



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Old Town's red light district of the past

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Image: 310 North Lee Street. Photo, Library of Congress.

At the turn of the 20th century the 300 block of North Lee Street was home to Alexandria's red light district.

Several residences on the west side of the street, between Queen and Princess streets, were considered houses of ill repute where prostitution, gambling and illegal liquor sales attracted customers and at times, attention from police.

These homes officially operated as boarding houses for women, and insurance maps from the early 1900s show a half dozen female boarding houses in that single block of North Lee. The houses themselves were between two and three-and-a-half stories tall and held as many as 10 boarders. At least one, a structure at 310 North Lee whose doorway is seen in this photograph, dated to the late 18th century. These homes, sometimes called "resorts," were popular with warehouse laborers, railroad workers and sailors, who worked at the nearby waterfront.



One of the most notorious homes belonged to Eva Baker who operated a boarding house for at least 15 years. Both she and her customers were repeatedly arrested, usually for liquor violations but sometimes for violent offenses. She was also charged on several occasions with operating a disorderly house.

Police and city officials tolerated the illegal activity on North Lee until 1914. When the red light district in Washington, D.C., was shut down that year, there was a significant increase in business done in Alexandria's brothels, and problems escalated. The City of Alexandria cracked down on the residents of North Lee, ordering them to vacate the homes in June of 1914.

"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.



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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.