



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

A Christmas evolution

Alexandria Times, December 21, 2017

Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

On Dec. 19, 1860, John H. Parrott ran an advertisement in local Alexandria papers titled: 'GOODS FOR HOLIDAY AND NEW YEAR'S PRESENTS AND OTHER PURPOSES.'

Parrott claimed, "I am prepared to offer the largest Stock of Goods, I have ever exhibited in Alexandria and at very moderate prices, for cash, or to punctual dealers on the usual terms."

Some of the items he offered included: "Rosewood, morocco and mahogany writing desks, Ladies' Rosewood Work Boxes, Gents' Dressing Cases and Traveling Bags, Wire and Silk Velvet Porte Monies and Buckskin." And while Parrott also advertised "a great variety of Juvenile and other Books, Bibles, Prayer Books, Hymn Books, Gift Books and Annual" it's interesting to note that the majority of the items that he lists in his Christmas ad focus on gifts for adults.

This contrasts with the advertisement taken out twenty years earlier by John Francis, who wrote, "He indulges and hopes that his young friends will pay him a visit during this season of festivity, bringing with them their Christmas pennies." Francis highlighted his "bountiful supply of Cakes, Candies, Confectionary and Nuts together with a beautiful assortment of Toys of all kinds." Francis noted his long tradition of illuminating his establishment including "A statue of Queen Victoria, as she was arrayed in her bridal robes" on Dec. 21, 1840.

While only two examples, the two ads reflect an evolution in the way in which Americans in general, and Alexandrians in particular, viewed Christmas. Prior to the 1820s, Christmas was viewed as a raucous holiday, in which drinking was the main focus. Its reputation as a holiday of vice led Puritans in the North American colonies to ban its celebration in the 17th century, and the American concept of gift-giving was brought to these shores by Dutch, rather than English, settlers.

It wasn't until the writings of Washington Irving in the early 1810s that American concepts of Christmas focused on the holiday as a time to be spent with family, specifically children. In fact, the current image of Santa Claus as a jolly gift-giver to children wasn't developed by Thomas Nast until the Civil War, after the second of these advertisements was posted.

Christmas in the Antebellum period also had divergent images between North and South. It was still viewed with suspicion in New England, where Thanksgiving was a more significant holiday, whereas in the South the first three states adopted Christmas as a holiday in the 1830s.

The differing target audiences of the Francis and Parrott advertisements seem to reflect the conflicting and evolving sentiments of Alexandrians towards what was still developing into the major holiday it is today.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

“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.