Statement of Significance

The Mt. Olive Colored School is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its importance as a locus of rural African American education in Delaware and Criterion C as an example of the 1920s Colonial Revival schools designed specifically for Delaware by nationally-renowned school architect James Oscar Betelle. The period of significance for the resource extends from its initial construction in ca. 1923 to 1954. This period of significance encompasses the time in which the resource operated as a two-room colored school house and extends to 50 years from the present.

Under Criterion A, in the areas of education and African-American heritage, Mt. Olive represents the post-World War I movement organized and financed by Pierre Samuel du Pont to reorganize Delaware's segregated educational system and to rebuild Delaware's schools. During the 1920s, schools for Caucasian children were consolidated to serve larger geographical areas with more grades under one roof while those for African-American and Native American students remained small (usually one or two room), local, and limited to the elementary grades. While no serious consideration was given to integration, this segregated scheme was intended to improve access to educational opportunities for students of color by minimizing the economic impact of their school attendance. Particularly in Kent County, African-American children worked in farm fields, orchards, and canneries. Significant disruption of that workforce would have caused financial hardship for the children's families and met with the disapprobation of Caucasian employers, who saw little need for the education of African Americans in any case.

Under Criterion C in the area of architecture, Mt. Olive School represents one of the types of schools designed for Delaware by noted school architect James Oscar Betelle of Guilbert and Betelle, Newark, New Jersey and Columbia University Teachers College. While significant elements of its design—e.g., banked nine-over-nine awning windows, wood-shingle siding, a deep cornice with gable returns, a pedimented portico, and other Colonial Revival details—were common to Betelle schools for Caucasian students as well as those of color, the particular combination of plan, elevation, and detail at Mt. Olive is found only in schools for African-American and Native American students. There have been some changes to the building including replacement windows and siding on portions of the façade and the east side (rear elevation); however, these changes do not sufficiently detract from the integrity of design and materials to affect the significance of the resource. While there is archival evidence of more than two dozen schools like Mt. Olive across Delaware's three counties, it is not yet clear how many are extant and in what condition. The State Historic Preservation Office is currently undertaking a survey of all du Pont schools, and the findings of that investigation will shed more light on how Mt. Olive compares to its contemporaries. Even if others of the same design survive intact, Mt. Olive Colored School is significant for the role it played within its local community.

Mt. Olive School also represents the only known tangible element from a rural African American rural or "settlement" community in Little Heaven. African American settlements as defined in *African American Settlement Patterns on the Upper Peninsula Zone of Delaware 1730-1940+/-: Historic Context* (Skelcher 1995) typically include, at minimum, institutions such as a church and a school building, and residential buildings. An African American church – the Mt. Olive A.M.E. -- is located nearby to the east, but the building has been highly altered and there are no recognizable African American residential buildings in the vicinity. Furthermore, the church and school are now physically isolated from one another. As a community institution, the Mt. Olive School is the last surviving property associated with the Little Heaven African American Settlement with sufficient integrity to qualify for listing.

History

In the Antebellum period, one demographic characteristic set Kent County apart from both the other counties in Delaware and the rest of the United States. The 1860 census, the last taken before passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, enumerated 7,721 free African Americans living in Kent County. This accounted for over 26 percent of the total population of the county at a time when free African Americans made up approximately 15 percent of Delaware's population and only 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population (University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center 1998). No other county in the nation boasted such a high percentage of free African Americans. While slavery did exist in all three Delaware counties, census takers counted only 203 slaves in Kent County in 1860. One of the key reasons for the relative absence of slavery was economic. Rather poor or poorly drained soil combined with a comparatively short growing season prevented the development of the kind of single-crop, labor-intensive economic system which made slavery economically viable elsewhere. Therefore, in Kent County, farmers and other employers found it more cost-effective to hire African-American workers on a seasonal basis.

Political factors may also have induced free African Americans to settle or remain in Kent County. The laws, regulations, and social customs of the state reflected both the need for "Negro labor" and a firm belief in the dogma of white superiority. This resulted in an ambivalent record of race relations in the state. Delaware became the first slave state to abolish the domestic slave trade, and the Delaware courts developed a doctrine that presumed persons of color free unless proved otherwise. It was the only slave state to implement such a policy. However, Delaware also passed Jim Crow laws very early—prior to the Civil War—and African Americans could neither vote nor hold political office (Hoffecker 1977: 90-96). After the Civil War, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution were soundly rejected in the State Legislature; Delaware did not ratify them until early in the twentieth century.

Despite severe racial discrimination, a significant number of African Americans resided in Kent County throughout the nineteenth century. During the first half of the twentieth century, however, the percentage of African Americans in Kent County dropped to 18 percent of the total population. While there was a small decline in the absolute number of African American residents, the percentage decrease is largely attributable to an increase in the number of whites moving into Kent County. African Americans, who numbered 7,745 in 1900, dropped to 6,859 by 1950, while the number of Caucasian increased nearly 6,000 in that same period (U.S. Historical Census Browser, 1999).

The racial discrimination ubiquitous in every aspect of Delaware society extended to an already poor public education system. During the early years of the republic, few educational opportunities existed for residents of Kent County, Caucasian or African American. Delaware provided very little support for public schools until 1829 when the state legislature passed a free school act. The act provided for the formation of school districts that could receive state money for public education (Bevan 1929: 667-669). The state, however, in spite of collecting tax dollars from all residents regardless of color, provided education to whites only and did not fund schools for black children. As a result, the education of African-American children—when there was any at all—was the work of philanthropic or religious organizations. Prior to the Civil War, only seven schools dedicated to the education of African Americans existed in Delaware. The Society of Friends organized all but one of these schools (Skelcher 1999: 3). During the post-Civil War era, the Democratic Party, referred to by many as "the White Man's Party", dominated Delaware politics. Democrats firmly opposed anything that smacked of Reconstruction (to which this slave-holding Union state was not subject) and any measure that provided for the

public education of African Americans. Religious groups, such as the Methodists and the Quakers, fervently believed that education provided the best hope for African Americans and fought for educational and racial equality throughout this period. In the face of fierce Democratic opposition, most religious leaders concluded that African American education could only come from philanthropic sources (Skelcher 1999:6-9).

With this political reality in mind, Methodist and Quakers met at the Wilmington Institute Free Library in December of 1866 to form an educational system for African Americans (Skelcher 1999: 6-7). This conference resulted in the formation of the Delaware Association for the Moral Improvement and Education of the Colored People. The Delaware Association collected private donations and secured funds from the federal government's recently established Freedman's Bureau. They used this capital to establish schools for African Americans throughout the state. The Delaware Association hired and contributed toward the salaries of the schools' northern-educated, African American teachers, but it often fell to local communities to provide housing. From 1867 to 1876, the Delaware Association established 32 schools throughout the state that, at their height, enrolled 1,200 students (Hoffecker 1977:107-108).

The Delaware Association, private donations, constant fundraising by African Americans, and support from local churches all played significant roles in providing for the education of African American children during this period. By the close of the nineteenth century, there were over 80 African-American schools in Delaware (Skelcher 1999:35), and though their existence was a tribute to the dedication of the African American community and the philanthropists who supported their efforts, the schools were still extremely small in most cases and grossly underfunded in all cases. During the 1890s, Delaware took measures to organize African American schools under state control. The ratification of a new state constitution in 1897 merged the organization of the still-segregated schools and codified comprehensive Jim Crow laws across Delaware (Skelcher 1999: 56). While the new constitution did provide state funding for the education of African American children, it also institutionalized the "Separate but Equal" doctrine—which was, of course, the former but never the latter. "Colored Schools" were funded by the tax receipts of African-American men whose disadvantaged economic status insured that the schools would be destitute. In spite of some progress in the establishment of schools and the 1892 founding of Delaware State College for Colored Students as a Morrill Land-Grant College, educational opportunities for African Americans remained severely limited compared to the opportunities offered to whites, and those too were undeniably inferior.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, while other areas of the country sought to reform and expand schools, the quality of public education in Delaware deteriorated even further for both African-American and Caucasian students. Delaware was the last state in the union to provide higher education for women, so the pool of trained teachers was inadequate, as were funding, facilities, equipment, and supplies across the board. Despite the ascent of the Republican party, the Democratic legislators who had long adamantly—and, for decades, successfully—opposed higher education for women, were also able to block any educational initiatives that diminished local control or increased expenditures because imbalanced apportionment and Republican infighting gave the obstructionists disproportionate voting power in the State Legislature. While they had fought and won the battle for college education of Caucasian women, even more liberal-leaning legislators were not inclined to risk their political careers for the seemingly hopeless cause of "colored schools", so while legislators quarreled, funding stagnated and education declined steadily.

In 1917, the U.S. Bureau of Education published a report that ranked Delaware as thirty-ninth of the 48 states in public support for education. The publication of this report prompted many Delawareans, most notably Pierre S.

du Pont, President of the du Pont Company and Chairman of General Motors, to organize and fund the Service Citizens of Delaware. This organization, like many others of the time, was born not just of philanthropic impulses but of the xenophobia of World War I and the contemporaneous Red Scare as well as the fear induced by the subsequent influenza pandemic. The Service Citizens' initial goal was to modify the educational system to facilitate the "Americanization" of immigrants, but the group soon found that the task at hand entailed not just adding civics and hygiene courses to existing school curricula but building, staffing, and supplying an entire school system essentially from scratch.

In 1919, the Service Citizens of Delaware scored their first major political victory with the passage of a new School Code. This measure equally distributed (still desperately inadequate) state funds for schools, established uniform tax rates, made school attendance compulsory for children under the age of 14, and provided school transportation to Caucasian children in rural areas. School districts however, did not have to raise property taxes in order to pay for education. In Kent County, many public officials had opposed the Code's enactment, and they often did as little as possible to implement it while awaiting what they wrongly expected to be its speedy repeal. As a result, funding for schools in lower income areas remained low and attendance was correspondingly poor (Skelcher 1999: 63-65). Increasingly frustrated with the lack of government initiative to improve schools, especially those for African Americans, du Pont decided to take action.

Also in 1919, du Pont resigned his key business positions and assumed the Vice Presidency of the Delaware State Board of Education. He promptly convinced the Board to conduct an investigation of the current conditions of state schools and consider ways in which they could be improved. This investigation, conducted by a team of researchers from Columbia University Teachers College looked at all schools in Delaware, Caucasian and "colored", and though it found almost nothing to be proud of, it revealed that conditions in African American institutions were particularly appalling. In response to the report, du Pont founded the Delaware State Auxiliary Association (DSAA), created a trust fund for its work, and provided $2 million to begin construction of separate schools for African-American and Caucasian children. Ultimately, du Pont would give $6 million to public education in Delaware and effectively build the state's entire school plan; such a gift remains unique in the history of the United States (Taggert 1988: 15-18).

Not only Progressive ideals—belated though they may have been in coming to Delaware—inspired du Pont's construction of schools for African Americans before those for Caucasian children. His original plan was to build no more than a few model Caucasian schools in the naïve hope that those who could afford to pay would see the wisdom of building their own schools, but he was surprised by white Delawarean's shortsighted intransigence. Though he encouraged racial animosity with the tactic, he had hoped to shame whites into building their own schools by building "colored schools" that were better than the old ones their children attended (Taggert 1988: 130-31). Recognizing that not a single acceptable school for African-American children existed in the state, du Pont believed that all necessary schools for children of color could be built within his budget and within a relatively short time, thus making Delaware's "colored" schools the perfect experimental prototype (NR94001032: 8:5). African Americans were exceptionally grateful for the exceptional gift he bestowed upon them—each school building consciously designed not only to be the most commodious instructional space but a community center as well.

Under du Pont's leadership, Caucasian schools districts were consolidated so that more children in more grades from wider geographical areas could benefit from the broader curricula of larger schools. Those for African-American and Native American students, on the other hand, remained small (usually one- or two-

rooms), local, and limited to the elementary grades. While no serious consideration was given to integration, this segregated scheme was intended to improve access to educational opportunities for students of color by minimizing the economic impact of their school attendance. Particularly in Kent County, African-American children worked in farm fields, orchards, and canneries. Significant disruption of that workforce would have caused financial hardship for the children's families and met with the disapprobation of white employers and legislators who saw little need for the education of African Americans under any circumstances.

Once he had somewhat reluctantly dedicated his considerable energies to the cause of public education in Delaware, du Pont took the same approach to solving its problems that he took to business. After organizing activist groups with corporate-style boards and management structures, assessing the situation, and providing the necessary financial means to begin work, he sought out the country's top school architects to design the best, most progressive new schools. That search led him to James O. Betelle of the Newark, New Jersey architectural firm of Guilbert and Betelle and the faculty of Columbia University Teachers College. Betelle was a consultant to state school boards in New Jersey and California, and after serving on a Columbia survey team in Delaware wrote a two-part article for *The American Architect* on du Pont's proposed school building program in Delaware. Betelle had also lived in Delaware Betelle was very sensitive to the context of his designs and devised school buildings for his former home in the well-known and popular domestic Colonial Revival style to provide a comfortingly familiar appearance and impart a home-like atmosphere for learning. At the same time, he incorporated the most up-to-date thinking on all practical areas of the buildings including classroom arrangement, lighting, ventilation, heating, and sanitation. Though the cost of carrying out his original plans proved prohibitive, many of his key ideas survived in the construction of both "colored" and Caucasian schools (Skelcher 1999: 72-99).

Betelle had thought carefully about the best possible designs for "the small rural school", which he described as "not as simple a problem as it might at first glance seem", and which in Delaware meant almost all of the "Colored" schools and only a few "white" schools (Betelle 1920: 759). He observed that, "The architecture of small rural schools throughout the United States has undoubtedly been very much neglected. These buildings, with but few exceptions, are unattractive and without elements of good taste or good architecture" (Betelle 1920: 758). Of course, he aimed to rectify this situation in Delaware and thereby set an example for the rest of the country. In 1920, when he published the articles in *The American Architect*, Betelle had not yet given up on the idea of a full basement play area and two comparatively small extra rooms on the main floor in two-room schools like Mt. Olive, one a "lunch room" in which girls could also study "household arts", and the other a community library and boys' "industrial arts" room. He proposed that these specialized classes could be taught by itinerant teachers who would travel from school to school in specially equipped automobiles. He also suggested that another car outfitted with a movie projector and reels (and generating the necessary electricity to operate the projector) could bring "the world's news and some wholesome entertainment into the midst of a district that would otherwise be neglected" (Betelle 1920: 764). In the second of the two articles, he made the case for building "teacherages" adjacent to schools to house the single women who would staff them most suitably. While the head of the DSAA, Joseph Odell, denounced these ideas as impractical, Betelle's overall scheme was judged sound and implemented, as modified, across the state.

Mt. Olive was erected sometime between 1922 and 1923. This time frame is deduced from Skelcher's research (which was derived from the P.S. du Pont Papers) and from a historic photograph of the building. Mt. Olive was one of some 26 African-American schools that were built in Kent County between 1922-1925 (Skelcher 1999:102). The State Board of Education Photograph Collection has a photograph of the completed Mt. Olive

Colored School taken on February 15, 1923.

In 1920, Betelle compromised on heating and plumbing in the name of pragmatism. He wrote, "It was desired in the new Delaware schools to make some advances in the design of the school buildings and at the same time keep down maintenance costs. The money [from du Pont] would not be expended to the best advantage if a school building containing all city conveniences was presented to a community, the maintenance of which would always be a heavy burden of expense" (Betelle, 1920: 758). Therefore, his specifications called for indoor chemical toilets (still an improvement over outhouses), an indoor hand pump for drinking water to avoid freezing pipes when the school could not be heated (again, an improvement over an outdoor pump or none at all), and more economical stoves instead of warmer furnaces. These were likely part of the original equipment at Mt. Olive, and were probably not upgraded until after World War II. A 1941 insurance evaluation does not describe the plumbing but indicates that Mt. Olive was still heated by "drum stoves" although it then had electric lights, probably installed under the auspices of the Rural Electrification Administration (http://www.state.de.us/sos/dpa/exhibits/document/schoolval/358.shtml).

By 1928, the Auxiliary Association had completed eighty-nine schools for African American children at a cost of nearly $2.2 million. These new schools improved the education of African American children in Delaware dramatically. State funding for African American students, thanks in large part to the appointment of Pierre du Pont, who was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine for his efforts, as State Tax Commissioner, equaled that of white students. While significantly improved, African Americans still did not have the same access to education that their white counterparts did. Segregation limited opportunities for African Americans desiring a secondary or post-secondary education. The State College for Colored Students in Dover remained the only institution of higher learning for African Americans until 1948, when the University of Delaware opened a few of its programs to black students. The *Brown v Board of Education, Topeka* ended legal segregation in 1954, but the U.S. Civil Rights Commission did not certify Delaware's school desegregation until 1968 (Skelcher 1999: 117-118). In the interim, schools built by du Pont housed almost all of the state's African American students. The buildings also continued to serve as community centers for many African American communities, as Betelle had intended, even after the students had moved on.

While significant elements of the design of Mt. Olive and the two dozen similar two-room "colored" schools were common to Betelle schools for white students as well as those of color, the particular combination of plan, elevation, and detail at Mt. Olive is found only in schools for African-American and Native American students. The distinctive banked nine-over-nine awning windows, wood-shingle siding, deep cornices with gable returns, and pedimented porticos were used in most du Pont schools, but the two-room variations do not appear to have been built for white students. As Caucasian schools were almost all consolidated and those that could not be usually had unique, often one-room, and sometimes portable buildings, it is not surprising that this specific type would be built only for students of color.

Mt. Olive was also sometimes called Magnolia (the nearby town to the north), as well as Little Heaven. A small African American community existed in this area, as evidenced by the existence of both the Mt. Olive School and Mt. Olive A.M.E. Church on Skeeter Neck Road. For a time, the Mt. Olive School was an important component of this African American rural or "settlement" community. African American settlements as defined in *African American Settlement Patterns on the Upper Peninsula Zone of Delaware 1730-1940+/-: Historic Context* (Skelcher 1995) typically include, at minimum, institutions including a church and a school building, as well as residential buildings. The church building has been highly altered and there are no recognizable African

American residential buildings in the vicinity. As a community institution, the Mt. Olive School is the last surviving property associated with the Little Heaven African American Settlement with good historic and architectural integrity.

During the late twentieth century, the Mt. Olive Colored School was apparently rented by the Masonic Lodge. Although research was undertaken at the Kent County Courthouse (Dover), and State Board of Education files at both the Delaware State Archives (Dover) and Hagley Eleutherian Mills Museum and Library (Wilmington), no additional information was gleaned on what the building was used for after it ceased its function as a school.

Boundary Justification

The existing tax parcel, Map No. 8-00-11300-02-3500-00001, will serve as the National Register boundary for the Mt. Olive Colored School. The parcel is a polygonal shape, and the boundary is delimited by the edge of the pavement along Clapham Road (to west), Skeeter Neck Road (to south), S.R. 1 (to east), and to the rear of the lot on the north. This boundary sufficiently encompasses the historic acreage of the school, the sidewalk, and the lot on which the building stands to maintain the setting and feeling of the Colonial Revival du Pont School. The produce stand, which post-dates the 1923-1954 period of significance, is non-contributing. This boundary was prepared in accordance with the guidelines set forth in the National Register Bulletin: *Defining Boundaries for National Register Properties* (National Park Service 1997).

State Historic Context Framework:

Time Period:	1880-1940 Urbanization and Early Urbanization
Geographical Zone:	Upper Peninsula
Historic Period Themes:	Architecture, Engineering, and Decorative Arts Education Ethnic Heritage: Black

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