



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Sprucing up The Lyceum

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Image: Ballou's Lyceum, Office of Historic Alexandria.

The Lyceum, Alexandria's History Museum, is having some work done. Repair, painting and plaster work will revive the building's exterior this year, and internal work including a new lecture hall kitchen and new chairs added last year will continue with the addition of a new projector, sound system, curtains and a fresh coat of wall paint. This is not the first time The Lyceum has undergone cosmetic work or renovations.

The Lyceum Company, which promoted education in Alexandria, partnered with the Alexandria Library to build The Lyceum, known then as Lyceum Hall, in 1839. The Lyceum Company sponsored lectures and debates in Lyceum Hall, and they also rented the space for concerts, traveling lecturers, meetings, scientific demonstrations and fundraisers. During the Civil War, it served as a hospital, quarters for troops and a meeting space. After the war, it was a private residence, office building, the Commonwealth's first Bicentennial Center and now serves as Alexandria's History Museum.

In ads for the first lecture on Dec. 10, 1839, *The Alexandria Gazette* noted "The Lyceum Hall will, of course, be ready for the occasion – though, we understand, the finishing ... has not yet been given to it." Indeed, work continued through much of 1840, with the *Gazette* noting that the building was "handsomely stuccoed" in August and the iron railing around the building was nearly complete in mid-September.

After nearly two decades of use, Lyceum Hall underwent major renovations in 1858 – "The speaker's platform is greatly enlarged, surmounted by an elliptical arch, handsomely recessed, and furnished on either side with neatly fitting retiring rooms. The seats for the audience, have been cut down and made more comfortable ... and are now tastefully arranged as in an amphitheater.... The former unsightly bulkhead over the doors has ... been converted into a handsome gallery extending the length of the room and capable of accommodating a large number of persons. The acoustic qualities of the Hall too, which were always quite good, have, we learn, been greatly improved by the changes made."

Lyceum Hall reopened in October with Professor Donald Macleod providing readings and recitations. A column in *The Gazette* noted that, "The new Hall was universally pronounced a complete





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success – the seats are comfortable and admirably arranged – the stage handsomely frescoed, carpeted, and fitted out – and the whole well lighted and ventilated.” Sadly, vandals damaged the building and grounds in 1860, necessitating repairs.

After the Civil War, when Lyceum Hall became a home, major renovations took place. Doors and stairs were moved and the lecture hall was divided into bedrooms. It was further converted into offices in the 20th century before the city saved the building and it became the Bicentennial Center and now the city’s museum. The Lyceum has undergone improvements since, most recently in 2014 when a new, more historically accurate, roof was installed incorporating wooden shingles. The current upgrades aim to enhance the building’s historic appearance and improve the amenities and charm of the Lyceum’s lecture hall.

“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.