



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The firehouse steeple brought down by weather

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Image: Detail of "Birds Eye View of Alexandria, Va." Charles Magnus, 1863. Library of Congress.

This detail from Charles Magnus' 1863 print, "Birds Eye View of Alexandria, Va.," documents the area generally between St. Asaph and Fayette streets from Duke to King streets, with Prince Street running vertically and crossing South Alfred Street in the dead center. To the right side in the 100 block of S. Alfred St. can be seen the Friendship Firehouse building, rebuilt in 1855 after a devastating fire had burned the previous building of the volunteer fire company to the ground, allowing only minutes for the firefighting equipment contained within to be removed.



When staff from the Office of Historic Alexandria carefully reviewed the Magnus print several years ago, it was initially suspected that the New York lithographer had erred in depicting the firehouse topped by the tall steeple as seen in this view, as the building is actually fitted with a much lower cupola and crowned by the famous weathervane of a fireman.

Throughout the print, other minor errors can be detected, but these usually related to the building color choice, which represented building materials, or very minor details such as chimney shape or fenestration.

Also, while Magnus was careful to base his bird's eye views on a map of the city depicted, he at times took liberties to present a view as he wished it to be, not as it actually was. As an example, in his "Bird's Eye View of Washington, D.C." he presented the Washington Monument, only half built at the time the print was created, as a completed architectural tribute to the nation's first president. As such, Magnus finished the monument as originally designed by architect Robert Mills, with a circular colonnade at its base topped by a low pyramidal crown, a far cry from what was eventually built as the decades wore on without funding for the obelisk.

After noting the major architectural element added at Friendship Firehouse, OHA staff continued their search for an explanation. One was found in the records of the firehouse logbook from 1871, which described a major construction program at the building only 16 years after it was built. Apparently the building had, as Magnus recorded, been built with a steeple as tall as the building itself.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

But Alexandria's windy winter storms often wracked and twisted the steeple, breaking the rooftop seal and allowing water to routinely enter the building. In desperation for a solution, it was decided to remove the handsome spire altogether and replace it with a much lower cupola.

Ironically, OHA faced the very same issues with the newer cupola and in 2010, a major project to reinforce and strengthen that element of the building was undertaken. Subsequent to reviewing the logbooks, at least two photographs taken by Andrew Russell during the Civil War also document the original firehouse steeple, but it appears only in the background.

To the right side of Prince Street along South Washington Street can clearly be seen The Lyceum, by this time converted from a center of learning and private subscription library into a military hospital, and the Downtown Baptist Church with its tall steeple offset from the church building. To the left of The Lyceum is the home where Minnie Howard would live decades later, before it was demolished for the expansion of the Alexandria Hospital that once stood on Duke Street.

"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.