

Emanuel's Brief History

One Sunday morning at St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, during the fall of 1787, upon refusing to be a further victim of racial discrimination, the Reverend Richard Allen withdrew from St. George's. He purchased an old, dilapidated blacksmith shop. He moved it to a lot that he had purchased on Sixth and Lombard Streets, where he founded a separate Methodist Church, which became Bethel. He associated it with the non-sectarian Free African Society that he established the year before to encourage moral character and to assist members in times of need. When he founded the church, it was a Methodist Church for Africans. Because the Methodist Church sought to control the church that Allen had founded, he separated from the Methodist Church and, on May 9, 1816, founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Reverend Morris Brown, who later became the second bishop of the AME Church, and other African-American ministers and laymen, seceded from the Methodist Church in Charleston due to the cancellation of the few privileges they were given within the church. Brown and about 1,000 followers became the core of Charleston's African Church movement. He then sought to have it affiliated with the Reverend Allen's African Church movement in Philadelphia. On July 15, 1818, he connected his Charleston church with Richard Allen's African Methodist Episcopal.

Charlestonians organized several meeting houses. Eventually, they built a church in the Hampstead suburb of Charleston at Reid and Hanover Streets.

Denmark Vesey was an active member of the Hampstead congregation. He and his master, Captain Joseph Vesey, relocated to Charleston in the late 1790s. Vesey had traveled extensively and was multilingual. In 1799, he won \$1500 from a local lottery, purchased his freedom, and established a carpentry business. Vesey masterminded a very complex but unsuccessful slave insurrection in 1822. Peter Prioleau, the house slave of Colonel John C. Prioleau, informed his master of the Vesey plot after being told about it by another slave. As a result, 131 men were arrested, and the authorities brought charges against 117 men. They released thirty-eight for lack of evidence, and seventy-nine were tried. Fifty-nine were convicted, and twenty of the seventy-nine who were tried were acquitted. Eleven of the men acquitted were determined to be so dangerous that they were expelled from the state of South Carolina. Vesey and five of his co-conspirators were hanged on July 2, 1822, between 6 and 8 a.m. By the year's end, thirty-five men were hanged, and thirty-five were banished from either the state or the country.

Local whites later reacted to Vesey's planned uprising by destroying the Hampstead church and by imposing even more strict regulations on the African-American community. Because of further white hostility, the African church became dormant. Many members went back to white churches, while others continued to worship within the African Church tradition secretly. This continuation of meetings of the Hampstead congregation enabled them to resurface with 3,000 members in 1865.

On September 6, 1865, the trustees of the new but unincorporated Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church purchased the present site of Emanuel. This site was most appealing because it was on the north side of Calhoun Street, where African Americans could live and worship more freely under county jurisdiction. Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, who was forced to leave Charleston in 1835 because he operated a school that was outlawed by the state, returned exactly thirty years later from the north and reorganized the congregation. He founded the South Carolina Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and became its first bishop. The Reverend Richard Harvey Cain, who later became a member of the United States House of Representatives in 1872, was assigned as the congregation's pastor. The church was named "Emanuel," meaning "God with us."

The wooden two-story church that was built on Emanuel's present site in 1872 was damaged by the devastating earthquake of August 31, 1886. The construction of the present structure started in the spring of 1891. It was completed in the spring 1892 under the leadership of the Reverend Lewis Ruffin Nichols for \$35,000. The magnificent brick Gothic Revival structure with encircling marble panels was redecorated and stuccoed from 1949-1951 under the leadership of the Reverend Frank R. Veal for approximately \$67,487. The bodies of the Reverend Nichols and his wife were exhumed and entombed in the base of the steeple of the church so that "they may forever be with the Emanuel that they helped to nurture."

The toil, dedication, and superb skills of Emanuel's builders are the basis for the church being a monumental example of architectural splendor. The exterior's brilliant white with "Charleston green" trim warmly greets all visitors and passersby. Through the vestibule is the sanctuary that contains the 1892 wooden pews, altar, and floor. The three chandeliers also date to the original electrification of the building, except for the globes that were replaced by the present ones in the 1950s and 1960s. The massive pipe organ, purchased for \$800, was dedicated in 1908 and still bellows the same rich notes today. It is located in the choir loft to the rear of the sanctuary facing the pulpit. The gas lamps of days past have been preserved and line the sides of the church above and beneath the balcony railings. A string of dentil work,

a prevalent architectural device, is between the two rows of gas lamps on both sides of the church.

Two murals of Christ are mounted on either side of the altar. They were painted by John H. Green, a local African-American artist, in 1945 and commissioned by the church's Repair Club. Beneath them are two marble memorials honoring the Bishop Richard Harvey Cain and Bishop Moses Buckingham Salter, former pastors who dynamically led their congregations. They became the fourteenth and twenty-first bishops, respectively. A majestic stained-glass window stands between the murals, allowing the sunlight to shed a peaceful glow behind the altar.

Thirty-three men (including Morris Brown) and one woman served the congregation as its pastor. Of the thirty-four pastors, five of them became bishops, five served as college presidents, and one became a general officer of the AME Church. The general officer was the Reverend A. W. Holman. In 1978, Reverend Holman came to Emanuel from Bethel AME Church in Georgetown, South Carolina. He was a native of Lincolnton, South Carolina, which was founded by Blacks after the Civil War. The leader of the movement to purchase the land for the town was the Reverend Richard H. Cain. The town was named for Abraham Lincoln. Reverend Holman provided the leadership for the restoration of portions of the church in 1979. He served as Emanuel's pastor from 1978 to 1988. Holman came back to Emanuel as a congregant in 2000, after he retired from his position as director of the department of salary supplement of the AME Church. He died in 2004.

A bequest in Reverend Holman's will giving the church some of the books from his personal library and \$5,000 to build a suitable bookcase for the books provided the resources for Emanuel's A. W. Holman Memorial Library. The bookcase was designed by Willi Glee and built by Larry Imlas of Low Country Case and Millwork. The library was dedicated on September 9, 2018.

As a result of Hurricane Hugo on September 21-22, 1989, Emanuel and some of its properties sustained great damage. Over \$230,000 was spent for repairs to the church alone, including the replacement of its 1903 wood-framed steeple that was destroyed. A new steel-framed steeple was dedicated on August 26, 1990. Under the steadfast leadership of the Reverend John H. Gillison, who came to Emanuel in 1988, the church was able to move forward to a strong recovery from the disastrous aftermath of the hurricane.

In December 1998, under the leadership of the Reverend Dr. William Smith, the church received a new copper-clad steeple after a year of restoration efforts. It is crowned with an operative gold-leaf weather vane. The steeple restoration cost approximately \$70,000. The Reverend Dr. Smith initiated a

reorganization of the church's infrastructure and continued improvements as we moved into the new millennium.

On Wednesday evening, June 17, 2015, after three meetings, including a Quarterly Conference, that convened back to back, beginning at 4:30 p.m., a self-acclaimed white supremacist entered the lower level of the church. He joined the pastor and eleven other members for Wednesday night Bible study. When he entered, he asked for the pastor and joined him at one of the tables. After sitting with them for about an hour, when they stood to pray as was customary when a meeting ended, the members bowed their heads. The stranger pulled out his Glock handgun and commenced to shoot them. When he finished, he had killed nine of the twelve individuals in the room. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death.