



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Yates Gardens dates to Yeates the gardener

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Image: The Yates Gardens townhouse development in 1941. Library of Congress.

One of the earliest planned developments in 20th century Alexandria was the Yates Gardens complex, started south of Franklin Street in 1940, largely in the vicinity centered around South Pitt and South Royal Streets. The area is named after the family that owned the horticultural lands and tree nursery created in the area in the early 19th century.

Later, the property was also used periodically as a sort of community pleasure grounds, where outdoor picnics and celebrations could be held away from the built-up downtown area in a more rustic setting with specimen plantings, open fields and scenic views of the river.

The land was first developed as a market garden by Peter Billy in the early 19th century, and then leased to William Yeates, a Quaker, in 1813. A skilled gardener and pump maker, Yeates intended to develop a major horticultural business in the newly designated national capital, of which Alexandria was then a part.

As years passed, he purchased surrounding lands and added a personal residence to the site on the south side of Franklin Street that was assessed at \$4,000 in 1826. Yeates was one of the first nurserymen to recognize the need for ornamental plantings and fruit trees in the growing city, and although he died that same year, his son and namesake immediately assumed his role, advertising trees that bore pears and “apples of all sorts” just months after his father’s death.

Despite the primary business strategy of the Yeates family, Alexandria’s growth during its inclusion in the District of Columbia was stagnated due to the restriction of Federal buildings to the eastern side of the Potomac. Ultimately D.C.’s County of Alexandria was retroceded back to the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1847 after Congress approved the plan a year earlier.

Two years later, William Jr. died and operation of the nursery site passed to John Wilson, who introduced public use of the site for outdoor events. During the Civil War, the site of “Yeates Gardens” and the original residence was included on an 1862 map of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, still located in a largely unbuilt area in the southeast quadrant of the city.

But within two years, most of the area just to the north would be filled in by “Hayti” and “The Hill” neighborhoods, where African American Contrabands settled in tents and hastily-built dwellings after their





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

desperate escape from the deep South, seeking protection by federal troops in union-held Alexandria. When the war ended, the entire area languished for decades as the city entered a decades-long economic slump.

With the start of World War I, Alexandria's economic fortunes improved and the city began to attract scores of new workers for the Federal government, transitioning into a bedroom community for Washington well before the Second World War. But as global circumstances grew dark by 1940, the need for local housing for military and government personnel skyrocketed.

This increased demand for housing coincided with the ongoing restoration of Virginia's colonial capital at Williamsburg, begun in late 1927 by John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his wife, the noted art patron Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. That massive preservation initiative, the most comprehensive living history museum project yet sponsored in the United States, inspired an intense interest in America's 18th century landscape, architecture and decorative arts heritage across the country.

Alexandria was part of the burgeoning restoration movement. During the pre-and postwar period, a time when the nation's third regulated historic district — the Old and Historic Alexandria District — was designated, new civic buildings were constructed per traditional Virginia architectural styles, and even utilitarian new development incorporated historical design elements.

The new Yates Gardens townhouse development, as seen in this 1941 promotional photograph taken for developer Edward Carr, capitalized on the architectural legacy of early Alexandria, but also incorporated landscaped setbacks for street front garden areas, rarely seen in the city street grid before that time. In addition to traditional townhomes, updated with the latest conveniences of the time, the development incorporated quaint neighborhood amenities including hand-lettered wooden street signs, vintage lampposts, decorative fencing and rustic stone walls.

Echoing this theme of early Americana, the young families that quickly moved in filled their homes with modest reproduction furnishings and accessories that reflected the colonial period.

Over the next few weeks, this column will further explore the impact of Yates Gardens design on city planning principles and design in the Port City.

"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.