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Out of the Attic

Ramsay House finally becomes city's visitor center (part 3 of 3)

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Image: Ramsay House Visitor Center. Courtesy, Visit Alexandria.

After years of missed deadlines and false starts, by 1950 the restoration of the Ramsay House at King and North Fairfax Streets was finally deemed impossible by architect Milton L. Grigg. The disastrous fire of 1942, coupled with years of weather infiltration, repeated vandalism and even Grigg's own destructive investigation of the structure had all but obliterated the original building fabric of the 18th century dwelling, requiring even the foundation to be replaced.

But with a small treasury of \$9,000 collected after eight years of fundraising by a collaborative partnership between the Alexandria Historical Society and the Alexandria Association, the city's fledgling Board of Architectural Review for the Old and Historic Alexandria District finally approved Grigg's design drawings for the building's reconstruction by December 1950.

One serious matter of concern was the location of the main entryway of the building, which Grigg insisted was originally accessed from a courtyard on the east side of the structure. While BAR members were skeptical, they deferred to Grigg's expertise as a restoration architect at Colonial Williamsburg.

In January 1951, demolition and reconstruction activities began, and within months the exterior of the reconstructed building was complete. Still, the interior remained vacant while city leaders and preservationists continued to debate the final uses of the building, envisioned almost a decade earlier as a tourist center.

One of the negative aspects of that use, made abundantly clear over the years of fundraising, was the deteriorating condition of Alexandria's downtown area then marked by an exodus of commercial enterprises to outlying suburbs. Many residents felt that an investment to preserve the Ramsay House was far too questionable to support tourism.

Even as reconstruction was underway, there were still calls to raze the building for parking and the expansion of city offices. Proposals were put forth suggesting the structure be used instead for a new police headquarters, a ceremonial office for the Alexandria mayor, or divided up between local community organizations, with each room interior funded separately.

Then in 1953, the state and federal governments announced a new expressway was to be built along the Fairfax Street right-of-way to connect with a planned Jones Point bridge to Maryland, requiring the demolition of the newly reconstructed structure. City leaders were shocked and, once again, years passed while that issue was sorted out. Though the exterior was quite presentable as a historical landmark at the time, the building sat vacant and unused.

Ultimately the road project was abandoned and in 1956 the city ponied up the remaining funds needed to complete the interior. Once complete, the structure served a variety of competing uses until





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

1973, when it was finally designated as Alexandria's official Visitor Center, nearly 30 years after that idea was first floated as the reason for city acquisition. While the Ramsay House may well be the first historic preservation project directly supported by city government, historians still debate the architectural integrity of the reconstruction design, materials used and yes, even Milton Grigg's claim that the doorway was on the eastern side of the building.

Clearly, the building as reconstructed more accurately represented those buildings restored at Colonial Williamsburg than anything ever built in the Port City. But the decades-long public conversation about preserving the Ramsay House served as a major policy turning point in Alexandria.

Ultimately a policy emerged that was something in between the industrialization and unbridled expansion in the post-war years and the pure preservation effort in Colonial Williamsburg. Alexandria's "middle way" emphasized preservation and tourism over industrialization. But at the same time, moderate revitalization was favored over total historic restoration. Within a decade, Alexandria would further pursue this new concept by embracing urban renewal.

"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.