

## **Public Summary – The Octagon House Near Alexandria**

The First Baptist Church retained History Matters, LLC to conduct a documentary study on their property that is located at 2932 King Street in Alexandria, Virginia. The documentary study was required by Alexandria Archaeology prior to any future ground-disturbing activities undertaken by the church. The city staff were particularly interested in identifying the octagonal structure identified as the Cole house on Civil War-era maps; this building appeared to have stood in near proximity to the current church buildings.

History Matters found that an octagonal house stood on the grounds of the First Baptist Church from 1856 to 1866. For its short existence, the Octagon House played a remarkable role during a turbulent time in Alexandria's history. Built in 1856 by Sarah W. Hall, a New Yorker who relocated her family to the Alexandria area, the house's octagonal design and concrete construction were unusual in Northern Virginia.

After the outbreak of the Civil War in the spring of 1861, the house's location along Leesburg Turnpike and in the vicinity of several Union Army fortifications led to its use as a headquarters by several Union regiments and as a regimental hospital. In particular, the Octagon House was associated with U.S. Brigadier General John Sedgwick (1813-1864) and nurse Amy Morris Bradley (1823-1904).

The Octagon House burned to the ground in 1866. As all above-ground physical traces of it disappeared, the house's history also faded.

### **Sarah W. Hall and Her Octagonal House**

In the summer of 1856, New Yorker Sarah Webster Lawrence Hall purchased a 19.74-acre parcel that the Camp family had subdivided from the north end of their farm. Located in Fairfax County at that time, and approximately one mile from the Alexandria city limits, the land that Sarah Hall purchased was within sight of the Virginia Theological Seminary (known then as the Theological Seminary or Fairfax Seminary) to its west.

According to a Union soldier who met her during the war, Sarah Hall was “a woman of matronly dignity, cultivated and refined.” Born circa 1802, she was the daughter of Colonel Joseph W. Lawrence of Geneseo, New York and the widow of Charles Hall. A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, Charles was the Secretary of the American Home Missionary Society, a national Christian organization started by several Protestant denominations to establish nation-wide and foreign missions to convert non-Christians. Sarah supported Charles' work, managed their household, and gave birth to and raised five children.

Charles Hall died in October 1853. The probate records of his estate note that the Halls' children included two sons—Charles Stuart and James—and three daughters—Sarah Cornelia, Mary Emma, and Anna Louisa. Charles Stuart Hall, the only child then over 21 years old, lived in Alexandria, Virginia. Sometime before the fall of 1853, Charles Stuart had moved to Fairfax County to attend the Theological Seminary and then became a music teacher in Alexandria. His younger brother James lived in New York City and worked as a clerk in the Bank of the Republic.

By the summer of 1856, Sarah Hall moved her three daughters to the Alexandria area to live with her eldest son, Charles Stuart. She seems to have employed men of the Camp family to construct her house. The August 27, 1856 *Alexandria Gazette* records that the rear wall of the house fell during

construction “injuring two brothers, named Camp, and a couple of laborers.” According to the next day’s edition, “the house, part of which fell in on Monday, near Shuter’s Hill, belonged to Mrs. Hall, and was constructed of clay, gravel, and cement, on a new plan, in an octagonal shape.”

Two factors made Sarah Hall’s house unusual for the area: its octagonal plan and its building materials. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a small number of eight-sided buildings were constructed in Virginia as houses (for example, Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest) and as outbuildings. The use of the octagon plan for two- and three-story houses gained popularity in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of Orson Squire Fowler’s *A Home For All* in 1848. With their encircling porches, roof additions such as cupolas, wide ranging views from the rooms, and exposure to light at all times of the day, octagonal houses also featured different room arrangements than the traditional rectangular dwelling.

In Northern Virginia, three octagonal houses are known to have been constructed during this period. Of these, only the Glebe House at 4527 17<sup>th</sup> Street North in Arlington County remains standing. Constructed in the 1850s, the brick, octagonal section of the Glebe House was an addition to an earlier 19<sup>th</sup>-century brick house. The second octagonal house stood on Columbia Pike near current day Glebe Road. Constructed in the 1850s, the two-story, frame octagonal house became the headquarters for General McDowell during the U.S. Civil War. Sarah Hall constructed the third octagon house.



**Figure 1.** Photograph, “Seventh Brigade Hospital – Octagon House – Gen Slocum’s Brigade – 1861-1862.” Courtesy of Alexandria Library Special Collections Branch. Original located in Special Collections Library, Duke University)

Sarah Hall’s choice to build an octagonal structure for her new home indicates her interest in a contemporary architectural fashion. Her choice to use concrete as a building material may have related to the 1854 edition of Fowler’s *A Home For All*, which advocated using gravel and cement as “New, Cheap, Convenient, Superior” method of building. Constructed of concrete, Sarah

Hall's house was finished in cement and was Italianate in detail with large wooden brackets under the eaves of the cupola roof and the roof over the second story. Hexagonal or octagonal wooden posts supported the encircling, flat porch roof that provided an open veranda for the second story. **(See Figure 1)**

Less than a year after the Octagon House was constructed, Sarah Hall's son Charles Stuart drowned while bathing in the Alexandria Canal. Although only 26 years old, he had established a good reputation as a musician and teacher in Alexandria and as the organist at Christ Episcopal Church. The *Alexandria Gazette* notice of his drowning on July 20, 1857 included the information that "Mr. Hall's mother and sisters reside on the heights, near this place."

Sarah Hall's move to Virginia came at a time of upheaval in her personal life and in national political events. Throughout the 1850s, sectional turmoil between primarily non-slave-holding northern states and southern slave-holding states heightened to what would soon become armed conflict. The sectional divisions were felt in the Alexandria community. Being from a northern state, Sarah Hall was subjected to suspicions from many of her southern neighbors, or as her son-in-law Day Otis Kellogg phrased it, "the rapacity of a semi-civilized community." (Kellogg, 1917-67) A graduate of the Theological Seminary, Reverend Day Otis Kellogg married Sarah's eldest daughter, Sarah Cornelia Hall, on April 10, 1861; he later wrote that he "got my bride away just one day before the Civil War began at Fort Sumpter." (Kellogg, 1917-67) After their marriage, the Kelloggs moved to Philadelphia.

### **The Octagon House During the Civil War (1861-1865)**

On May 24, 1861, the day after Virginia seceded from the United States, the Union Army occupied Alexandria. The city's location across the Potomac River from the nation's capital and at the water and overland transportation crossroads for northern Virginia, made Alexandria a vital supply area for the Union Army. Leesburg Turnpike provided a major transportation route for troops and supplies from Alexandria to northwestern Virginia.

After the Union's Army of the Potomac's loss in their first battle at Bull Run on July 21, 1861, many regiments from Maine, New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere were occupied with defending Washington. These regiments constructed and manned the circle of forts then being built in Virginia, Maryland, and Washington County to protect the nation's capital. They performed guard duty at various outposts and transported supplies to troops. The regiments also maintained hospital facilities for soldiers injured in battle or suffering from disease.

In the summer of 1861, Sarah Hall and her two daughters moved north to Philadelphia to live near the Kelloggs. In their absence, due to its location and size, the Union Army utilized Hall's octagonal house for its own needs. The appearance of the Octagon House was sufficiently remarkable that Captain B.S. Church of the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment Engineers included it on his map of the area, which was probably drawn early in the war. **(See Figure 2)** Brigadier General John Sedgwick of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of Heintzelman's Division made the house his headquarters in the late summer of 1861. Sedgwick supervised the construction of nearby Fort Ward, one of the more than sixty forts that were rapidly built at the beginning of the conflict to protect Washington, D.C. and its environs. Located on Braddock Road approximately two miles from the Octagon House, Fort Ward occupied high ground that sloped down to the west and to the east toward Leesburg Turnpike. Begun in July 1861, the fort's initial construction was completed in September 1861. Sedgwick was a career Army



officer; later, with his death at the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse, he would become the top-ranking U.S. officer to be killed in the Civil War.



**Figure 2.** Map, Capt. B.S. Church, n.d. “Reconnaissance in advance of Camp Mansfield by 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment Engr.” The Octagon House is circled. (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

Southeast of the Octagon House along Leesburg Turnpike, the Camp family farm contained open, slightly rolling land and the water source of Taylor Run. The land and water provided a convenient area for temporary regimental encampments that Union forces used for most of the war. A photograph taken by E.L. Wires on September 8, 1861 shows the Maine Third and New York Thirty-Eighth Regiments encamped in this area; it is possible that the photograph was taken from the second floor porch or the cupola of the Octagon House.

**(See Figure 3)** Private Robert Knox Sneden noted that on September 20, 1861, “the tents of the 3<sup>rd</sup>

and 4<sup>th</sup> Maine and the 38<sup>th</sup> New York and 40<sup>th</sup> New York regiments were struck [and] loaded on the wagons and all moved out from the vicinity of the Octagon House two miles further on the Leesburg Turnpike beyond camps of all other regiments.”

Nurse Amy Morris Bradley witnessed the constant movement of regimental camps in the area of the Octagon House. Bradley moved to Virginia in the late summer of 1861 to serve as a nurse with the 5<sup>th</sup> Maine Regiment. When the 5<sup>th</sup> Maine received orders to move, she assumed nursing duties and supervision of the hospital for the soldiers from the Third Maine Regiment and the New York 40<sup>th</sup> Regiment in a temporary hospital set up in the Powell House, which stood across Leesburg Turnpike from the Octagon House. The circa-1861 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers map **(See Figure 4)** depicts an octagonal house in the location of the Octagon House with a resident named

Cole. Either the mapmaker got the wrong name in 1861 or Sarah Hall leased the property to someone named Cole.



**Figure 3.** Photograph by E.L. Wires, “Maine Third and New York Thirty-Eighth Regiments,” September 8, 1861. In the distance, center right, would be the Camp farm. (Courtesy of photo owner Don Troiani)

From Amy Morris Bradley’s vantage point at the Powell House, she recorded in her journal:

“As I raise my eyes, the light from the camp fires of the Pennsylvania 63<sup>rd</sup> is brightly illuminating the heavens for a long distance. O, I wish you could take a peep at these encampments by night. The sight is grand. Just beyond the last named regiment the Pennsylvania 61<sup>st</sup> are pitching their tents where the Mozarts [New York 40<sup>th</sup> Regiment] were this morning.” (Cashman, 1990-97)

Born and raised in East Vassalboro, Maine, Amy Morris Bradley was a remarkable woman whose first career as a teacher took her to schools in the New England states and to Costa Rica in Central America before 1860. In addition to being a noted educator, Bradley was also a single woman during an era when women were expected to marry and raise children as their chief occupation. The outbreak of war in 1861 gave her a new career as a nurse; her caring nature and her seemingly inexhaustible energy and organizational abilities brought her to the attention of prominent military



officers and to civilians with the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a civilian auxiliary to the U.S. Army Medical Bureau. Her connections within the Sanitary Commission enabled her to more efficiently



**Figure 4.** U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Circa-1861. *Detailed map of Part of Virginia from Alexandria to the Potomac River above Washington, D.C.* (Library of Congress, Division of Geography and

obtain hospital supplies and clothing for the soldiers in her care.

From the beginning of the Civil War, approximately one-and-one-half times as many Union soldiers died of diseases such as typhoid, dysentery, malaria and measles than were killed in battle. It was typical that regimental doctors and nurses saw more cases of illness than of battle wounds in the hospitals around Alexandria. When the regiment moved to its next assignment, those not in any condition to join their units were evacuated to general hospitals in Alexandria or to the convalescent camp initially established at the foot of Shuter's Hill. By mid-1861, inadequately staffed regimental hospitals were combined into brigade hospitals to consolidate resources.

In November 1861, General Henry Warner Slocum, who commanded the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade of General William B. Franklin's Division, recognized Bradley's abilities by appointing her Matron of the Brigade Hospital. At that time, the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade consisted of regiments from New York and Maine—4,000 men all encamped a short distance from each other. Slocum authorized Bradley to take over the Powell House and the Octagon House, both of which were vacant at that time. The photograph of the Octagon House shows Amy Bradley standing on the second floor porch. (See Figure 1)

In March 1862, the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade broke camp and moved to Centreville, Virginia. Bradley travelled with the troops out to Centreville and then Manassas before they were called back to Alexandria in April 1862. In May, she volunteered her services to the U.S. Sanitary Commission in Washington; the commission accepted and sent her to Yorktown to work on the hospital transports that ferried soldiers from the front lines to the hospitals behind the lines. In September 1862, as part of her Commission work to improve Union hospitals, Bradley returned to Alexandria. She was instrumental in moving Camp Convalescent (called "Camp Misery" by the soldiers because of its

poor drainage and lack of facilities at the foot of Shuter's Hill) to higher ground near Four Mile Run. There she organized the distribution of clothing to the needy, organized hospital tents, took discharged soldiers to Washington to obtain their pay and arrange train travel to their homes, and published the *Soldiers' Journal*, the camp newspaper whose distribution reached the White House.

From January to April 1863, Companies K and C of the Eleventh Regiment Rhode Island Volunteers encamped in the Octagon House area, and their company commander Captain Upham used the Octagon House as his headquarters. Private R. W. Rock, a member of the Eleventh Regiment, wrote that the encampment area was "on the direct road to Alexandria, and but a short distance from the residence of a Mrs. Hall, a large octagonal-shaped building, which could not escape notice." (Thompson, 1881-103) While visiting the encampment, Rock met Mrs. Hall and recounted that she:

had gone to her old home, only to find it more a heap of ruins than at her last former visit. She stopped at the house of the nearest neighbor, one Mr. Camp, who appeared to be a Union man. There Mrs. Hall was packing the remnants of her furniture and what there was left of her husband's formerly valuable library, to remove them to the north. (Thompson, 1881-105)

The Octagon House seems to have remained in use as the headquarters of whatever Union regiment encamped to its south. Within three months of the surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865, Alexandria ceased to be occupied by the Union Army.

### **The Octagon House's Final Days**

Sarah Hall lived near her daughters in Philadelphia throughout the war, but travelled to Alexandria on occasion to look after her property. When the war ended in 1865, and with no family left in the Alexandria area, she planned to sell the property. However, according to son-in-law Kellogg, on the afternoon of November 21, 1866, Hall's octagonal house was burned "by an incendiary in its owner's sight while she was on an errand...to sell it." (Kellogg, 1917-67) According to that day's *Alexandria Gazette*, "in a very short time the entire building, save the chimney, was consumed...."

By 1868, Sarah had moved with her daughter Anna Louisa and Anna's husband Rev. Gustavus Bird to Honesdale, Wayne County, Pennsylvania. In May of 1868, Sarah found a buyer for the property and ended the Hall family's short and traumatic stay in Alexandria.