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Out of the Attic

A Long Time Home for Man's Best Friend

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Image: Myra Lee Chevalier and her dog, Hal, are barely visible in this view of the Lee-Fendall House garden. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

In the nearly 230 years since its construction, the Lee-Fendall House at 614 Oronoco St. has been home to over a dozen families, many of whom have had a variety of pets, especially dogs.

The first record of a canine at Lee-Fendall House appears in the personal property tax records of Philip Richard Fendall in 1797, as dogs were taxed in the city at that time. His nephew, a young Robert E. Lee, had a dog while growing up in Alexandria, and legend has it that the future leader of the Army of Northern Virginia and his faithful friend were frequent visitors to his uncle's home in the 1820s.

The next dog known to live at Lee-Fendall House appeared in the 1890s. As seen in the above photograph taken during that period, Myra Lee Chevalier and her favorite pet Hal are visible in the rear garden of the house. Myra lived there from 1880 until 1903 with her sister and brother-in-law, Mary Elizabeth Lee and Robert Fleming, as well as other members of the extended Lee family. Myra was well known in Alexandria for her singing and acting prowess, and it is said she appeared on stage to acclaim locally and in other American cities. When her canine companion passed away in 1898, his death made the pages of the local newspaper.

In 1903, the Flemings sold the house at 614 Oronoco St. to Robert Downham and his family. If the frequency of which their dog Frank appears in Downham family photographs is any indication, the American bulldog was dearly loved.

Labor leader John L. Lewis purchased the house from the Downhams in 1937. Lewis owned an English bulldog named Socrates, but as expenses related to Socrates appear in records from the 1930s through the 1960s, it is likely that more than one dog bore that name over the years. After Lewis' death in 1969, it is believed that a family named Votaw rented the home from 1971 to about 1973. Apparently, in lieu of a kennel, their basset hound Clarence used the cage of an elevator installed by Mr. Lewis.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Today, the [Lee-Fendall House Museum & Garden](#) tells the stories of all its former residents, both two-legged and four-legged, through a variety of tours and programs. The museum recently explored its animal history in a joint program with the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria.

“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.