

NRHP 3/30/7

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 Willis Presbyterian Church and Cemetery  
other names/site number Grace Baptist Church. #031-0045

**2. Location**

street & number 5733 Floyd Highway South not for publication   
city or town Willis vicinity   
state Virginia code VA county Floyd code 063 Zip 24330

**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 )

[Signature] 2/12/07  
Signature of certifying official Date  
Virginia Department of Historic Resources  
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 commenting or other official Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I, hereby certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register  See continuation sheet. Signature of Keeper \_\_\_\_\_  
 determined eligible for the National Register  See continuation sheet.  
 determined not eligible for the National Register Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_  
 removed from the National Register  
 other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

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**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property** (Check as many boxes as apply)

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

**Category of Property** (Check only one box)

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

**Number of Resources within Property**

| Contributing | Noncontributing |            |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|
| <u>  1  </u> | <u>  0  </u>    | buildings  |
| <u>  1  </u> | <u>  0  </u>    | sites      |
| <u>  1  </u> | <u>  0  </u>    | structures |
| <u>  0  </u> | <u>  0  </u>    | objects    |
| <u>  3  </u> | <u>  0  </u>    | Total      |

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register   0  

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

Reverend Robert Childress Presbyterian Rock Churches, MPD

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:   Religion   Sub:   religious facility    
  funerary     cemetery    
  landscape     retaining wall  

**Current Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:   Religion   Sub:   religious facility    
  funerary     cemetery    
  landscape     retaining wall  

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification** (Enter categories from instructions)

  Gothic Revival  

**Materials** (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation   concrete    
roof   asphalt    
walls   stone    
other   wood  

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

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### 8. Statement of Significance

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**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 and 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.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a 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.

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**Areas of Significance** (Enter categories from instructions) Religion, Social History, Architecture

**Period of Significance** 1954-1956

**Significant Dates** 1954

**Significant Person** (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A

**Cultural Affiliation** N/A

**Architect/Builder** Stanley, Lyle

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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### 9. Major Bibliographical References

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**Bibliography**

(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 # \_\_\_\_\_

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**Primary Location of Additional Data**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreege of Property** approx. 1.7 acres

**UTM References** (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

| Zone | Easting | Northing | Zone    | Easting | Northing | Zone   | Easting | Northing | Zone | Easting | Northing |    |    |        |         |
|------|---------|----------|---------|---------|----------|--------|---------|----------|------|---------|----------|----|----|--------|---------|
| 1.   | 17      | 545850   | 4078813 | 2.      | 17       | 545899 | 4078842 | 3.       | 17   | 545919  | 4078827  | 4. | 17 | 546004 | 4078866 |
| 5.   | 17      | 546038   | 4078832 | 6.      | 17       | 545933 | 4078784 | 7.       | 17   | 545923  | 4078813  | 8. | 17 | 545874 | 4078787 |

See continuation sheet.

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: Randle Brim, John Kern, and Michael Pulice

Organization: Virginia Department of Historic Resources date December, 2005

street & number: 1030 Penmar Ave SE telephone 540-857-7586

city or town Roanoke state VA zip code 24013

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps** A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs** Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Rev. Stuart Lee Childress (contact)

street & number 30 Lynn Drive telephone \_\_\_\_\_

city or town Ararat state VA zip code 24053

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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## 7. Summary and Site

The former Willis Presbyterian Church is now in the hands of the Grace Baptist Church, which carefully maintains the structure. The 1954 fieldstone church is located at the western end of the tiny Willis community in southwestern Floyd County, more than 2800 feet above sea level, on the south side of U.S. Highway 221 and the west side of Floyd County Rt. 764 (Burkes Fork Road), where the two roads intersect. The front of the building faces north towards Highway 221.

The Willis Church is itself surrounded by a fieldstone retaining wall. The only other secondary resource historically associated with the church is a cemetery directly across Rt. 764 from the church. Both the stone wall (structure) and the cemetery (site) are considered *contributing resources* for the purposes of this nomination. Adjacent to the cemetery, to the south, is a modern, non-contributing church structure owned and occupied by the Grace Baptist Church, which is not included in the nominated boundary.

### Description

Completed in 1954, the Willis Church was the last of the Rock Churches to be constructed. It consists of a one-story gable-fronted rectangular form (30' by 52') with a square (10' by 11') bell tower attached to the building's front (north) façade at the northeast corner and a dated granite corner stone. The bell tower is the main architectural character-defining element. It features round-arched entrances on its east and north elevations and crenellations consisting of sharp rocks pointed upward. The entire building, including the tower, was erected on a poured concrete foundation, and has walls of light framing covered with a thick quartz and quartzite fieldstone exterior veneer. A few large, well-formed, faceted quartz crystals also appear among the rocks. On both long sides of the building (east and west) are two buttresses with exposed concrete bases as high as the foundation of the building, with the remaining portions stone covered, and sloped concrete copings at the top. Alternating with the buttresses are six-over-six double-hung sash—three windows on the west side, two windows and a door on the east side. On the west elevation there are four openings in the concrete foundation (which encloses a full basement)—three small windows and a door with bulkhead entrance. The top of the foundation is about at grade on the east side, and therefore has no basement windows. The front elevation has a single, off-center window of the same six-over-six configuration. The rear (south) elevation has no fenestration. The medium-pitch gable roof is covered with asphalt shingles. The interior is an open nave plan with unpainted, knotty pine

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wainscoting and white-painted flush vertical board paneling above. The ceiling is covered with flat natural wood veneer tiles. The floor is carpeted. The pews face the dais and podium at the rear of the building. A quartzite fieldstone retaining wall surrounds the parcel on the north and west sides

**Cemetery and Retaining Wall**

The Willis Church has a cemetery that predates the church by several decades, and has the best examples of gravestone carving. It contains graves dating from the mid-19th century through the 20th century. Many of the gravestones display folk-art carvings with high artistic values, and a number of them are carved from high quality local soapstone, which was quarried within the three counties since prehistoric times. Some of the others exhibiting high levels of craftsmanship are fashioned from white marble. A quartzite fieldstone retaining wall surrounds the church building on the north and west sides.

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Summary and Justification**

Willis Presbyterian Church is one of the six Childress rock-faced churches located in the Virginia counties of Floyd, Carroll, and Patrick, built between 1919 and the early 1950s by Presbyterian minister Robert W. Childress. The six churches are significant in their embodiment of Appalachian patterns of Presbyterian religious worship and Presbyterian social activism in western Virginia. The churches also tell the story of the remarkable ministry of Robert W. Childress, who brought spiritual faith and social awakening to the people of the central portion of the Blue Ridge Province in Virginia. As such, Willis Presbyterian Church is significant under Criterion A in the areas of Religion and Social History, and under Criterion C for its unique architecture. The period of significance is from 1954, the year of its construction, to 1956, the year of Robert Childress's death.

**Historical Background**

Willis Church, built in 1954 in Floyd County five miles northeast of Buffalo Mountain, was the last of the rock-faced churches constructed under the spiritual leadership of Bob Childress, and the only one of the six churches constructed after Childress suffered his serious stroke in 1951.

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Willis Presbyterian Church traces its origins to meetings in the home of Troy Weeks, a prominent and respected leader in the Town of Willis who taught school and then became the town postmaster. For more than a year the Willis Presbyterian congregation worshiped as a mission of the Buffalo Mountain mother church. Willis Presbyterian Church began its history as an independent church in October 1939 with Elders Troy Weeks, Ephrom Weeks, and Henry Mayberry and twenty-four charter members. Troy Weeks served as clerk of the Willis Session until 1965, and as an active elder until 1981.<sup>1</sup>

From 1939 until 1953 Willis Presbyterian Church met in the Willis bank building, which had closed during the Depression. In January 1953 the Willis Presbyterian congregation held a meeting moderated by Bob Childress where they agreed to sell the bank property to Blue Ridge Lodge, No. 4, of the International Order of Odd Fellows for \$2,200. The meeting then resolved to use the money from the sale of the bank for construction of a new church building. Bob Childress moderated another Willis Presbyterian Church meeting in April 1953 in which the congregation agreed to buy a vacant lot in town and build a new church. At an August 1953 meeting moderated by Bob Childress and attended by wife Lelia, the Willis building committee agreed to "build a wood building cased with granit [sic] stone." The building committee would draw up plans for construction after looking at the few churches. In October 1953 Elder Troy Weeks reported that the building committee had contracted with Lyle Stanley to build the new church building. Stanley would do all woodwork and specified basement work for \$2,250 with materials furnished by the congregation.

Construction photographs located by Brim show the wooden framing erected by Lyle Stanley and then covered with tarpaper and ready for field rock encasement. The fieldstone came from many places, including the Susan Quesenberry farm, the J. W. Boones farm, and lands owned by the Weeks. Troy Weeks did the initial electrical wiring for the church and installed the chimes in the bell tower. Eventually speakers on the Willis church bell tower broadcast gospel music Saturday evenings and Sundays played from 78-rpm records. Bob Childress's failing health obligated him to resign his pastorate at Willis Church in September 1953, and his son William "Bill Joe" Childress, then a second-year student at Columbia Union Theological Seminary, ushered the Willis congregation into the new Willis Presbyterian Church during the summer months of 1954.

In July 1967 the Willis Presbyterian congregation changed its name to the Interfaith Church of Willis. Around 1990 the church name changed to Willis Full Gospel Church. That congregation

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vacated the Willis rock-faced church by 2003, and Grace Baptist Church purchased the church from Peaks Presbytery, which retained first right of purchase, for \$4,000. The 2003 transfer was facilitated by Bob Childress's son Bryan, who was glad to see the Willis church remain in service.<sup>2</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Here again Randle Brim's primary research interviews with Troy Weeks's daughter, Barbara Weeks Bain, and his location of the original Willis Session Minutes have provided new and important information on the Willis Church. Brim, *Simple Pleasures*, December 2004, and personal communication, September 2005.
2. Brim, *Simple Pleasures*, December 2004, and personal communication, September 2005. Stephan Russell Lackey, present pastor of the Willis Rock Church, now Grace Baptist Church, personal communication, November 2005.

### 9. Bibliographical References

Abingdon Presbytery, Wytheville, Virginia. Published minutes, 1916-1944.

Brim, Randle. *Simple Pleasures*. Monthly publication of *Mount Airy News*, North Carolina. December 2004. "Willis Rock Church," 2-4, 6, 8.

Abingdon Presbytery session minutes for Bluemont, Slate Mountain, Dinwiddie, Buffalo Mountain, and Willis Churches.

Davids, Richard C. *The Man Who Moved a Mountain*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970. Paperback edition, 1972.

Slate, Richard, elder of Dinwiddie Presbyterian Church since 1947. Personal communication, September 2005.

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**10 . Geographical Data**

**Verbal Boundary Description**

The boundary of the nominated parcel includes only the church and cemetery and the immediate grounds around them, as shown on the accompanying GIS-produced aerial image. The following UTM points designate the boundary polygon as it is being nominated: 1. 17 545850 4078813 2. 17 545899 4078842 3. 17 545919 4078827 4. 17 546004 4078866 5. 17 546038 4078832 6. 17 545933 4078784 7. 17 545923 4078813 8. 17 545874 4078787

**Boundary Justification**

The nominated parcel boundary corresponds exactly to that of the original church and cemetery parcel.

**Photographs**

Willis Presbyterian Church (DHR #031-0045)  
Floyd County, Virginia  
Date: December 2005  
Photographer: Michael J. Pulice  
Negative No. 22021

1. Church, facing south.
2. Church, facing southeast.
3. Church, facing northwest.
4. Church, corner/date stone.
5. Faceted quartz crystal in stone facing.
6. Church, interior, facing rear of church.
7. Cemetery, facing east.

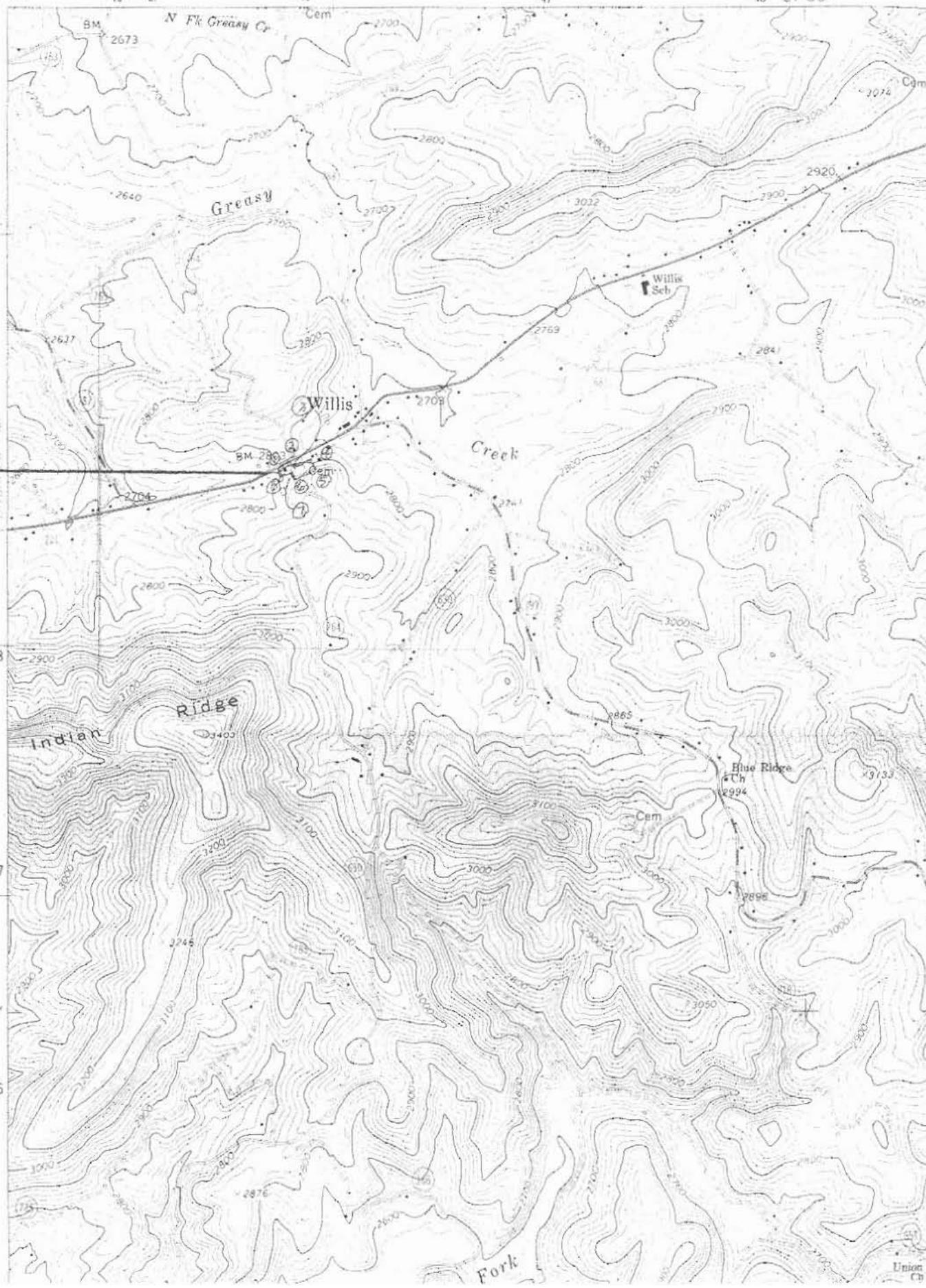
6857' NE  
(INDIAN VALLEY)

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

80°30' 545000m E 546 547 548 27'30"

4080000m N

LLIS  
METHODIAN  
CH AND  
METER  
YD CO, VA  
N ZONE-17  
5850E  
78813N  
5899E  
78842N  
5919E  
78827N  
46004E  
7078866N  
16038E  
4078832N  
45933E  
4078784N  
45923E  
4078813N  
15874E  
078787N



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