

Site of National Significance

Christ Church (Alexandria), Virginia*

Location: Southeast corner of Cameron and Columbus Streets,
Alexandria, Virginia.

Ownership: Fairfax Episcopal Parish, 118 N. Washington Street,
Alexandria, Virginia.

Statement of Significance

Christ Church, Alexandria, designed by James Wren and erected in 1767-73, is probably the finest surviving and least-altered example of the type of the small rectangular two-story brick church that was utilized in Virginia during the last third of the 18th century. Although Christ Church has been somewhat enhanced by the additions of galleries and a tower in the period 1785-1818, the structure has never been abandoned or had its interior completely stripped as is the case with the other extant examples of this late-Georgian type of church.

History

In 1765 Truro Parish was divided and Fairfax Parish, containing the congregation in Alexandria, was laid off. In 1765 the Vestry of the new parish decided to build two new churches, one at Alexandria and the other at Falls Church. The architect selected for both churches (and in 1769 he also did the plans for Pohick Church) was Colonel James Wren. James Parson served as the first contractor for Christ Church in Alexandria. Construction began in 1767, but he was unable to finish the structure. The Vestry then gave the second contract to John Carlyle and the church was accepted as completed on February 23, 1773. Total cost of the two contracts was 1820.

Built on a new rectangular plan, with two tiers of windows, Christ Church is about 60 feet long and 50 feet wide. The walls, 28 feet high, are laid in Flemish bond. The facades, five-bays long and three-bays wide, are symmetrically composed with rectilinear windows below and arched windows above. Stone quoins, painted white, emphasize the corners of the building and similarly painted keystones accent the flat-arched

*This church should be compared with Pohick Church, Virginia. Both are of the same general plan and type.

brick lintels of the first tier of windows and the arched brick headings of those above. The broad hipped roof rises above a continuous modillioned cornice to a short ridge and the roof was originally covered with cypress shingles. The east end wall is pierced by a two-tier-high Palladian window which is framed by four pilasters and a broken pediment in the Tuscan order. The entrances are located in the three-bay wide west end and were originally comprised of two doors separated by a center window. (The center window was converted to a third door in 1818, when the tower was added at this point). The two original entranceways are framed by rusticated masonry, Tuscan pilasters, and triangular pediments.

The interior has two east-west aisles, leading from the two original doors. The aisles have floors of tile laid on flagstone. The high box pews, arranged into three groups by the aisles, have pine floors. There is some question over the original arrangement of the pews and pulpit: some believe that the canopied raised pulpit, now centered before the fine Palladian window in the east wall, was originally located against the center of the long north wall. The existing wooden galleries which extend around the north, west, and south interior wall, were added at some date between 1785 and 1800. A rectangular tower, 16 feet wide and 17 feet deep, was added to the church in 1818. Centered on the west end, the brick tower is three stories high and supports an octagonal brick and wood belfry that rises in three stages and the whole is topped by a cupola.

Condition

Unlike most other Virginia churches, Christ Church was not abandoned during the Revolution and Disestablishment, and its interiors were not permitted to fall into ruins. Federal troops also occupied Alexandria during the Civil War and Christ Church continued to be used for religious purposes. Once again the building was spared the fate that befell most other Virginia churches. The exterior (walls, windows, doors, and exterior woodwork) is original and unaltered, except for the addition of the tower at the west end. The interior reflects organic change and includes both 18th and 19th century woodwork. The church is in excellent condition. Still active as a church, the building is also open to visitors.

References: Hugh Morrison, Early American Architecture (New York, 1952), 367; A. Coffin and A. C. Holden, Brick Architecture of the Colonial Period in Maryland and Virginia (New York, 1919), 15, 27; Aymar Embury, Early American Churches (New York, 1914), 80-82; Robert A. Lancaster, Historic Virginia Homes and Churches (Philadelphia, 1915); George C. Mason, Colonial Churches of Tidewater Virginia (Richmond, 1945); William B. O'Neal, Architecture in Virginia (New York, 1963), 133; James S. Rawlings, Virginia's Colonial Churches, An Architectural Guide (Richmond, 1963); Harold W. Rose, The Colonial Houses of Worship in America (New York, 1963); Edward F. Rines, Old Historic Churches of America (New York, 1936), 35-37; Virginia, A Guide

to the Old Dominion (American Guide Series) (New York, 1940), 179-181,202; Stephen P. Dorsey, Early English Churches in America, 1607-1807 (New York, 1952); Deering Davis, Stephen P. Dorsey, and R. C. Hall, Alexandria Houses, 1750-1750-1830 (New York, 1946), 70-71; Historic American Buildings Survey: (13 sheets, 1958; 51 photos, 1958, and 4 data pages, 1958).

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

The National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings

Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia

Christ Church, Alexandria, designed by James Wren and erected in 1767-1773 is a superior and little-altered survivor of the type of small rectangular two-story brick church that was utilized in Virginia during the last third of the 18th century.

Built on a new rectangular plan, with two tiers of windows, Christ Church is about 60 feet long and 50 feet wide. The walls are laid in Flemish bond. The facades, five-bays long and three-bays wide, are symmetrically composed with rectilinear windows below and arched windows above. Stone quoins, painted white, emphasize the corners of the building and similarly painted keystones accent the flat-arched brick lintels of the first tier of windows and the arched brick headings of those above. The broad hipped roof rises above a continuous modillioned cornice to a short ridge and the roof was originally covered with cypress shingles. The east end wall is pierced by a two-tier-high Palladian window which is framed by four pilasters and a broken pediment in the Tuscan order. The entrances are located in the three-bay wide west end and were originally comprised of two doors separated by a center window. (The center window was converted to a third door in 1818, when the tower was added at this point). The two original entranceways are framed by rusticated masonry, Tuscan pilasters, and triangular pediments.

The interior has two east-west aisles, leading from the two original doors. The aisles have floors of tile laid on flagstone. The high box pews, arranged into three groups by the aisles, have pine floors. There is some question over the original arrangement of the pews and pulpit. Some believe that the canopied raised pulpit, now centered before the fine Palladian window in the east wall, was originally located against the center of the long north wall. The existing wooden galleries which extend around the north, west, and south interior wall, were added at some date between 1785 and 1800. A rectangular tower was added to the church in 1818. Centered on the west end, the brick tower is three stories high and supports an octagonal brick and wood belfry that rises in three stages and the whole is topped by a cupola.

*Put in in 1820:
Colonial Revival
to first steps in Libby's
CFP
4/2/78*

Unlike most other Virginia churches, Christ Church was not abandoned during the Revolution and Disestablishment, and its interiors were not permitted to fall into ruins. Federal troops also occupied Alexandria during the Civil War and Christ Church continued to be used for religious purposes. Once again the building was spared the fate that befell most other Virginia churches. The exterior (walls, windows, doors, and exterior woodwork) is original and unaltered, except for the addition of the tower at the west end. The interior reflects organic change and includes both 18th and 19th-century woodwork. Still active as a church, it is also open to visitors.

* * * * *

NSHSB: 1/5/70
C W S