



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Rebuilding the devastated City Hall

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Image: City Hall, 1970s. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

The embers of the disastrous City Hall fire of May 19, 1871 were still smoldering as City fathers set to work to replace the structure. Just four days after its destruction, Alexandria City Council was presented with a financial plan to rebuild that included \$10,000 from the insurance settlement and \$40,000 from the sale of 2,000 shares of stock, which was then held by the City's "Sinking Fund" in the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. As part of the plan, rentals from vendor stalls and offices within the new complex would be allocated to the Sinking Fund and re-invested in city bonds to recover its loss on the stock sale.



Just after a month later, the Council approved an architectural plan submitted by Washington architect Adolf Cluss to rebuild the government complex using a site plan that closely followed the evolution of the two earlier buildings on North Fairfax and Royal streets. But Cluss' design moved the main building entrance to the center of Cameron Street, which had originally been planned as the main thoroughfare in downtown Alexandria.

The new City Hall, as seen in this image from the 1970s, was to be U-shaped built in a modified Beaux Arts style, with town offices in the west wing and northwest corner facing Royal Street. Courtrooms and offices were to be located in the northeast corner of the building, with the police and fire stations to be housed in the east wing, along Fairfax Street. On the second floor, in the central portion of the building above Cameron Street, were to be rooms for the local chapter of the Masonic Lodge.

Although since 1871 the building has gone through many remodels and the relocation of certain services to other sites in the city, the close observer will still note evidence of the adoption of Cluss' proposal in the current building. Small signs embedded above doorways in the brick façade of the structure remain to identify their original functions, and above the main doors on Cameron Street, Masonic symbols are subtly detailed within the architectural trim of the second floor.

By October 1871, a contract was awarded to a local builder, Edward H. Delahay, for a price not to exceed \$45,000. Another architect, Benjamin Price, was selected to replicate Benjamin Latrobe's 1817 clock tower and steeple that was severely damaged by the fire. The additional \$8,000 cost resulted in a modified design for the tower that recalled the earlier Latrobe massing and style, but incorporated design



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features and architectural elements that blended in with those created by Cluss in adjacent facades of the building.

In one major departure from Latrobe's design, high above Royal Street at the third floor level a large marble panel enclosed by a brick frame was installed on the front of the tower base. The panel, clearly visible from the upper stories of Gadsby's Tavern across the street, describes the tragic fire and the determined effort efforts to build the new edifice.

"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.