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Out of the Attic

The controversial John L. Lewis and the Lee-Fendall House

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Image: Lee-Fendall House around 1937, from North Washington Street. Photo, Library of Congress

Labor leader John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers of America, moved to Alexandria with his wife Myrta and children Kathryn and John Jr. in 1935. They first leased 212 South Fairfax St., known as the Dr. William Brown house, which was often included on historic home tours.

In 1937, Lewis purchased the historic Lee-Fendall House at 614 Oronoco St., seen in this photograph, taken around the time they moved in. Again, the Lewis's made their home, known for its connection to the Lee family, available for historic house tours, as well as benefits for labor-related causes, even after Myrta died in 1942. John and Kathryn, who served as his secretary, opened their home in January 1957 in honor of the 150th anniversary of Robert E. Lee's birthday. They also hosted benefits, like a tea for the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria where guests brought their own pets and had a pet parade in the gardens.



The labor leader who founded the Congress of Industrial Organizations often attracted attention at his own home. Reporters and photographers would wait outside the Lewis home when covering controversial labor stories, and one photographer was even arrested in 1946 for climbing onto a wall along the Lewis property to photograph a woodpile inside his yard. In 1949, an intruder set a fire inside the home while no one was home, but damage was minimal.

Lewis remained at the Lee-Fendall House until he died in 1969. Many of the furnishings, as well as some of his papers, were auctioned off later that year, and the Virginia Trust for Historic Preservation purchased the house in 1972 for \$185,000.

“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.