



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Preservation in Alexandria gets off to a slow start (part 2)

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Drawing of the Ramsay House, City of Alexandria.

By May 2, 1944, only two weeks after the pending demolition of the historic William Ramsay homestead was announced, the Alexandria City Council had successfully negotiated, and acquired for restoration as a potential tourist center, the site at North Fairfax and King Streets, thereby ending the immediate threat to the building.

But even then, after years of neglect and a major fire in 1942, the vacant building's preservation strategy was marginal, and the expectation of an immediate public-private partnership somewhat premature. Before city acquisition, public outrage and determination to save the building was immensely strong, but after the immediate crisis passed the sense of urgency declined.

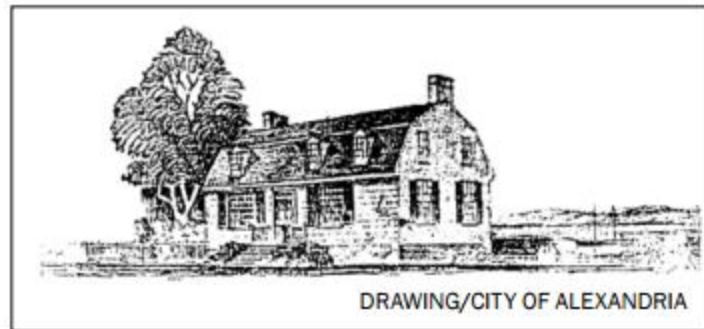
Two weeks after title passed to the city government, an organization called the Ramsay House Restoration Association was loosely formed and published a brochure, illustrated with the drawing seen here, of what the "restored" Ramsay House would look like. It was projected that the restoration sum of \$20,000 would be quickly raised by a contribution from all Alexandria residents within two weeks, and then work would begin.

When the expected contributions fell far short of the stated goal, city leaders became concerned at the prospect that unwilling taxpayers would be obliged to further fund the project. So the local authorities urged the association to incorporate itself as a non-profit corporation, and further set up its own committee of appointed officials to monitor the group's progress.

After several months of delay the proposal submitted for incorporation, supported by the city committee, was a bit vague on the actual plan for the Ramsay House. It instead espoused the larger vision to create a formal, citywide historical society which would act as an advocate for all aspects of history and historical landmarks in the city.

Still, months passed without basic stabilization and the decrepit house continued to deteriorate. Finally, by the end of 1945, a lease was generated between the city and the restoration group to begin the project, and Alexandria native Milton Grigg, an architect who had worked on the restoration of buildings at the John D. Rockefeller-funded project at Colonial Williamsburg, was selected to guide the endeavor.

By mid-1946, no actual construction work had yet begun on the structure, and city authorities finally lost patience. Almost two years to the day after city council moved to acquire the Ramsay property





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

for preservation, a further vote authorized that the small building be instead repaired by the city, and used as an annex for offices at city hall, specifically for the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.

Preservationists were livid, vehemently criticizing the city for not allowing enough time for proper fund-raising and the acquisition of historically accurate building materials needed to complete the project. While city councilors expected some opposition to their vote, they were overwhelmed by the public reaction. Within two weeks they reversed their action and extended the restoration time period for an additional two and a half years.

But even by 1949, the revised restoration goal of \$25,000 for Ramsay House was far from reached and progress was stagnant. Even the local newspaper lamented, "Alexandria, unlike Williamsburg, has no Rockefeller Foundation to restore it to its Colonial grandeur. Time and nature being what they are, the city may soon have no Ramsay House either." A project that had once had such hope six years earlier now appeared destined to fail.

The reality expressed by the newspaper editorial produced much reflection in Alexandria, and the aspirations for the future of the city. The outcome would ultimately set the stage for how Alexandria would develop in the post-war period. *(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.