

# Historic Alexandria Quarterly

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## A Nostalgic Account of Growing up in Old Town in the 1950's

by Stephen Williams, M.D.



The author, Stephen Williams (forefront), participating in the George Washington Parade on February 22, 1952.

We kids who grew up in Alexandria in the early 1950's never knew at the time just how lucky we were. We were unwitting beneficiaries of the prosperity of the post-war years and the relative societal calm, or stagnation, of that period. We were not obliged or expected to do anything more than go to school, play, and stay out of trouble. The faster-paced District of Columbia was a mere six miles north, but it may as well have been six

hundred; we in Alexandria were as insulated from it by temperament as we were by the Potomac River.

Before its rebaptism as "Old Town" by real estate entrepreneurs, the section of the city near the river was just simply "downtown" to those who lived there. It was an interesting mixture of unpretentious antebellum brick townhouses, rows of wood frame

dwellings often covered over with asbestos shingles of unnatural hues, and dozens of small commercial establishments, most of which lined the King Street corridor. There were kids everywhere, and a big contingent of us occupied the blocks east of Washington Street to the river. Though there were no formal boundaries, those of us in the Old Town area were subconsciously aware of a territorial prerogative. We seldom ran into kids from the west side, and when we did, it was with some degree of suspicion and curiosity.

Life then was uncomplicated by video games, soccer leagues, shopping malls, or political agendas. While our dads got up to go to work every day and our moms usually stayed home to keep house and ride herd on us, we were more or less free, when not in school, to “go out and play.” In fact, we older kids were encouraged, if not forced, to get out of the house so that our folks could have some peace and quiet. In those days nobody worried too much about strangers lurking in the shadows to mug or kidnap us. These things did happen, of course, from time to time, but somehow our parents did not have to worry incessantly about whether or not we would show up at dinnertime. The city streets became our world, and we came to know them intimately.

In Old Town there were few dedicated playgrounds, and we used to roam the streets during the long summer vacations in search of adventure. Except on certain big streets, traffic was light and automobiles constituted a relatively minor threat to our safety. Getting across

Washington Street was at best frightening and at worst downright dangerous. At least there was usually a policeman stationed at King & Washington to help people cross. Pedestrian safety in town was important even then - I recall listening to a lecture at the old Washington School by Officer Dick Mansfield, whose catch phrase was “Look both ways and live more days!” We used to admire those serious kids who got to be members of the school safety patrol, with the white cross-chest belt and the shiny chrome badge. Their outstretched arms seemed to form an impassable steel barrier that only the most reckless would try to skirt. To this day I cannot forget the singsong cry of “OFF DUTY!” when the safety patrols would quit their posts for the day. I doubt they were obligated to yell that out, but they always did, and it became one of the familiar sounds in the neighborhood, like the metallic boom of the galvanized garbage cans being tossed back onto the sidewalk after emptying by the trash collectors.

The old police headquarters in City Hall across from the old Carlyle House apartments was an exciting place to walk by. We always expected to see some fierce felon being led inside in handcuffs to be booked. More often than not, however, we saw stumbling derelicts being hustled in after swooning on the sidewalk in front of the Mecca Grill, Sam’s Place, or some such oasis. And the alley on the side, which used to be transformed into the farmers’ market on Saturday mornings, was lined with parked police motorcycles: big, white Harley Davidsons with huge saddles and squawking radio speakers. Sometimes there were recovered stolen

bicycles stashed back there, too. On Saturday mornings *real* farmers would appear, selling actual farm-grown products. This never failed to attract a big crowd.

It is impossible to forget the cloying smell of the fresh flowers combined with that of dozens of plucked, headless chickens, newspaper wrappings, and cheap cigars. One jolly, toothless farmer's wife sold pale yellow sugar cookies, the likes of which I have never encountered since. And it's probably just as well, since her dental problems may well have originated from sampling her wares. Nobody sold saris, folk art work, or upscale coffee, that I recall.

The best available playground in Old Town was the big one on South Lee Street. There was plenty of space for playing ball, and the swings were positioned ideally for enjoying a great view of the river. We used to dream of swinging higher than the tops of the smokestacks of the old power plant that graced the lower end. Even with our feet stretched straight out, heads thrown back, and the extra power of a push from one of the other kids, nobody ever accomplished the fabled 360° loop-the-loop that we all aspired to. The sloping sides of the park were tempting for rolling, only to discover too late that they were infested with poison ivy. I recall the pink dust of dried calamine lotion on my clothing every summer. There was no serpentine stone wall or flagstone walk delimiting the playground then, but the city fathers did deem it appropriate to install a water fountain which functioned some of the

time and probably saved countless kids from summer dehydration. On those hot July days when one could see the waves of heat shimmering up from the blacktop on Lee Street and not a leaf was in motion we would scramble for first place at the beloved fountain. Whoever got there first was invariably taunted by the others, "Aw, c'mon, don't drink it dry!" Worse yet, stepping on the pedal sometimes obtained nothing more than a rusty squeak and a feeble hiss of hot air from the pigot.

Adjoining the Lee Street playground was the Wilkes Street railroad tunnel. In those days at least one train a day went through it, usually about dusk, hauling coal cars to the two power plants on Union Street. We youngsters at some point all scraped up enough nerve to walk through the tunnel as a feat of bravery, not unlike that of those heroes in the north end of town that climbed the fat Mico water tower and painted their slogans on the red and white checkerboard sides. I remember choosing a sunny Sunday afternoon for my rite-of-passage walk, when it seemed unlikely that a train would be along. The descent on the ties down the open portion of the tunnel approach from Royal Street was easy enough, with frequent looks over my shoulder to be sure no headlight was visible in the distance. Once inside the portal, however, the atmosphere changed menacingly. The air suddenly became cold, with a strong odor of diesel fuel, and daylight seemed to vanish entirely. As I worked my way along in the blackness, I jumped at every noise from the outside, which sounded unmistakably like the rumble of a locomotive approaching. In the heart of the seemingly endless tunnel I

stepped into clammy pools of water, oil, and slime that sat between the ties in the pitch darkness. There was a tiny concrete ledge about a yard up on each side, and I managed to crawl up and out on one side with difficulty. Finally, with palpable relief I emerged, blinking in the sunlight, at the river end. It took the rest of the day to get the oil stains off my shoes and socks. And how my father ever found out where I had been I have no idea, but he certainly did. That was the end of my tunnel explorations.

The many cobblestone alleys, parking lots, and occasional unsupervised yard became unofficial playgrounds for many of us, since the official ones were quite distant from one another. The Moose Club, razed long ago to make way for new townhouses, originally was housed in a palatial Italianate building at Wolfe and S. Pitt Streets. The back yard was big enough for a ball diamond, and despite the ruckus that dozens of us used to raise while playing there, I don't ever recall anyone coming out to run us off. I suppose it was the Lodge's contribution to our well being, and we shall always be grateful. A little further north, a huge parking lot belonging to a church and never used except on Sunday mornings sat empty and guarded by the intimidating sign, "No ball playing - Police will be called." And they weren't kidding. An old crone who lived adjacent to the property delighted in summoning the police at every opportunity. There are probably a few baseballs buried in her back yard to this day that were never recovered after sailing over her fence. Every summer the Recreation Department

sent workers to the shady park that used to adjoin the Washington School at Wolfe and S. Washington Streets. I remember being impressed by City's largesse as we were all handed free plaster figurines to paint in gaudy colors. It provided a less painful alternative to playing ball on the entirely stone-covered diamond at Wolfe and S. St. Asaph Streets, where a slide into home plate was worth a transfusion.

Glen Echo Park was heavily advertised then, but it was so far away that few of us ever got there very often. We still had a longing for thrills and were forced to improvise with what was available to us. Every snowstorm brought dozens of kids with sleds to Shooter's Hill for the long, terraced ride from the Masonic Temple steps practically to Callahan Drive. The police would thoughtfully close off the end of Duke or Wolfe streets down to Union for the same purpose. In better weather we loved to roll down grassy embankments, such as the small hill along the tracks at Alexandria Union Station, while our parents relaxed on the green wooden benches by the hedges and watched the end of the steam era of railroading. One day in a steep yard on South Pitt Street we discovered a large, empty barrel and spent the afternoon getting in and rolling each other down the hill as fast as we could go until the barrel finally disintegrated into splinters after smashing repeatedly into the iron picket fence at the bottom. We couldn't walk straight for an hour afterward, but it was worth it.

The dock and port area of Old Town had a lot to offer to local youngsters,

too. Anyone who grew up there recalls the frequent appearances of merchant ships, like the *Margaret Bowater*, flying Scandinavian flags and unloading innumerable giant rolls of paper for newsprint at the foot of Wolfe Street. It was commonplace to see the red Robinson Terminal flatbed trucks straining up the hill, loaded with dozens of rolls. We used to watch the crane unloading the ships for hours from our vantage point at the Cyclone fence that bore the sign "Positively No Admittance." The sense of adventure was heightened by occasionally spotting one of the members of the ship's crew leaning against the railing with cigarette in mouth, well above the scuppers from which water cascaded monotonously down the rusty side into the brown Potomac waters. Somehow the crew never looked like what we had envisioned Norse seafarers to be from our school books.

Once or twice the entire population of that neighborhood was witness to a spectacular fire in one of the warehouses. The paper rolls stacked to the ceiling generated lots of heat and smoke and required not only the intervention of a good portion of the Alexandria Fire Department but also the assistance of the fireboat from Washington, D.C. During one such fire, the water from the hose streams caused the tightly-packed rolls to swell, eventually leading to the collapse of one of the warehouse walls and nearly destroying a ladder truck parked nearby.

Sundays were particularly auspicious for exploring in the dock area. Most of the businesses were closed, and

there were few watchmen around to run us off. The Navy buildings at Jones Point were abandoned at that time, and the old lighthouse was in great disrepair. We made a quick exit from the latter when we found that the lamp room on the roof was home to several nests of hornets. The old brick machine shop nearby still had a huge steel hook suspended on a heavy chain from the ceiling, and we took rides back and forth among the debris. The idea that the chain could snap and kill us all in an instant somehow never occurred to us.

We often went farther north on our bikes, too, taking care not to get the tires caught in the ruts along the railroad tracks on Union Street. The fertilizer factory at the foot of Oronoco Street had a high wooden loading trestle, which extended tantalizingly from inside the building a good distance out onto the river, where ships would tie up. We would stash our bikes behind some bushes and sneak up the rickety wooden ladders, up to a height of about three stories, and then creep out on the trestle to the end over the water. There was a miniature rail line, like those used in mines, on the top, but at least they had the good sense to lock up the cars inside the plant on weekends so that we kids couldn't start our own hand-powered amusement park ride. Adjoining the plant was a big, open yard used for offloading crude sulfur from ships. Big nuggets of the stuff used to get scattered on the street routinely, and we would help ourselves to what we could fit in our pockets. We learned that when chunks of it were ignited, they burned with a blue flame and emanated what we later learned was sulfur dioxide, one of the components of acid

rain. One day in a friend's basement, after we had tired of the usual tame experiments offered by a Gilbert chemistry set, we decided to fire up some of the sulfur. After five minutes we were all sitting gasping and coughing out on the curb, with our eyes watering freely. I doubt if our friend's basement was ever troubled by termites after that!

The Vepco power plant at Slater's Lane was the unofficial northern boundary of the city for us. The sight of the slowly winking red lights on each of its smokestacks at night was as characteristic of Alexandria as the sequential neon sign atop the George Mason Hotel, which said first "George," then "George Mason," then finally "George Mason Hotel." The enormous coal pile at the Vepco plant has endured through the years. We kids would have loved to get into that for climbing and playing "King of the Mountain," but we could never figure how to get past the watchman in the little office at the gate. We consoled ourselves by watching the steam-powered "fireless cooker" locomotive shift coal cars about. In the same area you could set your watch by the high-pitched whistle of the Norton Company rendering plant at the foot of Montgomery Street. We used to wonder just what their omnipresent green trucks with the red barrels were carrying so inconspicuously.

Before the awareness of the need to clean up the river, we used to see all sorts of things wash up on the banks, from old automobile tires to animal entrails dumped further upstream. Small boats were much less in evidence then, though some people

actually lived in houseboats on Hunting Creek near the site of Hunting Towers. The Wilson Line did provide a pleasant sight as its cruise ship wandered slowly down to Marshall Hall and Mount Vernon each summer evening until it finally sank after some years. At night, provided that the tide was not out, it could be delightful to walk along the river. We used to enjoy eating outside with our parents on the high terrace of the Beachcomber Restaurant, now an arms dealer, at the foot of Prince Street. The lights on the Maryland shore were few, and the silence was broken only by the distant hum of the infrequent cabin cruiser passing by with its bluegreen and red navigation lamps glowing in the deep darkness. The rhythmic lapping of the small waves onto the riverbank was just about the only other sound, since there was no Wilson Bridge then with its noisy trucks. Air traffic was just beginning to increase from National Airport, but the sight of aircraft taking off at night was unusual. I can barely recall the sight of seaplanes, bobbing on their pontoons, tied up at the old ferry dock on Strand Street where the Norfolk-Washington steamboat used to call.



The Norfolk and Washington Steamboat Companies provided services to Alexandria through the early 1950's. Photo courtesy of T. Michael Miller from his book, *A Seaport Saga*.

Like most kids, as soon as we had a little change, we would try to see how fast we could spend it. Some of the more enterprising of us took paper routes in hopes of financing one of the big-ticket items someday, like a new bike. Those fellows who really needed the money commanded our respect by signing on to deliver the *Washington Post*, which required a big commitment in time and physical stamina, not to mention getting up in the early dawn before school. The rest of us slackers preferred the relative cake-walk of delivering the *Gazette*, which was much thinner and easier to fold into a cylindrical or, for the real experts, triangular shape, perfect for long-distance hurling, more often than not into the prickly bushes somewhere near the front door. Also, the *Gazette* was conveniently timed for afternoon distribution after school. The worst feature of all was having to collect the money every two weeks from people who did their best to hide when we came around, yet quick to call in a complaint if they missed their paper one day.

We bore witness to the emergence of the supermarket and the decline of small, independent grocers in those years. Old Town was dotted with numerous mom-and-pop stores, often in a corner location and spaced about two blocks apart. Block residents tended to be loyal to their stores, and there didn't seem to be much competition among them. Nobody ever saw a "sale" advertised to undercut a rival. More and more families were driving their Nashes or Hudsons up to the Acme on Powhatan Street or the strikingly-modern Giant on North St. Asaph to stock up on cheaper merchandise, however. We neighborhood

kids probably helped the corner stores stay viable a lot longer than they would have otherwise through the purchase of penny candy, ice cream, and sodas. Hot summer days sent us like homing pigeons to the store on our corner to squander whatever coins we might have acquired. Some of us were so desperate that we combed the area for old soda bottles for the deposit money. We learned the value of recycling long before it became trendy.

Almost all those stores had a long, white sign furnished by the Coca Cola Company, with a big red button at each end displaying a bottle, with the name of the store in between in tall, green letters. The wooden screen door usually was etched with patent medicine advertising. "Snap Back with Stanback" headache powders was quite common. As one entered, the scent of bread yeast was powerful, despite the competing smells of newspapers and, in some stores, kerosene, dispensed from a hand pump right inside the store for home heaters. The wife of the proprietor usually sat at the till behind the counter, dozing in the heat and monotonous drone of the ceiling fans until we kids burst through the door. We headed right for the candy case, with dozens of colorful items displayed wisely behind glass. The proprietor seemed to have infinite patience as we deliberated over our purchases, often amounting to about a dime among us.

Certain treats were difficult to forget, such as the tiny wax bottles with colored syrup inside. You chewed the bottle to release the syrup, which always tasted the same, no matter what the color. Wax lips were a distant second choice. Jawbreakers,

which were full of cinnamon and measured just about the diameter of one's windpipe, were popular in those days before product liability lawyers and the Heimlich maneuver were known. Jujubes, Pom Poms, and Sugar Daddies had just the right amount of stickiness to extract one's baby teeth with nominal chewing. We earned a lot of quarters under our pillows thanks to those candies, but we reinvested them later to repair the cavities in our permanent teeth. The most vile candy of all, and consequently the most affordable, was "Lick-Em-Ade", a powder of questionable ingredients sold in small envelopes, to be licked by indiscriminating youngsters directly from the package. It turned your tongue and lips into whatever brilliant color was on the envelope while probably wreaking untold damage to your internal organs.

The cold drinks, indispensable on hot days when the playground fountains were on the blink, really *did* cost only a nickel, even the big Nehis, which seemed to our young eyes to be a foot tall. The Coke bottles bore the reassuring message "Bottle sterilized for your protection." TruAde orange and grape drinks had no carbonation, purportedly contained a tiny percentage of "natural" ingredients, and were sold in bottles which looked like elongated hand grenades, with dozens of raised glass squares on the sides. We liked the gassy drinks better because they took longer to finish, but we were never known to refuse a TruAde, either, if someone offered. Royal Crown Cola, which had a considerable market share despite the competition, bore the mysterious label showing an Egyptian pyramid. We shunned the Brownie chocolate drink because the bottle was always smaller than the others, as

was 7-Up; we required gallons of liquid in exchange for our hard-earned nickel. Dr. Pepper had unpleasant medical connotations and was therefore relegated to the back of the red drink box in which the bottles stood in icy, churning black water up to their necks.

While ice cream standards such as the Popsicle, Creamsicle, Fudgsicle, and the more elusive Dreamsicle could be had at the corner store, it was much more fun to drop everything and run when you heard the jangling of the bells of the Good Humor man. Kids suddenly appeared from everywhere, like earthworms after a rain shower. It was uncanny how the white-uniformed driver could reach into the ice compartment, steaming with condensation, and extract exactly the item you wanted without looking. He would then quickly click out your change from the metal coin organizer that he, like the AB & W bus drivers, wore on his belt. A big chocolate-covered bar with a bite out of it was painted on the sides of the truck and bore the name of the company. We usually settled for something less expensive, like a "Rocket," which was a cardboard tube filled with ice cream that you pushed up from below with a stick. On really hot days you had to push in a hurry or you would end up wearing more of the ice cream than you ate. Our parents hated the ice cream man, who timed his visits just before supper when we were so ravenous that we were even considering eating our vegetables.

Televisions were relatively scarce in those days, and the movies attracted big crowds of kids, especially on weekends. For a quarter you could pass into the hushed,



padded velvet opulence of the Reed or Virginia Theatres, so dark that even the little glowing lamps in the aisles failed to help you find a seat. We tried to dodge the usher, who always wanted to stick us in seats next to some adults who would shush us repeatedly. We preferred the freedom of either the back row or the very front. Being in the front row forced us to lie practically supine in order to see the screen; we seemed to look up the nostrils of the actors. We never had anybody in front of us, though. We were duly impressed when Cinemascope came to town. This required the theatres to widen their screens considerably and reinstall the automatic curtains that used to swish back majestically at the beginning of the feature. A howl of delight always erupted throughout the theatre when the cartoon appeared, rich in color after the Pathe black-and-white news reel that usually preceded it. While most of us were content to have a box of regular popcorn for 15 cents, the more privileged kids plunked down a quarter - the price of a second admission - for the Buttercup version in the tall brown and yellow container. For some unclear reason, Milk Duds were a popular treat during a movie, but nobody seemed to buy them elsewhere. It was not uncommon to leave the theatre with a few of them stuck to the sole of your shoe.

We did have certain television programs that we watched faithfully in the late afternoon during the winter when darkness fell about five o'clock. We tended to cluster together in the den of whoever possessed a TV set until dinner time forced us to disperse to our own homes. *Captain Video*, ushered in by the symphonic strains of Wagner, amazed us with its primitive

special effects and the clowning of a youthful Arnold Stang, who played a character named Clumsy McGee before going on to immortality as the voice of the Chunky candy slogan. The Pinky Lee and Howdy Doody shows came to be favorites soon after. An edentulous Gabby Hayes fired a cannon full of dry cereal directly at the camera each evening to illustrate that Quaker Puffed Wheat was indeed "shot from guns." Saturday mornings not only offered cartoons but also the *Winky Dink* gimmick show in which we put special plastic sheets on our TV screens and then drew on them with crayons (at least, *most* of us used the special sheets to protect the TV screen) to simulate fighter cockpit controls, racing cars, and the like. Space adventures captured our imaginations, too, and all over town chapters of the "Rocket Rangers" sprang up at the behest of the dynamic squadron leader of the show of the same name. Even the old movie serials like *Flash Gordon* kept us spellbound watching that first spatial skinhead, Ming, wreak his revenge on our hero.

Locally we relied on the avuncular Pick Temple, a laid-back urban cowboy apparently cloned by the Giant Food chain to entertain us after school by showing a few cartoons from the '30's and strumming his guitar. After we all filled in cards at the grocery store, we found that Pick uncannily remembered our birthdays every year with a photograph of himself holding Nellybelle or whatever his guitar's name was. A few of us actually got to appear on the show, which originated at a studio in Washington. Close behind Pick came Hoppity Skippity, whose show had a similar format, with kids perched on bleachers made up to resemble a

rabbit warren. The star was dressed in a woefully unconvincing rabbit costume which looked more like a white pair of Dr. Dentons with long ears attached. He repeatedly emphasized throughout his program that he was a “weal, wive wabbit!” Although even the dimmest of us could see through this patently false assertion, Hoppity was an authority figure, and if *he* said he was weal, then who were we to doubt him?

Certain holidays were particularly dear to the kids in Old Town. When there was not a foot of snow on the ground, George Washington’s Birthday was one of the best. The excitement began to build in the morning as the various parade units started to assemble in the Gibbon Street area. We watched as skittish, slobbering horses were unloaded from trucks after their long ride into town, while sailors in blue flannel pea coats with white caps and immaculate spats lined up in formation, ready to swing out onto South Washington Street for the march straight up past Montgomery Street. Other crack military units had closely-shorn soldiers with cap visors pushed down to eye level and chrome scabbards glinting in the sunlight. Their heel taps would click rhythmically on the pavement. When the parade finally got underway, preceded by police on motorcycles who roared up and down the sides of the street to keep the swelling crowds back, we wormed our way to the front for the best look. We were bored by the limos bearing waving politicians that we had never heard of, but when the Kena Temple Arab Band came into view we were ecstatic. Who can forget the robed lines of goateed kazoo players, the crashing cymbals, and, best of all, the Buddha-bellied

leader with the jewel in his navel, swinging his scimitar menacingly from side to side in time with the music and glowering at us kids? Toward the end of the parade always came straggling, unruly groups of Cub Scouts supervised by unsmiling adults wearing a look of resignation. Fire engines from all the neighboring districts brought up the rear, and we all delighted in seeing Smokey, the mascot of No. 2 station in Alexandria, standing in a dignified pose atop their gleaming red pumper.



King Street during the Christmas holidays (circa 1950's).

Christmas was always associated with the incessant pinging of the handbells of the Salvation Army volunteers standing shivering around the little iron pot in front of G.C. Murphy’s on King Street. At night the whole distance on King Street from Fairfax Street past Henry glowed with the multicolored lights in two rows suspended high across the street and connected to big plastic illuminated stars in the center. Scratchy carols played over and over from outdoor speakers in front of some of the hungrier stores. Santa Claus officially came to town not by helicopter but on the back of the white Rescue Squad No.1 truck and would hand out presents to an excited mob of kids. The G.C. Murphy store toy department was equipped with a glass shelf

where kids could “test” various toys before requesting them on their Christmas list to Santa. Other merchants were less tolerant of young customers. Knight’s Hardware had an extensive toy department on the second floor, as did Fagelson’s further up King Street, but items were either displayed behind chicken wire or under the watchful eye of an intimidating and sour-faced salesperson who was ready to pounce as we put a hand out toward a tempting item.

Halloween in those days was different. Street crimes were rare, and we almost never saw any parents tagging along after their children to Trick or Treat. As well, there were a lot more children in Alexandria then, and the sidewalks were alive with bands of costumed youngsters carrying paper shopping bags full of booty that nobody needed to X-ray. It was not unusual for one’s doorbell to ring every thirty seconds with yet another request for candy from a clump of outstretched paper bags. At the corners we would stop and exchange strategy with other groups of kids for getting the most candy out of a particular block. The smell of overheated pumpkins with flickering candles inside filled the crisp October air. Our dime-store costumes were always made of stiff, cheap material that looked better in the package, but we didn’t care, since it was too dark to see much and usually chilly enough to have to wear a coat underneath. The opera masks, too, were scratchy and hot, but we all wore them defiantly. Despite the threat of a “trick” to those who gave us no candy, I don’t recall any ever being played. Vandalism was quite rare in those days before spray paint cans became fashionable.

Certain sights, sounds, and smells were characteristic of Alexandria at one time. The bell in the steeple tower at St. Mary’s Church rang punctually every evening at six o’clock. We loved to watch the big bell swinging back and forth back in the days before electronic chimes. Coal was still popular for home heating, and the Fannon coal trucks would make their rounds, dumping loads down a long chute into basements through special openings in the front of many homes. Some people still had ice boxes instead of refrigerators. Mico ice deliverymen used to amaze us by picking up huge blocks of ice in tongs from their trucks and effortlessly carrying them into kitchens, while we clambered into the back of the trucks for ice fragments to cool us on hot days. Alexandria Dairy was always out early on home delivery with a variety of milk bottles, including the ones with the special cream compartment on top with the sculpted smiling face in the glass. Their trucks were short, stubby, and ubiquitous then. From time to time we would watch the bottling conveyor belt operation at the plant on N. Pitt Street. Even better was the spectacle at the Coca Cola plant at King and Peyton, where green bottles would speed by and fill instantly as we pressed out faces to the windows. Nobody ever offered us any free samples, though.

Various traveling trailer shows were commonly seen parked on King Street: I distinctly remember one called “Jail on Wheels,” complete with a mock-up of a jail cell, an electric chair, and a couple of bored-looking fellows dressed up as cops. Around the corner in front of Whelan’s Drug Store was another trailer which displayed a shiny black foreign convertible, supposedly

Hitler's own personal limousine, which had us all gawking for a nickel "donation."

Fire alarms in town used to save us from many an otherwise dull afternoon and provide us with free entertainment. If we were in the midst of a ball game, we would drop the ball and bat and take off running after the engines. There used to be block after block of wood frame dwellings with bay windows and round cupolas through Old Town, and they tended to burn furiously, with clouds of smoke that were visible blocks away. More often than not, though, the calls turned out to be something trivial. We watched with morbid fascination as the firemen sprayed down people's smoldering mattresses, sofas, and other personal possessions which had been hauled out on the sidewalk for a thorough dousing. Alarms were always an excuse for an impromptu gathering of neighbors, too, who stood in robes and hair curlers in small groups and exchanged local gossip after the excitement died down.



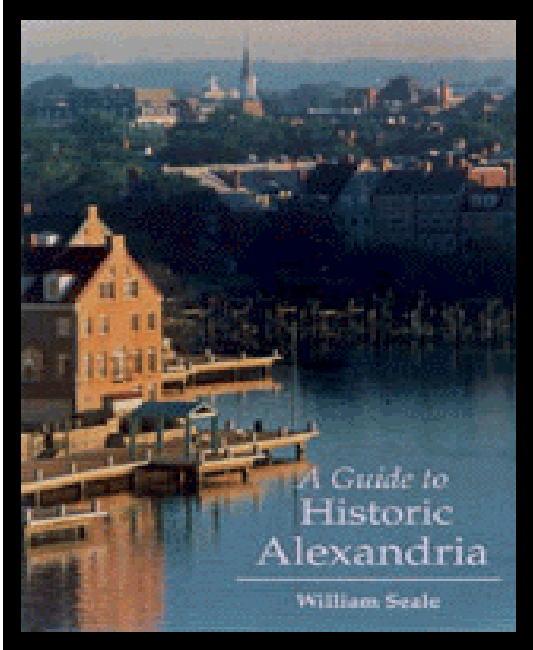
The 200 Block of Prince Street, North side. Photo courtesy of Evelyn Cox's *Historic Alexandria Virginia Street by Street*.

Since those days a half century ago Old Town has undergone vast changes. It has become more affluent. Paradoxically, in spite of the declining birth rate, home

additions and enlargements have abounded. The mom-and-pop businesses are gone. Once neglected, humble dwellings have been transformed into splendid residences bearing plaques attesting to their historic origins. The noise of kids playing kick ball on the streets is seldom heard. The streets are cleaner, the gardens and parks neater, and yet a certain atmosphere which we all took for granted is lacking. I can appreciate it now that such a long time has passed. Old Town was among the best of places to be a kid then, despite its shortcomings. I hope those who are growing up there today will be able to say the same fifty years from now.

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*Stephen Williams grew up on South St. Asaph Street, attending both the Washington School and St. Stephens School. He graduated from the University of Virginia and the University of Bologna's medical school in Italy. Dr. Williams practiced medicine in the District of Columbia and Alexandria for more than twenty years before moving back to Bologna with his wife, Lucia, who is a native of Bologna. For several years, Dr. Williams served as Vice President of the Friendship Veterans' Fire Association. He continues to practice medicine in Bologna, caring for many American students who are studying abroad.*



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*Previous issues are available at Historic Alexandria's website: [ci.alexandria.va.us/oha](http://ci.alexandria.va.us/oha)*



## HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA HOLIDAY PROGRAMS *December*



### **7<sup>th</sup> -Holiday Ornament Decorating**

“Decorate your own ornament inspired by artifacts”  
Alexandria Archaeology invites families to decorate take-home dough ornaments using shapes, colors and patterns based on the Museum’s collection of excavated artifacts.

1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. *Free!*

Alexandria Archaeology Museum  
105 N. Union Street  
3<sup>rd</sup> Floor of the Torpedo Factory  
(703) 838-4399

### **7<sup>th</sup> -Kwanzaa Craft & Game Workshop**

“Learn to make the handmade gifts of Kwanzaa”  
Staff will teach you how to make inexpensive Kwanzaa gifts (Zawadi) at home. All supplies will be provided.

10:30 a.m. to Noon *Free!*

Alexandria Black History Resource Center  
638 North Alfred Street  
(703) 838-4356

### **7<sup>th</sup> - A Dickens of a Christmas Party**

“Celebrate the season with this Victorian-era party”  
Enjoy the spirit of the holiday season at this Living History event presented by The Little Maids of History. Participants join “the Carter sisters” in their Victorian parlor for a presentation of *A Christmas Carol*, music, games, ornament making, tree trimming and light refreshments.

2:00 - 4:00 p.m. \$3/person

The Lyceum, Alexandria’s History Museum  
201 S. Washington Street  
(703) 838-4994

### **13<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> - Candlelight Tours**

“Candlelight tours at Lee-Fendall House, Carlyle House, Old Presbyterian Meeting House and Gadsby’s Tavern Museum.”

Enjoy seasonal decorations, entertainment and light refreshments. A wonderful holiday tradition.

6:00 to 9:00 p.m. Admission until November 1: \$15/adults, \$12/seniors, \$5/children; After November 1: \$20/adults, \$15/seniors, \$5/children Call (703) 838-4242 for information.

### **14<sup>th</sup> - “Christmas in Camp” Open House**

“Experience the holidays during the Civil War”

This holiday event interprets how Christmas was observed during the Civil War. The program features living history interpreters, a Victorian tree, period music, refreshments, and readings of “*The Night Before Christmas.*”

Noon - 4:00 p.m. - \$2/adults, \$1/children  
Fort Ward Museum & Historic Site  
4301 W. Braddock Road  
(703) 838-4848

### **15<sup>th</sup> - Colonial Ringers Handbell Concert**

“Enjoy the festive sounds of the holiday season”

Don’t miss this popular holiday concert and sing-along.

3:00 p.m. - *Free!!*

The Lyceum, Alexandria’s History Museum  
201 S. Washington Street  
(703) 838-4994

# Office of Historic Alexandria

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