

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is used for documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form* (National Register Bulletin 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information. For additional space, use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

New Submission Amended Submission

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Reverend Robert Childress Presbyterian Rock Churches, #017-5032

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Churches founded by Rev. Robert Childress in Floyd, Patrick, and Carroll Counties, ca. 1919-1954.
Presbyterianism in southwestern Virginia, ca. 1919-1954.

C. Form Prepared by

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city or town Richmond state VA zip code 23221

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature and title of certifying official

Date

Virginia Department of Historic Resources
State or Federal Agency or Tribal government

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Table of Contents for Written Narrative

Provide the following information on continuation sheets. Cite the letter and the title before each section of the narrative. Assign page numbers according to the instructions for continuation sheets in *How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form* (National Register Bulletin 16B). Fill in page numbers for each section in the space below.

E. Statement of Historic Contexts (If more than one historic context is documented, present them in sequential order.)	Pages 1 - 8
F. Associated Property Types (Provide description, significance, and registration requirements.)	Pages 9 - 11
G. Geographical Data	Page 12
H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods (Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.)	Page 13
I. Major Bibliographical References (List major written works and primary location of additional documentation: State Historic Preservation Office, other State agency, Federal agency, local government, university, or other, specifying repository.)	Pages 14 - 15

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 120 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.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 1

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

E. Statement of Historic Contexts

Summary

The six Childress rock-faced churches are located in the Virginia counties of Floyd, Carroll, and Patrick in the relatively isolated Blue Ridge Province of the Appalachian region of the United States. 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 six rock-faced 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. The period of significance for the nomination is from 1919, the year of construction of Bluemont Presbyterian Church, to 1956, the year of Robert Childress's death.

Religious Patterns and Presbyterian Worship in the Appalachian Region, 1750–1950

The six rock-faced Presbyterian churches built by Robert W. Childress between 1919 and the early 1950s are located in Floyd, Carroll, and Patrick Counties of southwestern Virginia.¹ European-American settlement of the Blue Ridge began after the French and Indian War of the late 1750s and early 1760s. Mid- to late-eighteenth-century traffic on the Great Valley Road skirted the area now included in Floyd, Carroll, and Patrick Counties to the northwest, and Raitz and Ulack indicate that the population in the study area of the Childress rock churches did not attain a density of six persons per square mile until around 1800. The study area received Scotch-Irish settlement from the mid-Atlantic, and English settlement from the west Chesapeake Tidewater. The initial Scotch-Irish settlement tended to be Presbyterian, while English settlement might be Methodist or Episcopal. By 1800 American Methodism had begun to expand in the region at the expense of the Presbyterian Church, and Baptists gained strength on the Piedmont. Both Methodists and Baptists benefited from the religious revivals that began around 1800 and continued through most of the nineteenth century. The Presbyterians insisted on an educated ministry, and a shortage of trained ministers in remote settlements contributed to a decline in the practice of the Presbyterian faith. Raitz and Ulack conclude that by the early 1900s only 6 percent of recorded church population in central and southern Appalachia was Presbyterian; at that time Methodists made up 30 percent of church attendees; and Baptists constituted 40 percent of church membership. Raitz and Ulack found that by the mid-twentieth century Baptist Church membership predominated in Carroll and Patrick Counties, whereas no religious group totaled over 25 percent of church membership in Floyd County.²

Presbyterians in America adhered to a system of federated congregations whose presbyters or elders governed through the local church session, the larger presbytery, the regional synod, and, by the time of American independence, a national assembly. Religious historians Gaustad and Barlow conclude that “the combination made for a Presbyterian Church with a distinctly intellectual tenor . . . and a church tirelessly dedicated to higher education.” They note that on the eve of the Revolution there were at least thirty Presbyterian Churches in the Virginia Ridge and Valley Province just west of the Blue Ridge in Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge Counties,

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 2

and they posit that the great majority of these Presbyterians on the Virginia frontier were Patriots.³

Between the Revolution and the Civil War, Alice Felt Tyler in *Freedom's Ferment* comments that the revivals and religious awakenings in the early 1800s encouraged settlers west of the Blue Ridge to take advantage of every opportunity for community life and welcomed missionaries. Presbyterians were in a good position to assume responsibility for missionary work because they were already established in the Scotch-Irish settlements in the Ridge and Valley. Tyler concludes, as did Gaustad and Barlow, that the Presbyterian churches "insisted on an educated clergy, . . . endeavored to bring culture to the Western communities as rapidly as possible, . . . and considered missionary activity in the West a patriotic as well as a religious duty."⁴ Tyler observes that eventually Protestant sects west of the Blue Ridge seemed to succeed "in inverse ratio to their intellectual attainments and indirect ratio to their emotional appeal." Hence, after the Civil War, Appalachian Presbyterians lost strength to Methodists with their relatively uncomplicated creed and to Baptists with their independent church organization and tendency to splinter into numerous groups: Hard- and Soft-Shell Baptists, and Primitive and Free-Will Baptists.⁵

The Presbyterian Church in America divided over the issue of slavery during the Civil War, as had the Methodists and Baptists during the 1840s. After the Civil War Presbyterian Church factions reunited and national Presbyterian Church membership increased steadily from 700,000 in 1870 to 3,500,000 in 1950. These membership figures show Presbyterians to be far more numerous in 1950 than the other two principal denominations of the eighteenth century, the Congregationalists and the Episcopalians. National Presbyterian Church membership in 1950, however, was less than 30 percent of Methodist membership and less than 20 percent of Baptist membership.⁶

II. Precedents for Presbyterian Spiritual and Social Activism in the Appalachian Region, 1910–1950

John Edgerton in *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* recounts several instances of Presbyterian pastors or missionaries from the rural South whose modest family origins, subsequent education in Presbyterian seminaries, and socially active ministry in the Appalachian region parallel the career of Robert Childress. Aubrey Williams, raised in rural poverty outside of Birmingham, Alabama, received early education through the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. In 1911 Williams, in his twenties, studied for the Presbyterian ministry at Maryville College in Tennessee, even though he had only finished one year of formal schooling. In the 1920s he headed the Wisconsin Conference of Social Work before working in public relief assistance during the Hoover Depression years. During the New Deal administration of Roosevelt, Williams headed the federal relief effort in six southern states. Eugene Smothers, the son of a Kentucky sharecropper, received a Presbyterian seminary degree and became a missionary who in 1932 served four small county parishes in Cumberland County, Tennessee. Smothers went on to build a church, school, and community center in the model New Deal cooperative community of Big Lick in the Tennessee Appalachian region, before becoming a national leader of the United Presbyterian Church. Claude Williams, a Tennessee

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 3

sharecropper's son, became a teenage preacher in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the 1930s, served as a Presbyterian pastor in a west Arkansas church in the mid-1930s, and then headed Commonwealth, a radical labor college in Mena, Arkansas, until the school closed in 1940. Known thereafter as a Christian radical, Claude Williams parted company with the Presbyterian Church in the early 1950s.⁷

III. Robert Childress and the Rock Presbyterian Churches of Floyd, Carroll, and Patrick Counties, Virginia

In the sixty-five years between Robert Childress's birth in Patrick County, Virginia, and his death in 1956, he had received rudimentary education in The Hollow, Patrick County, attended a Methodist Revival around 1910, subsequently met a recent graduate from Presbyterian Seminary, and by 1920 decided to become a seminary-trained Presbyterian minister. During his student years in seminary, Childress established a Presbyterian church in Mayberry, Patrick County. Upon graduation from seminary in 1926 he began his Presbyterian missionary work at Buffalo Mountain, missionary work that he continued for thirty years while founding numerous churches and bringing his spiritual and socially active educational leadership to those who worshiped with him.

Richard C. Davids, in *The Man Who Moved a Mountain* (1970), tells the story of Robert W. Childress, "an overwhelming, magnetic kind of man," who established six rock Presbyterian churches in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains of Floyd, Carroll, and Patrick Counties from the 1919 to the early 1950s. The ministry of Bob Childress changed the lives of rural backcountry residents living in relative isolation in a mountainous no-man's-land along the borders of the three counties of Floyd, Patrick, and Carroll. When Bob Childress died in 1956, he left a spiritual legacy of changed and awakened lives and a material legacy of six rock Presbyterian churches: *Bluemont*, Patrick County, built 1919, rock-faced 1945-1946; *Mayberry*, Patrick County, built 1925, rock-faced 1948; *Buffalo Mountain*, Floyd and Carroll Counties, build of fieldstone in 1929; *Slate Mountain*, Floyd and Patrick Counties, built of fieldstone in 1932, expanded in 1951; *Dinwiddie*, Carroll County, built of fieldstone in 1948; and *Willis*, Floyd County, built of fieldstone in 1954. All six of the Childress rock churches are still places of worship. Bluemont, Mayberry, Buffalo Mountain, Slate Mountain, and Dinwiddie continue to hold Presbyterian services and retain strong ties to Bob Childress. In 1967 the Willis Church became Interfaith, then Full Gospel, and is now the home of Grace Baptist Church.⁸

Robert W. Childress was born January 19, 1890, the third from the youngest of nine children raised in one-room cabins. His father Babe came from Scotch-Irish ancestry and was of the third generation of Childresses to live in The Hollow in Patrick County. His "pure Irish" mother Lum experienced depression for a time after Bob's birth. Hard drinking and unschooled, the Childress parents loved their children and kept a clean home, but they never owned land and had to move frequently following evictions for arrears in rent. Fourteen years Bob's senior, Hasten as the oldest child assumed many responsibilities for raising the family.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

**Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document**

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 4

At the age of six Bob Childress began attending Friends Mission School taught by Sally Marshburn, who was sent to The Hollow by Quakers at Guildford College in North Carolina. He never missed school or Sunday school and studied with Miss Marshburn until she married and moved away when Bob was fourteen. Childress drank and fought for the next six years until he attended a weeklong Methodist revival, where he experienced, not revelation, but a new peace. The next year at twenty-one he attended eighth grade again at Friends Mission School until he married Pearl Ayers, a fellow student. After the birth of a son Conduff and a daughter Evelyn, he taught at Kimball elementary school and worked as a blacksmith until his wife Pearl died during the flu epidemic of World War I. At twenty-nine he became a Patrick County deputy sheriff for two years before he resumed blacksmithing and married Lelia Montgomery.

Following his second marriage, Bob Childress began attending "brush arbor" services, some of them headed by Roy Smith, who had recently graduated from Presbyterian Seminary. Childress and Smith became fast friends, and in 1920 at age thirty, now with four children, Childress decided to become an ordained Presbyterian minister. Bob's decision meant that he would have to attend and graduate from high school and college before attending seminary. It would take eleven years before he received his ordination as a minister. Bob crammed for entrance with Roy Smith and began high school at Friends Mission at the same time that his son Conduff entered first grade.⁹

At Friends Mission School Bob Childress advanced to tenth grade within a month and graduated from high school by the end of the school year in the spring of 1921. In June he received a letter of acceptance from Davidson College, and in September he and Lelia and the children moved to Davidson. A son Paul was born to them in November. The following spring of 1922 professors at Davidson recommended that Childress proceed directly to seminary. After a summer of lay preaching and teaching around Mayberry in Patrick County, Childress and Roy Smith approached Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. Union Theological refused to admit Childress to the seminary but allowed him to attend classes. That fall of 1922 Lelia gave birth to a third son, Bill Joe. After a semester Union Seminary recognized Childress as a student of high record and promise, offered him a scholarship and a rent-free house on campus, and gave him a \$100 scholarship each year for his remaining time in seminary. During the summer of 1923 after his first year in seminary Bob Childress and family returned to Mayberry. There he built a two-room school and resumed preaching. Childress and family spent the next two summers in Mayberry, where the Presbyterian church was completed in 1925. During the final year in seminary daughter Hattie was born in frail health. A few days before graduation from seminary in June 1926, Childress accepted an offer from Peter Cunningham Clark of Montgomery Presbytery to establish a place of worship at "The Buffalo" or Buffalo Mountain, Floyd County. Clark described Buffalo Mountain as a dangerous, isolated place where men drank and shot at each other and where people were uneducated, without schools or Sunday schools. Childress accepted Clark's challenge and moved to Buffalo Mountain in the late spring of 1926.¹⁰

Bob Childress and his family lived on Buffalo Mountain, where he preached for three years at the Presbyterian Buffalo Mission School founded in 1923 by Rev. Clark while Clark was superintendent of home missions for Montgomery Presbytery. When Childress led construction

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 5

of Buffalo Mountain Church, built in 1929 from local fieldstone, he established the mother church of his ministry. During the Depression he supervised fieldstone construction of Slate Mountain Church in 1932. After World War II, Childress directed rock-facing for Bluemont Church in 1946 and rock-facing for Mayberry Church in 1948. Under Childress's leadership Dinwiddie Church was constructed of fieldstone in 1948. Finally, Willis Church was built of fieldstone in 1954, two years before Childress died of complications from a stroke suffered in 1951.

During the remarkable thirty years of his ministry, Bob Childress provided education and spiritual and social leadership for people living in rural isolation in the Blue Ridge Mountains of the bordering Virginia counties of Floyd, Patrick, and Carroll. He helped feed and clothe the poor, comforted the indigent, and awakened lives. He helped secure improved transportation, such as roads and bridges financed by WPA funds during the Depression, used buses to bring people to church and Sunday school, and broadcast gospel music from loud speakers mounted on the towers of some of his rock-faced churches. Like "a wild horse in a field," with incredible energy he brought high spirits and awakened excitement to the lives of those he touched.¹¹

Presbyterian churches were established but not prominent in the Blue Ridge Mountain counties of Carroll, Floyd, and Patrick at the time that Bob Childress began his pastorate there in the mid-1920s. The first Presbyterian church in Floyd County was founded in the Town of Floyd in 1850. A second Presbyterian church was recorded in Floyd County land records in 1897, and a third in 1910. By 1921 trustees of Abingdon Presbytery had purchased land in Floyd County for a church school. By that date the Floyd County Index to Real Estate Conveyances listed four Presbyterian churches in the county, as opposed to eighteen Primitive Baptist churches.

Presbyterian churches in Carroll, Floyd, and Patrick Counties were variously administered by Abingdon Presbytery, Montgomery Presbytery, and Fincastle Presbytery. Childress's initial ties were with Abingdon Presbytery, presently housed in Wytheville, and Montgomery Presbytery, whose records now reside at the Peaks Presbytery in Lynchburg. The Abingdon Presbytery in 1925 reported inadequate facilities for Home Mission work, saying that "many fields have no workers and organized churches stand vacant." In 1933 the Abingdon Presbytery noted that churches in Bluemont and Dinwiddie subsequently served by Childress received the least funds from and paid the lowest dues to the presbytery, and that those churches stood in the presbytery's "most needy, most difficult, and most neglected field." Circuit Court deeds have not been located for all the Childress churches, and Randle Brim's recent research has turned to personal interviews with church members and to examination of original session minutes of the individual churches' records, which remain in possession of the individual congregations.¹²

The legacy of Bob Childress and his six rock-faced churches survives in the rural mountainous region of southwest Virginia half a century after his death in January 1956. Davids doubtless overemphasized the changes wrought by the Childress ministry in *The Man Who Moved a Mountain*. A 1974 article in the Patrick County Historical Society file for Mayberry Presbyterian Church quotes an old lady raised on The Buffalo as saying, "He [Richard Davids] writes like we

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 6

were all savages before Bob Childress came.” The New Deal, the Works Progress Administration, and better roads and schools sponsored throughout Virginia by the Harry Byrd machine did much to counteract the rural isolation that the ministry of Bob Childress constantly challenged while he built his rock-faced churches as the focus of faith-based communities and as rallying points for spiritual and educational outreach. But no political programs and machines could generate the personal energy and excitement of Childress’s ministry. As Davids frequently recounted, Childress used humor and compassion and remarkable energy to bring people into his church circle of positive expectations and loving care. As Brim concluded from his interviews of those who knew Bob Childress and have remembered him for half a century since his death, Childress was revered for bringing out the best in people. He brought women into active leadership in his church. He brought children into church services by bus, and he encouraged children to receive higher education. He welcomed people to services with church-steeple broadcasts of gospel music. He built his six rock-faced churches with the labor and socially active leadership of church members who founded their faith in his ministry.¹³

Endnotes

1. Karl Raitz and Richard Ulack, *Appalachia, A Regional Geography, Land, People, and Development* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), chapters 1 and 2.
2. *Ibid.*, chapters 3 and 4.
3. Edwin S. Gaustad and Philip L. Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38-41.
4. Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Civil War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), chapter 2.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Gaustad and Barlow, 131-138.
7. John Edgerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995): A. Williams, 100-101; E. Smothers, 125; C. Williams, 78, 157-158, 289, 567.
8. Richard C. Davids, *The Man Who Moved a Mountain* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970). Davids met Robert Childress in 1950 and subsequently interviewed him and his extended family and neighbors. The book has gone through twenty printings and has generated of its own folklore. It now provides the basis for a dramatization, *The Man Who Moved a Mountain*, authored by Joseph Maiolo and Thomas Isbell. Randle Brim has recently revisited the six Childress rock churches in a series of articles that appeared in *Simple Pleasures*, a publication of *Mount Airy News*, July-December 2004, and Brim has since authored other articles on Robert Childress in 2005 issues of *Simple Pleasures*; Brim’s most recent article in *Simple Pleasures*, July 2005, is a review of the Childress play written by Maiolo and Isbell. Brim has visited all six churches, has visited with descendants and neighbors of Robert Childress, and has interviewed current church elders and historians, including Stewart Childress, grandson of Robert and pastor of two of the churches. Brim has also researched session minutes for five of the six churches; he was unable to locate session minutes for Mayberry Church. Mr. Brim has been remarkably generous in sharing his extensive research and stands as the principal coauthor of this Statement of Historic Contexts.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 7

9. The narrative in this and the two preceding paragraphs comes from Davids, *The Man Who Moved a Mountain*, Chapters 1-4.

10. Davids, *The Man Who Moved a Mountain*, Chapter 5. Hattie was the seventh Childress child, the youngest of five boys and two girls.

11. Donald Nance, former archivist for Abingdon Presbytery in Wytheville, Virginia, called Buffalo Mountain the mother church; personal communication, August 2005. Randle Brim, historian of the Childress churches, reports that Childress broadcast gospel music played on 78-rpm records from Buffalo Mountain, Bluemont, Slate Mountain, Dinwiddie, and Willis churches; personal communication, September 2005. Richard Slate, elder of Dinwiddie Church and affiliated with Childress churches since 1947, likened Childress to “a wild horse in a field”; personal communication, September 2005.

12. Floyd County Circuit Court, Index to Real Estate Conveyance. Donald Nance explained the changing jurisdictions of Abingdon, Montgomery, Fincastle, and Peaks Presbyteries; personal communication, August 2005. Minutes of Abingdon Presbytery, 1925-1936, recorded the needy state of the Carroll County Presbyterian churches that would be served by Childress. Randle Brim has generously shared his original research in the session minutes of the Presbyterian churches of Buffalo Mountain, Slate Mountain, Bluemont, Dinwiddie, and Willis, personal communication, September 2005.

13. Newspaper clipping from the Mayberry Presbyterian Church file, Patrick County Historical Society, 1974 (no attribution for the name of the newspaper). It has been a privilege to work with Randle Brim on this documentation of the Childress Rock Churches. We met in April 2005 at the Stuart Public Library, and he immediately shared his enthusiasm and research on the project. When I reread his fine articles in *Simple Pleasures* in late August 2005 and asked him specific questions, he responded with concise documentation and the excitement of his discoveries from wide-ranging personal interviews and from careful research in session minutes of the individual churches. His full-time employment as a planner in North Carolina meant that he had to respond to my questions on his own time. His series of e-mails on Willis Church began at 9 p.m. on Thursday evening, September 8, 2005, and continued in rapid succession with informative observations and digital images of session minutes in eight transmittals until 1 a.m. Friday morning, September 9. Finally, on Saturday morning, September 10, 2005, he e-mailed a fully annotated transcript of his December 2004 *Simple Pleasures* article on Willis Church. He then followed with similar documentation on the other five churches he discussed in the *Simple Pleasures* articles he authored from July through November 2004. It has been an honor and a privilege to work with Randle Brim on this historic context.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 8

**Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document**

Acknowledgements

Valuable assistance with mapping and review was provided by Quatro Hubbard, Lindsay Graham, Marc Wagner and Jean McRae of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond office. Virginia Tech College of Architecture graduate intern, Michael F. Kennedy, assisted with measuring the buildings and created the 3-dimensional renderings of each church enclosed with the documentation. David E. Rotenizer was helpful in getting the process started and in obtaining permission to nominate from the church pastors and trustees. Richard Slate helped obtain permissions by encouraging the churches to let the nomination process take place, helped the surveyors gain access to the churches, and provided important information about the churches and Reverend Childress. Reverend Stephen Lackey, pastor of the Grace Baptist Church in Floyd County, also graciously provided information concerning the Willis Church, which is now in his care.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section F Page 9

F. Associated Property Types

Name of Property Type: Rock-faced Presbyterian Churches founded by Rev. Robert Childress

Description

There are only six rock-faced Presbyterian Churches founded by Rev. Robert Childress, two in each of the historically remote, mountainous southwestern Virginia counties of Carroll, Floyd, and Patrick. Buffalo Mountain and Dinwiddie churches are in Carroll County, Slate Mountain and Willis churches are in Floyd County, and Bluemont and Mayberry churches are in Patrick County. Collectively, the churches are unique in the region, due largely to their rock facing. All of the churches have similar facing of un-coursed and un-cut quartz and quartzite fieldstone, brought to the building sites by church members. Most, if not all of the churches have a number of clear, quartz crystal stones, some faceted by the quartz crystalline molecular structure, that were considered to be special contributions by those who provided them. In some cases the pointed, six-sided crystals are very large, measuring perhaps six or seven inches long and three or four inches in diameter. One of these can be seen near the front entrance of the Willis Church. Some non-faceted, rounded, clear quartz nodules are as large as eight inches in diameter. Two of these can be seen near the front entrance of the Slate Mountain Church. The light yellow-brown coloring of the majority of fieldstones, and the random manner in which they are laid gives the churches a distinctive natural, organic appearance that compliments, and is complimented by the pastoral surroundings. Although not especially detailed architecturally, the designs of the churches feature Gothic details, such as steeply-pitched roofs, parapet towers, arches, and stained-glass windows. Each of the six churches is different from the others in overall form and decorative detail. The Buffalo Mountain Church and Slate Mountain Church have the most stunningly detailed stained glass windows. At Slate Mountain, the stained glass design of each window is different, commemorating individuals for whom each window was privately sponsored. Each church has a different scale and footprint. The Dinwiddie and Buffalo Mountain churches, followed by Slate Mountain Church, are the largest and most elaborate, with transepts and more complex floor plans than the simple nave plan. They are also perhaps the most decorative, with round-arched and triangular-arched doors and windows of diverse sizes, and stout buttresses with cast concrete copings. The Bluemont, Mayberry, and Willis churches were constructed on a smaller scale, with rectilinear footprints lacking transepts and simple nave-plan interiors. Four of the churches have stone towers, constructed without framing. The towers are very much alike, with square footprints and moderate heights. The Mayberry Church is the only one to have a steeple and spire, which is made of wood, and like the Buffalo Mountain Church, is without a stone tower.

Church Interiors

The exteriors of the churches, with exception, demonstrate excellent historic integrity. In the case of Dinwiddie and Slate Mountain, additions have been made to the original structures, but because the additions are of an appropriate design and scale, and have compatible exterior treatments, they do little to detract from the original edifice. They are, however, clearly differentiated from the original sections and it is obvious in both cases that the additions came later. The church interiors are generally plain,

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section F Page 10

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

with few decorative treatments. Slate Mountain Church has a very narrow sanctuary and a peaked ceiling with exposed timber-frame trusses, and a balustrad choir loft or gallery at the front of the church, above the entrance vestibule. The interior of the Dinwiddie Church is quite similar to that of Slate Mountain Church, with peaked ceiling and exposed trusses of massive squared timbers, but the choir loft/gallery is at the opposite end of the church, behind the altar.

Dinwiddie Church is the only church that has unpainted knotty-pine boards on the walls and ceilings, rather than plaster or sheetrock. All of the churches except the Willis Church have what appear to be original light fixtures of single white-glass globes dangling from the ceilings. All of the churches have retained their original pews.

Contributing Secondary Resources

The Mayberry Church is the only one of the six that does not have a cemetery associated with it. The Willis Church has a cemetery that predates the church by several decades, and has the best examples of gravestone carving. Many of the gravestones are of 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. In the cases of the others, the cemeteries date to the same periods as the churches, and the gravestones are mostly of a more modern variety, made of polished granite. While the Willis and Slate Mountain cemeteries have no fence or enclosure of any kind, the others have impressive enclosures. Bluemont's is perhaps the most impressive, with a large number of closely-spaced, robust, ashlar masonry pillars and heavy, painted chains between them. Dinwiddie Cemetery's enclosure is similar to Bluemont's, but it has masonry pillars of fieldstone matching the church exterior, connected by two metal poles. The tops of the pillars are pyramidal. The Buffalo Mountain Cemetery has a continuous wall of mortared quartzitic fieldstones, matching the church exterior, with square pillars of the same materials at the corners and spaced intermediately along each wall. The surrounding landscape and the majestic Buffalo Mountain are viewed in spectacular fashion from the cemetery. The walls or enclosures surrounding the cemeteries are considered to be part of the cemeteries, rather than separate resources for the purposes of this nomination, but they are indeed important parts of each cemetery, and of each church's legacy. The Willis Church is itself surrounded by a fieldstone retaining wall, which has been identified as a separate, *contributing* resource in this nomination. The sole contributing outbuilding on any of the nominated parcels is a small stone springhouse on the grounds below Buffalo Mountain Church. Built during the same period as the church for use by its members and clergy, it is historically significant and therefore is also identified as a *contributing* resource in this nomination.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

**Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document**

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section F Page 11

Significance

The significance of the Rock-faced Presbyterian Churches founded by Rev. Robert Childress has a great deal to do with the design, construction, overall appearance, and integrity of the six churches. Because they were constructed mostly by Rev. Childress and church members rather than by professional builders, and because they are very unique in the region, and are remarkably well suited aesthetically to their environment, they are of considerable architectural significance and therefore eligible under Criterion C in the area of architecture at the regional level. The six churches are also significant for their embodiment of Appalachian patterns of Presbyterian religious worship and Presbyterian social activism in western Virginia. The churches 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, they are significant at the regional level under Criterion A in the areas of Religion and Social History. Their period of significance is from 1919, the year of its construction, to 1956, the year of Robert Childress's death.

Registration Requirements

Only the churches and their cemeteries associated with Reverend Robert Childress as part of his ministry during the first half of the twentieth century meet the registration requirements. The structures must be faced with local fieldstone.

Subtype

Outbuildings—in order to meet the registration requirements, outbuildings must be associated with the Childress churches and date to the same period as the church they are associated with. Like the churches, they must also be faced with fieldstone.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section G Page 12

**Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document**

G. Geographical Data

The Childress churches are situated about in the center of the Appalachian region in the physiographic province of the Blue Ridge, as identified by cultural geographers Karl Raitz and Richard Ulack. Bordered to the southeast by the Piedmont and to the northwest by the Ridge and Valley, the Blue Ridge Province extends in a narrow band southwest from south-central Pennsylvania for 550 miles to northeast Georgia and contains the highest mountains and most spectacular scenery in the Appalachian region. The Virginia counties of Carroll, Floyd, and Patrick however, occupy a broad section of the Blue Ridge Province called the Blue Ridge Plateau, which is characterized by steep hills but few large mountains that tower above the surrounding landscape. The churches are located within these relatively remote, rural counties of southwestern Virginia. As a group, they are arranged on somewhat of a circuit encompassing nearly 155 square miles. All of the churches lie at an elevation in excess of 2200 feet above sea level. The area is transversed by the Blue Ridge Parkway, created and maintained by the National Park Service. Its right-of-way comes within close proximity of three of the churches.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section H Page 13

**Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document**

H. Summary of Identification and Survey Methods

The importance of the “rock churches,” as they have become known, came to the attention of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources’ Roanoke Regional Office by around the turn of the millennium. Staff archaeologist, Tom Klatka, was among the first to take notice of not only the churches, but also the cemeteries. In 2003, at the urging of David Rotenizer, a Carroll County preservation advocate, DHR held a meeting at which the trustees of all the churches were informed about the state and national register programs. In 2004, after successfully earning the trustees’ support for a survey and multiple property nomination, Roanoke Region architectural historian, Michael Pulice, and graduate student intern, Michael Kennedy, began intensive documentation of each church property. Longtime Dinwiddie Church member Richard Slate accompanied Pulice and Kennedy to provide information and help gain access to the churches. At that time they received word that Randle Brim was researching and writing the individual histories of the churches and was nearing completion and publication. His articles were published during the latter half of 2004 and early 2005. In 2005, John Kern joined the effort to assemble all of Brim’s work into a cohesive body, with proper citations that would be appropriate for the register nomination. Kern interviewed Brim and Slate, and conducted additional research in order to solidify, further develop and complete and the historic context portion of the nomination.

Because there are only six rock churches associated with Reverend Childress, each of them well-known locally, identification of contributing properties was easily accomplished. Moreover, the churches are very similar to each other, but are quite unique among other houses of worship in the region.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section I Page 14

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section I Page 15

Rev. Robert Childress
Presbyterian Rock Churches
Multiple Property Document

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