

Media Release



bluffton
HEART OF THE LOWCOUNTRY

August 7, 2019

For More Information:

Debbie Szpanka
Public Information Officer
Town of Bluffton
20 Bridge Street
Bluffton, South Carolina 29910
(Office): 843.706.4534
(Cell): 843.540.2274
(Email): dszpanka@townofbluffton.com

Town of Bluffton Applauds the Campbell Chapel AME Church For its Induction into the National Register of Historic Places

Together with A Call to Action, a local civic organization, and Celebrate Bluffton, an organization devoted to historic preservation, Town of Bluffton leaders congratulate and celebrate the induction of the Campbell Chapel AME Church into the National Register of Historic Places – only the second Town structure to achieve this national honor.

“This is a huge accomplishment; one that honors an historic structure with a story which has never been told in a formal venue. The induction and its back-story give praise to the many hands and hearts which built this church, provided an educational space to African American children in Reconstruction and embodied the story of hope, resilience and dedication of freed men and women,” Nathaniel “Nate” Pringle, president and founder of A Call to Action, said.

The only other Bluffton structure which has been inducted into the National Register of Historic Places is the Church of the Cross, which was listed in May 1975. The National Register of Historic Places is a list maintained by the National Park Service, which is a division of the United States Department of Interior.

“The only two structures in Bluffton which are listed on the national register are churches and now we have an expanded testimony on how these specific churches contributed to the fabric of Bluffton’s story and our community,” Town Manager Marc Orlando said.

Five Years of Research:

The journey to gain historic recognition for the church began in 2014 when Pringle wanted to inform the then-new pastor, Rev. Jon R. Black, of the cultural heritage and significance of the chapel. Pringle and Carolyn Coppola, founder of Celebrate Bluffton and a local historic preservationist, started discussing the project. The two spent countless hours researching, digging through

documents, listening to elders for oral history and piecing the information together. The process began in earnest after Coppola submitted the research to the State Historic Preservation Office and was given the approval to proceed. Coppola and Pringle then dedicated nearly five years collecting the information needed to submit the application to the National Register. The National Register of Historic Places announced Campbell Chapel AME Church's place on the Register April 26, 2019.

"The application for Campbell Chapel AME Church was similar to writing a thesis," Coppola said. "The challenge was that the sole piece of historic documentation was a copy of the church's deed. The majority of the church's history was pieced together through a physical examination of the building, oral history of its congregants, census data and Freedman's bank records. It was truly an investigation into the church's and Bluffton's past."

The church, originally owned by a white Methodist congregation, was constructed in 1853 and then was bought by nine freed slaves. The new owners converted it into an African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Fred Hamilton, an officer of the Campbell Chapel AME Church and a town council member, said he is a descendant of one of the founding members of the church.

"I knew the story of the church growing up and so did many in the congregation since the entire church was made up of several families at that time," Hamilton said. "Now, the congregation is made up of hundreds of families and this recognition gives an opportunity for everyone in the community to know the church's history, connect to its story and know its contributions to Bluffton."

Coppola said this was the opportunity to tell the entire story of the significant role this church played during throughout its more than 150 years of service.

"Preservation isn't about just about saving buildings, it's about strengthening communities," Coppola said. "This induction gives this structure its spotlight for the regional significance it contributed to the lives of freed slaves and how its role echoes the national story of that time."

Church Served Many Community Roles:

Beyond its role of a worship center, this church was also a safe gathering place for African Americans during the Reconstruction era. The church's Sunday school was also the only school many children of freed slaves attended.

"The church's Sunday school played a role in the education of African Americans," Coppola said. "This education contributed to the congregation's rise in social status and resurgence of the AME Church in the south. Campbell Chapel AME Church served the educational, political and social needs of its community during this crucial historical period and it is still a servant-leader of Bluffton."

"When we acknowledge and invest in our historic structures, voices of the past rise up and the entire town reclaims the story of those neighbors who has walked before us," Pringle said. "When we honor our collective history, we honor all the facets of what makes us the community we are today."

Timeline of Campbell Chapel AME Church

- 1853: The church was constructed by a white Methodist congregation
- 1863: Emancipation was announced.
- 1863 – 1870: Seventy-seven African Methodist Episcopal Church missionaries were sent to the South to aid the needs of newly emancipated.
- 1874: Trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church South for St. Luke's Parish sold the church and property to nine former slaves, who organized a new AME congregation in Bluffton.
- 1874: A cast-iron bell was purchased and installed and remains in the cupola today. This bell was crucial to the historic research for the company's inscription is still visible on the bell and this provided clues to dates which the bell was bought and first used.
- 1877: This year marks the end of the Reconstruction Era and the time that the AME Church was the second largest African American Church in South Carolina.

#####