



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

City growth brings a need for city education

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Image: Mount Vernon School, 1907. Photos, Alexandria Library, Special Collections.

Soon after the early commuter developments of Del Ray and St. Elmo received their first residents towards the end of the 19th century, calls were made to improve the educational facilities for local schoolchildren.

In 1900, a new elementary school was built along Mount Vernon Avenue in what was then Alexandria County and appropriately named the Mount Vernon School. The new center of learning was built in the classical style of colonial Virginia civic architecture; a symmetrical, five-bay, two story brick structure with limestone quoins at each corner. Architectural details at the roofline featured a dentil cornice with built-in, lead-lined gutters, and squared leaders placed on the north and south facades immediately adjacent to the quoins to minimize their visual impact.



An ornamental entryway made of brick pilasters and entablature surrounded the double entrance doors which were topped by a half-round fanlight and keystones. A near vertical flagpole rose from the sill of the second floor window, easing the daily chore of raising and lowering the American flag for staff and schoolchildren alike. Finally, a large cupola was placed at the center ridge of the slate hip-roof to provide ventilation that rose through the building to the attic.

In its first years of operation, the small school was staffed by two teachers using only the first floor as classroom space, while the second floor was left open for community and town meetings. But the community grew quickly and within a very short period of time, overcrowding became a primary concern. By the time this photograph was taken in 1907, plans were already underway to enlarge the school by adding to the rear, and by the addition of a columned portico to the front facade. When the town of Potomac was incorporated in March 1908, these changes were quickly implemented and were just the first of a long series of alterations which would continue over the ensuing decades. By 1910, a principal and four teachers were employed at the enlarged school.

As Alexandria County had no high school, parents of Potomac schoolchildren going onto high school were required to pay tuition at nearby public high schools beyond the town's borders. By 1915, parents lobbied town officials to educate their children through the public treasury at high schools within the adjacent city of Alexandria. Two years later, the local school board purchased the old Richard Lloyd



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House and converted that structure into a high school for 30 students. Within seven years that facility also reached capacity, and the town finally built a new high school named after George Mason directly across Mount Ida Avenue from the elementary school. With 14 classrooms and state-of-the-art educational facilities, it was expected that the new high school would serve the community for generations. As it turned out, the new high school would cease to exist within a decade.

“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.