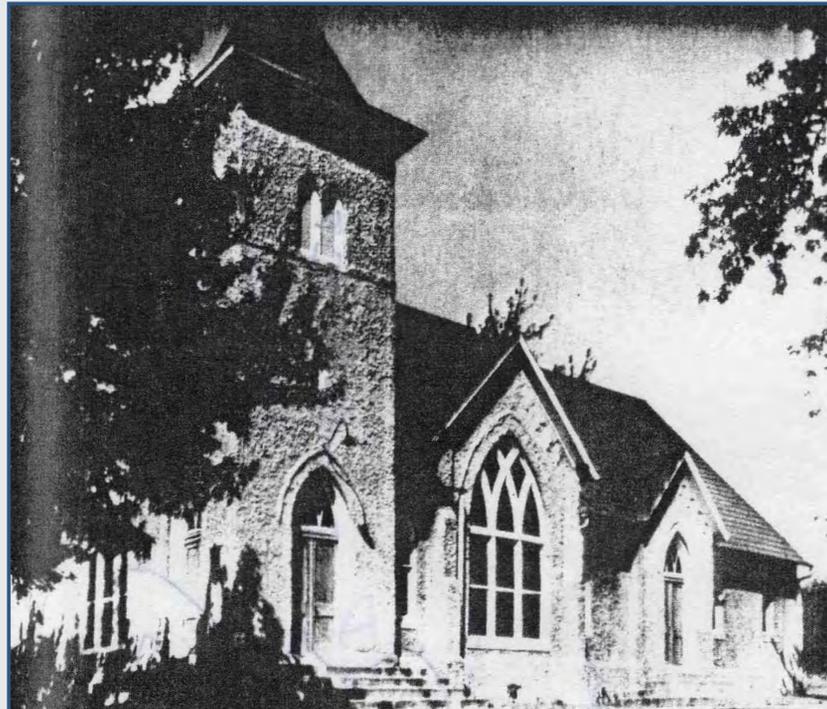


ST. JOHN'S BAPTIST CHURCH



St. John's Baptist Church, circa 1953. Photograph of original church before alterations to the building. Note the original double-leaf entry doors on the first story of the steeple.
Courtesy of St. John's Baptist Church.



St. John's Baptist Church, 1991. Note the removal of the original entrance doors, the modern flat roof vestibule on the gabled facade, and the two-story rear addition.
Courtesy of Arlington County Planning Department.

Founded in 1903, the congregation of St. John's Baptist Church proudly recalls African-American heritage in Arlington County. Some of the early members were emancipated slaves or relatives of emancipated slaves who either lived in slave quarters at the Custis-Lee Mansion (Arlington House) or in Freedmen's Village, a government established temporary settlement that provided transitional housing, employment, and training for refugees and freed men. However, the African-Americans who lived there created a much more permanent community. They founded a Baptist church within the village, Old Bell Church, which later was renamed Mt. Zion Baptist Church. In 1874, the congregation moved the church from Freedmen's Village to Nauck in the southern part of present-day Arlington County.

Twenty-nine years later in 1903, with a desire for a different place to worship, 23 men and women of Mt. Zion established St. John's Baptist Church. The following year, the church trustees, Henry L. Holmes, John W. Worley, Dallas Jones, Thornton H. Gray, and Robert Syphax, purchased a tract of land on the late Guy Henry estate at the present corner of Columbia Pike and North Scott Street. Holmes was a prominent African-American leader who held the position of Arlington's Commissioner of Revenue (1876-1903) and established the Penrose neighborhood. Gray and his wife, Selina, had been slaves at the Custis-Lee Mansion and had a close personal relationship with the Lee family; Selina was entrusted with the keys to the mansion after the Lee family was forced to flee Northern Virginia.

Unable to construct a new church immediately, the congregation held services at the Odd Fellows Hall on Columbia Pike until sufficient capital was accumulated for construction of a new place of worship. It also was purported that a group of church members, along with the first pastor, Rev. Edgar E. Ricks, mortgaged their homes to build the new church. On September 28, 1907, *The Washington Post* stated that the "Grand Lodge of Colored Odd Fellows" planned to celebrate the laying of the cornerstone of the St. John's Baptist Church the following day. Judge Winston Brooks, a carpenter and a member of the congregation's Board of Deacons, was chosen to erect the church at 1905 Columbia Pike. Born in 1863, Brooks and his wife, Mary Hill, settled in Arlington circa 1890. Brooks completed the Gothic Revival church in 1908.

The original stone church had a side-steeple and a steep front gable roof. The steeple featured a louvered lantern containing the belfry, a bracketed wood cornice, a composite shingled roof, and a bronze finial. The original walls were covered with pebble-dash stucco. The large pointed arch windows with lancets were typical of Gothic Revival-styled architecture. Parishioners entered a small vestibule via double doors located in the steeple. Church historians suggest that the original configuration of the building consisted of a high-mounted pulpit in the northwest corner with the nave oriented diagonally instead of the typical center aisle plan.

Although the original St. John's Baptist Church building was demolished in 2004, the two-story rear addition dedicated in 1987 was incorporated into the new church building on the site. The present-day church was re-dedicated in December 2005. The former congregation — who continues to worship at the site — serves as a continual reminder of the perseverance and success of Arlington's African-American community.