



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### The little mysteries along Alexandria's streets

*Alexandria Times, February 23, 2017*

Image: Sign on North Royal Street, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Alexandria is a remarkable city for many reasons, including its deep roots in history, keen sense of detail and aura of romantic charm. However, it is not often that these three attributes come together in one place.

Plaques and markers across the municipality highlight historically significant buildings, people and events but, except for the sad saga relating to the death of the Female Stranger in 1816, there is little evidence concerning the deep emotions of love and passion during earlier times.

The curious eye also must always be alert to the small and unexpected in the Port City. Even lifelong residents can stroll down the same sidewalks for years on end and suddenly recognize something new on their daily walkabout.

As just one example, consider two cast-iron downspouts affixed to homes directly facing each other across South Fairfax Street, near the intersection with Prince Street.

At first they appear identical, and offer little clue about the time period of their fabrication and installation. But only the most careful observer will notice that there is a small, but significant, difference between them that silently documents the swirling social, racial and political issues of their time.

The difference is the raised lettering confirming their construction in "Alexandria, D.C." and "Alexandria, VA," instantly conveying information that they were cast within a few years of each other around 1847, when Alexandria retroceded from the District of Columbia back to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

This moment in time captures the evolving circumstances that ultimately separated the North and South in the years just prior to the American Civil War.

A relatively recent walk down North Royal Street caused a similar reaction in the mind of this writer. Walking up the east side of the street for years on end, on Valentine's Day 2016, a new marker tracing a major event in someone's life was discovered.

After initially walking past a typical street tree just north of Cameron Street, a momentary glint of light from the center of the tree trunk caused a closer inspection. There, nailed to a tree just north of



PHOTOS/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

---

Cameron Street was a tiny metallic, crudely etched label documenting a major life-event: "BENEATH THIS TREE I KISSED HER; 17, NOV 78."

Immediately upon reading the short text, thoughts raced through the mind concerning this unexplained testimony. Who kissed her? Who was she and what was so special about her that compelled the writer to document it for all time?

What happened in Alexandria on November 17, 1978 that ultimately resulted in this spontaneous act of passion, one that so moved a bewitched lover it needed to be recorded for all to bear witness?

As it turns out, not much happened on November 17, 1978. It was a Friday, the 321st day of the year according to the Gregorian calendar. On that day, somewhere, love was in the air as unofficial royal and first cousin to Queen Elizabeth II, Gerald Lascelles, married actress Elizabeth Colvin.

But even that long-overdue wedding was a bit anti-climactic, as Gerald worked for years to divorce his first wife, Angela. By the time the wedding finally occurred on that fateful November day, Gerald and Elizabeth's son, Martin, born in 1962, was in attendance and a teenager.

It's doubtful that the across-the-pond nuptials could have spawned a sudden love match on the aptly named Royal Street. Interestingly, on that same day, Great Britain also performed a nuclear test at a site in Nevada, but no connection between nuclear fission, radioactive winds and sudden expressions of romance in Northern Virginia has yet been established.

But there is one notable event connected to Alexandria on that crisp autumn day, the release of The Doors' record, "An American Prayer." Although former lead singer and George Washington High School graduate Jim Morrison had died more than seven years prior, his spoken poetry had been recorded in 1969 and 1970, and was put to music by the remaining band members.

Is it possible the amorous tree writer was inspired by this new release? Unfortunately, we may never know, and the search for these mysterious, disco-era lovers goes on.

*"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 Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*