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Out of the Attic

Powerful labor leader lived in Alexandria

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Image: Protesters in front of Lewis' home. Courtesy Lee-Fendall House

America in the 1940s was dependent on coal and John L. Lewis had the power to disrupt coal production with a single word – strike. Lewis was president of the United Mine Workers of America and founder of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and his rise to the top of one of America's most powerful unions was interesting.

Born to a poor family in the mining town of Lucas, Iowa, Lewis left school at a young age and started working in the mines. He became involved locally with the UMWA and began a rapid rise through the ranks. His passionate rhetoric and intimidating physical presence made him an effective advocate for the rights of American workers. However, his uncompromising commitment to his cause made him many enemies among business leaders and politicians.

In the 1930s, the UMWA moved their headquarters from Indianapolis to Washington, D.C., in order to work more closely with the federal government. Lewis and his family purchased the historic Lee-Fendall House in Alexandria, which annoyed some of the local families who considered Lewis an outsider and a radical. Every morning, Lewis was chauffeured from his home to the UMWA headquarters building on Fifteenth Street in D.C. From behind his imposing office desk, Lewis defied two U.S. presidents.

When America entered World War II, Lewis pledged not to call for coal strikes during the war. However, Lewis went back on this pledge when he realized that miners were subjected to grueling hours and unsafe working conditions because of wartime demands for coal. President

Franklin Roosevelt could do little to force the miners back to work: the power was in the hands of the union. Many Americans saw Lewis' strikes as unpatriotic and protestors outside his Alexandria home called Lewis "Hitler's helper."

Following World War II, Lewis used his power against President Harry Truman when he again called for a nationwide strike. A federal court issued an injunction against Lewis demanding he keep the miners at work. Lewis ignored this injunction.

Truman responded by asking Congress for the authority to seize the mines. After tense negotiations, a compromise was reached with the signing of the Krug-Lewis Agreement in 1946. This





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agreement established a system of healthcare and pensions for mine workers, which Lewis considered his greatest achievement.

Congress, angered by Lewis' repeated strikes, passed the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. This act severely restricted the activities and power of labor unions, particularly when these activities were deemed a threat to national security. Lewis and Truman continued a pattern of strike, threat and negotiation over the next few years, but now the federal government had the upper hand. Despite this, Lewis was instrumental in Congress passing the Federal Coal Mine Safety Act in 1952, which greatly improved safety standards in coal mines.

An exhibit about the life and work of John L. Lewis is on display at the Lee-Fendall House Museum, located at 614 Oronoco St. This is the house where Lewis resided from 1937 until his death in 1969.

“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.