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Out of the Attic

Del Ray's one-time love of cookie-cutter homes

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Image: Emmanuel Temple, 2707 DeWitte Ave. Courtesy, Emmanuel Temple Seventh Day Adventist Church.

The intense development of Del Ray as a streetcar suburb in the early years of the 20th century was aided by the mass production of building materials that could be produced elsewhere and shipped to almost any destination accessible by rail.

Del Ray's rapidly growing population and close proximity to major rail lines made it a natural location for "pattern book" houses — dwellings designed and precut to exact plans and specifications in a far-off factory, then shipped and assembled at a distant site. Potential homebuyers simply selected a plan from a pattern book suiting their architectural taste, space needs and budget.

Then they ordered the home direct from the manufacturer, which often arranged favorable financing.

Initially, pattern buildings were designed as small and portable, allowing buyers to use them for a variety of purposes, such as a workshop or vacation cottage, as well as to erect and dismantle the structures as needs changed. But as their popularity grew, the size and uses of pattern structures came to compete with traditional building construction.

In the decades before zoning and building codes, pattern book houses were generally of high quality and purchasers could rely on the reputation of formidable national retailers — including Sears, Roebuck and Co., Alladin Homes, and Mershon and Morley Co.

At the time, Mershon and Morley of Saginaw, Mich., was among the largest hardware and lumber dealers in the United States. The company's portable home business was just a small division of its overall operations.

Although Del Ray had a number of pattern book homes by 1930, the following year the community would receive its first such church building: a Mershon and Morley Gold Bond Portable Chapel erected at 2707 DeWitt Ave. After construction of the rusticated cement block foundation, the church was built in about one day — to the amazement of neighbors.

Although sold as portable, the now permanent building still serves the faithful at its original location as the Emmanuel Temple Seventh Day Adventist Church.





**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

“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.