Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia

Alexandria Times

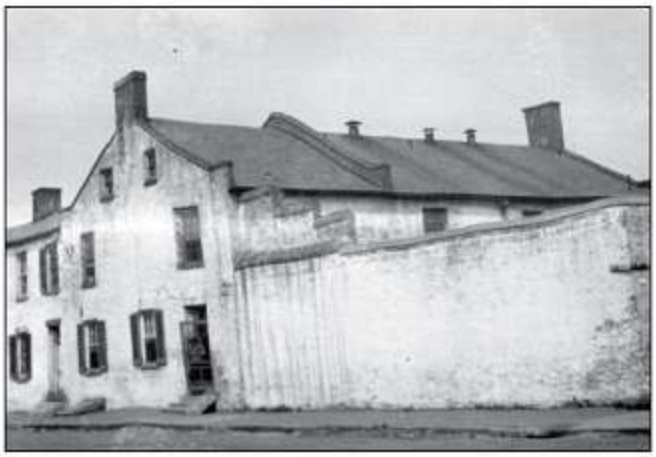
Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

Unfit for murderers

Alexandria Times, August 5, 2010

Image: The Alexandria Jail, N. St. Asaph Street. Photo, Alexandria Library Special Collections.



In Alexandria's early years, the jail was located at Market Square and later near the waterfront at the end of Wolfe Street. In 1823, the conditions at the jail were so bad that a letter to the editor of a local paper described the jail as "not fit for the reception of murderers." In 1826, an act of Congress authorized a new jail for Alexandria, then part of the District of Columbia. It directed that a new site be identified and approved $10,000 in funds for construction.

The new jail was designed under the direction of architect Charles Bulfinch who served as the Commissioner of Public Buildings. The jail was located at the northeast corner of Princess and St. Asaph streets and was completed in 1827. Those housed in the jail included convicted criminals, debtors, slaves and, during the Civil War, Confederate prisoners.

The jail building itself was located along N. St. Asaph Street and a high, whitewashed wall ran south and then east along Princess Street, the corner seen in this photograph. The brick wall, as tall as 20 feet by 1896, met the building to the north, enclosing the jail yard. The jail yard sometimes served as the site of executions for those sentenced to death.

The Alexandria jail was expanded and modernized several times before a new detention facility was built on Mill Road in the late 1980s. After 160 years of service, the old jail site was sold to a developer, along with adjacent property belonging to the City. A new townhome community called Bulfinch Square was constructed on the site, but part of the jail's façade and the wall on the corner still remain.

"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.