

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
COMMUNITY MEDIA

Alexandria's first historic preservation

Alexandria's tourism economy, begun in the mid-1920s, was still in the embryonic stage in the 1940s. The city was reeling from the impact of the Great Depression and then World War II, which delayed reinvestment in large swaths of what is now Old Town.

Despite this reality and the desperate condition of many of Alexandria's 18th-century buildings, hope ran high in the fledgling preservation movement, which promoted projects to restore Alexandria. A model was Colonial Williamsburg, the nation's first large-scale historical restoration project, which was initiated by John D. Rockefeller in the 1920s.

An April 17, 1944, local newspaper announcement of the imminent demolition of the home of town founder William Ramsay, the modified gambrel-roof structure

located at the northeast corner of King and North Fairfax streets, shook Alexandria residents. Unlike the pristine Murray-Dick-Fawcett House, already recognized by national historians as one of Virginia's most authentic period homes, the nearly two-century-old Ramsay House building was by then well-worn, having suffered years of neglect, inappropriate alteration and use.

This situation was capped off by a devastating fire in 1942, which essentially gutted the building's interior, further threatening its existence. The city's fire chief was not prepared to condemn the building just yet, and ordered it boarded up, expressing hope that the building might be restored as a museum at some point in the future.

Within days of the newspaper article, the media reported

"frantic citizen efforts," which quickly built pressure to save the building. Nationally recognized architectural historians, community organizations and even private individuals, such as Ramsay's great-great-granddaughter Rebecca Ramsay Reese, pledged funds and labor to the preservation effort.

City officials were immediately engaged, and within two weeks of the published announcement, Council had negotiated and consummated a sale with the site's owner to purchase the property for \$9,500. The plan was for a permanent center to promote Alexandria tourism to be established in the early building.

The city's lightning-quick acquisition of the property was not matched by the high expectations envisioned by Council for an imminent private-public partnership. In-

stead, the building languished for many months while a restoration proposal was slowly developed. Frustrated by the snail's pace of the process, the city finally issued an ultimatum for the project, prompting a renewed discussion on the fate of the building and the role of preservation stakeholders in Alexandria.

National Preservation Month started as National Preservation Week in 1973. In 2005, the National Trust expanded the celebration from a week to the entire month of May to offer a fuller exploration of buildings and spaces of historical significance to a larger American history. Readers can learn more about historic preservation in Alexandria at www.alexandriava.gov/Preservation.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.