

Churchyard

The churchyard of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House¹ lies in that portion of Alexandria, Virginia, generally known today as Old Town. It is in the "Old and Historic Alexandria District" a historic preservation area created by the City of Alexandria in 1946². It is also situated in that portion of Old Town that was designated a National Historic Landmark District by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1966. Properties in this particular portion of Old Town are subject to regulations designed to preserve the area's historic architectural integrity. Oversight as to adherence with these regulations is the responsibility of the City of Alexandria's Board of Architectural Review (BAR).

The block of Old Town Alexandria that includes the churchyard of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House is bounded by the present-day streets of Fairfax (to the east), Wolfe (to the south), Royal (to the west), and Duke (to the north). The northern half of this block, consisting of lots 82 and 83, lay in the original town of Alexandria as platted in 1749 and were auctioned by the town's trustees to Hugh West on behalf of George West in December of that year. The southern half of the block, composed of lots 90 and 91, is the location of our churchyard. The lots became part of the town of Alexandria with its first territorial expansion in 1763 and were initially sold by the town's trustees to George Johnston. The churchyard consists of the interior (northern) halves of lots 90 and 91. The exterior (southern) portions of these two lots include the yard of Elliot House, now part of the Meeting House churchyard as well, and those lots on which are situated residences that face Wolfe Street and the parking lot of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church at the corner of Wolfe and Royal streets.

On July 12th 1773, the interior halves of lots 90 and 91 were sold by Richard and Eleanor Arrell to the Rev. William Thom, the congregation's first installed minister, "and his successors who shall be Presbyterian ministers elected and appointed to officiate, minister & preach in the Presbyterian Church³". The deed signing was witnessed by John Carlyle, Jonathan Hall, James Hendrick, John Muir, and William Ramsay. The survey laying out the property line on the northern side of the new Presbyterian Meeting House lot was apparently not as accurate as it should have been — its location was contested and resurveyed as early as the 1820s and multiple times since.

The northern line of the property originally ran from the north side of the current north wall at the northwest corner of the lot (where it meets the sidewalk on Royal Street) and extended further north by the time it reached the Fairfax Street side of the property. How much farther north is not known, but one can stand on the west side of Royal Street and view the collision of the north (rear) side of Flounder House with the sanctuary of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church to gain some appreciation of the original sense of this property line's location.

On the southern side of the churchyard was located a ten-foot wide alley that originally extended the width of the block from Fairfax to Royal streets. Like many of the alleys in Old Town, this one was probably conceived of in different manners by adjoining property owners. On maps, it is depicted as being wide enough to provide access to the interior portions of all lots facing Wolfe Street, but not sufficiently wide to drive a carriage through (or park an automobile at the rear of

one's home). Access via the alley remained important to both the congregation and our neighbors on Wolfe Street into at least the 1840s, and appears as an across-block passageway on a plat map as late as the 1860s. Eventually, it was taken over by lot owners along Wolfe Street. The portion of the alley lying between the original portion of Elliot House and the Meeting House — currently the side yard of Elliot House — was legally closed only in the 1950s.

When a parsonage (now Flounder House) was erected on the Royal Street side of the churchyard in 1787, the churchyard was understood to consist of two separate units — a public section, which consisted of the eastern side facing Fairfax Street and was occupied by the Meeting House and the burial ground; and a private western section, which fronted on Royal Street and contained the parsonage and its yard. This division of the churchyard into public and private spaces continued until the 1925-28 restoration of the Meeting House. The two yards were united at that time by removing the fence that divided them and minor re-landscaping.

Landscaping done in conjunction with the restoration reoriented the Meeting House churchyard to make Royal Street the dominant entrance to the churchyard and grounds, now a fully open and public space (Flounder House continued to be occupied as a rental property, however). This alteration to the churchyard was done to make the Meeting House, which at the time served primarily as a historic shrine, more directly visible and accessible to tourists riding the trolley that ran along Royal Street on its way from Alexandria to Mount Vernon. In December 1932, at the program conducted by the City of Alexandria to conclude that year's George Washington's Birth Bicentennial, a newly erected brick wall that surrounded the churchyard was dedicated. It was a gift of the Sons of the American Revolution and defined the churchyard as the unified space that we know today. A bronze plaque commemorating the gift of these walls is located on the north wall of the churchyard, immediately to the northwest of the Meeting House.

When the Meeting House was restored to full-time use as a congregational worship space in 1949, the new congregation returned to earlier practice and utilized Fairfax Street as the dominant entrance to the churchyard. A significant step toward further unification of the formerly public and private portions of the churchyard was made in 1952 when the yard's first walkway was installed. The new brick walkway provided an all-weather walking surface connecting the sidewalks on Fairfax and Royal streets for the first time in 180 years of use. Subsequent alterations to the churchyard, from the incorporation of new structures such as the Education Building to the partial implementation of several landscape plans and the planting of memorial trees over the last half century, have all respected the historic status of the Meeting House fronting on Fairfax Street as the dominant architectural and landscape feature of the churchyard.⁴

In 2005, the churchyard received its first significant alteration of its property lines in 222 years. When the restored and extended Elliot House was dedicated on April 17th of that year, its lot, which extended south from the Meeting House to Wolfe Street, became a part of our enlarged churchyard. The boundaries of our churchyard remain unaltered since 2005, but usages continue to evolve. See, for instance, the still-new corner garden next to Elliot House, which is filling out into a wonderful neighborhood green space. Descriptions of other historic uses of the churchyard, including its sheltering a fire engine, are included in the sections that follow.

FOOTNOTES

¹"Old Presbyterian Meeting House" is used here to designate this particular congregation of the Presbyterian Church. Several different names have served to designate our congregation during its nearly two-and-a-half-century history. The "Society of Presbyterians" identified those residents of Alexandria who first joined in public worship in the Assembly Hall on Market Square when it was erected in 1760. This congregation became the "First Presbyterian Church at Alexandria" when a second Presbyterian congregation was formed here in 1817 and retained that name through dissolution of the congregation in 1899. Other designations used to identify our congregation include simply "Presbyterian Church" (1772-1817), "Union Presbyterian Church" (1874-80), and since 1949, "Presbyterian Meeting House" or "Old Presbyterian Meeting House".

"Meeting House" is used to refer to the structure that serves as our house of worship rather than terms such as *is*anctuary¹ or *ic*hurch¹. In line with Protestant practices in Colonial British America most fully exemplified by New England Puritans but also by Presbyterians, Methodists, and the Society of Friends (Quakers) in the Middle Colonies and elsewhere, "meeting house" served to designate "house of worship" (Bonomi 2003, Buggeln 2003, Mallary 1985, Sweeney 1993, Donnelly 1968, Garvan 1960, Wallace 1930). In Virginia, where the Church of England served as the colony's official denomination, "meeting house" also served to designate places of worship erected by denominations other than the Church of England, i.e., all formally *id*issenting¹ denominations, which included Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, German Reformed, and Quakers.

²The first such "historic district" to be established in the United States through a preservation ordinance was the Old and Historic District of Charleston, South Carolina in 1931; the second was the Vieux Carre Historic District of New Orleans, Louisiana in 1936.

³The wording is taken from the original deed. The Arell family name is spelled "Arrell" on the deed, but more commonly was spelled "Arell". It is not known when the Arells purchased these two lots.

⁴An important aspect of the churchyard not discussed here is landscaping and plantings. Several landscape architects have provided consultation and/or plans for the churchyard, including Leon Zach, Rose Greely, Laurence Stevens Brigham, and J. Dean Norton. Several memorial plantings are known to have occurred over the years — a cherry tree placed at an unknown location in the churchyard by the Monticello Guards (with simultaneous plantings here and at Monticello) and a tree transplanted from Mount Vernon to the Alexandria Academy, both in conjunction with the celebration of George Washington's birth bicentennial in 1932; four trees placed in front of the Meeting House at a ceremony that included a national radio broadcast featuring the director of the U.S. Forest Service in 1933; a dogwood tree in the churchyard by Jean Robertson Elliot in honor of her Presbyterian forebears in 1960; and English boxwood in the churchyard by Charles and Elizabeth Nance in 1990. The Meeting House has been included in the annual Historic Garden Week in Virginia tour many times since it was first conducted in 1929, most recently in 2007.