



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Athenaeum has a long and varied history

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Image: Federal officers gathering in front of the Bank of the Old Dominion, 1864. Photo by Matthew Brady. (Library of Congress)

In April 1851, a year that free banking was starting to take hold in Virginia, legislation was passed by the General Assembly to “incorporate the Bank of the Old Dominion at Alexandria.” By December, construction on the bank had begun. A few months later, the *Alexandria Gazette* wrote that “the interior of the Bank of the Old Dominion, which is now nearly finished and ready for use, will present a very handsome appearance, corresponding to its exterior architecture.”

They were right. Known today as the Athenaeum, situated on the northwest corner of Prince and Lee streets, the building still stands out as a handsome piece of Greek-revival architecture. In the years between 1852 and the present the building has had many functions, always serving as a central point of Alexandria history.

For 10 years, the Bank of the Old Dominion operated successfully. On May 24, 1861, the lives of Alexandrians were dramatically transformed — and so was the bank. After the Union occupation of Alexandria, the Federal Army commandeered the building for its own use.

Thanks to the efforts of its courageous cashier, William Henry Lambert, the Bank of the Old Dominion was the only Virginia state bank to repay its stockholders and investors at the end of the war. Shortly before Union troops occupied the building, he loaded all of the assets from the bank’s safe into a wagon and transported them to a hidden spot. The Old Dominion Bank closed about a year later, on April 10, 1862. However, at the end of the war the bank was able to pay off all of its obligations to depositors out of the hidden cache.

For a short time after the First Battle of Bull Run/ Manassas, the Old Dominion Bank was used as a triage hospital for wounded soldiers. Unfit to be a hospital, the building at 201 Prince St. was subsequently turned into the Chief Commissary Office of the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps. It operated as the headquarters of the U.S. Commissary General of Subsistence in Alexandria and was led by Captain A. E. Clarke, who received and issued stores in bulk. It was the ideal building for a commissary office, as it had teller windows and a safe.

The photo shown above was taken by famed photographer Matthew Brady in 1864. It depicts federal officers gathering in front of the Bank of the Old Dominion and includes a view of the cobblestone-





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

paved Prince Street. The building was a logistical center for the Union army in Alexandria and was frequented by officers working in the city.

After the Union Army vacated the building, Citizens National, a growing national bank, established occupancy. Lambert's work to preserve depositors' assets was remembered by many, and he was made the first cashier of Citizens National Bank. The building was transformed into a storehouse for the Stabler and Leadbeater apothecary in 1907. It changed hands again when it was bought by the Free Methodist Church of Northern Virginia in 1925.

Before the foundation of the Athenaeum was laid, the people of Alexandria knew that it would be one of the most prominent buildings in the city. An article published in the Alexandria Gazette on April 9, 1851, informed readers that the Bank of the Old Dominion "will be an ornament to the town, and convenient to our citizens."

For the last 53 years, the Athenaeum has been the home of the Northern Virginia Fine Arts Association. The NVFAA sponsors several art exhibits each year from regional artists. In addition to supporting local artists, the building hosts high quality music and dance performances, most recently the U.S. Air Force Band String Orchestra. The Athenaeum is not government sponsored, instead deriving its income from membership and attendance at its various events.

"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.