

A HISTORY OF THE OLD PRESBYTERIAN MEETING HOUSE

The Old Presbyterian Meeting House is a heritage of the historical past and a living body of the present. Those who enter the Meeting House feel a sense of communion with its founders and the historical figures associated with it. The church's history extends back in time more than two hundred years, beginning with the arrival of Scottish and Ulster-Scottish settlers in the Alexandria area in the eighteenth century. Creating positions for themselves in the community primarily as merchants and sea traders, they played leading roles in founding the town of Alexandria and in establishing its Presbyterian church.

The Church of England was the established religious denomination in the Colony of Virginia, so Presbyterian Calvinists, along with other "Dissenters," were not free to engage in public worship. They met in one another's homes for worship until 1760, when they began holding public services as the "Society of Presbyterians" in the Assembly Hall that housed the town hall and school on Market Square. In 1772, this Society of Presbyterians received recognition as an organized congregation when their petition to the Presbytery of Donegal (Pennsylvania) was answered by the provision of an ordained minister, Rev. William Thom (served 1772-1773). In 1775, they were "enabled to erect and cover-in a brick building sixty feet long and fifty broad" – the original Meeting House – as their third called minister, the Rev. Dr. James Muir (served 1789-1820) subsequently wrote.

As with all organizations possessing a long history, the Meeting House congregation has shared in both societal and its own joys, difficulties, and crises. In its first years of existence, the War for Independence disrupted the life of the church. The Presbyterians were fervent supporters of the American Revolution, and the British rulers were prone to believe that the Presbyterian leaders had incited the rebellion of "Cousin America." These patriots of the Revolution, including those from the Alexandria Presbyterian church, went off to the war, and a number of colonels in the Revolutionary Army were Presbyterian elders. During that time the church had to depend on transient, supply ministers, at least four of whom left the pulpit for patriotic duty with the American soldiers.

In succeeding years, internal dissension and the departure of members to settle in America's expanding West disrupted congregational life. At the same time, there was a general decline of religious feeling throughout the country that combined with the spread of rationalistic and deistic tendencies. Nevertheless, by 1787 the congregation had become sufficiently established to build a parsonage as a residence for its second pastor, the Rev. Dr. Isaac Stockton Keith (served 1780-1788). Now called "Flounder House" in light of its unusual architectural style, this structure still stands on the Royal Street side of the churchyard. By 1790, the congregation had completed construction of the Meeting House with the addition of a cupola and the town's only bell.

A crisis in 1817 caused a split in the congregation. Because the Rev. Dr. Muir was by that time in declining health, the members had been discussing for several years whether to call a collegiate pastor. Differences of opinion about the person to be selected to assist the Rev. Dr. Muir came to a head when the congregation voted in favor of installing the visiting evangelist, the Rev. Daniel C. Baker, as co-pastor rather than the Rev. Dr. Elias Harrison. Both men were present in Alexandria at the time, as Dr. Muir had brought Elias Harrison to serve as the principal of the Alexandria Academy. The Rev. Baker declined to serve, but 39 communicant members, seeking a different style of worship, withdrew from the Meeting House and formed Alexandria's Second Presbyterian Church, affiliated with the Presbytery of Winchester. The 62 communicant members who formed the continuing congregation at the Meeting House took the

name of First Presbyterian Church. The continuing congregation remained in the Presbytery of Baltimore with the Rev. Dr. Muir as its pastor and the Rev. Dr. Harrison as co-pastor. Reflecting national currents within the Presbyterian Church, differences in interpretation of doctrine and faith and style of worship were among the factors that lead to the creation of a second Presbyterian congregation. For several years following the split, the First Presbyterian Church made unsuccessful efforts to reunite the two congregations.

After the death of the Rev. Dr. Muir on 8 August 1820, the Rev. Dr. Elias Harrison was installed as the fourth pastor of the Presbyterian Meeting House. His pastorate, extending from 1820 to 1863, suffered two great tragedies. In 1835, a fire that was caused by a bolt of lightning devastated the Meeting House, leaving little but the walls still standing. It fell to the Rev. Dr. Harrison to lead the rebuilding efforts. The congregation, aided by contributions from the community, completed the reconstruction of the church two years later. In the rebuilt Meeting House, the pulpit was relocated from the north to the west wall; pews realigned to face west; and the roofline altered from hip to straight line. The reconstructed Meeting House also included a vestibule at its entrance on Fairfax Street. In 1843, the bell tower with a re-cast bell was added, and in 1849 a pipe organ, made by the famous organ builder, Henry Erben from New York City, was installed that replaced the 1817 Hilbus organ that had been destroyed in the fire. The Erben instrument is still played today. In 1853, the wooden entrance porch was replaced by a stone platform and steps.

The Civil War came upon the Rev. Dr. Harrison's pastorate as a crowning misfortune. Union forces occupied Alexandria throughout the war and set up a military government. They converted the city into a transportation hub and a hospital center for both Union soldiers and Confederate captives. The Meeting House did not escape the intrusions of the military occupation. Since the Rev. Dr. Harrison, along with other local clergy refused to take an oath of allegiance to the authorities, he was not allowed to perform marriage ceremonies. As his letters to a friend suggest, he died with a heart grieving over the "evil times" of war and party bitterness. Throughout his long pastorate this unassuming man, beloved by his congregation and community, labored against adversity with unflagging perseverance and undimmed faith. He is one of the builders of our Meeting House traditions who have made the past a living force in the present.

The congregation of the Meeting House remained predominantly pro-Union during the Civil War, and following the war continued as a member of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the so-called Northern Presbyterian Church. Alexandria's Second Presbyterian Church became part of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., the so-called "Southern Presbyterian Church, which was the more popular course in Virginia following the Civil War. The membership of the Meeting House declined from an average of around 200 communicants prior to the war to about 70 by the later decades of the nineteenth century. Difficulties arose during the post-war period in retaining clergy, all of whom were called from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A: the Rev. George M. McCampbell, who served from 1866 until he was called to serve the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City; the Rev. William A. McAtee, who served from 1870 until he left to serve the Presbyterian Church in Hagerstown, Maryland; and the Rev. James M. Nourse, who served from 1885 until he left to serve the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey. From 1874 until 1880, members of the Meeting House congregation joined with members of Second Presbyterian "looking for a union of the whole Presbyterian family North and South" and worshipped together as the Union Presbyterian Church under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. J. J. Bullock. In 1899, unable to find a minister willing to serve at the Meeting House, the

congregation was dissolved and the Presbytery of Washington City transferred the property to Alexandria's Second Presbyterian Church. The history of Alexandria's First Presbyterian Church had come to a close.

From 1899 until 1949 the Meeting House property was part of Second Presbyterian Church, and was utilized occasionally by Second Presbyterian and other congregations for worship and Sunday school classes. With the passage of time – especially after interest in reviving and preserving the structure emerged in the 1920s – the Meeting House became an historical monument. This cradle of the Presbyterian faith in Alexandria provides an outstanding example of the restrained and simple beauty of the style of church architecture bequeathed to the nation by Reformed Protestants of Virginia. The building is associated with famous figures from the era of the American Revolution and the founding of the United States as a nation. Colonel John Carlyle, Alexandria's leading citizen of the time, was chiefly responsible for the building of the Meeting House; Colonel Dennis Ramsay, who shared in getting its construction started, was a mayor of Alexandria; another member of the church, William Hunter, Jr., founded the St. Andrew's Society of Scottish descendants.

There are also connections between the Meeting House and Northern Virginia's most famous resident, George Washington. It is believed that he made a contribution to the building of the original Meeting House and that he attended worship services conducted by Masonic Lodge No. 22 at which charity sermons were delivered to raise funds for the assistance of those in need. He also attended services here on 9 May 1798, proclaimed by President John Adams as a National Day of Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer when war with France seemed likely. Dr. James Craik, a member of the Meeting House congregation and surgeon general of the Continental Army, was by Washington's side during the French and Indian War and the War for Independence. A personal friend and Washington's physician for many years, Dr. Craik attended him on his deathbed. When Washington died, the bell of the Meeting House – the only one in Alexandria at the time – tolled for four days and three nights. The Rev. Dr. James Muir, who was chaplain of Masonic Lodge No. 22, took part in Washington's burial service at Mount Vernon. Alexandria's memorial services to Washington were held in the Meeting House – Dr. Muir delivered one sermon, and others were delivered by Rev. William Maffitt, a Presbyterian; Rev. Thomas Davis, an Episcopalian; and Rev. James Tolleson, a Methodist.

For many years, Masonic Lodge No. 22, in which Washington was Worshipful Master, celebrated the anniversary of its two patron saints, John the Evangelist and John the Baptist, with a procession to the Meeting House or one of the other places of worship to hear a charity sermon. The Washington Society – formed in 1800 by George Washington's friends and associates, including the Rev. Dr. Muir – commemorated his birthday and the nation's Independence Day year after year with a parade to the Meeting House and an oration there by a notable speaker. In 1814 Francis Scott Key addressed this group not long before he wrote "The Star Spangled Banner," and Chief Justice John Marshall delivered one of these speeches. Among other noteworthy observances in the church was a funeral service for President Zachary Taylor, a citizen of Virginia, upon his death in 1850.

Early Meeting House ministers took active roles in the development of Alexandria's educational institutions and in other spheres of community affairs. The Rev. Dr. Isaac Stockton Keith was an original trustee of the Alexandria Academy. Washington maintained a continuing interest in this educational institution and provided a financial endowment for its free school for orphans and the indigent. The Rev. Dr. Muir served as president of the Board of Trustees of the Alexandria Academy during most of his ministry; the Rev. Dr. Harrison served for a time as its

principal and subsequently as president of its Board of Trustees. Numerous other Presbyterian ministers taught here, including the Revs. William Maffitt, James Kirk, and William McWhir among others. Following Dr. Muir's death, his wife and daughters also conducted a school that the Rev. Dr. Harrison served as superintendent. When the Alexandria Library Company was organized in 1794, the Rev. Dr. Muir became its president, and he continued to head it for the next thirteen years. The Rev. Dr. Elias Harrison served as president of Alexandria's Board of Guardians of the Free Schools for over twenty years. He and Benjamin Hollowell, a gifted and honored local Quaker teacher, later founded the Alexandria Lyceum, Alexandria's adult continuing education and intellectual entertainment center, and acted as its leaders for many years.

In other areas, Rev. Dr. Muir took part in the laying of the cornerstone of the United States Capitol on 8 September 1793. In the War of 1812, he headed a party to negotiate with the British commanders for the safety of Alexandria. He distinguished himself not only as a Presbyterian minister and as a representative of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, but also as an effective and esteemed community leader.

Adjoining the Meeting House is a historic burial ground that is not only the final resting place for scores of congregation members but a memorial to the church's founders, heroes from the War for Independence and leaders of early Alexandria. There the visitor walks among the graves of the Carlyles, William Hunter, Jr., the Muirs, and Dr. Craik. Also among those buried here are other friends of President Washington and members of his Masonic Lodge. At one side of the graveyard is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution, erected by the National Society of the Children of the American Revolution and dedicated in 1929. Each year on the first Saturday in December, members of the St. Andrew's Society, dressed in kilts, march to the graveyard to the music of their bagpipers to honor the Society's founder, William Hunter, Jr., at his grave and attend a worship service in the Meeting House. In 2006, the St. Andrew's Society and the Virginia Sons of the American Revolution installed a memorial plaque in the burial ground near the Tomb of the Unknown to honor the Patriots of the Revolutionary War (see Memorial to Revolutionary War Patriots Interred in the Meeting House Burial Ground). In 2009, the congregation placed a second memorial plaque in the burial ground to commemorate the approximately three hundred persons interred here (see Memorial to Congregation Members Interred in the Meeting House Burial Ground).

During the half century after the Meeting House closed its doors in 1899, it was without its own congregation and served only sporadically for worship. By the 1920s, the church buildings had fallen into disrepair and town authorities considered acquiring it as an historic site. A national campaign to restore the Meeting House was initiated by Second Presbyterian Church in 1925 and chaired by John B. Gordon. Civic, fraternal, patriotic, and historical organizations including the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Daughters of the Confederacy, the National Society of the Children of the American Revolution, the Eastern Star, and the Elks joined the endeavor. They formed committees of their own for this purpose and contributed to the Presbyterian Meeting House Restoration Fund. This effort enabled the repair of the church, the installation of a new roof, and the renovation of the walls, ceiling, and floors. Funds donated by Andrew Mellon and Elihu Root made possible the installation of electric reproduction whale oil lamps, similar to those used in Colonial times. The Restoration Committee adopted the name "Old Presbyterian Meeting House" in its public notices about the restoration campaign. The renovated Meeting House was open daily to visitors and was utilized

on occasion for worship services. This access spurred continuing public interest in the Meeting House.

With tensions in Europe heightened following the annexation of Austria into the German Reich in March 1938, the anniversary of the May 1798 National Day of Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer worship service took on special significance. The original service, which George Washington had attended, had been conducted during a time when the involvement of the United States in war also seemed imminent. In May 1938, the earlier service was memorialized with another service and the placing of a memorial tablet on the front of the Meeting House. Two years later, the Alexandria Association presented the Meeting House with a pulpit believed to look like the original one.

During and after the Second World War, an influx of new residents into Northern Virginia put pressure on its churches to enlarge their facilities and services. That need – and its responsibility as title-holder of the Meeting House property – impelled Second Presbyterian Church to undertake a study to decide whether to keep to its own sanctuary at the northwest corner of Prince and St. Asaph streets or to build a new one outside of the downtown area or to relocate to a rehabilitated Meeting House. In February 1949, the congregation of Second Presbyterian Church voted to remain at its existing location but also approved the formation of a new congregation at the Meeting House. With approval from the Presbytery of Potomac, Presbyterian Church in the U.S., over 100 members withdrew from the Second Presbyterian Church to re-constitute a full-time congregation at the Meeting House. The new congregation turned with zeal and dedication to prepare for the formal opening of the renewed church. Outside the Meeting House they cleared the unkempt grounds of shoulder-high brush and weeds, while inside they cleaned the floors, pews, walls, and windows.

On 12 June 1949, an organizational meeting brought the new congregation to life. Members were received, a statement of organization was adopted, and officers were elected. The dedicatory sermon bore the title, “New Hearts in Old Stones.” The Second Presbyterian Church, formed more than a century earlier by members from the Meeting House congregation, had now become the mother church of the newly organized body. After 50 years of semi-dormant existence without a separate established congregation, the Meeting House was reborn as a living church. We can sense the feeling inspired in the charter members who brought about this rebirth from a report of the Stewardship Committee a month later: “It comes to the experience of few people in their lifetime to embrace an opportunity such as this and to accept the challenge for good presented.”

The new congregation completed its organization with the formation of committees and set about supplying a Rehabilitation Fund to support the extensive work of renovation. The membership had to gather resources for maintaining a staff and for carrying on missions and ministries. The Women’s Auxiliary, subsequently called the Women of the Church, made substantial contributions to this effort, raising funds through numerous enterprises such as bazaars, bake and cake sales, teas, luncheons for public events, and rummage sales. The church leadership obtained generous subscriptions and contributions, and friends in the community – including the Alexandria Association – provided gifts to the endeavor. With this support, the congregation repaired the walls and roof of the Meeting House and enlarged the basement to provide space for washrooms and a new furnace. They improved the wiring, renovated the floors, and replastered the ceiling. They also reconditioned the Erben organ, including modernizing it with a mechanical blower.

The new congregation was officially named “Presbyterian Meeting House,” but it more commonly became known as “Old Presbyterian Meeting House,” in reference to its historic nature. The first regular worship service was held on 19 June 1949, and the Sunday School was opened in the gallery that same day.

For more than a year the congregation depended upon the Rev. Dr. A. Donald Upton, a Congregational minister, until the Rev. Dr. Kenneth G. Phifer was installed as the first called pastor for the re-established congregation. To date, the reborn Meeting House congregation has been served by five ministers: Reverend Doctors Kenneth G. Phifer (served 1950-1958), William R. Sengel (served 1960-1886), Thomas K. Farmer (served 1987-1991), Gary W. Charles (served 1993-2004), and Robert R. Laha, Jr. (served 2006 – present). Under their leadership, the Meeting House has grown in members, facilities, and mission efforts. The membership increased from 150 in 1949 to approximately 1,000 at the present time. The national church, which remained divided following the Civil War, reunited to form the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. in 1983.

During renovations begun in 1952, Flounder House was transformed from a residence into studies for the pastors, meeting rooms, and offices. Increasing Christian education activities led to the construction of the Education Building in 1957. Developing from the Sunday School established in 1949, these activities expanded in scope and included adult classes as well as programs for the young people of the congregation. In 1958, the Meeting house acquired properties in the 400-block of South Royal Street and cleared the land for use as a parking lot. In 1965, the congregation installed a Reuter organ in the east gallery of the Meeting House, arranged on either side of the Erben organ, which dates from the 1840s. The Reuter organ continued in service until 1997, when it was removed to make room for pipe organ Opus No. 4 of the Lively-Fulcher Company, and the Erben organ was returned to the apse behind the pulpit.

In 1999, the Meeting House congregation regained control of the Presbyterian Cemetery on Hamilton Lane, about a mile west of the churchyard. After the closure of the Meeting House in 1899, the cemetery had also fallen into serious disrepair. In 1923, a group of concerned citizens petitioned the court to appoint Trustees to oversee the cemetery. They were replaced in 1949 by a new group of court-appointed Trustees from Second Presbyterian Church, who managed its operation for the next half century, until the cemetery was brought back under the authority of the Session of the Meeting House.

Also in 1999, the former home of financier R. Sherrard Elliot and his wife, Jean Elliot, Poet Laureate of Virginia and Alexandria Poet-in-Residence, became a Meeting House facility. The Elliots, long-time members of the congregation, where Sherrard had served as an elder and trustee, had presented their home as a gift to the Meeting House in 1978, retaining rights to lifetime occupancy. Sherrard passed away in 1987, and when Jean Elliot died in 1999, the Meeting House restored and expanded the structure. Today it includes original rooms on the first floor – a parlor and library – and a pastor’s study and conference room on the second floor. An addition contains offices for church staff, meeting rooms, and a large multi-purpose room known as Heritage Hall. Named “Elliot House” in memory of its generous donors, the renovated structure has served the Meeting House congregation since 2005. With the transfer of church offices to Elliot House, Flounder House underwent a transformation to classrooms, office space – currently utilized by the Alexandria Tutoring Consortium – and a dedicated room for the Meeting House Archive.

Following the tradition established by the Rev. Drs. James Muir and Elias Harrison, the re-established congregation actively participates in dealing with a broad spectrum of community

concerns. It has taken a significant part in the affairs of the larger Presbyterian Church: ministers have served as moderators of National Capital Presbytery, and both clergy and elders have served as delegates to the General Assembly, the national legislative body of the Presbyterian Church. The congregation is a member of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, which welcomes “all whom God calls into community and leadership in God’s church.” Outside the United States, the Meeting House has assisted Presbyterian mission projects in Japan, Congo, Mexico, Kenya, Korea, and Pakistan. Here in Alexandria, the Meeting House Cooperative Preschool is operated for families both from within and outside the church membership. Several Alcoholics Anonymous groups meet weekly in Flounder House. The congregation’s Family-to-Family ministry, carried out in close cooperation with the city’s social service agencies, extends a helping hand with financial assistance to those in urgent and unusual need. Through the work of volunteers from the congregation and contributions of food, the church helps Carpenter’s Shelter and Christ House feed the homeless. Volunteers also share in bringing Meals-on-Wheels to shut-ins and in preparing bag lunches for the needy. Members of the congregation have also participated in constructing the first Habitat for Humanity house erected in Alexandria, several others subsequently, and in renovating local homes in collaboration with Rebuilding Together Alexandria. The Meeting House took the lead in creating Alexandria’s Tutoring Consortium to improve the reading skills of inner-city school children. Summer work camps to West Virginia, Mexico, and Haiti assist in building and repairing homes and providing medical services. Members of the congregation are also active in VOICE (Virginias Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement), ALIVE (Alexandrians InVolved Ecumenically), and the Alexandria Neighborhood Health Services.

This text was originally prepared by Dr. Harold Vedeler in 1996; it was revised by the History and Archives Committee in 2009.

For more information, see “Chronology of Events in the History of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House” and other documents in the history section of this website.

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