

## Meeting House

The original Meeting House, erected in 1775, was largely destroyed by fire in 1835.<sup>1</sup> General information about the original structure survives, but no image is known to exist that was made during the sixty years it served the congregation. From textual information that survives, we know that many design aspects of the original Meeting House were incorporated into the rebuilt structure that was completed in 1837. The two structures resembled each other in appearance. The reconstructed Meeting House incorporated very little that would have been innovative in terms of contemporary American church architecture practices during the 1830s. In fact, the rebuilt structure that survives to this day represents a remarkably pure embodiment of what is sometimes referred to as "plain style architecture," a form of architectural expression that was closely associated with Reformed-Calvinist denominations in the United States and had been practiced for well over a century by the 1830s.<sup>2</sup>

Reformed-Protestant plain style architecture, although employed infrequently in Virginia where the Church of England dominated, appeared frequently in places of worship for Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, Dutch Reformed, and German Reformed congregations throughout the Middle Atlantic states and New England. Terms such as "unadorned," "austere," "modest," "functional," "noble simplicity," and "quietly reverential" are among those often used to describe the visual impact of Reformed-Protestant plain style architecture. Rather than a true architectural style, it is an architectural expression—it is an "unadorned" expression as opposed to an "adorned" or "ornate" one. This unadorned expression may be wrought in numerous architectural styles. The formal architectural style of the Meeting House is Georgian. Equally unadorned expressions may be found in places of worship constructed in Modern and Post-Modern architectural styles of the current century.<sup>3</sup>

Theologically, Reformed-Protestant plain style architecture attempts to create a place of worship that is based upon principles for corporate worship in the Reformed theological tradition, viz., a worship space that (1) forms a *Domus Ecclesia*, house for the gathered assembly, i.e., a meeting house, rather than a *Domus Dei*, house of God, with separate spaces for priests and worshippers, and (2) visually emphasizes the importance of the Word proclaimed. Thus, of most importance, is the centrality of a pulpit within a "preaching room" or "auditory church building," with accompanying facilities for baptism and celebration of the Lord's Supper, the latter never including a communion rail as is typically found in the worship spaces of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican-Episcopalian congregations. Most importantly, worshippers in such a space are accommodated in a spatial arrangement that facilitates hearing the Word (the reading of scripture and preaching). Embellishment or decoration of the worship space, even the presence of a cross, in a strict Reformed theological sense, is interpreted as a form of visual distraction from the principle task of worshippers engaged in corporate worship through focusing on hearing and responding to the Word.<sup>4</sup>

## Original Meeting House

The original Meeting House was erected as Alexandria's second house of worship in 1775, two years after the house of worship for the Church of England—now Christ (Episcopal) Church—

had been erected, which then served as the official place of worship for this portion of Fairfax parish. No taken-from-life image exists of the original structure, but we know that it possessed basically the same overall dimensions — 60 by 50 feet — as the four other places of worship erected in this area during the period, which were for congregations of the Church of England — St. John’s Church, across the Potomac River at Broad Creek, Maryland (constructed in 1766), Falls Church in Fairfax County to the west (1767-69), Pohick Church in Fairfax County to the south (1769-74), and Christ Church in Alexandria (1773). Externally, they all presented very similar appearances, differing only in terms of number of stories and detailing (Upton 1997).

The original Meeting House was a two story structure, with walls 26-feet tall and a hipped roof topped by a cupola that contained a gilded bell. Its entrance doors were located on Fairfax Street, or perhaps on both Fairfax street and its southern side facing the alley that would have served as a walkway to a second set of entrance doors. The placement of entrance doors in adjacent walls was not unusual in local Anglican church structures, where seating configurations emphasized spaces for families accommodated with box pews, and cross aisles that allowed easy access to liturgical stations at several different locations within the worship space (rather than all being clustered at the front). An excellent example of this local early style of internal arrangement continues to exist at Pohick (formerly Church of England now Episcopalian) Church, in Fairfax County south of Mount Vernon.

A conjectural drawing of the original Meeting House, the only image of the original Meeting House known to exist, it was prepared by Mary Jane Stewart (1829-1909) around 1880, and is similar to one that appeared in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine (Carne 1880). Stewart was a member of the congregation who could have possessed only a vague recollection of the original Meeting House — she was only six years old when it burned, and the drawing was prepared nearly a half century after the fire. Nonetheless, her representation could incorporate good handed-down information — her father, John A. Stewart would have possessed knowledge of the original structure that had been formed over decades. He had been a member of the congregation prior to 1817 and had served on the church committee when the original structure burned.

The Stewart image is presumably meant to depict the Meeting House as it would have appeared during the first half of the 1830s, just prior to the fire. The open and semi-pastoral setting depicted in the drawing is probably accurate, as the churchyard’s location in the 300-block of South Fairfax Street was long considered to be at the southern end of the street, meaning at the end of the street’s built-up portion. During this period, the location of Christ Church, in the 700-block of Cameron Street, was considered even more remote — it was thought to be located out of town all together. The churchyard of the original Meeting House was separated from the paved sidewalk of Fairfax street by a brick wall.

The interior configuration of the original Meeting House probably differed at least somewhat, and possibly considerably, from the reconstructed Meeting House. Information on its layout is fragmentary. The pulpit was located along the north wall — the current pulpit is centered on the west wall. Originally, seating included at least some benches. In the eighteenth century, congregational seating often included both enclosed pews and benches. One of these original benches remains in use — it is the black bench with an extra deep seat that provides seating at

the west end of the southern gallery. Some of the benches used in the original structure were sold to the Alexandria-Washington Masonic Lodge No. 22 in 1789. Those benches continue to be preserved in the recreated Alexandria lodge room at the George Washington National Masonic Memorial on King Street.

Enclosed pews with doors, either slip pews like the ones installed in the reconstructed Meeting House and still in use today, or box pews like those found at Pohick Church, provided a second form of seating in the original Meeting House. Galleries, to bring listeners as close to the pulpit as possible, extended along three sides of the original structure, as in the current Meeting House. A pipe organ, built by Jacob Hilbus of Washington, D.C., was installed in the gallery opposite the pulpit in 1817 and served until it was destroyed by the fire of 1835. If the original structure had entrance doors on adjacent walls, as in the manner of Pohick Church, then its aisles probably extended from both sets of doors and crossed in the center of the room.

The original Meeting House did not include a bell tower, but instead had a cupola on the roof to hold high the town's first, and for many years only, publicly sounding bell. The bell was manufactured by the foundry of Morton and Foster in London and served not only as the signal that worship services were soon to begin, but also as the entire community's public announcement system — from sounding an alarm in emergencies such as fires to mourning the death of George Washington in 1799.

The congregation contemplated erecting a truly massive bell tower and steeple, complete with town clock, in the late 1780s to accommodate its then-new church bell but it was not to be. Plans to erect a tower and steeple were advertised — newspaper notices seeking construction bids called for brick and stone work [that] are to be 95 feet high from the foundation, on which will be erected a spire of wood, of 65 feet high. At 160 feet, this would have been a truly massive bell tower and steeple. It would have been nearly 100 feet taller than the current 65-foot bell tower, and 40 feet taller than the current bell tower and steeple of neighboring St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church. Following the standard fund-raising procedure of the day, a public lottery was undertaken, but a smallpox epidemic swept through Alexandria in 1791 — at the time no doubt considered a Providential intervention — and forced its cancellation. Plans for a tower and steeple were abandoned, and none was ever constructed.

In 1835, a lightning strike largely destroyed the original structure, but it had also sustained considerable damage in encounters with extreme weather conditions at least twice earlier. In July of 1786, a hurricane swept through the Middle Atlantic region that caused damage from Hampton Roads at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay north into Pennsylvania and New Jersey. It tore the roof from the Meeting House and caused a wall and gallery to collapse. In a sermon delivered two decades later, the Rev. Dr. James Muir described the storm's visit — *God rides on the wings of the wind; sensible of his approach all gives way. It is the homage of nature prostrating before him. July, 1786, gave a display of powers able to crush the boldest offender. A violent hurricane, raised the roof of the Presbyterian church [Meeting House], and tossed it about like the lightest substance. A solid mass of wall was driven in, and in the fall a third of the galleries [the gallery on the side where the wall collapsed], except the pillars, with all the pews below shivered to pieces. When the elders of the church and others came to*

*ascertain the damage, their astonishment and dejection were visible; a judicious member, who had mingled with the crowd, after a moment's pause, cheerfully exclaimed, 'Never mind, keep a good heart, all will be well, see the pillars are standing' (Muir 1812 15-16; italics in original).*

A second encounter with severe weather elements caused extensive damage to the windows of the original Meeting House. In June of 1811, a horrendous hail storm, described in the newspaper as "the severest hail-storm ever witnessed by the oldest inhabitants [of Alexandria]", caused considerable damage throughout the town. The Rev. Dr. James Muir provides a first-hand account of this encounter —

The weather on the 7th of June, was cloudy with short intervals of sunshine extremely scorching. About five in the afternoon the sky was overcast; distant thunder was heard, and frequent flashes of lightning seen. A dark cloud rushed forward from the West changing to the North as it approached the town attended with the severest hail-storm ever witnessed by the oldest inhabitants, which, in a narrow vane, raged for fifteen minutes. The hail, or rather the lumps of ice, were of irregular shapes, having sharp points. They weighed several ounces, and in circumference exceeded four inches, although the size was diminished before they could be weighed or measured in consequence of the deluge of rain. They fell with irresistible force; trees were partly stripped [stripped] of their foliage, and of large branches; the shingles and slates of several houses were split:—many gardens were destroyed;—The waters of the river were splashed a foot or two upwards and all around;—The bird was killed in its flight, the cattle panic-struck run about seeking shelter:—several citizens were bruised;—Every house in town having windows to the North lost their glass, which lay strewn on the floors, and through every street;—Our church has lost glass to the amount of near three hundred panes (Muir 1812 17-18; italics in original).

If the original Meeting House had the same window configuration as its replacement — 16 panes over 16 panes of glass, i.e., 32 panes of glass, per window — near three hundred [broken] panes would have meant that the glass in all of the windows on the structure's north side would have been destroyed, plus some from other sides as well.

## Reconstructed Meeting House

The original Meeting House experienced its most destructive encounter with severe weather elements on the Sunday afternoon of 26 July 1835 — lightning in a turbulent summer storm struck the Meeting House and caused such damage that an essentially new structure was required to replace the original one. The next issue of the newspaper reported — "During the storm of Sunday afternoon last, the lightning struck the steeple [cupola] of the First Presbyterian Church in the first place, and in a few moments the ancient and venerable building was completely enveloped in flames. The fire spread with such rapidity from the steeple [cupola] to the roof, and from the roof to every part of the edifice, that, notwithstanding the most praiseworthy exertions were made by the fire companies and individuals to arrest the progress, there remained in a few hours nothing of the church but its walls" (Alexandria Gazette 28 July 1835).

The replacement structure was completed and dedicated two years later, on 30 July 1837. It incorporated the 60 by 50-foot ground dimensions and 26-foot tall walls of the original, plus an addition to the Fairfax-Street end that added space for a narthex and stairs to the galleries. The

Alexandria Gazette assessed the replacement structure — “The First Presbyterian Church edifice, rebuilt on the site of that old Church, which was destroyed by lightning about two years ago, was on Sunday last solemnly dedicated to the services of religion. The building is plain in its exterior, but commodious and neat, and its interior chaste and handsome, and well adapted for the convenience of seeing and hearing” (Alexandria Gazette 1 August 1837).

In terms of its architecture, the rebuilt structure embodied the plain meetinghouse style that was not only carried over from the original structure but had existed for generations in numerous other houses of worship throughout urban centers in the Middle Atlantic and New England portions of the Eastern Seaboard. Examples include the local “kindred spirit” Presbyterian house of worship erected the previous decade — Georgetown Presbyterian Church (then known as Bridge Street Presbyterian Church), erected in 1821 on Bridge (now “M” Street just west of its intersection with Pennsylvania Avenue (it was demolished in 1872). Older examples, in earlier established urban centers include St. George’s United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, the “mother church of American Methodism”, which dates from the 1760s; and Christ “Old North” Church and Old South Meeting House in Boston, both erected in the 1720s (these three houses of worship remain in use).

The Alexandria Gazette article’s reference to the rebuilt structure being “well adapted for the convenience of seeing and hearing” refers to the slope of the floor in the first-floor seating area — the floor at the pulpit end of the room is about a foot lower than at the Fairfax-Street entrance end. This makes each pew just a little bit lower than the one behind it, thus enhancing both viewing and hearing. It represents perhaps the rebuilt structure’s one “modern” feature, i.e., incorporating an innovation just coming into use. The floors in the worship space of Christ Episcopal Church (built 1773) and St. Paul’s Episcopal Church (built 1817) are both flat, producing a different feeling about their interior space and a different functionality.

The reconstructed Meeting House was expanded in 1843 with the addition of an abutting bell tower at its western (burial-ground) side. A new bell, incorporating metal from the fire-destroyed original one, was cast by the Alexandria Iron Foundry of Thomas W. and Richard C. Smith, then located on the eastern side of Royal Street between Wilkes and Gibbon streets (current site of the Safeway store). This foundry also cast the bell for the old Fairfax County Courthouse and both continue to function today. The structure’s front porch and steps, originally of wood, were replaced with granite ones in 1853; they also remain in use to this day.

Amazingly few interior alterations have been made to the Meeting House since its reconstruction in the 1830s. Most have been made to accommodate technological improvements, such as replacing oil lamps with gas lights or introducing air conditioning to lower humidity and temperature during the summer. Changes have also been made to color schemes in response to altering contemporary tastes. Nonetheless, today’s Meeting House appears much as it did when reconstructed in the 1830s — “commodious and neat” chaste and handsome, and well adapted for the convenience of seeing and hearing” to again quote the Gazette — a remarkably unified and chaste visual aesthetic whole.

The most significant visual alterations that have occurred to the Meeting House since its reconstruction in 1837 cluster at the room's front and in its galleries. The bell tower that was added to the Meeting House outside created space for an apse inside. This new interior space was utilized to house a new pipe organ in 1849. The instrument, which replaced the fire-destroyed 1817 Hilbus organ, was built by Henry Erben of New York City. It remains in use in this same space today, although from 1928 to 1997 it was located in the east gallery, having been relocated there during the renovation that was completed in 1928 in the belief that it was the original Hilbus organ, which in fact had been located in the gallery.

Almost a century after the addition of a bell tower resulted in changes to the interior of the Meeting House, a second structural modification was made to its front interior portion. In 1940, the existing pulpit and steps were reconfigured to their current appearance — an enclosed pulpit with steps curving down from both sides to the floor level. The new pulpit and steps replaced a lectern-style pulpit that sat in the center of an open-stage platform from which steps descended straight out to the sides. The earlier pulpit arrangement is visible in the Historic American Buildings Survey photograph of the Meeting House. The new pulpit was a gift of the Alexandria Association. At the dedication of the new pulpit, it was described as — ìa pulpit, which had been missing from the church for many yearsÖ [that was designed] on the basis of such data as was available concerning the appearance of the original and [of] a careful study of Presbyterian pulpits of the colonial period.î It was designed by Ward Brown, an architect engaged in Alexandria's historic preservation efforts during the 1930s, who would serve on the Old and Historic District's Board of Architectural Review when it was established in 1946.

In 1981, one other structural modification known to have occurred to the Meeting House since the 1830s took place when an entrance/exit door was added in the room's northwest corner. It was located in one of the four niches that had once been occupied by heating stoves. A step-free exterior ramp leading from the sidewalk at Fairfax Street to the door was added at the same time.

Several other objects of recent vintage in the worship space are the communion table and baptismal font, created for the Meeting House in the early 1950s. The table for the service of the Lord's Supper was designed by architect E. Townsley Jenkins, and the baptismal font by J. Rowland Snyder. The cross that now sits on the side table was created by the Stieff Silver Company of Baltimore during this same period. No historic antecedents of these objects are known to have existed at the Meeting House. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tables for serving the Lord's Supper, at which congregants would have been seated to receive the elements, would have been erected whenever this service was conducted, usually four times a year. Crosses and baptismal fonts were rarely found in Presbyterian places of worship for most of the historic congregation's existence (Melton 1967, Smith 2001). Baptisms were often conducted among family members and friends at private homes. Crosses, baptismal fonts, and alter-like tables for serving the Lord's Supper only began to be introduced into Presbyterian churches during the second half of the nineteenth century, when notions of acceptable church architecture among America's Presbyterians, as among other Protestant denominations, underwent radical reconceptualizations.

The open galleries of the reconstructed Meeting House, with their flat-floor spaces, have served the congregation in many different capacities — they have served as a multi-purpose space longer than any other portion of the congregation’s facilities. From 1837 through 1952, they provided the congregation with its only space other than the ground floor of the Meeting House and the great outdoors for meeting space or conducting classes on Sundays. The congregation’s lecture hall, located at the corner of Duke and Royal streets, was considered too far away for such use. For generations, the galleries were simply referred to as *the Sunday School*, but they provided space for numerous other functions over the decades — the choir from 1837 to the present; Erben organ from 1929 to 1997; Reuter organ from 1965 to 1997; and offices for clergy and secretary from 1949 to 1952. Today’s pews, which sit on top of raised platforms in the north and south galleries, were installed beginning in 1954. Since 1997, the east gallery has housed the Lively-Fulcher Opus 4 pipe organ. The central portion of the east gallery wall, where the clock is located, was extended slightly when the Lively-Fulcher organ was installed. The clock, original to the first Meeting House, survived the 1835 fire but no longer functions — its hands are now set at 10:20 p.m., the hour George Washington died on December 14, 1799, a reminder that Alexandria’s memorial services at his death were conducted at the Meeting House.

Sources of lighting in the Meeting House, other than daylight, have changed regularly over the years in response to the availability of new technologies — electrically powered lights, present since the first decade of the twentieth century, are at least the fourth generation of lighting technology to be utilized. Originally, candles were called upon, and served as the lighting source for so long that the terms *early candlelight* and *candlelight* routinely served to indicate early evening and evening portions of the day. For decades, evening worship services in the Meeting House were announced as occurring at *early-candlelight* or at *candlelight*. Whale oil lamps followed candles. Lighting fixtures for both candles and whale oil lamps would have included wall sconces and chandeliers. In 1853, the sperm whale-oil lamps and chandeliers then in use were replaced by a third form of lighting technology — gas. Alexandria’s first gasworks had been constructed at Lee and Oronoco streets in 1851 and the town’s first gas-illuminated street lights were installed in 1855. The wooden standards along the gallery railings that today are topped with candles originally held glass-globe fixtures with burning jets of gas. Glass-globe gas-light fixtures were also suspended directly beneath each of these wooden standards. Electric lights represent the fourth form of lighting technology for the Meeting House, and most of the fixtures currently in use form the third generation of fixtures utilizing electricity. The first generation of electrical light fixtures was introduced in 1907 — a photograph taken shortly thereafter shows plain milk-glass globe fixtures hanging from gallery ceilings along with the still-existing gas-light fixtures. A second generation of electrical light fixtures was installed in conjunction with the 1925-28 restoration — the existing mix of gas and electric light fixtures was replaced by electric reproduction whale-oil ones, visible in the Historic American Buildings Survey photograph of the Meeting House interior. The national fund raising effort that was conducted to restore the Meeting House, which included the whale-oil style light fixtures, received the support of many persons, including Andrew Mellon, then U.S. Secretary of the Treasury; Elihu Root, then president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and former Secretary of War and of State; and Daniel Willard, president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The whale-oil style lamps were eventually replaced by a third generation of electrical fixtures. The pewter-on-brass chandelier that currently hangs from the ceiling at the center of the

room was produced in the Netherlands and installed in 1960. The brass-with-glass-globe light fixtures along the side aisles and in the narthex were installed as part of the 1987-90 restoration-renaissance. The exterior light above the front porch was added then as well.

While the Meeting House, described as "chaste and handsome" in 1835, remains unadorned, its interior space does include visually prominent features that deserve explicit comment. The enclosed slip pews with doors are original to the reconstructed Meeting House. They emulate the older-style enclosed-pew seating of the original Meeting House rather than the open pews generally utilized by the 1830s. Racks for holding hymn books, communion cups, and pencils were added to the pews during the 1950s, with the racks for hymn books being doubled in size in 1980 to accommodate Bibles as well.

Though not visibly prominent, two other features of the enclosed pews are noteworthy. When you enter a pew, you need to step up, and to step down when leaving — the floor inside the enclosed pews is raised three inches above the floor of the room to provide an airspace for better insulation. One other feature of the enclosed pews, which must have been important to some worshippers during the nineteenth century but whose very existence today surprises us, is spitting boxes. Spitting boxes, installed in the pews of "chewers", were drawer-like boxes that were filled with sand and located under the seats of the pews in front of chewers. No doubt spittoons once could be found in the room's corners as well.

A stone tablet memorial to the Rev. Dr. James Muir (1757-1820), who served the congregation for thirty-one years from 1789 to 1820, is located on the room's north wall. It was re-erected at this location at the reconstruction in 1837 to be near Rev. Muir's burial site under the original pulpit along the north wall. A second stone tablet, located on the south wall, was placed there in the 1880s to honor the Rev. Dr. Elias Harrison (1790-1863), who served the congregation for forty-six years, first as collegiate minister with Rev. Muir from 1817 to 1820 and then as sole minister from 1820 to 1863, and Robert Bell (1809-1885), who served the congregation as an elder for forty years and as superintendent of the Sunday School for over fifty years.

## **Recognition and Preservation of the Meeting House**

The significance of the Meeting House, both in terms of the structure's architecture and of actions taken by the congregation that are associated with it, has long been formally recognized both by the congregation itself and by numerous organizations outside the congregation. It is a National Historic Place — a structure considered "significant in American History, architecture, archaeology, engineering and culture [and] worthy of preservation". This designation, conferred by the U.S. Department of the Interior, includes listing in the federal government's National Register of Historic Sites (plaque on facade of Meeting House; National Register of Historic Places website). The Meeting House and its churchyard are located within the Alexandria Historic Landmark District, a U.S. Department of the Interior designated National Historic Landmark.

The Meeting House is also a Historic Landmark of the Commonwealth of Virginia, designated by the Historic Resources Board of the Commonwealth of Virginia (plaque in narthex of



Meeting House; Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission 1976). It is a Presbyterian Historic Site, so designated by the Presbyterian Historical Society of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (plaque in narthex of Meeting House; Presbyterian Historical Society 1982-99). Locally, it is recognized not only as a historic structure but as one that has maintained its historic and architectural integrity by the Historic Alexandria Foundation (plaque on façade of Meeting House). It was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey, a program initiated in 1933 by the U.S. Department of the Interior to document the nation's architectural heritage, and was photographically documented in 1936 and 1939 (images at Library of Congress website). The Meeting House is regularly included in surveys of historic structures (e.g., Brock 1930, Lindsey 1931, Rines 1936, U.S. Writers' Program 1939 and 1940, Rawlings 1963, American Institute of Architects 1965, Bodine 1967, American Institute of Planners 1976, Cox 1976, Cromie 1979, Northern Virginia History Officials 1981, Davis and Rawlings 1985, Seale 2000, Shively 2001, Massey 2003), and most recently appeared in the richly illustrated *The Ideals Guide to Historic Places of Worship in the United States* (Skarmees 2004).

Concern for preservation of the architectural integrity of the Meeting House has been active within the congregation for at least three-quarters of a century. During this period, three major restoration/renovations have been undertaken. The first such project was initiated in 1925 with a national fundraising campaign to make needed repairs, that the church may stand for more than another century, a landmark of the days of Washington, of early Presbyterianism in America, and a symbol of united North and South. [It is by urgings of descendants of the seceding Southern brethren of the Old First Church that the crumbling steeple [i.e., bell tower] of the ancient edifice is to rear itself once more to its full height and proclaim that 'there is no more strife—no enmity which can not be forgotten'.'] (Washington Post 22 February 1925) Consulting architect for this project was Clarence Lowell Harding of the District of Columbia. (Gordon 1929)

Among the many tasks undertaken with the 1920s restoration/renovation was the installation of a slate roof by Joseph Rodgers; replacement of the existing gas and electric lighting systems with electric reproduction colonial oil lamps; reconditioning and relocation of the Erben organ from the apse to the east gallery; repairs to the interior floors and walls, repainting of the interior in a buff color; placement of a bronze plaque over the builder's stone in the Fairfax Street façade that read 'Old Presbyterian Meeting House – Erected 1774'; clean up of the burial ground and churchyard; erection of a white picket fence along Royal Street; and the preparation of numerous framed images of pages from historic congregation records, of individuals associated with the Meeting House, and the unfinished Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington, that were placed on walls throughout the interior. When the restoration was completed in 1928, the dedication celebration included a nationally broadcast radio program from the Meeting House that featured Major General John A. Lejeune, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps and John A. Saunders, Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

For the next twenty years, the Meeting House served both as a place of worship and as a museum celebrating Alexandria's connections to George Washington and to its colonial past. Its prominent stature as a museum linked with George Washington was recognized by the United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, which presented it with a Joseph Nollekens' bust of George Washington in 1932. The Commission presented other copies of the Nollekens' bust to the White House, Justices of the Supreme Court, U.S. Senators and

Representatives, and state governors for display in their capital buildings. The Meeting House's copy, originally displayed in one of the side niches, is now located in the library in Elliot House. The museum phase extended through 1949 and was something the new congregation worked to move beyond — text of the first brochure they prepared for visitors began with "A shrine becomes a living church" You have crossed the threshold of one of America's most historic and beautiful churches.

A second major restoration/renovation was undertaken immediately after an independent congregation reoccupied the Meeting House and its associated property in 1949. Tasks undertaken as part of this project, which took place during 1949 and 1950, included numerous repairs to the exterior brickwork, roof, windows, interior walls, floors, and clock on the wall of the east gallery; replacement of supports for the bell in the tower; replacement of the pot-bellied coal stoves with a forced-air gas furnace that included installation of air ducts; painting with a color explicitly created for the Meeting House by the Glidden Paint Co. in response to research undertaken to discover original paint colors; and a cleaning and tuning of the Erben organ, plus the installation of an electric blower for the bellows (after a century, playing the organ became a one-person job, as the task no longer included the hand pumping of air into the bellows!). Consultants on this project included Walter Macomber, then resident restoration architect at Mount Vernon and previously the architect at Colonial Williamsburg (1928-33); Frederick L. Rath, Jr., director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Helen Duprey Bullock also of the National Trust; and Worth Bailey, architectural historian and curator at Mount Vernon. When the project was completed, U. S. Grant III, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, singled out the Meeting House in a national address as a place where "after years of what President Cleveland called 'innocuous desuetude' [it] has recently been rescued by its own daughter church, the Second Presbyterian, and has correctly and lovingly been restored and opened again for worship" (Washington Post 5 May 1952).

In 1987-90, the congregation undertook a third restoration/renovation of the Meeting House, which again included both exterior and interior phases. A detailed preliminary investigation of the structural integrity of the Meeting House guided several subsequent actions, including the repair of structural supports in the roof and replacement of the slate roofing, which had been put in place during the 1925-28 restoration, with sheet metal. Other work to the exterior included re-pointing and cleaning of the brick; replacement of the front doors; replacement of roof gutters; removal of the bronze plaque that had covered the front facade builder's stone since the 1925-28 restoration; replacement of the two exterior sets of stairs at the base of the bell tower; and the repair and painting of windows, bell tower woodwork, etc. Interior work included replacement of electric light fixtures in the aisles, narthex, stairs, choir loft, and outside front facade; replacement of carpeting, first installed in 1959; renovation of rest rooms; renovation of the pulpit to make its upper section removable; installation of a new sound system; and the repairing and repainting of interior surfaces. In 1990, the congregation received a Merit Award for "extraordinary achievement in historic preservation/renovation" for this project from the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The choice of a date for the construction of the Meeting House provides an example of the difficulties that

sometimes accompany pinpointing specific dates for acts that occurred "long ago". The date of 1774 was long accepted as its date of construction — it is the date used in the first history of the congregation, prepared by the Rev. Dr. James Muir (Muir 1794); it appeared in every public account throughout the nineteenth century and throughout nearly the entire twentieth century; it appears on the builder's tablet on the facade of the Meeting House, which was placed there in 1837. In the 1990s, a newspaper advertisement was discovered that had appeared in the *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis) on 17 May 1775. Placed by John Carlyle and William Ramsay, it sought construction bids for the Meeting House, so we know that it was not erected in 1774. The 1775 date has since served as the date of construction for the original structure. To place the date of construction in its historic context — the town of Alexandria was chartered in 1749; our congregation was organized in 1772; and the local Church of England "house of the church", now the worship space of Christ (Episcopal) Church, was erected in 1773 (Morrill 1979).

<sup>2</sup>Jeanne Halgren Kilde, in her work on architecture and theology, provides two definitions of "meetinghouse"— (1) "A building used by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritans and other groups for public assemblies and religious services." (2) "A physically austere building used for worship." (Kilde 2008 226). Photographic images of the range of architectural styles that have been utilized in American houses of worship, including meetinghouses, are provided by Chiat (2004), Morgan (2004), Skarneas (2004), and Presbyterian Historical Society (1982-99).

<sup>3</sup>The Georgian style of architecture appeared in the United States in buildings erected between roughly 1700 and 1775. Notable examples include the Wren Building of the College of William and Mary, The Capitol Building, and the Governor's Palace, all in Williamsburg, Virginia. Hallmarks of Georgian architectural design include rigid symmetry, axial entrances, geometrical proportions, medium-pitched roofs with little overhang, multi-pane double-hung windows, brick and stone construction materials, and red, tan, or white colors (Curl 2002, Poppeliers et al. 1983). The architectural style of the Meeting House also owes much to the Italian Renaissance architectural master, Andrea Palladio, whose influence was so strongly expressed in the structures designed by Thomas Jefferson (Rybczynski 2002, Brownell et al. 1992).

<sup>4</sup>Reformed Protestant plain style architecture provides an approach to structuring places of worship that has not only been historically significant in the United States, but remains vital and active today. On its historical application, see Garvan (1950 and 1960), Sweeney (1993), Turner (1979), Brett (2005), Buggeln (1999), Nichols and Trinterud (1960), White (1964 and 1999), White and White (1988), and Williams (1997 and 1999). Tolles presents the case that the Quaker meetinghouse in its utter functional simplicity represents the ultimate development of that [Protestant plain] style (Tolles 1959 487). Heatwole (1989) documents the importance of the plain style for American Mennonite places of worship. Ellis (1997) demonstrates how the values of religious dissenters in eighteenth-century Virginia altered domestic as well as religious architecture. Contemporary expressions of the plain style are shown and discussed by Bruggink (1971 and 1982), Bruggink and Droppers (1965), Daniels (1982), Engleman (2004-05), and Miller (2004-05). Williams' historical-geographic analysis of religious architecture demonstrates an immense number of regional differences; see chapters on New England, The Mid-Atlantic States, and The South (1997 1-155). In religious architecture, as with numerous other aspects of culture, Northern Virginia was a zone of convergence (conflict zone) between sources from Tidewater Virginia and the Middle Colonies and New England (Upton 1997 90-98). The Meeting House provides a remarkably well-preserved expression of the Reformed-Protestant plain style architecture expressed in the Georgian mode — it is Georgian in terms of its basic design elements and proportions but its plain-style expression omits the distinctively Georgian vocabulary of decorative elements (Curl 2002).

<sup>5</sup>Throughout the Colonial British American period, the Church of England served as the official religious denomination of Virginia. The congregations of other denominations, such as Presbyterian, Friends (Quaker), German Reformed, Baptists, and Mennonites, all fell into the general category of "Dissenters".

<sup>6</sup>It was sometimes referred to as the "Church in the Woods" (Morrison 1979).

<sup>7</sup>The facade of the Erben organ continues to wear a mask dating from the period when it was located in the gallery. Its "refaced" facade — a covering of grey paint — dates from its being incorporated into the casing of the Reuter organ, which was painted grey. The original finish of the Erben organ's wooden facade was faux-grained wood.

<sup>8</sup>The Alexandria Association was established in 1932 as the first local organization dedicated to the preservation of the city's historical landmarks. Installation of the new pulpit was seen as completing the work of the 1925-28 restoration headed by John B. Gordon of Second Presbyterian Church. The dedication program included an address by Frederick A. Delano, chair of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission and the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, spirituals performed by the Sabbath Glee Club of Richmond, Virginia, and pieces performed on the Erben organ.

<sup>9</sup>The congregation established a Sunday School program (Sabbath-Day School) in 1817, so the provision of space to conduct classes is long-standing requirement. The provision of space for a choir — a choir loft — is a long-standing demand as well, perhaps dating from as early as the 1790s, when congregational singing of hymns emerged at the Meeting House. A choir as a separate body of individuals existed by the late 1830s — Minutes of the Church Committee note the hiring of a choir director in February 1839.

<sup>10</sup>The memorial to the Rev. Dr. Elias Harrison and Robert Bell provides the Meeting House's sole expression of the Gothic Revival architectural style, which emerged in the United States during the 1840s and flourished following the Civil War (Stanton 1968).

<sup>11</sup>An account of the significance of the Meeting House and the many historic acts associated with it has not been attempted here. Some indications of the content of such an account are contained in Events in the History of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House (Old Presbyterian Meeting House 2008).

<sup>12</sup>National guides to historic houses of worship such as the one by Skarmas (2004) provide an interesting measure of the uniqueness of the Meeting House — Skarmas describes about two-hundred historic houses of worship, something less than one-tenth of one percent of all houses of worship in the United States — rare company.

<sup>13</sup>The Meeting House was included in the tourist promotion program funded by Alexandria's City Council and the American Automobile Association that erected highway direction signs in 1930. One of the two original Meeting House signs continues to stand at the corner of Pitt and Wolfe streets. The guidebooks prepared for the federal government's American Guide Series indicate that admission to the Meeting House during the 1930s cost \$0.10 (U.S. Writers' Program 1939, 1940).

<sup>14</sup>The 1949-50 Meeting House restoration/renovation occurred just as federal interests in historic preservation took a major step forward — legislation by the U.S. Congress created the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949 out of the former National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings. The Meeting House congregation was an institutional member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation during the 1950s and 60s and sent representatives to the Trust's annual national preservation conferences several times during this period.

<sup>15</sup>Several documents produced during the course of the 1987-90 restoration/renovation provide valuable historical information; see especially Downey (1986 and 1988), Jennings (1988), Mosca (1988a and 1988b), and Tuttle et al. (1989). They are preserved along with other papers from each of these projects in the Meeting House Archive.