

**Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission**  
**P.O. Box 1014**  
**Nevada City, California 95959**  
**[info@nevadacountylandmarks.com](mailto:info@nevadacountylandmarks.com)**  
**530-274-7118**

15 April 2022

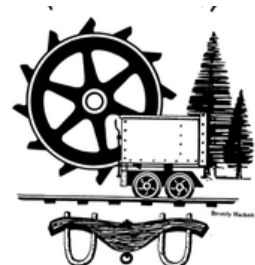
Nevada County Board of Supervisors  
950 Maidu Avenue  
Nevada City, CA 95959

Honorable Chair and Board Members:

At today's meeting of the Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission, the Commission voted unanimously to recommend to the Board that the application for landmark designation of the Nevada City African Methodist Episcopal Church Site, located at 549 N. Pine Street, be approved. The applicant is Edward Hicks, the property owner. The landmark is to be designated as Nevada County Historical Landmark NEV 22-02.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was erected in 1864 to serve Nevada City's black community. In addition to holding religious services, the church was a center for cultural, political and civil rights events. The church was used until 1894, after which a series of residential buildings occupied the site.

The applicant, assisted by Linda Jack of the Nevada County Historical Society, has provided a thorough and compelling level of research and documentation to accompany the application, which has been reviewed by the Commission for historical accuracy. The application and supporting documentation is enclosed.



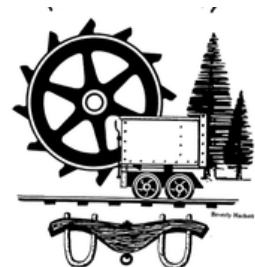
If you approve the application, please forward the resolution and accompanying documents to the County Recorder.

If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request.

Yours truly,

  
Bernard Zimmerman, Chair

Cc: Edward Hicks  
Linda Jack



**County of Nevada  
State of California**

**Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission  
Application for Registration of Historical Landmark**

**Name of proposed landmark:** The Nevada City African Methodist Episcopal Church Site

**Location:** 549 N. Pine St, Nevada City, CA 95949

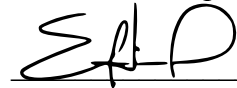
**Name of applicant:** Edward Hicks

**Address:** [REDACTED]

**Home or work phone:**

**Name and address of landowner upon whose property proposed landmark is located, if owner is not applicant:**

I authorize the placing of a plaque or marker on site.



Landowner's signature

2/14/2022

Date

**Brief history and description of proposed landmark:**

By the mid-1850s Nevada City was home to a number of African Americans who had come to California in search of gold. The community was composed of miners, restaurateurs, barbers, teachers, domestic workers and laborers. Initially, members of the community attended religious services at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Grass Valley that had been built in 1854. The community then built a church at this site which was used between 1864 and 1894. Since then, a series of residential buildings have occupied the site. The applicant is the present owner of the site.

**Unique aspects or properties of proposed landmark:**

The church served as the center of the religious, social and civic life of Nevada City's Gold Rush era community, many of whom lived near the church. See attached *Linda Jack, A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Nevada City*.

**How will the landmark be protected and maintained?**

The owner of the property will maintain the landmark.

**Bibliography Cite or attach available books, records, articles or other materials pertaining to the proposed landmark:**

**Books**


- Delilah L. Beasley. *The Negro trail blazers of California: a compilation of records from the California archives in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, in Berkeley; and from the diaries, old papers and conversations of old pioneers in the state of California*. Los Angeles, 1919, 153-54.
- Maria E. Brower, *Nevada City*, Arcadia Press, 2005, 56.

**Articles:**

- *1867 Nevada City Assessment Roll*, volume B, 3. (Searls Historical Library)
- *Linda Jack, A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Nevada City*
- Pierce, Bosquit Abstract & Title Co., *Abstract of Title to Lot 8 in Block 25 in the City of Nevada*.

**Other: (e.g. photographs, prints or drawings. Please list and attach separately)**

- H.S. Bradley, *Official Map of Nevada City*, 1869.
- Augustus Koch, *Bird's Eye View of Nevada City*, 1871
- *Agreement for Bilding (sic) A House*, between W.C. Groves and the Church elders. Available at the Searls Historical Library.

  
Applicant's signature

2/14/2022

Date

This completed form and all related documents shall be sent to the:

Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission

Attention: Chairman

P. O. Box 1014, Nevada City, Cal. 95959

An application must be considered solely on its historic or architectural merits and not for commercial gain, political benefits, or other non-historical reasons.

An individual Commissioner can advise and counsel an applicant, but all applications must be considered by the full Commission, meeting in regular session.

## A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Nevada City

By Linda K. Jack

February 2, 2022

By the mid-1850s Nevada City was home to a community of African Americans who had come to California in search of gold. The community included miners, restrauteurs, barbers, teachers, domestic workers, and laborers. Some members of the community attended religious services at the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in Grass Valley that had been built in 1854.<sup>1</sup>

By 1858 Nevada City's residents were able to attend an A.M.E. service locally when Reverend Robert Taylor led services at an unknown location.<sup>2</sup> In 1864 the community decided to build a church of its own. On May 9<sup>th</sup> William C. Groves signed an agreement to build a church on Lot 8, Block 25 on N. Pine St., which backed up to Oregon Ravine.<sup>3</sup> The church is shown on H.S. Bradley's *Official Map of Nevada City, 1869* and on Augustus Koch's *Bird's Eye View of Nevada City, 1871*. The lot is now numbered 549 N. Pine St.

In the 1860s much of downtown Nevada City was racially integrated. The Bradley map shows that many African Americans were property owners. Two members of the Booth family and Garret Cantine owned properties adjacent to the church. Nearby Samuel and Elijah Booth each owned property on E. Broad; the Godair family owned three lots near Pine and Cottage; John Hamilton and his wife Lucy owned a restaurant at the corner of Commercial and N. Pine; and Nat Ford and Henry Dorsey owned property on Main and Church respectively.<sup>4</sup>

The men who signed the agreement to build the church were D.D. (Dennis Drummond) Carter, Samuel Rodgers, Elijah Booth, John Hamilton, and James Jenkins. Groves's fee was \$227.50 payable when the roof was on, and the building half finished. An additional \$227.50 was payable when the building was completed. The Church elders agreed to supply all the necessary materials.<sup>5</sup>

A fundraising festival attended by Black and white residents was held on August 1, 1864. The church was dedicated on September 18<sup>th</sup> with Bishop T.M.D. (Thomas Mayer Decauter) Ward officiating. Ward had dedicated the Grass Valley A.M.E. Church a decade earlier. On the day of the dedication the collection plate gathered \$300 toward expenses. Regrettably, shortly thereafter the foundation of the church gave way during a storm. In March 1865 while workmen

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<sup>1</sup> Elijah Booth was also an elder of the Grass Valley's A.M.E. Church that had been built on S. Church St. in 1854.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Pat, "Nevada County's Black Pioneers," *Nevada County Historical Society Bulletin*, 39:20, July 1985, 3.

<sup>3</sup> The agreement is at the Searls Historical Library. It is entitled *W.C. Groves Agreement for Bilding (sic) A House*, MM91-E, but the text indicates that it is in fact for a church. For a transcript of the agreement see Ed Tyson, "Nevada City's African-American Church," *Nevada County Historical Society Bulletin*, 46:2, January 1992, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Official Map of Nevada City made by H.S. Bradley, 1869*. Block 25, Lot 8 is labeled "AME Church."

<sup>5</sup> Groves, W.C. *Agreement*

were excavating to put sills under the building it collapsed into a pile of rubble.<sup>6</sup> The church was later rebuilt with funds raised at a series of bazaars, dances and dinners that were supported by Black and white residents. By 1867 the church had established a “Sabbath School” with Oscar D. Montelle as superintendent. The school had two teachers, twenty-five students, and an impressive library of 180 volumes.<sup>7</sup>

The church operated until May 28, 1894, when on behalf of the A.M.E. Church, Trustee Elijah Booth sold the property to Edwin Tilley for \$480.00.<sup>8</sup> A series of residential buildings were constructed on the property over the years.

### *The A.M.E. Church*

The A.M.E. Church grew out of the Free African Society (FAS), a benevolent organization founded in Philadelphia in 1787. The Society provided mutual aid for “free Africans and their descendants.”<sup>9</sup> When white officials at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia pulled Black worshipers off their knees while praying, FAS members made plans to transform their mutual aid society into an “African” congregation, that would become the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>10</sup>

The denomination reached the Pacific Coast in the early 1850s. In addition to the Grass Valley Church, other Northern California churches were established in Sacramento, Stockton, San Francisco, San Jose, and Marysville during the 1850s.<sup>11</sup>

A.M.E. churches in Northern California were generally served by circuit-riding clergymen who performed marriages, christenings, burial services, and religious education.

### *Civil Rights*

One of the most important social roles of the A.M.E. Church in California was to be an institution of advocacy for civil rights in a highly politically charged period.

For African Americans the most important civil rights goals in the 1850-1870s were:

- To abolish slavery locally and nationally
- To secure voting rights for African American men
- To gain access to public accommodation and education
- To eliminate the ban on testimony of African American people in court

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<sup>6</sup> Bean, Edwin F. 1867. *History and directory of Nevada County, California; containing a complete history of the county, with sketches of the various towns and mining camps*. Nevada (City): Daily Gazette Book and Job Office, 1867, 192 and Jones, 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Bean, 106.

<sup>8</sup> *Morning Union* (Grass Valley), April 26, 1898, 6.

<sup>9</sup> The Official African Methodist Episcopal Church Website. Accessed on August 29, 2020, at <https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Newly arrived free Blacks in California organized the first of three Colored Citizens Conventions on November 20-22, 1855, at St. Andrews A.M.E. Church in Sacramento. One of the Nevada City church's founders, D.D. (Dennis Drummond) Carter, and residents Daniel Mahoney and George Duvall represented Nevada County.<sup>12</sup> Carter was Nevada City's most prominent Black civil rights activist. In anticipation of the forthcoming passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, in 1869 Carter organized a canvas of the towns and mining camps in the county to identify potential voters so that they were prepared to register to vote when the news of passage arrived. The list was published in the Black-owned San Francisco newspaper, the *Elevator*.<sup>13</sup> When D.D. Carter's wife, Jennie, read the long-awaited news of the Amendment's ratification she wrote to her editor, Philip A. Bell: "I have just read that Georgia ratified the Fifteenth Amendment. I can't keep still, no use trying. I have cried hurrah, hurrah, and our old gobbler responded every time. All alone no one to talk to, and ready to collapse, I was thankful for the turkey's attention. So, California can sit and weep that she cannot stay the tide of progress, and fifty years hence in history, won't the present Legislature and Governor of State appear to our people like long-eared horses?"<sup>14</sup>

Securing the right to vote also allowed Black men to participate in other civic activities. Church founder D.D. Carter made an unsuccessful run for marshal in 1873, and in 1874 John Hamilton was the first Black man to serve on a Grand Jury in Nevada County, possibly the first in California. The *Daily Transcript* characterized Hamilton's service this way: "All bear testimony to his gentlemanly deportment, his disposition to ferret out abuses, his intelligence and responsibility."<sup>15</sup>

### *Education*

In 1854, African American students in San Francisco became the first children segregated in California's public schools. Soon, however, state law prohibited "Negroes, Mongolians [Chinese and other Asians] and Indians" from attending public schools with white children anywhere in California.<sup>16</sup> Andrew Moulder, an early state superintendent of schools, stated: "The great mass of our citizens will not associate in terms of equality with these inferior races, nor will they consent that their children do so."<sup>17</sup>

Black parents pushed for equal access to education for their children. Many of Nevada County's African American pioneers had been enslaved and prohibited by law from learning to read or write. In 1860 a "colored school" was opened on Pine St. with Garret Cantine as teacher. His

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<sup>12</sup> *Proceedings of the First Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California*, November 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>, 1855, Sacramento, CA. Accessed January 11, 2022, at: <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/265>

<sup>13</sup> *Elevator*, November 12, 1869, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Elevator*, February 5, 1870, 2-3. Georgia ratified on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, but it was Iowa's vote the next day that pushed the amendment through.

<sup>15</sup> *San Francisco Examiner*, April 26, 1873, 1 and *Nevada Daily Transcript*, January 10, 1874, 5.

<sup>16</sup> California never included children of Mexican ancestry with blacks, Indians, and Asians in its state school segregation laws. Mexican American children only became a target of local segregation efforts after 1900 when their numbers grew rapidly in the schools.

<sup>17</sup> "BRIA 23 2 c Mendez v Westminster: Paving the Way to School Desegregation," Constitutional Rights Foundation, Bill of Rights in Action, Summer 2007 (Volume 23, No. 2). Accessed on August 29, 2020, at <https://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-23-2-c-mendez-v-westminster-paving-the-way-to-school-desegregation>.



daughter, Jessie, would also become a teacher there. In 1870 after the Washington School was built in Nevada City, a former school building adjacent to it was used for Black students.

In 1874 the California State Supreme Court confirmed that "separate but equal" public schools for minority students were legal. Nevada County's State Senator, Myles Poore O'Connor reflected local opinion when he was quoted as saying: "If there was only one child of color in his district, and it must be educated, he would favor building a house and sustaining a school for it alone before admitting it to a white school."<sup>18</sup> Segregation in Nevada City schools ended in 1876 when the school for Black children closed. The *Daily Transcript* reported: "Things go smooth enough and all complaints about the change ceased long ago."<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the state-wide expense of a separate education system for a relatively small number of African American children caused the state legislature finally to abolish "colored schools" in 1880.<sup>20</sup>

### *Social Life*

The church also played an important role in the social lives of its members and the larger community. Both the Grass Valley and Nevada City churches were known for their accomplished musicians. D.D. Carter was an especially talented musician and music teacher who, prior to leaving Philadelphia for California, had played in the band of Frances (Frank) Johnson, one of America's earliest Black composers and musicians. On a European tour the band played before the young princess who would become Queen Victoria. Carter led the Military Band of Nevada City and taught music to whites and Blacks.

The church was also a focal point for the members of the Lincoln Club, a social and political organization that sponsored festivals associated with important anniversaries important to Blacks. These would come to be called "festivals of freedom." Two of the most important anniversaries were the abolition of the Atlantic slave on January 6, 1808, and Great Britain's emancipation of the slaves in the West Indies on August 1, 1834. Both anniversaries were observed in Nevada County. On August 1, 1862, the community celebrated not only the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies, but also the abolishment of slavery in the District of Columbia that had gone into effect on April 16, 1862. The picnic was held at the Sutton Ranch near the Glenbrook racetrack and was so well attended that the participants tied up all the available rigs from the local livery stables.<sup>21</sup> Events such as the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation were added to the festival calendar over time. The one festival still celebrated today in at least 45 states is Juneteenth, which is an annual observance on June 19th to remember when Union soldiers enforced the Emancipation Proclamation and freed all remaining slaves in Texas on that date in 1865.

The Church was also the site for fundraising for events in the wider community, literary readings, and concerts. Following church services and social events the restaurant of church elder John H. Hamilton on Commercial Street was a regular site for the celebrations to continue.

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<sup>18</sup> Carter, Jennie. *Elevator*, February 11, 1870, 2-3.

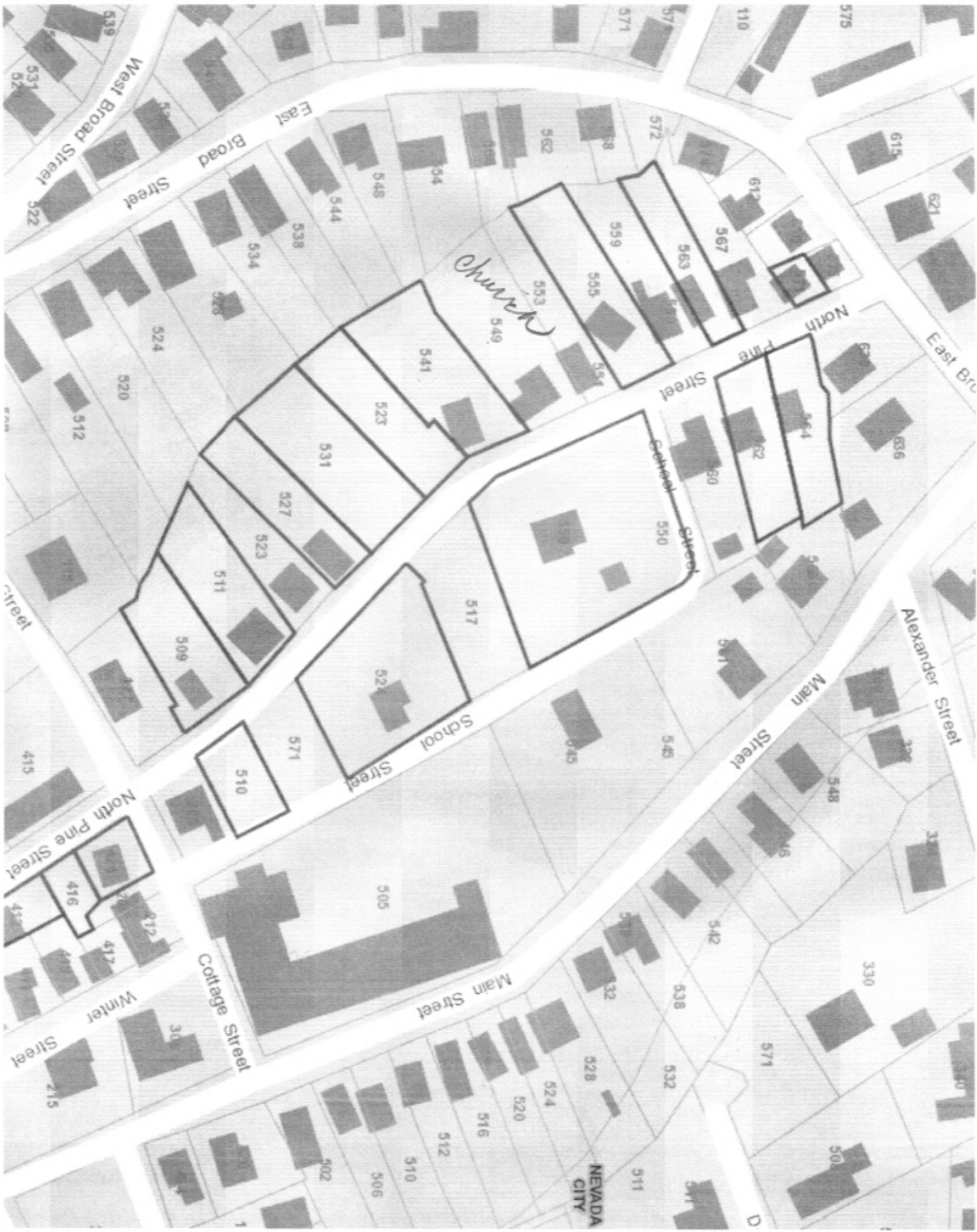
<sup>19</sup> Jones, 22.

<sup>20</sup> "BRIA 23 2 c Mendez v Westminster.

<sup>21</sup> David Allan Comstock, *Greenback and Copperheads: The Nevada County Chronicles, 1858-1969*. Grass Valley: 1995, 196.

1869 Bradley map







Koch, Bird's Eye View-NC AME Church

