



TOUR – Historic Fredericksburg Churches

10 October 2019

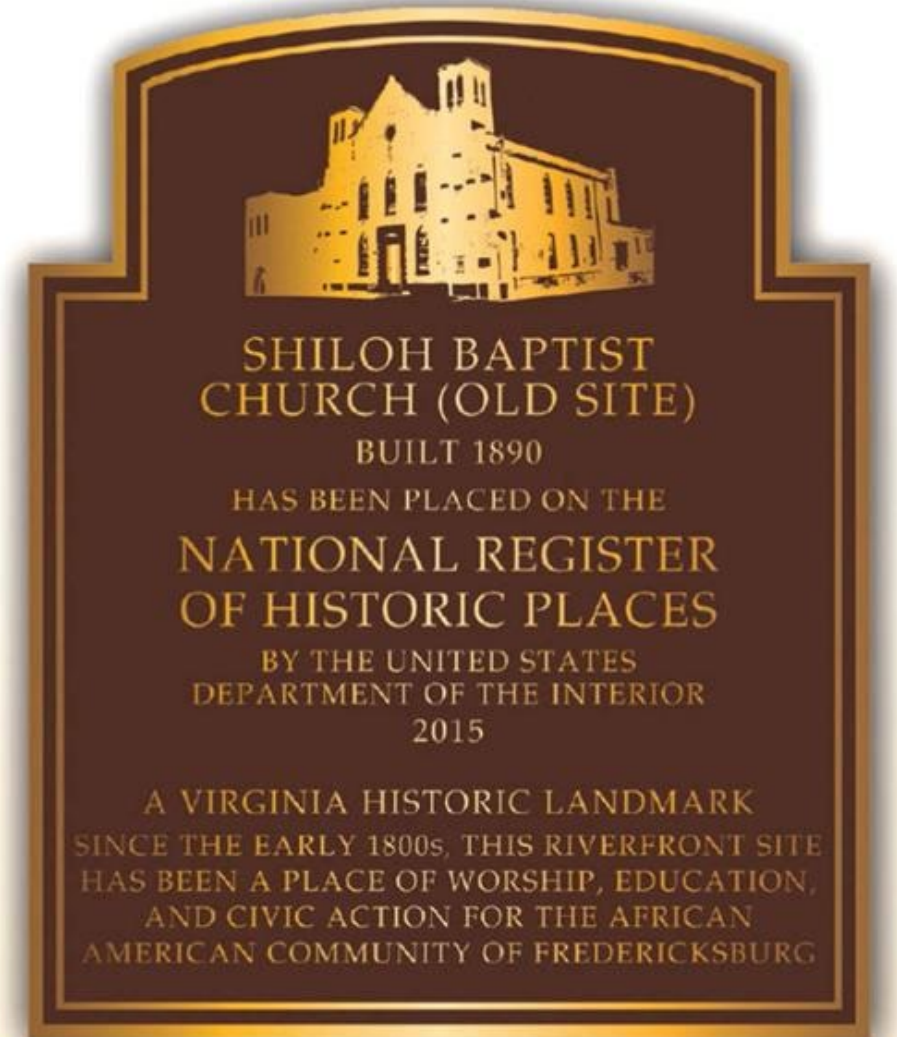
Sponsor: Carolyn Sulima

Pictures: Joe Alfred



We will have the opportunity to visit two of the many historic churches located in the Old Town area of Fredericksburg: Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) and The Fredericksburg United Methodist Church. Mark Olsen we will meet us at the Shiloh Baptist Church, 301 Sophia Street at 10:00 am to present architectural features and historical information about Shiloh Baptist and answer questions.

Margaret Mock will meet us at the Fredericksburg United Methodist Church at 308 Hanover Street. The churches are two blocks apart so participants may decide to either park and walk from the first to the second church or move their vehicle.





Some local records suggest that the first Baptist meeting house in Fredericksburg, Virginia, was established about 1804. The wooden building stood near what is now the Fredericksburg train station on Lafayette Boulevard.

The congregation included white folks, enslaved and exploited Black folks, and a few individuals known locally as “free Negroes,” though their freedom was in no way equal to that of the whites.

Blacks who sought membership were examined first by certain Black brethren, then by a group of white deacons. Both groups had to be satisfied. Nearly all early churches in Fredericksburg had separate entrances for Blacks (often a side door), as well as separate seating areas (often a crudely furnished gallery), for blacks.

The original wooden building remained the main gathering place for Fredericksburg's Baptists until 1815. At that time, some members withdrew and began worshiping in a building along the Rappahannock River at what is now the present location of Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site). This building, originally owned by the Bank of Virginia, had been badly damaged during the great Fredericksburg Fire of 1807, which destroyed about half of the buildings in town. The damaged shell had remained largely unused for a decade.





By 1818, some Baptists expressed interest in constructing a larger, more permanent building on the site, which perhaps encompassed the ruins of the earlier church. In April 1820, Horace Marshall and his wife, Elizabeth, sold the lot at what is now 801 Sophia Street to the trustees of “the New Baptist Meeting House” for \$900. It is believed that a brick church building was erected on the site in the late 1830s or early 1840s. This building was known as “the Shiloh Baptist Meeting House.”



Even before the building was constructed, the congregation was thriving. According to one published report, by September 1831, the congregation had approximately 300 “members of color.” According to other reports, by the late 1830s or early 1840s, the congregation had more than eight hundred members, three-quarters of whom were “people of color.” Although these members constituted a majority of the membership, it is possible that most of those present at Sunday services were white, as the “colored” membership came from a wide area encompassing the City of Fredericksburg, Stafford, Spotsylvania, and Caroline counties. Enslaved individuals were not always allowed (or able) to attend services on a regular basis.

The original church building at what is now 801 Sophia Street had a balcony that wrapped around three sides of the sanctuary. On those Sundays when owners allowed their slaves to attend services, they entered the building through a separate side door that led directly to the gallery. Enslaved blacks sat in the side galleries, where they could presumably be better seen by their owners sitting on the main floor. “Free” Blacks sat in the end gallery.



Initially, the Civil War had little effect on Shiloh, though rumors and stories — as well as fears and hopes — must have abounded. In July 1861, the U.S. House of Representatives endorsed the army’s emerging and previously informal “contraband policy.” This policy absolved “all army officers and soldiers from any moral, if not legal, obligation to return runaways.”



The resolution approved by the House of Representatives had been introduced by Illinois Republican Owen Lovejoy. The resolution declared that “in the judgment of this House, it is no part of the duty of the soldiers of the United States to capture and return fugitive slaves” (quoted in Kenneth J. Winkle, *Lincoln’s Citadel: The Civil War in Washington, D. C.* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013], 236).

Consistent with this resolution, President Abraham Lincoln issued a formal opinion in August 1861, stating that in rebellious regions — which would include Fredericksburg — any slaves crossing to Union lines were “thus liberated.”



For more than 200 years, there has been Methodist activity in Fredericksburg. As early as 1801, the congregation had erected its first building, a frame structure on George Street and in April 1802, received the appointment of its pastor. After a tenuous existence for its first twenty years, the small congregation began to grow. This change was due in large measure to the leadership of John Kobler and his wife, Mary, who moved to Fredericksburg from Culpeper in the early 1820's. In 1841, the growing congregation moved to Hanover Street and constructed a new brick church. It was used until 1862 when it was extensively damaged during the battles of the Civil War, which raged in and about the city.



Our Mary Washington ElderStudy Tour Group