



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Establishing St. Joseph Church

*Alexandria Times, June 10, 2010*

*Image: Establishing St Joseph Church. Photo, Oblate Sisters of Providence Archives, Baltimore.*

**B**efore St. Joseph Catholic Church opened in 1916, African American Catholics in Alexandria attended St. Mary's Church but worshipped within the limits of segregation.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they sat in the north wing, had their own religious education classes and were married by a priest in their homes. At the same time, Thomas Blair, a black man, served as sexton for nearly 30 years. In the early 1900s, African Americans at St. Mary's met regularly at the church's lyceum with Charles Hannigan, a priest from Richmond in the Josephite Order, an order whose mission was evangelization in the African American community.



In 1913, Blair convened a committee to form a new church and appealed to the bishop in Richmond. Property at the northwest corner of Wythe and North Columbus streets was acquired in 1914, and Reverend Joseph Kelly was appointed to be the first priest at the new St. Joseph's parish. That same year, Mother Katharine Drexel, founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and a member of a wealthy family in Philadelphia, donated \$8,000 toward St. Joseph's.

The church building, designed by Washington architects Murphy and Olmsted, was expected to cost around \$12,000, and on October 8, 1915, church officials and parishioners attended the groundbreaking ceremony seen in this photograph. On November 21, 1915, the bishop set the cornerstone and on May 14, 1916, St. Joseph Church was officially dedicated. Two weeks later, longtime sexton Thomas Blair, considered by many to be the father of St. Joseph Church, died at age 65.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*



**Office of Historic Alexandria  
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

---