



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Return to 'The Blue Door'

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Image: 708 Wolfe Street. Library of Congress.

Last week's *Out of the Attic* referenced the small house at 708 Wolfe St., photographed as "The Blue Door" by renowned photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston in the 1930s. A longtime local historian expressed interest in the story and asked for clarification of certain facts as well as more information on the structure and its original owner, Jonathan Butcher.

The home at 708 Wolfe St. was built about 1800, in a still-rural area of Alexandria. Though on the fringes of town, it was located within the original boundaries of the newly created District of Columbia.

But in contrast to other houses closer to Alexandria's 18th-century center, the Wolfe Street home was built with a deeper setback and gabled facade turned perpendicular to the street. The designer obviously did not anticipate that townhouses would be built immediately adjacent.

Interestingly, the front windows in the three-bay house featured nine-over-six light window sashes in the upper-floor bedrooms and larger eight-over-12 light sashes on the first-floor living areas. A one-story shed addition also was placed on the west side.

Butcher, who occupied the house in 1802, was a hardware merchant in Alexandria at the dawn of the 19th century. Together with business partner John Paton, he oversaw the firm of Paton and Butcher on the northwest corner of King and North Fairfax streets for more than two decades.

Unfortunately, Butcher declared bankruptcy in 1818. Not long after, his business partnership dissolved with Paton's death in January 1819.

Butcher's residency in Alexandria is long associated with Wolfe Street. Before 1802, he lived farther east at 415 Wolfe St., and after moving to 708, he built two other nearby homes at 716 and 718 Wolfe St., apparently on speculation.

Last week's article identified "The Blue Door" as a real estate office in the 1930s, based on the sign at the property.

However, additional research shows that the structure likely housed an antique shop during this period and that the real estate sign may have referenced the sale of the property.



"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.



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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.