The Architectural Significance of St. Michael's Church

It took ten years to build St. Michael's Church, from 1751–1761. When completed, it was considered a feat of engineering unparalleled in colonial America. There are many innovative architectural features that account for the church's widely celebrated status.

Portico

A freestanding portico runs along the Meeting Street side of the building. St. Michael's was the first American colonial church to feature a two-story portico, which is supported by Tuscan columns.

The Nave

The main body of the church is constructed of brick covered with stucco.

No columns were used to support the fifty-foot width of the church. Rather, an innovative system of trusses supports the ceiling and roof. This design was regarded as an architectural phenomenon designed and constructed by local carpenter, Samuel Cardy.



At the time the church was built, Anglican services placed great emphasis on the sermon rather than the liturgy. As a result, the heart-pine pulpit was placed in the center of the church, overlooking the congregation. A domed canopy, or sounding board, is topped by a pineapple finial as a sign of hospitality. The finial was a non-traditional design, designating the independent spirit of the colony. Fluted Corinthian columns support the canopy, and six scrolled brackets carry the pulpit.

The box pews were made of native cedar. The Governor's Pew #43 was occupied by George Washington (1791) and Robert E. Lee (1861) when they attended services.

A rail of English-made wrought iron, imported around 1772, surrounds the chancel. This piece is among the earliest significant wrought iron installations in Charleston.

The Font

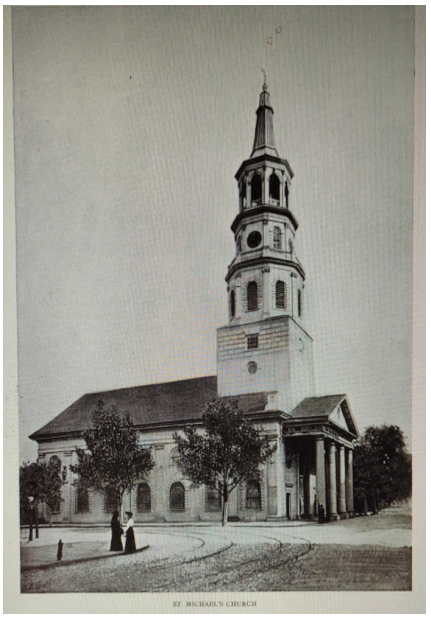
The London-made font is an oval shaped basin of marble supported by a mahogany pedestal. A brass canopy covers it and is connected to a pulley with a brass dove at the other end – signifying the descent of the Holy Spirit at the River Jordan when John baptized Jesus. The placement of the font near the entrance of the church signifies baptism's role as the point of entry into the Christian life. In the eighteenth-century, St. Michael's was one of three Anglican churches to have a baptismal font.

The Organ

While organs were largely relegated to cathedrals in seventeenth-century England, St. Michael's purchased a John Snetzlar organ that was installed in 1768. It was the second largest in British America.

Steeple, Bells, and Clock

St. Michael's 186-foot spire was among the most prominent and tallest in the Southern colonies. A 7½-foot vane enhanced its visibility. This iconic feature served as a landmark for mariners, a fire lookout, and a tactical vantage point during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars.



The oldest functioning colonial clock tower in the country, the clock of St. Michael's was imported from England in 1764. At the same time, St Michael's purchased eight bells, four of which were attached to the clockworks. The largest bell was to strike the hour and the quarter hours were rung with the four smaller bells. To this day the ringing of the bells marks the passage of time for the city.

SAINT MICHAEL'S CHURCH
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