



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The romance of a stamp

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Image: Alexandria Blue Boy Provisional stamp

In November 1846, James Wallace Hooff mailed a love letter to his girlfriend, Jannett Brown, who was visiting relatives in Richmond. The couple was secretly engaged, but Hooff, fearful of the disapproval of the Brown family, asked her to burn the letter as usual. For some reason, she didn't follow his instructions, and saved not only the letter, but the stamped envelope. More than a hundred years later, that stamp, known as the "Alexandria Blue Boy Provisional" was sold for \$1 million.



The stamp was issued by Alexandria Postmaster Daniel Bryan, a one-time resident of the Lloyd House at 220 N. Washington St. Stamped on blue paper, rather than the usual buff color, the stamp predates the first United States postage stamps that were released the next year. The stamp features the words "Alexandria Post Office" in a circle and "Paid 5" in the center.

James and Jannett were married in 1853 and raised their family in Alexandria. Specifically, they lived at 517 Prince St., now known as the Murray-Dick-Fawcett house. In 1907, after their deaths, their daughter, also named Jannett, came across their correspondence from their courtship. The uniqueness of this particular stamp caught her eye, and, at the recommendation of a friend who collected stamps, she took it to a dealer for appraisal.

Soon after its discovery, the family sold the stamp for \$3,000. It later sold for \$10,000 and then \$18,500. In 1981, it was bought in Zurich, Switzerland, by a German collector for a then-record \$1 million. That price has since been eclipsed a couple of times, and the record today is \$9.5 million for a British Guinea stamp. The price and story of this stamp show how seemingly common actions, such as sending a letter to one's fiancé, can make history. James probably never realized the value of the stamp that he purchased to send his fiancé a love letter, and the envelope's contents are presumably why Jannett saved the letter and the envelope, rather than the rare stamp. But the "Alexandria Blue Boy's" discovery at 517 Prince St. adds depth to the history of the house beyond it

"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.



**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

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