



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A Civil War landmark destroyed by fire

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Image: Marshall House Hotel. Photos, Library of Congress.

Alexandria's promotion of its historic sites as an indicator of economic activity is widely recognized to have begun in the 1920s with the purchase of Gadsby's Tavern for preservation by the local American Legion post.

But even decades earlier, visits to historic sites was common in the city. The elegant Mansion House Hotel, built directly in front of the 1752 home of town founder John Carlyle, advertised tours of the

"Old Colonial Home" hidden behind the huge hotel without references to Carlyle, British Gen. Edward Braddock or the colonial governors who met in the house to devise plans for the French and Indian War.

At the start of the Civil War, after the deaths of Union Col. Elmer Ellsworth and hotelier James Jackson at the Marshall House on King and South Pitt streets, that site immediately attracted visitors interested in the martyrdom of the first men from the North and South to be killed by violence in the conflict. In fact, throughout the city's occupation by Union troops, no sooner did many soldiers arrive in Alexandria that they requested directions to the hostelry to view the site of the deaths on the third-floor staircase landing.

Over time, the oil cloth on the landing started to disappear as bits and pieces were torn off as souvenirs, then the floor itself started to be pried up. Eventually stair newels, woodwork and even letters from the hotel's sign were fair game for tourists who were intent on obtaining a personal piece of history related to the incident.

Built in 1799, the Marshall House was originally a lodging called Washington Tavern, and changed its name in the mid-1820s. When James Jackson arrived in Alexandria with his young family to serve as the manager just months before hostilities began, he was an ardent secessionist, and raised a massive Southern flag atop the hotel.

In April 1861, he borrowed a ceremonial cannon from neighbor, John Rudd, which was often used in town celebrations. He placed the cannon in the rear yard aimed directly through the main hallway to the front doors, and boasted that anyone who tried to remove the flag would do so over his dead body.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

A month later on May 24, Jackson's boast was sealed. Ellsworth's early entry that morning into the building to take the flag was met instead with a shotgun blast to the chest and the immediate killing of Jackson by Union Cpl. Francis Brownell.

After the war ended, the Marshall House served as a location for a series of marginal businesses but still attracted tourists from both the North and South. But at midnight on February 25, 1873, tragedy struck and the building was largely destroyed by fire. The rear portion of the building, which housed a barber shop and printing establishment, was totally consumed by flames, as was the third floor and roof of the main building fronting King Street. Water damage and freezing ice further damaged the first and second floors so that only the outer brick walls were left intact. Strong winds and burning embers set homes on fire blocks away, but fortunately these were quickly extinguished by their owners.

The fire was deemed arson, and a man named Robert Manley who had been seen in the area was arrested by police. The structure was soon rebuilt using the original walls and maintaining the original window fenestration, but substantially altered with a flat roof, Victorian-style gingerbread trim and cast irons decorative elements, similar to those used at the Methodist Church on South Washington Street. A comparison of the two photos seen here, taken before and after the fire, can confirm that they are actually one and the same building. The Marshall House was finally torn down in about 1950.

"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.