

VLR-10/14/86 NRHP-12/4/86
**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

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National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic st. John's African Methodist Episcopal Church DHL File No. 122-211

and or common Same as above

2. Location

street & number 539-45 East Bute Street N/A not for publication

city, town Norfolk N/A vicinity of

state Virginia code 51 county City of Norfolk code 710

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes; restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes; unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	<u>N/A</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name St. John's A.M.E. Church Mrs. Viola Carr

street & number 539-45 East Bute Street

city, town Norfolk N/A vicinity of state Virginia 23510

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Norfolk City Hall

street & number N/A

city, town Norfolk state Virginia 23510

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Division of Historic Landmarks Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no
File No. 122-211

date 1985, 1986 federal state county local

depository for survey records Division of Historic Landmarks, 221 Governor Street

city, town Richmond state VA 23219

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one	
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved	date <u> N/A </u>
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed			

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

St. John's African Methodist Episcopal Church, Norfolk, Virginia, erected in 1887-88 at 539-45 East Bute Street in what was at the time a Norfolk downtown area, remains an almost unaltered example of Richardsonian-style architecture. It is the only church in the area of predominantly brick construction relying stylistically on a distinctive interpretation of the Lombard (North Italian) ecclesiastical style. The only exterior modification is a small rear addition for mechanical equipment. The interior plan consists of a large nave with a horseshoe-shaped balcony. This area remains unchanged except for the altar section and the organ, both of which were rebuilt in the 1970's. The nomination consists of two contributing buildings.

ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS

St. John's African Methodist Episcopal Church in its design is a distinctive interpretation in the spirit of Henry Hobson Richardson, of Northern Italian Lombard Romanesque ecclesiastical architecture without being a literal copy. St. John's is reminiscent of the facade of Sant' Ambrogio in Milan (6th century) in many of its details such as the red brick, the arcades and the steep-pitched gable. The general massing of the building is dominated by an overly large, heavy and steeply pitched slate roof. This was dictated by the internal requirement to accommodate a large sanctuary and horseshoe-shaped balcony with a seating capacity of 1,500 people. This roof is pierced by three shallow, rectangular dormers which provide for ventilation. The main facade of the church faces north on East Bute Street. This facade is accented by a centered stone entrance portico, containing the main entrance to the church and is architecturally the most articulated and complex facade of the building. One story in height, this portico, built of light grey freestone, is the most ornate part of the church. Its design is reminiscent of the ambulatory of a Romanesque abbey. It consists of two large openings headed by semi-circular arches. The openings are separated by three small columns of the Tuscan-Romanesque order which are mounted on a plinth. The columns' capitals are carved in a rich Romanesque fashion with intertwined foliage. The outside corners of the porticos are terminated by small spur buttresses, the top of which rise above the portico cornice to terminate in low peaked pinnacles. The two arches feature bracket lanterns made of bronze, the wall plate of which act as visual keystones and which extend to the underside of the very simple and slightly projected cornice. One enters the portico by means of two shallow steps and then enters the church proper through a pair of large double doors whose openings repeat the arches on the front of the portico. Each of the double doors consists of two large leaves carved in six-panel design, with the two top panels being glazed with clear glass. The upper part of the door opening is filled in with a semi-circular panelled overdoor or transom. The main Bute Street (north) facade consists of a center section with a steep gable. The rake of the roof is accented by a slight overhang consisting of brownstone and terminates in a large round brownstone finial richly carved with a rose and ivy motif. There is a large opening with semi-circular arched head in the center of this facade. This opening is subdivided; the bottom 2/3 are taken up by two round-headed openings separated by a small column. Each of these two openings is further subdivided by vertical tracery. The upper third of the opening is made up of a large rose window which consists of an outerband of eight semi-circular openings, while the center carries four circular opening arranged in the form of a cross. The tracery itself is heavy and consists of metal filled in with stained glass, the

(See Continuation Sheet #1)

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7. SUMMARY DESCRIPTION - Architectural Analysis

lower part of which depicts the annunciation to the shepherds while the medallions in the rose carry the Alpha and Omega and the symbols of the apostles. The color range of this whole window is noteworthy as being largely in the lighter range, which allows a flood of cool north light to bathe the otherwise dark nave dominated by the enormous mass of the exposed underside of the roof (originally dark stained planking) and the dark stained roof trusses. This part of the facade is further accentuated by two small windows and a red stone band at the peak as well as by four small windows; the latter are set in round-headed masonry openings arranged in vertical parts on either side of the large center window. The intersection of this facade roof with the slightly protected west tower is embellished with a single red stone gargyle.

The dominant elements of the front facade are the two flanking towers. The west tower is rectangular, rises above the nave and projects slightly forward. The east tower is lower and its peak is approximately level with the nave roof ridge. The shape of the west tower is that of an octagon as seen from the front and side but modified to a rectangle where it abuts the nave roof. The front (north) side is flush with the main church facade. The towers house the stairs which provide access to the second-floor nave and its balcony while the higher west tower also serves as the bell tower. Architecturally, the two towers help to visually reduce the weight of the overly heavy gable of the main facade and provide a frame and terminus for the facade composition as a whole. The west bell tower combines various Romanesque design elements in a fairly complex system of fenestration and wall openings which are centered one above the other. At the first floor, there is a single round-arched window with stained glass. At the second level, there is a larger opening located above a projecting ornamental brick course. This opening is divided into two round-arched windows separated by a brick band. Above this opening is a rose window with heavy wood tracery. The rose consists of eight circular openings surrounding a slightly larger central circle. Above this is another ornamental projecting brick course which is surmounted by a masonry panel pierced by a pair of small round-headed windows. Slightly above these is another projecting brick course which also marks the interception of the nave roof with the tower. This junction point is accented with a single red stone gargyle. Above this point, the heavy masonry mass of the tower becomes much lighter. The masonry is now reduced to square masonry shafts located at the four corners which ultimately extend above the tower cornice line to terminate in small copper-roofed peaked turrets, the tops of which are emphasized by a projecting brick neck band. Slightly recessed behind the face of these four shafts are the main facades of the tower. These consist of a round-arched opening which takes up the full width of the panel. This is divided by brick tracery into two round-headed openings above which there is a round opening flanked by two small triangular openings. This tracery is surmounted by a brick gable. The openings themselves are filled with scallop-edged louvres. The gable is surmounted by a row of blind perpendicular tracery capped off by the projection of the tower's roof cornice. The tower roof is a rectangular pyramid covered in slate which terminates in a

(See Continuation Sheet #2)

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7. SUMMARY DESCRIPTION - Architectural Analysis

copper cross finial. The east tower is octagonal in shape on its north and east facades which are of brick. The tower shape is modified to a rectangle where it adjoins the nave roof and appears to be of frame construction with a covering of asphalt roofing shingles. The corner walls of the octagon are slightly narrower than the sides which parallel the main building facades. The lower part of the tower, facing the street, is flush with the building facade. The mass of the tower is embellished with a number of ornamental projecting brick bands. The tower itself is slightly corbeled out at the eave line of the sanctuary roof. On the street facade, the top band of the tower consists of solid brick piers flanking a small engaged brick pediment in which is centered a small-headed window. Along the rake line of this pediment, there is vertical tracery similar to that on the west tower. The other sides of the tower do not have the pediment but are solely embellished with a band of tracery. The whole tower is surmounted by a simple masonry cornice above which a small peaked roof extends at each of the tower corners while a large octagonal pyramid-shaped slate roof covers the tower as a whole. This terminates in a copper cross finial similar to that on the west tower. The overall height of the east tower is much lower than that of the west tower with its peak at approximately the same elevation as the ridge line on the main building. The tower is pierced on the first and second levels by a series of round-headed windows centered on each of the sides, with the openings facing the street being slightly lower than the others. The fenestration on the north (street) side is surmounted by a rose window matching that on the west tower. Glazing consists of colored glass. The side walls are divided into five bays which encompass the area of the nave. This area is delineated by spur buttresses and stiffeners for the wall. These bays are preceded on the front facade by the projected sides of the two towers and are followed at the rear by a one- and two-story tall service structure. The spur buttresses are of limited structural utility. The massive roof trusses, because of their design, which includes a lower chord consisting of tie rods and turnbuckles, do not exert any horizontal thrust which thus precludes the need for heavy or flying buttresses. The masonry bays between the buttresses are pierced by three openings which are centered above each other. All openings have brownstone sills and a moulded bull-nosed brick surround and arch. The openings at the first level are paired windows with segmental arches glazed in part with stained glass depicting ecclesiastical symbols while those opening on office areas have colored glass. Fenestration at the second level consists of similarly paired long rectangular openings with segmental arch heads. Glazing on this level which is seen from the nave, represents scenes from the life of Christ. The most ornate fenestration occurs at the uppermost level. Here, the clerestory is composed of tri-partite round-headed windows with heavy wood tracery. These openings take up almost the entire space between the spur buttresses and are glazed with multi-colored glass. The openings in the last bay toward the rear of the church have been modified to provide emergency door openings onto industrial type metal fire escapes. The west facade is further interrupted by a high rectangular brick chimney with a corbeled cap. The end of the facade closest to the street (north) frontage of the church is taken up by the two projecting corner towers of St. John's.

(See Continuation Sheet #3)

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates April 1888 **Builder/Architect** Charles Cassell, 47 Granby Street, Norfolk, VA

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

St. John's A.M.E. Church is architecturally significant as the only ecclesiastical edifice in the Tidewater area designed in North Italian (Lombard) Romanesque idiom. It incorporates in its design, but does not copy slavishly, features (notably in the detailing of its masonry elements) reminiscent of Sant' Ambrogio (6th century) in Milan, Italy. Together with two other downtown churches built in the H.H. Richardson Romanesque Revival style, it represents for Norfolk an architectural style which dominated American ecclesiastical architecture at the end of the 19th century. Moreover, St. John's is significant as the last remaining known structure which can be directly associated with Charles M. Cassell, a man hailed as one of Norfolk's leading ^(late) 19th-century, early 20th-century architects. St. John's is further noteworthy as the largest church constructed by blacks in Norfolk during the 19th century.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

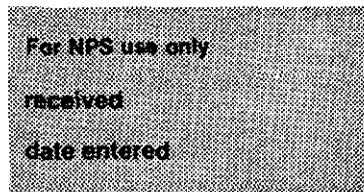
St. John's A.M.E. Church is a significant element in Norfolk's architectural history. The structure is the earliest of a series of churches erected in Norfolk in the spirit and style of the H.H. Richardson Romanesque Revival. It is the only church in the Tidewater area which employed the Romanesque style associated with Northern Italy (Lombardy). It is a distinctive adaptation of that architecture without being a copy. It used stylistic elements such as red brick arcades, steeply pitched gable and ornamental brick work which are derived from those used in the Sant' Ambrogio (6th century A.D.) in Milan, Italy. Taken in conjunction with the nearby First Baptist Church (1906) and Epworth Methodist Church (1894), which stylistically rely upon North European Romanesque design with heavy reliance on rock-faced rusticated stone facades, it provides an unmatched local example of the range of style which characterized the ecclesiastical architecture of the Romanesque Revival period. St. John's and its adjacent parsonage built in a modified version of the Georgian Revival style are also among the very few buildings predating the turn-of-the-century which survive in downtown Norfolk.

St. John's is also the only surviving structure which can be associated with one of Norfolk's leading architects, Charles M. Cassell. Whether Cassell designed the church or simply supervised its construction is not known for certain. Robert W. Lamb (writing in 1888) stated that "The largest church edifice erected by our colored people will be, however, the St. John's A.M.E. Church situated on Bute Street, near Church Street. The cornerstone of the new church,

(See Continuation Sheet #4)

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8. SIGNIFICANCE - Historical Background

now being built on the site of the old one by Messrs. Tee and Brittingham, was laid April 16, 1888. Under the supervision of Mr. Cassell, one of our city's excellent architects, the work is being rapidly pushed and will be completed this year making a very handsome addition to the architecture of this part of the city."¹ Chataigne's City Directory of 1887 lists the firm of Cassell and Cassell, Architects. A Chamber of Commerce publication of 1893 provides somewhat more information on Charles M. Cassell. He is now listed by himself along with his projects, several of which are shown in photographs. This list does not include St. John's. The sketch further states that residences were his specialty and that commissions of this type employed him the year round. Cassell's preferred style was Northern European Romanesque Revival featuring rock-faced rusticated stone facades. He also designed a church erected in Portsmouth, Virginia (Park Place Church). This structure used wood siding and stylistically was a rectangular building featuring an abundance of gables and a small cupola in a style which can only be called Queen Anne with Byzantine overtones. Unfortunately, none of these buildings have survived making comparisons impossible. However, judging by the photos, none shows the sensitivity of design and ability to interpret the hallmarks of a period which are manifest in St. John's. The discrepancy between the quality of the design of St. John's and Cassell's other work could be due to the fact that Cassell only supervised the construction. The Chamber of Commerce publication tells us that "Charles M. Cassell has been twenty years in practice - eight here and twelve before that in Baltimore.... His perceptor in the business was his uncle, Charles E. Cassell, a leading architect of Baltimore."² It is possible that the actual design was the work of the uncle and that Charles M. Cassell moved to Norfolk to supervise construction and then set up his own practice.

The history of St. John's congregation is also of great interest as closely paralleling the social evolution of Norfolk's black population from slavery to freedom. It began as an outreach effort around 1800 by the Cumberland Street Methodist Church, obtained its independence during the Civil War in 1863 and joined the A.M.E. connection in 1864. Thereafter, the congregation through its own efforts managed to erect what was then the largest black church edifice in Norfolk. They have taken an active role in Virginia A.M.E. affairs ever since. The congregation was instrumental in the establishment of St. Mark's A.M.E. and John M. Brown, named after the Reverend John M. Brown, the first pastor of St. John's A.M.E. and the revitalization of St. James A.M.E. John M. Brown, founded in 1902, was subsequently disbanded in 1932; St. Mark's merged with another congregation and became known as Union Chapel; St. James is still active.

¹ Robert W. Lamb, Ed., Our Twin Cities of the Nineteenth Century, Norfolk and Portsmouth. (Norfolk, Virginia, 1883-8), pp. 158.

² The Chamber of Commerce Book: Pictures in Maritime Dixie. Norfolk, Va. Port and City. (Norfolk, Virginia, 1893), p. 48.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Chataigne, J. H. Compiler. Chataigne's Directory for Norfolk, Portsmouth and Berkeley, 1889. Norfolk, Va., 1889.

The Chamber of Commerce Book: Pictures in Maritime Dixie. Norfolk, Va. Port and City. Norfolk, Va., 1893. (See Continuation Sheet # 5)

10. Geographical Data

Acree of nominated property approx. one acre

Quadrangle name Norfolk South, VA

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A	<u>1</u> <u>8</u>	<u>3</u> <u>8</u> <u>5</u> <u>6</u> <u>4</u> <u>0</u>	<u>4</u> <u>0</u> <u>7</u> <u>8</u> <u>9</u> <u>8</u> <u>0</u>	B			
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C				D			
E				F			
G				H			

Verbal boundary description and justification JUSTIFICATION

The property boundaries correspond to the parcel originally purchased by the congregation in 1848.

(See Continuation Sheet # 5)

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	<u>N/A</u>	code	county	<u>N/A</u>	code
state	<u>N/A</u>	code	county	<u>N/A</u>	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Lisbeth M. Coker, Historic Preservation Consultant

organization N/A

date June 9, 1986

street & number 50 Channing Avenue

telephone (804) 393-8836

city or town Portsmouth

state Virginia 23702

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature



H. Bryan Mitchell, Director
title Division of Historic Landmarks

date October 31, 1986

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register: 1986

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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ST. JOHN'S AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NORFOLK, VA

Continuation sheet #5

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

The Cumberland Street Methodist Church records, Norfolk, Va. On file with First United Methodist Church (current name), Norfolk, Va.

Lamb, Robert W., Ed. Our Twin Cities of the Nineteenth Century, Norfolk and Portsmouth. Norfolk, Va., 1883-8.

Monumental A.M.E. Church. Souvenir Program - 25th Anniversary. 1927. On file with Monumental A.M.E. Church (formerly John M. Brown A.M.E. Church), Norfolk, Va.

Roberts, K. and A.M., Eds. Moreau de St. Mery's American Journey 1793-98. Garden City, N.Y., 1747.

St. John's A.M.E. Church. A Souvenir of the Burning of the Last Mortgage. December 12, 1915. On file with St. John's A.M.E. Church, Norfolk, Va.

St. John's A.M.E. Church. A Trinary Observance Program. November 17-24, 1963. On file with St. John's A.M.E. Church, Norfolk, Va.

St. John's A.M.E. Church. A.M.E. Historical Digest. Norfolk, Va., 1983. On file with St. John A.M.E. Church, Norfolk, Va.

St. John's A.M.E. Church. 119th Anniversary 1863-1982 Program. On file with St. John's A.M.E. Church, Norfolk, Va.

St. John's A.M.E. Church. One Hundred and Thirteenth Session of the Virginia Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Program May 2 - May 6, 1979. On file with St. John's A.M.E. Church, Norfolk, Va.

St. John's A.M.E. Church. Organ Rededication Program. December 9, 1979. On file with St. John's A.M.E. Church, Norfolk, Va.

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Wertenbaker, T.J. (2nd Edn. Edited by M.W. Schlegel) Norfolk Historic Southern Port. Durham, N.C., 1962.

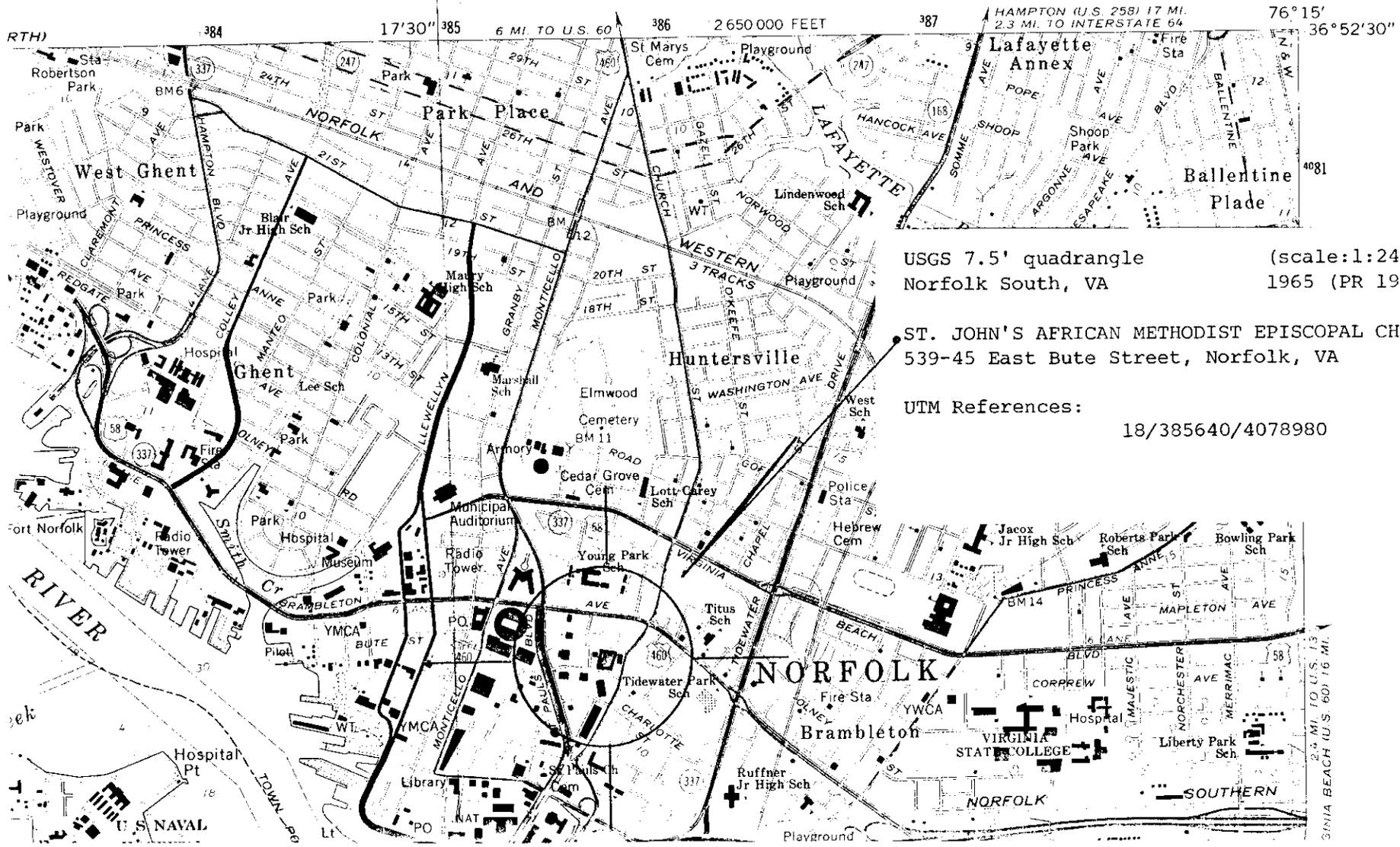
10. VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Beginning at a point (A) at SW corner of the parcel and extending 174.52' in an easterly direction to the confluence of Fox Lane; thence following the R/W line of Fox Lane 15.18' in a northeasterly direction; thence extending 100.52' in northerly direction to the intersection of the Fox Lane and Bute Street rights-of-way; thence in a westerly direction 184'; and thence extending in a southerly direction 110.00' to the point of origin.

OF VIRGINIA
L RESOURCES

NORFOLK SOUTH QUADRANGLE
VIRGINIA
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

5757' 1 NW
LITTLE CREEK



USGS 7.5' quadrangle (scale:1:24000)
Norfolk South, VA 1965 (PR 1980)

ST. JOHN'S AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
539-45 East Bute Street, Norfolk, VA

UTM References:
18/385640/4078980

2.4 MI. TO U.S. 13
SINIA BEACH (U.S. 60) 1.6 MI.