



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

“Our Alexandria” dollhouse collection offers glimpse at black history

Alexandria Times, December 13, 2018

Image: Courtesy, Alexandria Black History Museum

Dollhouses are commonly associated with youth – a typical bedroom accessory for a child’s bedroom. The modern-day dollhouse dates back to 17th-century Northern Europe and was not intended for children, but rather symbolized social class and wealth.

The dollhouse collection currently on display for the third time at the Alexandria Black History Museum represents much more than affluence or children’s toys. This exhibit portrays the African American experience in Alexandria over the past century. The miniatures that artists Sharon J. Frazier and Linwood M. Smith have created over the past two decades serve as a valuable tool for cultural preservation.

Both Frazier and Smith are lifelong residents of Alexandria. Both attended Parker-Gray High School, which was built in 1950, strictly for African Americans. Upon graduation, Frazier began her career as a public health nurse and Smith worked as a mechanic for the city.

It wasn’t until 1994 that Frazier invited Smith to assist with her artisan hobby of creating dollhouses. Smith had a passion for woodwork: he loved restoring antique trunks and building sentimental gifts for friends in the community. As their partnership and collection grew, they began to realize the potential to create a series, focusing on the history of Alexandria.

Early, free, black neighborhoods consisted of: The Bottoms, Hayti, Uptown and Petersburg. After the Civil War, as people migrated to Alexandria in order to escape slavery behind Union lines, the African American population rose to 5,300 by 1870.

During the years of segregation, these neighborhoods were the only areas in which African Americans could own property or a business. Nearly all the dollhouses are located within the Parker-Gray Historic District, also known as Uptown.

Though Frazier and Smith focus on the positive characteristics of their neighborhood, we must realize most of these establishments existed amidst the shameful years of segregation. For instance, the “Robert Robinson Library,” built in 1940 in response to the 1939 sit-in at Barrett Branch Public Library, carried limited, second-hand resources that all African American students in the city had to share.

Frazier and Smith recall having to wait in line for a turn with the limited encyclopedias to complete their homework assignments. The “Rooming House” is an example of families who opened-up their homes to accommodate African American travelers through Alexandria. White-owned department stores often did not permit African Americans to use their fitting-rooms. Therefore, a trip to the “Seamstress’s House” was necessary.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Local visitors reminisce about their youth, with memories of a close-knit community which fostered the success of its children. The exhibit also appeals to international visitors who can relate to displays like the “One Room School House” or “Preparing Thanksgiving Dinner.” Come visit the Alexandria Black History Museum to view all 26 of these ornate and detailed doll houses and learn about the African American experience in Alexandria.

“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.