



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

'New Woman' captures city's historic buildings

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Image: 708 Wolfe Street. Library of Congress.

Francis Benjamin Johnston rose to prominence as one of the nation's most important female photographers at the turn of the 20th century, counting famous celebrities, national politicians and architecturally significant buildings worthy of preservation among her subjects.

Johnston was born in 1864 to a well-heeled family in West Virginia and grew up in Washington, where she was constantly exposed to her parents' influential friends. One of these, George Eastman, presented a young Johnston with an Eastman Kodak camera. Soon after, she began studying photographic techniques under the tutelage of another family friend, Thomas Smillie, the former director of photography at the Smithsonian Institution.

She later toured Europe, visiting illustrious photographers and gathering important images for Smithsonian collections. Upon her return, she became a representative of Eastman Kodak and worked at the company's Washington offices. Eventually Johnston opened a studio in the nation's capital, ultimately serving as the official photographer to five presidents.

Johnston was an early advocate for women's liberation. In 1897, she famously produced a photographic self-portrait titled the "New Woman," in which she appeared in an aggressive stance, holding a cigarette and stein of beer while shamelessly exposing the stocking-clad calf underneath her petticoat.

In 1913, she moved to New York where she opened another studio, lectured on women in business at New York University and produced a massive portfolio on Manhattan's architecture of the 1920s. She became increasingly concerned about the destruction of historic buildings and returned to Virginia to produce a series on significant homes and buildings in Fredericksburg that were threatened by neglect or demolition.

The response to her work in Fredericksburg proved a positive force for the fledgling preservation movement. In 1933, the Carnegie Corporation of New York gave her a grant to record important buildings in Virginia and eight other southern states. One of her Alexandria subjects — seen in this 1930s photograph — is the small house at 708 Wolfe St.

Titled simply "The Blue Door," the photo is named after the real estate office located in the building at that time (as identified on the sign to the right). Though a high brick wall has replaced the picket fence — and the blue front door is now green — the historic house still stands along Wolfe Street.



"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.



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

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.