

ON EDISTO ISLAND

Oldest Presbyterian Church Still Strong in Service

By MICHAEL DRAYTON

ON ONE of South Carolina's sea islands stands an old church by the side of the road, keeping watch over the hundred or so graves nestled around it and serving as a House of Worship each week for about 75 loyal Presbyterians. It is the Edisto Island Presbyterian Church, the oldest church of its denomination in our state.

The Edisto Church, with its beautiful white-columned portico, was built in the 1830s, but the organization goes far beyond that. Some authorities feel relatively certain that the church was organized about 1685, while others are more willing to date its founding about 25 years later, in 1710. At any rate, the old

church has been open and serving its community continuously longer than any other in South Carolina.

In support of the earlier founding date, certain records show that a number of Baptists from the ill-fated settlement at Port Royal moved up the coast in 1686, settling on Edisto Island, and there "worshipping in common with a certain group of Presbyterians." This would mean, then, that a Presbyterian meeting was being held in the late 17th century on Edisto.

The Baptist group later withdrew and formed their own church. It is no longer in existence.

AS WAS THE custom in colonial America, property and slaves were deeded to the churches. To care for these deeds, a group of eight trustees was elected from the congregation. In the church yard stands today a monument to the memory of men who donated to the church tracts of land and numbers of slaves in the early 1700s. Because these gifts had grown

to such a large number, and because a British law limited property ownership by churches to the recognized Church of England, a corporation was established and a charter issued by the state in pre-Revolutionary times.

This corporation still is in existence, and it holds the title to the property of the church. The records of the Corporation, as it is generally known, are extant from 1790. The corporation still holds regular meetings today.

After the Revolution the church entered into a series of long and fruitful pastorates by beloved ministers of the Old School Presbyterian Church. It was during the leadership of one of these men, the Rev. William States Lee, that the present building was constructed. Mr. Lee began his ministry on Edisto in 1821, and served the church through 50 years of his life.

In 1830 a contract was awarded to a Mr. Pillans, presumably of Charleston, for the design and erection of a new church building. In July of 1831 the congregation moved into their new home, and presented Mr. Pillans with a bonus gift of \$300 for "his wonderful progress." The building has been praised for its beauty and stability.

The lines of the church building follow the Greek revival trend which was so in evidence in early American building at that time. About five years after the building was finished, the large fluted columns which stand on the front portico of the church were added, and since that time the building has not been changed.

During Mr. Lee's ministry the present Manse was built also. The Manse, or parsonage, is located about a mile from the church on the quiet waters of Store Creek. It is a large, typical low-country home situated

on the bluff of the creek, and surrounded with great oaks and pines.

The home has a total of ten rooms, with a large piazza which extends over almost two sides of the house, facing east and south.

MINISTRY CONTINUES
TODAY, nearly 300 years after the church was established, its ministry to the people of Edisto Island continues. The Rev. Drayton Cooper and his wife, the former Miss Hazel-Thomas King of Lake City, are serving the church. The Coopers recently moved to Edisto from Decatur, Georgia, where they were in school.

During recent years, even though the church has not had a resident pastor for five years, the congregation has continued to move forward. Improvements were made to the church building, and to the Manse. The old pot-bellied stoves which heated the church were replaced by a modern furnace, and a new electronic organ was installed within the past two years.

Since the growth in popularity of Edisto Beach as a resort area, the church has broadened the scope of its ministry by sponsoring an inter-denominational worship service on the beach each Sunday morning. This service, which was originated about five years ago by the then pastor, the Rev. W. H. Goodman, is held in the Lions Club building.

"BEACH SERVICE"
IN ITS beginnings the "beach service" was attended by only a few families each week. Through the years, however, the resort congregations have grown to the point that the Lions Club is filled each Sunday. The record attendance seems to stand at about 190 for this past July 5, 1959.

In commenting on the "beach church," Mr. Cooper said, "The folks who come to this service are coming because they sincerely want to come to church. There is no pressure put on

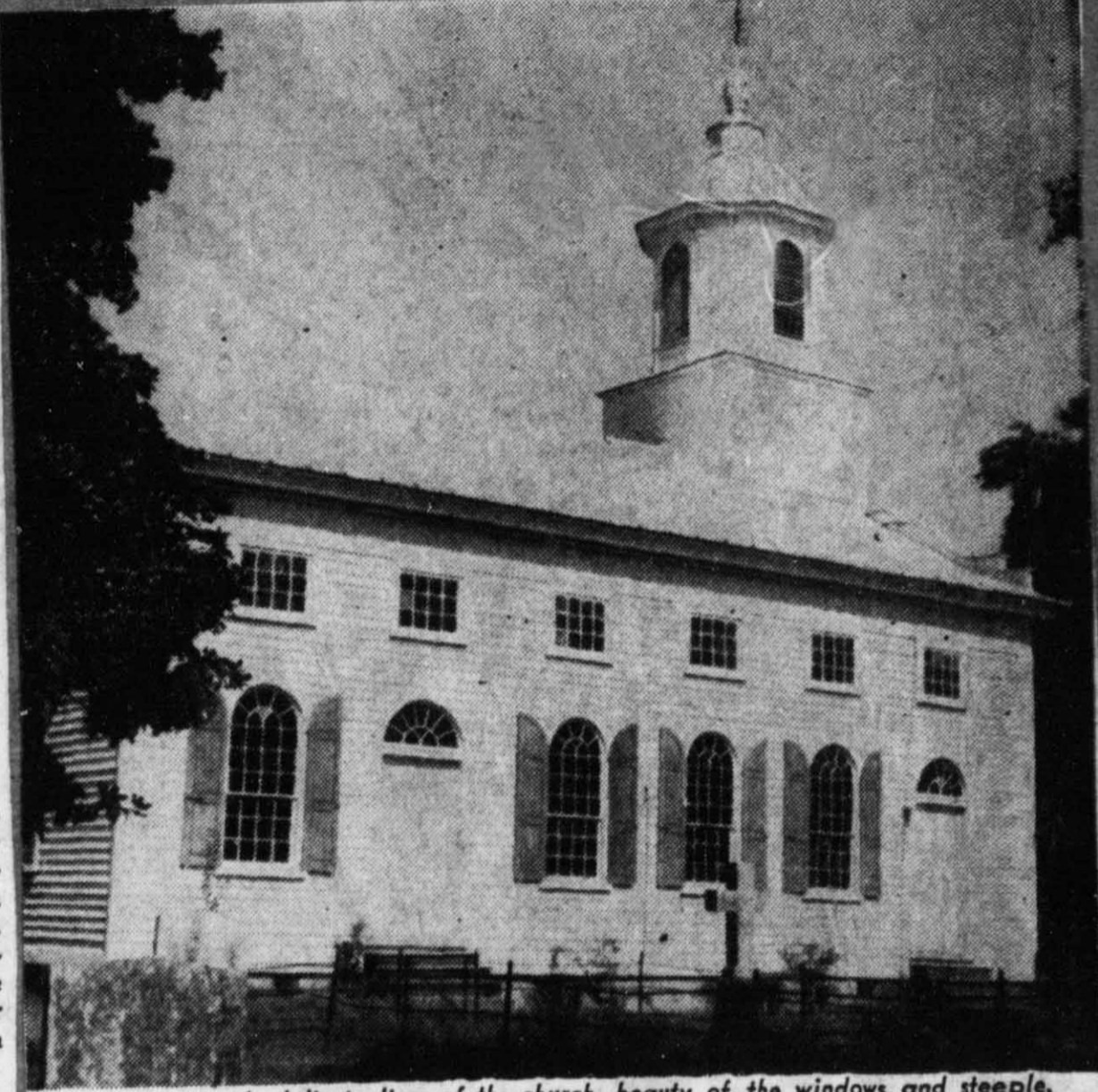
them to keep up with the Joneses while they're here at the beach." One of the features of the beach service is that worshippers may dress as they see fit, in bathing suits, shorts, or anything that is comfortable.

When the new pastor and his wife received the call from the Edisto church they were filled with mixed emotions. "We both had grown up in small cities, and we really didn't know much about country living," Mrs. Cooper said, "But we love it now."

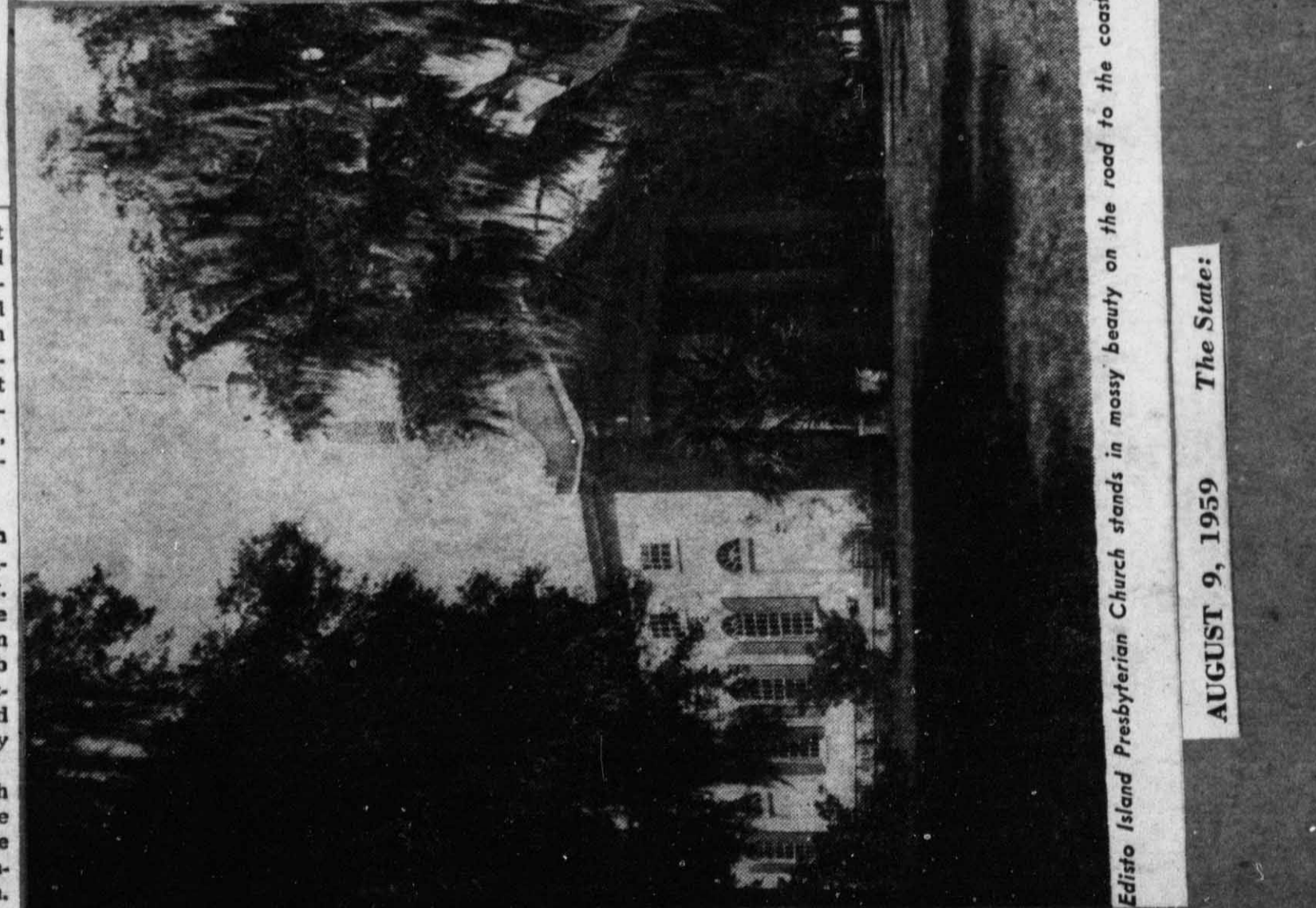
"Hazel really had her hands full moving in," Mr. Cooper added, "but the ladies of the church helped us greatly by cleaning up the Manse, and with a few gallons of paint here and there, we're very proud of our first home." Both the Coopers like Early American furniture, "But we didn't know we'd ever have an authentic setting for it," added the minister's wife.

Moving to the Edisto church was like going back home for Mrs. Cooper. Her parents lived at Edisto when she was a child, while her father, Dr. L. B. King, was the resident physician at the CCC camp on the island. Her mother and father are now practicing medicine in Lake City, S. C.

The Edisto Island Presbyterian Church, the oldest in the state, continues to meet today's needs in a setting of yesterday.



Side view reveals delicate lines of the church, beauty of the windows and steeple.



Edisto Island Presbyterian Church stands in mossy beauty on the road to the coast.

AUGUST 9, 1959 The State:



Ancient markers of the cemetery bear names long prominent in South Carolina history.



RIGHT: The ante-bellum parsonage commands a sweeping view of tidelands from its location on a bluff overlooking Store Creek. (Staff Photos by Eugene Sloan.)

State
Aug. 9, 1959