

# Zion Baptist Church

A small group of Christian believers established Zion Baptist Church in 1864 on the corner of Wolfe and South Union Streets, northeast of the Wilkes Street Tunnel. At the end of the Civil War, Zion Baptist was one of five African American Baptist churches in Alexandria.

Many of Zion's founding members had settled in Alexandria during the Civil War, and most likely worked for the Federal government on the railroad or along the waterfront. Because of the prominence of the church in this low-lying area, the neighborhood was referred to as Zion Bottom. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, the church was also used as a meeting place in service to the community. By 1868, the year when African American men first voted in Virginia, Alexandria's First Ward Radical Republicans regularly met at Zion. They also used the church as a meeting place to nominate African American men to political office. In May 1877, local Radical Republicans chose George L. Seaton, one of the wealthiest African American people in Virginia, for City Council along with a handful of other African American men. The church held numerous services, festivals, and other events.

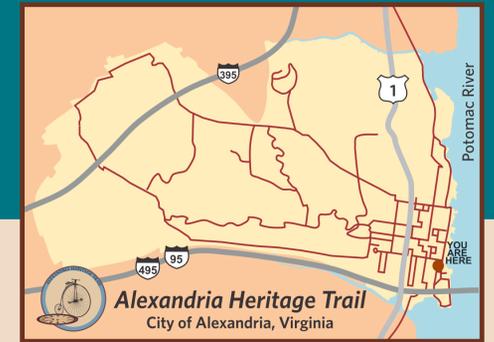
**DEDICATION OF ZION CHURCH.**—For the past three or four years the congregation of Zion Church, colored, principally by their own exertions, but with a little assistance from their friends, have been engaged in raising funds to build a brick church to replace the old frame one which stood near the baptising grounds, on south Lee street. They have worked faithfully and patiently, first buying the ground and then building as far as their money would go, and now have succeeded in erecting a very neat little church, capable of seating their congregation, at a total cost of upwards of \$3,000. For some time past services have been held in the basement, but yesterday, the building having been completed, services were held in the church proper, when the dedication took place. A large congregation assembled and the ceremonies were conducted by Rev. G. W. P. King, of Washington, assisted by Rev. Fields Cook, of this city. In the morning and at night also services were held, which were attended by large congregations. Rev. W. B. Johnson, of Washington, is the minister in charge. During the day collections amounting to upwards of \$50 were made, which will be devoted to fitting up the interior of the building and to the purchase of a bell, the cupola for which is already to receive it.

Article entitled "Dedication of Zion Church," reporting efforts by the Zion congregation to build a new church and the ceremonies surrounding its dedication  
*Alexandria Gazette*, October 30, 1882, 4

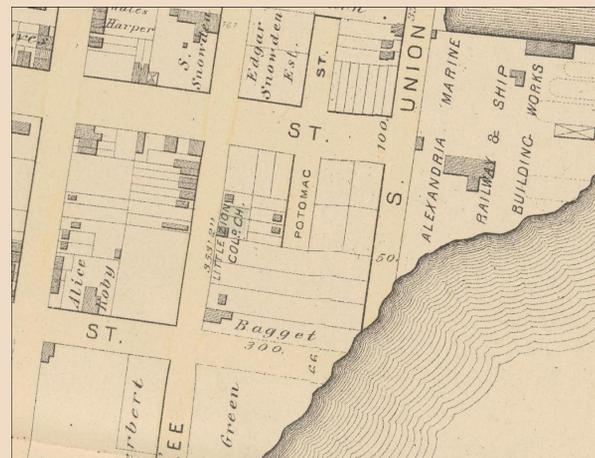


David H. Anderson's "Albumen photograph of Jefferson Davis's grand jury," May 1867. George Lewis Seaton (standing center, rear) sat on the Grand Jury that indicted former Confederate President Jefferson Davis for treason against the United States. It was said to be the first integrated jury in the country. Federal prosecutors declined to prosecute. Reverend Fields Cook founder of Ebenezer Church is also pictured (back row, second from the left).

Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.



Scholar Henry Lewis Gates Jr. once said, the "backbone of the church has been Black women almost from the very beginning," though this work is often not acknowledged. Women often took on the role of mothers and leaders in African American churches, including in Alexandria. Mother of Zion Baptist Church, Frances D. Gravitt, is buried in Coleman Cemetery in nearby Fairfax County.  
Alexandria Archaeology Museum



Detail from "City Atlas of Alexandria, Va.," G. M. Hopkins, 1877, showing Zion Baptist Church  
University of Virginia, Special Collections

In the summer of 1873, the railroad forced many residents to leave the area around Wilkes Street Tunnel and the original church location so that the company could build a distributing depot. Many moved their homes, community, and church to this area, on the land north of Battery Rodgers. Initially the church served its membership in a wood frame building. In 1882, the Zion Baptist Church erected a new brick church where it still stands today. The church's location on South Lee Street was further away from the threat of flooding and closer to the new location of the Zion Bottom neighborhood. The church opened to the public in June 1882, using funds raised by its congregants.

One of the most notable people associated with the church was the prominent civil rights attorney, Samuel Wilbert Tucker. Born in 1913, Tucker grew up at 916 Queen Street. His father, Samuel Tucker, Jr., was raised just a few doors up from Zion Baptist Church, where the Tucker family worshiped. His father directed the Sunday School and the church choir, and Tucker played the church piano. Tucker attended segregated schools in Alexandria and Washington, D.C., that left a deep impression on him and would later fuel his fire to fight for Civil Rights. Before becoming a leading attorney for the NAACP, Tucker staged a peaceful protest in 1939 at the whites-only library at 717 Queen Street in Alexandria. Tucker died in 1990 and his legacy continues in Alexandria and across the country. Today the church serves the community by opening its doors to host various meetings, services, and other events.



Samuel Wilbert Tucker, a native of Alexandria and Zion Baptist Church member, became the leading attorney for the NAACP and worked tirelessly to end segregation and to bring civil rights to African American people.  
Alexandria Black History Museum

