



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

King Street's Victims of Urban Renewal

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Image: 418 King Street, 1967. Photo, Library of Congress.

A The King Street storefronts depicted in this photograph document just how far commercial real estate in Alexandria's once prime retail area had declined by the mid-1960s.

By that time the area around City Hall, which prospered in the first half of the 20th century, was decimated by the development of nearby suburban shopping centers. These post-war giants offered free parking, larger stores and modern amenities. Although the downtown buildings retained elements of architectural distinction, many had been compromised by decades of "remuddling," a term coined by Old House Journal editor Clem Labine, to describe the inappropriate and often irreversible alteration of historic buildings.

The buildings at 416 and 418 King St., as photographed here about 1967 (418 King St. is in the center and 416 King St. is to the left) were a perfect example. Their blighted condition bolstered the successful argument in the mid-20th century that Alexandria needed a radical [urban renewal](#) project to replace dated and derelict buildings with modern offices, retail shops and vast underground parking facilities. The result was the destruction of dozens of early structures that defined the city's historic core and architectural heritage.

Known locally as "The Kennedy Buildings," 416 and 418 King St. were loosely associated with James Kennedy, a bookseller who came to Alexandria from Ireland at the turn of the 19th century. Kennedy bought the property, then consisting of a tenement and an open lot, on May 11, 1818 for \$6,100. The sellers were the heirs of Jacob Fortney, a local blacksmith who died in 1814 and was followed in death by his wife, Catherine, two years later Fortney acquired the property in 1804 for \$1,820 from Robert Kirk, son of early Alexandria Mayor James Kirk, who purchased it from Robert Alexander. Alexander had owned the property since before Alexandria's founding.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

With his son, James Kennedy operated a book and fine stationary shop at 126 S. Fairfax St. that also sold notions, toothbrushes, telescopes, German flutes and violin strings. He died in Philadelphia in October 1820, and the King Street property, which then contained his dwelling and two stores, was passed on to his wife and daughters.

It is believed that about 1850, his wife, Eliza Kennedy, partnered with Samuel Miller, owner of the adjacent property — seen on the right side of the photo — to demolish the existing structures and replace them with four identical buildings, separated only by a centered firewall.

For a brief period, Eliza Kennedy's real estate investment paid off, but she died only two years after the new buildings were constructed. The property passed to the heirs of her niece, Eliza Barton. During the Civil War, the buildings were subjected to the intense retail uses associated with the war period, when shops were routinely subdivided for multiple tenants.

After the war, as the city's economy struggled, attempts were made to upgrade and modernize the structures. The addition of new windows, a cornice and, ultimately, the replacement of first-floor fenestration with glazed facades further compromised the structures' historic integrity, leading to their destruction in 1968.

“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.