



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The female stranger and her hold on Alexandria

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Image: The female stranger's tomb, located in St. Paul's cemetery.

On Oct. 14, 1816, the legend began that has entranced Alexandrians for more than 200 years. This local lore has inspired books, ghost tours, TV shows and even the preservation of Gadsby's Tavern Museum. The tale of the female stranger has many twists, turns and theories.

While there are many versions of the story, the basic story is as follows. In 1816, a gentleman and his sick female travelling companion arrived at the city hotel, now known as Gadsby's Tavern Museum. Here, at least one doctor and nurse attended to her; however, they were curiously sworn to secrecy regarding the identity of the sick woman.

On that fateful October day, she died, leaving the gentleman heartbroken. He ordered a very fine, expensive table top grave, then promptly left town without paying his bills. Today, people can still visit this grave in St. Paul's Cemetery, where she is listed as "The Female Stranger."

The mystery of this woman's identity has consumed generations, and multiple versions of the story have attempted to explain the mystery. Some believe the lady was Aaron Burr's daughter Theodosia, who was lost at sea in 1812. To explain the four-year gap, some stories suggest she was kidnapped by pirates, held captive on a deserted island, and then appeared in Alexandria four years later after escaping.

Another version suggests the couple was fleeing an accidental murder as she escaped the clutches of an elderly guardian. There is even a story involving two sets of orphans, a love triangle and a kidnapping.

In recent decades, guests to the tavern have reported experiencing the female stranger in the building. One man claims he saw a woman in period clothes near the ballroom, but when he followed her down the hallway she vanished. As he walked in the bed chamber nearby, he discovered an empty room but a candle that was still hot to the touch.

During preservation debates in the 1920s, Alexandria residents argued Gadsby's Tavern should be saved and protected due to its association with three people: George Washington, Lafayette and the female stranger. While we may never know the identity of the anonymous woman, it is clear she has and will continue to capture the imaginations of locals and visitors alike.





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.