



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

A local family's involvement with Friendship Firehouse

Alexandria Times, May 23, 2019

Image: Friendship Firehouse and the alley in the 1920s. Library of Congress.

In 1988, the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Company petitioned city council to change the name of the alley adjacent to it. Its request was to honor the Downham Family for their support of the Friendship Fire Company. Although the original petition has them helping right after the Civil War, further research shows their involvement beginning in the early 20th century.

Emanuel Ethelbert, known as E. E., Downham moved to Alexandria from New Jersey in 1862. Once here, he began to sell whiskey. In 1874, he won two terms to city council. In 1887, he became mayor, following John B. Smoot's death. He also served as a board member of the German Co-Operative Building Association, and Board of Alderman, as well as a councilman.

In 1903, Downham became the president of the Friendship Fire Company, or as they began to call themselves beginning that year, the Friendship Fire Association. Not much else was written about Downham until January 1909, when prior to annual elections a letter from him arrived declining to be a candidate for re-election. The secretary was instructed to express regards.

Also, in 1903, the application of Robert F. Downham, E.E.'s son, was approved by the Friendship Fire Association. Applicants had to be nominated by members, so most likely his father selected him. Robert Downham ran a saloon and later continued his father's wholesale liquor business. During Prohibition in Virginia he became a haberdasher or a dealer in men's clothing and accessories. He was involved in the Shriners and Knights Templar and assisted in raising funds for the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. For some time, he lived in the Lee-Fendall House.

Robert shows up a few more times than his father in the Friendship Fire Association Minute Book. In May 1921, R.F. Downham was elected trustee, but more importantly, in June of that year, he moved





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that a check be ordered to purchase the material for Electric Lights in the firehouse. In February 1922, Robert “very kindly donated fifty pair of white gloves for the use of the members taking part in the parade.”

There was an absence of the Downham family in the minutes book until the 1980s when Robert’s son, Richard, became involved. His name first appeared in the records in the late 1980s. He was a member and trustee of the Association when the name for the alley change was requested. The alley name was changed from South St. Asaph Alley to its current name of Downham Way.

“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.