



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandria's first foray into preservation

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Image: *The Ramsay House, ca. 1940. Office of Historic Alexandria.*

The recent successful effort by the City of Alexandria to acquire the historic Murray-Dick-Fawcett House at 517 Prince St. mirrors another preservation success story accomplished 61 years earlier, when the Alexandria City Council took unprecedented action to save the earliest home in the city from demolition.

In the 1940s, Alexandria's tourism economy, which began in the mid-1920s, was still in its embryonic stage, reeling from the impact of the Great Depression and, subsequently, World War II, which precluded reinvestment in large swaths of what is now Old Town. Despite this reality, and the desperate condition of many of Alexandria's 18th century buildings, hope ran high in the fledgling preservation movement that promoted projects to restore Alexandria in a manner similar to Colonial Williamsburg, the nation's first large-scale historical restoration project initiated by John D. Rockefeller in the 1920s.



Residents were startled on April 17, 1944, when a local newspaper announced the imminent demolition of the home of town founder William Ramsay, the modified gambrel-roof structure located at the northeast at the corner of King and North Fairfax streets. Unlike the pristine Murray-Dick-Fawcett House, already recognized by national historians as one of Virginia's most authentic period homes, the nearly two-century-old Ramsay House building was by then well down-on-its-heels, having suffered years of neglect, inappropriate alteration and use, as seen in this photo taken about 1940.

This situation was further capped off by a devastating fire in 1942, which essentially gutted the building's interior and further threatened its existence. Even the city's fire chief was not prepared to condemn the building just yet, instead boarding it up and expressing hope that the building might be restored as a museum at some point in the future.

Within days of the newspaper article, "frantic citizen efforts" as described by the media, quickly built pressure to save the building. Nationally-recognized architectural historians, community organizations and even private individuals, such as Ramsay's great-great granddaughter Rebecca Ramsay Reese, pledged funds and manpower to the preservation effort. City officials were immediately engaged and amazingly, within two weeks of the published announcement, the council had negotiated



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

and consummated a sale with site's owner to purchase the property for \$9,500, with the thought that a permanent center to promote Alexandria tourism could be established in the early building.

But the lightning-speed acquisition by the city government was not matched by the high expectations envisioned by council for an imminent private-public partnership. The building languished for many months while a restoration proposal was slowly developed. Frustrated by the snail's pace of the process, the city finally issued an ultimatum for the project, which prompted a renewed discussion on the fate of the building and the role of preservation stakeholders in Alexandria. (*To be continued...*)

"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.