



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Alexandria-Scotland Connection

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Image: Second from the right is the Lord Provost of Dundee, Ian Borthwick.

Alexandria of the Lord and Lady Provost of Dundee, Scotland, and the completion of the Scottish Walk celebrations in Old Town last weekend, perhaps now is a good time to review the roots of Alexandria's long connection to Scotland.

Despite the union of England and Scotland in 1707, Scottish merchants and businessmen found their English counterparts less than willing to share the tobacco industry with them. While English businesses owned the tobacco plantations in the tidewater regions, Scottish investors and businessmen established outposts in the Piedmont region.

As early as 1707, a factory owned by Glasgow merchants was operating on the Potomac River. Hugh West established himself as a tobacco inspector at the Hunting Creek Warehouse, the predecessor of Alexandria at the foot of Oronoco Street, as early as 1732. By 1740, he was joined by fellow Scotsmen John Carlyle, William Ramsay and John Pagan in exporting tobacco hogsheads to Glasgow.

In 1741, John Graham, a native of Dumfries, Scotland, established Dumfries, Virginia. Alexandria, too, used to have a Scottish reference in it, as Belhaven was named after John Hamilton (1656-1708), considered a patriotic figure in Scotland and a fierce opponent of the union of Scotland and England.

Carlyle built his house at 121 N. Fairfax St., and you can still visit the house that General Braddock took for his headquarters in 1755. Ramsay was named the first honorary mayor of Alexandria in 1761. He built a house on the northeast corner of King and Fairfax Streets, which has been reconstructed and now serves as the Alexandria Visitor's Center. The Maryland Gazette reported in 1761 that Ramsay led the city's celebration of St. Andrew's Day, in celebration of Scotland's patron saint.

William Hunter Jr., our mayor from 1789-1790, founded a fraternal organization in Alexandria known as the St. Andrew's Society. The society consisted of both native Scots and those of Scottish descent, which raised money for charitable purposes. It met quarterly at various local taverns, and their annual highlight was the St. Andrew's Day feast on Nov. 30. The Society remained active until the 1840s in Alexandria, and one of its offshoots was incorporated in Washington, D.C. in 1855. It is still active today.

In part due to its historical connection to Scotland, Alexandria and Dundee have been sister cities since 1993. Dundee is the fourth-largest city in Scotland, and is also its sunniest city. This year marked the second year in a row that the Lord and Lady Provost Borthwick visited our city to observe the Scottish Christmas Walk festivities. Their visit, and the annual Christmas Walk, are an enduring reminder of our town's long connection to Scotland.





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.