



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Evolution of Market Square

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Image: Market Square in the 1960s, Library of Congress.

Market Square was established only a few years after Alexandria was founded in 1749, and the Saturday morning market may be the oldest of its kind in the United States.

The site is centrally located on the prime block, where King, North Royal and North Fairfax streets intersect, and immediately adjacent to City Hall. At that time, Cameron and North Fairfax streets were the main avenues in Alexandria, and their intersection was considered the most important in Northern Virginia.

In the early years, Duke and King streets largely accommodated the westbound transportation of agricultural produce from Virginia's vast open lands.

Large wagons filled with grains and hogsheads filled with tobacco leaves were hauled to Alexandria's gridded street network near what is now West Street. Within a short time, those heading from Little River Turnpike to the wharves or marketplace could easily access King Street by using a short diagonal roadway, appropriately named Commerce Street.

Cameron Street, named for Thomas Fairfax, the sixth Lord Fairfax of Cameron, was the location of many of the town's finest residences and was bisected by the taxpayer-funded Christ Church. Its west facing facade not only welcomed travelers to Alexandria, but also forced them to divert around the imposing structure and pay homage to the building's importance.

Originally, Market Square was little more than a scruffy field where housewares, foodstuffs, animals and farm products could be sold to local townspeople or those coming to Alexandria from its rural hinterlands. The area was also used for other purposes, such as the sale of African slaves and the mustering of militias. By the late 18th century, the square started to fill with permanent structures and buildings providing a home for prospering commercial sellers, taverns and warehouses.

At the start of the Civil War, buildings framed the entire block at the front of the square, with the marketplace reduced to an interior courtyard that could only be accessed by two small passageways called Sharpskin Alley and Market Alley. Sharpskin connected the mid-block space between North Royal and North Fairfax streets, while Market linked Sharpskin to King.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Within this confined space, supplemented by stalls at the rear of City Hall, a huge variety of public activities took place and often spilled onto the public sidewalks outside the square. The area was even the site of the Friendship Fire Company before its move to South Alfred Street in 1855.

This view of a flounder-style tavern at Sharpskin and Market alleys was taken in the early 1960s, just before the [demolition of dozens of buildings](#) to create today's open Market Square plaza and fountain.

“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.