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Out of the Attic

A gem of a house on Prince Street

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Image: 517 Prince Street. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

One of the most interesting examples of architectural survival in densely populated Alexandria is the humble dwelling at 517 Prince Street, one of the earliest homes in the city and possibly the least altered 18th century home in Northern Virginia, which is still used today as a residence. At the time of its construction in 1775, the one and a half story dwelling was in the rural wilds of western Prince Street, outside the original 1749 town limits that ended between Pitt and Royal Streets. When the town was extended further westward in 1763, the new limit ended at the eastern border of the lot, which remained in Fairfax County. The property was finally annexed within the Alexandria limits in the 1790s.



The house was built by Patrick Murray (also indicated as Murry) in 1775, soon after he had acquired one of three half-acre lots owned by John Alexandria, Jr. in the block bordered by King, Prince, St. Asaph and Pitt Streets. The remaining lot in the block, directly east of Murray's, was acquired by George Washington in 1763 for investment purposes. Washington built a small tenant house on that property, which also remains standing today. Folklore has it that as the city continued to grow westward, and Prince Street was graded and paved, the original front center entry porch had to be removed due to its intrusion on the sidewalk, and the brick foundation rose high above grade when the street was leveled.

By the mid 1780's, Murray, a local blacksmith, had secured enough funding to construct an addition to his home and his own livery stable to the rear of the house along St. Asaph Street, but his success was short-lived. Within seven years he had over extended himself financially, and in 1792 he his property to the executors of the estate of Samuel English, to whom he was indebted. For a time the executors rented the dwelling before it was finally sold in 1794 to Elisha Cullen Dick, the physician to Washington who attended to him at his death.

Although a well-respected doctor in Alexandria, Dick's skills as a heavy real estate speculator in early Alexandria were not as noteworthy. He sold the Prince Street property within two years and moved to 408 Duke Street, and in 1801 he himself went bankrupt, losing his own home and being forced to relocate again to a rental at 211 Prince Street.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

After Dick, the property was purchased by King Street merchants John Thomas Ricketts and William Newton. By 1801, Ricketts had moved to a three story dwelling on the northeast corner of King and Columbus streets, and the Prince Street house was used by his business partner. By 1810, the structure was rented to Charles Chapman, a business clerk, and later by William Brown whose son, John Douglas Brown, purchased it outright in 1816, adding an addition to the rear. The house and stable were insured by Brown with the Mutual Assistance Society in 1823.

Although the stable property was later sold off, the dwelling remained in the possession of Brown's descendants for the next 184 years, and the family made very few changes to the structure. Historic building fabric and finishes remain largely intact on both the exterior and interior. In 1936, the structure was recorded for its historic and architectural significance by the U.S. Department of the Interior for the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Despite the relatively small rooms within, the house has been recognized by local historians as a "fascination microcosm of the complete single-family dwelling, containing in addition to the usual living, dining and bedrooms a kitchen, a necessary, rooms for slaves or servants and storage rooms, all under one roof." In 2014, the current owner was honored to receive the Alexandria Archaeological Commission's Ben Brenman Award for his careful stewardship and preservation of the property.

"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.