

110 Calhoun St.

News + Courier

7/10/82

Emanuel Church A Shrine

Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the oldest black churches in the United States, has been designated a historical shrine and registered in the National Register of Historic Places, and will be honored at "Emanuel Day" services at the church Sunday.

Emanuel's history dates to 1818, around the time the Free African Society was formed by AME founder Richard Allen and several other clergymen in Philadelphia. Both groups were formed because black participation was restricted in white churches. The Free African Society was the front runner of the AME church in America.

The Rev. Alonzo W. Holman, pastor of the church, said the church has enjoyed a rich history. He said Denmark Vesey, leader of the slave uprising in 1822, was a member of the church.

It was white backlash against Vesey's rebellion, coupled with the backlash from Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia in 1834, that forced the suspension of black church serv-

ices in the Lowcountry until 1865.

The church had been named the Bethel circuit, but when the ban on black church services was lifted it was renamed Emanuel.

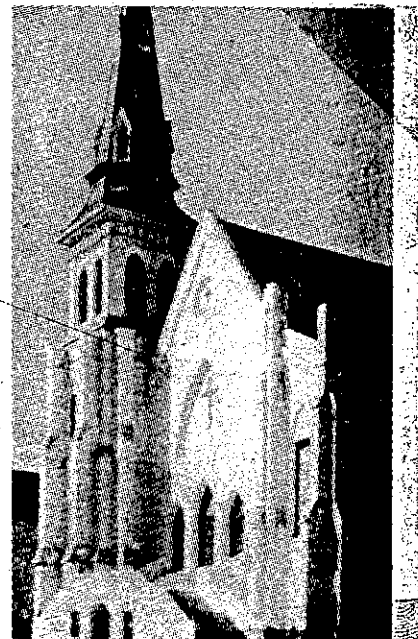
Church record indicate that the congregation of the church did not cease to meet during the ban, because when it was lifted the church had close to 3,000 members.

The old structure, which had been burned after the Vesey controversy, was rebuilt in 1872 at the present location on Calhoun Street.

In 1882 the congregation split and Mount Zion AME Church was formed. The present edifice was completed in 1891 under the leadership of Dr. L.R. Nichols.

The church was incorporated in 1912 and presently has about 2,000 members.

Sunday services will begin at 11 a.m. and the dedication ceremonies will be conducted by Charles Lee, director of the S.C. Department of Archives and History. He will present the medallion to the congregation.



Emanuel AME Church

Origins Of Emanuel Church Date To Late 18th Century

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON
Special Writer

Emanuel AME Church, 108 Calhoun St., built in 1891, has one of the oldest black congregations in the United States.

The congregation, originally known as the African Church, was organized about 1783 by free blacks and slaves.

The founding of the church coincided with the establishment of the Free African Society, a religious and social organization, in Philadelphia and Boston.

The first house of worship of the African Church was in the vicinity of Hanover and Amherst streets. A cemetery was located near the church.

One of the founders of the congregation was Denmark Vesey, a free black man. Vesey was convicted and executed as the alleged leader of a conspiracy to incite a slave rebellion in 1822.

Another founder was Morris Brown, a free black preacher and teacher. Brown was compelled to leave South Carolina in 1822 because

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of suspicion (never proved) that the congregation was involved in the alleged Vesey plot. He went to Philadelphia and subsequently became a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Free African Society in the North became the AME Church in 1816. The African Church of Charleston joined the national organization in 1818. In 1820, the Charleston congregation was named the Bethel circuit.

The Bethel church was burned as a result of the Vesey controversy. The church was rebuilt and remained open until 1834, when state law closed all black churches, in reaction to Nat Turner's Rebellion in Virginia.

The congregation met in secret until the end of the Civil War. In 1865,

the Rev. Richard Cain, a black missionary from the North, reopened the Bethel Church, renaming it Emanuel.

A new church was built in 1872 on the site of the present structure. That structure was heavily damaged in the 1886 earthquake and was finally razed in 1891.

The present structure was built in 1891 under the direction of the Rev. Dr. L.R. Nichols, whose son later became an AME bishop.

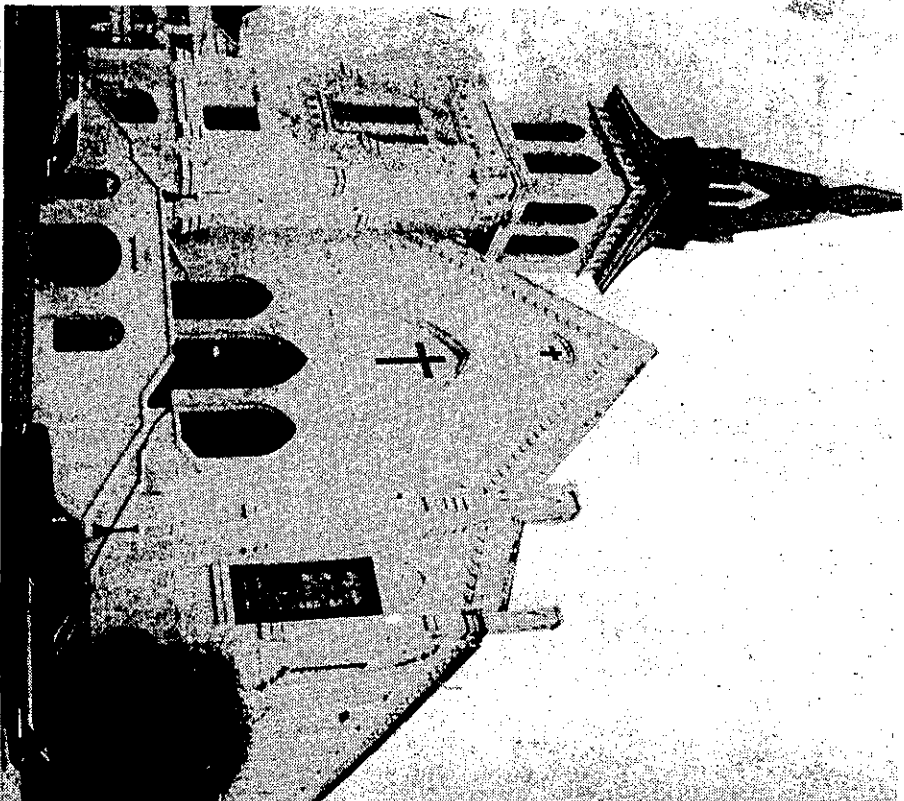
In 1952, Dr. Nichols' remains were moved from the Emanuel Cemetery on Meeting Street Road and placed in a crypt beneath the church steeple.

Emanuel AME Church is a substantial structure of stuccoed brick, made more imposing by its elevation on a high basement.

The structure is in the Gothic Revival style, with the main structure being a rectangle, and a square tower on the southwest corner.

The church is basilican in plan, with side aisles under pent roofed

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Present Church Built In 1891

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108 Calhoun

...Church

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extensions of the main gable roof.

The Gothic decorative elements are simplified. The main doorways are in pointed arches with traceried lights above double doors.

A large blank pointed arch with a cross, inset with glass brick (a 20th century addition) and a blank bull's eye with a cross-shaped recess, relieve the plain surface of the upper part of the facade.

The gable and pent roof ends are delineated with a molded cornice

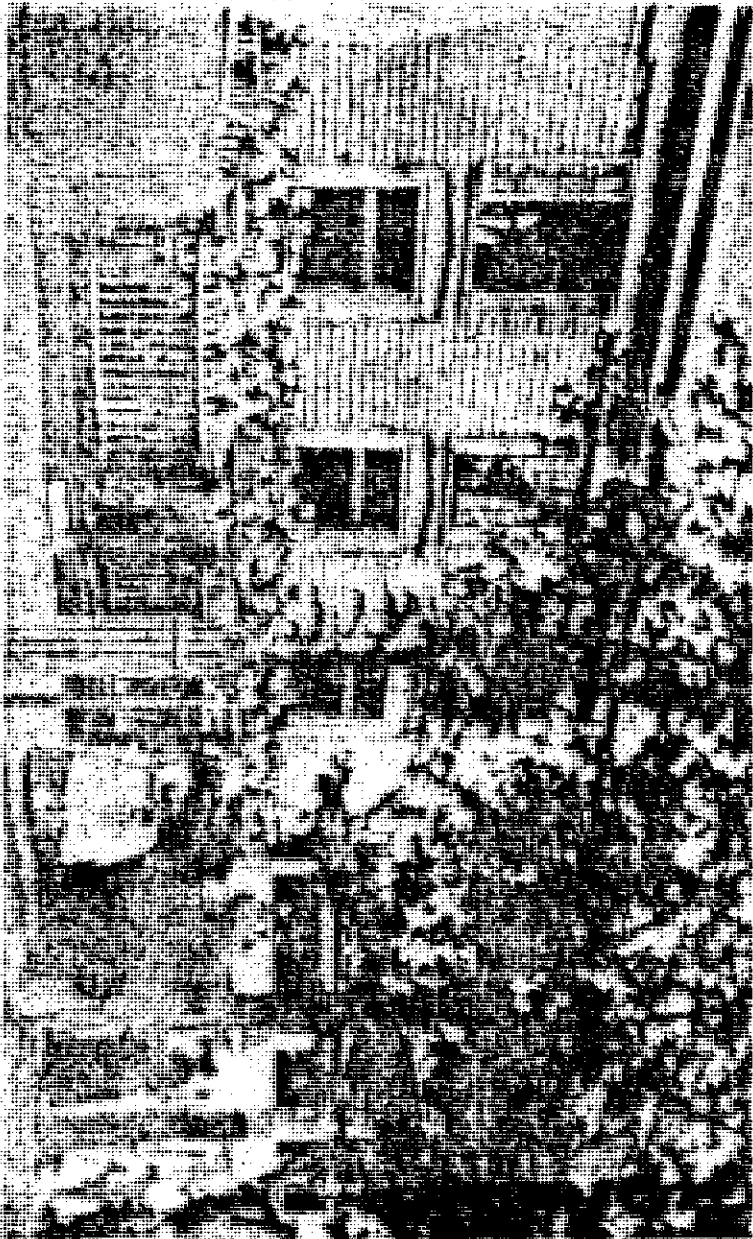
with a band of corbels, following the rake of the roofline. A corbelled cornice also runs along the sides of the building.

Windows are square-headed, in pointed-arch openings with blank tops. Buttresses range along the sides of the building and are situated on the facade and on the corners of the tower.

The tower has four levels, the fourth being an open cupola with pointed arch openings, louvered, and blind arcading below the cornice.

The steeple is faced with pressed tin, simulating fish-scale shingles, and terminates in a weathervane.

AME Church Commemorating 165th Anniversary



25th Anniversary Of Church

The painted wood Emanuel AME Church on Calhoun Street, circa 1890, photographed for the 25th anniversary of the church on that site, just prior to the construction of the current structure in 1891.

By JANE E. ALLEN
Post-Courier Reporter

Members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church at 140 Calhoun St. are commemorating their 165th anniversary and documenting the history of the oldest AME congregation in the South.

Unfortunately, says Elizabeth Alston, a black historian, author of a short history of the church and an educator in the Charleston County Schools, restrictions during slavery and the lack of formal schooling gave blacks little chance of collecting and saving documents. Not until the 1960s did blacks begin to truly appreciate their cultural and religious roots, she says. But Emanuel's members are providing some of the rare photographs and documents that will help in the compilation of a history of Charleston's AME community.

In 1914, the Rev. J.E. Beard published "Minutes of the South Carolina Annual Conference of the African M.E. Church, 1865, 1866, 1867." The booklet is one of many documents in the archives. In his foreword, Beard stated:

Possibly one of the greatest faults of the Negro race today is not his indifference to making history, but his lamentable tendency to neglect recording his history. It is indeed unfortunate that the white historian records so little of us that is worthy. But it is more unfortunate that the Negro records so little of his deeds which to the unborn millions would be a great source of inspiration and enlightenment as well as work of honor and value.

Emanuel AME church members are intent on leaving a legacy. The church kicked off its 165th anniversary May 8 with the dedication of its archives and the unveiling of an anniversary logo by Charleston artist Louis Herr Jr., incorporating the various meeting places of the church from 1818 to 1983.

The archives have special significance because they are located in the church tower stairwell above the tomb of

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the Rev. L. Rufin Nichols, bishop of the AME church and the pastor responsible for construction of the present structure in 1891. His personal collection of letters and memorabilia is being donated by his son, Bishop D. Ward Nichols, retired senior bishop of the church. He has contributed many stories passed by word of mouth. He recently informed parishioners that the Calhoun Street location was important to church members because the underground railroad passed through there.

The archives, which are just beginning to take shape, contain deeds, old books, programs, and the encyclopedic of the AME church, written at the turn of the century. One of the photographs on display, circa 1900, depicts a group of bishops' wives, the "first ladies of the church," who were active in missionary work. The church has at least one copy of "The Recollections of Daniel Payne," an early AME bishop. Special commemorative souvenir sheets, printed for mortgage burnings and payments of church debts, offer glimpses of how the church facade changed over the years. On Nov. 29, 1909, a souvenir sheet was printed for the elimination of the church's \$28,000 debt. Pewter ceremonial vessels and bowls stand on wooden shelves with old glass pieces.

The church applied for a grant from the South Carolina Committee for the Humanities for a research project, which Mrs. Alston will direct. She hopes to involve black historians like Lerone Bennett, a senior editor at Ebony.

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AME Church

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Magazine. Eugene Hunt, an English professor at the College of Charleston, has agreed to write a dramatization of the church's history, she said.

While the present facade is shrouded, it appears in brick in a 1914 photograph. According to Bishop Nichols, the bricks were made by slaves. Since the photograph was taken, a rose window on the south facade and a small circular window above it have been covered in glass and bricks and bear black crosses on a white background. The entrance to the church at the basement level has been expanded to include an area under the front steps.

The church, the oldest black congregation south of Baltimore, Md., and the largest AME in the South, was designated a historical shrine and entered in the National Register of Historic Places in 1962.

According to Mrs. Alston, the concept of the African Methodist Episcopal Church dates to 1787 when Richard Allen of Philadelphia, later the first AME bishop, was indignant that blacks attending white churches were relegated to the balconies or back pews. So he organized the African Methodist Society.

In Charleston, Morris Brown, a local pastor and free black man, organized the "Beulah Circuit," which met at Arduerst and Huguenot streets. There is evidence of a field of black graves there. Mrs. Alston said Church members met at a "bearse" house there, and withdrew from their Methodist churches to form the AME church, which later became Emanuel. Most blacks in Charleston belonged to the Methodist church before joining the AME church. African Methodism was our first independent black church in the South.

The whites were not pleased by this display of independence by the African church, said Mrs. Alston. They filed

a charge as early as 1817 that the services were a nuisance. More than 400 blacks were arrested, among them Morris Brown. Given the chance to leave the state or go to jail, they chose jail, but were released in 1820. The church petitioned the state legislature to be allowed to worship. The whites actually tore down the church building and blacks returned to the Methodist churches around 1822. By 1825, black church services had been run almost underground.

The first freed church was built in 1816-18, and Denmark Vesey, leader of a black insurrection that led to his eventual hanging, may have been a church leader according to some historians. Brown was forced to leave the city after being implicated in the Vesey plot, but James Hamilton, the city's "intendant," the equivalent of mayor, helped him escape, Mrs. Alston said.

The church closed in 1834 and went underground for many years. Daniel Payne, a Charleston native who ran two schools for black children on Truett Street and Coming Street, returned South as the first bishop of the AME conference on Hilton Head Island in 1865. Emanuel reopened that year on Calhoun Street with the Rev. Richard Harvey Cain as pastor.

Cain, also a U.S. Congressman, urged his parishoners to help set up a village to prove that they were capable of self-government. The idea came to fruition with the establishment of Lincolnville, a community of free blacks still in existence today, and is the birthplace of the present pastor, the Rev. Alonzo Holman.

According to Bishop Nichols, church members had a chance to buy property across Calhoun Street, but did not want to occupy land owned by whites. That property became the site of Mount Zion AME church, which split from Emanuel in 1882. At the turn of the century many other AME churches sprang up around Charleston. In 1912, the church incorporated.

Crowning moment

Steeplejacks raise enthusiasm at Emanuel AME

By CONLEY SMITH
Of the Post-Courier staff

6/29/90

The sixth generation of steeplejacks steeled their tiny bodies against a chain-link fence with eyes skyward as their fathers and uncles took hold of the Emanuel AME Church steeple and pulled it atop the church at 110 Calhoun St.

It wasn't their first steeple watch nor would it be the last for the youngsters who came from Florida with the family-operated Able Industrial Contractor Inc.

While the storm has meant a quick succession of jobs as the jacks conquered steeples like St. Matthew's, Second Presbyterian and St. Philip's, it's been a long nine months for Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, according to the Rev. John H. Gillison.

As he watched workers ready the steeple for liftoff via a 70-ton crane, Gillison said that "the spirit has already been raised, it's enthusiasm going up."

While the recent repairs to the church's stained glass windows were an inspiration, he said the steeple would serve as evidence that the church was whole again. The original steeple was installed in 1903 where it remained until Hurricane Hugo struck, slamming it to the ground.

But there is a slight difference in the two — the old steeple's frame was wooden and the new one is made of steel. Paul Ferguson, who led the Ahle team, said that the custom steeple is reinforced to withstand another storm.

"If a wooden one lasted nearly 100 years, a steel one should last 300. A storm would have to take the whole thing off next time," Gillison said.

The crane backed into place alongside the church as a crowd gathered on all sides of the church. Meanwhile, a church member handed out cards for onlookers to fill out so she could record those in attendance at the steeple's resurrection.

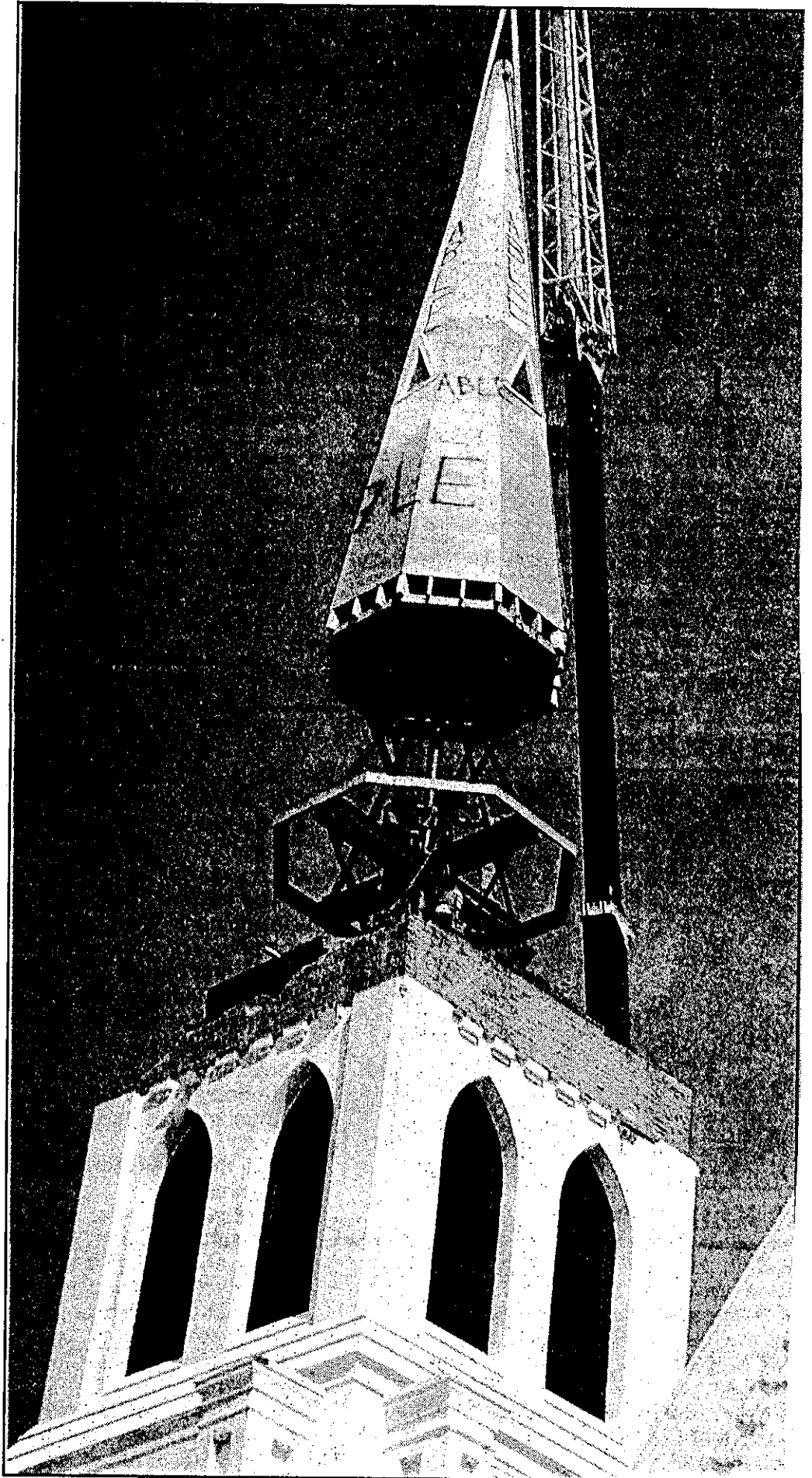
As workman hooked up the steeple on the ground, one of the steeplejacks' wives urged a toddler to "look at daddy" high atop the church. Once it was lifted skyward toward the base, the steeplejacks spun it into place as Ferguson barked orders from the ground.

But the steeple is not quite complete; there is still the handiwork to be completed along the base of the church.

Emanuel is the oldest AME church in south and was founded in 1818 and reorganized in 1865. The present building was constructed in 1891.

"I'm excited," Gillison said after the steeple was slipped into place. "Within the next two weeks you'll begin to see the beauty of it," he said. While many of the congregation gathered for the re-topping of the steeple, Gillison said a formal dedication will be scheduled later.

"It looks so bare (without the steeple). It looks like the queen wearing her crown now," he said.



Emanuel's new steeple is lowered into place.

Staff Photos by Conley Smith