



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Innovative school served local black students

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Image: Lancasterian School, 418 S. Washington St., ca. 1880. Courtesy, Historic Alexandria Foundation.

In 1812, the Alexandria City Council budgeted \$2,000 for a new school just south of the Alexandria Academy along South Washington Street to begin proper instruction of the Lancasterian method of teaching.

Also known as “mutual instruction,” the concept grew popular in the early 19th century after British educator Joseph Lancaster developed it. By using older, more knowledgeable students as monitors to assist the teacher in the instruction of younger pupils — as well as encouraging individual merit through recognition and awards — class sizes could be increased and the overall cost of education to the community could decline.

Lancaster espoused a specific architectural design for such schools, including the building shape; placement of windows and doors so as to not encourage looking outside; rate of incline of the floor rising from the teacher’s desk; and even the arrangement of furnishings, which were permanently affixed to the floors to prevent movement.

Alexandria’s Lancasterian School, seen in this photograph taken about 1880, actually started in the old Alexandria Academy, seen in the left background of the image. After moving into a one-story building, the school became a place of learning largely for black children in the area, which was then part of the District of Columbia, under the auspices of Dr. James Hanson, a white minister associated with the Methodist church.

But in 1847, the District gave back its land west of the Potomac River to Virginia, where the education of black children was forbidden. It was not until the Civil War, when Union troops occupied Alexandria for more than four years, that the school was used again for black students.

By that time it was the children of contrabands, a term coined for former slaves who escaped the Deep South and sought protection behind Union lines, who received educational instruction at the facility. The Lancasterian School was finally torn down about 1887 and replaced the following year by the Washington School, now occupied by the Campagna Center.





**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.