



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

All aboard at Alexandria Union Station

Alexandria Times, September 5, 2019

Image: Alexandria Union Station. Alexandria Library, Special Collections.

For generations, passengers have embarked on journeys and have been welcomed home at Alexandria Union Station. It exemplifies the time when railroads were the dominant means of transportation.



Built during the “Golden Age” of passenger travel, the station is the only building extant representing Alexandria’s extensive railroad history. Alexandria Union Station opened on Sept. 15, 1905, serving the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway, Southern Railway and Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad. A freight station was also built on the east side of the tracks adjacent to the new passenger terminal.

The first railroads began in the late 1840s, and trains came to be the dominant means for transporting people and freight in Alexandria between 1851 and the 1930s. By 1900, the city’s pedestrians and horse-drawn vehicles shared roads and intersections with four separate rail lines. Businesses moving freight and passengers had to coordinate connections between five different railroad terminals at North Fairfax, North St. Asaph, North Henry, South Henry and South Patrick streets.

The Alexandria Union Station is an example of the trend for building architecturally significant railroad facilities intended as community gateways. The new terminal was developed because of changes in the railroad terminal and track structure in the District of Columbia as influenced by the City Beautiful movement. This movement sought to improve the economic and social conditions in cities by creating beautiful civic spaces and buildings.

In this effort, railroad companies collaborated to improve freight and passenger rail between Richmond and Washington. The creation of Alexandria Union Station was the continuation of efforts to consolidate rail traffic and eliminate the need for multiple inner-city tracks and stations.

Except for a few modifications, Alexandria Union Station today looks much like it did when it was first built. It is an example of the Colonial-Revival style with Federal style details. The Flemish-bond brick pattern is not found anywhere else in the city. Originally the roof was slate with a copper ridge roll. It was replaced with composition shingles in 1982. The freight depot was torn down in the early 1980s to accommodate construction for the Metro subway station.

In 1997, the City of Alexandria led a restoration which addressed accessibility requirements and returned the station to its 1905 appearance based on period blueprints.

Interior space is the same, however room uses have changed. For example, the original floor plan had racially segregated women’s waiting rooms and toilet facilities. The radiators, and probably the



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

oak settees, are original. The black and white floor tile and square bay window date from 1929 modifications. The glass enclosure of the breezeway is an addition of the 1997 renovation.

“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.