

THE FOUNDATION TURNS FIFTY

By Morgan D. Delaney

President, Historic Alexandria Foundation

THE HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA FOUNDATION was incorporated fifty years ago, on the 12th of October 1954, as a non-profit corporation, formed “to preserve, protect and restore structures and sites of historic or architectural interest in and associated with the City of Alexandria, Virginia, to preserve antiquities, and generally to foster and promote interest in Alexandria’s historic heritage.” It was a different town then, not so prosperous, and not a particularly desirable address in the Washington area. What was remarkable was that the entire early town had survived nearly intact, with complete streetscapes of 18th and 19th century structures. Most of the old buildings were run-down; many were derelict.

Yet Alexandrians had always been proud of their heritage, which claimed both George Washington and Robert E. Lee as native sons. They revered the houses and sites where both had lived, visited and worshiped. Historian William Seale, a long-time resident of Alexandria, wrote about our early citizens’ interest in preservation in an article in the 1989 Historic Alexandria Antiques Show catalogue.

Alexandria’s “historical” star rose with that of George Washington. As the town closest to Mount Vernon, it was already identified with him before he died, and some city ceremonies evolved from this, including most notably the balls that first celebrated his birthday... Soldiers during the Civil War sought out the sites of Washington and colonial times... The natives of the town, as well, were possessed by a feeling for its history... By the 1880s Alexandria was appearing in popular magazines, always in the context of its colonial history.

Despite this deep current of citizen interest, sustained economic prosperity was elusive enough to hold the old-fashioned town in genteel decay. The rise of the Colonial Revival in the late 19th century had its advocates in local citizens, particularly architect Glenn Brown, who “restored” Christ Church, but did not succeed in kindling a serious restoration movement.

The Alexandria Association was chartered in 1932 by citizens interested in local history and culture. But actual restoration of the old architecture came with newcomers, arriving during the days of the New Deal 1930s. It was they who initiated the preservation movement, leading to the historic town that we know today. They loved charming old “colonial” houses. Albeit dilapidated, they were cheap to purchase and not too difficult to fix up. Gay Montague Moore, Howard and Mae Joynt, Martha Monfalcon, Ward Brown, among many others, fostered a new preservation ethic in Alexandria. An old guard of native Alexandrians were involved as well—Margaret Moore Mourt, Sara



"The beautiful drawing room" read the caption accompanying this image of the front parlor of the Benjamin Dulany house at 601 Duke Street. It appeared in Gay Montague Moore's *A Seaport in Old Virginia*, published in 1949, recounting romantic tales of Old Alexandria houses. Howard and Mae Joynt, the owners of the house at the time, were active in the early preservation movement.

street, that now, ironically, serves as the city's history museum!

Fortunately, the National Park Service has a vested interest in development along Washington Street. Back in 1929, when the city fathers learned that Alexandria was to be bypassed by the new George Washington Memorial Parkway to Mount Vernon, they went to the Park Service and had it re-routed to Washington Street, agreeing solemnly at the time to "maintain the dignity of Washington Street through Alexandria." A 1946 letter to the city manager from the Park Service challenged the spot zoning for commercial buildings as a threat to the "dignity" of the streetscape.¹ Two native sons, both City Council members at the time, Paul L. Delaney and Thomas Hulfish, proposed that the city government enact legislation to protect the city's architectural heritage. Despite opposition, led by the Chamber of Commerce, claiming that the new legislation would impede progress, infringe on the rights of private property owners and would be difficult to administer (sound famil-

iar?), the council drafted an "Old and Historic District" ordinance, modeled upon that enacted 15 years earlier by Charleston, South Carolina.

In August of 1946, the Council by a 4-to-3 final vote adopted the ordinance. Although it represented the best achievable political compromise at the time, there were significant flaws in the protections it offered to the city's architectural heritage. The boundaries of the District were narrowly drawn; there was an 1846 cut-off date for protected buildings (those buildings erected 100 years prior to the legislation); members of the Board of Architectural Review could be appointed more for reason of politics, than for expertise. Thus, despite the fervent hopes of the preservation community that they had achieved protection for the old city, the wheels of "progress" continued to sweep away many landmarks. Fortunately, citizen activism over the past 50 years has swayed city government on numerous occasions to strengthen significantly the provisions of the preservation ordinance: expansion of boundaries; protection against

Carlyle Hooff and the Delaney and Hulfish families—to name but a few.

The end of World War II, and the burgeoning economic prosperity that followed in the Washington area, posed, for the first time in nearly a century, serious and nearly constant threats to the survival of old Alexandria. As William Seale described it: "A little city, emerged from hard times, longed to build things new." Commercial construction was proposed for Washington Street, which, since the early 19th century, had been Alexandria's premier residential address. The owner of the Lyceum proposed to demolish the building and replace it with a six-story office building—the first of several threats to the impressive Greek Revival building, one of the most significant landmarks on the



In this December 1956 snapshot, lower King Street appears more sober than we know it today. The early warehouses were largely still being used for their original function. The present day, tree-lined streetscape of restaurants, lighted by “Gadsby-style” light standards, did not emerge until the 1970s. The 1950s look was undoubtedly more akin to its appearance in the early days.

money was required to fund this ambitious project, and, during these early years, the Foundation seems to have lived hand-to-mouth. The synopsis of the research on early buildings by Ethelyn Cox and many of the photographs were published in 1976 as *Historic Alexandria: Street by Street*.²

There were constant new crises to be dealt with, as yet another building was threatened with demolition. Preservationists had to fight the battles on a building-by-building basis, always making sure that they attended City Council meetings. Not even important architectural landmarks were safe. The Lloyd House was approved for demolition in 1956, and then was saved by the unlikely intervention of a businessman from Wyoming, who had read about its fate in a Washington newspaper. Gay Montague Moore also was a heroine in this saga, when she advanced the funds to buy off the wrecking company’s demolition contract.

The most egregious threat, arising during the 1950s, was the Federal government program of “urban renewal,” which visualized a new urban landscape, from which the past would be swept away through wholesale demolition and rebuilding. Local governments—and developers—naturally, were attracted by

the promise of such Federal largesse. The urban renewal plans for Alexandria would have destroyed most of the downtown, leaving only a few landmarks, such as Gadsby’s Tavern and Christ Church. Apartment and office blocks were to line the waterfront and Washington Street. Some historic buildings were even to be replaced by trees! The preservation community was stirred into a role of heightened activism. HAF mounted a plaque program to mark and identify historic structures, thereby raising public awareness of the town’s threatened early architecture. This was followed by an easement program, which afforded legal protection against demolition of buildings and sites. Ultimately, after countless public hearings, Urban Renewal was pared down to 6 blocks along King Street.

William Murtagh, long-time Alexandria resident and first keeper of the National Register of Historic Places, wrote about Urban Renewal in Alexandria in the 1996 catalogue of the Historic Alexandria Antiques Show:

Surely the worst and most intrusive development in Alexandria’s historic area has been what Urban Renewal brought along the King Street corridor east

of Washington Street. The loss of the city's old downtown—which hindsight tells us could have been so fine had it been restored (while still providing parking in the center of the blocks, behind the buildings)—was a major blow. The buildings demolished were no more substandard than any other historic structures which have survived in the area. These were replaced between Fairfax and St. Asaph by overscaled buildings of a very ordinary and dull architecture. I'm always reminded of Boston warehouses when I see them.



During its early years, HAF spearheaded the preservation, restoration and repair of many important historic structures, including the Lloyd House, the Lyceum and the Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee. Fundraising was always a pre-eminent and often daunting task. HAF, itself, did not achieve its goal of acquiring an important early building until 1993, when it convinced the City that it was capable of raising the money to

As part of the HAF survey of early buildings, Russell Jones photographed these rowhouses in the 300 block of North Saint Asaph Street in 1962. His images provide documentation of the early town before its revival. When these buildings were "restored," they lost many of the subtle details which contributed to their architectural character.

accomplish the restoration of the 18th century Alexandria Academy — an important landmark in the history of universal education in the United States. \$1,200,000 was raised from private and public sources for the completion of this noteworthy project.

In a companion article in this catalogue, Jean Taylor Federico describes many of the accomplishments of the Foundation during the past two decades, focusing upon those that were achieved in conjunction with the city agency which she heads, the Office of Historic Alexandria. It was in 1983 that the City Council gave official recognition to the city's growing role in preservation by establishing a governmental agency with a full-time director and public funding.



HAF initiated a program of "plaquing" historic buildings during the city's "urban renewal" era. Board member, William Laird Warwick, had noticed the use of markers during a visit to Society Hill in Philadelphia (also threatened by demolition under urban renewal), and imported the concept to Alexandria. These days a "plaque" is said to raise the market value of the house.



In the decades after its construction in 1785, the Alexandria Academy had acquired additional ornamentation around the windows and doorway. The \$1.2 million dollar restoration undertaken by HAF returned this important early building to its original appearance and interior configuration. The Board of Trustees meets in the first floor classroom each month.

One of the more notable recent achievements of HAF has been the sponsorship of the Historic Alexandria Antiques Show, the success of which has led to a stable source of funding for new programs, including the Historic Alexandria Preservation Fund. Grants from this fund are awarded to meritorious projects, which may range from “bricks and mortar” restoration work, to conservation of artifacts in our museum buildings, to scholarly research on aspects of Alexandria’s cultural and architectural history. Over the past 15 years, these grants have supported a wide range of preservation activities and expanded the preservation constituency.

During its first half century, Historic Alexandria Foundation has been a leading force in the transformation of Alexandria into today’s beautiful and vibrant community. As we look back upon the occasion of our 50th birthday, HAF can be proud of its many accom-

plishments both large and small. But we also need to look towards the future. Howard Joynt once said that the work of preservation demands constant vigilance. Early preservation efforts concentrated on exteriors and streetscapes, while many significant interiors have been lost. Prosperity has cleaned up the face of our historic district, which has now become a “prestigious” address. No longer can historic buildings be purchased for a few thousand dollars by old house enthusiasts. Long-time preservationists here rightly worry about the integrity of our historic houses. Too often new owners and architects see the houses as raw materials to make into something else. Unsympathetic remodelings and overly large additions abound. This astonishes those who know Old Town better. The early houses of Alexandria will never successfully accommodate the soft amenities of McLean and Potomac and still maintain their aura of history. What they have cannot be built anew; the moss cannot be attached to the stone.

HAF has always had an important role in educating the public about historic architecture and fostering interest in Alexandria’s heritage. There is, seemingly now, an alarming public detachment from history, architecture and good design. Our advocacy for sensitive restoration and preservation of our surviving relics from the past will continue unabated. We are currently refining plans for an educational video about historic architecture and an in-depth publication on the same subject. Our outstanding collection of old buildings is what gives our town a very special sense of place. Please help us preserve it sensitively into the 22nd century. ❖

¹ The National Park Service maintains a very strong interest in Washington Street and was among those many who appeared before the City Council on October 9, 2004 successfully opposing the demolition of the Gunston Hall Apartments.

² The large format photographic negatives, along with Mrs. Cox’s extensive notes, were given by HAF to the Alexandria Library in the 1990s. These resources are available for research at the Beatley Library.