

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church
912 3rd Avenue North
HPC #88-01 - Designated April 1988



Built in 1922, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is Gothic Revival in style and located in the Jamestown neighborhood northwest of St. Petersburg's downtown core. It is the first and oldest continuing predominantly African American church and denomination in the city and has served a key social, civic and religious role in the life of that community. The church was located in the midst of a thriving business area and many activities were held at Bethel for the purpose of uplifting the spirits of its members and people in the surrounding community. In fact, because the church was such a key institution in the neighborhood it was named "Methodist Town" a name it would keep until the mid-1970s. Many of the founders were local businessmen or laborers who contributed labor or construction materials to assist in the building of the original and future churches including Charles Hargrave, property owner; Ancell McLaughlin, insurance agent; Loomis Williams, land developer; Jake Hughes, hotel and landowner; Nathaniel Williams, mortician; Robert Blue, grocery store proprietor; and Albert Debose, developer.

The church building is a good example of Gothic Revival architecture. Based on current inventory information less than one percent of the surveyed buildings in St. Petersburg are Gothic Revival. It features a rectangular-shaped floor plan, a parapeted roof, two towers topped with battlements, and numerous pointed arched windows with traceries. The Gothic windows have stained glass in them.

The Bethel AME church was first constructed in 1894 under the auspices of Reverend J.S. Braswell. Built initially of wood, the church was altered several times and later relocated across the street so that the larger masonry church known as the "Stone Church" could be erected in 1905. In 1922, construction began on the present brick building which was architecturally based on the mother church of the denomination, Bethel A.M.E. in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was literally built right over the existing masonry church. Church records indicate that only one Sunday service had to be suspended due to the construction activities.