



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Despite popular design, local octagon home fell on hard times

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Image: Alexandria's Octabog House, with the Virginia Theological Seminary in the distance, ca. 1861. Photo, Courtesy Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

In the mid-19th century, octagon-shaped houses became a fad in the United States, spurred on by phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler, who in 1848 published “A Home for All.” The tome promoted the stylistic and functional benefits of an octagon house. Though Fowler did not invent the octagon house, he believed his designs and recommended construction materials, like gravel walls, made building such homes affordable.

At least one octagon house was known to have been built in Alexandria. In the 1850s, Reverend Charles Hall, the former Secretary of the American Home Mission Society, purchased property off the Leesburg Turnpike, then about a mile beyond town limits. His new octagon house, constructed of clay, gravel and cement, had structural issues. In 1856 part of it “fell in,” according to a local newspaper.

After the deaths of two of his children and the reverend himself, just Mrs. Hall and her daughters remained, but they moved out around the Civil War's start. During the first year of the war, Union officers took over the vacant property and converted it and another nearby home for use as a hospital. In late 1861, nurse Amy Morris Bradley with the Fifth Maine Regiment became the matron of what was called the Seventh Brigade Hospital. This photograph, with the Virginia Theological Seminary visible in the distance, was taken around that time.

Even after its use as a hospital ended, soldiers still frequented the octagon house which was apparently ransacked. One member of the Eleventh Rhode Island Volunteers later wrote that while he was visiting, Mrs. Hall returned to her home but found it “more of a heap of ruins.” In 1866, the octagon house was destroyed by fire in a case of suspected arson.



“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.