

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE OLD PRESBYTERIAN MEETING HOUSE

1760 Alexandria's Presbyterians begin worshipping congregationally in the Assembly Hall located on the town's Market Square with clergy supplied from Pennsylvania. Earlier, worship services were conducted in private homes, known as "reading houses".

1772 The local Society of Presbyterians organizes as a formal congregation when it calls the Reverend William Thom (1750-1773) as its first pastor. He is struck down by yellow fever the following year.

1775 The original meeting house is erected on the same site as the current one. Its hipped roof design incorporates a cupola with Alexandria's only bell. [See more at entry for 1835.]

1780 The Reverend Isaac Stockton Keith, D.D. (1755-1813) is called as our second pastor. He serves as the founding president of the Alexandria Academy, an early experiment in providing schooling without regard to gender, race, or ability to pay. Four Presbyterian ministers succeed him as president or headmaster, and its scholars (students) are publicly examined at the Meeting House. He serves here until 1788 when he is called to serve a congregation in Charleston, South Carolina.

1785 Reverend Keith, General Daniel Roberdeau and other members of the congregation sign the Memorial and Remonstrance opposing Virginia's pending religious assessment bill. With passage of the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom (1786), Alexandria's Presbyterians petition the General Assembly "praying that the Society of which they are members may be constituted a Body corporate and politic and vested with such civil prerogatives and privileges as are usually granted to other incorporated Churches saving to them the free and full exercise of every spiritual power which essentially belongs to them in the Capacity of a Christian Church."

1787 Flounder House is erected as a parsonage by Robert Brockett in the classic flounder style. It still stands and now houses offices and meeting rooms. [See section labeled Churchyard.]

1789 The Reverend James Muir, D.D. (1757-1820) is called as the congregation's third pastor. Born in Scotland, he serves the congregation for thirty-one years, and assists in establishing the Alexandria Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge, Alexandria Library Company, Alexandria Relief Society, Onesimus Society, Washington Society of Alexandria, Board of Guardians of the Free Schools, and the Bible Society of the District of Columbia; he founds and edits The Monthly Visitant; and negotiates with the British to save Alexandria during the War of 1812.

[A memorial to the Rev. Dr. Muir is located on the north interior wall of the Meeting House.]

1799 When George Washington dies at Mount Vernon in December 1799, four community memorial services are conducted at the Meeting House. They are led by the Rev. William Maffit, headmaster of Alexandria Academy, the Rev. Thomas Davis, Jr., of Christ Church, the Rev. James Muir of the Presbyterian Church, and the Rev. James Tolleson of the Methodist Church. The Meeting House church bell tolls from the time of Washington's death until his interment.

1809 The Alexandria Presbyterian Cemetery is established.

1816 A Sabbath-Day School is established at the Meeting House. Classes, initially led by eight teachers and elders, utilize the catechisms of both Isaac Watts and the Presbyterian Church.

1817 Differences among members over style of worship lead to the formation of a second Presbyterian congregation. The congregation continuing at the Meeting House is renamed First Presbyterian Church; the new congregation becomes Second Presbyterian Church.

The church's first pipe organ, built by Jacob Hilbus and Henry Howison of Washington, D.C., is installed during the year.

1820 The Reverend Elias Harrison, D.D. (1790-1863) is called as our fourth pastor. He serves the congregation for forty-three years through the tumultuous period that culminates in the Civil War. He heads the Alexandria Academy; presides over the Board of Guardians of the Free Schools; is a founder of Alexandria's Lyceum, its Orphan Asylum, and Female Free School;

directs the Alexandria Library Company; and is a national director of the American Colonization Society.

[A memorial to the Rev. Dr. Harrison is located on south interior wall of the Meeting House.]

1835 Lightning strikes the Meeting House in July and the ensuing fire destroys most of it. The rebuilt structure, completed in 1837, again utilizes a Georgian style, but the roof assumes a straight roofline. A bell tower, with re-cast bell, is added in 1843, and the entrance porch and steps are re-done in granite in 1853.

With remarkably few subsequent alterations, the rebuilt Meeting House remains an outstanding expression of Reformed Protestant plain style (meeting house) architecture to the present day.

1836 The Presbytery of the District of Columbia, which had convened for its founding at the Meeting House in 1823, returns to Alexandria to discuss issues that will divide the Presbyterian Church into Old School and New School denominations the following year.

1849 The church's second pipe organ, built by Henry Erben of New York City, is installed. It includes 9 stops and remains in use today. [This organ located in the apse.]

1861-65 When the Commonwealth of Virginia joins the Confederate States of America, Alexandria is immediately occupied by the U.S. Army forces. The town becomes a major staging ground and hospital center for the Union Army for the duration of the war. The Meeting House congregation includes many strong Unionists and worship services continue to be conducted throughout these difficult times.

The Meeting House remains with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Second Presbyterian Church, which had joined the United Synod Presbyterian denomination in 1857 to insure that clergy and members could own slaves "from principle and as a matter of choice", joins the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. after the war.

1865-1880s Following the Civil War, a series of pastors serve the congregation, each for a few years only — Reverend George M. McCampbell (1841-1918), our fifth pastor, serves from 1866 until he is called to Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City; Reverend William A. McAtee, D.D. (1838-1902), our sixth pastor, serves from 1870 until he is called to the Presbyterian Church in Hagerstown, Maryland; Reverend James M. Nourse (1840-1922), our seventh pastor, serves from 1885 until he is called to Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

During 1874-80, large portions of Alexandria's two Presbyterian congregations unite to form the Union Presbyterian Church, an experiment "looking for a union of the whole Presbyterian family North and South." They worship at the Meeting House and are led by the Reverend J. J. Bullock, D.D. (1812-1892), who also serves as chaplain of the U.S. Senate.

During the 1880s, a Congregational minister, the Reverend Eliphalet Whittlesey (1821-1909), frequently leads the congregation in worship while also serving Howard University and the U.S. Board of Indian Commissioners.

1890s On entering the 1890s, the congregation numbers seventy communicant members. Prior to the Civil War, the congregation averaged about two hundred communicant members. Efforts to call a pastor from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. to serve the congregation during the decade are not successful and the congregation dissolves.

1899 The Meeting House property is conveyed to Second Presbyterian Church and is retained by that congregation until 1949. The Meeting House is used for worship services and Sunday School classes by numerous groups, including Bethany Methodist, Lee Street Chapel, Bethel Presbyterian Mission, St. Paul's Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, Salvation Army, ship-builders and torpedo-builders during World War I, and Second Presbyterian Church.

Flounder House provides shelter for the indigent and serves as a rental property.

1925 Second Presbyterian Church organizes a restoration of the Meeting House that includes the cleaning and repairing of walls and pews, and the installation of a slate roof. The restored structure is rededicated on June 8, 1928 and is regularly open to the public for visitation.

1929 Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution is erected by the National Society of the Children of the American Revolution.

[This memorial located at the north side of the burial ground.]

1932 The city of Alexandria concludes its George Washington Birth Bicentennial Celebration on the 133rd anniversary of Washington's death with a program at the Meeting House.

1938 A memorial service held on the 140th anniversary of a service led by the Rev. Dr. James Muir on May 9, 1798, a National Day of Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer that was attended by George Washington, reflects on the current and earlier period's "hazardous and afflictive situation". [A plaque memorializing this event is at the Fairfax Street entrance.]

1949 Sponsored by Second Presbyterian Church, an independent congregation is once again created at the Meeting House. Its first worship service is led by the Rev. Dr. A. Donald Upton on the nineteenth of June 1949.

1950 The Reverend Dr. Kenneth G. Phifer (1915-1985) is called as our eighth pastor. Among his many efforts to lead the newly established congregation, he organizes a joint meeting of the presbyteries of Potomac ("Southern" denomination of Presbyterians) and Washington City ("Northern" denomination of Presbyterians) at the Meeting House in 1952, the first formal meeting of local Presbyterians since the Civil War. The Education Building, dedicated in 1957, is the congregation's first new structure in over 120 years. In 1959, Rev. Phifer serves on the city's Committee for Public Schools. Later that same year he is called to the Louisville Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

1960 The Reverend Dr. William Randolph Sengel is called as the congregation's ninth pastor. He leads efforts to advance social and racial justice within the church and the local community; to re-unite the northern and southern denominations of the Presbyterian Church; and to promote ecumenism. He serves our congregation until 1986 when he becomes pastor emeritus.

1978 Sherrard and Jean Elliot convey their residence to the congregation. It is located next to the Meeting House on Fairfax Street and dates from the 1840s. Restored and extended in 2005, it now accommodates church offices. [See section labeled Churchyard.]

1987 The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Farmer is called as our tenth pastor. Rev. Farmer serves until he is called to the Presbyterian Church in Danville, Kentucky.

1988 The Reverend Dr. Edna Jacobs Banes is called as our third associate pastor. She is the first woman to serve as a minister of the Word and Sacrament at the Meeting House, and serves here until she is called to Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia in 2001.

1993 The Reverend Dr. Gary W. Charles is called as our eleventh pastor. Under his leadership, the congregation joins the Covenant Network of Presbyterians in welcoming "all whom God calls into community and leadership in God's church." In 2004, he is called to serve Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

1997 The church's fourth pipe organ is installed. Built by Lively-Fulcher as Opus 4, it replaces a Reuter organ that had served since 1965. It includes 35 ranks and 2,026 pipes. [This organ is located in the east gallery.]

TODAY The Reverend Dr. Robert R. Laha, Jr. was called as the twelfth installed pastor in 2006. Serving with him are the Reverend Ann Herlin, associate pastor; Priscilla Andre-Colton, director of Christian education; Alice Tewell, youth director; and Samuel Baker, music director and organist.

We are an inclusive congregation, seeking to grow in faith, to serve the Lord, and to be a truly gracious community. We hope you will join us for worship, service, and fellowship.

THE CHURCHYARD

The churchyard of the Meeting House includes several structures — Meeting House (1775, 1837) at the eastern side, Flounder House (1787) and Christian Education Building (1957) at the western side, and Elliot House (1844) to the south.

A significant portion of the churchyard is devoted to a burial ground. Three hundred members of the congregation are buried here, although most of their graves are no longer marked. Here lie our first pastor, the Rev. William Thom (site unknown) and third pastor, the Rev. Dr. James

Muir and his family (he is buried under the Meeting House). Also interred here are John Carlyle (1720-1780), founding trustee and first overseer of Alexandria; Dr. James Craik (1727-1814), surgeon general in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War and close personal friend and physician to George Washington; William Hunter, Jr. (1731-1792), mayor of Alexandria and founder of the St. Andrew's Society; Lewis Nicola (1717-1807), Colonel in the Corps of Invalids of the Continental Army and member of the Society of the Cincinnati; and numerous other veterans of the French and Indian War and of the Revolutionary War. The burial ground is also the final resting place of an unidentified veteran of the Revolutionary War, who is honored with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution. Numerous founding members of Alexandria-Washington Masonic Lodge No. 22, which George Washington served as master, are also buried here.

Members of the congregation are also buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery located on Hamilton Lane, one mile west of the Meeting House, adjacent to Alexandria's National Military Cemetery. It was established in 1809 and continues to operate. There rest the mortal remains of our fourth pastor, the Rev. Dr. Elias Harrison and his family, and numerous other citizens of Alexandria from the eighteenth century on. Among the veterans buried there are Dennis Ramsay, Colonel in the Virginia Continental Line during the Revolutionary War and mayor of Alexandria; Charles McKnight, Captain in the Revolutionary War and commander of Alexandria's Independent Blues in the War of 1812; and General Robert Young, Lieutenant Robert Brockett, Jr., Dr. James Carson, Robert Allison, and Samuel Bowen, all of whom served in the War of 1812. [Information plaques are located in the burial ground.]

The Old Presbyterian Meeting House is located in the Alexandria Historic District, a U.S. Department of the Interior National Historic Landmark. The Meeting House itself is recognized as a National Historic Place by the U.S. Department of the Interior; as a Historic Landmark by the Commonwealth of Virginia; and as a Historic Site by the Presbyterian Historical Society. The Meeting House and the Elliot House are both recognized by the Historic Alexandria Foundation as structures that have maintained their historic and architectural integrity. Both structures are also included in the Historic American Buildings Survey of the Department of the Interior. The churchyard burial ground and the Presbyterian Cemetery are included in the Sons of the American Revolution National Register of the American Revolution. The congregation serves on the City of Alexandria's Historic Alexandria Resources Commission as an institutional member.

This text was prepared by Dr. Donald C. Dahmann, History and Archives Committee, Old Presbyterian Meeting House, Alexandria Virginia, 703-549-6670, history@opmh.org, 2009.
