

CENTER POINT

MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH & SCHOOL

1883



1977

HOMECOMING

OCTOBER 30, 2022

WELCOME!

Thank you so much for making the trip to join us for this very special day celebrating Center Point and the people who called it home.

This day is the culmination of 5 years of research piecing together the history of the community known as Center Point and Wolf Gap. We have benefited greatly from working with a committee of Center Point descendants and supporters: John Birdsong, Mitchell Birdsong, John Finch Nelson, Berenetta Houston, & Lena Brown Prince. I am so very grateful for their support, advice, and help.

My interest in Center Point is twofold: my father is the current owner of the Old Center Point Cemetery and the Center Point Church & School building. Wolf Gap, a 501c3 nonprofit specializing in local history, is leading the research and documentation of the Center Point community. Today is an important step in the future of this historic place.

In January of 2022, Wolf Gap received a grant from Humanities Tennessee to support the project we call "Extending the Stories of Center Point." With that funding, this year we have recorded three video interviews with Center Point descendants Mitchell Birdsong, John Birdsong, and Lena Brown Prince. This same funding supported our work to digitize family photos from the Center Point community, with the purchase of a high-quality scanner and flash drives to share digitized materials. The same grant is funding today's Homecoming event, and will allow us to print an expanded and improved exhibit on Center Point's history incorporating all we've learned over the last year.

Center Point was important to the people who lived, worshipped, and learned here. It is important today not only for the ways it can connect descendants to their ancestors, but also for the stories it tells about the strengths of an African-American agricultural community that grew and thrived for a century.

Thank you for being here. You are Center Point!

Kelly Fisk Hamlin

Executive Director, Wolf Gap

OCTOBER 30, 2022

CENTER POINT HOMECOMING

- 2:00PM Gather at Wolf Gap Education Center, Center Point Room
- Refreshments
 - Digitization station - share and preserve your family photos
 - View Stories of Center Point exhibit in East Gallery
 - Share your "Why are you here?"
- 2:55PM Caravan to Center Point Church & School building
- 3:00PM Visit Center Point Church & School building
- Opening Prayer, Pastor Berenetta Houston
 - Address, Pastor Jeremy Wells
 - Center Point Past, Present, & Future, Wolf Gap Executive Director Kelly Fisk Hamlin
 - Discussion & Brainstorming future of Center Point site
 - Closing Prayer, Pastor Jeremy Wells
- 4:00PM Visit "Old" Center Point Cemetery
- Cemetery is accessible only with 4WD/off-road vehicles. You are welcome to take your own 4WD vehicle.
 - We have arranged vehicles to take 9 passengers at a time to visit the cemetery. Those riding in trucks will park and walk about 1/4 mile after we arrive; off-road vehicles will be reserved for those who need to drive as close as possible to the cemetery.
 - First trip in to Old Center Point will immediately follow program at Center Point Church; additional trips to cemetery will follow until all who wish to see the cemetery have had the opportunity.
- Visit "New" Center Point Cemetery
- On your own, located just down the road from Center Point building, noted with sign at road.

CENTER POINT TIMELINE

- 1850s Private School at Center Point: White slaveowner Thomas G. Paine ran a "common country school" at Center Point for local white families who could pay tuition.
- 1872 "School House Lot": John H. Birdsong (white) buys the 3.4 acre "School House Lot" from Thomas G. Paine (white) for \$55.
- 1874 Old Center Point Cemetery: Blacksmith, farmer, and U.S. Colored Troops veteran William Anderson (black) purchases the 2-acre Center Point Cemetery from Freeman Birdsong (white) for \$40. It began as an enslaved burial ground and contains as many as 140 burials dating into the 1920s.
- 1883 Center Point Church: Deacons of Center Point Church (R.D. Sherrill, Porter Beaty, & Tony Birdsong) purchase the 3.4 acre "School House Lot" from John H. Birdsong (white) for \$100. Center Point was brought into the Richland Creek Missionary Baptist Association by J. Felps.
- 1887 Center Point School: There was a school at Center Point by 1887, possibly earlier. The Pulaski Citizen reported that the teacher that year was William Birdsong.
- 1880s-1890s Deacon John Bledsoe reports that Center Point member Clarissa Henderson has been "churched" several times for "sinful" behavior. Local parent Perry Grigsby was very particular about choosing the teacher for his children at Center Point in the 1891 school year, wanting "a man with a good reputation."
- 1911 Indian Creek M.B. Assoc.: The Indian Creek Missionary Baptist Association held its general sessions at Center Point, bringing many from around the area to the church. Some time between 1883 and 1911, Center Point had changed its membership from Richland Creek to Indian Creek M.B.A.

CENTER POINT TIMELINE

- 1911-1912 First Building Burned: Some time in 1911 or 1912, the first frame building at Center Point was destroyed by a fire.
- 1912 Second Building: In 1912 the second building at Center Point was completed. It was two stories, with the church & school on the ground floor and a fraternal lodge in the upper story. It was approximately 30ft by 40ft.
- 1928 New Cemetery: When the Old Center Point Cemetery reaches capacity, the New Center Point Cemetery near the church & school begins interring burials, with the earliest known burial is in 1928.
- 1948 Third Building: Mr. Henry Sims's Building Trades class constructs a new cinderblock building at Center Point, replacing the 1912 frame building. This building still stands today.
- 1950 Center Point Community Graveyard: The Trustees of Center Point Missionary Baptist Church & Community Graveyard (Sam Harney, Matthew McCollum, Lira King, James Angus, & Alexander Moore) purchase the 1-acre New Center Point Cemetery property from Alexander Moore, Asa Moore, and Arthur Will Harney for \$75.
- 1952 School Closes: Center Point School closes and students are sent to Indian Creek School, at Indian Creek M.B. Church in Bryson.
- 1977 Church Closes: Pastor Gilbert Jones retires, leading to the closure of Center Point Missionary Baptist Church soon afterward.
- 2017 Wolf Gap begins research on Old Center Point Cemetery and Center Point Missionary Baptist Church & School
- 2022 First-ever Center Point Homecoming Event

CENTER POINT MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH & SCHOOL

In the 1850s, a “common country school” existed at Center Point for the children of local white families who could pay tuition. In 1884, John H. Birdsong (white) sold the “School House Lot” from this original Center Point School to the African-American Deacons of Center Point Church. Deacons R.D. Sherrill, Porter Beaty, and Tony Birdsong established a Missionary Baptist Church at Center Point soon thereafter and constructed a small single-story building on the site. As in many communities in the segregated South, Center Point functioned as a school building during the week and a church building on Sundays.



The only surviving pieces of the original 1912 Center Point building. The table and a set of two pillar side tables (repurposed from the staircase of the 1912 building) are currently in use at the Indian Creek M.B. Assoc. Tabernacle in Elkton, TN.

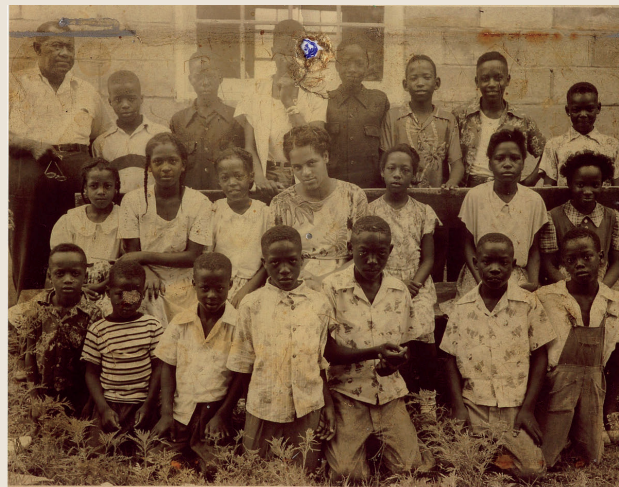
The original church & school building burned in 1912. It was replaced with a two-story building which also served as a fraternal lodge. That building was 30 ft x 40 ft, was heated with a wood stove, and students got their drinking water from a spring on the school grounds. During this period, Center Point Missionary Baptist Church was an important member of the Indian Creek Missionary Baptist Association. In September of 1911, the Indian Creek M.B. Association held its general sessions at Center Point, bringing visitors to the church from across the area.

The school was known as both Bunker Hill and Center Point School in county school records through the 1940s. In the 1945-1946 school year, the daily “program of work” at Center Point School consisted of Devotion, Writing, Reading, English, Spelling, Geography, Safety, Arithmetic, and History. That year, the school’s Parent-Teacher Association held a fundraiser supper to raise money to have a class picture taken, and to clear and improve the school grounds with newly planted flowers.

CENTER POINT MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH & SCHOOL

In 1948, Mr. Henry Sims's Building Trades class built a new concrete block building on the site, heated with a coal stove. That building still stands today.

Center Point stopped serving as a school after the 1951-1952 school year, when it merged with Indian Creek School located near Bryson. Center Point Missionary Baptist Church closed in the late 1970s. The most recent church members included members of the Bailey, Driver, King, Brown, Horton, Smith, Vance, Garrett, Angus, and McCollum families. .



Center Point School circa 1950-1952;
teacher Prof. A.M. Gilbert.
Photo courtesy of Mitchell Birdsong.



The Center Point building as it looked in 2021.

The building and lot were vacant for decades. In 2003, the heirs of the church's final trustees sold the church property to Tim Fisk. His daughter, Kelly Fisk Hamlin, is the Executive Director of Wolf Gap. With Wolf Gap, Kelly is serving as a liaison between the landowners (her family) and the descendant community in an effort to determine the best future for Center Point.

"OLD" CENTER POINT CEMETERY



This cemetery is located on private property off of Tarpley Shop Road (35.119072, -86.922579).

Historically it was accessed by a path from the Wolf Gap Road.

There are at least 140 burials in this cemetery, but only 7 graves are marked with headstones. Many are marked with field stones, and many are unmarked. This cemetery likely began as an enslaved burial ground, but in 1874 local farmer, blacksmith, and U.S. Colored Troops veteran William Anderson purchased the cemetery lot. These names are based on death certificates, family records, and other research.

George Adkins (d. 1916)

Maria Anderson (d. 1892)

Marion Benton Anderson (1861-1905)

William Anderson*

Mary War Virginia Anderson (d. 1919)

Frankie Bailey (d.1917)

Abram "Abe" Bass (d. 1923)

Lestor Bass (1889-1918)

Lizzie Birdsong (1900-1920)

Martha Birdsong (1920-1921)

Thomas Birdsong (d. 1922)

Emma Bledsoe (d. 1917)

Oran Bledsoe (1833-1914)

Wade Bledsoe (d. 1922)

Chany Gardner (1902-190?)

Candis Gardner (1904-1905)

Emma Gardner (1864-1914)

Phoebie Gardner (1901-1918)

Candis Grigsby (1839-1907)

Coleman Grigsby*

Edward Harney (1893-1921)

Clarissa Henderson*

John Henderson (1865-1934)

Perry Grigsby*

Harry Holloway (d. 1892)

Louise Holloway (d. 1916)

Isabella Jennings*

Roy McCollum (1917-1917)

Rev. James Monroe Moore (1869-1920)

Still Born Child (d. 1919)

"NEW" CENTER POINT CEMETERY

This cemetery is located just northeast of the Center Point building on Franklin Hayes Road, at 35.129404, -86.916158.

Burials began in this Center Point Cemetery after Old Center Point was full. The earliest known burial in this cemetery is 1928.

Mary Bailey	Lira King (1886-1980)
Tom Bailey	Jimmy King
Alice Grigsby Birdsong	Billy King
Thomas Birdsong (d.1928)	Thomas "Tommie" King (d.1929)
Jim Coleman	Caesar King
Beulah Coleman	Nancy King (d. 1946)
Addie Harney Driver (1897-1984)	George King
Marcella Moore Garrett	Fannie McCollum (1871-1951)
Jim Garrett	Foster McLaurine
Earnest (Black Jack) Garrett	Seborn McLaurine
Curtin Garrison	Dellie Patterson
Mable Garrison (d. 1934)	Ella Patterson
Lula Grigsby	James Reed (1930-1934)
Beula Lee Grigsby	Major Reedus
Dorothy Ann Harney (1937-1969)	Mary Shines (1910-1939)
Erskine Holt	Richard Smith
Fannie Holt	Tom Stevenson (d. 1934)
William Holt	Alice Stevenson (1895-1946)
Augusta Horton (d. 1977)	Ada Wilson

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

We want and need your opinions about the future of Center Point Church & School, and Old Center Point Cemetery.

How would you like to see these spaces managed & used?

How can we make sure these spaces are meaningful to future generations?

What are the best ways to share the stories of the people who made their lives at Center Point?

What is most important or interesting about Center Point?

How would you like to be involved with this process?

Let's continue the conversation about Center Point. Please make sure we have your preferred contact information on the sign-in sheet at Wolf Gap.

Leave your thoughts on the index cards at Wolf Gap, or call or email us with anything that comes to mind after you leave today.

Kelly Fisk Hamlin; kelly.hamlin@wolfgaptn.com;
931-292-3733; 256-527-0536

IMAGES OF CENTER POINT PAST AND PRESENT



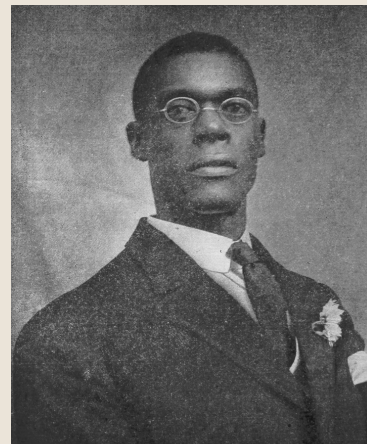
Center Point building as it stood in 2021.



Mitchell Birdsong, John Finch Nelson, Lena Brown Prince, Berenetta Houston, & John Alfred Birdsong at Center Point in May 2022.



These pews were used in Center Point's current building. They have been reupholstered and found a home at Indian Creek M.B. Church, Bryson TN.



Rev. Monroe Moore was raised at Center Point and became an esteemed Missionary Baptist preacher. He is buried at Old Center Point.



The graves of Maria Anderson (d.1892) and Candis Grigsby (1839-1907) at Old Center Point Cemetery.



The Center Point building in October 2022, after work to repair and stabilize the building.

Help us add to these images by sharing any photos of people who lived, worshipped, or attended school at Center Point.



Wolf Gap is a 501c3 nonprofit organization located at 2718
Tarpley Shop Rd., Pulaski TN 38478.

Visit WolfGapTN.com to learn more about what we do.

Contact us at info@wolfgaptn.com, or 931-292-3733.



**Humanities
Tennessee**

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