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Out of the Attic

Above the Apothecary: What the customers didn't see

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Image: Courtesy Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Museum

When someone goes into a store, they see the products and services offered for sale. But the story of what goes on behind the scenes, in back rooms and on upper floors, is also interesting. The story of the second and third floors of the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary are good examples of behind-the-scenes working conditions from days gone by.

The current museum occupies 105 and 107 South Fairfax St., which are the two buildings the family used the longest, although their business owned up to 11 buildings. Dendrochronology places the 105 building's construction around 1815, and the 107 building's around 1805.

The most prominent feature when you climb to the second floor today is the lift door, which opened to allow a manual freight elevator. The pulley, or lift, system was designed to bring products in on the ground floor and be able to move them between floors via the elevator to avoid having to use the steep narrow stairs. This kind of system was popular in mercantile buildings that required heavy or large containers to be moved between floors. The 105 building also had a dumbwaiter installed that went between all the floors in the late 19th century.

The second floor also contains a manufacturing room, where medicinal ingredients were stored in repurposed flour and sugar tins and mixed together for customers. While drug manufacturing was part of the Leadbeater business, redistributing paints and medicines made up the majority of the commercial enterprise.

Edward Stabler began using the upper floors of 105 Fairfax as warehouse space as soon as he purchased the building in 1829. At the height of the business in the 1910s, five to eight men worked in the upper warehouse and packing rooms on the third floor. During this peak, the business counted approximately 500 wholesale customers, all in the D.C. area.

But the business peak didn't last that long for the Apothecary. In 1933, it declared bankruptcy, and the buildings and their contents were put up for auction. Spurred into action to save the historic





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

collection for future generations, concerned Alexandria citizens and the American Pharmaceutical Association purchased the collection and archives with private buyers.

L. Manuel Hendler, a Baltimore ice cream merchant with an affinity for the history of pharmacy, purchased the majority of the contents and archives. The following year, the newly formed Landmarks Society of Alexandria purchased the buildings at auction. Hendler then donated the contents and archives to the Landmarks Society.

With the buildings and collection secured, the structures were conjecturally returned to their 18th-century appearance by noted restoration architect, Thomas Tileston Waterman. The museum was officially opened in 1939, free of charge thanks to the financial support of the American Pharmaceutical Association. After an extensive renovation that added a fire suppression system and restabilized the structure, the Landmarks Society donated the museum and its important contents to the City of Alexandria in November 2006.

“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. Historic Alexandria would like to highlight the work of Callie Stapp, curator of the Stabler-Apothecary Museum, in this column.