

Spotlight on History

News from The Lyceum, Friendship Firehouse Museum & Historic Alexandria
Winter 2014



Wood Shingles Top The Lyceum

Be sure to look up the next time you visit The Lyceum. Yes, there is a new roof. The roof was replaced this past summer. The previous roof surface dated to the original renovation of the building in the early 1970's. As it was showing signs of deterioration, we were provided with the opportunity to recreate another element of the building's original appearance. The worn asphalt shingles were removed and wood shingles installed. Approved by City of Alexandria staff, the wood shingles have been treated with a fire-resistant chemical and, as they did 174 years ago, provide weather-proof and long-lasting protection for an important City landmark.

Why wood? In the original construction documents, a collaboration between builders David Price and William H. McKnight, and Alexandria Lyceum representatives Benjamin Hollowell and Thomas W. Smith, the following specifics were noted:

"Roof to be 9 feet rise, well framed according to drawing, the king post to be fastened to the girder with iron straps at the bottom, and covered with good sheathing & best Susquehannah shingles." (Contract dated June 17, 1839; original document in Local History/Special Collections, Alexandria Library.)

Interestingly, a 10-foot by 10-foot observatory was also apparently planned for the roof, but no images of the building exist that show this feature, including the two earliest views of The Lyceum. An engraving from *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* in 1858 shows the building much as it appears today, but with its original iron fence surrounding the property. Careful observers will also note an early wooden fire hydrant near the corner of the street. A photograph of the building as a hospital ward taken during the Civil War about five years later, which included most of the medical staff out front, also clearly shows the fence and its brick footing, but again, no

observatory. (Photograph by Andrew J. Russell, ca. 1862-1863; The Lyceum Collection, museum purchase.) A frugal Quaker schoolteacher, Benjamin Hollowell may have decided that the observatory was an expensive addition that he could live without.



Upcoming Programs at Friendship Firehouse Museum

February

Monday, February 17, 11 a.m.- 4 p.m.
Presidents' Day Open House

March

Saturday, March 29, 11 a.m.
*Women's History Month Story Time in collaboration
with Hooray for Books!*
For age 6 and older. \$4 per child. Reservations online
from mid-January, or call 703.746.4994.

April

Saturday, April 12, 1 p.m.
Saturday, April 26, 1 p.m.
Alexandria's Firefighting History Walking Tours
For age 10 and older. \$6 for adults, \$4 ages 10-17.
Reservations online from mid-January, or call
703.746.4994.

May

Sunday, May 11, 1-4 p.m.
Mother's Day Open House

Saturday, May 17, 1 p.m.
Saturday May 31, 1 p.m.
*Alexandria Firefighters During the Civil War
Walking Tours*
Reservations online from mid-January, or call
703.746.4994.

June

Sunday, June 15, 1-4 p.m.
Father's Day Open House

Upcoming Programs at The Lyceum



March

Saturday, March 8, 3 – 4:10 p.m.
Her Story: Women in Action
A program for Girl Scout Brownies and older Girl
Scout Daisies. Girls and adults do hands-on activities,
including a service project. For age 6 and older. \$6
per scout, \$6 per adult. Register online from mid-
January, or call 703.746.4994.

July

Tuesday, July 29–31, 9 a.m. until Noon
Clio's Kids: A History Mini-Camp
Clio's Kids introduces children ages 5 – 7 to American
history and life in historic Alexandria. Our theme for
2014 is "Alexandria: Then and Now." We'll learn
about life in Alexandria - past and present! Indoor and
outdoor activities; snacks provided.
\$105 per child. Register online from mid-January, or
call 703.746.4994.



Lectures Commemorating the War of 1812

Presented by the Office of Historic Alexandria
& Alexandria Historical Society

Wednesdays, 7:30 p.m.
The Lyceum Lecture Hall

February 26

Lisa Kraus --- *Archaeology of the War of 1812: From Barney's Flotilla to Bladensburg*

March 26

Stuart Butler --- *Defending the Old Dominion: Virginia and its Militia in the War of 1812*

April 23

Steve Vogel --- *Through the Perilous Fight: Six Weeks That Saved the Nation*

May 28

Patrick O'Neill --- *The Battle of the White House*

Spotlight on: The Friendship Firehouse Collection

Since the Friendship Fire Company was founded in 1774, it is amazing to consider that the Company has had only three fire bells over the course of its history. The first bell was procured in 1839 for their engine house on King Street between Alfred and Columbus. According to the Friendship Minute Book on April 8th, a member “reported having purchased a Bell for Engine House weighing 189 lbs for \$34.20.” The Company also “ordered that the Bell be rung upon every alarm of fire and toll when necessary to notify members of meeting.” As the company grew and more equipment was obtained, that by-law would change a little to read, “The Bell shall be tolled preparatory to each meeting and rung when there is a fire indicating by distinct strokes the ward in which it occurred and in return of apparatus after an alarm shall indicate the return of each piece.” This first bell, which was a ship’s bell, was used until their engine house was destroyed by fire in 1855.

With the new firehouse on South Alfred Street, the Company bought a new bell. Interestingly, the exact date of this purchase was not mentioned in the Minute Book. However, a new bell was apparently needed because repairing the original bell was mentioned in 1845 and in 1851, “On motion J. Bowlz was instructed to fix the Bell the best he could & charge the expense to the Company.” In regard to a new bell John Muir, who compiled the history of the Company, wrote, “A new bell, weighing 350 lbs., and costing \$150, was bought of Mr. Carr, . . . the old bell and engine being taken in part payment.” Perhaps one day more research will unearth additional information about their second purchase.

The second bell reportedly broke within a year. According to an August

9th, 1856 *Alexandria Gazette* article, “The steeple of the Friendship Fire Company was struck with lightning yesterday afternoon, and slightly damaged.” While only the steeple is mentioned, the bell could have been damaged as well. The steeple was repaired numerous times, eventually being shortened to the cupola we have today. According to John Muir, the bell was broken saluting a visiting fire company.

Throughout 1856, the Company searched for a new bell, and the Minute Book cites this search many times. On Monday evening Sept 1, 1856: “On motion a committee of 5 was approved by the Pres to solicit contributions to aid us in purchasing a new Bell.” Three other notations throughout 1856 and into 1857 mention the search as well. While it was not noted in the Minute Book when they received the new bell, the *Alexandria Gazette* offers an interesting report. On March 24, 1857 it reported, “The bell of this Company, purchased last year, having been accidentally injured, a new one weighing about 600 lbs., and costing, with its fixtures, about \$300, has just been received by the Company from the foundry of Register & Webb, Baltimore, and is represented to be of excellent tone, Key of D. The old bell, on being removed from the steeple, was thrown from the roof of the Engine House to the ground, 35 feet, without any increased injury thereto. This large and efficient Company has now a handsome Engine House, an imposing steeple, quite a large bell, and excellent apparatus, the whole of which has been paid in full.”

Now that the third and final bell was secured, it should have been a prosperous time for the Friendship Company. However as the Civil War began in 1861, Alexandria was occupied by Federal troops. One paper mentions, “The bell of the Friendship Engine House has been tolled for several nights for the purpose of attracting a sufficient number of the members to hold a meeting, but a quorum, we be-

lieve, cannot be obtained. The president of the company and a number of its members are absent from the city.” In 1862 the Minute Book stated, “Hiting [sic] upon this assurance the Friendship essayed to resume its organization, but on tapping it’s bell to obtain a meeting of the members, word came from the provost office that unless the bell was stopped all persons found in the Engine House would be arrested and sent to the Slave Penn.” Although it would be a difficult time for the company and firehouse, the bell remained intact.

After the Civil War, there was little mention of the bell in the Minute Book, — except in reference to changing the pull rope. Today, the bell and engine house are preserved and the public can visit and learn about Alexandria’s heritage. The bell is still heard on special occasions such as a child’s birthday party, or the annual Friendship Firehouse Festival.

-- Catherine Weinraub



Sources:

Alexandria Gazette, August 9, 1856

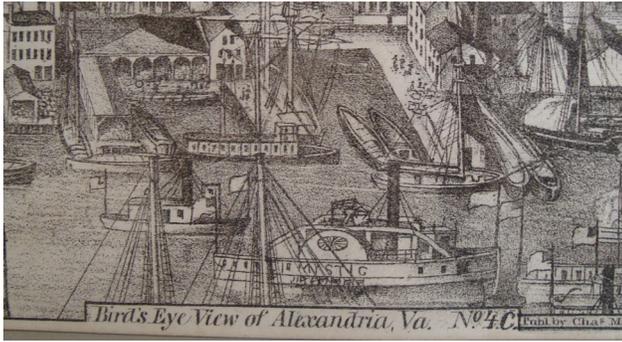
Alexandria Gazette, March 24, 1857

Carter, T. Michael, Ph.D, *Forming a More Perfect Community: An Early History of the Friendship Fire Company*, Historic Alexandria Quarterly, Summer 2002

Friendship Minute Book, Volume I, 1810-1854

Friendship Minute Book, Volume II, 1855-1872

The Local News, October 16, 1861



**Occupied City:
Life in Civil War Alexandria**

Open daily, this exhibition at The Lyceum traces life in Alexandria following Virginia's decision to secede from the Union in May 1861. See how Robert E. Lee's hometown was transformed literally overnight from a prosperous commercial port into a supply, hospital, and transportation center for the Union Army. Find out why Alexandria became a destination for African Americans seeking freedom. Explore the experiences of townspeople and others who lived here during this tumultuous time, through their own words, as well as in period photographs and historic artifacts. On view through March 23. For more information, see www.alexandriahistory.org or call 703.746.4994.

Office of Historic Alexandria
The Lyceum
201 S. Washington Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

The Lyceum
Alexandria's History Museum
202 South Washington Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314
703.746.4994
www.alexandriahistory.org
Open Monday—Saturday 10 a.m.—5 p.m.,
Sunday 1—5 p.m.

Friendship Firehouse Museum
107 South Alfred Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314
703.746.3891
www.friendshipfirehouse.net
Open Saturday and Sunday, 1 to 4 p.m.

