



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

The Port City's first seat of government

Alexandria Times, May 14, 2015

Image: City Hall. Image, Alexandria Library.

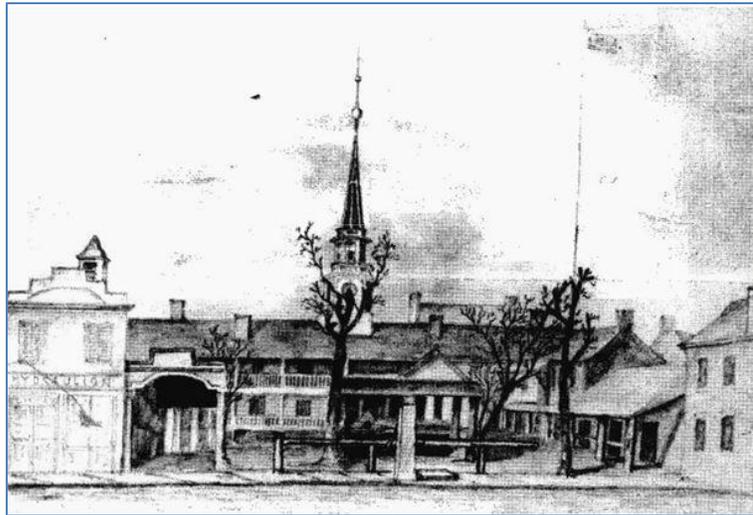
Alexandria's earliest Town Hall and Court House were constructed in 1752 and paid for by a public lottery. The design for the building was directed by several early founders of the town, including William Ramsay, Richard Conway and John Carlyle, whose home was built almost directly across North Fairfax Street. When the Fairfax County Court House was moved to the Town Hall from Spring Field, the area near present day Tysons Corner the same year, Alexandria became the main center of government in Northern Virginia.

A set of magnificent weights and measures, given to Fairfax County by the King of England in 1744, also made the move to the emerging Port City. George Washington was an Alexandria town trustee during the years before the American Revolution and also served as a justice at the Fairfax court.

By the early 19th century, increased physical and economic growth in the local area as well as local political circumstances dictated the replacement of the 65-year-old town hall. In 1809, a causeway was built across Great Hunting Creek to connect Alexandria to Richmond, and the Washington-Alexandria Turnpike was begun, to link the national government buildings under construction in what was to become the downtown of the new national capital. The emergence of Alexandria as a global trading center and its inclusion in the new District of Columbia projected large scale growth within the former Virginia backwater.

In 1817, a large three-story brick town hall was constructed along North Royal Street to replace the Fairfax Street structure opposite the City Hotel, now known as Gadsby's Tavern. The new government structure was dominated by a tall, central clock tower that projected forward of two adjoining wings to the north and south. The clock tower was designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, a British trained neo-classical architect, often referred to as the "Father of American Architecture."

Latrobe, who also helped lay out the turnpike to Alexandria, was hired by Thomas Jefferson in 1803 as surveyor of Public Buildings of the United States. He was later appointed Architect of the Capitol





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

to oversee that building's reconstruction after it was burned during the War of 1812. But in the same year he designed Alexandria's Clock Tower, he resigned his federal posts due to his dislike of many aspects of Pierre L'Enfant's plan for the federal city.

Although he maintained a private architectural practice, within only a few months he was forced into personal bankruptcy. Soon after, he left Washington for New Orleans to accept work on that city's new water works project. He died there in 1820 at age 56 after contracting Yellow Fever in the Louisiana swamplands.

The 1817 Town Hall on Royal Street, seen in this drawing showing the pre-1871 east side of the building within the market area, included not only town offices and court facilities but also stalls for Market Square vendors and a museum and meeting rooms associated with the town's Masonic Lodge.

However, the expected economic prosperity of being part of the nation's capital never materialized in Alexandria, and in 1847 Congress authorized the retrocession of lands formerly acquired from Virginia back to the Commonwealth. The handsome building survived the Civil War largely intact, only to be consumed in a devastating fire on May 19, 1871.

“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.