



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### When ‘Carpenter Gothic’ was the rage in Alexandria

*Alexandria Times, October 18, 2012*

*Image: Carpenter Gothic architecture, northwest corner Prince and S. Washington Streets. Photo, Library of Congress.*

**B**efore the George Washington Memorial Parkway extended Washington Street beyond Alexandria in the early 1930s, it was a sleepy, largely residential boulevard lined with beautiful homes from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. While most of these impressive homes were constructed in Federal or Greek Revival styles, there were some notable exceptions. The house pictured — which was owned by merchandise broker William F. Brooks and once stood at the northwest corner of Prince and South Washington streets — featured then popular Gothic Revival architecture.

Built in the 1850s, the residence made a major architectural statement about the prosperity of pre-Civil War Alexandria. The two-and-a-half-story residence was clad in clapboard, rather than brick, thus promoting a truly American adaptation of an unusual style known as “Carpenter Gothic.” The wood siding and trim allowed for painting in a polychromatic color scheme, specifically designed to highlight the extensive architectural detailing.

Other Gothic-style building elements included bracketed gable rooflines and large pediment windows on the upper stories. Two floor-to-ceiling, multisided bay windows fronted on the Prince and Washington streetscapes and were topped by small balconies. As such, occupants could constantly view the action in the growing city below.

The house was integrated into its landscape in the Andrew Jackson Downing tradition with mature plantings and trees. It also was surrounded by a formal picket fence that firmly established the primary entrance on Prince Street. The house would have been at home along New York’s Hudson River Valley, just as it was in a port city along the Potomac.

In the 1920s, Washington Street bore witness to increasing tourist traffic, as well as commercial development. The former Brooks homestead was demolished in 1929 to make way for the Virginia Public Service Co.’s new office building, which still stands at that location. Interestingly, several other fine examples of Carpenter Gothic homes still sit along South Washington Street, notably along its west side.



*“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.*