



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

A church for Presidents

Alexandria Times, January 9, 2014

Image: Christ Church. Library of Congress.

Before the American Revolution, the Church of England was the established church of Virginia, as well as part of the Colonial government. For administrative purposes, the colony was divided into parishes, and all residents paid taxes to maintain church activities.

Although Virginia was colonized in 1607, settling the northern portion of the state proved slow going. Alexandria was not established until 1749.

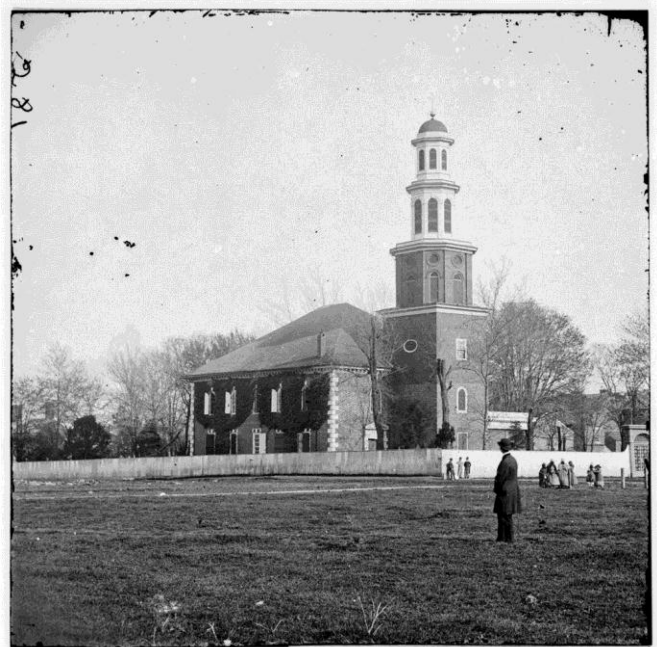
By 1753, Alexandria had a “chapel of ease” to provide a place of worship for residents too far from the main Anglican church, which was seven miles to the west. That more distant house of worship was named Falls Church, as it was located along the road to the Great Falls of the Potomac River.

In 1765, a new parish in Northern Virginia was created, and the inadequate buildings at Falls Church and Alexandria were replaced. Two new churches, designed by James Wren, were built in each town and completed just before the Revolutionary War.

After the war, government support of religious institutions ended. Despite this, Alexandria’s Christ Church prospered with the support of area residents like George Washington and the clerical leadership of David Griffith, Bryan Fairfax and William Meade.

On April 21, 1861, after resigning his commission in the U.S. Army, Robert E. Lee attended Sunday morning services at the church. When the Union Army occupied Alexandria a month later, it seized many churches and converted them into hospitals or stables. Fortunately, as George Washington’s place of worship, Christ Church was largely preserved with its interior left intact.

Still, desecrations of the surrounding cemetery — caused by soldiers camped out among the graves — did occur. This photograph, taken during the war years, shows the rural area that surrounded what was often called the “Little Church in the Woods” during that time.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Several years after the war's end, in 1869, a mission to assist poor women in the area was established. Three years later, parishioner Sallie Stuart led efforts to create missions of the newly formed National Women's Auxiliary to the Board of Missions throughout Virginia.

Throughout our nation's history, many American presidents and world leaders have visited Christ Church. On January 1, 1942, just weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill visited the church to commemorate the World Day of Prayer for Peace.

"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.