



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A look back at Alexandria's 200th birthday celebration

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Image: Courtesy, Alexandria Library Special Collections.

After celebrating Alexandria's 270th birthday this past Saturday, a question was asked about other city birthday celebrations. Perhaps the most memorable was the 200th, in 1949, which included a play, called "Alexandria, Thy Sons," written for Alexandria's residents.

Using Windmill Hill Park – which had been given to the city four years earlier – as the stage, the city commissioned a play about our town. An amphitheater was carved into the hill, and 500 residents participated in the drama covering the first 200 years of our town. One of the major casting decisions was for Willard Scott of later television fame to play a young George Washington.

The play had a run of seven nights. The two-hour play featured 16 episodes spread out over two acts. As the front page of the Alexandria Gazette put it on July 12, 1949, "each episode dealt with a particular incident in history, and except for the Battle of Monogehela, all occurred in Alexandria."

The Gazette singled out Earle Weatherwax for his performance as Gen. Braddock and the ballet dancing of Clova Demaine in the role of Alexandria personified as the highlights of the show.

But the show only garnered qualified praise from the local newspaper, which led its coverage of the performance with the comment, "The play, though not yet razor sharp, is to be given a rating of 'good,' and although the first-night turn-out was disappointing to many of the participants...this was typical of opening night audiences."

The review reserved particular criticism for the last two scenes, which included depictions of Robert E. Lee. The first included no dialogue and a difficult-to-recognize Lee in front of Christ Church. The second was in front of the train station, where he gave the audience a brief speech, but no explanation that the scene was supposed to depict his leaving Alexandria for Richmond to assume command of Virginia's troops in 1861.

A work in progress is perhaps the best way to summarize the mammoth undertaking Alexandria residents attempted 70 years ago. And even today, that is perhaps the most accurate depiction of Alexandria's history. One with many highlights, but also one with events, episodes and eras that warrant criticism. If there is a play for Alexandria's 300th anniversary, let us hope that we have improved.





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.