



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Hannah Griffith: The making of a businesswoman

(Part II)

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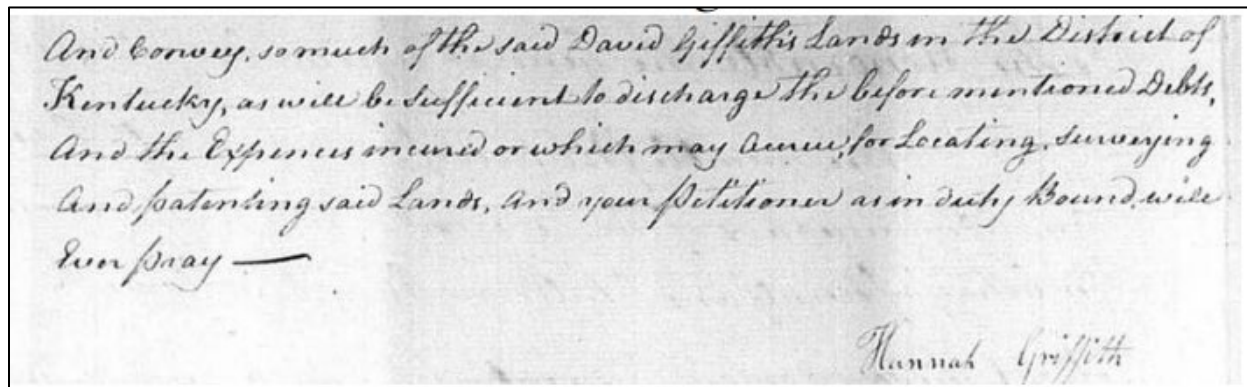


Image: Hannah Griffith's October 1791 petition to the General Assembly of Virginia. Courtesy, Gadsby's Tavern Museum.

In spring 1779, British colonists Hannah and David Griffith were witnessing the ground beneath them transform into a brand-new nation as they settled into Fairfax parish's 516-acres of glebe land and brick house, which belonged to the Church of England – soon to be the Episcopal Church in the United States.

Hannah Griffith acquired great social prestige during the next decade while her husband served as rector of Alexandria Church, now known as Christ Church. Rev. Griffith was revered for his patriotic actions in the American Revolutionary War and his friendship with George Washington, an elite congregant.

By fall 1789, state funding for the Church of England was ending and the new Episcopal Church was being founded amid financial uncertainty. It was then that Hannah Griffith's 47-year-old husband died unexpectedly while in Philadelphia.

Back in Alexandria, the young widow was notified as her husband's body was prepared for burial in that city so far away. She was no longer the rector's wife and her home on the glebe was to transition into the hands of the replacement rector, Bryan, the 8th Lord Fairfax.

Griffith worried for her two daughters – Elizabeth, named for Hannah's mother, and Sarah, for David's. She worried for her six sons – Llewellyn, Alfred, Camillus, William (named for Hannah's father), Colvill (her maiden name) and the eldest child, David Jr. Nineteen when his father died, David Jr. soon relieved some of his mother's anxiety when he married Lord Fairfax's daughter and his new father-in-law allowed the newlyweds to reside in the glebe house. "Widow Griffith," as identified in tax records, and her seven children ventured into Alexandria and embarked upon their next chapter.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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Fortunately for the Griffiths, they owned several lots in Alexandria, which was soon to be part of the new capital of the U.S. She had to sort out payment for the family's substantial debt and somehow provide income. She recognized the investment value of the city lots and decided to lease them out. She penned an elegant petition to the government requesting permission to sell the 1,000 acres in Kentucky which had been given to her husband as payment for military service.

No stranger to management and industry, her mother had owned a shop in New York and she herself had acted as a "deputy husband" during the war, Hannah Griffith determined to start her own business.

In 1794, she leased a building and obtained a license to operate an "ordinary." She then opened her "Coffee-House." Much less common than taverns and other types of "ordinaries," coffeehouses were typically found in prosperous cities and catered to wealthy merchants. Proprietors of the sophisticated establishments were most often highly respected men.

Coffee stimulated conversation and negotiations while subscription fees worked to deter customers of the "lower sort." John Gadsby had popularized the City Hotel next door by the time Hannah Griffith retired her coffee-stained apron at the turn of the 19th century. Living into her sixties, she never remarried and was buried in an unknown location in 1811.

*"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 and invited guests. This week's column is by Kristy Huettnner, Office of Historic Alexandria.*