

The Miller Family: Quakers and Merchants (108-110 S. St. Asaph Street)

Mordecai Miller (1764-1832) and his son Robert H. Miller (1798-1874) were significant figures on the 500 block of King Street, as well as in Alexandria as a whole. Both successful businessmen, they were also Quakers who were actively involved in the emancipation of slaves and the welfare of free blacks. Their activities in this regard were instrumental in the creation and development of a free black neighborhood that later came to be known as Hayti (more below). Robert was also strongly involved in other civic activities that greatly contributed to the urban development of Alexandria.

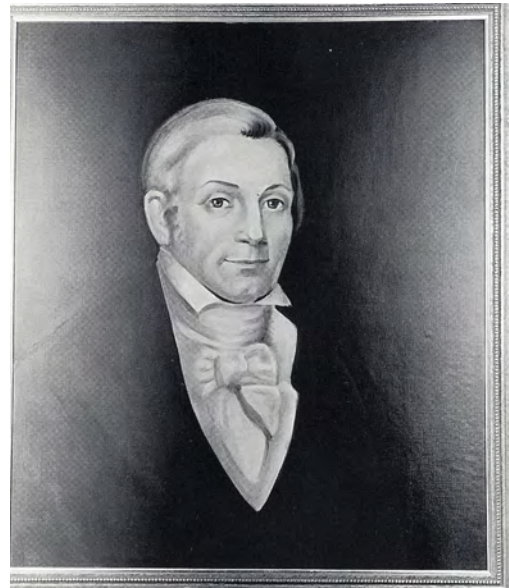


Fig. 1: Portrait of Mordecai Miller, aged about 50, by John Gadsby Chapman (ref pending)



Fig. 2: A Bracket Clock made by Mordecai Miller, ca. 1788-99 (ref pending)

Originally from Pennsylvania, we know that Mordecai Miller was living in Alexandria by 1791 and working his trade as a silversmith and clockmaker. He married Rebecca Hartshorne in 1792 and soon turned to the mercantile and trading business and became a prominent and wealthy merchant (Terrie 1979).

Miller was also involved in other activities. During his lifetime, Mordecai Miller built a total of nine houses on the 400 block of South Royal Street, two of which were built after the recession of 1819. These were all rented to free blacks. With the support of other Quakers who seemed concerned with the plight of the black population of Alexandria, Miller helped create the first free African American neighborhood, one that was later named Hayti, probably after the island where Toussaint L'Ouverture led his slave rebellion (McCord 1985). Miller was also involved in the emancipation of black slaves; records attest to several manumissions on his part, as well as numerous instances where he was called upon to attest to the free status of African Americans (Provine 1990). [Read more about Hayti](#)

In 1801 Mordecai Miller bought the land on 108 South St. Asaph Street. After purchasing the adjacent southern parcel (110 S St. Asaph) in 1805, he built a house on the combined lots and lived there until 1818 when he moved into a new house on Washington Street.



Fig. 3: Inside view of the barrel, ca. 3.7 ft. below surface (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

In 1978, archaeologists found the remains of a barrel embedded in the soil of the Millers' backyard (Fig.3). The artifacts found within it indicate that it was used as a trash pit. The barrel hoops were placed about one foot apart. The barrel itself was rather shallow, measuring a little under 4 feet. Complete artifact analyses were not completed for this feature, but preliminary observations indicated that this trash pit may have been used as early as Mordecai's occupation of the site.

In 1833, the property on South St. Asaph Street passed to his son, Robert H. Miller. Robert moved in immediately and stayed in the house until 1852 along with his wife Anna and his eleven children.

Like his father, Robert was a very successful business man. In addition to owning a large china store on the corner of King and Fairfax Streets and being a partner in his father's shipping business, he was also president of the First National Bank of Alexandria. His civic activities also followed in his father's footsteps. Robert built another house on the South Royal Street block and continued to make real estate available to the free black community. He eventually began selling those properties and by 1840, all the black homeowners on the 400 block of South Royal Street had bought their homes from him. In the words of one researcher, "under Mordecai, the community of free black renters was established, and under Robert, in 1834, it advanced towards a community of homeowners"(McCord 1985, 25-26).

[Read more about R.H Miller's China Store](#)



Fig. 4: Portrait of Robert H. Miller (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 5: Robert and Anna Miller's 50th Wedding anniversary with family (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

Robert was also very much involved in the public life of Alexandria. He served on the Town Council for several terms and was one of the founders of the Alexandria Water Company of which he eventually became president. At a time when epidemics were all too common, the need for an effective sanitation system was especially important in order to maintain not only a healthy population, but also healthy trading and business conditions (Wheelock 1995).

(Read more about the Miller presence on the 500 Block on pages 24 and 36 of the [Social History](#))

Further evidence of Robert H. Miller's interest in clean water supply was uncovered by archaeologists during the 500 Block excavations ([See Site Map](#)) A cistern equipped with a water filtration system was uncovered on Robert Miller's lot at 108-110 S. St. Asaph Street (designated Feature LL). It was most likely built around 1836 when the house was remodeled and a brick extension was added to the preexisting frame house that occupied the front of the lot.



Fig.6: Top View of the Cistern, AX 1 Ft. LL (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

This brick lined feature was much larger than any other found on site. It measured approximately 8.5 feet in diameter, 6 ½ in depth, and was separated into two unequal sections by a brick wall running north to south (see Fig. 6).

As archaeologists dug deeper, they uncovered two additional brick constructions on either sides of the dividing wall. Both these features formed rectangular compartments against either side of the central wall and were both filled with dirt (see Fig.7).

The “dirt” turned out to be alternating levels of charcoal, sand and/or gravel. These brick compartments had in fact functioned as filtration systems and a hole at the bottom of the central wall connected them to each other.

The water would have poured into the larger eastern side of the feature, down into the first filter, up through the second filter, and into the western section where it would have been collected for use (McLoud 1980). See Figure 8 below.



Fig. 7: View of Ft. LL East with rectangular filtration compartment, AX 1 Ft. LL (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION).

The cistern was located beneath ground, just under the southern wall of the brick house extension. Brick lined cisterns such as this one are not at all documented and research has produced only a few similar examples. Based on these however, it seems probable that the water was directed into the cistern from the roof and through a system of pipes. A water pump located inside the house would then have been used to raise the water from the western side of the cistern (McLoud 1980).

The cistern probably went out of use shortly after the Miller family’s occupation of the site. After the creation of the Alexandria Water Company in 1851, water piping began replacing previous arrangements for those who could afford it.

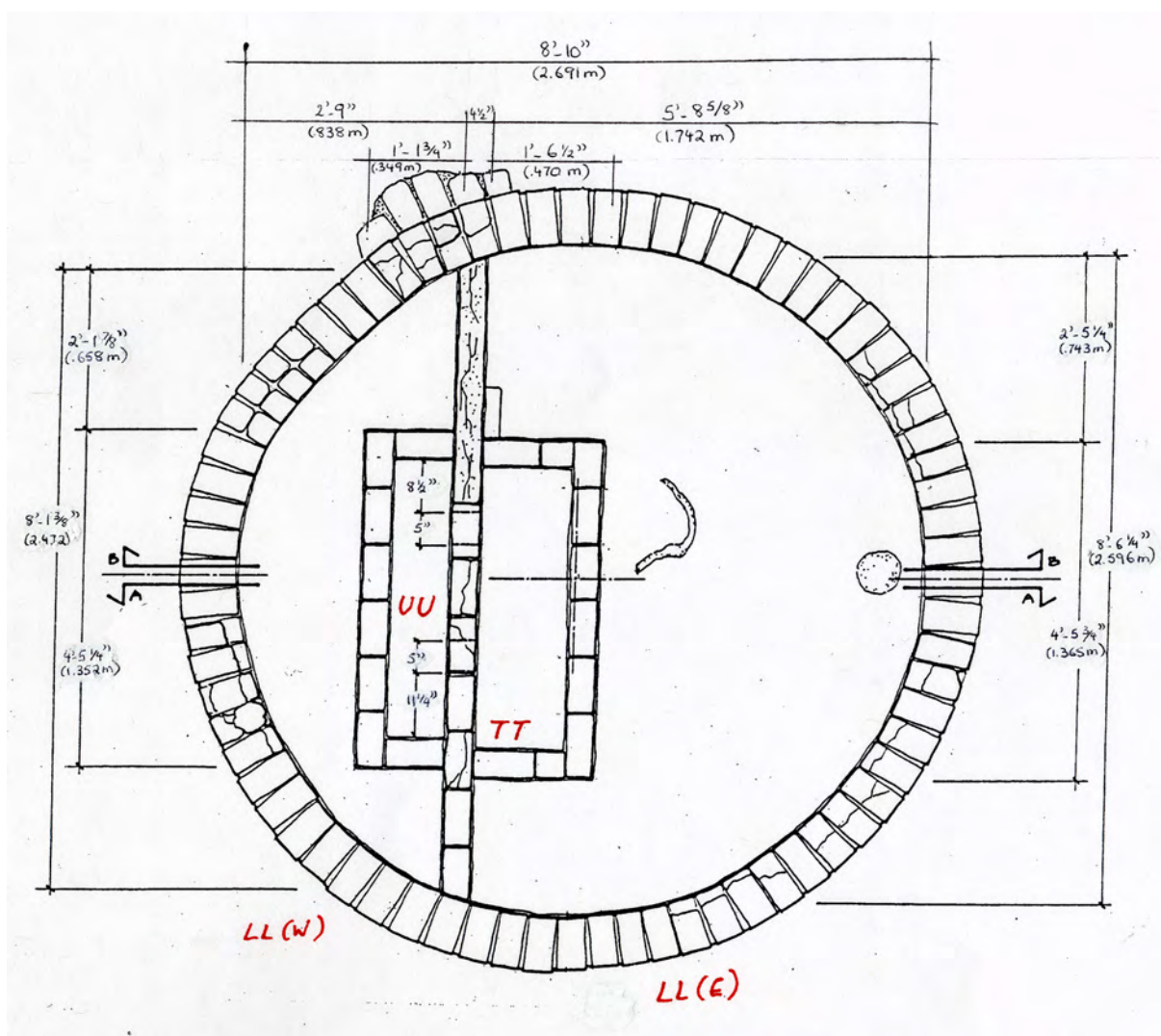


Fig. 8: Plan View of the cistern (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

[Read more about digging up the cistern](#)

References

Unless otherwise indicated, historical information was extracted from the Alexandria Archaeology Files (AAF), mostly compiled by Ruth Sinberg Baker, Vivienne Mitchell, and Nancy Sennewald.

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