



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A Place of Learning and a Place of Healing

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Image: 601-603 Queen Street, ca. 1915. Photo, Library of Congress.

Although stylistically different, for many decades the two buildings at 601 and 603 Queen St. had a shared history in Alexandria.

The two-story structure on the right side was built in 1842 by schoolteacher Robert L. Brockett to serve as Alexandria Academy. This was the third Robert Brockett to be associated with this rapidly growing section of Alexandria in the first half of the 19th century.

His grandfather — the first Robert Brockett — who died in 1829, was a Scotsman who settled in the Port City as a real estate investor and acquired several lots in the vicinity of North Washington and Queen streets. In 1808, he built the four wood-frame houses at the northeast corner of that intersection, known as “Brockett’s Row” for residential and business use. The structures still are used for those purposes today.



The second Robert Brockett, father to Robert L. Brockett, was a mason and contractor who, in 1832, transformed an old sugar mill and tobacco warehouse along the 200 block of N. Washington St. into the school irreverently called Brimstone Castle by the students of Benjamin Hallowell. It is believed that it is this Robert Brockett who built the venerable family homestead at 318 N. Washington St. that stood for well over a century until it was demolished in the 1950s. The combination of family-owned real estate and construction expertise undoubtedly assisted Robert L. Brockett with establishing a solid footing for his new school on Queen Street.

By 1853, as Alexandria’s fortunes prospered, Robert L. Brockett’s school grew in popularity and he added a huge addition on the west side to accommodate a Female Boarding Seminary. This was one of the earliest buildings in Alexandria to feature interior gas and water lines as well as a heating system supplied by flues.

But during the Civil War, it was the large size and unusual infrastructure of the three-and-a-half-story section that led military officials to confiscate the building for use as a [hospital](#). Almost overnight the feminine finery and sweet voices of young schoolgirls were replaced by the oozing wounds and agonized cries of severely injured soldiers brought back to Alexandria from the battlefields of Virginia.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Unlike other military hospitals in Alexandria, this one was named for the street on which it was located. This medical facility and similar ones established at the Mansion House Hotel on North Fairfax Street, the Oronoco Street dwelling now called Lee-Fendall House and the old Hallowell school buildings contributed to an overwhelming sense of despair in this area of Union-occupied Alexandria. In fact, the family then occupying the Lloyd family home at 220 N. Washington St. noted the horrendous smells and intermittent screams that continually pierced their walls from these buildings and that triage care was often necessary on the sidewalks that surrounded them.

After the war, the Queen Street complex was badly battered and the city's economy was in ruins. Although rebuilding the Port City took decades, by the turn of the 20th century industry had established a foothold. The old downtown buildings that survived often were converted into offices for industrial businesses. In this photograph of the former Brockett School and Queen Street Hospital, taken in about 1915, the complex was being used by the Allied Asphalt Products Company.

“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.