptist Temple. One source, local historian Elaine Weintraub, recalled that when conducting an oral history interview with an Aquinnah-Wampanoag man in the 1990s, the speaker mentioned he and his family attended the Baptist camp meetings, traveling from Aquinnah and staying in a tent.

My research into the Baptist Temple and the Vineyard Highlands has identified several sources which suggest that attendees did camp in tents, both on in Baptist Temple Park and on lots in the Highlands area. In 1879, the *Cottage City Star*, a short-lived newspaper published in Oak Bluffs, reported that boarders attending the Baptist August meetings could stay "at the Baptist Temple grounds in a large tent with cots for twenty-five cents a day."²² In 1911, the *Vineyard Gazette*, reporting on Massachusetts Governor Eugene Foss' planned attendance at the Baptist Camp Meeting, notes that the "Temple is surrounded by the tent colony, which constitutes quite a community in camp-meeting time."²³

While it is unclear if the "tent colony" was limited to the Baptist Temple grounds or extended into the larger Highlands community, the newspaper accounts show that attendees were staying in tents for a significant portion of the existence of the Baptist camp meetings. They also suggest that both communal and individual tents were used, as the terms "community" and "tent colony" evoke an image of clusters of smaller tents, like that of the Methodist Campgrounds.

A historic deed record provides additional information on both these points. In 1884, Dr. Samuel T. Birmingham purchased two lots on Simpson Ave from the Vineyard Grove Company for \$140.²⁴ The deed for this

20 Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, pp. 57-58, 65, 71.

21 Railton, *History*, pp. 248-256.

22 *Cottage City Star*, "Baptist Camp Meeting," July 30, 1879. *Cottage City Star* Newspapers, RU 435, Martha's Vineyard Museum.

23 *Vineyard Gazette*, "Gov. Foss to Attend Camp-Meeting," June 22, 1911. *Vineyard Gazette* microfilm collection, Vineyard Haven Public Library.

24 DCRD 1884, B. 60, p. 81

property included conditions which together prohibited putting buildings of any kind on the lots, but which allowed tents, which were typically prohibited in other VGC deeds from the time. These conditions seem to indicate that Dr. Birmingham purchased the property not as a building lot but as a tent lot, likely for attendees of the Methodist and/or Baptist camp meetings. This historic deed record shows that properties in the Highlands were used as tent lots and, because of their small size (typically 35x70 ft), likely for smaller tents for an individual or small family, friend, or church group. This deed suggests that other properties in the were used as tent lots, possibly without the express permission of the VGC.

By examining deed records in the Highlands area, I have identified at least sixty-eight individual properties that were owned for at least two years, which were later sold with buildings. This includes a property on Myrtle Ave that was rented Winchendon Baptist Vineyard Association from 1876 until the group purchased it in 1879, without a building on the lot. The possibility that tent lots were common provides an explanation for why many lots sold in the early years of the Vineyard Highlands development did not have houses added for years or even decades. This historical investigation shows that attendees to the Baptist camp meetings would have had a choice of lodging types, including homes owned by themselves, friends, or family, rented homes, rooming houses, hotels, and individual and communal tents.

The Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association and Baptist Temple Park

The new evidence for the use of tents at the Baptist Temple does not mean that the history of the MVCMA is irrelevant to our understanding of the Baptist camp meetings. In fact, descriptions of early Methodist camp meetings in Oak Bluffs become one of the most important sources of information on the material and spatial organization of Baptist meetings, especially in the three years before the tabernacle was constructed. A brief review of this history provides a framework from which to interpret the historical space and to imagine how attendees to the Baptist Temple would have experienced it.

The MVCMA was started in August 1835 by Methodists who wanted a permanent campground to host yearly, two-week long revival in what is now Wesleyan Grove, and the organization and community continues into the present. The earliest camp meetings in the Wesleyan Campgrounds were held under the open air with a simple wooden preacher's platform and in 1870 the association added a large canvas tent for both speakers and attendees. In 1879, a year after the Baptist Temple was built, a large iron tabernacle was built in the Methodist Campgrounds, which still

stands today.²⁵ Between 1835 and the early 1850s, all those attending the Methodist camp meetings stayed in large communal tents or smaller tents for individuals or families. The communal tents were divided down the middle by sheets at night to make “lodging apartments for the two sexes.”

The first wooden cottage was built in the Methodist Campgrounds in 1859 and soon after the majority of individual tents were replaced with cottages. The communal lodging tents continued to be available for attendees without a tent or cottage lot but at this time large boarding houses were also built and largely replaced communal tents by the 1870s.²⁶ The Methodist camp meetings of the 1860s, with its mix of tents and permanent lodging options, likely is a good point of comparison for the Baptist camp meetings from 1875 into the 1910s.

Foodways and other amenities such as lighting and toilets have detailed in the history of the Methodist Campground which may provide insights into investigations of Baptist Temple Park. Before the 1870s, attendees to the Methodist camp meetings would have brought pre-made meals with them that would keep in the August heat with no ice or refrigeration and occasionally cooked meals at collective campfires.²⁷ The foodways of those at the Baptist camp meetings were likely similar to these but with more options for meals cooked at inns and permanent homes. This too would have been similar to the Methodist campgrounds in the 1860s when hotels, and some permanent cottages designated as cook houses, served those attending the meetings.²⁸

The Methodist Campground and Tabernacle were lit first by oil lamps and by the early 1880s these had mostly been replaced by gas lamps. Electric power was first available in 1884 in Oak Bluffs, but it wasn't until 1895, the town installed its first electric arc lights, running fifty in the summer and twenty-five year-round. These lights which were placed along main roads and public squares, outside of hotels, and in the Methodist Tabernacle. However, many homes in Oak Bluffs continued to use oil, kerosene, and gas lamps into the 1920s. The electric lights in the Methodist Tabernacle were also quite limited until the system was updated in 1926.²⁹ There is no evidence that the Baptist Temple used electric lights, and it is likely that the main lighting source at night would have been oil or gas lamps.

As can be expected for a large, extended outdoor gathering, the disposal of human waste was a great concern at the Methodist Campgrounds.

25 Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, p. 56; Railton, *History*, pp. 151-153, 274-275.

26 Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, pp. 57-59, 65, 71; Railton, *History*, pp. 149, 153, 196-197.

27 Railton, *History*, p. 153.

28 Hough, *Martha's Vineyard*, pp. 57-59; Steve Height 2024, pers. comm.

29 Railton, *History*, pp. 174, 401-403; *Vineyard Gazette*, “Will Dedicate Electric Cross,” July 2, 1926.

The Campgrounds was too small for each tent or cottage to have a private privy, so communal privies were built under the preachers stand, with toilets for women at the front and toilets for men at the back. However, as the Methodist Camp meetings grew, more facilities were needed. In the 1870s the MVCMA purchased a half-acre property along the nearby Meadow Lake, which was used for more privies and, due to complaints, “expensive stables and shed were built to cover [the] nuisance from public view.”³⁰ In 1890 water pipes were installed in the Campground allowing for flush toilets and septic tanks. In 1911, the last privies were condemned.³¹

It is possible that the BVA built privies in Baptist Temple Park, either on the Baptist Temple grounds, like the first privies at the Methodist Campgrounds, or in the wooded areas of the park. It is also possible that privies were placed on property owned by the BVA near the park. Hotels, inns, and private homes would also likely had their own privies and would have continued to have these into the first quarter of the 20th century. Today, virtually none of the properties in the Highlands area are connected to the municipal sewer system and instead have septic tanks to collect wastewater.³² Modern septic tanks were invented in 1895, these first were large and primarily used for municipal waste, but by the 1940s, individual home sewage systems became more economical and more common.³³ Any historic privies located in Baptist Temple Park or the Highlands area would be an important archaeological and historic resource and, if possible, should be investigated as such.

The Destruction of the Baptist Temple: Demolition or Arson?

The generally accepted narrative is that the Highlands Property Trust demolished the Baptist Temple in the 1940s as the building had fallen into disrepair. There is also another well-known narrative which suggests that the Baptist Tabernacle was destroyed by a fire.³⁴ As suggested to me by a long-time resident of the Highlands, the Baptist Temple was burned down in a racist act because it was a Black church or associated with people of African descent.³⁵ While the Baptist Temple is no longer standing, there

30 Railton, *History*, pp. 263-264.

31 Sally, Dagnall, A. K. Lobeck, Douglas Thompson, and Ellen Weiss, “A Brief History of the Martha’s Vineyard Camp Meeting Association,” 2007.

32 Christine Seidel, “Parcels Connected to Wastewater Treatment - Martha’s Vineyard”, (2020) GIS Feature Service, Dukes County, MA GIS. Martha’s Vineyard Commission.

33 Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Environmental Services in Urban America from Colonial Times to the Present*. (2008), pp. 110, 193.

34 Herrick, “East Chop Column”; Skip Finley, “Oak Bluffs Town Column: July 21,” *Vineyard Gazette*, July 21, 2015. Edgartown, MA.

35 Oral history conversation, August 28, 2023. Notes taken.

are material remains of the structure, a recent archaeological survey conducted by myself along with Oak Bluffs residents found no evidence of burning at the site. The destruction of such a large structure would almost certainly leave behind some mark. Further, the remains of the Baptist Temple show evidence of a controlled removal of the Baptist Temple, supporting the demolition narrative. Together, the historical and archaeological evidence suggest that the Baptist Tabernacle was demolished by the Highlands Property Trust, likely between 1937 and 1940.

However, we should fully dismiss the arson narrative, the fact that it has persisted alone provides some insight into Oak Bluff's past; often stories are told, believed, and repeated because they resonate with the historical memory and experiences of community members.

By following the arson story, I found that there was indeed a fire at the Baptist Temple in the early 20th century. On July 19, 1913, a blaze started by a discarded, lit match started caused "considerable damage to the benches" of the tabernacle which were set out in preparation for the upcoming camp meeting in August.³⁶ This event occurred in the context of recent historical memory of a spate of suspicious fires in Oak Bluffs in the late 19th century, including the nearby Highland House hotel which was widely believed to have been burned by the owners for insurance money.³⁷ The



Archaeology crew examining remnants of the Baptist Temple, August-September 2023. Jeffrey Burnett, Fred Hancock, Steve Height, Laurie Howick, Polly Patterson, and Ed Zephir.

36 *Fall River Daily Evening News*, "Considerable Damage Done by Blaze at Baptist Tabernacle," July 21, 1913, p. 10.

37 Railton, *History*, pp. 294-298.

fire also occurred and would have been remembered in the context of the precipitous rise of anti-Black racism in the US and Oak Bluffs during the first decades of the 20th century, including the unprecedented five-year period of collective white violence against Black towns and neighborhoods between 1917 and 1923.³⁸

The persistence and widespread acceptance of this narrative provides some insight into experiences of racism and racialization in the past and present, especially for Black residents and visitors to Oak Bluffs. The conviction that such a racist act could have occurred in early 20th century Oak Bluffs and was never acknowledged reflects lived experiences of racism in the town perpetrated by neighbors and visitors that similarly remain unacknowledged. This included racist discrimination at local hotels well into the 1960s. Millie Briggs, who owned the Island House with her husband Ralph Briggs from 1959, recalled how they excluded people of African descent from booking rooms because their presence reduced business from whites. In a 1997 interview with Linsey Lee, Mrs. Briggs recalled that if people of African descent were sitting on “your porch then white people didn’t want to come and sit there” and her husband “would have to try in a diplomatic way” to suggest several Black-owned inns that “for their own good it might be better if they went to.”³⁹ More specifically, the Highlands Property Trust which bought the Baptist Temple in 1937 was a segregationist organization, which added overtly racist and religiously discriminatory restrictive covenants to at least thirty properties in the Highlands between 1936 and 1950.⁴⁰

Did Other Organizations Use the Baptist Temple?

In September 1875, the “New England Black Baptist Association” held a convention in Baptist Temple Park. Local historian Chris Stoddard did not cite a source for this and there no additional information on the event in the histories of the Baptist Tabernacle, which focus primarily on the Baptist Vineyard Association.⁴¹ It is likely that the organization referred to by Stoddard was the New England Baptist Missionary Conven-

38 Edward González-Tennant, *The Rosewood Massacre: An Archaeology and History of Intersectional Violence* (2018); Andrew Patch, “The First Cottagers of Color in Oak Bluffs,” *Martha’s Vineyard Museum Quarterly* (2021) Vol. 62, no. 3, pp. 3-18.

39 Briggs, Millie, Interview by Linsey Lee (1997), pp. 22-23. Manuscript and audio tape, Martha’s Vineyard Museum; DCRD 1959, B. 238, p. 12.

40 DCRD 1936:191.336, 1936:192.212,470, 1937:194.310, 1938:196.432, 1938:197.94, 1940:200.480, 1940:201.533, 1940:203.21, 1941:204.420, 1942:205.594, 1942:206.548,554,556, 1942:215.32, 1943:207.576, 1944:208.522, 1945:210.40,365, 1946:211.86,389, 1946:218.337, 1947:212.360, 1947:213.158,185,282, 1948:213.588, 1948:214.250, 1950:217.375, 515.

41 Chris Stoddard, *A Centennial History of Cottage City* (1980), p. 74.

tion (NEMNC), founded in 1874 by Baptist preachers of African descent, including by William Thomas Dixon (1833-1909) and William Jackson (1818-1900).⁴² The NEBMC was founded to hold annual meetings of representatives from Baptist churches, Sunday schools, and organizations with the primary objective to “spread the Gospel.”⁴³ Stoddard’s use of an alternative name for the NEBMC is understandable as other historians and historical accounts use a variety of names for the organization, including the “New England Missionary Convention,” “New England Baptist Convention,” and “New England Baptist Association.”⁴⁴ It is unclear if Stoddard added “Black” to the name based on his source material or if the historian meant to show clearly and concisely that the organization was led by people of African descent.

Without additional evidence, it is not possible to say with certainty that the meeting held at Baptist Temple Park in September 1875 was organized by the NEBMC. However, the organization was connected to Oak Bluffs from its earliest days as one of its founders, Reverend William Jackson was a summer resident of the town from 1871 to his death in 1900. In 1871, Reverend William Jackson purchased property in the Methodist Campgrounds and built a cottage there. His daughter Mary A. Jackson continued to own this property until 1921.⁴⁵ Additionally, the Bradley Memorial Church of Oak Bluffs, led by Reverend Oscar E. Denniston, joined the NEBMC in 1924 and Reverend Deniston attended the 1927 meeting held in Providence, RI.⁴⁶ The Bradley Memorial Church was founded by Reverend Denniston in 1907 and before it closed in 1966, had a large, majority Black congregation. By the 1920s, this congregation grew such that Bradley Memorial began holding services in a larger building in downtown Oak Bluffs during the summer months.⁴⁷

In an oral history interview, Dean K. Denniston, Sr., Vineyard resident and son of Reverend Denniston, mentioned in the 1920s the Baptists had a

42 Conference of Baptist Ministers in Massachusetts, “William Jackson (1818-1900),” Website; *New York Age*, “Dean of Colored Clergy Dies in Brooklyn—Buried with Imposing Ceremonies,” June 10, 1909; Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (1994), p. 16.

43 New England Baptist Missionary Convention [NEBMC], “Journal of the Fifty-Third Session of the New England Baptist Missionary Convention,” (1927), pp. 1-3. A. B. Koger Collection, Banneker Douglass Museum, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis.

44 Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (1921), p. 200; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, “Brooklyn’s Old Negro Pastor Passes Away,” June 3, 1909; Taylor, *Black Churches*, p. 16.

45 Patch, “Cottagers of Color,” p. 3.

46 NEBMC, “Fifty-Third Session,” pp. 48, 128.

47 Robert C. Hayden, *African-Americans on Martha’s Vineyard: A History of People, Places and Events* (2005), pp. 168-172.

“production every night” at the tabernacle in the Highlands. Mr. Denniston and his brothers were paid “maybe fifty cents” by their father Reverend Denniston to distribute fliers for the events “all over East Chop.”⁴⁸ It is unclear whether Mr. Denniston was speaking of events organized by Bradley Memorial or the BVA or even if these events took place over the whole summer or during camp meetings. While Bradley Memorial was a member of the Massachusetts Baptist Convention as early as 1915, it is unlikely that the Bradley Memorial Church congregation regularly held services at the time because the church already had a summer location.⁴⁹

In the same interview Dean Denniston also tells an amusing anecdote which shows that speakers at the Baptist Tabernacle discussed people of African descent and race relations. In the story, Reverend Denniston, arriving late to event at the tabernacle, walked in at a stage-side entrance just as a speaker announced, “The Negro is advancing.” Mr. Denniston notes that his father never forgot that moment.⁵⁰ It is possible that Mr. Denniston was referring to the Baptist Vineyard Association camp meeting or a single church service event, but it is also possible that story is of a NEBMC meeting. Additional research should be conducted to identify if the NEBMC held a convention in Oak Bluffs in 1875 and/or any subsequent year. For this research, one could contact the NEBMC, which still exists and celebrated its sesquicentennial in May 2024 and may have historic archives and historians to work with. The New Bedford Whaling Museum also has in its collections the papers of William Jackson, including his journals and correspondence.

Newspaper records show that at least one other Baptist organization held a convention at the Baptist Temple and a detailed exploration of newspapers, particularly Boston-based and Christian papers, may reveal additional information. In 1928, the Moody revival assembly held a conference at the Baptist Temple the week after the BVA camp meeting to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Moody and Sankey revivals in Boston.⁵¹

Use By Its Neighbors

Today, Oak Bluffs residents and visitors use Baptist Temple Park as a short cut, leisure park, meditation and yoga space, parking space, historical site, and occasionally, a trash dump and discreet spot to drink alcohol. It is likely that individuals in the recent past also used the park for

48 Dean K. Denniston, “Dean K. Denniston Sr., interview by Linsey Lee” (2003), pp.19-20. Manuscript and audio tape, Martha’s Vineyard Museum.

49 Barnstable Baptist Association, “Minutes of the Eighty-Fourth Anniversary of the Barnstable Baptist Association.” In *Barnstable Baptist Association, 1910 – 1938*. Original Church Records, ABHS, Mercer University, Atlanta; Hayden, *Martha’s Vineyard*, p. 170.

50 Denniston, “Interview,” pp. 20-21.

51 *Christian Science Monitor*, “Moody-Sankey Chairs to Seat Assembly July 18, 1928.

similar activities, especially when the Baptist Temple was still standing. During an oral history interview, a long-time resident of the Highlands remembered, when a child in the 1940s, using the park as a shortcut as in the 1940s when asked by adults to pick up ice from downtown Oak Bluffs. They remembered the park as overgrown with grass that cut the children's legs and avoided it in later years. Another resident shared a story, passed down in her family, of a small community of people squatting or temporarily living in Baptist Temple Park in the early 20th century.⁵²

Dorothy West, the Harlem Renaissance writer and long-time Vineyarder, shows us how the Baptist Tabernacle was used by residents of the Highlands outside of conferences and religious services. Writing for her Oak Bluffs column in the *Vineyard Gazette*, in 1970, Ms. West reported that "Bill Dabney remembers when [the Baptist Temple] was still quite visible a tabernacle with a roof of sorts, a platform and benches ... children of the neighborhood, Bill among them, used to climb on the platform and recite the poems they had learned in school." Bill Dabney's stepmother, "Mrs. George S. Dabney," owned a cottage on Church Ave and deed records show that George S. and Anna M. Dabney purchased property on Church Ave in June 1945. Bill Dabney, born in 1907, must have played on the Baptist Temple in the 1910s and 1920s, well before the building fell into disuse. Ms. West noted that Danby's family was one of the "first Black families to summer here in cottages of their own" and while there is no record of the Dabney family purchasing property prior to 1945, they may have stayed with relatives.⁵³

Conclusion

The Baptist Temple and the camp meetings that occurred there are deeply significant to this history of the Highlands and East Chop. Some of the earliest long-term residents were members of the Baptist congregations which organized and attended the Baptist camp meetings. Including Charles Shearer and Henrietta Shearer who started a laundry business that the family later turned into the famous Shearer Cottage inn. Because of this, Baptist Temple is seen by community members as one of the core reasons there is now, and has historically been, a strong history of African American homeownership the Highlands.⁵⁴

This investigation of the history of the Baptist Temple builds on this ex-

52 Oral History Interview, Participant 002, July 20, 2023; Oral History Interview, Participant 001, July 19, 2023.

53 DCRD 1945:209.547; Dorothy West and James Robert Saunders, and Renae Nadine Shackelford (editors), *Dorothy West Martha's Vineyard: Stories, Essays, and Reminiscences by Dorothy West Writing in the Vineyard Gazette* (2001), pp. 23-24; *Boston Globe*, March 8, 1971, p. 35.

54 Jocelyn Coleman Walton, *The Place My Heart Calls Home* (2018), p. 21; Hayden, *Martha's Vineyard*, p. 54.

isting knowledge, possibly changing how the early Highlands community is imagined and remembered. The findings suggest that tents were used during the Baptist Camp Meetings into the 20th century, providing visitors inexpensive accommodations and providing lot owners opportunities to rent out lots without needing to first build homes. This also allows for a reinterpretation of the lots that were purchased but left empty, seemingly unused. The historical records also provide some clarity into the 1875 meeting organized by an African American Baptist organization, likely the New England Baptist Missionary Convention, providing a pathway for future studies into use of Baptist Temple Park by other Baptist groups. Further research is required to learn more about this history, including the possibility of archaeological investigation of Baptist Temple Park and sites significant to the early Baptist Camp Meetings in the Highlands.