

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name MONTVILLE BAPTIST CHURCH

other names/site number SONS OF ABRAHAM SYNAGOGUE / BETH ABRAHAM CONGREGATION

2. Location

street & number 5 HAMMERTOWN ROAD not for publication

city or town SANDISFIELD vicinity N/A

state MASSACHUSETTS Code MA county BERKSHIRE code zip code 01255

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Brona Simon

8/28/06

Signature of certifying official/Title Brona Simon
Massachusetts Historical Commission, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional Comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

- entered in the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain):

MONTVILLE BAPTIST CHURCH

Name of Property

BERKSHIRE COUNTY, MA

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

(Check only one box)

- private
- Public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	building
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION: Religious Facility (Church/Synagogue)

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE: auditorium

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

MID-19TH CENTURY: Greek Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE

walls WOOD

roof ASPHALT

other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

(Please refer to continuation sheets)

MONTVILLE BAPTIST CHURCH
Name of Property

BERKSHIRE COUNTY, MA
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant & distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

- ARCHITECTURE**
- ETHNIC HISTORY: European (Jewish)**
- RELIGION**
- SOCIAL HISTORY**
- COMMUNITY PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT**

Period of Significance

1839-1956

Significant Dates

1839 (Construction)
1922 (Conversion to synagogue)

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A
Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Architect/Builder

C. Barker & M. Crittenden (Otis, MA)
L. Barker & J.P. Bentley (South Sandisfield, MA)

Primary location of additional data:

- Massachusetts Historical Commission
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

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Montville Baptist Church
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SECTION 7: DESCRIPTION

Introduction

The Montville Baptist Church is a wood-frame Greek Revival-style meetinghouse with an exposed granite foundation. The building is set on a graded parcel in a rural setting. The building's current appearance reflects three periods of use as a Baptist meetinghouse (1839), an Orthodox Jewish synagogue (1921), and a community arts center (1996).

Location & Setting

The town of Sandisfield is located in the southeast corner of Berkshire County, the westernmost county in Massachusetts. It is bordered by the Massachusetts towns of New Marlborough, Monterey, Otis and Tolland and by the Connecticut towns of Norfolk and Colebrook on the south. The terrain consists mostly of steep wooded hills with fast-moving streams in the intervalles, particularly the Buck River tributary of the Farmington River which runs through the Montville area.

The Montville Baptist Church is located on a small parcel on the northwest side of Hammertown Road, just north of the intersection with Sandisfield Road (a primary local road designated MA Route 57). It is located on the north side of the linear village known as Montville (formerly Mechanicsville) that extends along Sandisfield Road and the adjacent Buck River branch of the Farmington River. In the immediate area, wood-frame single-family homes and farmhouses from the 19th and 20th centuries are set close to Sandisfield Road with some small-scale wood-frame former industrial buildings scattered along the Buck River. Many of the houses and industrial buildings have been heavily renovated and remodeled, although there are a few farmhouses in the area that have been carefully restored.

The church parcel is roughly rectangular with 130 feet of frontage on Hammertown Road. The church building is set in the middle of the parcel with a gentle slope leading up to the front and a steep rise on the other three sides. A semicircular dirt track leads from Hammertown Road to the church entrance. A grassy lawn encircles the church with wild shrubbery on the edges of the parcel. There are no outbuildings or additional structures on the parcel. (photo #1)

Exterior Appearance

The Montville Baptist Church exhibits the characteristic form of a rural New England meetinghouse with vernacular Greek Revival details. It is a rectangular wood-frame structure with clapboard exterior, multi-

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pane double-hung windows and a single-ridge gabled roof. The main elevation is composed of a series of engaged pilasters supporting a triangular pediment in the gable end, topped by a two-stage square belfry with louvered vents. A full understory, accessible at grade in the front of the building, is enclosed by a high granite block foundation. (photo #2)

The foundation consists mainly of square-cut mortared granite blocks, 6 to 8 inches thick, with rubble fill behind, but the materials and workmanship are not consistent. On the rear (north) elevation, the granite blocks at the corners give way to smaller and more random blocks in the center.

On the south elevation, four modern glass-panel doors are centered in the same plane as the foundation, providing access to a recessed vestibule where twin staircases and restrooms flank the recessed double-leaf grade entrance that opens directly to the lower level. The windows at the basement level consist primarily of 10/10 double-hung wood sash, except for a 6 & 6 double casement window at the northwest corner. All the basement windows have wooden frames and granite sills. Most of the glass panes appear to date from the 20th century.

The masonry foundation on the east side of the building is inconsistent in workmanship and materials. The southern portion of the north wall exhibits a pattern of granite blocks consistent in size and placement with the rest of the foundation, while the center section (on both sides of the first basement window) is composed mainly of fieldstone. The northern stretch of the wall shows still another treatment, with square-cut stones set very neatly in a manner noticeably different from the rest of the foundation.

The manner in which the granite foundation supports the wood-frame structure is also unusual. Wood-frame structures of this vintage commonly overhang the masonry foundation slightly, with the angle of the clapboards and skirt boards forming a drip edge that sheds water away from the building. In the case of the Montville Baptist Church, the foundation extends beyond the wood sill, creating a stone shelf that is cut flat, rather than beveled to shed water. Since that type of juncture would encourage pooling and wicking of moisture, a wooden water table covered with metal flashing has been added to deflect rain and snow.

The church itself is a rectangular, front-gabled wood-frame structure enclosing a single level sanctuary with high ceilings. The front (south) elevation consists of two engaged corner pilasters (on the front face only) supporting a broad entablature and a closed triangular pediment with flush-boarded tympanum.

The central feature is a narrow former entry framed by two engaged pilasters supporting a projecting cornice. The doorway location is now covered with clapboards and in the synagogue period (1921-1996) supported a large star of David hung on the clapboards. (The symbol is no longer extant.)

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The sidewalls of the building (photo #3) exhibit a pattern of regular fenestration with four windows evenly spaced along each side. All four elevations are covered with horizontal wood clapboards with a four-inch reveal. The clapboards are secured primarily with wire nails typical of the early 20th century.

On the main elevation the engaged pilasters framing the former center entrance preserve the wide flat profile common to vernacular Greek Revival details. The projecting cornice, as well, seems to derive from builders' guides and pattern books. The broad entablature applied to the wall on the three finished elevations is characteristic of the early to mid-19th century, as are the applied moldings on the pediment and tower. As the building now stands, there are no openings (windows or doors) on the main face of the meetinghouse above the foundation.

The corner pilasters on the main elevation are distinctively neoclassical rather than Greek Revival in design. The shafts are sharply tapered rather than straight and are applied to a wide back panel. The capitals are noticeably undersized in relation to the entablature they are meant to support. Both pilasters show cuts or joints in the top section of the shaft and both exhibit patches where electrical fixtures or other devices were formerly attached. On the side elevations, the engaged pilasters give way to simple cornerboards, although the wide entablature continues along each length.

The multipane double-hung wood windows along both sides of the main level are of colossal proportions (25 over 25 lights) with simple rectangular surrounds and wooden sills. The narrow muntin profile is appropriate for the date of construction (1839), although many of the colorless glass panes appear to have been replaced.

The rear elevation (photo #4) is fully clapboarded to the eaves and does not continue the broad entablature. The clapboards on the north side show a marked inconsistency between the upper and lower portions. The nailing pattern, reveal, and paint history are clearly different, indicating that a portion of the wall was previously re-sided. The lower sections of clapboarding show square patches near both corners where stovepipes were formerly located. A shallow modern addition runs along the back of the building and features a low-pitched hip roof, clapboard siding and a single flush-panel door at grade.

The single-ridge, gabled roof is currently covered with asphalt shingles. The fascia and soffits preserve their 19th century molded profile. The key visual element of the roof is the two-stage belfry that rests just behind the peak of the gable on the main elevation. The first stage is a low square base rising only slightly above the ridgeline of the roof. The wide overhanging eaves and flat roof of the base support a taller square belfry with a single rectangular louvered panel on each face. The belfry terminates in a secondary eave supporting a flat roof with no surviving needle or weathervane.

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Interior Appearance (photo #5)

A central vestibule at grade on the lower level of the front elevation of the building leads to the separate men's and women's staircases enclosed within the front corners of the building during the synagogue period. The outer doors that form the airlock are newly installed, as are the egress doors on the inner wall of the vestibule.

The wall construction under the stairs is mostly sawn lath and plaster (late 19th or early 20th century), although there are remnants of old board sheathing that may represent either an earlier wall type or simply the reuse of scrap building material. The first floor beams visible under the stairs show empty joist pockets and mortises, indicating that stairs from the lower level were not part of the original construction.

Once inside, the lower level consists of a single large multifunction room with a small kitchen, stage and utility room arrayed along the north wall. The floor is poured concrete. The walls are a mix of plaster and lath, wallboard, and composite panels. The ceiling is paneled with beaded-edge boards. The concrete floor is interrupted in the center by two pairs of wood columns which help to support the main sanctuary. The beaded-edge boards in the ceiling vary in width from 3 – 8.”

The main sanctuary level, accessible via the two corner staircases, consists of a single open space, two stories high. The back (south) wall is occupied by a stepped gallery between the two staircases with a pair of square columns supporting the roof framing above. A tall wooden cabinet or ark, which held the Torah during the synagogue period, has been relocated to the center of the back wall.

The main floor retains the original fixed wooden pews flanking two aisles. The entire length of the front of the sanctuary is filled with a recently constructed wooden stage. The center of the north wall is recessed slightly behind the original pulpit location. The flooring in the sanctuary consists of wide boards fastened with cut nails and painted.

The low-back wooden pews in the center and on both sides of the aisles appear to be 19th century in form and configuration. The side pews terminate in a simple wainscoting along the outer walls.

The walls of the sanctuary are hair plaster applied over early 19th century split lath (visible along the east wall). The walls are devoid of detail, except for a nicely rounded plaster wall return alongside each large window. There are two large rectangular patches in the plaster of the north wall, perhaps relating to a previous heating system. There is also a large plaster patch (about 6' wide) in the south wall where the old center entrance was covered over. Portions of the lath patched over the entry are visible in the crawl space below the tiered gallery and beneath the highest pew.

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The sanctuary ceiling consists of matched beaded-edge boards, roughly 3- 8" inches wide, similar to those of the lower level. The boards are laid over an earlier plaster ceiling, as indicated by the termination of the columns in the gallery. A brass chandelier and bars for stage lighting hang from the ceiling.

The dais or stage along the north wall of the sanctuary is of recent construction, but an earlier wooden dais from the synagogue period survives underneath. It features a center section 12' deep flanked by two short staircases and shallower side wings (approximately 8' deep). At the rear of the stage, a section of the flooring is hinged to provide access for the baptismal tank underneath.

Progress of Rehabilitation

The Montville meetinghouse is more carefully tended now than at any time in recent history. The Sandisfield Arts & Restoration Committee has repaired the roof and belfry, installed an airlock at the basement entrance and created a mechanical room and emergency egress at the rear of the building. The exterior clapboards and trim are being scraped by hand, caulked, and repaired in preparation for painting. Interior plaster repair and repainting is currently underway.

By nominating the Montville Baptist Church to the National Register of Historic Places, the Sandisfield Arts & Restoration Committee hopes to promote broader appreciation of the historic and artistic significance of this community resource. As the arts center becomes more widely known, the committee intends to solicit public and private funds for restoration and maintenance.

Archaeological Description

While no ancient Native American sites are known on the church property or in the general area (within one mile), sites may exist. Environmental characteristics of the property generally represent locational criteria (slope, soil drainage, proximity to wetlands) that are favorable for the presence of ancient sites. The church occupies a well drained, level to moderately sloping terrace within 1,000 feet of the confluence of Fuller Brook and Buck River. Glacial till containing stones and boulders are also characteristic of the soil type found in the area, a characteristic that may reduce the overall ancient site sensitivity at this location. In general, however, the potential for locating significant ancient Native American resources on the church property is low. During the 1922 renovations to adapt the Old Baptist Meeting House to the needs of an Orthodox Jewish Synagogue, a full basement was added and the landscape in front of the building was graded to

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create a direct entrance to the new basement meeting hall. Given the small size of the nominated property (less than one acre), the effects of 1922 renovations and the original construction of the church and related facilities, any Native American resources that may have been present were destroyed.

A high potential exists for locating historic archaeological resources on the church property. Structural evidence may survive from a small wooden horse shed illustrated behind the church in the 1904 Atlas of Berkshire County. Documentary research combined with archaeological survey and testing may locate additional evidence of outbuildings on the property. Archaeological evidence may also survive from occupational related features (trash pits, privies, wells) originally located in close proximity to the church.

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INTRODUCTION

The former Montville Baptist Church, erected in 1839 by local builders, is Sandisfield's most distinctive public building in the Greek Revival style. Its original use as a Baptist Church (from 1839), its subsequent use as an orthodox Jewish synagogue (after 1921), and its more recent use as an arts center (since 1996) reflect the changing character of the community over time.

The church building retains a high degree of integrity in location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association and meets National Register Criteria A and C at the local level. The Montville Baptist Church derives its architectural significance from the 19th century vernacular Greek Revival building style and its cultural significance from the longstanding use of the building for religious services and community events.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Montville Baptist Church (later the Sons of Abraham synagogue) encapsulates the pattern of 19th century settlement in western Massachusetts and the dramatic impact of European immigration on rural communities in the early 20th century. As a Baptist meetinghouse from 1839 to 1920, the building represents a common religious preference of the working-class Yankee population of the 19th century. As an Orthodox Jewish synagogue from 1921 to 1996, the building also represents the assimilation of Eastern European immigrants in the years following World War I. Through its history of use, the Montville meetinghouse meets National Register Criterion A at the local level.

In addition to its interesting history of use, the Montville Baptist Church is significant as one of Sandisfield's oldest public buildings. Built by local carpenters based on widely published designs, the building is a classic example of the vernacular interpretation of the Greek Revival style.

Criterion A: Sandisfield's Historical Development

Settlement & Colonial Period (1735-1775)

The Town of Sandisfield was established in 1736 (Housatonic Township #3), settled in 1750, and incorporated in 1762. Most of the original proprietors who received allotments of land were from Worcester County in Central Massachusetts, but the early settlers were mostly from Wethersfield (CT) and other central Connecticut towns. Some of the settlers also migrated from southeastern Massachusetts and Cape Cod. Most Sandisfield settlers were loggers, trappers, small-scale farmers (grain and

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livestock), or skilled artisans (carpenters, blacksmiths). As required for incorporation, the town erected a Congregational meetinghouse in 1757 to serve local residents. (The building was demolished in 1796.) By 1776, Sandisfield's population stood at 1,044, compared to its present year-round population of less than 700.

Federal Period (1775-1810)

As settlement continued in Sandisfield during and after the American Revolution, two Baptist societies were organized as an alternative to the established Congregational society. The first Baptist society was founded in 1779 by Joshua Morse (1726-1795). Morse was ordained as a minister in 1750 and came to Sandisfield in 1779 to start a new Baptist society. Morse died in July of 1795, but the 46 signatories to the original covenant increased to a membership of 115 by 1798. The society held meetings in members' homes and schoolhouses in Sandisfield, Tyringham, New Marlboro, and Great Barrington.

The second Baptist Society was founded in 1790 by Benjamin Baldwin (d. 1816) and initially used a meetinghouse in nearby Otis (MA). The difficult terrain that impeded travel to a central meetinghouse justified the existence of two Baptist societies in the town.

The population of Sandisfield increased gradually throughout the Federal period, from 1,044 in 1775 to 1,648 in 1810. The local economy continued to rely on farming, timber, and charcoal production along with small water-powered mills that met the local need for corn, lumber, and agricultural implements.

Early Industrial Period (1810-1870)

Throughout most of the 19th century, the hilltown economy was based on farming, timber, and small-scale water-powered industries. Important agricultural products were rye, flax, potatoes, corn, and cider.

As the Erie Canal system facilitated the transport of people and goods to the Midwest and as frontiers were opened to settlement, the small and hilly farms of western Massachusetts began to lose their appeal. While many Berkshire County residents migrated westward, the rapid development of water-powered mills and the advent of railroad service in Berkshire County (1842) appeared to promise a better future. The hamlet of Mechanicsville (later Montville) in Sandisfield took advantage of the fast-flowing Buck River in the 19th century to support sawmills and gristmills, cloth-finishing mills, a toolworks, and a tannery.

The two Baptist societies in Sandisfield were served by a series of ministers from nearby towns in Massachusetts, New York, and Connecticut until 1829 when they were united under the leadership of

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Henry C. Skinner and Rev. John Wilder. In 1839, the united society voted to erect a new Baptist meetinghouse in the hamlet of Mechanicsville (Montville).

The Baptist meetinghouse was completed by February of 1842 when Jarius Barker sold to the Baptist Society of Sandisfield a four-acre parcel "on which the Baptist Meetinghouse now stands" for a price of only \$100 (Berkshire County Registry of Deeds, South District, Book 119, page 442). It is interesting to note that the deed was not actually filed until 1874.

The church records and membership rolls have not come to light, so it is difficult to sketch a demographic profile of the congregation or to identify key leaders. In western Massachusetts communities, Baptist societies in the mid-19th century tended to draw from working-class populations with modest levels of formal education.

In Sandisfield, the signatories of the 1839 Montville deed identified in the 1850 Federal census (Jairus Barker, Seldon Fuller, James Jones, Orville Merrill) were all farmers and laborers. Jairus Barker (1785-1857) and Orville Merrill (1805-1881) are both listed in town records as deacons of the Baptist Church.

Jairus Barker (1785-1857) was born in Arlington, Vermont, of parents from Coventry, Connecticut. The family moved to Sandisfield by 1788 when Jairus was still a toddler. Between 1808 and 1825, Jairus and his wife Tabithy [Tabitha] had seven children (Ajulina, Fidelia, Abigail, Lester, Sylvester, Lavina and Edmund).

Orville Merrill (1804-1881) was born in Sandisfield to parents from West Hartford, Connecticut. Between 1830 and 1835, Merrill and his first wife (name unknown) had three children (James Henry, Mary Eliza and Samuel Bedortha). After his wife passed away, Orville married a second time in 1875 at age 71.

James Jones (1799-1875) was born in Sandisfield and married Sally Chapel in 1822. They had two children (Perry Green and Lucy Ann).

The names and key dates of service of some of the Baptist ministers in Mechanicsville have been retrieved from town records and census records.

- Rev. James Squire (1839-1841)
- Rev. John Higby (1841-46)
- Rev. J. Tony Smith (1846-1854)
- Rev. Thomas Wright (1854)
- Rev. J.L. Barlow (1854)
- Rev. J.F. Jones (1856)
- Rev. J.V. Lintel (1859)

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- Rev. R.H. Maine (1863)
- Rev. Allen E. Battelle (1871)
- Rev. C.L. Ruberg (1874)
- Rev. J.T. Binder (1878)
- Rev. Wallace Crocker (after 1878)

While town records indicate that none of the ministers was born, married, or died in Sandisfield, children were born to several ministers during their tenure in town. Rev. James Squire and his wife Eliza had a daughter (Helen Parthenia) born in Sandisfield in 1840. Rev. John Higby and his wife Hannah had two children born in Sandisfield, Caroline (1843) and Mary Amanda (1847). Rev. Thomas Wright had two daughters born in Sandisfield (names not recorded, born 1853 and 1855). Rev. A.E. Battelle and his wife ("E.M.") had a son George born in Sandisfield in 1872. Rev. Wallace Crocker and his wife Ellen had a daughter Agnes Browning born in Sandisfield in 1885.

Late Industrial Period (1870-1910)

The growth of American industry after the Civil War resulted in an affluent upper class residing in and around major metropolitan areas like New York City. Easy access by train from New York encouraged the construction of elaborate summer "cottages" in Berkshire County (MA) which was known as the "Newport of the Hills" by 1880.

The trend to affluent tourism directly affected the more accessible locations in Berkshire County and had very little impact initially on remote areas like Sandisfield. The Beers Atlas of Berkshire County (published 1876) captured the town just after its industrial peak with five distinct villages or hamlets and a total population of about 1,500 people. In addition to the usual farmhouses and village residences, the town included sawmills, gristmills, a shingle mill, a wagon shop, a bedstead factory, blacksmiths, tanneries, general stores, post offices, and a hotel.

By 1876, the village of Mechanicsville had been renamed Montville, perhaps in a nod to the village improvement societies of the early Victorian period which sought to replace unattractive or functional (and somewhat derogatory) place names with more poetic designations. (There is no evidence to suggest that the renaming of the village references the town of Montville, Connecticut, located 70 miles southeast of Sandisfield.)

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The village as represented by the Beers Atlas (1876) consisted of 26 residences, a sawmill, three rake shops, two blacksmiths, a stovepipe shop, a flour and feed store, and a general store. The small town-owned parcel just west of the Montville Baptist Church was the site of district school (no longer extant). The nearby residence east of the church was being used as a parsonage. A small wooden horse shed behind the Montville Baptist Church is recorded in the 1904 Berkshire County atlas, but there is no clear record of when it was built or when it was removed.

Plans for a regional network of railroads along the Farmington River fell through in 1873 and Sandisfield, like other Berkshire hilltowns, saw a rapid decline in farming and small industries. The population of Sandisfield declined dramatically from 1,482 in 1870, to 807 in 1890 and to only 566 residents in 1910.

By the 1890s, membership in the Baptist society had declined and the meetinghouse was known to be in poor condition. The small congregation appealed for regional assistance in June 1894 when Edward A. Whitney as Deacon of the Baptist Church in Sandisfield sold the parcel "on which the meetinghouse now stands" to the Berkshire Baptist Association, Inc. (Berkshire County Registry of Deeds, South District, Book 155, page 589). Conditions did not improve and broken windows (perhaps related to the adjacent district school) and a leaking roof took a heavy toll on the building as it was left essentially vacant for the next 25 years.

Early Modern Period (1910-1955)

The Federal income tax (1913) and stock market crash of 1929 effectively destroyed the conspicuous affluence of the Berkshire County cottages. Local industries in the adjacent hilltowns also declined and Sandisfield at its lowest point counted a population of only 412 residents in 1930.

Sandisfield's unexpected influx of new Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century was due to the action of Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-1896), a German Jew who made a fortune as a European railroad developer. Concerned about the worsening plight of Jews in western Russia (primarily rural Orthodox Jews from Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine), he founded the Baron de Hirsch Fund in the United States in 1891 and a subsidiary organization, the Jewish Agricultural and Aid Society.

The Jewish Agricultural and Aid Society worked to identify potential emigrants and provide financial incentives for them to settle in dispersed farming communities in America rather than in crowded cities. Abandoned or underutilized farmland was available in New England and elsewhere for very low prices. By avoiding the metropolitan population centers, small communities of Jewish settlers were expected to assimilate more rapidly and avoid some aspects of discrimination.

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Prior to the purchase of the Montville meeting house in 1921, the Jewish congregation in Sandisfield was organized as Congregation Ahavat Ha-Tzedek. Its membership included Levi Albert, Yisroel Albert, Abraham Kleiner, Zvi Dovid Kosberg, Max Neger, Chaim Orenstein, Ephraim Orenstein, Beryl Pinsky, David Pinsky, and Solomon Pollock. Religious services were conducted in the home of Levi Albert in the village of New Boston (Sandisfield) for the benefit of Jewish residents in all areas of Sandisfield including East and West New Boston, Town Hill, and Montville.

The Baron de Hirsch Fund helped establish rural Jewish settlements in several Connecticut communities including Chesterfield, Colchester, Ellington, Montville, and Newtown. In an article dated July 11, 1904, the Winsted (CT) Evening News described the Orthodox Jewish community in nearby Sandisfield, Massachusetts.

Jewish Settlement – Colony of Hebrews in Sandisfield is Busy Improving Run Down Farms

The Jewish colony in Sandisfield is busy cutting brush, pulling stumps, and burning over pastureland. Plowing and planting, work in the grain and hay fields, etc. is steadily going on. Not only do the men work in the fields, but the women and boys do their share of outdoor work... What will be the outcome of this influx of foreign population is hard to say. It will certainly make an improvement in the looks of the land, and as long as they dig and drudge the way they are now doing over in the new settlements, the farms will grow more valuable, the merchants do a better business and the valuation of the town be increased... These people pay cash for everything, mind their own affairs and keep their own society.

[Quoted by Anne Hoffman in Sandisfield: Biography of a Town, p. 87]

In August 1921, the Berkshire Baptist Association sold the building and land to Benjamin Jensky (Berkshire County Registry of Deeds, South District, Book 231, page 229). He used the former parsonage as his home and sold the adjacent meetinghouse to the Montville Sons of Abraham Congregation (B’Nai Abraham) for \$1,500 in September 1922 (Berkshire County Registry of Deeds, South District, Book 231, page 469). When Benjamin Jensky of Montville (Sandisfield) purchased the former Baptist meeting house in 1921 and sold it to the Jewish congregation, there was some initial dissention about locating the new synagogue in the hamlet of Montville rather than the more accessible village of New Boston. The issues were apparently resolved and on September 22, 1924, the congregation was formally organized under a new constitution as the Sons of Abraham. To adapt the old Baptist meetinghouse to the needs of an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, the meetinghouse was raised up and the area underneath was excavated to convert the three-foot foundation to a full basement. The landscape in front of the building was re-graded to create a direct entrance to the basement meeting hall and corner staircases below the original front door.

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On the main elevation, the corner pilasters and central doorframe were retained in the 1922 remodeling, but with new clapboarding between and within them, eliminating the original entrance. (The outline of the old entrance can still be glimpsed from the inside by crawling under the tiered pews in the rear.) The new basement entrance also provided separate access to two interior staircases (for men and women respectively).

On the inside of the meetinghouse, the plaster walls, multipane windows, and wood pews remained intact. The original pulpit was removed and replaced with a dais across the front of the sanctuary. Raised tiers of seating for women were erected in a separate section at the back of the synagogue, while the pews on the main floor were reserved for men. In the 1924 constitution, the congregation cited the teaching of children as a primary goal. Membership dues of \$15 per year would go to support a rabbi "to teach the children and to be of service to us when we wish."

Under the date of November 2, 1927, the minutes of the congregation record income of \$152.35 from a masquerade ball, but with no details of the event.

At a meeting in 1928, there was a discussion about finding rooms near the synagogue for members who lived too far away to walk to services on the High Holy Days.

The minutes of 1936 include a motion that Brother Steinberg should withdraw all the money from the bank "to fix the shul," but no details are provided. Repairs to the floor were needed in 1939 and the congregation voted to tear up the floor on September 15, 1939 to evaluate what was needed.

By 1936, the members were contracting on an annual basis with Reb Schochet HaCohen to supervise the slaughtering of chickens and other livestock according to Jewish law. Mr. Stein was the butcher for the congregation, but there were periodic complaints about him selling meat that was not kosher. In 1940 there was a flurry of concern about a member of the congregation who was accused of selling "carcasses" (non-kosher chickens) to Jews in nearby Hartford (CT). As a result, the congregation decided to invest in a machine that the Schochet could use to tag or seal chickens as kosher. The Schochet continued to serve the congregation at least through 1944, although there were constant debates about how frequently he should visit members and how much he should be paid.

Beginning in 1937, the congregation is referred to as Congregation B'nai Abraham in the minutes. The Ladies Auxiliary raised money by sponsoring dances at Galaski's Dance Hall in Sandisfield (built by Abe Baranoff in 1927, but no longer extant). The first dance in 1937 raised \$110.50 after \$16 was paid for the live music. Other dances were scheduled to raise additional money as needed to support the buildings and activities of the congregation.

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In 1939, the congregation agreed that anyone who was not a United States citizens should be helped to become one. There was some concern voiced in the congregation about land in Sandisfield that was being given to non-Jewish Germans. Money was also collected for the assistance of refugees.

The B’Nai Abraham congregation was originally headed by Rabbi Max Cohen (1888-1940). Rabbi Cohen emigrated from Russia in 1905 and settled in Sandisfield where he and his wife Ida raised five daughters. He was instrumental in purchasing the Montville Baptist Church building and conducted regular services in the structure for more than eighteen years. After the rabbi’s death, the synagogue was used only for special occasions with no resident leadership.

A preliminary analysis of the 1930 Federal census for Sandisfield yields a profile of the Jewish community at its peak. Looking only at heads of household and their spouses (a total of 188 people), slightly more than 50% (101 individuals) were born in New England, New York, or Canada. Another 30% (57 individuals) were born in Russia, Austria, or Poland and have traditional Jewish surnames. The remaining heads of household and spouses hail from Italy, Scandinavia (Finland and Sweden), Ireland, Germany, and other European countries.

Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe was severely restricted by new immigration quotas that took effect in 1924. The Great Depression of the 1930s and Sandisfield’s remote location eventually contributed to a demographic trend that could not be reversed. As small farms became less viable, more people left Sandisfield to seek employment and educational opportunities elsewhere. The district schools in Sandisfield were consolidated in 1949 and the small district schoolhouse adjacent to the synagogue in Montville was subsequently demolished.

The Jewish population gradually declined during the Depression as families and grown children left Sandisfield for other locations. In 1937 the congregation had to borrow money to pay the bills for insurance and electricity. In 1940 the building was without electricity and was not restored until the congregation paid the \$28 that was past due,

The minutes of Congregation B’nai Abraham end in 1943 and the synagogue closed in the late 1940s. There was an effort to reopen the synagogue in the 1980s, but the congregation was not able to maintain the minimum numbers required under Jewish law.

In 1950, Sandisfield’s total population stood at only 437, but the town was being rediscovered as a summer resort for visitors and second-home residents from New York City.

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Recent History

As the Orthodox Jewish congregation aged and dwindled, the old meetinghouse/synagogue became a financial burden in constant need of repair. To celebrate the congregation's 50th anniversary in 1971, B'Nai Abraham raised \$2,000 towards renovation of the synagogue, but even that amount proved inadequate.

Following the establishment of Tanglewood in Lenox as the summer home of the Boston Symphony in 1937, nearby Berkshire communities like Sandisfield began to find new life as summer resorts and arts centers. A large influx of middle class tourists replaced the few wealthy families of the Gilded Age. The trend continued throughout the second half of the 20th century, and Sandisfield's year-round population of 667 (2000 census) more than doubles during the summer arts season.

By the 1980s the building was in poor condition. A local carpenter braced up the roof to prevent collapse while a local group was organized to pursue the goal of establishing an arts center on Sandisfield, which became the Sandisfield Arts and Recreation Committee (SARC). The remaining members of the former synagogue agreed to donate the building to SARC in 1995. At a "Special Meeting of the Sons of Abraham Congregation of Sandisfield, Massachusetts" on October 15, 1995, those attending agreed that all Jewish residents and all Jewish property owners in Sandisfield would be considered members of the congregation and allowed to vote. Twenty-eight members were present and approved four resolutions:

1. To loan one Torah to Knesset Israel in nearby Pittsfield, Massachusetts.
2. To appoint a committee to consider the possibility of loaning two other Torah's (in storage at Knesset Israel).
3. To place other religious articles of personal property (Ark, several framed wall pieces) on loan to SARC.
4. To convey all real estate "as is" to SARC for charitable, educational and/or civic purposes.

In 1996, SARC was organized as a nonprofit group to take over ownership of the Montville meetinghouse (Berkshire County Registry of Deeds, South District, Book 975, page 51). Through arts programming and constant fundraising, the committee has managed to preserve the meetinghouse and convert it to use as a community stage and auditorium.

In the last few years, SARC has made substantial progress in preserving and restoring the old meetinghouse. A grant from the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund of the Massachusetts Historical Commission helped repair the roof and bell tower in 1999. The success of that project led to

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additional support and the eventual full restoration of the building as it stands today. A new airlock has been installed on the basement entrance in the front of the building. A small addition in the rear has expanded the stage facilities, but all of the building's historic details from both periods of use (Baptist and Jewish) have been retained.

At the present time the entrance and stage have been upgraded and the exterior of the wood-frame building has been patched and completely repainted. The historic pews remain in place as seating for the theatre. Interior plaster repair and painting is underway.

Criterion C: Architectural Style

Thanks to the survival of the original construction contract (Berkshire County Registry of Deeds, South District, Book 80, page 76), the detailed requirements for construction of the meetinghouse in 1839 are known. Since the level of detail in the document is unusual for a vernacular structure, the agreement is transcribed in full below:

Be it remembered that on this 15th day of January 1839, it is agreed between Harvey Fuller, James Jones, Sheldon Fuller, Lester Barker and Orville Merrill of Sandisfield, County of Berkshire and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, committee of the Baptist Society of Sandisfield, and Calvin Barker, Munson Crittenden of Otis, county aforesaid, and Lester Barker, John P. Bentley of South Sandisfield, carpenters, in manner and form following, to wit, we the said Calvin and Lester do for ourselves our heirs, executors and administrators, covenant and agree with the committee aforesaid or their successors in office that we the said Calvin and [blank] as our assigns shall and will before the first day of December next in good and workmanlike manner, and according to our best knowledge and skill at a place called Mechanicsville in said Sandisfield will and substantially erect, build and finish one Meeting house according to the draft or scheme hereto annexed – the foundation to be composed of good weather brick or smooth quarried undressed stone, laid in lime mortar, one foot in thickness, and the front three feet in height. The sills of the frame of good sound white hemlock or red beech, or any other suitable timber, the beams and posts and braces of good sound hardwood. The braces in the body part to be 4 by 5 inches, and the rest according to the plan – and two ties 4 by 8 inches between each bent – the outside of the roof boarded and shingled with good hemlock shingle. The body clapboarded with good pine stuff – and the doors, window casings and moldings to be first rate pine stuff, the front gable end to be ceiled with pine boards, 4 inches in width, the other clapboarded, the Belfry, the first story clapboarded, the next ceiled up with four window blinds, the upper deck covered in a good substantial manner with a railing of panel work of a suitable height. The inside to have two panel doors of 1 and 1/2 inches thick of good pine – the floors of good white hemlock or maple – the slips [pews] and casings to be of good pine or bass, the top of the slips to be of butternut or cherry stained. The pulpit to be in front with two doors of good pine – oak stained, the whole to lath and plastered with two good coats of lime – and the outside to

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be painted white with three coats of good oil and white lead, and it is understood that the lumber shall be as good as is generally used in buildings of this description.

And if any misunderstanding should arise respecting the goodness of the materials or the manner of the work, the judgment or voice of the master workman shall be considered the same as two of the committee in determining such questions. And if after any part of the work is finished and the committee disapprove of it, the same shall be left to three disinterested men to determine. And the said committee do hereby covenant and agree with the said Calvin Barker and co. and Lester Barker and co. to furnish the ground prepared for laying the foundation – and to cause the subscription for building the house to be filled, up to the amount of one thousand five hundred dollars of as good responsible names, as those who are now on said list, that the said contractors shall receive one thousand four hundred dollars of said subscription money, the one half of it when the frame is erected, and the remainder when the work shall be completed, and Mr. Jarius Barker shall use his best endeavor to collect the same, and to keep a good look out whether any of the subscribers refuse to pay, or are likely to fail and in such case the contractors are free to take the subscription and collect them themselves, but it is distinctly understood that the building committee shall not be responsible for any default in paying said subscriptions. And in witness hereof the contracting parties do hereby bind themselves to the faithful performance of each of the said covenants above written in the final sum of two thousand dollars.

Sam'l Merrill
Jarius Barker
Barker & Crittenden, contractors
Barker & Bentley, contractors
John M. Fuller
Joseph S. Fuller
Lester J. Barker
Orvill Merrill
James Jones

The result of the contract was the current Montville meetinghouse, a wood frame structure on a stone foundation with a simple gabled roof and a square belfry. The exterior clapboards remain on the sides and rear, as do the original multipane windows and the original slips or pews in the sanctuary.

The building's two major periods of use (Baptist meetinghouse, 1839 and Orthodox Jewish synagogue, 1922) are clearly reflected in the current physical characteristics of the structure. The most significant

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change occurred in 1922, when the building was raised up and excavated underneath to create a full understorey enclosed by an exposed granite foundation. On the front (south) elevation, the center entrance at the sanctuary level was clapboarded over and a new vestibule was created at the basement level.

Since most of the clapboards on the front elevation were replaced in 1922 and subsequent remodelings, it is possible that the front elevation might have included windows flanking the main entrance. If so, they were removed when the rear seating was constructed in the sanctuary.

It is even possible that the front walls might have originally been flush-boarded (“ceiled”), like the tympanum above and as suggested by the 1839 building contract (“the front gable end to be ceiled with pine boards, 4 inches in width”).

The wide entablature on the building suggests that engaged corner pilasters may have existed originally on the front elevation, but perhaps in a broader and simpler Greek Revival profile. The current tapered pilasters probably date from the synagogue period. The slender proportions, simple Doric-inspired capitals and projecting base certainly have more in common with the Colonial Revival trend of the 1920s than with the Greek Revival style of the 1830s.

The south wall of the sanctuary has been greatly modified with the sealing of the original center entrance, the lowering of the gallery and the creation of new corner staircases. Sag lines in the plaster and paint lines on the columns show that the gallery was originally raised up to a height of about 8 feet above the floor. The main center entrance (about 6 feet wide) came in directly below the raised gallery, as indicated by the lath and plaster patch. Patches to the sill and apron of the first set of windows and to the plaster of the south wall indicate that two corner staircases originally led up to the higher gallery from the sanctuary floor. (The staircases ran first along the east and west walls, and then turned to rise along the south wall.) The center entrance and the original corner staircases were eliminated when the new men’s and women’s staircases were run from the lower level.

While the Sandisfield Arts Center preserves the basic form and details of the old Baptist meeting house, the structure also clearly exhibits the modifications that were made in the 1920s to accommodate the needs of the Orthodox Jewish congregation. Both the historic religious uses are equally significant and cover an almost equal span of years. The plan for restoration and rehabilitation under the leadership of the Sandisfield Arts & Restoration Committee seeks to preserve representative and character-defining features from both periods of use.

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Summary

The Montville Baptist Church / Sandisfield Arts Center is one of the largest and most significant public buildings in the community. Its dual role as a Baptist meetinghouse and a Jewish synagogue is unusual and highly significant, especially since both tenancies span an almost equal term of about 75 years. The original Baptist meetinghouse, its conversion to a Jewish synagogue and the more recent development of a community arts center all speak eloquently to the transformation of a small Berkshire community in the 19th and 20th centuries.

By its prominent location and relation to other historic structures the Montville Baptist Church is an important visual icon for the village of Montville and the town as a whole. The building's former religious uses and the new use as an arts center relate directly to the major themes of Berkshire history and merit its listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Archaeological Significance

Historic archaeological resources described above have the potential to contribute important information related to the social, cultural, and economic characteristics of the Mechanicsville hamlet (later Montville), architectural characteristics of a rural New England meetinghouse with vernacular Greek Revival details, and the layout of facilities associated with the church. Since church records and membership roles have not been found, archaeological resources may represent an important source of information to describe the mid to late 19th century Baptist congregation. The identification and detailed analysis of structural evidence related to church facilities and the contents of occupational-related facilities (trash pits, privies, wells) may contribute important evidence that indicates the extent the Montville congregation encompassed a working class population with modest levels of education common of other western Massachusetts communities. Construction features located around the meetinghouse and the contents of trash deposits may contain evidence of construction materials used in original construction of the meetinghouse and characteristic features used in its design. Design characteristics and the location of stables, barns, and outbuildings may also contribute important evidence relating to the layout of church facilities and the economic characteristics of the congregation. Detailed analysis of the contents of occupational-related features may also document important social, cultural, and economic changes at the church and its congregation as it changed from a Baptist society to an orthodox Jewish congregation.

(End of Section 8)

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MAPS AND TOWN PLANS

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BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION:

The boundaries of the nominated property are shown as a penciled line on the accompanying Assessors Maps of the Town of Sandisfield, Massachusetts, Sheet 202, Parcel 12. The trapezoidal parcel of 0.62 acres is located near the northwest corner of Sandisfield Road (MA Route 57) and Hammertown Road and includes 130 feet of frontage on the west side of Hammertown Rd.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION:

The boundaries of the National Register nomination delineate the parcel traditionally associated with the Montville Baptist Church since its construction in 1839. The church is located in a rural hamlet of single-family homes and farms clustered along Sandisfield Road (MA Route 57) in the area known as Montville (formerly Mechanicsville).

The church property is bordered on the northeast by a privately-owned residence, on the northwest by private pastureland, on the southwest by a town-owned parcel that formerly held a district school (no longer extant), and on the southwest by an unpaved roadway (Hammertown Road).

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Sandisfield (Berkshire) MA**

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The coordinates originally provided for Montville Baptist Church were 18 655970 4664450. The correct location is 0.63 miles (1000 m) due west of this point at **18 654970 4664450** (North American Datum 1927).

Corrected March 2009

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APPENDIX

Ida Jenks Schachter was seven years old in 1921 when the church became a synagogue. In an interview in 1996, she recalled:

My father [Benjamin Jensky] sold the church to the Jewish community, but the property included the parish house. The house wound up belonging to my father and my family moved in, all six kids and parents. The house [now privately owned] is situated next to the synagogue and on either side of the synagogue was the school [no longer extant]. I remember the excitement when the church bell had to be removed to make the building kosher, and the removal of any Baptist prayer books and New Testaments that may have been left. The hall downstairs [in the meeting house] was filled with movable benches and many beautiful chairs with rush seats. An ornamental cover for the Sefer Torah was needed and was made by my mother [Rebecca Jensky].

The parsonage was left completely furnished, including an organ and in a small room upstairs all kinds of Bibles and other books. They remained there and my mother warned us not to go near them. The well at the house would go kind of dry in warm weather, so we had to supplement the water supply by taking pails to the corner where Mr. Rich's store was and use the town watering trough. The watering trough had two sections, the largest part for horses, the smaller section for people.

(History of the Jewish Community in Sandisfield, Mass., typescript of an interview with Ida Jenks Schechter, 1996. Collection of Sandisfield Historical Society.)

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**Montville Baptist Church
Sandisfield, Berkshire County, Massachusetts**

Black & White Archival Photographs

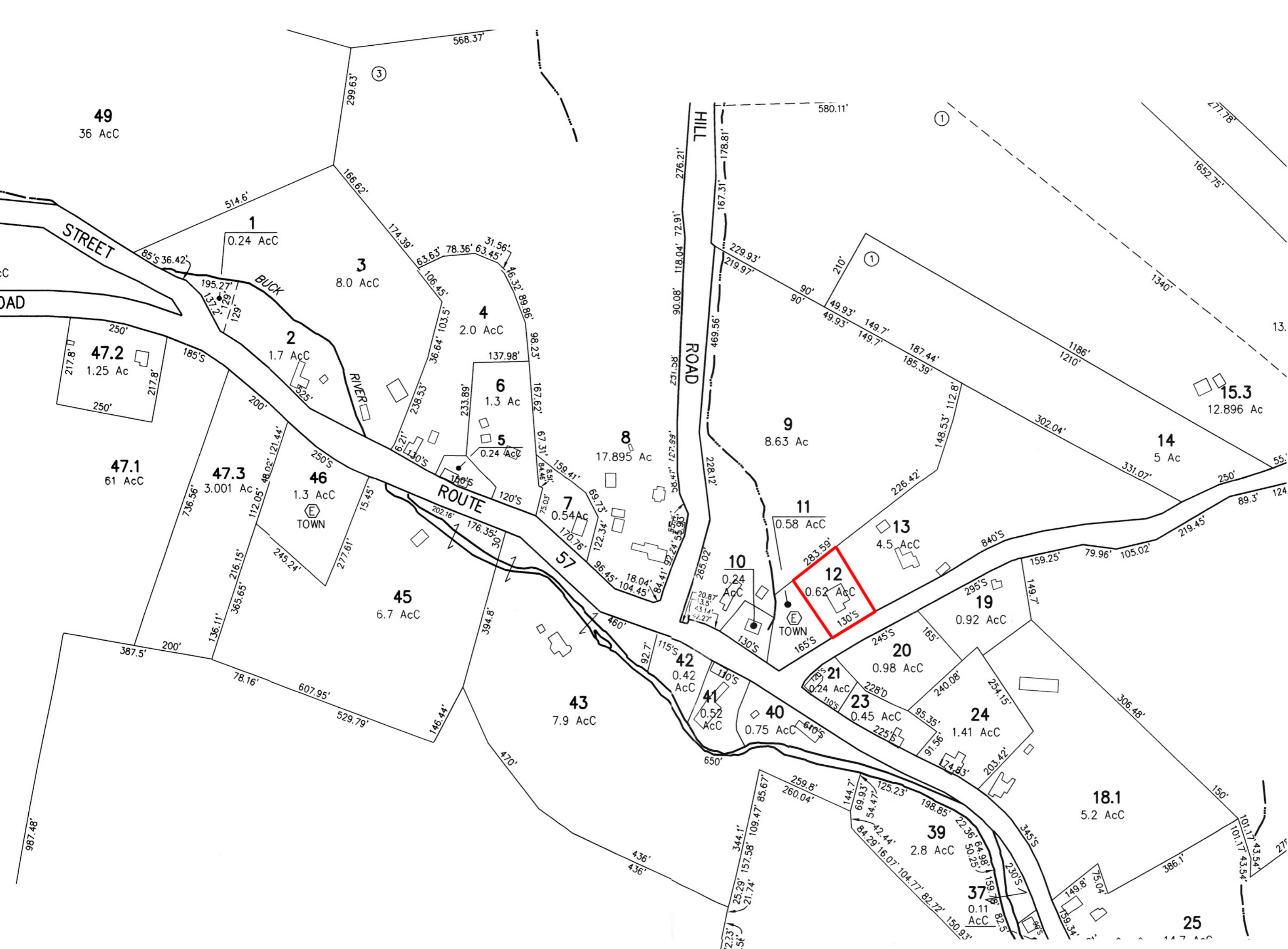
Photographer: Gregory Farmer

Date: October 2005

Location of Negatives: Agricola Corporation, PO Box 861, Chicopee, MA 01014-0861

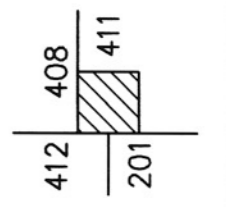
1. Exterior view of Montville Baptist Church, looking northwest from Hammertown Road.
2. Exterior view of Montville Baptist Church, looking northwest from adjacent property.
3. Exterior view of Montville Baptist Church, looking northeast from Hammertown Road.
4. Exterior view of Montville Baptist Church, looking southwest to Hammertown Road.
5. Interior view of the Montville Baptist Church.

(End)



Excerpt

INDEX DIAGRAM



MAP NO.

202

ASSESSORS MAP

SANDISFIELD

MASSACHUSETTS

Montville Baptist Church
Sandisfield, MA
Map 202 Parcel 12

Montville Baptist Church
Sandisfield, MA
18 654970 4664450

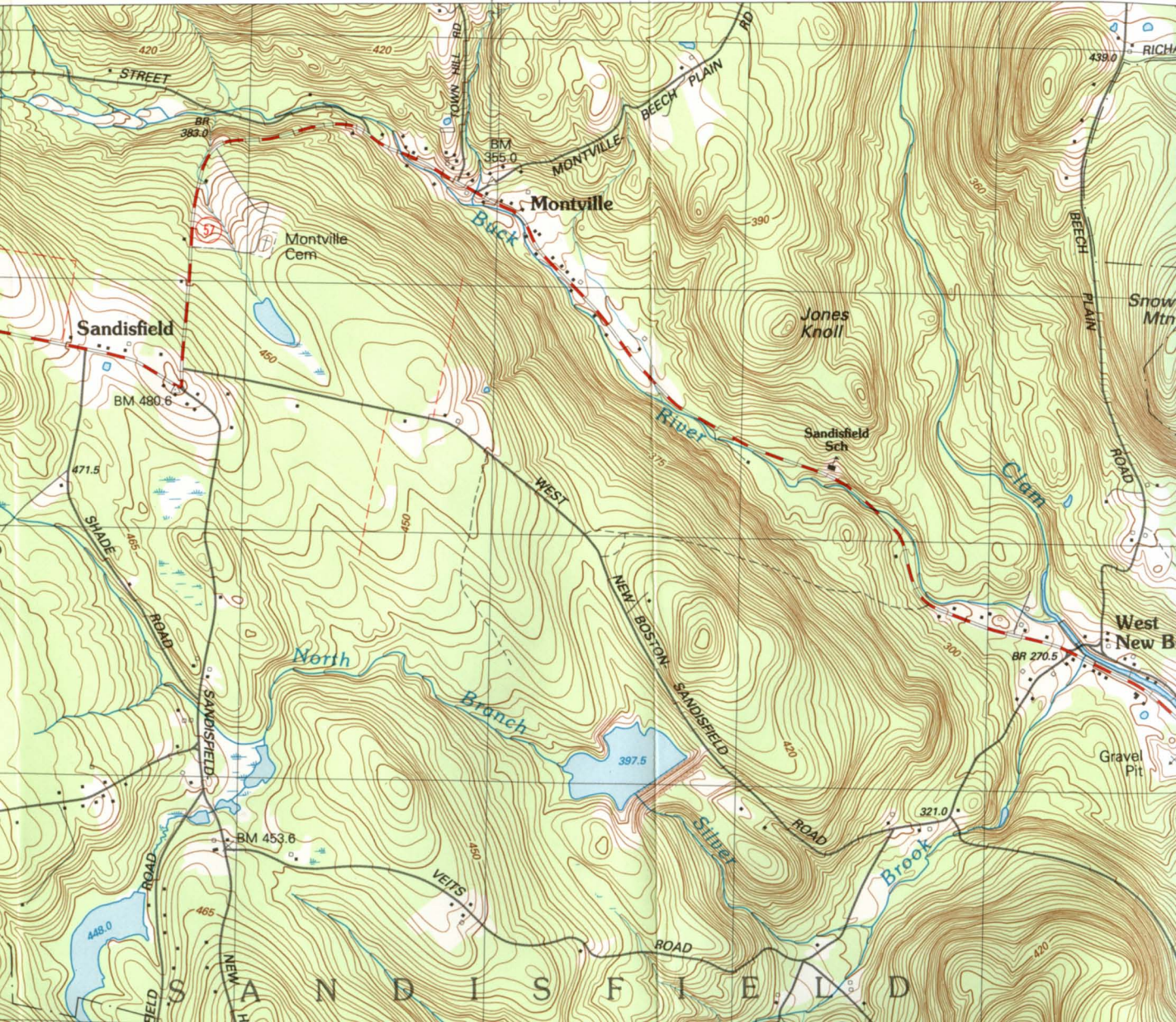
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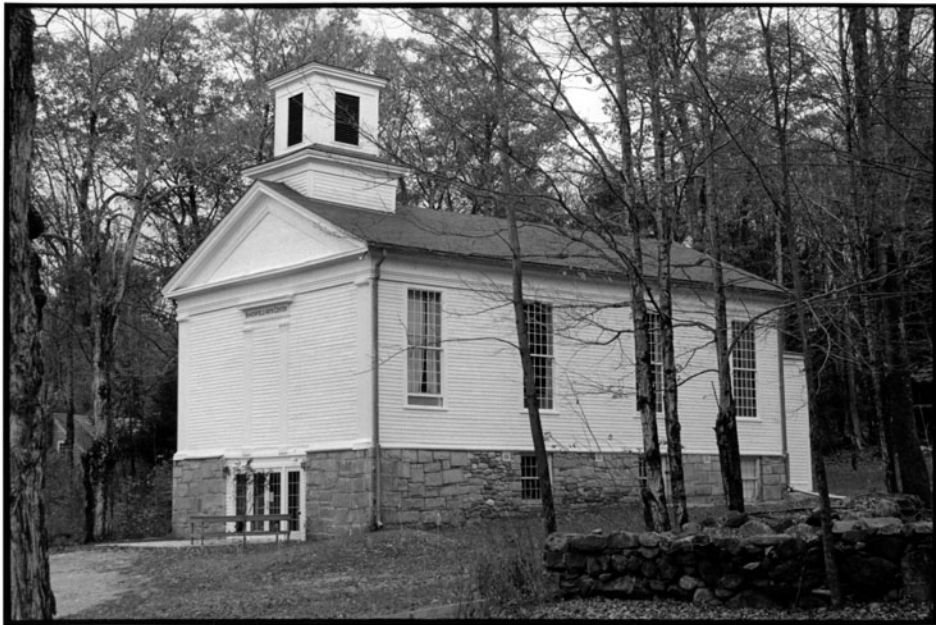
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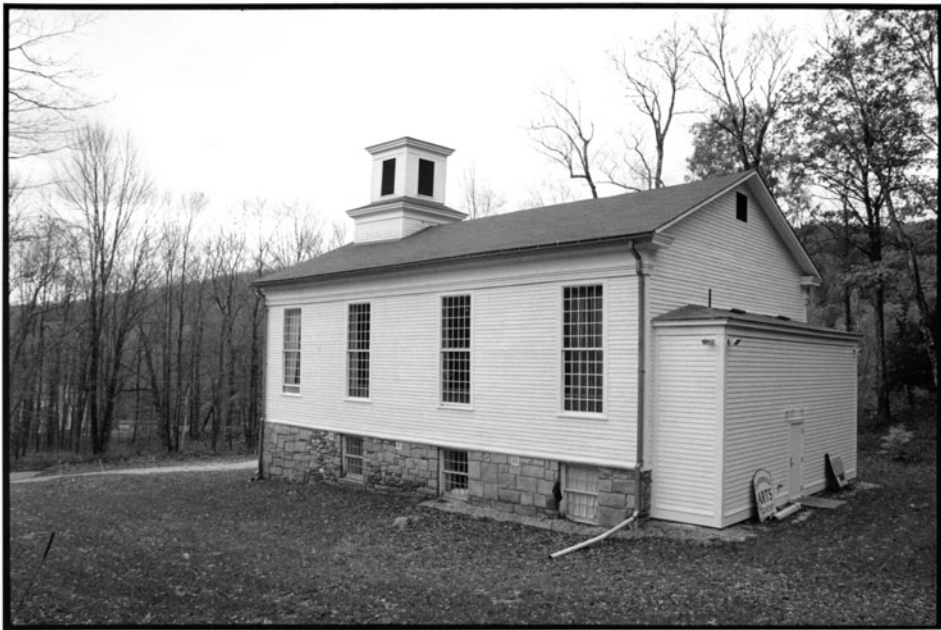
1. Exterior view of Montville Baptist Church, looking northwest from Hammertown Road.
(Photograph: Gregory Farmer, October 2005)



2. Exterior view of Montville Baptist Church, looking northwest from adjacent property.
(Photograph: Gregory Farmer, October 2005)



3. Exterior view of Montville Baptist Church, looking northeast from Hammertown Road.
(Photograph: Gregory Farmer, October 2005)



4. Exterior view of Montville Baptist Church, looking southwest to Hammertown Road.
(Photograph: Gregory Farmer, October 2005)



5. Interior view of the Montville Baptist Church.
(Photograph: Gregory Farmer, October 2005)



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth
Massachusetts Historical Commission

August 28, 2006

Dr. John Roberts
National Register of Historic Places
Department of the Interior
National Park Service
1201 Eye Street, NW, 8th floor
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Dr. Roberts:

Enclosed please find the following nomination form:

Montville Baptist Church, Sandisfield (Berkshire), MA

The nomination has been voted eligible by the State Review Board and has been signed by the State Historic Preservation Officer. The owners of the property were notified of pending State Review Board consideration 30 to 45 days before the meeting and were afforded the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Betsy Friedberg".

Betsy Friedberg
National Register Director
Massachusetts Historical Commission

enclosure

cc: Gregory Farmer, consultant
Liana Toscanini, SARC
Sandisfield Board of Selectmen
Norton Fletcher, Sandisfield Historical Commission
Sandisfield Planning Board Chair