



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

How a church became a Civil War hospital

Alexandria Times, March 9, 2017

Historic image of Downtown Baptist Church, ca. 1861-65. The Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes, Francis Trevelyan Miller, Editor in Chief, Volume Seven, Prisons and Hospitals. New York, The Review of Reviews Co., 1911, p. 234.

One of the most iconic church buildings in Alexandria is the Downtown Baptist Church at 212 S. Washington St., whose tall steeple has towered over the city since the 1800s.

In 1803, 12 members of the Back Lick Baptist Church petitioned to start a Baptist church closer to the town of Alexandria to further expand the evangelistic ministry as preached by George Whitefield, a British itinerant pastor who came to America in 1738, performing outdoor religious revivals up and down the eastern seaboard.

By 1740, his fiery brand of religious fervor, as preached to thousands, earned the moniker the “Great Awakening.” Using his loud voice, theatrical skills and religious rhetoric, he engaged with huge crowds up and down the East Coast. The crowds were composed largely of people who did not attend church and African American slaves, many of whom were exposed to Christianity for the first time.

In 1740, there were only two Baptist churches in Virginia, but within a half century, there would be more than 200, and downtown Alexandria’s growth as an urban center made it a logical choice for a new location.

After a serious fire in 1830, the church was rebuilt, and in 1858 it was enlarged again to serve a growing ministry. But with Alexandria’s occupation by the Union Army just three years later, the



PHOTO/‘THE PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR IN TEN VOLUMES’



COURTESY PHOTO



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

building's use as a religious institution was suddenly cut short as military authorities seized it for use as a hospital.

Problems between the Union Army and area churches first began on February 9, 1862, when Rev. Kensey J. Stewart of the nearby St. Paul's Episcopal Church ignored an order by a Union officer to include a prayer for President Abraham Lincoln in his weekly sermon.

Stewart was immediately arrested by a Union officer for not reciting the requested prayer. He was literally pulled from the pulpit and jailed overnight, but quietly released the next day.

Several months later, the Rev. Mr. Bitting, pastor of the Baptist church, was threatened with an even worse fate if he did not recite a similar prayer. On July 21, 1862, a Philadelphia newspaper belatedly included the following story reflecting the growing tensions in occupied Alexandria: "A Philadelphia minister in trouble."

In the article, we learn that Bitting, who is from Philadelphia but is now pastor of the Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, was lately informed by Col. Gregory, the provost marshal, that if he could not pray for the Lincoln and the success of the Union Army, he would be compelled to close his church.

Several weeks before the article was published, Bitting had informed Gregory that he had made it his policy not to include political references in his sermons, and that he could not comply with such a request.

He was quickly informed that the question had become one of "government or no government, and that if he was not for the government, then must be against it."

The church was immediately closed and confiscated by the Union Army, and on July 5, 1862, it reopened as the Downtown Baptist Church General Hospital. Just over two months later, it was included within the full list of Second Division of Alexandria hospitals.

Of the 993 beds counted in the Alexandria General Hospital Division, Downtown Baptist included 150, with an additional 80 beds in its ward at The Lyceum, directly across Washington Street. The Downtown Baptist Church Hospital closed on December 8, 1864.

"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.