

Re: Francis D. Lee
Architects of Charleston



The Unitarian Church.

FRANCIS D. LEE

1826—August, 1885

FRANCIS D. LEE PRACTICED IN CHARLESTON DURING a little more than a decade, 1850-1861, for almost half of which time he was a partner of Edward C. Jones (qv). The eclecticism of the period shows strongly in his work. One may regret the juxtaposition of dissimilar forms which resulted, but considered individually, his structures are so successful that Samuel Lapham has written that "Lee was a master of any style".¹

He was born in 1826,² one of several children of William and Elizabeth (Markley) Lee of Charleston.³ Through his father, he was descended from the colonial portrait painter, Jeremiah Theus.⁴ His sister, Mary Elizabeth Lee (1813-1849), wrote a quantity of magazine verse which was collected in book form after her death.

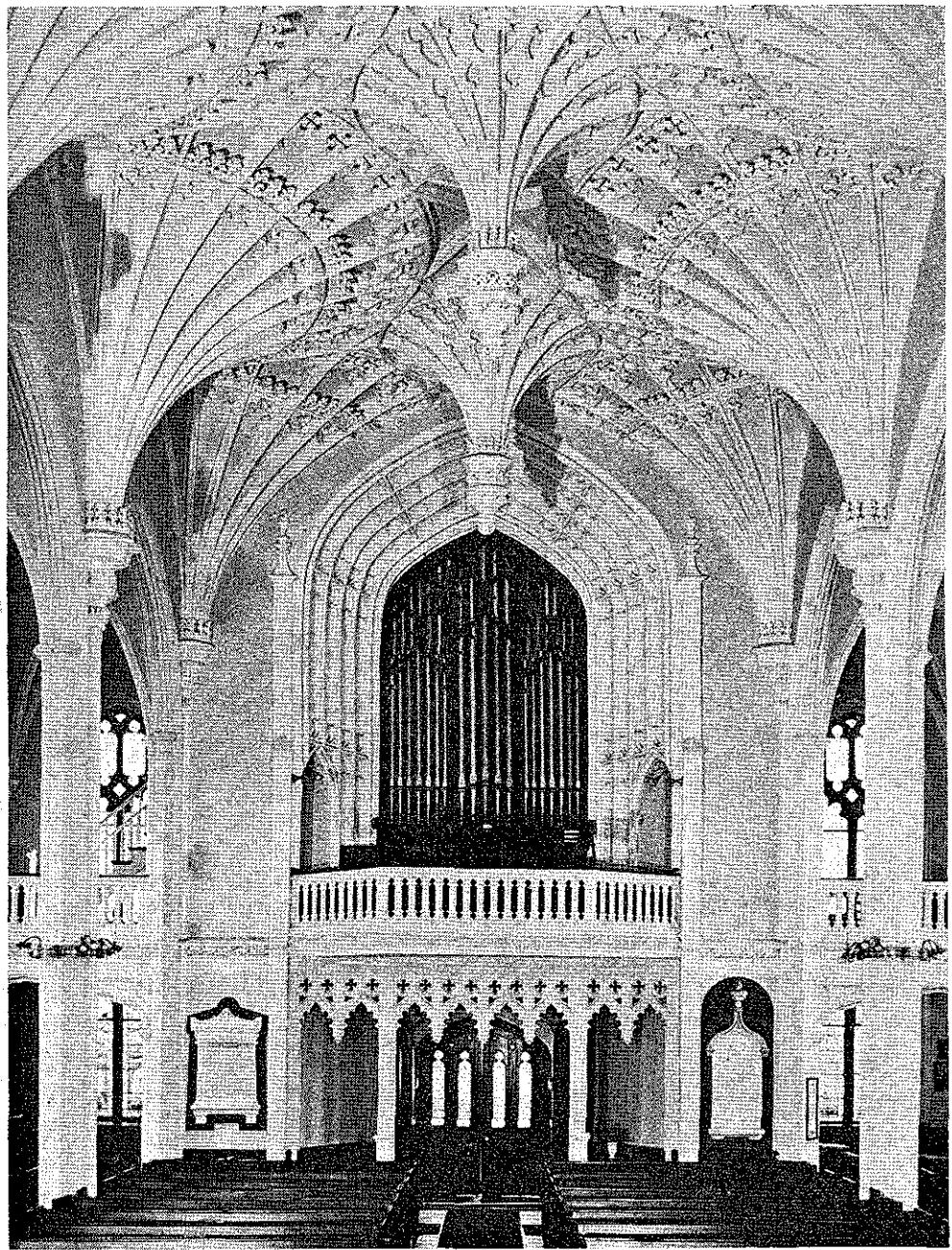
At the College of Charleston, where the records give his middle name as Dee,⁵ he won a gold medal with a speech on "Imagination" in 1845,⁶ and was graduated in 1846.⁷

In the following year, he joined the short-lived South Carolina Lyceum, a group which heard lectures on scientific discoveries, his name coming last on the list of curators.⁸ He was later to join Union Kilwinning Lodge No. 4, Scottish Rite Masons,⁹ and the South Carolina Society,¹⁰ and to be recording secretary of the Carolina Art Association,¹¹ all of which organizations still exist.

Lee taught in Mr. Sachtleben's school in 1848 and '49,¹² but by the end of the latter year, was again a pupil, studying architecture in Edward C. Jones' office. Louis J. Barbot (qv) was a fellow student. Lee's architectural drawings won him a silver medal, the highest award in this class, at the South Carolina Institute's 1849 fair.¹³ He is said to have aided Jones in laying out Magnolia Cemetery in 1850.¹⁴

By November, 1850, he was on his own, a practicing architect with an office on Broad Street.¹⁵

Lee's early work includes two examples of the Gothic Revival. One is the pinnacled Elbert P. Jones marble monument near the great oak at Magnolia Cemetery, made at Philadelphia in 1852-53 at



The Unitarian Church, 6 Archdale Street. Gothicized in 1852-1854 by F. D. Lee.

a cost exceeding \$6,000.¹⁶ Lee thought well enough of it to sign it, but its interest lies in its parallelism to a larger work in the same style, the remodeling of the Unitarian Church in 1852-54.¹⁷

Here he drew his inspiration for the interior from the fan-tracery vaulting and pendants of the chapel of Henry VII at Westminster. Lee's vaulting is not structural, however, but superficial, and made of laths and plaster. His real problem was to fit it in. To quote the *Courier*:

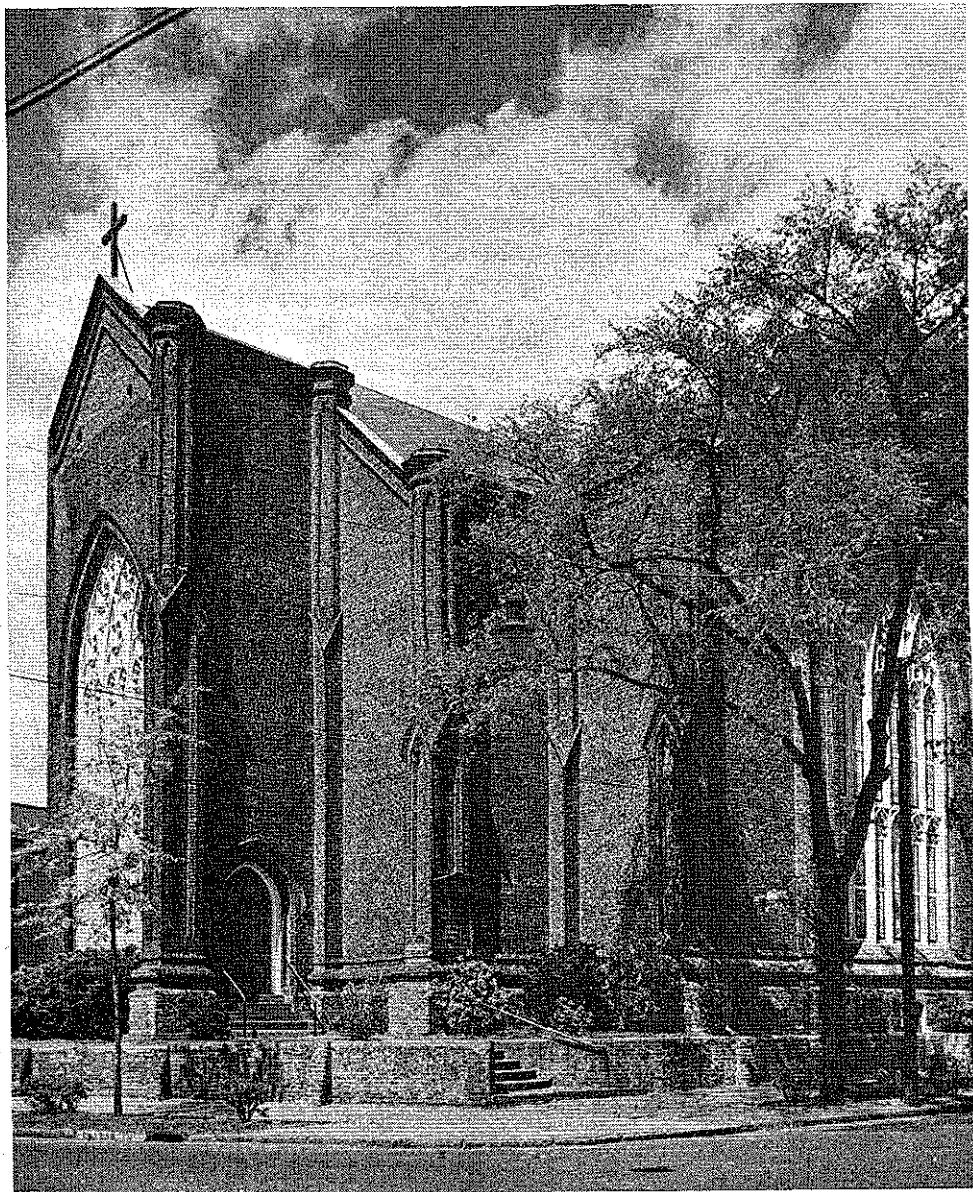
"A certain degree of reverence for the old walls, induced the congregation to retain, and if possible, to adapt them to a more pleasing and graceful structure. Indeed the cost of re-construction could hardly have exceeded the expense of perforating the faithful old masonry to admit of the new and lofty windows, or of compassing the ancient massive tower to build up one more lofty and imposing.

"The difficulties which presented themselves in carrying out the design, seemed almost insurmountable, inasmuch as the shape of the old structure being almost square in plan, was ill adapted to the Gothic style, that species of architecture being decided on by the committee . . .¹⁸

This church, especially the decoration of the tower, suffered in the earthquake of 1886, which should be remembered when judging Lee's design.

Almost contemporary with the remodeling of the church was a very different work, completed early in 1853, the grocery store of S. S. Farrar & Brothers, at the southwest corner of East Bay and Cumberland Street, running through to State Street, and containing some 42,184 cubic feet of storage space. Here Lee used cast-iron pillars.¹⁹ He was to employ iron in quantity again in the Fish Market, and near the end of his life he was to design extensive department stores at St. Louis, Missouri, so that this large commercial building may be considered somewhat prophetic. It may be, however, that he won his knowledge of stores from Jones, who had drawn the plans of a notable example in Charleston.

On July 1, 1852, Lee became Jones' partner in the firm of Jones & Lee.²⁰ The time was auspicious. Cotton was high, and railroads were to enrich everyone, or so many believed. Building boomed. The partners received orders from all over South Carolina and even from adjoining states. Several of the works of the firm which have



St. Luke's Church, 22 Elizabeth Street at Charlotte, begun in 1859. F. D. Lee, architect. The steeple, planned for the northwest corner (left) was not built.

been considered in the chapter on Jones may have belonged by right to Lee. Others, in this chapter, seem almost certainly his.

He was the architect of the Farmers' & Exchange Bank on East Bay,²¹ built 1853-54,²² an admirable little structure in Moorish style. Lopez and Trumbo were the contractors.²³ Lee used the unpointed horseshoe arch, reminiscent of the Alcazar at Seville, on a facade made up of pale Jersey and somber Connecticut brownstone,²⁴ producing the striped effect dear to Moorish builders.

William Gilmore Simms wrote that, beside its neighbor, the Roman Doric Planters' & Mechanics' Bank, it looked "as a toy-box under the eaves of the tower of Babel."²⁵ The location was unfortunate, but "toy-box" is misleading. Perhaps the subtropical sun is responsible, and the fact that the thirty-second parallel of latitude skirts Charleston and Morocco alike, but the bank wears an air of sincerity, and does not look as if it had escaped from a fairground.

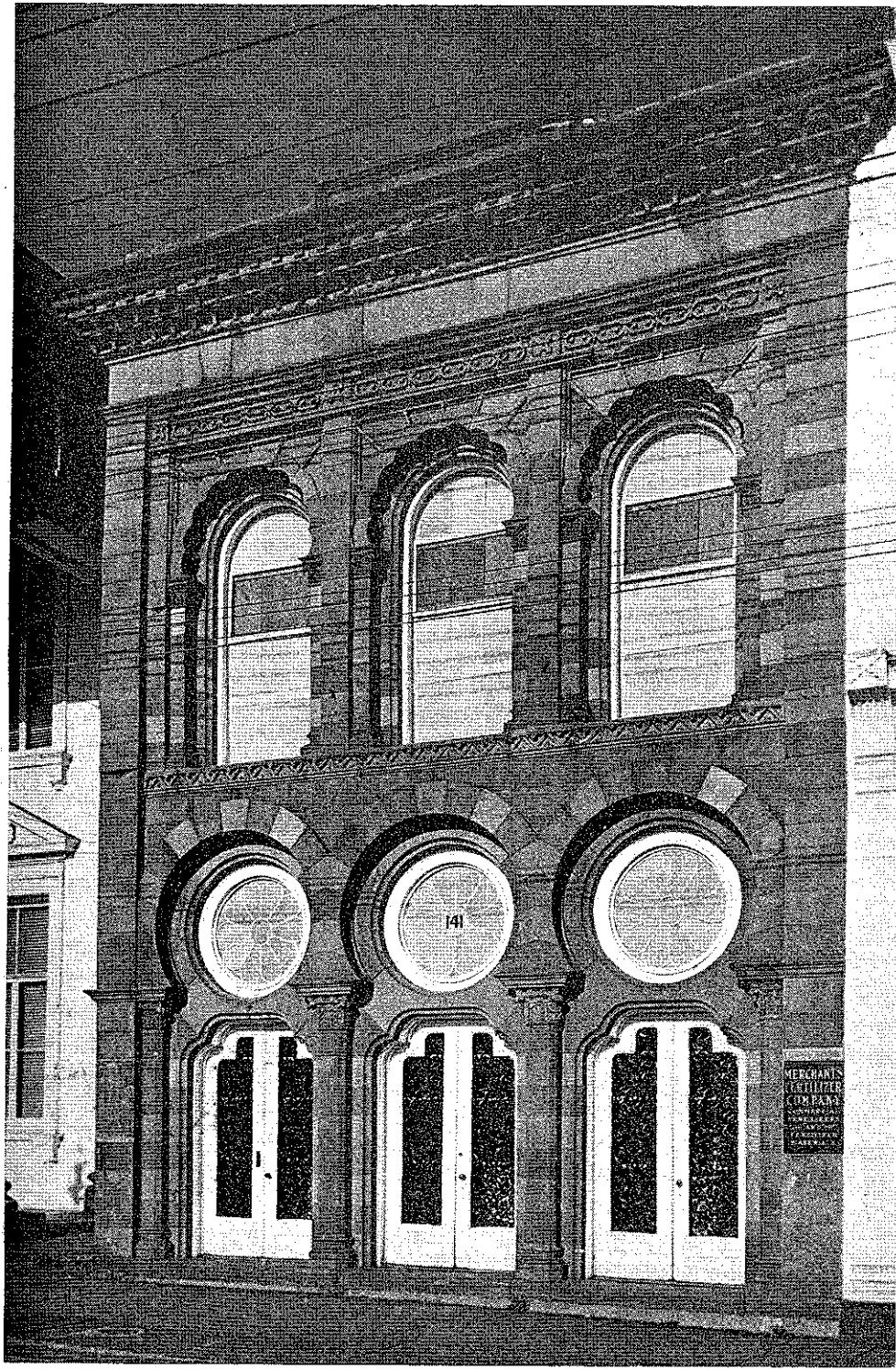
As Lee is credited with the design of the bank, he may, by analogy, be thought to have planned the Moorish Fish Market, which newspapers of the time ascribe to the firm. This astounding affair was made of iron and concrete, It was 44 feet square by 21 high, and stood at the foot of Market Street, beside a boat basin 42 feet by 90, which was fitted with granite steps.²⁶ One regrets the absence of a picture.

The ironwork was made by Cameron, Mustard & Co., one of nine Charleston foundries of the time.²⁷ Due to the bursting of a coffer dam, change of contractors, etc., the Fish Market approached completion only late in 1856.²⁸

Another Oriental design, the Vanderhorst tomb at Magnolia Cemetery, made of brownstone in Egyptian style, may, perhaps be a product of Lee's eclecticism. The narrowing of the upper part of the doorway is not unlike that at the Farmers' & Exchange Bank, and though this is a small detail by which to judge, the skillful handling of the unfamiliar order brings Lee to mind.

In the busy year of 1853, Lee took time from weightier matters to design the silver trumpet which the Phoenix Fire Engine Company gave their president.²⁹

Lee aided Jones in the large task of remodeling the Orphan House in 1853-54.³⁰ The contractor was Lewis Rebb, who also built the Citadel Square Baptist Church in 1855-56. Papers of the day name Jones & Lee as the architects. If Lee drew the plans, the church is one of his most important works in point of size, but less spirited than most of his designs. The *Courier* described it as "Norman, with all the details and ornaments of that picturesque style,



The Farmers' and Exchange Bank, 141 East Bay, built 1853-1854. Lee used the Moorish style throughout this building.

but 'without the extreme massive and heavy proportions.'³¹ It has suffered from the diminution of its steeple, the spire of which blew down in 1885, toppling outward in an arc with a roar heard above the hurricane.

The partnership with Jones ended January 5, 1857,³² and Lee moved his office from the corner of Broad and Church Streets (now the Chamber of Commerce building) to the State Bank building, No. 1 Broad Street.³³

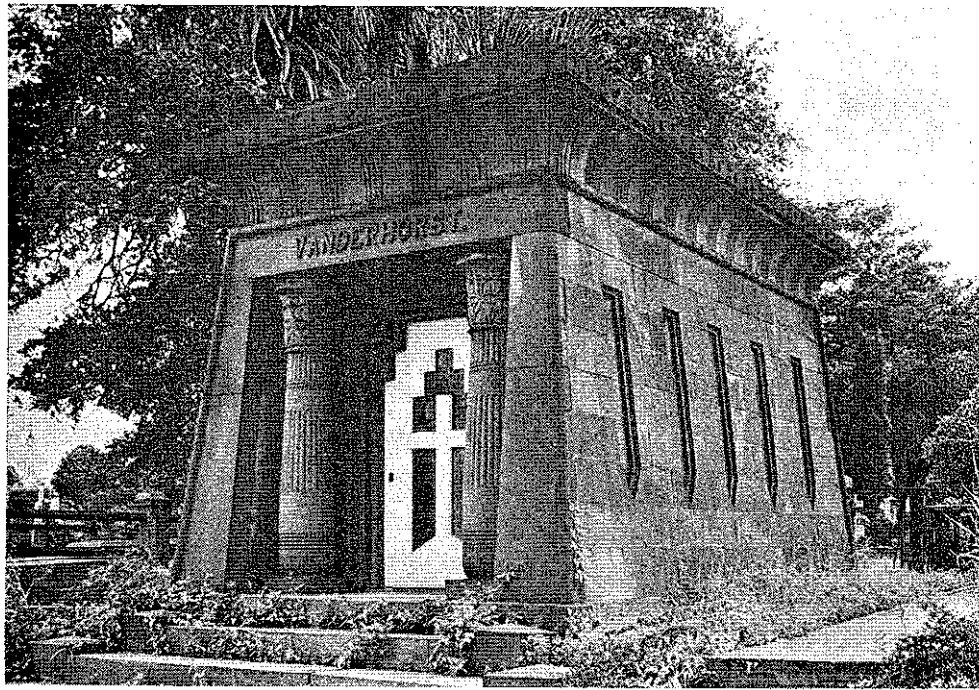
From this year dated a two-story, clapboard dwelling on the northwest corner of Rutledge Avenue and Doughty Street. His imagination did not display itself here. It is as if his client had said, "No nonsense, Mr. Lee." Neither did it owe much to local architectural tradition, although he gave it ample piazzas. This house showed that by the late fifties, even relatively unimportant buildings in Charleston were sometimes designed by architects. The builder, James M. Curtis, contracted to build the house with its appurtenances, to furnish the material and to perform the whole under Lee's direction for \$5,200.00.³⁴ This dwelling was pulled down in 1963.

In 1860, a hotel planned by Lee was opened at Florence, South Carolina, which had just become a railroad junction.³⁵

In the preceding year, he had designed St. Luke's Church, at the northeast corner of Charlotte and Elizabeth Streets. Patrick O'Donnell was the contractor.³⁶ The cornerstone was laid May 12, 1859. It is amusing to learn from the *Courier* that the style, "perpendicular Gothic, of the Tudor period," is "from the extreme lightness when compared with the other styles of Gothic . . . peculiarly adapted to our Southern climate." The church forms a Greek cross. A steeple, 210 feet high, was to have stood in the angle of the north and west arms,³⁷ but guns boomed at Fort Sumter, and it was not built.

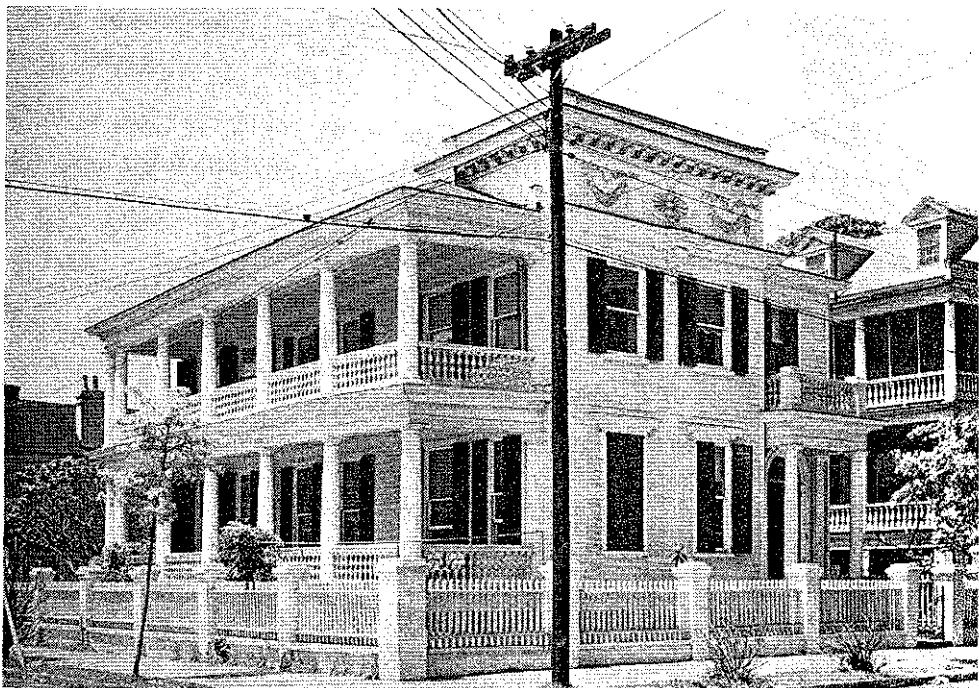
Its lack is not felt. The exterior of this church is the only Gothic Revival work in Charleston which has about it the flavor of the style it imitates. (Inside, the story is different—here is merely another creditable interior.) Lee gave it honest lines, but something is due to the accident which left revealed the texture and hearty deep red of its walls. Like other churches of the day, it was to have been slicked over with stucco, but patriotism intervened, and the lime was given to the Confederacy.

Entering the Southern army, Lee served with distinction as an officer of engineers, reaching the rank of major. Coastal fortifications planned by him included Fort Walker at Hilton Head,³⁸ in the defense of which he saw active service,³⁹ and Battery Wagner on



The Vanderhorst tomb, Magnolia Cemetery.

Dwelling at Rutledge Avenue and Doughty Street, built 1857. F. D. Lee, architect.
Destroyed, 1963.



Morris Island.⁴⁰ He invented a spar-torpedo which attached to the semi-submersible, *Little David*, damaged the armored steam-frigate, *New Ironsides*, flagship of the Federal fleet.⁴¹ Soon every Confederate iron-clad ram carried such a weapon. South Carolina appropriated \$50,000 toward the purchase and refitting of a heavy boat to carry the torpedo, but as the sum proved insufficient and neither the army nor navy departments at Richmond would further the plan, the vessel remained incomplete at the end of the war.⁴²

When peace came, Lee went to France in an endeavor to interest Napoleon III in his weapon.⁴³

He returned to Charleston, as is shown by a plat of Magnolia Cemetery, preserved at the office there, which is signed and dated "Enlarged from a Lithograph/By/Francis D. Lee/May 1866". The architect appeared in the *Charleston Directory* of 1867-68 also. But his Post-Bellum career belongs not to South Carolina but to Missouri. He went to St. Louis in 1868.⁴⁴

There, a member of the firm of Lee and Annan, he designed the Merchants' Exchange, completed in 1875.⁴⁵ Other works by him there include the Jesuits' College,⁴⁶ the red brick and sandstone Roe Building, built about 1883 in Gothic Revival style, and the recently demolished "Gay's Central Building," completed in 1880-81.⁴⁷

Lee died on a fishing trip in Minnesota, August, 1885, and lies buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery at St. Louis.⁴⁸

An editorial in the *News and Courier* (Charleston) of August 29, 1885, deserves to be quoted in full though it is incorrect on several points, notably as concerns the place of Lee's death, and the attribution to him of St. James' Methodist Church (the Spring Street Methodist Church, by Barbot & Seyle), the Westminster Presbyterian Church (by Jones), and the Glebe Street Church, the early date of which (1847-48) makes a connection with Lee improbable.

"Major Francis D. Lee.

"The news has been received in Charleston of the death of Major Francis D. Lee, which occurred at St-Louis, Mo, on Wednesday last, from apoplexy. Major Lee was a Charlestonian by birth, and passed his early youth in this city. He was born in the year 1827, and was the son of Mr. William Lee and the nephew of Judge Thomas Lee. He was graduated from the College of Charleston, and immediately afterwards entered upon the study of architecture, which he adopted as his profession. He was taken into the office of Mr. Edward Jones, where his studies were completed, and he was made junior partner of the

firm of Jones & Lee. He remained here until the breaking out of the war, and in that time had assisted to construct and plan a number of the best known public edifices and grounds in and around the city. He assisted in planning the laying out of Magnolia Cemetery and the remodeling of the Orphan-House. He was the architect of the Unitarian Church, St. Luke's Church, the Glebe Street Church, St. James' Methodist Church in Spring street, the Westminster Church, and the first Holy Communion Church built in this city. At the beginning of the war he was given a commission in the engineer corps of the Confederate army, and in that position rendered valuable service to the Confederacy. He was always Gen. Beauregard's right-hand man, and in the siege of Charleston filled an important part in the defence. It was during this period that he invented a valuable submarine torpedo, which caused Gen. Beauregard to exclaim, upon witnessing its first test, which was made in this harbor just in front of the Battery: "Charleston is now safe." Major Lee was engaged in the first battle at Fort Walker, at Port Royal, and subsequently planned Battery Wagner on Morris Island. He served throughout the war with considerable distinction, and at its close went over to France upon the invitation of Napoleon the Third, who had become interested in his torpedo. He remained in France long enough to have four or five interviews with the Emperor, and then returned to this country, settling at St. Louis. He made that city his home and soon rose to the foremost rank of his profession at that place. He became thoroughly identified with the interests of the city and planned two of its largest and best known buildings, the Merchants' Exchange and the Jesuits' College.

"Major Lee was a magnificent draftsman and a man of unusual intellect, and was as skilled in the use of the pen as of the sword. He was of fine physical appearance, and his handsome, genial face was always to be seen at the social gatherings of the day. He was married to Miss Ancrum, of Camden, South Carolina, and upon settling in St. Louis his house became the headquarters for all South Carolinians who passed through that city, and those who have once been entertained by him can never forget his grand hospitality. A man of genial spirits, the possessor of a kind heart and cultivated mind, his death will be long and sadly felt by the hosts of friends whom he has made, both in St. Louis and Charleston."