

Alexandria Times

Denise Dunbar
 Publisher & Executive Editor
 ddunbar@alextimes.com

Margaret Stevens
 Director of Sales & Marketing
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Sydney Kodama
 Reporter/Opinion Editor
 skodama@alextimes.com

Jim McGrath
 Sports Reporter
 jmcgrath@alextimes.com

Julia Gwin
 Reporting Intern
 jgwin@alextimes.com

James Libresco
 Reporting Intern
 jlibresco@alextimes.com

SALES & MARKETING

Margaret Stevens
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Marty DeVine
 mdevine@alextimes.com

Patrice V. Culligan
 pculligan@alextimes.com

Stephanie Santiago
 ssantiago@alextimes.com

Tina Franco
 Business Operations Manager
 tfranco@alextimes.com

DIRECTOR OF ART & DESIGN

Jessica Kim
 graphics@alextimes.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Gayle Converse
 Kim Davis
 Mathylda Dulian
 Mark Eaton
 Mark Edelman
 Thompson Eskew
 Kim Gilliam
 Ella Mitchell
 Erin Shackelford
 Hannah Shibliq
 Kathryn Ziemer

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 908 King Street, Suite 200
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Alexandria
 COMMUNITY MEDIA

Alexandria's first historic preservation, part 2

By May 2, 1944, two weeks after the announcement of the pending demolition of the historic William Ramsay homestead, the Alexandria City Council successfully negotiated and acquired the property.

The goal was to restore the site as a potential tourist center, ending the immediate threat to the building. But even then, after years of neglect and a major fire in 1942, the vacant building's preservation strategy was marginal, and the expectation of an immediate public-private partnership was somewhat premature.

Before city acquisition, public outrage and determination to save the building were high, but after the immediate crisis passed, the public sense of urgency declined. Two weeks after the title passed to the city government, an organization called the Ramsay House Restoration Association was loosely formed and published a brochure, illustrated with the drawing seen here, of what the "restored" Ramsay House would look like.

An expected contribution from all Alexandria residents was projected to quickly raise the estimated restoration sum of \$20,000. Then work would begin.

When the expected contributions fell far short of the time-sensitive goal, city leaders became concerned at the prospect that unwilling tax-



Drawing of the Ramsey House.

PHOTO/CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

payers would be obliged to further fund the project. So the local authorities urged the association to incorporate as a non-profit corporation and set up its own committee of appointed officials to monitor the group's progress.

After several months of delay, the proposal submitted for incorporation, supported by the city committee, was vague on the actual plan for the Ramsay House, and instead espoused the larger vision to create a formal, citywide historical society that would act as an advocate for all aspects of history and historical landmarks in the city. Months passed without basic stabilization, and the decrepit house deteriorated further.

Finally, by the end of 1945, the city and the restoration group signed a lease to begin the project, and Alexandria native Milton Grigg, an architect

who had worked on the refurbishing of buildings at Colonial Williamsburg, was selected to guide the restoration.

By mid-1946, no actual construction work had begun on the structure, and city authorities finally lost patience. Almost two years to the day after the City Council moved to acquire the Ramsay property for preservation, a further vote authorized city funds to repair the small building. The new plan utilized the building as an annex for offices at City Hall, specifically for the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.

Preservationists were livid and vehemently criticized the city for not allowing enough time for proper fundraising and the difficulty in acquiring historically accurate building materials needed to complete the project. While City Councilors expected some opposition to their vote, they

were overwhelmed by the public reaction.

Within two weeks, they reversed their action and extended the restoration time period for an additional two and a half years. But by 1949, the revised restoration goal of \$25,000 for Ramsay House was far from realization, and progress was stagnant.

To be continued...

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.