



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### The origins of Alexandria's most famous building

*Alexandria Times, May 7, 2015*

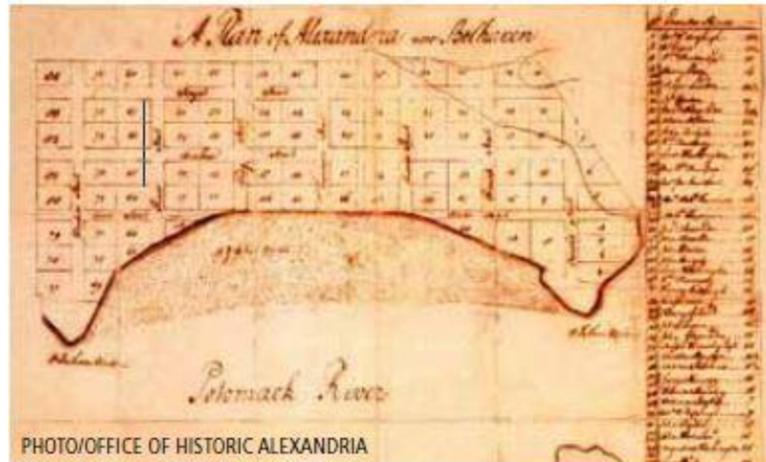
Image: 1749 map of Alexandria. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

In honor of National Preservation Month, we begin a multi-week examination of one of the most iconic buildings in the City of Alexandria: City Hall. Since 1752, the seat of government in Alexandria sat at the same location adjacent to Market Square, and has traced the development of the municipality from a tiny hinterland at the unsettled northern edge of the Virginia colony to one of America's most dynamic and vibrant communities just a stone's throw from the most powerful city on Earth.

This transition over the better part of two and a half centuries has been guided from the same land parcel originally set aside for a government center when the town was laid out in 1749. Yet the strategic importance of the location of City Hall at the center of community, and in close proximity to the river, was crucial to the fast rise of Alexandria's prominence in 18<sup>th</sup> century trade and the growth and expansion of the city as it pursued its future.

Alexandria was first laid out in the spring of 1749, when eleven trustees appointed by the colonial government to oversee the town's development hired a Fairfax County surveyor named John West, Jr. West was charged with laying out an initial tract of land acquired from John and Philip Alexander, named in their honor and possibly after the small town of Alexandria, Scotland. As seen on this 1749 map drawn by 17 year-old surveyor's assistant, George Washington, the plan called for a gridded street network that serviced 84 half-acre lots. Two lots between Royal and Fairfax Streets, just south of Cameron, were reserved for a town hall, courthouse and market place.

In the early years, Cameron Street was planned as the primary east-west-thoroughfare in the new town, but the swampy marshland along the creek known as Ralph's Gut often prevented adequate passage at its intersection with St. Asaph Street. This caused travelers to divert to King Street instead, prompting that roadway to evolve into what became an unofficial Main Street. For decades, development on the north side of the city was hindered by the unstable land conditions and unpleasant smells emanating from the slow-moving creek.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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By 1753, all 84 parcels within the first land allocation had been sold, and the town hall and court house had been built at Cameron and North Fairfax Streets, almost directly opposite the new home of John Carlyle. The first court session was held on May 3, 1752, after the House of Burgesses authorized the move of the Fairfax County Courthouse from Spring Field, near present day Tyson's Corner, to the new government center at Alexandria.

At the same time, the lots comprising the market place were acquired and Market Square became the focus of daily life in the town, providing space for the acquisition of fresh meat, vegetables and gossip for local townspeople. But by the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, soon after its inclusion in the new District of Columbia, Alexandria had outgrown the simple wood-frame building that had served it for six decades and a new government structure was needed to serve the rapidly growing community.

*"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.*