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Out of the Attic

A tavern and bath house ahead of its time

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Image: Gadsby's Tavern with the former building on the northwest corner of Cameron and North Royal streets, 1860s. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

In the 1760s, the property at the northwest corner of Cameron and North Royal streets operated as a tavern. The establishment was one of several that formed a tavern district in the young town of Alexandria and catered to locals and travelers alike.

Taverns at the time functioned as full-service hotels, places where people could get a meal and drink and socialize, but also rent a bed for a night, stable their horse and receive other services. The building remained standing for over a century.

Toward the end of its life it appeared (outlined in red) in the background of a photograph taken in front of Gadsby's Tavern during the Civil War, and in 1863 it was described by a longtime resident as a "long, old and very ugly wooden house."

In 1811, a tavern keeper named Frederick Shuck leased the property. Shuck also established a public bathhouse on the property to operate in conjunction with his ordinary. Shuck's bathing concept may have been a bit before its time. Bathhouses came into vogue in American cities in the late 19th century as a result of new understandings about hygiene and public health.

This was not Shuck's first foray into running a bathhouse in Alexandria. Several years earlier he operated the Rural Felicity Tavern, which may have been near the bridge over the Great Hunting Creek that had opened in 1809, where customers could pay a fee for a bath. Two years after opening his baths on North Royal Street, Shuck put them up for sale in 1813, offering a facility "in complete order for the approaching season. The House will be sold with or without the utensils for Bathing," he advertised in the local newspaper. Shuck quickly found a willing buyer in Thomas Shields, a friend and associate looking to change his career path.

Born in 1785, Shields was a barber and hairdresser by trade, having apprenticed under the tutelage of Peter Vallet from the age of 15 in 1801. In 1807, a year after completing his apprenticeship, Shields had a shop of his own on Royal Street near Prince Street where he offered "hair cutting, dressing and hair manufactory" for both gentlemen and ladies. In 1813 Shields obtained a tavern keeper's license



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Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

and subsequently advertised in the local newspaper that he had “taken the bathhouse formerly kept by Mr. F. Shuck...which are now open and will be kept in the most complete order.”

In this new enterprise, Shields offered bathing for men and women (“two separate baths are kept exclusively for Ladies...”) with separate entrances for each. In his newspaper ads, Shields stressed the healthful effects of warm baths, which could cure “the most violent pains of the Rheumatism, weakness in the limbs, etc., etc.” Apparently the public bathing facilities were a seasonal affair, offered to customers between May/June and October of each year.

Each year between 1813 and 1818, Shields announced the opening of the baths in the early summer via newspaper advertisements. In 1814, he petitioned the Common Council for permission to use a public water pump on Cameron Street for his bathhouse “until he can sink a well.” Evidently he was receiving complaints for using public water for his private business.

Given the economic climate of the time, and the instability caused in Alexandria by the War of 1812, Shields appears to have struggled to keep his bathhouse and tavern afloat. In April 1819, Shields opened “a new shaving office” on Prince Street, apparently having abandoned his tavern and bathhouse enterprise. Two months later, Shields sold his interest in the tavern/bathhouse to Margaret Garner, a woman who may have been serving as the ladies’ bathhouse attendant for Shields.

In June 1820, Shields declared bankruptcy. He fell back to barbering throughout the 1820s, sometimes in shops in Alexandria, at other times in Washington, D.C., but he continued to concoct creative business ventures, at one point opening a soda fountain next door to his barber shop where he was “happy to deal out this delightful beverage to all who will please to honor him with a call.”

Garner assumed Thomas Shields’s lease with six years remaining. In newspapers her business was referenced as “Garner’s Tavern” or “the Theatre Tavern.” In 1825, her lease expired and the property owner, Sarah Porter, promptly sold the lot to Thomas Irwin for a mere \$50. The property stayed in the Irwin family until 1849, when Thomas McCormick acquired it. Michael Harlow later bought the property in 1868, and by 1870 he tore down the tavern and erected a new building in which he operated a grocery store for many years.

“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.