



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### If walls could talk

*Alexandria Times, May 2, 2019*

Image: Wood order from 1854.

The Murray-Dick-Fawcett House, at 517 Prince St., was named after three early owners – but there have been many owners and occupants since 1772, when Irish-born merchant Patrick Murray built a two-room house on a half-acre lot in the newly expanded town of Alexandria. And all may have left their mark on the house.

When the City of Alexandria acquired it in 2017 using conservation funds with plans to turn it into a museum, the quest to discover who did what when and how began in earnest. Physician Elisha Cullen Dick owned the house for a short time but likely didn't alter it. Then merchant John Douglass Brown bought it in 1816. It stayed in his family for almost 200 years. Descendants made it their home, keeping the pre-Revolutionary War structure and additions in a close-to-original state.



Handmade nails and pegged-wood joints in trusses still support the roof, which was partially covered with a shedlike extension in 1784. Wide-plank floors, plaster walls, original molding and trim remain throughout. The 1790s annex with large fireplace still is used to warm the house on chilly days. There's also a smokehouse, laundry room and three rooms with multiple privies, more common in commercial establishments.

From the beginning, building materials were repurposed. Windows from the old part were moved to the new. Exterior doors became interior ones. Brown shifted the front door to the side of the house, complying with an ordinance banning sidewalk obstructions. Just 14 years after moving in, he died, leaving wife Mary Goulding Gretter with five young children.

Twenty-two years later, their daughter Jennett married James Wallace Hooff. They had 11 children, plus domestic help, when they lived in the house. They found it too cozy, so they sent a son to board with relatives. The distraught boy scratched an attic window pane that never got replaced. Perhaps other repairs were more urgent.

In February 1854, Hooff started a tab "for repairs on house on Prince St." with James Green & Son, located at the corner of Prince and Fairfax streets, manufacturers of cabinet furniture and "dealers in lumber of all kinds." During a two-month span, he bought various lengths and sizes of oak, poplar and spruce, plus nails of many sizes, and paid \$31.

The house got its first bathroom in the 1850s. Was that wood used to build it, ending privy usage? The privies were sketched in 1936 when Hooff grandson Lewis Fawcett opened his home for the Historic American Buildings Survey. Those renderings hang in a hallway today under a row of wooden pegs worn from years of coat-hanging.

Adhering to Brown family tradition, when Charles Joseph Reeder bought 517 Prince St. in 2000, he used reclaimed barn timbers and dry sink cabinets to add a kitchen. The new and old blend.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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From newly discovered Brown family papers and historic records, the story of the least-altered 18th-century house in Alexandria – or perhaps the most repurposed one – is being written.

The house is open for tours today from 5 to 7 p.m. Cost is \$10 for the tour and a reception with a cash bar.

*“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.*