



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The city almshouse that became a baseball field

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Image: Maskell C. Ewing map of Alexandria, 1845. Library of Congress.



This week, this column will continue its look at the Maskell C. Ewing map of 1845 and look at the western edge of downtown Alexandria, from Columbus to West streets. At the time this map was prepared, the city street grid ended at West Street, and beyond lay rolling fields and forests to the far stretches of the horizon.

At the top of the map, the most significant topographic feature is Shuter's Hill, which had been used as a hunting ground since Native American times and was developed into a major plantation by several prominent Alexandria families from the 1780s through the 1850s. Merchant John Mills constructed an elegant mansion on the hilltop in 1781. By 1800, the property was sold to the Lee and then the Dulany families. Benjamin Dulany, a wealthy planter, used the property as a summer home. The mansion burned in 1842 and was replaced by several smaller houses in subsequent years, several of which are just barely visible by marks adjacent to the top of the hill.

Just at the base of the hill along Duke Street, is the old Drover's Tavern, a basic house of lodging and refreshment for the hordes of cattle drovers that entered Alexandria daily from the western hinterlands. They drove their herds to the Alexandria butchers and meatpackers, ultimately bound for the elegantly decorated sheds at Market Square that sold meat products. It was at this site that laborers would gather every New Year's Day to offer their services to agricultural farmers and employers throughout Fairfax County.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Connecting King and Duke streets, the careful observer will note a series of diagonal streets, including Diagonal Road and Commerce Street, which allowed for produce wagons to reach the market and port of Alexandria from Duke Street and avoid making difficult right-angle turns. Of further interest is that the official map designation of D.C. in the upper left-hand corner has been crossed out and remarked as Virginia by hand, demonstrating the map owner's pride in being back in the commonwealth after Alexandria's 1846 retrocession.

At the left center of the map is the boggy morass of Hooff's Run, reaching beyond King Street from Great Hunting Creek. The creek was surrounded by brewing operations, horse pens and, on the east side, the growing cemeteries that emerged along Wilkes Street. Just east of the creek on the north side of King Street can be found the elegant homestead of Francis Peyton, noted as one of the finest landscaped properties in Alexandria and even recognized on this map with special markings indicating specimen trees and shrubs.

On the northwest edge of the downtown area, just south of the oval course labeled as a racetrack, is the old Alexandria Almshouse, the community's official "poor house" where the destitute of the city were offered minimal housing and sustenance. In use for well over a century near the intersection of what is now U.S. Route 1 and Monroe Avenue, the almshouse was finally sold by the city about 90 years later, only to receive it back in the mid-1930s when the new owner, who had attempted to develop a boarding house on the site, defaulted on the mortgage.

As by then it was the height of the Great Depression, and believing there was no further economic gain from such a remote location, city council decided to open a baseball field at the site, using the almshouse to store the necessary equipment for Alexandria's growing number of baseball teams. Thus was born what today is known as Simpson Field.

"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.