



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The 1858 Prettyman hose reel carriage

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Image: The Prettyman hose reel carriage at Friendship Firehouse Museum. Office of Historic Alexandria.

This week's features the 1858 Prettyman fire hose reel carriage, a representative of the forward-thinking adaptation of technology that Alexandria showed in the 19th century. Today, it badly needs restoration, and technology will be used to help us understand what it looked like originally.

Long fire hoses were a technological innovation in 19th-century firefighting. Alexandria's fire companies adopted the technology relatively early, buying their first hoses in the 1830s. The hoses replaced bucket brigades, supplying fire engines with a steady source of water from wells and cisterns more efficiently.

Hose carriages that could carry a reel of up to 600 feet of hose were produced. One 100-foot hose could deliver more water faster than 60 men working together in a bucket brigade could. The 1858 carriage was built in Alexandria by Robert Prettyman, a carriagemaker and member of Friendship Fire company.

It is probably the only hose reel carriage made in Alexandria. The carriage was fitted with two large bells to sound the alarm as the vehicle bounced through Alexandria's streets. The total cost of the vehicle was \$550.

The Prettyman hose carriage was originally quite colorful. Historic paint analysis has determined the carriage's suspension, steering and chassis were finished with a Prussian blue primer, topped with three layers of high gloss in darker blue.

Analysis has also determined the foliage motifs decorating each side of the reel were gold leaf. The bell springs and sides of the reel drum were black. The wood wheel edging the reel drum and its spokes were painted a bright yellow. The carriage wheels were reddish brown with an outer band of yellow and yellow ray-shaped details that narrowed as they extended outward from the hub.

The carriage was repainted many times over the years, but that finish has been failing for decades now. While the wood and iron components are sound and dry, much of the paint has cracked, peeled and fallen off. The conservation plan calls for a complete documentation of all paint layers on each component before the vehicle is painted to preserve the wood and what remains of its original colors.

To contribute to the carriage's restoration, please go to this site:
www.spring2action.org/organizations/historic-alexandria-museums.





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.