This photo was taken during the construction of First United Methodist Church. The downtown building celebrates its 75-year anniversary tomorrow.

**Anniversary ceremony will honor those who helped make First United Methodist Church building a reality.**

Story by Judy Stanford • Photo by Denise Broussard

First United Methodist Church stands out among its downtown neighbors. The flight of steps that leads to its covered porch is marked by two-story columns that speak of stability and longevity.

Tomorrow, the downtown landmark will hold services celebrating its 75th anniversary. Although the edifice has occupied the same spot for three-quarters of a century, it represents a history that goes back an additional 35 years.

In the beginning, the Methodist population of Lafayette, then known as Vermilionville, didn't even have a minister to call their own. According to annuity committee member Denise Broussard, Circuit riders, itinerant preachers who rode on horseback from town to town, like the Reverend Johnson among others, ministered to their needs sporadically as they passed through.

That changed in 1886, when the Reverend W.F. Brown was assigned as pastor to Lafayette and New Iberia. "They didn't have an actual church," Broussard said. "They would meet in people's homes." In 1886, a donation of land at the corner of Washington and Congress streets by Benjamin Porter Peto was made in hopes of building the congregation's first church.

The facilities were expanded in a renovation project in 1936, but that proved just a temporary measure. Within 30 years, the congregation outgrew the church. Plans for a new building were to be considered on property at the intersection of Lee and Main streets, begun in 1951, but by the Rev. Leon J. McCain and J.J. Davidson, chairman of the building committee. Representatives from area churches and the Jewish temple attended the first services in the new church, which was completed Oct. 11, 1953.

Building the new church required a great deal of effort on the part of the faithful. Keeping the goal was another challenge. The then-lottery $100,000 prize bag almost proved to be too much. The church almost closed in 1969, Broussard said. "They owed a sum of money to the bank, which wouldn't give an extension on it and sent foreclosure papers. Other area churches helped to save our church. Several churches bought the note."

The combined efforts of St. John Cathedral, First Baptist Church, the Episcopal Church of the Ascension, First Presbyterian Church and Temple Sholom saved the church from going under. "By the 1970s, the debt was paid off," Broussard said.

To honor those efforts and to reflect the theme of the first services held in the church, representatives of those religious organizations have been invited to participate in First United Methodist Church's 75th anniversary ceremonies.

To open the celebration, the church's pastor, the Rev. Spider Milton, and his parishioners will be piped into the church by Michael Barney, playing Highland bagpipes. Music will again fill the church, beginning at 4:30 p.m., provided by the Handbell Choir, trumpeter Paul Morton and organist Ann Jones. The United Methodist Combined Choir, consisting of the Cokesbury Choir and the Cokesbury Church Choir, accompanied by Jones and Barby Elia, will also perform.

Bishop William H. Hitchmon will join Milton in the celebration and deliver the main address. There are few who still remember the building of the church and one of them will hold a special place in the celebration. "We're dedicating the service to Elizabeth Dohos Montgomery," Broussard said of the 100-year-old church member. "She was a young adult when the new church was finished."