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Out of the Attic

Spring Gardens and Alexandria (Part II)

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Last week's column discussed the disagreement between historians on the location of Spring Gardens, listed as the location of a lavish Alexandria July 4th celebration in 1798. The two historians, Ruth Lincoln Kaye and T. Michael Miller, exemplified two approaches to a historical question.

One relied on tradition, the recalled memories of the location relayed over generations. The other focused on newspaper accounts and advertisements to substantiate their claim. Since this disagreement in 1989, archaeologists conducted two studies on one of the locations in question. Using a variety of sources, the studies seem to have settled the debate on the location of the Spring Gardens tavern.

The first study is dated October 1989, the same year the dispute played out on the pages of the *Fireside Sentinel*. The study, by the James Madison Archeological Research Center before the widening of Duke Street, relied heavily on newspaper accounts and advertisements to establish the presence of a tavern on the Spring Garden Farm property.

The study notes that Abel Willis opened a pleasure retreat in 1786 on a four-square acre property bounded by Wolfe, Payne, Wilkes and Hamilton streets. Interestingly, John Wise of Gadsby's Tavern fame bought the property in 1794. However, Wise sold the property the next year to the firm of Hamilton & Bowne.

The firm replaced Willis with Henry Wilbur as the manager of the resort. Wilbur tried to get out of the lease within a year. When that failed, he set out to profit from two assets on the property: the House of Entertainment including a billiards table, and the water springs that seem to have given the property its name.

In 1798, Wilbur did escape his lease, as the new owner of the property, John Mandeville, appointed John Hubbell to manage the retreat. Hubbell reopened the House of Entertainment in 1798, in

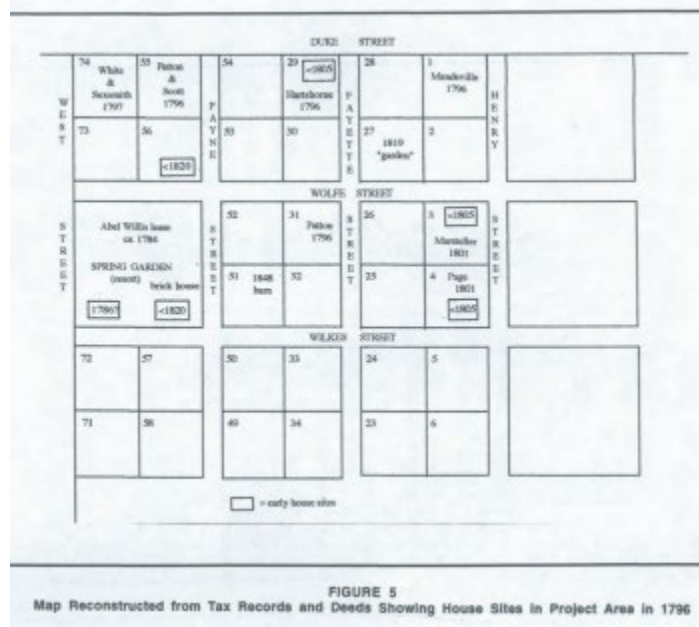


FIGURE 5
Map Reconstructed from Tax Records and Deeds Showing House Sites in Project Area in 1796. Courtesy Alexandria Archaeology Museum.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

time for the July 4th celebration discussed last week. The 1989 study used newspaper accounts and both the Fairfax County and Alexandria Deed Books to support its narrative.

After the 1798 celebration, the resort built a theater for live performances, although this building survived less than two years. In 1814, the Alexandria Gazette reported that the property, including the 30-year-old tavern, was destroyed by fire. Later owners attempted to revive the magic of the entertainment resort, but Civil War-era photographs of the lot show only a small frame tenement on a property that once hosted a citywide Independence Day celebration.

In 1999, Alexandria tasked Thunderbird Archaeological Associates with a study on the Old Town Village Site, on the corner of Duke and Henry Streets. While this study also used newspaper accounts and advertisements, it also relied on Alexandria Corporate and Circuit Court Deeds. The study found Alexandria merchant Mordecai Miller's 1833 will included a partition of Spring Garden Farm after Miller's death. The will does not note the existence of a tavern building on the property.

The subsequent studies on the Spring Garden Farm property provide readers with a glimpse into how some disagreements between historians are resolved. The broader tax and property record research provides a convincing argument that the Spring Garden Tavern once stood on the property known as Spring Garden Farm.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.