Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

What's in a street name?

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Image: Jonathan Shipley. Print by John Raphael Smith,1777, after portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Original mezzotint at National Portrait Gallery, London.

Alexandria's original plan for a gridded street system included great foresight that the small, mid-18th century town on the Potomac would someday grow into a great city, perhaps rivaling Baltimore as a major seaport on the Atlantic coastline.

When development of the town began in 1749, streets were laid out at 66 feet in width, coursing around rectangular blocks to provide efficient transport both from north to south and east to west without reference to geological landmarks or water courses.

This road system was replicated decades later in New York City when the Commissioner's Plan of 1811 dictated that the largely rural portion of Manhattan Island above Houston Street would also be set on a grid with hills leveled, valleys filled in and creeks and streams encased in culverts well below street level. Unlike Alexandria though, wider roadways running north and south would be called "Avenues" with numbers starting on the East Side and increasing as they moved westward, while narrower east-west cross-streets would be simply called "Streets" and numbered from south to north.

In Alexandria, the town fathers were incredibly loyal to the English crown and paid homage to the royal image and monarchy whenever possible. In the early street names of the town, only Water Street along the river and Oronoco Street near the tobacco warehouses strayed from the established order to promote royal ties. In 1763, other streets were named for English noblemen, such as Pitt Street for Sir William Pitt, and later in the 1770s Gibbon Street, named for Edward Gibbon, considered one of the first modern historians for his six volume treatise, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire."

Yet within a quarter-century of Alexandria's founding, the winds of revolution had started to blow and as the town expanded and new streets were added with names often associated with those supporting the independence of the American Colonies. One of these new streets, just west of Royal Street, was named St. Asaph Street in honor of Jonathan Shipley, pictured here, the Anglican Bishop of St. Asaph.

A close friend of Benjamin Franklin, Shipley was very concerned with the politics and policies of King George III toward the American colonies. He spoke out against the British Parliament's intended retaliation against the Boston Tea Party and taxation on the colonists.

Other streets associated with American patriots included Patrick and Henry Street, named for Patrick Henry; Fayette Street, named for the Marquis de la Fayette; and Franklin Street named for the illustrious inventor and diplomat. Washington Street, the town's only 100-footwide north to south roadway, was named for President George Washington, who had laid out the early plat for the town and served it

directly for many years. However, it is interesting to note that unlike other American cities, Alexandria did not cast aside its street name ties to the British monarchy even after independence.

"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.