

[**Editors Note:** In the Spring of 2016, the Arlington Historical Society and Columbia Masonic Lodge #285 co-sponsored the fourth annual Arlington history essay contest, intended to encourage interest and research in local history. The contest was open to 11th graders from H-B Woodlawn, Wakefield, Washington-Lee and Yorktown high schools. The theme of the contest this year was, “*Discuss how the opening of the Metro in the 1970s affected Arlington and how you think it might continue to influence the County’s development in future years.*” The Arlington Historical Society is proud to publish the winning essay.]

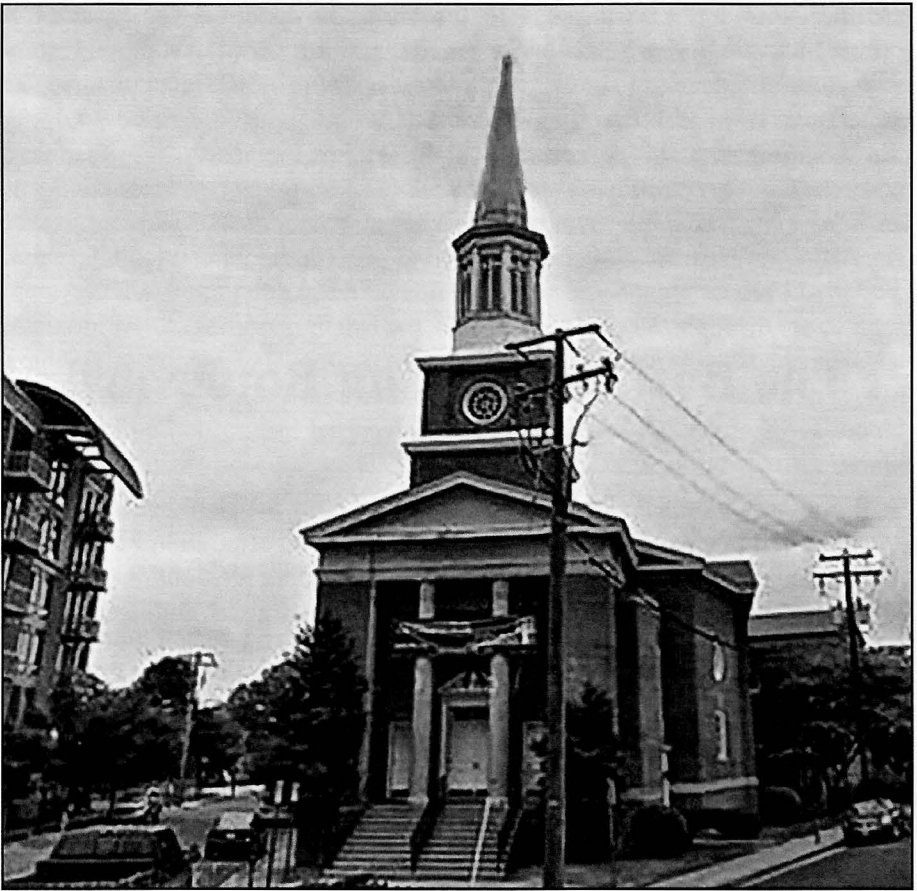
## The Battle of Wilson Boulevard

BY JAMES GUSMER

The old church is unrecognizable from within the shadows of the surrounding buildings as I drift past on a lazy Clarendon afternoon. I struggle to convince myself that this church was where I spent five long childhood years, where crayon drawings, playground adventures, and never-ending naptimes defined me in my younger days. Now, the chipped paint on the white chapel and the contrasting smooth brick have lost their familiar look, and I pass without a second thought.

While I am not a member of the Church at Clarendon, formerly known as the First Baptist Church of Clarendon, my time at the Child Development Center day care service held at the church has influenced my special interest in the building. Located just one block away from the Clarendon Metro Station, the First Baptist Church of Clarendon has been a historic icon in Arlington County and has faced many different transformations throughout its long history. Some of these changes have been highly controversial, such as the most recent eight-story apartment addition to the top of the church. When looking at the underlying causes behind the transformation of the First Baptist Church of Clarendon beginning in the 1970s and the resulting debatable renovations, this historic Arlington location reveals the effects that the Clarendon Metro has had on its surrounding community and how these effects appear in similar communities throughout Arlington County.

In 1909, the First Baptist Church of Clarendon organized from within the small neighborhood of Clarendon. With Reverend W. S. O. Thomas as pastor and a congregation of twenty-three members, the church developed slowly but steadily, opening its first church building in 1915. By 1932, the church had 801 members, and its growing population had a growing influence on the creation



[Howderfamily.com/blog/Divine-Apartments/](http://Howderfamily.com/blog/Divine-Apartments/)

**First Baptist Church of Clarendon has been a historic icon in Arlington County.**

of other Baptist churches, such as the Ballston, Westover, and Vienna Baptist Churches. With the 1940s came new church renovations, and as the 1960s approached, the First Baptist Church of Clarendon was thriving with a record membership of 1,660 (The Church at Clarendon).

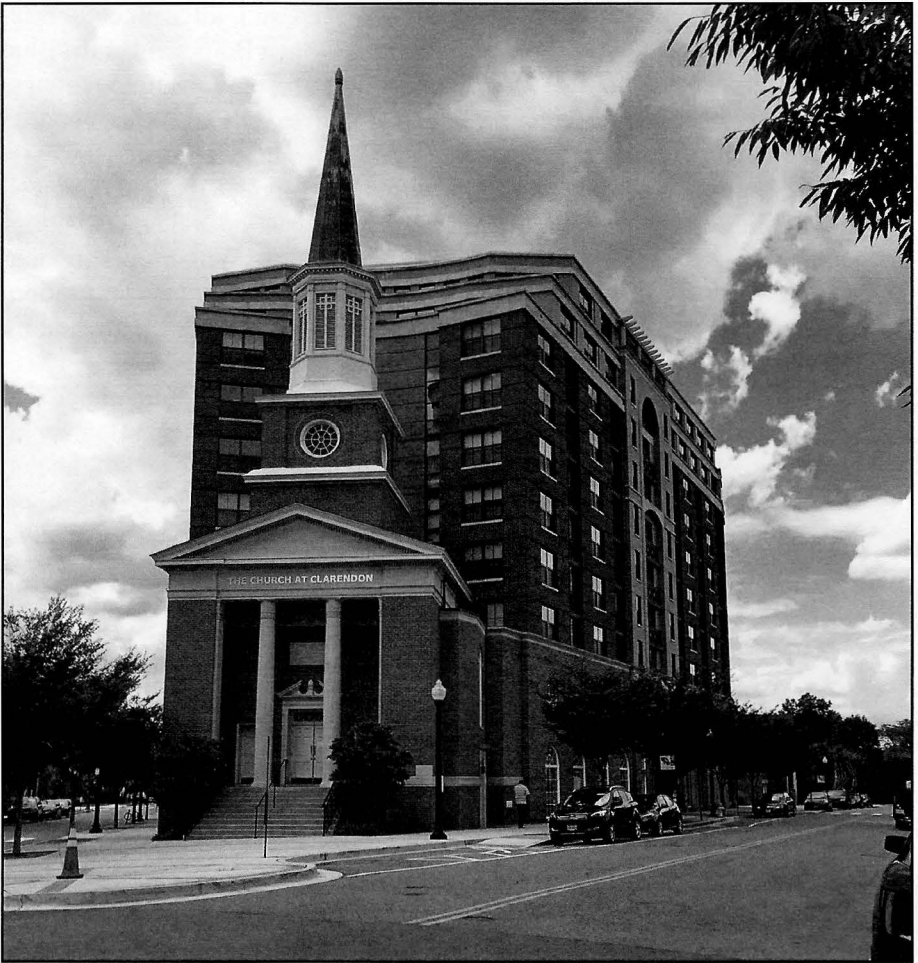
At the same time as the First Baptist Church of Clarendon began to prosper, the National Capital Transportation Agency (NCTA) began developing plans for a rapid transportation system in the DC area. Arlington, which was stuck in a suburban, outdated state, sought to bring new life to the area with the addition of the transportation system (Craft, 2013). While the NCTA was not able to execute its plans, the transportation project was taken up by a new government agency, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA).

Arlington County officials negotiated with WMATA and, after much debate, convinced them to service an Orange Line along Wilson Boulevard and a Blue Line to the Pentagon and Crystal City (Schrag, 2006). Some Arlington groups, such as the Committee on Optimum Growth (Co-Opt) led by Ted Weihe, opposed these plans because of the intended dense station-area development. However, Arlington County satisfied these groups with a compromise that only allowed the tallest buildings within a quarter-mile of a Metro station and tapered building height zoning for areas past this radius (Craft, 2013). With proper funding and public support, Arlington and WMATA quickly put their plans into action. By July 1977, Rosslyn and the Pentagon were serviced by the Metro, and by 1979, the Orange Line extended out to Ballston (Schrag, 2006).

The positive effects of the new Metro lines in Arlington were immediate. Hundreds of townhomes and condominiums were built along Wilson Boulevard, and projects such as the Ballston Common Mall and Fashion Centre attracted new businesses and customers upon opening. Arlington added ninety-five buildings taller than three stories from 1980 to 1989, and area median income values skyrocketed (Craft, 2013). Property values also boomed, as home assessments rose by thirteen percent in 1978 and overall values increased by \$1 billion by 1980 (Schrag, 2006). Arlington began attracting a younger and more diverse population to its unique neighborhoods, especially along the Wilson Boulevard corridor, where Clarendon and Ballston offered apartments, shops, and active nightlife by the 2000s (Schrag, 2006). Metro had changed Arlington exactly as intended, with urbanization attracting new life to the area.

However, the First Baptist Church of Clarendon did not see similar benefits. With the Metro came a younger, less religious crowd, which meant that filling pews grew more difficult each year. The church had to reduce its number of services to just one on Sunday, and, by 2002, attendance reached a low at just 477 parishioners and no pastoral staff. While the Clarendon Metro had brought new energy to a struggling area, the First Baptist Church of Clarendon experienced the opposite with declining membership, rising costs, and a deteriorating church (The Church at Clarendon).

Meanwhile, by the early 2000s, Arlington County had its own problems. While the boom in property values benefited the county's revenue, with the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor accounting for almost a third of Arlington's real estate taxes, the rising costs removed older Arlingtonians from their homes and brought in a new population (Schrag, 2006). Arguing that "the people who made Arlington what it is now ought to have some right to live in Arlington," some former residents insisted that Arlington create affordable living units. In addition, Arlington County officials realized that the county was becoming overwhelmingly homogeneous and sought economic diversity (Goldberg,



Max Gross

**The First Baptist Church of Clarendon changed its name to its current name: The Church at Clarendon in 2005.**

2015). Both of these reasons convinced the county to start building affordable housing units as alternatives to the expensive houses and apartments common in areas transformed by the Metro. Arlington's aim was to keep fifteen to twenty percent of housing designated as affordable, though questions remained as to where these units would come from (Goldberg, 2015).

These mounting issues within Clarendon and Arlington resulted in the first display of the most important impact of the Metro on the county: that it brought the Arlington government and its citizens into direct conflict over urbanization

and development. The First Baptist Church of Clarendon sold its air rights and worked out a deal with the county allowing a developer to build eight floors of apartments on top of the sanctuary, with most of those units dedicated to affordable housing (Pope, 2015). Lawsuits began almost immediately, challenging the zoning and legality of the new apartments. The court ruled that the county had violated its own zoning, so the County Board changed the zoning and resumed its plans (Pope, 2015). However, the lawsuits continued, this time led by Clarendon resident Peter Glassman over the First Amendment and separation of church and state. Arguing that the \$48 million in county and state loans and federal tax credits would enrich the church, Glassman attempted to prove that the county was promoting the Baptist church by funding the redevelopment. This time, the court dismissed the challenge and supported the county in its secular purpose of providing affordable housing (Rein, 2010). With opposition cleared, the Arlington County government and the First Baptist Church of Clarendon began construction of the apartments, completing the eight-story VPoint apartments in 2011 and resuming worship in the new church sanctuary in 2012 (Pyzyk, 2012).

While this conflict benefited both Arlington County by providing new affordable housing units and The First Baptist Church of Clarendon by providing a new church building, the fight between Arlington County and the Clarendon residents who opposed the building revealed that the Metro brought an increase in conflicts between the government and its citizens. As the Metro's spreading influence brought urbanization and growth, it also rubbed shoulders with Arlington residents who supported preservation of the county's history and sections of old, pre-Metro Arlington. These conflicts related back to the original opposition to the Metro from Ted Weihe and Co-Opt, whose ideas proved increasingly relevant as commercial growth commenced around Metro stations. In the case of The First Baptist Church of Clarendon, which changed its name to The Church at Clarendon in 2005, the county was forced to choose between keeping the historic church and modernizing to meet its goals. Other places around Arlington are facing the same choices. In 2015, Arlington Presbyterian Church decided to sell its property and replace it with new affordable housing units. Many church members and neighborhood residents opposed this plan, though resistance was unsuccessful and the church will be handed over in the next few years (Sullivan, 2015). On a broader scale, Arlington County has faced serious controversy over a potential Columbia Pike streetcar, which would serve South Arlington residents who do not have access to the Metro. This heated debate came to a close in 2014, when the County Board voted to halt plans on the streetcar. Both of these conflicts show the Metro's negative effect on Arlington, as sky-high property values and unequal development in

South Arlington have influenced the County Board's efforts to provide affordable housing and transportation to less developed areas as well as booming neighborhoods, which in turn has sparked conflict between the county government and Arlington residents over modernization and preservation of the past.

Today, The Church at Clarendon stands as a symbol of conflicting viewpoints, a battleground where two voices collided. The preserved historic church chapel with the vibrant apartments in the background represents the past and present, and the Clarendon Metro only one block away stands innocently unrelated to the incongruous building. People pass the building without a second thought as to why the church developed as it did, and very few realize that the Arlington Metro, which brought its famous urbanization and growth to Wilson Boulevard, also brought the end of the building I knew so well in my childhood as well as ongoing conflict between the county and its residents. While The Church at Clarendon transformation ended up as a success, Arlington will have to reevaluate its future plans for urbanization and growth as novelty conflicts with history, commercial conflicts with residential, and government conflicts with its citizens over addressing and reshaping the lasting effects of the Metro in Arlington County.

---

### *Works Cited*

Craft, Kevin. "When Metro Came To Town." *Arlington Magazine*. Arlington Magazine, November 2013. Web. 15 February 2016. <<http://www.arlingtonmagazine.com/November-December-2013/Metro/>>

Goldberg, Jeff. "Will affordable housing units in Arlington remain affordable?" *WJLA*. WJLA, 12 March 2015. Web. 15 February 2016. <<http://wjla.com/news/local/will-affordable-housing-units-in-arlington-remain-affordable--112216>>

Pope, Michael. "Virginia Church Reinvents Itself As Affordable Housing Developer." *WAMU* 88.5. WAMU 88.5, 19 June 2015. Web. 15 February 2016. <[http://wamu.org/programs/metro\\_connection/15/06/18/virginia\\_church\\_reinvents\\_itself\\_as\\_housing\\_developer\\_and\\_others\\_seek\\_to\\_do\\_the\\_same](http://wamu.org/programs/metro_connection/15/06/18/virginia_church_reinvents_itself_as_housing_developer_and_others_seek_to_do_the_same)>

Pyzyk, Katie. "Mixed-Income Apartment Complex Opens in Clarendon." *ARLnow*. Local News Now LLC, 13 April 2012. Web. 15 February 2016. <<https://www.arlnow.com/2012/04/13/mixed-income-apartment-complex-opens-in-clarendon/>>

Rein, Lisa. "Arlington affordable housing dispute morphs into test of church-state separation." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 21 March 2010. Web. 15 February 2016. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/20/AR2010032003068.html>>

Rein, Lisa. "Foes of Arlington County affordable housing project lose challenge." *The Washington Post*.

The Washington Post, 14 April 2010. Web. 15 February 2016. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2010/03/20/ST2010032004054.html?sid=ST2010032004054>>

Schrag, Zachary. *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Print.

Sullivan, Patricia. ““The church is not the building. It is our faith and our people.”” *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 26 December 2015. Web. 15 February 2016. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/the-church-is-not-the-building-it-is-our-faith-and-our-people/2015/12/26/dce43392-a41f-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/the-church-is-not-the-building-it-is-our-faith-and-our-people/2015/12/26/dce43392-a41f-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb_story.html)>

The Church at Clarendon. “Church History.” n.p., n.d. Web. 15 February 2016. <<http://www.1bc.org/history/>>

---

James Gusmer during the 2015-16 academic year was a Junior at Washington-Lee High School, Arlington, Virginia.

---