



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The real-life Long John Silver

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Image: Swift's Alley. Library of Congress.

One of Alexandria's historic but little-known shortcuts is the passageway known as Swift's Alley — seen here in a photograph taken about the mid-20th century — connecting South Fairfax and Lee streets.

The building in the far distance of the cobblestoned passage, at the centerline of bricks used for drainage and to facilitate wheelbarrows, is the present-day Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Museum. In the early 1800s, Jonathan Swift, a successful merchant and one of the Port City's most prominent residents, owned the land adjacent to this alley.

Elected to city council in 1804, Swift already held the titles to several significant real estate parcels in Alexandria, including a three-story brick warehouse in the 100 block of S. Union St., which he rented to William J. Hall. He also owned four properties along the south side of the 200 block of King St., then occupied by John Potts, a local builder.

Potts was the secretary of the Potomac Co., created by George Washington in 1785 to develop a lateral canal around the Great Falls.

Swift lived in one of the city's most beautiful homes, the rambling Georgian house called "Colross." He acquired it from Potts for the extravagant sum of \$9,000 in 1803. Originally called "Belle Aire," the elegant homestead, begun in 1799, occupied the entirety of the 1100 block of Oronoco St. and took nearly three years to build.

But its construction costs placed an excessive financial burden on Potts, forcing its sale almost as soon as it was completed. Swift died at Colross in 1824 and was buried on the property. More than a century later, after being severely damaged by a tornado, the large dwelling was dismantled, moved and rebuilt brick by brick in Princeton, N.J., where it survives today as the Princeton Country Day School.

According to "The Strange Case of Jonathan Swift and the Real Long John Silver," Swift operated several silver mines in Kentucky during the 1760s and '70s. His personal story is believed to be the basis for Robert Louis Stevenson's famous novel "Treasure Island."

But in a twist — and the point where fact diverges from fiction — historians and treasure hunters are still seeking the locations of Swift's lucrative mines in Kentucky.



"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.