



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Gone from the city, but not forgotten

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Image: O'Leary family boat next to the Old Fort Plant. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Many years after their encounter with Alexandria, the O'Leary family was reintroduced to Northern Virginia readers by an article in the Washington Post. The O'Learys were in Sacramento, having shown up in the mid-1980s. They received a similar welcome in California to the one they received in Northern Virginia.

A local California paper noted that James O'Leary lost an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court to force the capital of California to change its name from Sacramento, since, "claiming its use on city seals violated the constitutional separation of church and state."

Just as in Alexandria, the family became renowned for their vagabond lifestyle, "with constant disputes with Sacramento over their rundown homes and boats." One boat, similar to the family's listing Alexandria abode seen here, particularly vexed Sacramento authorities: a World War II minesweeper called the Seamill.

James, the patriarch, died in 2014 at the age of 101. In a phone conversation with a Washington Post reporter, one of the middle sons, John, said that his mother Florence passed away in 1999. Of the 12 O'Leary children that were on the Chicago and then the Reliant during their time on the Potomac, seven are still alive and four still live together.

Some things have changed. An injunction prevents the family from living on boats. Some things haven't. According to the local Washington reporter, "the O'Leary's have been declared vexatious litigants" in California, which affected the lawsuit they filed against Sacramento in that they had to pay \$1,485 to appeal the initial ruling against them.

They lost six boats in three years. John claimed that the family was never happy on land, and they showed up in one dilapidated vessel after another until they were banned from living on the water.

During the phone conversation, John O'Leary said that he was going to try to assume the mantle of his late father. And he said if he could get the injunction against living on boats lifted, he wanted to take his family back to the sea. In more than one article, John and his siblings argued that rather than going to public schools, they learned more by experiencing different locales and cultures during their childhoods. As John put it, "You learn and adapt and you never come out any dumber than you started."





**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

Just like their parents, the O'Leary children's belief that they have a right to be on the water hasn't changed despite changes in locations and circumstances. John's phone interview ended with the musing that if he were allowed to live on a boat again, he might return to the Potomac River.

"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 Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.