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Out of the Attic

How the Civil War paved the way for Beulah Baptist Church

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Image: Beulah Baptist Church, 320 S. Washington Street, Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

Beulah Baptist Church at 320 S. Washington St. was established in October 1863, the first church organized in Alexandria after the Union occupation of the city in 1861. The church was built in an area known as “The Bottoms,” a wet, marshy location on the southern outskirts of downtown that became one of the city’s first black neighborhoods. From its inception, the house of worship focused on providing religious and educational services to black residents, including the massive swell of contrabands.

Although Virginia law forbade educating blacks, that restriction was lifted in Alexandria when it became part of the District of Columbia. When the city retroceded to Virginia in 1846, the few schools educating black residents closed.

But when the Civil War began, Union authorities encouraged the establishment of schools for blacks. In 1862, a religious group, under the guidance of the Rev. Clem Robinson, opened the First Select Colored School in “The Berg” neighborhood. The area was named for Petersburg, the former home of many of its new residents.

A year later, Robinson and Dye Carter selected a parcel on South Washington Street for Beulah Baptist Church, and Carter oversaw construction of the building. The contraband school soon moved to that location and continued operating after the war. It finally closed in 1870, when Alexandria created a public school system for all children.

Architecturally, the two-story church is noted for a segmental arch over its double entryway and a large stained glass window centered above on the high front gable. Large, recessed brick panels flank either side and are framed by decorative brick pinnacles at the front corners of the structure. The roof has been modified several times since its original construction, leaving the exterior gable peak and height of the interior ceiling significantly raised. The differences in brick color and bond in the gable — and on a rear extension on the north wall — are still clearly visible to a close observer and mark the spiritual growth of a silent witness to Alexandria’s past.



“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.