



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Union seized and used churches as Civil War hospitals based on ideology

Alexandria Times, May 4, 2017

Image: The church as Civil War hospital. Washington Street Methodist Church Archives.

The selection of buildings used for Civil War hospitals in Alexandria appears to have been based not only on physical size and amenities that supported medical treatment, but as a form of punishment meant to embarrass, or at least humble, the civilian population left after union troops entered the city on May 24, 1861. Some buildings, such as the Mansion House Hotel on North Fairfax and the Bellhaven Female Institute on Queen Street were confiscated for their architectural layout, large rooms and special infrastructure including central heating and dumb waiter vertical transport. But as the war dragged on, other sites were added to the roster of treatment buildings based largely on the ideological views of their owners or constituencies.



Those offering comfort or sympathy to Southern politics were particularly vulnerable to having their property seized on a moment's notice. The homes and properties of relatives of Robert E. Lee, and even his personal attorney, Francis Smith, were taken. Public buildings and churches were also targeted. Amazingly, even statements by Northern newspapers expressing disbelief at the seizure of places of worship had virtually no impact on the practice.

The religious institutions confiscated were often taken because of the perceived views of their congregants, or some direct slight to the Union in not reciting a prayer for the President of the United States or a general Union victory. Both the North and South viewed the outcome of the war as ultimately the will of God and, from the union army viewpoint, if a church could not be counted on to support the union, then its messaging had to be silenced.

Thus, churches including Downtown Baptist, St. Pauls' Episcopal, Second Presbyterian, Grace Episcopal and Washington Street Methodist all succumbed to closure for the concurrent need for hospital facilities and to muzzle political opposition no matter what the source.

In some cases, the need to silence church authorities was even greater than the need for the building itself, as was the case for Washington Street Methodist Church. Located at 115 South Washington St., the church was condemned for hospital use in January 1862, with the second floor sanctuary used to house patients, and the first floor used as a stable for army horses.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Although the presence of service animals directly below severely wounded and sick patients must have been an obvious comfort and health hazard, the political insult sent to the former congregation appears to have been much more important. The once-elegant religious building suffered greatly during Union occupation, and when it was returned to the church four years later, major repairs were needed to make it suitable for church use. By 1870, even the façade was failing and had to be rebuilt. It took fifty years for the federal government to acknowledge its responsibility and in 1915 the U.S. government finally paid the paltry sum of \$3,680 for damages the building incurred during the war.

“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.