



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### A Home for Alexandria's Criminals

*Alexandria Times, November 20, 2014*

*Image: Alexandria Jail, from 1919 aerial photograph. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.*

**A**s this detailed view of the intersection of North St. Asaph and Princess streets, lifted from what may be the earliest aerial photograph of Alexandria's downtown that was taken in 1919, shows one of Alexandria's most notorious buildings.

Built in 1826 on what then was the outskirts of town, the Alexandria Jail cost more than \$10,000 to construct, and replaced an earlier prison a decade older that was located in a building at the foot of Wolfe Street. After a quarter century in the new national capital, the number of criminals and debtors in Alexandria that needed to be incarcerated in this section of the District of Columbia was rapidly growing, and the Wolfe Street facility was no longer capable of adequately securing its population.

The new jail was designed by the noted architect Charles Bulfinch, long considered to be America's first native-born professional architect. Bulfinch was born in Boston in 1763 and was a member of the Board of Selectmen there for a number of years, where he was credited for improving the city's infrastructure, public buildings and the design of the famous Boston Common. In 1817, he accompanied President James Madison during a weeklong tour of that city, and a year later Madison appointed him to replace Benjamin Latrobe as Architect of the Capitol in Washington and Commissioner of Public Buildings for the District of Columbia.

Although Bulfinch is perhaps best known for the completion of the United States Capitol in 1829, including the central portion, portico, wings and original low dome, he had extensive experience in the construction of jails and prisons. Fifteen years before his Alexandria commission, due to his own personal debts, he was secured for one month in a jail he had designed in Massachusetts.

During the American Civil War, the whitewashed jailhouse held Confederate Army prisoners who were crammed hundreds deep within its walls. The high brick barrier and outbuildings separated the open exercise yard on the south side from the public sidewalk along Princess Street. The yard on the north side was often used for executions by hanging. Conditions were dire within the jail, and ultimately Union authorities had to install two heating stoves directly adjacent to the jail cells to protect prisoners from freezing conditions. The building was vacated by Union command in May 1865 and it returned to city control.

Over the years, the jail facility was further enlarged and expanded but never truly brought up to modern standards of incarceration. Although residential development gradually filled in the surrounding





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

---

area, the site continued to serve as a criminal holding facility until it was demolished and replaced by townhouses that were built in 1987. Remnants of the St. Asaph Street facade and brick wall still survive and were incorporated into the new development.

*“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.*