

**Notes from Visit to Union Ridge Cemetery and Hord Chapel AME Church  
Bedford County, Tennessee  
January 24, 2023**

**Union Ridge Cemetery**

**Community Participants:** Elwood McMahon, Drexel Nelson, Jim and Shirley Stokes

**MTSU Center for Historic Preservation Participants:** Stacey Graham, Taylor Means, Antoinette van Zelm

Overgrown with many unmarked graves

We started out by walking along the fence line at the back of the cemetery

The land on the other side of the fence is owned by the Cespeskis [Correct? Spelling?] family

Several very old headstones, such as for Hugh Davidson, who died Sept. 19, 1811

[1841?]

The Houghs married into the Davidson family, and some of them are buried in the cemetery as well

Both of these were white families

Mr. Nelson shared with us a printed description of the “Davidson Cemetery,” described as being “on upper side of a large black graveyard,” that includes transcriptions of the grave markers

He also shared with us a typed transcription of an 1839 deed in which John Davidson gave land to the trustees of Union Meeting House and Camp Ground (Edmund Hord had in 1833 erroneously given to the trustees land that he thought that he owned but that was actually owned by John Davidson, so Davidson was basically making good on what Edmund Hord had tried to do earlier)

The trustees represented several different denominations

Rufus Howard (d. 1969) and his wife Clara Mai Nelson Howard (1900-1968) are buried in the cemetery, near to where it adjoins a residential area

Also buried near here: Jessie May [Mai?] Cortner, handmade, vernacular stone with a “T” on it, perhaps a variation of a cross, no dates

Plus Aron Christman (1853-1916), ancestor of Andre Chrismon, a lawyer and pastor who lives in Murfreesboro

Depressions near the driveway—Hord burials, per Mr. Nelson

Mr. Rufus Howard was Mr. Stokes’s grandfather and Mr. Nelson’s great-uncle

[Correct?]

He and his wife had 12 children, including Mr. Stokes’s mother

Mr. Howard owned land near the cemetery, as well as some other land in Union Ridge that had a cave on it

The land Mr. Howard owned near the cemetery was later purchased by a Reverend Wicks from Michigan  
 The original house burned down  
 Mr. Howard raised milk cows

Mr. Stokes was raised by his grandparents after his parents moved to Chicago  
 He helped his grandparents on the farm  
 He helped dig 3 graves in the cemetery  
 He has some obituaries of people buried in the cemetery  
 Scales & Sons Funeral Home took care of some of the burials

Mr. Stokes shared some of his history:

- Attended East Bedford Grammar School for African Americans
- Attended the segregated Harris High (formerly the Bedford County Training School) in Shelbyville for first 2 years of high school
- Then helped integrate Wartrace High School (now Cascade)
- Graduated from there in 1966
- Drafted, did basic training at Fort Campbell, then more training at Fort Dix and Fort Bragg before serving in Vietnam
- His grandmother died when he was in Vietnam and he received compassionate leave to come home, and his grandfather died shortly thereafter
- He joined his parents in Chicago and helped raise his siblings as he was the oldest child
- He and Shirley married in 1975 and moved to Milwaukee, where Mr. Stokes attended Milwaukee Technical Area College and then the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee (1984 graduate)
- In 1987, they moved to the Memphis area to help Shirley's parents
- In 2016, they moved back to Bedford County until 2020 when they returned to Oakland, south of Memphis
- He is writing the history of his upbringing in Union Ridge

James Coley Nelson is also buried in the cemetery (great-grandfather of both Mr. Stokes and Mr. Nelson—Correct?)

A white family, the Holts, lived near the cemetery (Doyle Holt, Clety Holt, and son Dan Holt)

Mr. Elwood McMahan's father—George William McMahan (1914-1965) is buried in the cemetery, as is his grandfather and great-grandfather  
 They are buried near the dirt road that runs through the cemetery

Note: George Singleton is buried in the New Hope Baptist Cemetery in Fairfield

Handwritten list of burials provided by Drexel Nelson

Typed list of burials provided by Jimmy Stokes

### **Hord Chapel AME Church and Cemetery**

**Community Participants:** Comer Hord, Drexel Nelson, Jim and Shirley Stokes

**MTSU Center for Historic Preservation Participants:** Stacey Graham, Taylor Means, Antoinette van Zelm

Mr. Nelson thinks that the original Hord Chapel (not extant) was located on the opposite side of the road, but Mr. Hord thought it was always on the side where it is now

The current Hord Chapel AME is a frame building with a cupola/bell tower

Dates to c. 1920 and was active until at least the late 1990s

The congregation is thought to date back to the 1870s

According to Mr. Stokes and Mr. Nelson:

Preaching was held at the church on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays but people came to Sunday School on the other Sundays, when preaching was held at the AME church in Wartrace

A large Homecoming celebration was held the first Sunday in August, with a lot of attendees, homemade ice cream, homemade spirits, lots of food

Mr. Stokes served as a youth delegate to AME conferences in Memphis and Nashville  
He was baptized at Hord Chapel and used to ring the bell

There are still some pews inside the church

The apse looks like it was added later

There are some burials behind the church, several likely covered in brush

We found a cremation urn for Lily Hord

Mr. Comer Hord shared some of his memories of Union Ridge:

- Brothers Uncle Andrew Hord and Papa Joe Hord
- Mr. Hord's father served in the Air Force
- The Hords owned about 95% of the land on the ridge, with the Cleveland family owning most of the rest
- Farmers farmed to live, not for a profit
- "We were dirt poor."
- All of the families on the ridge were African American, except for the Holts

- Mr. Comer's mother ironed for the Holts
- White people would put a sign up on the road leading to the ridge--"N—Knob"—and the residents would take the sign down
- "No one knew we existed."
- The roads were dirt until the 1960s; they were muddy when it was wet and dusty when it was dry
- "Everyone knew everyone up here."
- On Saturdays, people stopped working at noon and then went to Brick Row in Shelbyville, where the men whittled
- The African American teachers cared about the students a lot; the main difficulty Mr. Hord saw under segregation was the out-of-date books and other materials
- His grandfather raised potatoes
- Everyone had a horse
- In 1965 or 1967, he sat downstairs at the movie house [in Shelbyville?] with some of his siblings and friends, and they were abused by white patrons and others who stood outside the movie house and pushed them around as they made their way to their car; they were followed in their car and knew they couldn't go home so they went into the woods and ditched their pursuers
- Mr. Comer was also drafted after high school

Mr. Stokes provided us with a printout of a photo of the church. There is also information about it on Southern Places, including 3 church bulletins from 1997 (Southern Places is at <https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll4>). Dr. West surveyed the church as part of the Rural African American Church Project. He then photographed it in 2009, when it appeared to be abandoned.