



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A temporary home for a revolutionary hero

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Image: 301 S. St. Asaph Street, ca. 1940. Photo, Library of Congress.

One of the truly great houses of Alexandria is the large residence at 301 S. St. Asaph St., which is best associated with the prolonged visit of Gilbert du Motier, the celebrated Marquis de Lafayette, in the winter of 1824. Despite its meticulous symmetry and carefully executed architectural detail, seen in this view of the house that was taken in about 1940, it was mired in controversy soon after it was built in 1815.

The structure was constructed for the prosperous merchant Thomas Lawrason, the partner of William Fowle, who operated a store under their joint names for fine foods, drinks and housewares. Lawrason had engaged a Union Street carpenter named Charles Norris to install windows in the structure, and apparently suspected that the window frames had been recycled from another building. To counter this suspicion, Norris published a public notice in December 1816 stating that inaccurate “false and malicious reports” about his exorbitant fees, use of secondhand building materials and negligent use of materials furnished by the owner of the house were being spread about the city to try to destroy his reputation and “good name.” His claim appears to have settled the matter, as there was no apparent response. Lawrason died just three years later and the dwelling then passed to his wife.

Despite the somewhat questionable circumstances of its construction, even early in its life the house was recognized as one of the finest in Alexandria. In 1824, Lawrason’s widow granted a request to make the dwelling the temporary residence of the Marquis during his planned visit to the city later that year. In recognition of his service to the United States, Lafayette had been invited by President James Monroe and Congress to celebrate the upcoming 50th anniversary of the founding of the United States of America. Years earlier, as U.S. Minister to France, Monroe had tried to assist Lafayette and his family when they were imprisoned for several years after the tumultuous years following the French Revolution.

Lafayette arrived in New York in August 1824 with his son Georges Washington, named for his close friend and father figure, and his personal secretary Auguste Levasseur. Initially he expected to stay in America for about four months, but due to the lavish welcomes he received in each city during his tour of the states, the trip lasted nearly a year-and-a-half. Here in Alexandria, then a part of Washington, D.C., Lafayette was welcomed through a grand ceremonial archway erected in his honor, while local children lay roses on the streets leading to his temporary home at 301 S. St. Asaph St. Heralding his arrival, a banner over the arched doorway read, “A country can be free if she wills it.”





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Once ensconced in his residence, he was feted at a non-stop series of balls and receptions held throughout the town. Lafayette's popularity was such that a never-ending series of souvenirs was produced to commemorate his visit, prompting Alexandria's notable schoolmaster, Benjamin Hollowell, to pen this whimsical poem just after his own wedding held during the Frenchman's sojourn:

"Each lover of liberty surely must get/Something in honor of Lafayette./There's a Lafayette watch-chain, a Lafayette hat/A Lafayette this and a Lafayette that:/But I wanted something as lasting as life/And took to myself a Lafayette wife."

Although unknown to the Hollowells, the very next day, Lafayette visited the home next door to the newlyweds on Oronoco Street. In passing, he tipped his hat to Benjamin and his new bride Margarete without ever knowing that only a day before, the lady was declared the ultimate Lafayette souvenir.

"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.