

Elliot House

Elliot House has served the Meeting House congregation only since 2005, but as is generally the case with Meeting House structures, it possesses a long and unique story all its own. The Elliot House lot at the northwest corner of Fairfax and Wolfe streets was created with the division of lots associated with first expansion of Alexandria in 1763, and was once owned by Richard and Eleanor Arell, who donated the lot adjoining it to the north for use of the Meeting House congregation. In the early 1840s, it was purchased by the Charles B. and Susan Unruh family, who had moved to Alexandria from Germantown, Pennsylvania. Charles and his oldest son were blacksmiths with a shop located at the corner of Duke and Union streets. The Unruh family erected their residence at 323 South Fairfax Street — a wooden free-standing two-story structure in the Greek Revival style — by at least 1842. That structure continues as the front portion of today's Elliot House. It is the only major structure to have been erected on this corner lot, although several small ones may have preceded it.

Among the many residents of this structure since it was built by the Unruhs in the 1840s were several who were members of the Meeting House congregation. Robert W. Bell, Jr., who purchased the property in the 1860s and lived here into the 1880s, served for many years on both the Meeting House Church Committee and the governing board of the Presbyterian Cemetery. Alexandria's famous City Atlas (Hopkins 1875) depicts the lot during this period as including the residence with a two-story extension at its northwest corner and a frame stable in the northwest corner of the yard. Robert Bell worked initially in the family's printing-stationer-bookseller business — Robert Bell and Sons at 61 King Street — and later as a wood dealer and as surveyor for the City of Alexandria.

Several photographs of the structure from the first half of the twentieth century survive — during the mid-1920s, it was photographed along with nine other Alexandria buildings for an article in *Progressive Architecture* (Saylor 1926); and in 1939, it was photographed for the Historic American Buildings Survey, a project of the U.S. Department of the Interior to document the nation's architectural treasures. In 1939, it was known as "Crocker House". During this period, the home was occupied by a New-Deal couple from Missouri — the Honorable Harry W. Blair, Assistant U.S. Attorney General in the Department of Justice, and the Honorable Emily Newell Blair, suffragist and chair of the U.S. Consumers Advisory Board.

In 1960, the house was purchased by R. Sherrard "Sherrie" Elliot (1901-1987) and Jean Robertson Elliot (1901-1999), when they moved to Alexandria from Tarrytown, New York. Sherrie Elliot, a financier, served as vice-president of Financial General Corporation and on the board of several local banks. He was also an elder and trustee of the Meeting House congregation. Jean Elliot was active in numerous Alexandria organizations, especially ones relating to the town's history, and published the well-received collection of poems, *A Starrier Coldness*. Her poems also served as the text for *Alexandria Suite*, a musical work for mixed chorus and chamber orchestra or keyboard composed by Russell Woollen for the Alexandria Choral Society and debuted at the Meeting House in 1987. She was named Poet Laureate of the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1977 and of the City of Alexandria in 1979, and played a leading

role in the Alexandria Library Company, which held its annual lectures in the Meeting House during the 1960s and 1970s.

The Elliots presented their home as a gift to the Meeting House in 1978, retaining rights to lifetime occupancy. When Jean Elliot died in 1999, the Meeting House prepared plans to restore the original structure, construct an addition, and create a new side-yard garden. In conjunction with this project, a formal archaeological investigation of the yard was undertaken and a former well and a cistern were unearthed. Excavations produced numerous artifacts, which are now stored with the city's Alexandria Archaeology (Alexandria Archaeology n.d., Jirikowic et al. 2004). The restored and expanded Elliot House today includes original rooms on the first floor — parlor and library — and on the second floor — minister's study and conference room — plus offices for church staff and meeting rooms in the addition and on the lower level.

Elliot House has been recognized as an Old Town structure that has maintained its historic and architectural integrity by the Historic Alexandria Foundation (plaque located on its Fairfax Street facade). It was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of the Interior (photographed in 1939) and other accounts of historic architecture (Saylor 1926, Davis *et al.* 1946, Cox 1976). An Award of Merit for outstanding achievements in historic resources was presented by the Washington Chapter of the American Institute for Architects to the Meeting House congregation for its restoration/renovation of the original portion of the structure and its extension in 2006.