



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

HoJo's made inroads in Alexandria for a time

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Image: Howard Johnson's, 825 N. Washington St., in 1949. Office of Historic Alexandria.

Located at 825 N. Washington St. — within eyesight of the Hot Shoppes, Becks Iced Custard stand and Little Tavern (which were discussed in this column over the past several weeks) — stood the local branch of the venerable restaurant chain Howard Johnson.

Johnson began his career in 1925 as a drugstore operator in Quincy, Mass. Purchasing a small store with borrowed money, he quickly realized that the profit from his ice cream counter could far surpass that of pharmaceutical products and concentrated his business interests on iced confections. He soon introduced a new ice cream recipe with an increased amount of butterfat and developed the famous “28 flavors” concept that included every flavor he could imagine. Within several years his concession stands had spread along Massachusetts’ beaches. They offered ice cream, soft drinks and hot dogs in top-sliced “New England style” buns.



Johnson built his first sit-down restaurant in Quincy in the late 1920s, but the stock market crash of 1929 put an end to any hopes of expanding without help. He then turned to friends to fund construction of additional restaurants through one of America’s earliest franchise agreements. By the late 1930s, Howard Johnson restaurants were going up across the nation, mostly along major highways and tourist areas. Their menus included delicious chicken potpie and fried clam rolls.

All of the restaurants were built in a contemporized style based on early American architecture. The company’s trademark logo featured “Simple Simon and the Pie Man,” a whimsical image based on the children’s nursery rhyme usually seen on the weathervane and as a bas relief sculpture on a wall near restaurant entrances.

Johnson’s Alexandria restaurant, built in 1941, was a perfect complement to the local preference for Colonial architecture during that period. Even so, Baltimore-based architect A. Murray Myers did make certain concessions to the city, substituting natural slate for the chain’s signature roof of orange enameled tiles. The one-story restaurant featured symmetrical wings, a semi-circular entrance portico and large cupola faced by a clock. The former restaurant still stands as a PNC bank.

“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.