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Out of the Attic

An Unlocked Corner of Alexandria's History

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Image: Demaine's Funeral Home, 520 S. Washington Street. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

One of the few commercial corners to have remained largely unchanged for over 60 years is located at the northeast intersection of Gibbon and South Washington streets.

Since 1952, Demaine's Funeral Home has occupied the three-and-a-half story building on the site, originally built 50 years earlier as a new and larger factory for the prospering Paff Shoe Company, previously located in the old Green Steam Furniture building at Prince and South Fairfax streets.

After the shoe factory closed during World War I, the building was acquired by Roberts Memorial Chapel and used as an annex. Long-time Alexandrian Mabel Burts was raised in the surrounding neighborhood by an extended family that included her grandmother — a former slave — and had firsthand knowledge of the building in the 1920s. In a 2002 oral interview, she described the many happy times she shared with friends in the building during her youth.

"Our church owned that building where the Demaine's Funeral Home is now, Roberts Memorial," she recalled. "It was Roberts Chapel then. They bought that building. And they had movies in there. We [would] go over there and used to play games and everything. Because we wasn't allowed to ... go to the theater, the white theater, we had to go clean to Washington if we wanted to see a movie. And they had movies in there for us when we were coming up."

In the late 1940s, with new residents flooding into Alexandria during the post-war period, the building transformed into a colonial reproduction furniture showroom, highlighted with symmetrical, neo-colonial elements on the front facade to recall Alexandria's 18th century architectural roots. The entryway was relocated to the street-level center of the building. The formal double doors were surrounded by pilasters and topped by a pediment. A substantial entablature supported by four tall Tuscan columns ran the length of the building to enhance the Colonial brand and a small one-story addition with multi-paned windows was added to the north side.

The Demaine family's association with the funerary arts goes back to 1789, when one of the town's early cabinetmakers expanded his trade to include the construction of caskets. Ten years later,





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

upon the sudden death of former President George Washington, the tradesman was asked to construct a lead-lined, mahogany casket to specifically fit his large frame. In 1841, the growing firm also was located at Prince and South Fairfax streets and was well established as one of Virginia's oldest business concerns.

By the 20th century, the business had moved to a storefront location at 817 King St. and continued to serve Northern Virginia's most respected families. This photo, taken soon after the firm moved again to 520 S. Washington St., includes Demaine's signature aluminum sign, still in place. The larger location offered residents new funeral innovations such as on-site parking, a florist, a chapel, parlors, a private family room and a smoking lounge, all of which except the latter live on today.

"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.