



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Moving pictures in Alexandria: The early years

Alexandria Times, November 15, 2018

Image: The Reed Theatre, from the Souvenir Virginia Tercentennial 1607-1907 of Historic Alexandria, Virginia, by Andrew J. Wedderburn (Alexandria, 1907).

Thomas Edison unveiled his version of the movie projector in New York City in 1896, but Alexandria had to wait until 1904 for its first “Nickelodeon.”

Located in a side entrance on the 600 block of King Street, the first movie theater in Alexandria sat where a Gap Outlet now sells clothing. Back then, it was a former shoe store. The location was always supposed to be temporary, and its operators brought in folding chairs before each performance.

Producers brought their films directly to the theater, and the projectionists ran the films until they were worn thin. As the name implies, admission to see the new invention cost a nickel.

Alexandria’s first permanent movie theater was the Richmond, which started operation in 1911 on the 800 block of King Street. Like most of its contemporaries, the Richmond featured an organ to accompany the action on the screen. The Richmond predated the first movie theater in Washington, D.C., which didn’t open its doors until 1913.

In 1915, Harmon Reed, the first movie mogul of Alexandria, acquired the Richmond Theater. Reed named his company the Alexandria Amusement Corporation, and they would play a major role in the growth and then decline of movie theaters in our town. Its second theater was initially named the Surprise, also located on the 600 block of King Street, across from the old Nickelodeon, but Reed’s company renamed it the Ingomar.

In 1936, the Alexandria Amusement Corporation bought and started to construct the Reed Theater near Union Station on King Street. Reed and company sought to capitalize on the growth of Alexandria’s West End, particularly the neighborhoods of Shuter’s Hill and Rosemont. The Reed, pictured above, opened in 1937, as Northern Virginia’s finest theater. It could fit up to 1,200 guests, making it one of the largest theaters in the Washington area. It showed major films immediately after they had made their run at the renowned theaters on F Street in Washington, usually a full week before they were shown anywhere else in Northern Virginia.

Until the Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, all theaters in Virginia were segregated by race, including the three owned by the Alexandria Amusement Association, which only allowed white patrons. Alexandria’s first black theater opened the same year as the Reed, in 1937. Known as the Capitol Theater, it was located at the corner of Queen and Henry streets, and operated until 1947. A larger theater was built at Queen and Fayette streets, called the Carver-Alexandria, which





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

operated until 1965. It is now a church. The theaters for African American patrons showed the same films as the ones who only sold tickets to white customers.

The Second World War led to a boom in movie theater revenue in Alexandria. Between war workers and military personnel, Alexandria's population grew approximately 85 percent. Other theaters opened as a response to the increased demand for more screens. What started as a temporary Nickelodeon in a former shoe store peaked as a big business within 30 years with the operation of six permanent theaters. But the end of the war brought with it the seeds of the decline of the movie theater in Alexandria. Let's save that story for another week.

"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.