

**Matthews Chapel Presbyterian Church**  
**624 Matthews Chapel Road, Matthews NC**  
**PIN 21502101**

The history of Matthews Chapel Presbyterian Church is intimately tied to the history of Murkland Presbyterian Church, a former HLC-designated local historic landmark destroyed by arson in 1996. Because of that fire, the now-abandoned Matthews Chapel Presbyterian Church, built in 1952, is the oldest remaining building associated with a congregation comprised primarily of formerly enslaved people that was founded in or about 1865 by the “Negro Catawba Presbytery,” the first all-black Presbytery in the Presbyterian Church of the USA.

Murkland Presbyterian was one of four area churches organized for African-Americans by Samuel C. Alexander, Willis L. Miller, and Sidney S. Murkland (the first pastor and ultimately the namesake of the church). Those three white ministers were dismissed from the Southern Presbyterian Church because of their defiance of the SPC’s instructions to stop ministering to the local black population. Upon leaving the Southern Presbyterian Church, the three men created the inaugural “Negro Catawba Presbytery” for the Northern Presbyterian Church in 1866, and went on to help establish the Biddle Memorial Institute which later became Johnson C. Smith University. Most of the members of Murkland Presbyterian were former slaves and freedpeople, and many of those congregants lived in Tank Town, one of North Carolina’s oldest African-American communities located on the outskirts of Matthews, some six miles away from the Murkland church building, which was located on Old Providence Road. Because of that distance, and the lack of transportation, the Catawba Presbytery organized the Matthews Chapel Presbyterian Church in 1876 to accommodate the needs of those Matthews-area residents.

The remaining Matthews Chapel Presbyterian Church building, which was the church’s second sanctuary, was constructed in 1952 on the same property as the church’s original building. Additional research would be needed to determine when the original building was completed and what became of it, but county records show that the property was first purchased as a 2-acre parcel by Moses and Aaron Stitt and Harvey Downs as the trustees of the local Presbyterian Religious Society in August 1879 for \$70. The property was part of the 143 acres purchased in 1857 by Dr. J. S. Gribble in and around Matthews that came to be known as Tank Town when Carolina Central Railway laid its tracks across Dr. Gribble’s property in 1874. We can assume that the original Matthews Chapel church building was completed between that 1879 acquisition date and 1885, when the trustees of the Matthews Chapel Presbyterian Church borrowed \$250 from the Board of the Church Erection Fund of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the USA to improve their facilities. The indenture reflecting that loan references the acquired property as the land “upon which the colored Presbyterian Church now stands.”

Additional research would be needed to determine the role of Matthews Chapel Presbyterian Church in the daily life of the Tank Town community, but according to the census records of the Catawba Presbytery, the Matthews Chapel congregation ranged from 39 to 42 members during the 30-year period between 1930 and 1960. Because of its small size and apparently declining membership, the decision was made in 1969 to merge the Matthews Chapel congregation back into the Murkland church to form the Matthews Murkland United Presbyterian Church, later renamed the Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church. In 1986, the former Matthews Chapel

church building was renovated and converted into a community center for the residents of Crestdale, the new name for the Tank Town community that came into general acceptance in the 1960s following the county school system's 1963 re-naming of the Matthews Colored School to Crestdale. It is unclear when the Crestdale Community Center ceased operations, but the church did sell the building and associated property to a local private owner in October 2017.

This past summer, the town of Matthews opened a Heritage Trail that focuses on the historic Crestdale community. Starting at the rear of the Town Hall and Library, the trail continues for 1.5 miles through Crestdale – emphasizing several significant sites and aspects of the community with historic signage, including the former Matthews Chapel Presbyterian Church building – and connects to the Four Mile Creek Greenway at John Street.

- Tommy Warlick  
October 19, 2021

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