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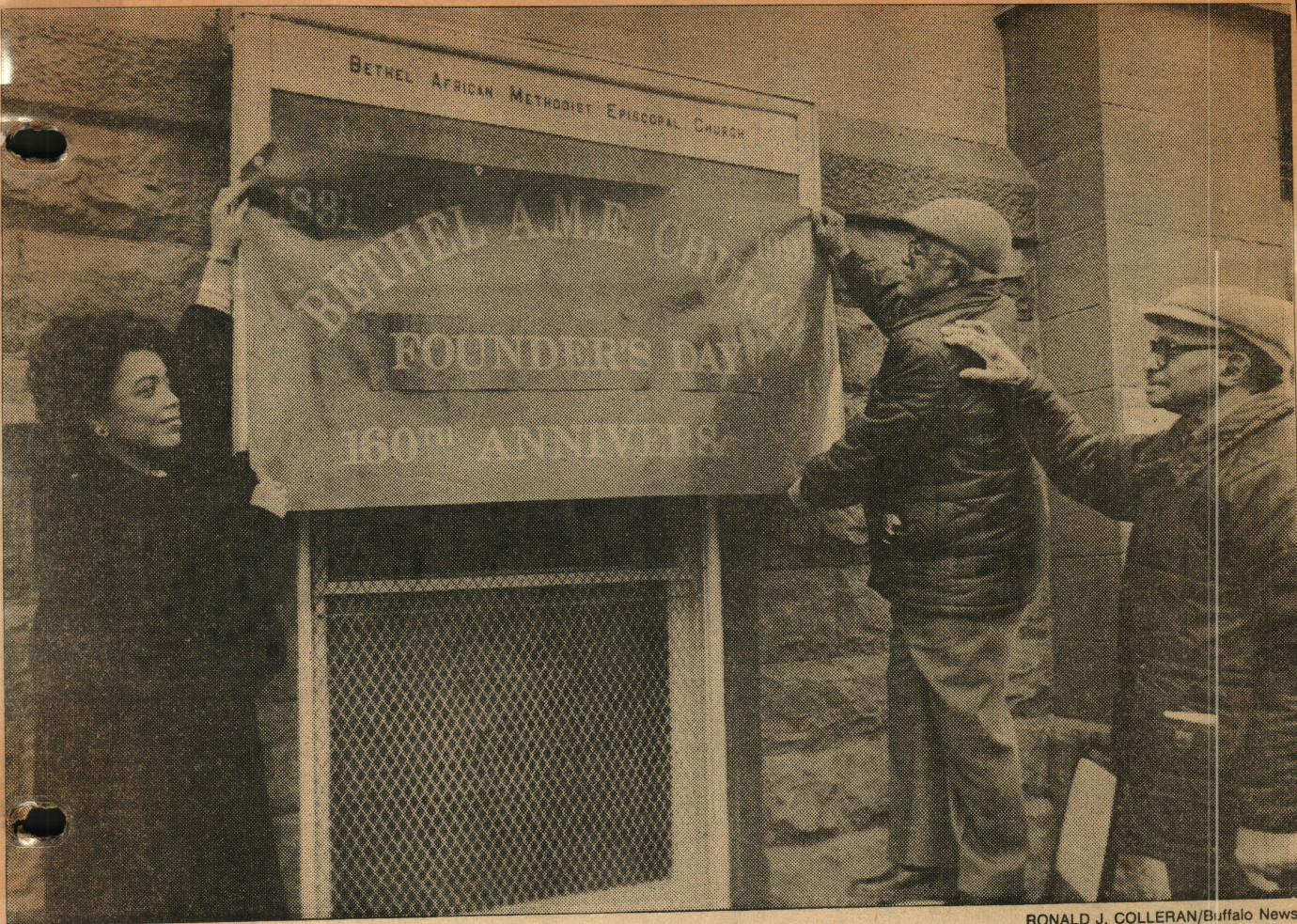
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RONALD J. COLLERAN/Buffalo News

Members Joya Shepard, left, Fred Bell Jr. and Eugene Thomas hang a banner announcing their church's 160th anniversary.

Bethel AME celebrates its 160th year

By DAVE CONDREN
News Religion Reporter

Members of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Buffalo's oldest black church, will begin a yearlong celebration next weekend of its 160th anniversary.

A Founders Day Banquet will kick off the celebration at 7 p.m. Friday in the Buffalo Hilton Hotel.

The speaker will be Bishop Frank C. Cummings of Philadelphia, who will talk about the denomination's history of independence since it was organized in 1787 to protest racial discrimination practiced in St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia. The head of the First District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop Cummings is known internationally for his astute business skill in guiding the construction and financing of the district's \$10 million office and convention center, which was completed in Philadelphia in 1989.

The 1,600-member Bethel church traces its roots to the Colored Methodist Society, Buffalo's first black religious organization, founded April 28, 1831. The anniversary celebration is being held in conjunction with National Black History Month.

In Buffalo religious history, Bethel AME takes its place as the city's third-oldest religious community behind First Presbyterian Church, founded in 1812, and St. Louis Catholic Church, founded in 1829.

Dr. Monroe Fordham, a Buffalo State College professor and authority on local black history, has determined that the Colored Methodist Society spawned the Vine Street Methodist Church in 1833. That congregation later became Vine Street African Methodist Episcopal Church and eventually Bethel AME Church.

Carolyn B. Thomas, who is active in the local church and a member of the Episcopal Committee of the national AME Church,

said the congregation has worshiped in buildings on Carroll Street, Vine Alley and Eagle Street. In 1953 it moved to its present location at 1525 Michigan Ave., a former Presbyterian Church.

"It is considered the Mother Church of African Methodism in Western New York," Mrs. Thomas said. "This church has been a church for 160 years. Even during the Depression, the doors never closed."

In addition to the talk by Bishop Cummings, the Founders Day program will include a review of the church's history by Fordham, presentation of awards by the Rev. Harry J. White Jr., the pastor, and Mary Randolph, banquet co-chairwoman, and musical numbers by the AME District Choir and the Bethel African Heritage Society.

Mr. White is the son of former pastor Harry J. White Sr., who served Bethel from 1952 to 1965.