

Images from the Storm

Figure 1. "View of the Octagon House on the Leesburg Turnpike, Va., headquarters of Brigadier General John Sedgwick, U.S.A., November 1861," by Robert K. Sneden.

(Re)Discovering Two Early Octagon Houses in the Arlington-Alexandria Area

BY DEAN DEROSA

Many Arlington County residents are acquainted with historic Glebe House, located on North 17th Street. Part of the farm set aside in colonial times for the support of the established Anglican Church, Glebe House served as the rectory for the Fairfax Parish minister. The present house was built in 1815 and very prominently features a large octagon-shaped wing added to the original structure at a later date, leading many to believe the house is a “true” octagon house.

Octagon houses became popular in the United States during the mid-1800s. They were built in many parts of the country, including in Virginia, and were both of brick and wood-framed construction. The structures had their origins in the octagonal designs of ancient Greek and Roman temples and villas. In Virginia, a very early adaptation of a classical octagonal design was Thomas Jefferson’s summer home, known as Poplar Forest, constructed of brick and still standing near Forest, VA, in Bedford County.

Nearer to the Northern Virginia area, the Octagon House in Washington, DC, is a widely known landmark. Built at the turn of the 18th century for Colonel John Tayloe, a rich Virginia plantation owner and acquaintance of George Washington, the impressive three-story brick mansion is part of the complex that today houses the American Institute of Architects. However, like Glebe House, Octagon House is not, strictly speaking, a classical, eight-sided octagonal house of the style built early-on by Jefferson and which became popular for upper-middle-income homes in the mid-1800s.

My interest in octagon houses in Northern Virginia was stimulated by a lovely watercolor of an octagon house painted by Robert Sneden, published by the Virginia Historical Society in *Images from the Storm* (Figure 1). According to Sneden, who was a private in the Union Army stationed in the Arlington-Alexandria area during the early years of the Civil War, the house was located just above Alexandria on Leesburg Pike and was used during the construction of Fort Ward as the headquarters of Major General John Sedgwick, under whose general command Sneden served when he first arrived in the area with the 40th New York Regiment. Sneden’s war diary also includes a period photograph of the same octagon house with a notation in Sneden’s own hand, identifying it as

the headquarters of General Sedgwick on Leesburg Pike (Figure 2). My interest was heightened when I happened to notice the clear image of an octagonal house similar in outline to the house portrayed in Sneden's diary in the background of a Civil War drawing of Freedman's Village by Alfred Waud, published in the May 7, 1864 issue of *Harper's Weekly* (Figure 3).^{*} Interestingly, however, Waud's illustration of Freedman's Village places the octagon house between the village and the Potomac River, definitely NOT on Leesburg Pike.

I solved this mystery of the location of the house on finding another copy of the photograph of the octagon house in Sneden's diary in the glass negative archives of the Library of Congress. However, in the Library of Congress archives, the eight-sided house is identified as the 1861 headquarters of General Irvin McDowell, not General Sedgwick. Also interestingly, the Library of Congress archives contain a second photo of the same house, similarly identified as General McDowell's 1861 headquarters. The two photos are actually a matched stereograph pair of images, here combined (for the first known time) in the accompanying modern stereoview (Figure 4).

Those familiar with the story of Arlington House and its surrounding plantation know that Arlington House was the family seat of George Washington Parke (GWP) Custis, Robert E. Lee's father-in-law and the adopted grandson of George Washington. General McDowell commanded the Union forces that occupied Arlington Plantation at the outset of the Civil War, shortly after then-Colonel Lee and his family made their fateful decision to side with the Confederacy and to abandon Arlington Plantation. As the story is told to this day at Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, General McDowell did not make Arlington House his headquarters, initially at least. In a courteous reply to a letter received from Mrs. Lee urging restraint, General McDowell promised his troops would respect the Lees' former residence and the "Washington Treasury" it contained—Washington and Custis family heirlooms inherited by GWP Custis on the death of his grandmother, Martha Dandridge (Custis) Washington. So although McDowell did not establish his headquarters in Arlington House itself, he would necessarily have done so in the neighborhood.

Further evidence that the octagon house portrayed in watercolor by Sneden was General McDowell's and not General Sedgwick's headquarters is provided by yet another Civil War drawing of the Arlington Heights area. This drawing

^{*} Freedman's Village was built on the grounds of Arlington Plantation, the home of Robert E. Lee and his family at the outbreak of the War Between the States. Freedman's Village was constructed during the last years of the war to house "contrabands"—Negro slaves and their families who fled plantations in the Confederate states and sought freedom and protection from the advancing, if not always victorious, Union Army.

was made in early 1862 by another Union soldier, William Lydston, and is found in the museum collection of Fort Ward (Figure 5). Lydston's charcoal drawing features a view of Fort Albany, which was situated near the eastern boundary of Arlington Plantation, along then (and present-day) Columbia Pike, to help guard the southern entrance to the City of Washington over the Long Bridge (present-day 14th Street Bridge). Most importantly, Lydston's drawing distinctly includes the octagon house General McDowell used for his headquarters, in the same location suggested in the Alfred Waud illustration of Freedman's Village.

So, clearly, present-day Arlington County boasted at least one early and "true" octagon house during the mid-1800s. It was of wood-frame construction, featuring both a second floor and a third-floor cupola observatory. It remains unknown who originally owned the home and how it fell into Union Army hands. Perhaps the owner was a Confederate sympathizer and, like the Lees, abandoned his property in advance of the Union Army crossing the Potomac at the end of May 1861 to take up defensive positions to protect Washington City. These are interesting questions for more extensive research.

The last question for consideration here is how Robert Sneden came to misidentify General McDowell's headquarters as those of General Sedgwick. Was there a second octagon house in the Arlington-Alexandria area?

The answer to this question is yes! In the special collections of the Alexandria Library is a period photograph of an octagon house that was located during the Civil War about a mile outside of Alexandria on the Leesburg Pike (Figure 6). This octagon house was originally owned by the Cole family. During the later years of the Civil War the house was used as a Union Army hospital, under the general command of General Henry Slocum. This is undoubtedly the octagon house used as headquarters during the early war years by General Sedgwick, as described by Sneden. That the photo shows the eight-sided house was located just outside Alexandria along Route 7 is confirmed by the iconic steeple of the Episcopal Seminary seen in the distance just to the left of the house in the photo. The Episcopal Seminary, which would later serve as General McClellan's headquarters for the Army of the Potomac, is still a prominent landmark in the Northern Virginia area, situated at the intersection of Seminary Road and North Quaker Lane in Alexandria. Local Civil War historians place the location of the Cole octagon house on the south side of Route 7, roughly at the site of the present-day Oakland Baptist Church just between TC Williams High School and the Lindsay Lexus car dealership. Indeed, one can today still make out the top of the Virginia Theological Seminary steeple from the top of a small knoll on Route 7 situated between the church and the high school playing field.

Finally, how did Robert Sneden confuse the two early octagon houses in the Arlington-Alexandria area? He likely saw both houses during the Civil War.

His diary contains a number of illustrations of Arlington House where he was camped on the mansion grounds for a time in the fall of 1862, when he served as a cartographer for General Samuel Heintzelman who then headed a portion of the Defenses of Washington—the ring of forts surrounding Washington City during the war—from Arlington House.

During this time, Sneden probably made a number of sketches of the landmarks later included in his diary. These, however, were likely not completed or made into watercolor paintings until sometime after the Civil War. Notably, Sneden was captured by Mosby's Rangers (and severely pistol-whipped, possibly by the "Gray Ghost" himself) in November 1863, and imprisoned under arduous conditions at Richmond and, later, Andersonville, GA, for nearly a year before he was paroled in late 1864. After the war, he spent a number of years completing his diary and wartime illustrations. Thus, it is probable Sneden obtained the photo of General McDowell's headquarters near Arlington House sometime after the war, mistook it for General Sedgwick's headquarters, and used the photo as a basis for his charming watercolor illustration of "General Sedgwick's headquarters along the Leesburg Pike."

Robert Sneden's confusion over the two octagon houses matters little today. But (re)discovering the existence of the two early octagon houses in the Arlington-Alexandria area is a fascinating part of exploring the Civil War history of Northern Virginia after 150 years, and knowledge of the existence of the two "true" octagon houses in the area should not be lost or forgotten over the next 150 years.

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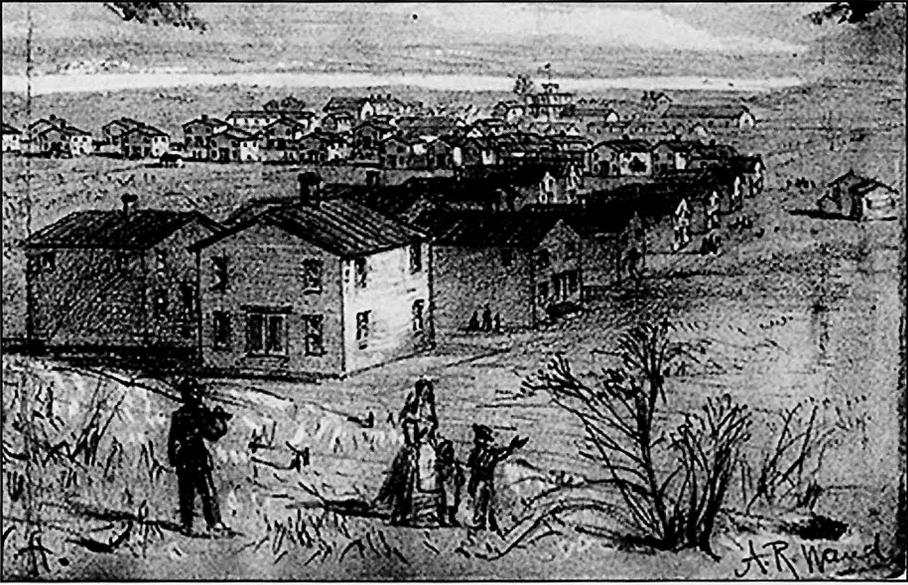
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Robert K. Sneden Diary, Vol. 1

Figure 2: Octagon House: Headquarters of General Sedgwick on Leesburg Turnpike, 1861.



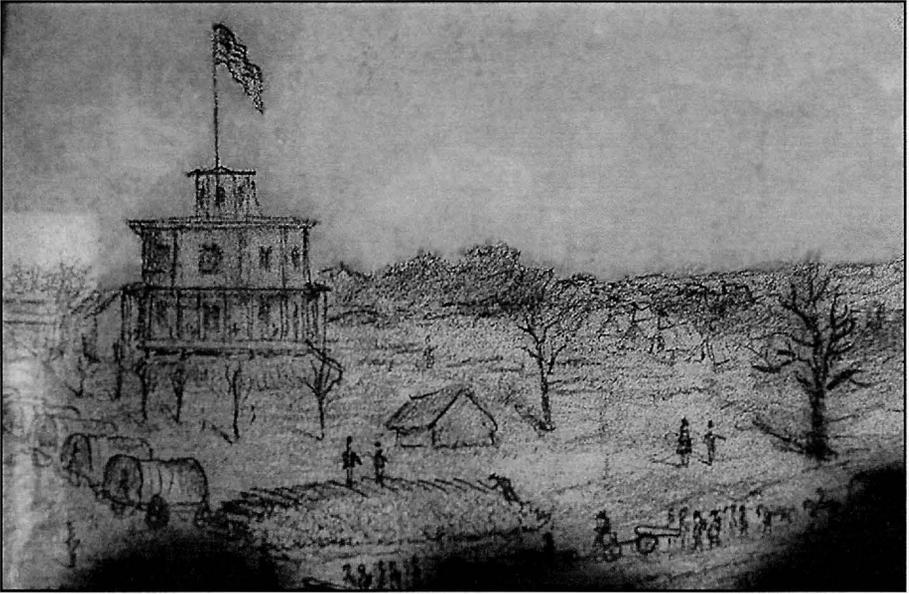
Harper's Weekly

Figure 3: Freedman's Village, 1864 (Detail).



Library of Congress

Figure 4: Headquarters of General McDowell near Arlington House, 1861. Modern stereoview by author using original stereograph images.



Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site

Figure 5: Eastern View of Fort Albany, 1862 (Detail) by William Lydston.



Alexandria Library

Figure 6: The Cole Octagon House, c.1860, photographer unknown.