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Out of the Attic

Interior influences at Yates Gardens

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Image: The living room in one of the Yates Garden townhouses showcases the era's colonial revivalism inspirations. Photo, Theodore Horydczak, 1941. Library of Congress.

Architecture and decorative arts in the early 20th century followed changing circumstances and tastes that were quite extreme. For many decades before World War I, American styles largely mirrored Victorian and, later, Edwardian designs, so-named for the British monarchs whose reign coincided with the various styles. Queen Victoria, who took the throne at age 18 in 1837, married her cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, in 1840, and their head-over-heels romance initiated a distinct change from the rigid symmetry of the Regency period as the British Empire expanded across the globe and was influenced by exotic Indian and Middle Eastern elements. Sadly, the prince's untimely death in 1861 caused the light-filled design fashion to shift in England and her current and former colonies, as the queen entered a period of mourning and seclusion that would last until her death in 1901.



This period, coinciding with the American Civil War across the Atlantic, significantly changed architecture and furnishings from a time when playful, romantic, even exuberant styles were replaced by sedate, overbearing and stoic designs whose distinctive features were evolved not just by the technological changes in building materials and tools, but also from the strict moral codes of the queen herself. Even interior fabric choices changed from light damasks and chintzes to heavy, dark velvets and satins. In this country, architects that followed the English fashion developed numerous variations on a wide variety of Victorian residential design principles, but by WWI, many Americans had grown weary of the formality, rigidity and overriding sense of gloom that presided over many American homes and were eager for a change. Once the Great War ended, the explosion of social freedoms and economic progress during the Roaring Twenties and emergence of Art Deco design was largely restricted to more elite urban areas, while the rest of the nation thirsted for a new design ethic.

In November 1924, that thirst began to be satisfied with the announcement that John D. and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller would personally fund the restoration of Virginia's colonial capital at Williamsburg. What had begun as an anniversary restoration of that city's early Bruton Parish Church by its pastor, the Rev. W.A.R. Goodwin, blossomed into the country's largest living history museum and restoration project when the good reverend convinced the wealthy New York art patrons, and heirs to the Standard Oil fortune, to underwrite the costs necessary to return Williamsburg to its former 18th-century grandeur.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Almost immediately, an interest in America's colonial past was stimulated and both residential and commercial architectural design shifted to revive this important period of American history.

Interest grew quickly in Virginia and then nationwide as the bicentennial of George Washington's birth was commemorated in 1932. In Alexandria, which by the late 1920s had started to develop its own tourism industry and envisioned itself as Northern Virginia's answer to Williamsburg, old Victorian design trappings were thrown off, and newly constructed buildings sprouted corniced pediments, stately colonnades and roof-top cupolas signaling the return to Virginia's historical roots.

This trend continued throughout the 1930s and was perhaps best expressed in the Yates Gardens residential complex south of Franklin Street. Then isolated in the quiet, southeast quadrant of Alexandria, Edward Carr's pre-World War II project encouraged prospective families to think of themselves as the contemporary descendants of the city's illustrious colonial residents, a right-of-passage squarely achieved simply by the purchase of one of the "authentic" townhouses that he had just constructed.

Although Carr's development was modestly priced for the time, ranging between \$6000 and \$7,000 (averaging a \$38 per month mortgage payment) to attract young government bureaucrats, his sales models were furnished in large part by costly 18th-century antiques provided by local dealer Helen McLaughlin, with additional period décor provided by decorator Joan Haley.

This photo, taken by Theodore Horydczak in 1941, demonstrates the design ethic achieved by juxtaposing modern, comfortable upholstered pieces with a traditional wing chair and highlighting the features of hearth and fireplace, the centerpiece of every colonial home. A patterned rug and simple floral drapery panels framed by a wooden cornice set the tone, and small curios from the historical period further define the mood. Even the lamp to the left echoed the early oil lamps of the olden days, adapted by a fringed shade for modern electricity.

For early Yates Gardens purchasers, the illusion was complete.

"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.