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Out of the Attic

Tracing the rise of Alfred Street Baptist Church

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Image: Alfred Street Baptist Church, Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

For more than two centuries the Baptist Church has played an influential role in the United States. It is believed that the first Baptist church originated in Holland after the Rev. John Smyth, an English separatist, reinterpreted the New Testament, taking it to mean baptisms should be performed only on believing adults. He thought the ritual should require a process of immersion, as opposed to the traditional sprinkling of water on an infant soon after birth.

From the start, this new Christian offshoot attracted a diverse following. As it spread, believers established many denominations, each supported by a strong, autonomous congregation.

Roger Williams started the first Baptist church in the North American colonies at Rhode Island in 1638. It spread quickly in the following century with the advent of the First Great Awakening, which encouraged believers to focus on one's personal commitment to redemption, salvation and morality, rather than a reliance on church ritual and doctrine.

By the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s, the Baptist faith expanded rapidly throughout the South, appealing to whites as well as blacks and resulting in the formation of one of Alexandria's most influential religious institutions: Alfred Street Baptist Church.

Alfred Street Baptist Church is the city's oldest black church, founded after Susan Black, a slave, was invited to join the all-white Alexandria Baptist Church in May 1803. Within three years other blacks had joined the group, and together they established the Colored Baptist Society of Alexandria as a conjoined church with Alexandria Baptist.

This step marked the establishment of the first black Baptist church north of Richmond.

The group first met in private homes and along the Potomac River, but by 1818, the congregation had grown large enough that land was leased from another Baptist family to build a small meetinghouse at 313 S. Alfred St. That land was finally purchased in 1842.

In 1850, the congregation separated formally from Alexandria Baptist. For the first time, it operated completely independent of the white church, which had formerly supervised its ministry. In 1855, the meetinghouse was replaced by a commodious brick structure, and the church thrived, paying off its mortgage within two years.

But during the Civil War, Union forces commandeered the church building and used it as a hospital, forcing services to be held elsewhere. After the war, though, the church continued expanding. It developed into one of Alexandria's major social and educational forces for black residents.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

In the 1870s, the name was changed to Alfred Street Baptist Church. By 1880, with 800 members, major renovations and additions to the original structure were undertaken.

Finally, in 1992, a massive new church complex was initiated. The project more than doubled the size of the church's facilities while retaining the exterior of the original building.

"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.