



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Thomas Jefferson's 1801 Inauguration

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Image: March 16, 1801 article, Alexandria Times. Office of Historic Alexandria.

Unlike current times, inaugurations two hundred years ago took place in March, not January. The first inauguration in the nation's new capital of Washington was Thomas Jefferson's in 1801.

The 1800 election had been bitterly contentious, with Jefferson defeating John Adams easily, but ending up tied in electoral votes with Aaron Burr, and not winning the Presidency until after it went to the House of Representatives. Seeking to strike a conciliatory tone, Jefferson's address included the remark, "We are all Republicans ... we are all Federalists."

This tone was probably particularly welcome in Alexandria, which was heavily Federalist. Life, even political life, moved more slowly in 1801 than it does today, and so Jefferson's major local inaugural celebration took place ten days after the official ceremony on March 14, 1801, at Gadsby's Tavern here in Alexandria.

According to the March 16, 1801 article in the *Alexandria Times*, pictured above, notable guests besides Jefferson included Vice President Burr, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn and Attorney General Levi Lincoln. Sixteen toasts were given after dinner, including the new president's "Prosperity to the town of Alexandria," and the vice president's "To the memory of our departed chief, George Washington."

One Alexandria Federalist who wanted to make sure Jefferson's conciliatory tone was more than just words was Collector of Customs Charles Simms. A Revolutionary War veteran, Simms had been appointed to his lucrative post by Adams in 1799. Not only that, he had twice accused Jefferson in print of betraying his trust, once when Jefferson was governor of Virginia, and once when he was secretary of state.

Fortunately for Simms, James Madison was a friend of his from their time in the Virginia General Assembly and as delegates from Virginia to the Constitutional Convention. According to local lore, Simms arrived at Gadsby's after dinner, as Jefferson and company were sipping wine. Madison vacated his seat for his old friend so that he could speak to Jefferson directly.

Simms claimed that his wit in conversation saved his position with Jefferson, and the two successive Republican presidents until his death in 1819. Simms used his renewed influence in Alexandria to win election as mayor. By the time Simms and Jefferson fell out over Alexandria's surrender to the British in 1814, Jefferson was out of office.





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 staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.