'The Architecture of Slavery Resistance: Emanuel AME Church of Charleston, South Carolina'

A paper presented at the Annual Conference of the
Southeast Society of Architectural Historians
Greenville, South Carolina
October 11, 2019

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the response of the resistance movement against slavery, conducted by Denmark Vesey and Reverend Morris Brown, in their efforts to establish the founding of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Charleston, South Carolina. The paper will also examine the architectural design and aesthetic of the current building.

Emanuel AME church was founded in 1816 and is considered the oldest AME church in the southern United States. The church has a history of resistance, from fighting against slavery to the Civil Rights Movement. Emanuel AME was founded by the Reverend Morris Brown, a free black man and prosperous shoemaker by trade, and Denmark Vesey, an enslaved man who purchased his freedom and thrived at being a carpenter in Charleston. Both would both become voices of resistance to slavery. The paper draws conclusions to the consequences of the congregants' actions upon the physical existence of the church buildings they resided in at the time, as well as how draconian laws dictated the siting of the current building and its design, as well as the influence of a French architect's design of the current building upon the landscape of the local vernacular.

Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME), or 'Mother Emanuel' as it is affectionally called, is located at 110 Calhoun Street in Charleston, South Carolina. Founded in 1816 it is considered the oldest AME church in the southern United States. The current owner of the church building is Emanuel AME Church. The church is under the administration of the Seventh District of the AME church. The current use of the building is for spiritual worship.

This church has a unique history as it is defined by its resistance to the institution of slavery, the influence of legal and antebellum traditions designed to maintain a segregationist society based on the construct of race and color. What is unique about Emanuel is that its fight against slavery and southern traditions occurred many decades before the outbreak of the American Civil War, noting that enslaved people as well as free people of color, were fighting to define their agency, while attempting to creating and own a safe physical place to worship. As such, the presence of the various buildings the congregants would call home were influenced either legally or physically, based upon the actions of its people. The current house of worship, constructed nearly three decades after the end of the Civil War, existed within a historical context where African Americans had more freedom to self-determine than at any time during Charleston's antebellum period. Known for its variety of denominations, Charleston had no shortage of architectural styles reflecting the local religious community. With Gothic and Greek Revival, the most prevalent styles in Charleston, it is likely that black church buildings like Emanuel were influenced more by the styles of this time and place, particularly since there was an architect involved in the building design, with little regard to denomination or culture. Further, to have a noted white architect design a church for African Americans may be viewed as the exception rather than the norm of this time. Emanuel's architectural character may say more

about the strong influence of the local vernacular context on the religious design of houses of worship rather that the actions of the congregants housed within the building.

Architectural Character

Emanuel AME was designed by John Henry Devereux, one of Charleston's most prominent architects. Devereaux styled Emanuel AME in the Gothic Revival and is responsible for a number of church buildings which represent different denominations and cultures. One such example is Saint Matthew Lutheran Church, constructed in 1872, and known for the presence of its 297-foot high spire, the tallest in Charleston. Saint Matthew was established in 1840 and served a German community of worshipers. Like Emanuel AME, Saint Matthew is an example of the Gothic Revival. Stella Maris Catholic Church, located on Sullivan's Island, supported an Irish community. Established in 1843 with the completion of construction in 1845, the church building represents another example of the Gothic Revival. The church tower was added to the building in 1880. Though not designed by Devereux, the New Tabernacle Fourth Baptist Church, a short distance from Emanuel AME, is another example of the Gothic Revival style. The architect of this church was a prominent designer in Charleston, Francis D. Lee.

Originally designed as exposed brick, Emanuel AME church's envelope remained masonry until stucco was applied to the exterior of the church in 1949. The stucco application process was completed in 1951.[1] The form of the building is rectilinear with a gable roof. A tower is located at the southwest corner of the building on the south façade. The tower was added to the church in 1903. A metal stairway was originally constructed on the south facade,

[1] Emanuel AME church website. http://www.emanuelamechurch.org/churchhistory.php

allowing congregants to enter the nave of the church on the second floor. The metal stairs were ultimately removed, and a concrete and masonry run of stairs and landing was constructed in its place. No documentation has been found to confirm when the metal stair was demolished, and the new concrete construction occurred. There are lancet windows on all four facades of the building. The south façade features the most prominent applications of the window type. There are three pairs of doors leading parishioners into the interior porch which continues to lead directly into the nave of the church. Directly above the three doors is a window in the form of a pointed arch. Within the pointed arch is a large rose window with stained glass framed within the opening. Directly above the pointed arch is a small circular window. The masonry wall is pitched at the top, simulating the pitch of the roof behind the wall. The pitch of the masonry wall is aesthetically enhanced with a bracketed cornice which is applied parallel to the pitch of the wall. There are two flat buttresses on the east end of the south façade, framing a lancet window. There is a seating aisle on the interior of the church at the east side of the church and framed with a roof pitch which is not as steep as the gable roof over the main portion of the building. Currently, the pointed arch window and the small circular window are covered with bricks and glass and painted white to match the color of the church. A black cross is placed in the center of each window. It is likely that prior to the closing of both windows, the openings allowed natural light to enter the interior of the church.

The form of the tower is designed with a base-body-capital configuration. This tripartite form is articulated with a door at the south face of the tower, along with a series of windows within the body of the tower. There are windows on the south and west faces of the tower. The tower is capped with a spire sheathed in copper shingles and a weathervane at the top of the spire. The flat buttresses, originally capped with white marble stonework, frame the corners of

the tower. The top of each tower buttress was originally capped with an ornate pinnacle, documented as original details and verified in historic images. The pinnacles have since been removed. The current steeple is not original to the building as the original wood-framed steeple was destroyed by Hurricane Hugo in September 1989. The current steel-framed steeple has been reconstructed to match the originally designed spire from 1891 and was dedicated on August 26, 1990.[2] This church has never had a bell in the tower, as it currently uses a digital sound system which simulates the ringing of a bell at appropriate times and events.

History of the Church

Emanuel AME has a history of Afrocentric resistance, from fighting against slavery to the Civil Rights Movement. The history of this congregation reflects the development of religious institutions for African Americans in Charleston. Its roots stem from a religious group of both enslaved and free African Americans organized in 1791.[3] The church was founded in 1816 by the Reverend Morris Brown, a free black man and prosperous shoemaker by trade, and Denmark Vesey, an enslaved man who purchased his freedom and thrived at being a carpenter in Charleston. Both would become voices of resistance to slavery, through their words and actions.

Founded as an English proprietary colony in 1670, South Carolina has had a religious history dominated by Protestants (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Lutherans) but marked by religious tolerance. Until the present century, leading churches have usually reflected a conservative theology and supported the views and morals of 'the

[2] From a church history program image #1593 in the Charleston County Public Library.
[3] *National Park Service,* '
Emanuel AME Church' https://www.nps.gov/places/emanuel-a-m-e-church.htm. Accessed October 10, 2019.

establishment' and of society rather than molding them or guiding them in new directions.[4] The philosophy of early Charlestown was based on religious tolerance and it was believed that with this attitude the settlement would increase in numbers and profitability.[5] However, the growth of Africans in the colony from the late seventeenth century into the late eighteenth century continued as a result of the establishment of plantations, as well as Charleston becoming a major center for the domestic slave trade in America, resulting in the majority of persons living in the city as persons of color, either free or enslaved. As a result of this growth, South Carolina's slave code was the most draconian on the English mainland. City officials monitored every aspect and moment of the lives of blacks in their community, and white ministers played their part. Many owned enslaved domestics, and one assured his mixed-race congregation that the Bible pronounced it 'contrary to God's will to run away or to harbor a runaway'[6] However, by 1860, Charleston's free black population outnumbered the white population by more than three thousand, representing one-third of all free blacks in the state.[7] This growth of Africans brought with it a direct challenge to the city's perception of being a known as a 'Holy City', an unofficial title placed on the city as a result of the religious diversity now present.

By the eighteenth century, Charleston was the wealthiest city in all of the original Thirteen Colonies. Its economy was based on the export of important cash crops such as rice, indigo, and sea island cotton. As these crops were all extremely labor intensive, none could have

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[4] Lewis P. Jones. "South Carolina', *Religion in the Southern States: A Historical Study*, edited with an introduction by Samuel S. Hill. Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1983, 263.
[5] Website article, 'Charleston' located at the following address: https://wwwlcharlestoncvb.com/media
[6] Douglas R. Egerton. 'The Long, Troubled History of Charleston's Emanuel AME Church', *The New Republic*. https://newrepublic.com/article/122070/long-troubled-history-charlestons-emanuel-ame-church. Accessed June 1, 2018.
[7] Bernard E. Powers Jr., 'African Americans in 19th century Charleston,' *Charleston Where History Lives: Charleston's African American Heritage.* Published online from the College of Charleston. http://www.africanamericancharleston.com/19thcentury.html. Accessed June 1, 2018.

been successfully cultivated without reliance on African labor and Charleston became the central port through which Africans entered the colony and state.[8] By 1860, and with a discussion of war looming, Charleston lay divided concerning States Rights, threatening the city's prosperity and position as a major coastal port. On April 12, 1861, Confederate troops issued the first shots of the Civil War when they fired upon Fort Sumter. Though Charleston was sporadically attacked by Union forces during the war, in 1864, three years into the war, General William Tecumseh Sherman, crossing the Savannah River, aimed for the capital city of Columbia, not Charleston, concluding that the city was 'a mere desolated wreck and hardly worth the time to starve it out.'[9] With the end of the war, emancipation brought opportunities for newly freed African Americans to positively guide their lives, including the ability to worship as they wished. This led to many blacks leaving the white churches they attended while being enslaved to create their own denominations as well as construct their own facilities.

Church History and Morris Brown

Emanuel AME was founded as the Hampstead Church in 1816 by African Americans who were former members of Charleston's three Methodist Episcopal churches. State law and city ordinance required lawful churches to be dominated by whites, though African Americans held separate services, usually in the basements. Hampstead Church was part of the 'Bethel Circuit' of the AME Church, which was the first independent black denomination in the United States, and founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1816 by Richard Allen. Hampstead created an independent congregation because of a dispute over the use of a black burial ground. The

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[8] Bernard E. Powers Jr., 'African Americans in 19th century Charleston,' *Charleston Where History Lives: Charleston's African American Heritage.* Published online from the College of Charleston. http://www.africanamericancharleston.com/19thcentury.html. Accessed June 1, 2018.
[9] Website article, 'Charleston' located at the following address: https://wwwlcharlestoncvb.com/media

white-dominated churches had increasingly discriminated against blacks in Charleston, culminating in 1815, when whites discovered that black Methodists had been secretly pooling money to buy freedom for enslaved congregants. Whites moved to restrict black autonomy. They planned to construct a hearse house on top of a black burial ground, a move Charleston blacks saw as a final insult. Over 4,000 black members left white churches in protest and formed an AME church in Charleston. In 1818 church leader Morris Brown discontinued his association with the all-white Bethel United Methodist Church in Charleston, to help form the first Emanuel AME Congregation church. This church quickly became the focal point for the city's enslaved community, and because of this the church congregants were routinely harassed by city officials. State and city ordinance allowed for black worship, but only between sunrise and sunset, and demanded that a majority of the congregants be white. The church's ministers allowed Denmark Vesey, an African American sailor and carpenter, to teach reading and writing, which was a violation of the state's ban on black literacy. This led Charleston authorities to repeatedly shut the church down. One Sunday in June 1818, whites swept into the church, arresting one hundred forty 'free Negroes and Slaves.' Eight churchmen were fined and sentenced to receive ten lashes. Authorities invaded the church again in 1820, and in 1821 the city council warned Reverend Morris Brown that they would not tolerate a 'school for slaves.'[10] Reverend Brown was imprisoned for one month but was never convicted. Upon his release, he and several other prominent members fled to Philadelphia while others managed to reconstitute the congregation in a few years. In reaction to Nat Turner's slave rebellion of 1834, the white-run city of

[10] Douglas R. Egerton. 'The Long, Troubled History of Charleston's Emanuel AME Church', *The New Republic*. https://newrepublic.com/article/122070/long-troubled-history-charlestons-emanuel-ame-church. Accessed June 1, 2018.

Charleston outlawed all-black churches. The AME congregation met in secret until after the Civil War in 1865.[11]

Church History and Denmark Vesey

Denmark Vesey was born in 1767 in the West Indies. Sold as a boy in 1781 to a Bermuda slaver captain named Joseph Vesey, young Denmark accompanied him on many voyages, eventually settling in Charleston with his owner in 1783. In 1800, Denmark was allowed to purchase his freedom with $600.00 he had won in a street lottery.[12] After joining and becoming a member of the segregated Second Presbyterian Church, Vesey would eventually leave that church, choosing to join the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1817. He became a 'class leader,' preaching to a small group of persons in his home during the week. White Charlestonians constantly monitored the African church, disrupting services and arresting members. An angry Vesey began preaching from the Old Testament, particularly Exodus, and taught followers that they were the New Israelites, the chosen people whose enslavement God would punish with death.[13]

Following the June 1818 raid on the African Church by city authorities, where one hundred forty congregants were arrested, black Carolinians were determined to maintain a place of independent worship. The black Carolinians' determination became the motivation for what would become Vesey's planned insurrection. In 1820 several blacks were 'taken up' for holding a late-night service at the church, and city authorities warned that they would not tolerate class

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[11] Emanuel AME church website at www.emanuelamechurch.org.pdf. Accessed June 1, 2018.
[12] *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 'Denmark Vesey' (date published: 28, June 2019), https://www.britannica.com/biography/Denmark-Vesey. Accessed September 19, 2019.
[13] *PBS,* 'This Far By Faith: People of Faith Denmark Vesey' http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/denmark_vesey.html. Accessed October 6, 2019.

leaders conducting instruction as 'the education of such persons was forbidden by law.' The *'African church was the people',* exclaimed Monday Gell, an African-born Ibo who labored as a harness maker. Vesey enlisted 'Gullah Jack' Pritchard, a friend and comrade, with the hope that he could recruit native Africans to join the rebellion. He and Gullah Jack had considered insurrection in 1818 and were determined to attempt it again.[14]

In 1822, Vesey and other leaders from the African Church began plotting a rebellion. Gullah Jack lead conspirators in prayers and African rituals and gave them amulets to protect them in battle. Vesey's theology of liberation inspired potential participants, and word of the rebellion grew. Several enslaved persons however leaked the plot to their masters, and Charleston authorities began arresting leaders. Vesey was captured in June 22, 1822. On July 2nd, Denmark Vesey and five other men were hanged. Gullah Jack was executed several days later.[15] In the aftermath of the Vesey rebellion, the African church was burned down and authorities passes a series of laws further restricting the rights of Charleston slaves.[16] Robert Vesey, one of Denmark's three children and an architect, rebuilt the church beginning in the fall from 1865 to 1872. In 1886, an earthquake demolished the wood-framed church building. The current church, constructed on the same site as the previous building, was completed in 1891.

Site Context

Emanuel AME church is located on Calhoun Street, in the middle of a city block in Charleston, South Carolina. Historically, Calhoun Street was once known as Boundary Street

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[14] *Encyclopedia,* 'Denmark Vesey,' http://www/encyclopedia.com/people/social-sciences-and-law/social-reformers/denmark-vesey. Accessed September 19, 2019
[15] *PBS,* 'This Far By Faith: People of Faith Denmark Vesey' http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/denmark_vesey.html. Accessed October 6, 2019.
[16] Ibid

and was the northern boundary for white citizens of Charleston. The street was used to separate blacks and whites. Blacks lived north of Boundary Street, within a series of adjacent bordered wards, located north and east of the city. Whites lived south of Boundary Street. Persons of color were not allowed to construct buildings made of brick, while whites observed no such construction restriction. Current demographic maps support this historic separation of the races based on housing patterns developed over time in the city; blacks continue to live north of what is now called Calhoun Street, while whites continue to live south of Calhoun Street. The historic relevance of this racial development pattern was exampled when in 1872 the church members of Emanuel chose the current site of the church to build their second house of worship and were required to construct the building out of wood. The opportunity to purchase land south of Boundary Street to build their second church was considered but church members did not want to occupy land owned by whites.[17]

According to Sanborn maps dated June 1888, 1902, and April 1944, the area surrounding the current church site was heavily residential and likely African American. Many families of the church once lived in the surrounding neighborhood and were able to walk to Sunday service as well as attend weekly events. Several June 1888 Sanborn maps document the existence of five churches within a two-block radius of Emanuel: Saint John's Reformed Episcopal Church (an African American church), Citadel Square Baptist Church, Second Presbyterian Church, Saint Luke's Episcopal Church (today this building houses the New Tabernacle Fourth Baptist Church), and a building located directly across the street from Emanuel which was documented

[17] Jane E. Allen, 'AME Church Commemorating 165th Anniversary,' *The Post and Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, dated May 16, 1983. Accessed June 19, 2017.

as vacant in 1888. Only the vacant church building has been demolished, however, the remaining four church buildings exist and continue to function as places of worship.

The repeat of history

Morris Brown, Denmark Vesey, and congregants of the church were determined to create and construct a safe spiritual place to worship and to simply be themselves. Laws, southern tradition, and acts of domestic terror were exercised against persons of color and their church buildings well into the height of the Civil Right era. This reach of destroying Afrocentric sacred space continued most recently with the burning of three churches in Louisiana in late March and early April of 2019. Black churches have always represented spaces within a racially unequal society that were black-owned, black-operated and black-controlled, said Anthony Pinn, a theologian and professor of humanities at Rice University, who studies religion and culture. Because of that, the spaces black churches create can be used to meet community needs, with or without the sanction of others.[18] They are gathering places in either rural or urban communities; a valued space in sparsely or expansive populated areas. White vigilantes and groups which sometimes included local officials destroyed hundreds of black churches. Surges in black church fires erupted during the mid-20th century civil rights movement. Between 1990 and 1996, about 90 black churches were burned in Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, and Louisiana.[19] Within those numbers are a range of stories. Many African American church goers

[18] Ross, Janell, *NBCBLK,* 'Blackness isn't safe, anywhere: How the church burnings in Louisiana send a dangerous message' https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/blackness-isn-t-safe-anywhere-how-church-burnings-louisiana-send-n992511. Accessed October 9, 2019.
[19] Ibid.

attend church for spiritual needs, cultural or family reasons, or for the social connections and camaraderie.[20]

When a destructive action such as this happens to a church building, what is the magnitude of what has been lost? This is a place where members did much of the physical work over the years to update the church's interior and exterior, making it a blend of the old and new. Now, among the items church member in the Louisiana parish fear may have been lost in the fire are a pulpit and railings crafted in the 1870s. Earnest Hines, a 66-year-old deacon and bricklayer at Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, one of the destroyed three churches, stated that '*we the people are the church.* We know that. But some things, they cannot be replaced. And every brick in that building, every person who ever knelt in it, we know, we simply deserve better than this.'[21]

As Monday Gell stated over a hundred and seventy years earlier, 'the African church is the people.' Those people however designed, constructed, and maintained the buildings of the early Black church, defining for themselves the cultural and social value of the relevance of making a safe place for themselves, both then and now. Morris Brown, Denmark Vesey, the AME congregants, as well as lesser known persons, with lesser known histories, and possessing lesser known church houses, are deserving of documentation and discussion in the greater discourse of architectural history as well as African American history as an example of Afrocentric material culture. From the resistance struggle against the institution of slavery in order to create and defend a place for worship, or to the simple maintenance of a country church located in a rural parish, these places of worship deserve the respect afforded to any place of

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

worship. These places of worship are examples of Afrocentric agency, defined by the architecture of the church buildings which houses the people and supports the events such as the resistance to slavery's and draconian segregationist laws and traditions present to the mid-1960s. The continued study of these houses of worship and the documentation of their history are necessary in order to fully understand the socio-cultural presence of the African American experience in the United States.