

Octagon House 1856-1866: A Remarkable Site During a Turbulent Time

Sarah W. Hall and Her House

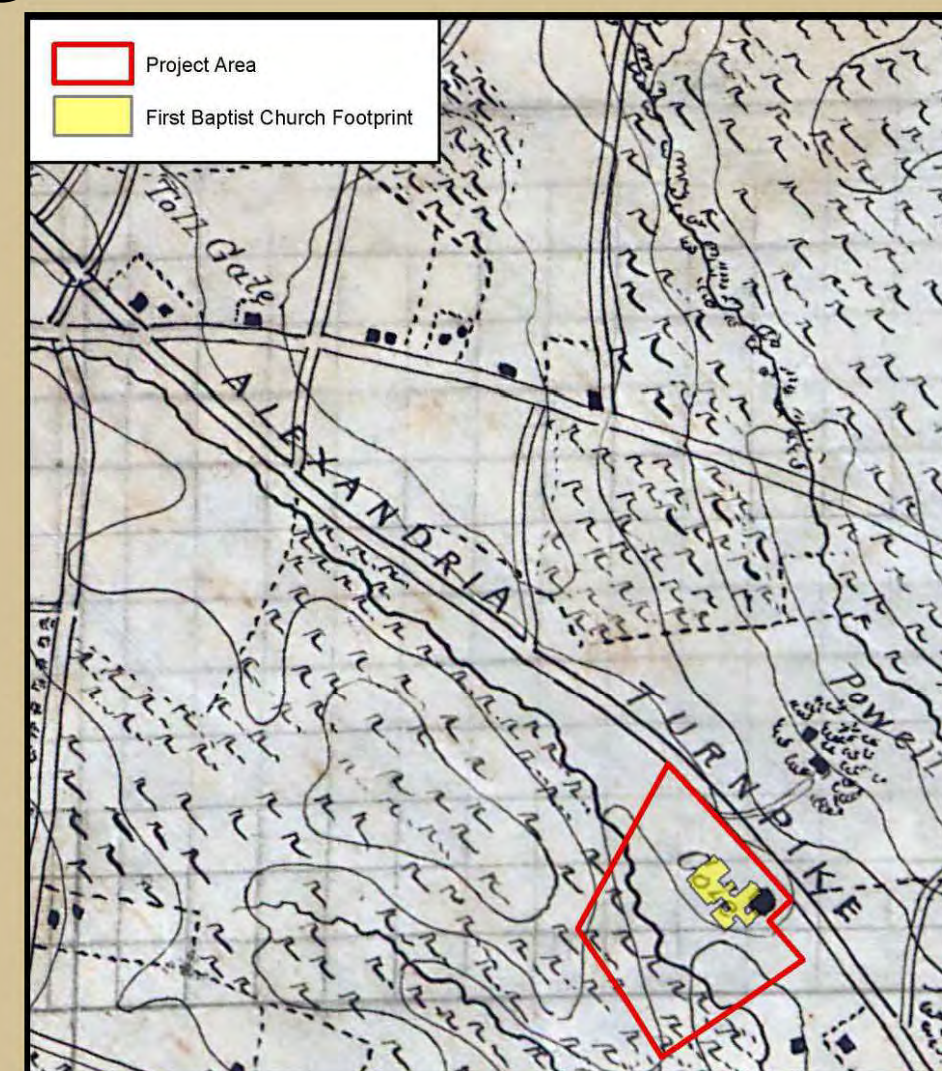
In 1856, Sarah W. Hall, a recently widowed New Yorker, moved her three daughters to the Alexandria area to be with her son Charles Stuart Hall, a music teacher and organist at Christ Episcopal Church. Charles Stuart Hall moved to Alexandria to attend the Theological Seminary. Hall purchased this land within sight of the Seminary, and two Hall daughters would marry Seminary graduates.

Sarah Hall's choice to build an octagonal house constructed of clay, gravel, and cement in 1856 indicated her interest in a contemporary architectural fashion. Following architectural pattern books of the day, Hall constructed an unusual house for the area that would be a landmark on maps drawn during the Civil War.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Sarah Hall and her family vacated the Octagon House and moved to Pennsylvania to live with a married daughter. In 1866, upon Sarah's return to sell the house, it was burned to the ground, reputedly by arson. She sold the property in 1868, ending the family's short, traumatic stay in Alexandria.

Civil War and the Octagon House 1861-1865

After the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, the Union Army utilized this area along Leesburg Turnpike for troop encampments. Secured by a circle of Union forts, part of the Defenses of Washington, Leesburg Turnpike became the major transportation route between Alexandria and northwestern Virginia. Union troops occupied the Octagon House as officers' headquarters and as a temporary hospital. Brigadier General John Sedgwick, first to occupy the house, supervised the construction of nearby Fort Ward in the summer of 1861.



Detail of circa-1861 map showing the area of the Octagon House with the current footprint of the First Baptist Church on the house site. The Powell House across Leesburg Turnpike from the Octagon House was also occupied as a Union hospital. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Detailed map of Part of Virginia from Alexandria to the Potomac River above Washington, D.C. (Library of Congress, Division of Geography and Maps; AECOM GIS Department)



"Seventh Brigade Hospital—Octagon House—Gen Slocum's Brigade—1861-1862." Only known photograph of Hall's octagonal house, the photo was taken during its use as a brigade hospital; nurse Amy Morris Bradley is seen on the 2nd-story balcony. (Alexandria Library Special Collections Branch)



Photograph by E.L. Wires, "Maine Third and New York Thirty-Eighth Regiments," September 8, 1861. Probably taken from the 2nd-story balcony of the Octagon House looking southwest toward Alexandria, this photo shows troops encamped along Leesburg Pike [upper left]. (Private collector).



Amy Morris Bradley stands at the entrance to the U.S. Sanitary Commission headquarters building at the second Alexandria Convalescent Camp. Detail of photograph Sanitary Commission at the Convalescent Camp near Alexandria, Va., May 1863. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

Amy Morris Bradley, Nurse and Matron

During the Civil War, the Octagon House became associated with Amy Morris Bradley, noted Maine educator, volunteer nurse, and Special Relief Agent for the U.S. Sanitary Commission in the Alexandria area. In 1861, Bradley moved to Northern Virginia as a volunteer nurse with the 5th U.S. Maine Regiment. Recognizing her nursing and organizational abilities, General Henry Warner Slocum appointed her as Matron to run the 7th Brigade Hospital at the Octagon House and the Powell House (located across Leesburg Turnpike from the Octagon House).

From September 1862 until the end of the war in 1865, Bradley worked as the Special Relief Agent for the U.S. Sanitary Commission at the Alexandria Convalescent Camp. She was instrumental in moving the camp from the east side of Leesburg Pike at the foot of Shuter's Hill to higher and more sanitary ground near Four Mile Run in Alexandria County (now Arlington County). There she organized hospital tents, took discharged soldiers to Washington to obtain their pay and arrange train travel to their homes, and published the *Soldiers' Journal*, the camp newspaper whose distribution reached the White House.



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