



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A hotel important in peace and war

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Image: Office of Historic Alexandria.

This interesting, turn-of-the-century view of the rear facades of two of Alexandria's most significant historical landmarks traces the ups and downs of Alexandria's economy from the mid-18th through the nineteenth centuries. The structure to the left is the old home of Scottish immigrant and town founder John Carlyle and his wife Sarah "Sally" Fairfax.

The home was an early love of George Washington and the notable beauty of one of Virginia's finest families. The wealthy couple moved into the newly-completed dwelling on August 1, 1753 and that very night their first son was born, causing John to boast "it's a fine beginning" in a letter to his brother.

For decades, the stone dwelling, built on two of Alexandria's most expensive lots just a stone's throw from the market place and City Hall, stood out prominently from its North Fairfax Street neighbors, set back far from the street front with a large hipped roof and impressive stone quoins. It was here in 1755 that British General Edward Braddock, Commander of His Majesty's Forces in North America, called together the governors of five American colonies for what Carlyle called "the Grandest Congress" to discuss military and funding strategy for the French and Indian War.

By the 1840s, the grandness of Carlyle House had seen better days, and the aging structure was ripe for redevelopment at Northern Virginia's most important intersection of Fairfax and Cameron streets. In about 1847, Prince Street furniture manufacturer James Green purchased the site and adjacent Bank of Alexandria building for a luxury hotel, commonly called Green's Mansion House, seen on the right side of the image.

Green preserved the old Carlyle mansion and built the new hotel across its expansive front lawn, leaving the historic house well hidden behind the immense four story structure. Only the rear facade could still be seen clearly from the Cameron Street side. The Mansion House Hotel opened in 1848 and was soon recognized as one of the finest hostelries on the East Coast.

During the Civil War, the huge hotel was confiscated by Union authorities and transformed into the Mansion House Hospital, until 1864 the largest medical facility in Alexandria. An upcoming PBS television series, "Mercy Street," will highlight a fictionalized version of this hospital's history, starting in January. Among the more interesting amenities of the hotel-turned-hospital was a dumb waiter in the building. Originally used to vertically transport food delicacies and starched linens between hotel floors, it was easily converted for use to transport wounded, stretcher-bound soldiers between floors as well.

After the war ended, Alexandria struggled for years to regain its economic strength and ultimately an attempt was made to renovate the hospital back into a luxury hotel with the new name of Braddock





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

House, to re-brand the hotel with its early historical associations. Under the ownership of George Brown, in 1883 a full rehabilitation and refurnishing occurred, and the hotel billed itself as the “Largest and only First-Class Hotel in the City.” Rooms were rented either by the night at \$2 or by the week for up to \$8, and were advertised to travelers passing through Alexandria or on short-term business in Washington, D.C.

Interestingly, an advertisement for the hotel during this period includes a description of the magnificent view of the city of Washington as seen from the hotel, and a brief history of the “old Colonial Stone House” that was even then toured by thousands of visitors annually. Although the Braddock House remained in business through the early years of the 20th century, the broken windows and ill-kept landscaping at the rear of the buildings suggest that even by 1900 when this image was taken, Alexandria’s economic fortunes had not improved.

“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.