

WELCOME TO THE TOUR

One Small Yard, the Whole Revolution

Alexandria was founded in 1749 as an **Anglican town** — its taxes owed by law to the established Church of England. The Presbyterians who organized here in 1772 were **dissenters**: legally tolerated, taxed for someone else's church, and required to keep their doors open at all times so their meetings could never be secret. In 1775 they raised a Meeting House anyway — in the opening year of the Revolution.

40+

REVOLUTIONARY
PATRIOTS BURIED HERE

2

WASHINGTON
WORSHIP VISITS

10:20

THE HOUR THE
CLOCK STILL KEEPS

This tour moves from the sanctuary — where a colonial clock rests at the moment Washington died — into one of the great patriot burial grounds of Virginia: his physician, his eulogist's pulpit, a Boston Tea Party participant, a Fairfax Resolves signer, and an Unknown Soldier of the Revolution.

WHY THIS TOUR

- ♦ **Led by the researcher himself** — not a scripted guide, but the historian who documented these lives.
- ♦ **Honest history** — where the stones are wrong, you'll hear it; where the record is uncertain, you'll hear that too.
- ♦ **Voices, not lectures** — first-person accounts delivered at the graves, including the man who won his freedom from Washington's own physician.

FROM MEETING TO MEETING HOUSE

1749	Alexandria founded in Anglican Truro Parish
1772	The Presbyterian congregation organized
1774	Cresswell's journal: "a set of rebellious scoundrels"
1775	First Meeting House erected ; Washington worships within, twice
1799	The town's only bell tolls Washington's death ; memorial services follow on this ground
1835	Lightning fire destroys the first church
1837	The sanctuary rebuilt — today's walls
1949	Congregation rechartered — about 1,000 members worship here today

Even the name is a story: "Old Presbyterian Meeting House" dates only to the 1920s — coined for the campaign that saved the building from a demolition order.

GRAVESTONE STORIES · ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

Plan Your Visit

THE ROUTE

- The Sanctuary — about 30 minutes, seated
- The Burial Ground — about 50 minutes among the founders
- Flex stops as time allows*

TOUR DETAILS

- ♦ **Meet:** Old Presbyterian Meeting House — 323 South Fairfax Street, Old Town Alexandria
- ♦ **Duration:** About 90 minutes · level walking, short distances
- ♦ **Terrain:** Brick walkways and uneven churchyard ground — sturdy shoes advised
- ♦ **Parking:** Street parking in Old Town
- ♦ **Booking:** Private group tours at gravestonestories.com

★★★★★

"Grave Dave, as he is known, was an amazing host and guide for this tour. He has clearly done extensive research... and he has made interesting connections among the people buried in this area."

— CAROLINE B. · VIATOR, MAY 2026

YOUR GUIDE



David Heiby is a public historian, Superintendent of the Presbyterian Cemetery, Treasurer of the Virginia Trust for Historic Preservation, and founder of Gravestone Stories. His research documents 400+ burials across Alexandria's historic burial grounds.

400+

BURIAL
BIOGRAPHIES

5.0

TRIPADVISOR
& VIATOR

#1

CULTURAL EXP.
ALEXANDRIA

A walking tour presented by
Gravestone Stories

gravestonestories.com

The Meeting House is a living congregation. To help preserve this ground, support the Burial Ground Fund — 323 S. Fairfax St., Alexandria, VA.

© 2026 David Heiby / Gravestone Stories. All rights reserved.

A GRAVESTONE STORIES WALKING TOUR

OLD PRESBYTERIAN MEETING HOUSE
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

"Rebellious Scoundrels"

THE PATRIOTS OF

Alexandria's Presbyterian Meeting House

In 1774, a hostile English visitor dismissed the Presbyterians of Alexandria in his journal. Walk the sanctuary and churchyard where more than forty of those "scoundrels" now rest — from Washington's own physician to a man who threw tea into Boston Harbor.



A tour in progress in the burial ground

1774

THE YEAR OF
THE INSULT

90

MINUTES
· ONE SITE

250+

YEARS OF
HISTORY

David Heiby

PUBLIC HISTORIAN · SUPERINTENDENT, PRESBYTERIAN
CEMETERY

TREASURER · VIRGINIA TRUST FOR HISTORIC
PRESERVATION

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

The Sanctuary

323 South Fairfax Street · seated · about 30 minutes

Why a “Meeting House” — Not a Church

Dissenters could not call their building a church. Under the Toleration Acts their worship was legal but watched: designated places only, no night services, **doors open at all times** — however foul the weather. Until 1786, every Presbyterian in the pews was still taxed for the Church of England. Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom ended that system — and the 1775 builders lived to see it fall.

“Went to a Presbyterian meeting. These are a set of rebellious scoundrels, nothing but political discourses instead of Religious Lectures.”

— JOURNAL OF NICHOLAS CRESSWELL, AN ENGLISH LOYALIST · NOVEMBER 6, 1774

The First Church · 1775

Brick, 60 by 50 feet, with the **only public bell in Alexandria until 1817** — the town's fire alarm, and the bell that tolled Washington's death in 1799. Washington worshipped twice within its walls. The facade plaque reads “Erected A.D. 1774 ... Rebuilt 1836” — **wrong twice**: the construction-bid ad ran May 17, 1775, and the rebuild finished in 1837.

The Fire & the Rebuilding

Lightning struck the steeple on **July 26, 1835**; two hours from bolt to ruin. The fire spared the walls, the pulpit, an organ split open with an axe to save its pipes — and a venerable colonial clock. The sanctuary you sit in is the 1837 rebuild, on the same footprint.

Around the Room

Rev. James Muir — who preached Alexandria's public memorial services for Washington — lies **thirteen feet beneath the north aisle**, near where the original pulpit stood. A single black bench from the 1775 seating survives in the gallery. And the colonial clock, saved from the fire, rests at **10:20** — the hour Washington died, December 14, 1799.

The Church That Died — and Came Back

The congregation closed its doors in 1889. By the 1920s the city urged demolition — and the rescue campaign that followed **invented the name “Old Presbyterian Meeting House.”** Rechartered in 1949, about 1,000 members worship over Muir's grave today.

The Burial Ground

Enter from the south walkway · about 40 visible stones, about 396 recorded burials

The Vanished Ground

The north property line once ran about **50 feet further north** — into what is now the Basilica of St. Mary's parking lot. A 1763 surveyor's error took sixty years to correct, and took graves with it. We pace it off.

Dr. James Craik

Gravesite 38 · far east end

Washington's physician and closest friend from Fort Necessity, 1754, to the deathbed 45 years later — in the room for **“Tis well,”** at 10:20 that night. His granite stone, raised in 1928, carries **two carved errors** (born 1727 — actually 1730; died Feb. 4, 1814 — actually Feb. 6). And an honest note: burials here were banned in 1809, five years before Craik died. Tradition places him here; **he might not be in this ground at all.**

Joseph Harris — A Voice

Delivered at Craik's grave · first person

Craik's enslaved manservant, at his side through the entire war — present at the same encampments, absent from every official account. In 1793 Harris **sued Craik for his freedom** on a legal technicality and won at the State Appeals Court. He lived free in Alexandria nearly forty years, and lies unmarked at Penny Hill, one mile west.

“I helped win this country's freedom before I won my own.”

— JOSEPH HARRIS FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE · DELIVERED AT CRAIK'S GRAVE

The Northeast Corner

Two patriot plaques and the unmarked dead they name: **Thomas Porter**, seventeen years old at the Boston Tea Party; **Lewis Nicola**, whose 1782 Newburgh letter asked Washington to be king; **Capt. John Harper**, who lies beneath the church's own north wall. For forty years this corner also held the Relief Fire Company's engines — beside the 1787 Flounder House parsonage where Rev. Muir raised his family.



Founders' Ground

The Scots-era row · the Tomb · the bell tower

The Hepburn Family

Merchant William Hepburn signed the 1785 Memorial & Remonstrance for religious liberty — and fathered four children with an enslaved woman, Esther David. Their son became **Rev. Moses Hepburn**, one of the wealthiest African Americans in Alexandria. One plot holds the era's whole contradiction.

Hunter & Creighton

William Hunter Jr. — twice mayor, founder of Alexandria's St. Andrew's Society (1760) — is buried under Scotland's motto: *Nemo me impune lacessit*. Beside him, **Dr. Robert Creighton** of Braddock's 1755 expedition, whose tablet spells him “CRIGHTON” — the stones keep making the records argument for us.

Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the Revolution

Gravesite 18 · by the north wall

An unidentified patriot, uncovered in the lost northern strip when St. Mary's expanded in **1826** — the one burial we know was moved when the yard shrank. His marble was dedicated in 1929.

The Muirs & the Vowell Sisters

Muir's wife and children rest here; the ground's **final interment — 1876 — is a Muir, itself unmarked.** Nearby, sisters Mary and Peggy Vowell died of consumption a year apart, each buried with four infant children: what the plain stones were plain for.

The Carlyles & the Bell Tower

Gravesites 10 & 11 · the last stop

Maj. John Carlyle — founding trustee of Alexandria, 1749, and a signer of the **Fairfax Resolves, July 18, 1774** — also placed the 1775 ad to build the Meeting House: he helped commission the room where the tour began, and lies a few steps from it. Beside him, **Sarah Fairfax Carlyle** (d. 1761), the oldest stone in the yard.

“Taxation and Representation are in their Nature inseperable.”

— FAIRFAX RESOLVES, NO. 6 · ADOPTED JULY 18, 1774 · A SIGNER RESTS AT THE LAST STOP



Original images and first-person voices at every stop