



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A Part of the Port City is relocated to New York City

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Image: Detail of Aerial Photograph, 1919.

Another detailed view of what may be the first aerial photograph taken of Alexandria's downtown, captured in 1919, is this close-up of the block surrounded by King, Pitt, Cameron and Royal streets. To the upper left, the dormered building at the corner is the old [Gadsby's Tavern](#), by then renamed the City Hotel, but no longer operated as a hostelry.

Located opposite the massive clock tower of City Hall that was originally designed by Benjamin

Latrobe, the venerable tavern that once hosted multiple American presidents and the grandest public events in early Alexandria was in a serious state of decline and disrepair.

The impressive first-floor rooms were reduced to serving as a second-hand clothing and rag shop, with the marginal wares often spilling out onto jumbled racks along the sidewalk.

Two years earlier, the building's owners had already begun to denigrate the building, as they sold off historic woodwork such as the front entryway and unusual second-floor ballroom features, including the musician's gallery, two mantelpieces, the cornice and door surrounds.

These significant architectural elements were moved to New York where they were installed as "The Alexandria Ballroom" for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's newly established American Wing. This important exhibition of early American arts and architecture by one of the world's greatest museums opened to critical acclaim in 1924 and led to a renewed appreciation of our nation's historical past.

Such prominent recognition of the styles and tastes that helped form the United States initiated a resurgence of public interest in the colonial and federal periods, both in Alexandria and across the country. Soon "Colonial" and "Early American" reproduction furnishings and architectural styles were widely popular across the country. Even the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg by John D. Rockefeller Jr. can be traced to the impact of what is still considered one of the Met's most important permanent exhibitions.

Interestingly, the photograph of this one block also documents the dramatic physical transition of Alexandria from the 18th through the 19th centuries. The image documents that North Royal and Pitt streets still contain their early gable-roofed homes and shops, with small outbuildings and workshops of every type crammed behind them within the interior spaces of the block. By the Civil War, newer and larger flat-roofed commercial buildings had begun to take hold along the prime real estate of King Street,





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

and often extended deep into the block interior. Then in 1912, the Swann Brothers Department Store that was ensconced in an early 19th century building at the lower right corner of King and North Pitt streets expanded into several of these larger buildings to the east, including the former Postal Telegraph Company, and the stores of P.G. Lawler, the Jamieson Studio and S.H. Lynn and Company.

Sadly, except for Gadsby's Tavern, all buildings within this block were demolished in the early 1960s to make way for the Tavern Square [Urban Renewal](#) Project. However, the deep excavations necessary to create the underground parking garage for the project resulted in the discovery of thousands of archaeological artifacts left behind after two centuries of human occupation of the site. Ultimately, the Alexandria Archaeology program was born as a result of the early investigations that resulted from these finds.

"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.