

**PHASE 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS  
MOUNT ZION AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
189 HOLLOW ROAD, SKILLMAN, MONTGOMERY TOWNSHIP,  
SOMERSET COUNTY, NEW JERSEY  
DECEMBER 2020**

**A JOINT PROJECT OF**



**Stoutsburg-Sourland African-American Museum**



**Archaeological Society of New Jersey**

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## **SUMMARY**

As part of the design process for renovations to the 1899 Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church in Skillman, Somerset County, New Jersey, 12 shovel tests were excavated immediately east and north of the existing building on December 12, 2020. This location is proposed to be used for placement of a ramp to make the building accessible, and for a small eastern extension of the building to house new heating/cooling equipment.

The shovel testing recovered 243 artifacts dating from the late 1800's and 1900's, including window and vessel glass, nails and bricks, plain white ceramics, coal, and an iron padlock, sash lock and hinge. No evidence for was found for other activity on the site before the construction of the church in 1899. No American-Indian artifacts were found. No evidence of former structures was identified.

The investigations were a joint project of the Stoutsburg-Sourland African-American Museum and the Archaeological Society of New Jersey, and were run as a public program involving registered volunteers under professional archaeological supervision.

The work forms part of a wider archaeological and landscape study of the property on which the church is located. The property is jointly owned by the Stoutsburg-Sourland African-American Museum and the Sourland Conservancy.

The proposed construction will not adversely affect significant archaeological resources, but archaeological monitoring of ground disturbance will be undertaken to supplement these Phase I investigations.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

SSAAM is very grateful to the Archaeological Society of New Jersey for making this project possible. Under the leadership of President Michael Gall and Michelle Davenport the Society archaeologists both ensured that the work was carried out to professional standards, and shared their expertise and enthusiasm with our volunteers. It made for a memorable day.

Thanks also to Rick Smith and JP for sharing their metal detecting expertise.

To all the volunteers who got their hands dirty: thanks for taking part in this part of the search for SSAAM's history!

Ian Burrow thanks his fellow SSAAM enthusiasts, particularly Executive Director Caroline Katmann for tireless organizational work, and Bruce Daniels and Kevin Burkman for much help and encouragement. Cathe Burrow is thanked warmly for helping to lay out the test grid.

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5. Volunteers and Archaeological Society of New Jersey Members shovel testing 12/12/20.

## CONTEXT

The Mount Zion AME Church was built near the railroad station stop of Skillman in 1899 on land owned by Corinda and Spencer True. It replaced an earlier church, erected before 1850 and located on the summit ridge of Sourland Mountain about two miles north of the present site. This first church burned down around 1890. Both churches played an important role in the local African-American Community in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Buck and Mills 2018, Harshbarger and Fredrickson 2017). The building is now the headquarters of the Stoutsburg-Sourland African-American Museum, established in 2014. It is on the New Jersey State Register of Historic Places and has been formally nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

The Museum has completed initial stabilization measures on the structure, and has now developed plans for the restoration of the building and to make it accessible to the public as a museum. These plans include the addition of an Americans With Disabilities Act-compliant ramp and the construction of a small eastern extension to house new heating and cooling systems. There will also be some restoration of the front (west) porch, as well as interior and structural improvements to the standing structure.

It was appreciated at an early stage of planning that this restoration would require ground disturbance adjacent to the building. It was therefore decided to undertake a Phase I identification survey well in advance of construction. This survey had several objectives:

1. To provide a general overview of the soils in the vicinity of the building
2. To identify any archaeological resources predating the 1899 building (prehistoric or historic)
3. To identify features and artifacts relating to the construction and use of the church and the immediately adjacent areas.
4. To develop recommendations for treatment of archaeological resources affected by the proposed construction.

By a happy coincidence the Museum was contacted by the Archaeological Society of New Jersey (ASNJ) in the fall of 2020, and consequently the investigations were carried out as one of the ASNJ's public archaeology programs. The Society provided the pro-bono services of seven professional archaeologists, who were assisted by 32 volunteers and members of the SSAAM board. The project was completed in one day on December 12<sup>th</sup> 2020, and received extensive media coverage.

## ENVIRONMENTAL AND HISTORIC BACKGROUND

The church building lies at the southern foot of Sourland Mountain. It occupies a terrace landform between Hollow Road to the west and the Rock Brook to the east. The brook drains southwards from the higher ground of Sourland Mountain to the north and then turns east to empty into Beden's Brook, a tributary of the Millstone River.

The solid geology of the area is the Passaic Formation (also often called Brunswick Shale). This consists of reddish-brown shale, siltstone and mudstone. The soil is mapped as Abbotstown Silt Loam (<https://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/App/WebSoilSurvey.aspx>), with an expected channery (=containing thin, coarse flakes of stone) component beginning at a depth of about 20 inches.

There are a small number of pre-Contact American-Indian sites recorded in the vicinity. The New Jersey State Museum has limited information on two (28-So-162 and 28-So-150), both about one mile east of the church site, and there are also reports of artifacts from the Blawenburg area (Hopewell Museum). There were at least three "Indian Villages" on the southern foothills of Sourland mountain in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century (Hunter and Porter 1990 chapter 3).

European settlement of the Skillman area probably began in the early 1700's. Dendrochronological work at the Whidden House, a short distance northeast of the church, shows that the earliest section of that house dates to the 1830's (SSAAM files), and by 1850 there were several houses in the vicinity (Otley & Keily 1850). The upper parts of Rock Brook were used as a source of waterpower for rural industries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The church was built near the railroad station stop of Skillman in 1899-1902 on land owned by Corinda and Spencer True. It was placed on a "narrow trapezoidal parcel of approximately 65 feet x 205 feet (0.21 acres)" (Harshbarger and Fredrickson 2017).

## INVESTIGATIONS

Despite the COVID 19 pandemic, this outdoor project was able to proceed using social distancing protocols. Face masks were mandatory, only three tests were under excavation at any one time, and the number of volunteers was restricted. Work stints for volunteers were also restricted to about 30 minutes, both to allow as many people as possible to participate and to some extent to limit exposure.

Figures 2 through 5 show the location and numbering of the shovel tests and the work in progress. Tests were dug to depths ranging from 2.5 feet to 1.2 feet (root impasse, Test 20-1), with an average depth of about 2 feet (see shovel test logs). All soils were screened through ¼" steel mesh. In addition, several of the backdirt piles were scanned with a hand-held metal detector, which resulted in the recovery of several additional metal items

In the majority of the tests a sequence of A-1, A-2, B-1 and B-2 horizons were identified, suggesting a largely intact soil sequence. The great majority of the artifacts came from the A-1 horizon, with a few from the A-2 and none from the B-horizons. A total of 12 tests were completed out of 15 laid out.

## **ARTIFACTS**

The 243 artifacts recovered in the testing were washed and cataloged on July 24<sup>th</sup> 2021 by volunteers and members of the Archaeological Society of New Jersey. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the material. The artifacts are stored in labelled plastic bags and are organized by the context or soil level within each shovel test. There are a total of 15 bags. A copy of this report will be placed in the box containing the artifacts. This box will form part of the permanent collection of the SSAAM Museum.

Most of the artifacts found can be related to the construction and use of the church. The 57 brick fragments most probably come from the now-demolished stove chimney against the north wall of the church. There are 31 fragments of window glass and a total of 41 iron nails of types that would be in common use around 1900.

Three other items probably from the building comprise a large hinge, a window sash-lock, and a padlock.

Other items relate to activities inside and outside the church. A cluster of plastic communion cups speaks to the last years of the worshipping congregation. 25 fragments of ceramic include pieces from a bowl and teacups. These fragments are almost all from very common domestic wares of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries but do include six pieces of porcelain. Seven pieces of glass are from small bottles or table glasses. Five fragments from incandescent light bulbs were also found.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Soils adjacent to the church building contain artifacts illustrative of the use of the site in the period of significance for the church and more widely in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
2. No evidence of structural or other features was identified.
3. No evidence was identified for prior use of the site.
4. The impacts of the footings of the proposed ramp, the extension and any other ground disturbances necessary for the restoration of the building will be addressed through monitoring by a qualified archaeologist during construction. Procedures will be developed in consultation with the architect and contractor(s).
5. SSAAM and the Sourland Conservancy will be in receipt of a grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust to assist in the development of a Master Plan for the recently acquired property immediately to the north of the church lot, and for the church lot itself. The scope for this master plan includes an archaeological management plan. The plan will

incorporate the results of these investigations and establish protocols for the management of archaeological resources on the whole property.

## **PUBLIC OUTREACH: TEXT FOR SSAAM WEBSITE, DECEMBER 2020**

### **HISTORY GOING UNDERGROUND AT SSAAM**

On Saturday December 12<sup>th</sup> 2020, seven professional archaeologists and 32 volunteers made history at the Mount Zion AME Church. This was the very first archaeological investigation at the site, and was a joint project of SSAAM and Archaeological Society of New Jersey.

Archaeology is one of the tools we can use in our search for the stories, history and culture of African-Americans in the Sourland Region. The last few decades have seen the development of a distinct sub-discipline of the archaeology of African-Americans and of the great African enslavement “diaspora” of the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The lives of people of African descent, both slave and free, are often “invisible” in the historical (that is the written) record. Using archaeology to study the places where they lived, the things they used, and the things they valued, we can learn more about them in a different way. SSAAM is now part of that wider research.

One of the questions that people often ask about archaeology is “How do you know where to dig?” It’s a great conversation starter. Here at SSAAM we are developing plans for the next phase of the restoration of the 1899. These plans include the construction of a wheelchair-friendly ramp at the back of the church, and a small extension to accommodate new heating and cooling systems.

Of course, things like these need foundations, and foundations require digging into the ground. So SSAAM teamed up with the Archaeological Society of New Jersey to do pre-emptive archaeology to recover what might lie beneath the ground before construction starts next year.

We used the method called “shovel-testing”. This involves digging circular holes about one-foot in diameter down to about 2.5 feet into the soil. This is done very carefully, placing all the excavated material in mesh screens in order to recover any artifacts. Two of our volunteers used small metal detectors to scan the dirt piles to see if anything had been missed, and this technique recovered several additional small metal items. Artifacts from each of the different layers or strata of soil are kept separate, because knowing where they came from, their “context”, is a crucial part of the analytical process. The depth of 2.5 feet is determined by two things: one is that fact that, generally speaking, if we are going to find artifacts they will be from the top two feet or so. The second, practical, reason is that it gets very difficult to dig a hole more than 2.5 deep with just a shovel!

We completed 12 of these tests in the area of the new ramp and extension: enough to give us a good idea of what lies beneath the grass here. We found that there were generally four or five

distinct soil horizons in all the tests. These are all basically natural strata and from top to bottom, and are termed A1, A2, B1, B2 and C. They get progressively yellower and more clayey the deeper you dig. Most of the artifacts came from the top two strata.

So what did we find? We recovered about 250 artifacts dating from the late 1800's and 1900's. These have not yet been cleaned and identified, but include such things as window glass, nails and bricks, plain white ceramics, coal and even an iron padlock. What we did **not** find was any indication of activity on the site before the construction of the church in 1899, or any American-Indian artifacts. Both of these things were a possibility, so we were on the lookout for evidence of that kind.

What happens now? The artifacts will be cleaned up, identified and cataloged, and will become part of the SSAAM collection. When construction starts we will be on hand to recover any other artifacts which may be encountered. The technical details of the work will be presented in a written illustrated report, copies of which will be sent to local historical organizations, libraries, municipalities and to New Jersey Historic Preservation agencies.

Many thanks to all our volunteers, and to the professional archaeologists who donated their time and skills, in helping us learn more about our past!

Ian Burrow, Ph.D.

Board Member SSAAM, Registered Professional Archaeologist

## REFERENCES

Buck, Elaine, and Beverly Mills 2018. *If These Stones Could Talk*. Wild River Consulting & Publishing, LLC

Harshbarger, Patrick, and Erin Fredrickson 2017. Draft National Register of Historic Places Registration Form Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.

Hunter, Richard W. and Richard L. Porter. 1990 Hopewell: A Historical Geography. Titusville, N.J. Township of Hopewell, Historic Sites Committee.

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**Table 1. Mount Zion AME Church, Skillman. Montgomery Township, Somerset County, New Jersey 2020. Artifact Catalog**

Bag #	Test #	Context #	Material	Identification/Type	Quantity /Count	Comment	Discarded (D)
15	20-01	1	brick	architectural debris	27	red	
15	20-01	1	brick	architectural debris	1	red corner frag	
15	20-01	1	glass	flat/windowpane	1	pale aqua	
15	20-01	1	leather		1		(D)
15	20-01	1	rocks		10		(D)
15	20-01	1	styrofoam		1		(D)
1	20-02	1	brick	architectural debris	10	red	
1	20-02	1	glass	flat/windowpane	5	pale aqua	
1	20-02	1	ceramic	porcelain-vessel	3	hard paste undercoated	
1	20-02	1	ceramic	porcelain-vessel	1	hard paste embossed floral	
1	20-02	1	ceramic	porcelain-vessel	1	hard paste overglaze printed floral/green	
2	20-02	2	brick	architectural debris	3	red	
2	20-02	2	glass	flat/windowpane	1	pale aqua	
13	20-03	1	brick	architectural debris	7	dark red	
13	20-03	1	plastic	communion cups	5	clear	
13	20-03	1	ferrous metal	nail, indeterminate	3	indeterminate corroded	
13	20-03	1	ferrous metal	nail, wire	1	wire, clinched	
13	20-03	1	ferrous metal	nail, wire	1	wire, shaft frag	
6	20-04	1	brick	architectural debris	8	red	
6	20-04	1	glass	bottle/jar	1	clear body frag	
3	20-05	1	glass	flat/windowpane	3	pale aqua	
3	20-05	1	coal	fuel	1		
3	20-05	1	ceramic	whiteware	1	undercoated/crazing 1815-1940	
14	20-07	1	brick	architectural debris	1	stamped "...&YL"	
14	20-07	1	lime mortar	architectural debris	2	white frag	
14	20-07	1	mortar	architectural debris	2	pink frag	
14	20-07	1	slate	roofing/walkway	1		
14	20-07	1	ceramic	whiteware	2	vessel	
11	20-10	1	glass	curved	1	clear. Crazing	
11	20-10	1	glass	curved: bottle or vessel	2	clear	
11	20-10	1	glass	flat/windowpane	13	pale aqua	
11	20-10	1	wood	indeterminate	1	charred	
11	20-10	1	plastic		14		(D)
11	20-10	1	styrofoam		1		(D)
12	20-10	2	glass	curved, bottle or vessel	1	clear	
12	20-10	2	glass	flat/windowpane	7	pale aqua	

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Bag #	Test #	Context #	Material	Identification/Type	Quantity /Count	Comment	Discarded (D)
12	20-10	2	ferrous metal	indeterminate	1	rusted	
12	20-10	2	wood	indeterminate	1	charred	
12	20-10	2	ferrous metal	nail, machine-cut	1	machine cut	
5	20-12	1	brick	architectural debris	1	machine made. Red/orange	
5	20-12	1	brick/mortar	architectural debris	2	beige. Foundation	
5	20-12	1	ceramic	cream/whiteware	11	plate/saucer	
5	20-12	1	glass	curved, vessel	1	clear	
5	20-12	1	glass	flat/windowpane	4	light aqua	
5	20-12	1	coal	fuel	1		
5	20-12	1	ferrous metal	lock	1	complete rusted padlock	
5	20-12	1	ferrous metal	nail, indeterminate	22	indeterminate	
5	20-12	1	ferrous metal	nail, machine-cut	2	machine cut	
5	20-12	1	ferrous metal	nail, wire	1	wire rusted	
5	20-12	1	ferrous metal	nail, wire	3	wire-pulled roofing	
5	20-12	1	metal copper alloy	rivet	2		
5	20-12	1	plastic		1		(D)
4	20-13	1	brick	architectural debris	1	spall	
4	20-13	1	metal	bolt	1	frag head & threaded shaft	
4	20-13	1	stone	flake?	1	Gray. Slate? Appears non-cultural	
4	20-13	1	glass	flat/windowpane	1	pale aqua	
4	20-13	1	coal	fuel	1	frag	
4	20-13	1	metal	hardware: door	1	hinge rusted	
4	20-13	1	metal	hardware: window	1	bottom sash/lock	
4	20-13	1	metal	indeterminate	2	frags rusted	
4	20-13	1	styrofoam	indeterminate	2		(D)
4	20-13	1	glass	lighting	5	curved colorless	
4	20-13	1	metal	rod	1	rusted	
4	20-13	1	ceramic	stoneware	3	small pot	
4	20-13	1	ceramic	whiteware	2	teacup plain mend 1840-1870	
7	20-14	1	ferrous metal	nail, roofing	1	roof tack rusted	
8	20-14	2	glass	curved bottle/container	1	clear body frag	
8	20-14	2	ferrous metal	nail, machine-cut	1	machine cut	
8	20-14	2	ferrous metal	nail, wire	1	wire-pulled	
8	20-14	2	ferrous metal	nail, wire	2	wire-pulled	
9	20-15	1	glass	curved, vessel	1	clear	
9	20-15	1	coal	fuel	1		
9	20-15	1	ferrous metal	nail, wire	2	wire-pulled	

**Table 1. Mount Zion AME Church, Skillman. Montgomery Township, Somerset County, New Jersey 2020. Artifact Catalog**

Bag #	Test #	Context #	Material	Identification/Type	Quantity /Count	Comment	Discarded (D)
9	20-15	1	ferrous metal	nail, wire	1	wire-pulled, whole	
9	20-15	1	ceramic	porcelain	1	undecorated	
9	20-15	1	ferrous metal	screw	1	whole	
10	20-15	2	mortar	architectural debris	1	white w/grit	
10	20-15	2	coal	fuel	2		
10	20-15	2	coal ash	fuel	4		
10	20-15	2	rocks		2		(D)
				<b>Total</b>	<b>243</b>		

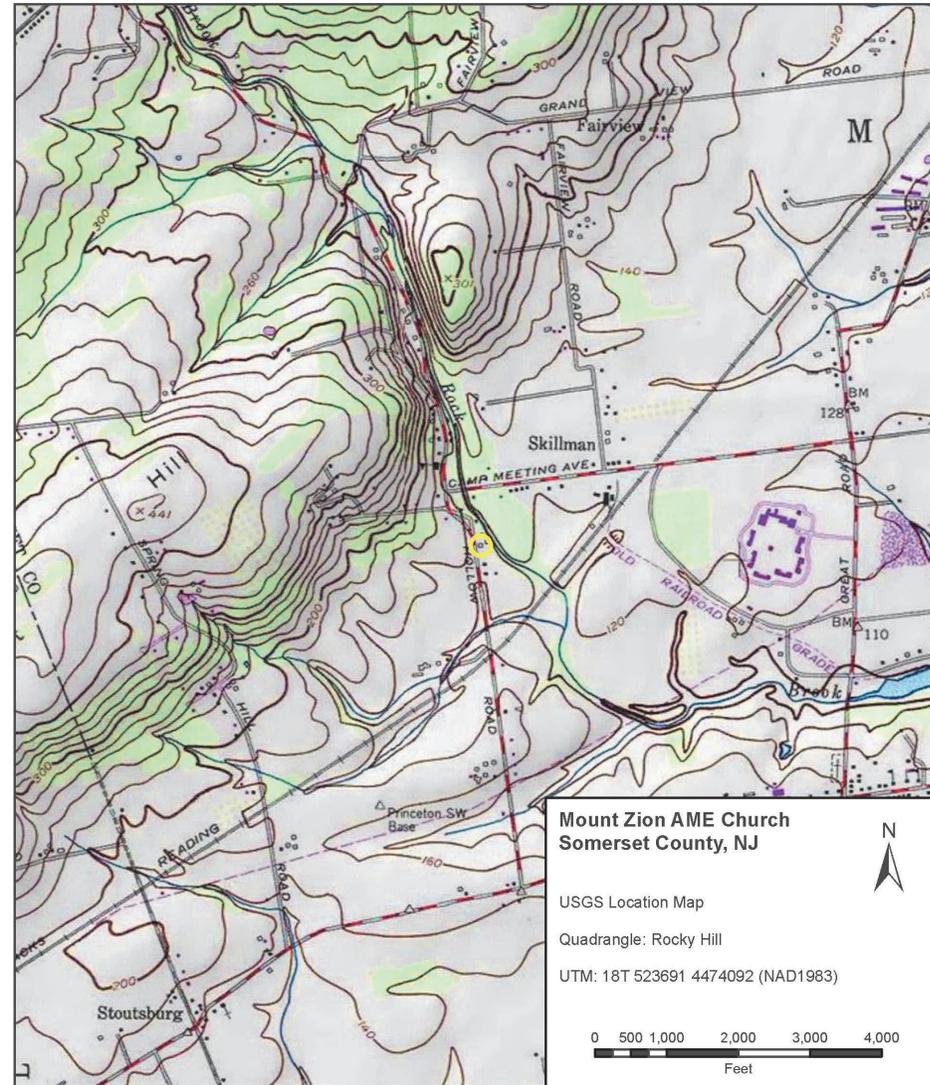


Figure 1: Location of Mount Zion AME Church (Yellow Circle) on Hollow Road, Skillman, Montgomery Twp. Somerset County NJ

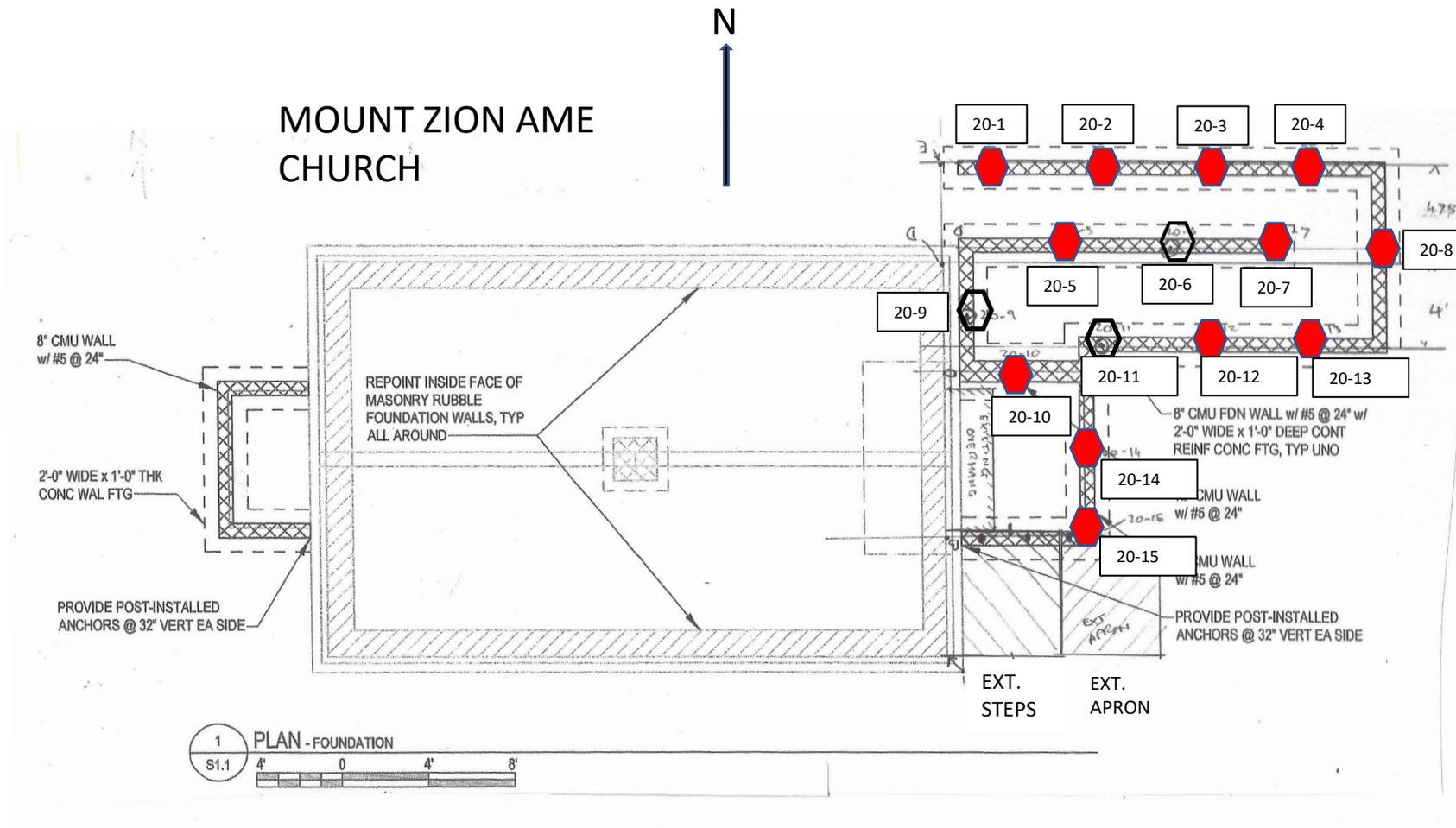


Figure 2: Completed (red) and planned (black outline) Shovel Tests 12/12/20 in relation to planned footings for ramp and east extension of building. Scale in feet. Base Map courtesy of Mills & Schnoering Architects.



Figure 3: Shovel Tests laid out 12/3/20. View facing SW. Photographer: Ian Burrow.



Figure 4. Volunteers and Archaeological Society of New Jersey Members shovel testing 12/12/20. Photographer: Ian Burrow



Figure 5. Volunteers and Archaeological Society of New Jersey Members shovel testing 12/12/20. Photographer: Ian Burrow