



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Colross: Made in Alexandria, remade in New Jersey

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Image: Colross, 1100 block Oronoco Street. Photo, Souvenir Virginia Tercentennial of Historic Alexandria, Virginia, 1907..

In 1799, Alexandria merchant John Potts acquired property along Oronoco Street and within the year began to erect a home. Potts, a prominent citizen who had served as secretary of the Potomac Canal Company, encountered financial difficulties and in 1802, he offered his still uncompleted home for sale. Ads described it as a “large and handsome brick dwelling house, 50 by 40 feet, with a brick stable, smoke house and well of excellent water” with a fenced garden and yard.

In 1803, Jonathan Swift, another Alexandria merchant, acquired the property. Known then as Belle Aire and Grasshopper Hall, the house faced Oronoco Street between Fayette and Henry streets and remained in the Swift family for more than 30 years. Under its next owner, Thomson Mason, the estate would be known as Colross. Mason, a judge and two-term Alexandria mayor, modified the property layout, enclosing some outbuildings into a single structure and replacing wooden fencing with a brick wall.

Colross remained in the Mason family until 1885 when lumber merchant William Smoot acquired it. Smoot was likely responsible for building the two-story brick structure seen to the east of the main house in this 1907 photo. The next owner purchased Colross in 1917 and used the two-acre tract for his business, the Alexandria Hay & Grain Company. A warehouse erected on the northern half of the block along Pendleton Street had loading docks on both sides reaching directly to the rails on Fayette and Henry.

A devastating tornado in 1927 caused significant damage to Colross and it fell into disrepair. A few years later, the structure was purchased, dismantled and rebuilt in Princeton, N.J., where it remains today. An archaeological investigation of the block in 2005 revealed significant features, including foundations of the house, brick walkways and a cistern.



“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.