



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A devastating fire brings sweeping changes

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Image: Alexandria City Hall, before the fire of 1871. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Alexandria's new market house and town hall structure on North Royal Street was a vast improvement over the earlier buildings across the market place at North Fairfax and Cameron streets when it opened in 1817. The structure included space for the Alexandria Library, the clerk of the Circuit Court for the District of Columbia — which at the time included Alexandria — and a room with meeting space for the local Masonic Lodge.

After 1827, a space was designated for town council meetings. The third floor was occupied by the Alexandria Museum, which was developed by local historian Major Mountford. The lodge and museum rooms were the site of a lavish reception to honor the Marquis de Lafayette during his month-long visit to Alexandria in 1824.



The east side of the building, as seen extending across this pre-1871 view facing the market place, was occupied by a two-story porch and the stalls of 23 butchers who plied their cutlery skills within the enclosures before cuts of meat were presented for sale within the nearby square. There were also a number of benches under the shaded portico to provide a cool place of respite for those from the Virginia hinterlands who had traveled to Alexandria to sell their produce and wares. In the background of the drawing can be seen the dormer and roof of Gadsby's Tavern, and in the foreground is the cupola of the Hydralion Fire Company, which contained an active fire bell.

During the mid-19th century, frontage along Cameron Street was still occupied by the original market house building, which was built in 1785. However, by the time the Civil War had ended, it was in deplorable condition. When the roof was repaired in 1869, the local newspaper at the time complained bitterly that the old building was in such poor condition that the only proper remedy was to pull it down completely and rebuild, lest guests at the nearby Mansion House Hotel would need to call for “something” to revive them after looking out their guest room windows.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

In response to the ensuing public outcry about the market building conditions, plans were drawn up by local architect Benjamin Price to renovate and rebuild the market house to fit in with the 1817 town hall and extend eastward along Cameron Street. This project began later that year and was largely complete by 1871, when plans were discussed to add a new courthouse to the complex. This new structure would also include a new police station, public hall and fireproof records room, a necessity lacking in the existing town hall building. But despite the best of intentions, the plans were too late to avert a municipal tragedy.

The fire at the town hall began in the early morning hours of May 19, 1871. A twice hourly check on the structure by Alexandria police officers noted no suspicious activity at midnight, but a check 30 minutes later encountered smoke emanating from the building. A call was put out to the fire company nearby, which responded almost immediately.

But within minutes the smoke intensified and soon the building was engulfed in furious flames licking out from the windows and ascending up the tall clock tower fronting Royal Street. Suddenly, Benjamin Latrobe's magnificent steeple twisted and collapsed, which spread the fire deeper within the structure until the building and nearby structures were a total loss. City fathers, stunned by the event for which no cause was ever clearly determined, acted within days to develop a new building plan for the municipality. For the first time, they decided that public municipal services would be coordinated within a modern, fireproof building.

"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.