



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The silent sentinel of North Washington Street

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Image: Express Spark Plug Co. of America, early 20th century. National Association of Chiefs of Police

Built in 1847, this huge building — topped by an octagonal cupola — at North Washington and Pendleton streets originally housed the Mount Vernon Cotton Factory, a major industrial operation that provided steady work for nearly 150 women in pre-Civil War Alexandria.

At the height of production in the late 1850s, the factory contained two 30-horsepower steam engines, which operated 124 looms. Each day, the facility churned out about 5,000 yards of cotton sheeting.

When war broke out in May 1861, the Union Army seized the building and alternatively used it as a hospital, warehouse and the city's largest prison, which housed more than 1,400 captured Confederate soldiers.

With the South's economy in ruins after the war, an effort to restart the cotton factory failed, and the building sat vacant for many years. But Robert Portner acquired it in 1902 and converted the facility into a bottling plant to supplement his booming brewery one block north.

Although Portner's business was one of the most successful in the city during the early 20th century, the advent of World War I and then the introduction of Prohibition eventually doomed the brewery. The building was again sold and became home to the Express Spark Plug Co. of America.

The company used the sides of the building to shamelessly promote its name and product, using 6-foot-tall lettering between the various stories of the structure to advise passers-by to "Be Good to Your Motor." This photograph, taken during that period, shows factory workers laboring within the cavernous plant.



The spark plug factory became one of the city's earliest casualties of the Great Depression. For a short period of time, the building was used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, but by 1935, it was converted into apartments to address Alexandria's growing housing shortage. An imposing portico — supported by four Corinthian columns — was added to the front facade.

In 1982, the structure was renovated as office space.

An interesting urban myth surrounds the plaster dummy that has long occupied the windowed cupola. According to local legend, the mannequin dates back to the 1854 murder of the night watchman. In that telling, the police tried to lure the murderer back to the site with the dummy.

Others date it to the Civil War era, placed there as a stand-in for an actual guard when he took breaks and left in the attic when the war ended. Another story holds that the clothed human substitute was left behind by the Department of Agriculture when it vacated the structure.



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

Whatever the truth, the silent sentinel still watches over busy North Washington Street, greatly loved by the throngs of motorists and pedestrians that look to his vantage point each day.

“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.