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Out of the Attic

The Many Transformations of the Alexandria High School

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Image: St. John's Academy, 218 S. Columbus St., ca. 1950. Photo, Library of Congress.

This week's Out of the Attic column traces the story of yet another unusually large Alexandria building once used as an academy.

It is believed that the large, three-story building on the southeast corner of Duke and South Columbus streets was first constructed in 1826 as a small home for Abijah Janney in the city's unusual Flounder style of architecture. By 1842, the small dwelling had increased in size to 10 rooms and was in the hands of Thomas Semmes.

Seven years later, it was further enlarged to five bays, with Greek revival elements such as a bracketed roofline. A large cupola topped it soon after its acquisition by Caleb Hallowell.

Caleb and his brother James were both nephews and teaching associates of the notable Quaker schoolmaster Benjamin Hallowell, who operated a well-regarded school on North Washington Street in the mid-19th century. In 1845, Benjamin departed Alexandria temporarily to help establish the Friends Central School in Philadelphia and left his boarding school in the care of his two nephews.

Upon his return, the brothers left Benjamin Hallowell's service. James went on to establish the Alexandria Female Seminary while Caleb ran the Alexandria High School along South Columbus Street. By 1859, Caleb Hallowell's building had grown several times, eventually boasting 40 rooms. Although the first extension imitated the height, details and fenestration of the earlier school design, the second was simpler and more utilitarian. Despite the surging growth of the city and the subsequent jump in Alexandria's student population in the 1850s, the Hallowells' schools were not destined to last. The outbreak of the Civil War ceased operations at both.

After the war, the large building re-opened as the Magnolia House, an elegant hostelry that advertised its "COMMODIOUS HALL" in capital letters to reinforce the image of an immense interior space, perfect for large social events. In addition to well-appointed rooms, guest amenities included an extensive larder, a vast assortment of spirits and ales, and bathing water heated by gas. The hotel accepted daily travelers and permanent boarders. Rooms "with double bed for two gentlemen" were discounted.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

In 1884, the building reverted back to an educational facility. Brothers William F. Carne and Richard L. Carne established the St. John's Military Academy in the building, one of the few such institutions in the United States at the time. The drilling of youthful cadets on the streets of the Port City, with actual weapons distributed to the school under authorization by the governor of Virginia, became a constant occurrence and well-noted feature of the town.

But the expenses of operating the large Columbus Street building for educational purposes proved overwhelming and the school closed in the 1890s. Soon after, it was again converted into a lodging house and later rental apartments, as seen in this photograph from the mid-1950s.

In the early 1980s, the structure was transformed again, this time to house condominiums. The conversion ensured the building's long-term preservation.

"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.