



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

City Hall, but not as we know it

Alexandria Times, June 25, 2015

Image: City Hall, 1907. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

This rare view of the Alexandria's City Hall, taken from the city's promotional souvenir brochure developed in honor of Virginia's tricentennial in 1907, includes the front and rear facades of the 1817 City Hall in each corner juxtaposed with the 1872 rebuilt City hall after the tragic fire of a year earlier. While the two buildings are somewhat similar in height and scale, purists will note that public claims of reproducing Benjamin Latrobe's beloved 1817 Clock Tower in the replacement structure are somewhat misleading.

A close examination of the earlier photos in the corners shows that the earlier tower was comprised of four parts—the lower tower section was a simple square wooden base, resting upon the center crest of the hip-roof. Above the tower was the belfry with four ornate clock faces affixed to a modified octagonal frame, basically a square shape, but with each corner sliced on the diagonal. Above the belfry was a tall octagonal section called a lantern where historically candlelit lanterns could be placed to provide a sense of presence and security, and which could also be utilized to provide ventilation for the structure. Finally, the lantern was topped a tall spire, with a gold orb and weathervane at its apex.

Although Adolph Cluss designed the new City Hall, he was apparently only partially responsible for restoration of the Latrobe clock tower. It appears that a design prepared by local builder and contractor B.F. Price was approved for the wooden steeple portion of the tower by City Council on June 12, 1872, but that the brick tower base, from the street to the third floor, was designed by Cluss.

Thus, the Cluss design for the base of the steeple moved the tower from within the mid-point of the structure to a new location forward of the flanking facades, and in line with the two three-story wings to the north and south.

The brick tower also was ornamented with the same Victorian flourishes and architectural details Cluss used on other facades of the building to unify it with the surrounding Second Empire architectural style. Even the ornate clock faces in the wooden belfry were detailed well beyond Latrobe's more refined Georgian design, with a projecting cornice, formal balustrades and a highly-visible chromatic scheme.

However, above the new brick tower and wood belfry, the octagonal lantern and spire closely resembled Latrobe's work and can be considered a clear reproduction. The similarity is so striking that it may even be possible that some salvaged elements from the fire were reviewed or even reused by B.F. Price in his final construction.

Other interesting features captured in this image include the cobblestone paved streets, with their





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

granite curbing and bluestone crosswalks, and the massive eight-armed telephone poles that brought modern communication to Alexandria for the first time. Of particular interest is the horse drawn cart, parked to the left, advertising groceries and liquors. What is most peculiar is the wall that appears to project out on the diagonal, towards the center of Royal Street and Cameron Streets from the lower left-hand edge of the image.

“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.