National Significance

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY
NOMINATION FORM

Continuation Sheet Item Number Page

Name Historic Bethel A.M.E. Church Location 1528 Sumter Street

Common Same Classification Building

Owner The African Methodist Episcopal Church
% Dr. J. Arthur Holmes and the Trustees of Bethel A.M.E. Church
1528 Sumter Street
P.O. Box 11341 Columbia, South Carolina 29211

Representation in Existing Surveys
Inventory of Historic Places in South Carolina, 1981

Description Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is a monumental Romanesque Revival brick church building designed by architect John Anderson Lankford, and built in 1921. The church has a rectangular plan with a gable roof and two towers on its facade (west elevation). Entrance to the church is via three double doors at the basement level of the facade. These doors are framed by engaged Romanesque columns, which support semicircular arches with the alternating voussoirs projecting. The columns, the arches, and the basement walls up to the springing of the arches are of concrete, scored to represent stone; the remainder of the church is of stretcher bond brickwork, with concrete trim. The towers rise at the north and south ends of the facade. The north tower is three stages above the basement, while the south tower is two stages. The north tower has a tripartite stained glass window beneath a semicircular arch at its first stage; three windows of stepped height, corresponding to an interior staircase, at its second stage; and an open belfry with a tripartite arcade*

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Significance
Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is significant as the work of John Anderson Lankford, one of the first registered black architects in the United States, and official architect for the A.M.E. Church. Lankford received training in engineering, mechanics, and construction arts at Lincoln Institute, and after graduation became part owner of a blacksmith shop. His work caught the attention of Booker T. Washington, who invited him to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Following a distinguished academic career, Lankford taught for a time at Tuskegee. John Lankford went on to teach at other technical institutes in Alabama and in North Carolina, where he designed his first building, a machine shop for the Coleman Cotton Mills in Concord, North Carolina. By 1901 Lankford had acquired a respected reputation for buildings in several states.*

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Acreage less than 1

Verbal Boundary Description The nominated property is shown as bounded by the red line on the accompanying Richland County Tax Map # 28, drawn at a scale of 1 inch = 100 feet. This boundary includes the historic church building, while excluding the adjacent hospital buildings and pavement.

UTM Reference Point 17/496850/3762720

Other Information

Description (continued)
at its third level. The south tower has three windows of stepped height at its first level and three tall arched windows at its second level. Each tower terminates in a brick parapet, resting upon corbeled brickwork, with tall pyramidal roofs crowning the whole. Gabled dormers, containing semicircular-arched louvered vents, pierce the center of each face of the parapets. Diagonal ribs rise from staggered concrete corbels at each corner of the towers to terminate in small pinnacles above the parapets. The center of the facade, between the two towers, has a large round-arched window with three arched windows and two roundels beneath an encompassing semicircular arch, and a tripartite louvered vent beneath the gable end. Concrete belt courses run from the springing points of the arches on both sets of windows. Another concrete belt course separates the basement from the main level.

The north and south elevations of the church each extend five bays beyond the towers. The bays are separated by triple-shouldered buttresses. The basement level has two six-over-six sash windows in each bay, while the nave of the church has a large, round-arched window , composed of three round-headed windows and two roundels, encompassed by a semicircular brick arch, in each bay, on both elevations. The eaves of the church, beneath the roof, have corbeled brickwork. The rear (east) elevation of the church has irregular fenestration, with no elaboration.

Bethel A.M.E. Church is entered at the basement level, which has a lobby opening onto a vast undercroft, whose ceiling slopes downwards towards the east in reflection of the sloping floor of the nave above. Twin staircases rise from the sides of the lobby to open into the rear of the nave of the church. These staircases continue to rise, giving access to the gallery of the church and to the belfry in the north tower. The nave of the church is rectangular with wooden flooring, paneled wainscoting, and plaster walls. A pressed-tin ceiling, in three planes, encloses the nave. The pews are arranged in concentric arcs, focusing on the chancel. A large U-shaped gallery, supported on six metal columns with paneled wooden bases, overlooks the nave; this gallery has a paneled wooden rail and a brass handrail. The gallery and nave together have a capacity of approximately five hundred. An elevator has been installed at the southeast corner of the church.

The nave and gallery focus on the chancel at the east end of the church. A large plaster arch encloses the chancel, which occupies a three-sided apse. The recesses of the building behind the apse are occupied by robing rooms and mechanical equipment, so that the apse is not visible from the exterior. The chancel has a wooden balustrade separating it from the nave. An altar, a pulpit, choir stalls, and a large organ occupy the stepped dais of the chancel. The side walls of the chancel have large round-arched windows, filled with stained glass, that have no exterior exposure; the central panel has a large arch spanning the organ recess.

Bethel A.M.E. Church is in excellent physical condition.

Significance (continued)
In 1902 Lankford moved to Washington D.C. to practice architecture. His first commission, the grand lodge building for the United Order of True Reformers, was the first project in the country to be totally financed, designed, and built by blacks, and established Lankford as a superior architect. Although Lankford became well known for his designs of residences for wealthy blacks in the Washington area and for educational and fraternal buildings, he was best known for his churches. In 1908 Lankford was elected official architect of the A.M.E. Church. He travelled throughout the south and west designing churches and overseeing construction. Lankford saw the church as the center of the black community, and so designed each church with a social hall as well as a sanctuary. He also provided each congregation with a booklet about the church's construction and maintenance.[1]

The congregation of Bethel A.M.E. Church organized in 1866 in an old sword factory on Wayne Street. The congregation moved several times before settling into their present home on Sumter Street; this is the second building on the site. Financial difficulties delayed construction of the present church and necessitated architect John A. Lankford scaling down his original design, which had included a swimming pool and shower facilities. The congregation worshipped

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Significance (continued)

in First Presbyterian Church until their own building was completed in 1921. Bethel continues to serve Columbia's black community from this location.[2]

[1]National Historic Landmark nomination form, Chappelle Administration Building (J.A. Lankford, architect), National Register files, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C.

[2]History of Building of Bethel Metropolitan Church, five detached pages in possession of Bethel A.M.E. Church, Columbia, S.C. "History of the Church," n.d., newspaper article in possession of Bethel A.M.E. Church.

Columbia, South Carolina. Bethel A.M.E. Church. History of Building of Bethel Metropolitan. [Five detached pages.]

Columbia, South Carolina. Bethel A.M.E. Church. "History of the Church," n.d. [Newspaper article.]

Columbia, South Carolina. South Carolina Department of Archives and History. National Register files. National Historic Landmark nomination form for Chappelle Administration Building, Columbia, South Carolina.

Withey, Henry F., and Withey, Elsie Rathburn. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970.