



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The life and lessons of the Alexandria Academy

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Image: The Alexandria Academy, 311 N. Washington St. Photo, Alexandria Library.

At an elaborate ceremony in September 1785, the cornerstone was placed near the center of a lot for the Alexandria academy — “a permanent and respectable school” for the city’s young male learners.

Students attended the school, at the intersection of Wolfe and South Washington streets, for a fee. But a year after construction, the third floor was furnished to provide space for free schooling of indigent city boys.

George Washington was the first school trustee and devoted funding for the free schooling initiative. He sponsored 20 students throughout his lifetime, as well as provided for such continuance in his will.

Unfortunately, the educational Facility struggled financially for several decades before finally closing in the early 1820s. The building was sold to Samuel Marsteller for use as a residence, which continued for more than six decades. In 1884, the Alexandria School Board acquired the lot from owner Joseph Howell and rededicated it for use as a public school. The photograph shows the school about a century ago, after a tin-roofed, wooden fire escape had been added to the west side as an alternate emergency egress. By this time the Washington School, a public school for boys (now The Campagna Center), had been built nearby, but both institutions were still clearly in a largely rural setting, just blocks away from the downtown area.

However, within a decade the scene improved by the introduction of street trees, a 6-foot picket fence around the former academy property and even a post office box on the corner. The Alexandria City Schools continued to use the building for educational purposes until 1952.

In the late 1980s, the Historic Alexandria Foundation advocated the preservation of the historic structure, and a full restoration to the building’s 18th-century appearance has been completed.



“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.