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Out of the Attic

Painting the history of a hard-nosed union leader

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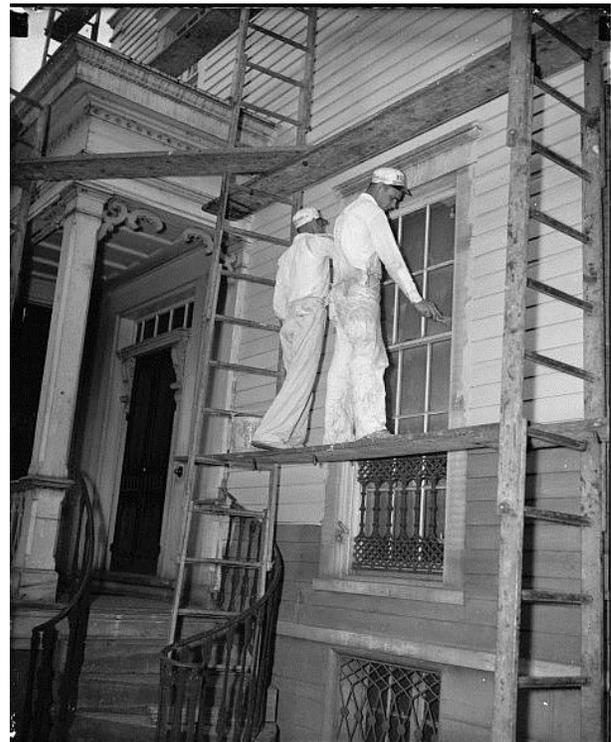
Image: John Lewis. Photo, Library of Congress.

The recent exterior painting of the Lee-Fendall House Museum brings to mind the controversial paint job the building received in July 1937. At that time, the structure had been purchased by the strong-armed labor leader John Llewellyn Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, for use as his family home.

Lewis was born in 1880 in Cleveland, Iowa, a small coal-mining town. After high school in 1897 he entered work at the Big Hill Mine in nearby Lucas, Iowa, and in 1906 was elected as a delegate to the United Mine Workers national convention. With his massive head, stern voice and dense eyebrows, he soon excelled at the strategic organization of union workers.

By 1919 Lewis was back at the UMW as acting president and in a daring act, considering the nation's dependence on coal-fired energy, called the nation's first coal strike in November of that year. After 400,000 coal workers walked off the job, President Woodrow Wilson obtained an injunction against the walkout, which Lewis obeyed. But within a year he was elected permanent president of the UMW and solidified his power over America's largest union.

In 1935 he established the Committee on Industrial Organization, part of the American Federation of Labor, with the goal to unionize workers on an industry-wide basis. But by 1937 tensions were rising between the two organizations, and as a gesture, Lewis employed AFL members to paint his house, as seen in this photo.



“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.