City of Alexandria

Office of Historic Alexandria

Alexandria Legacies

Oral History Program

Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies—City Preservation Movement*

Title: *Interview with C. Richard Bierce*

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Interviewer: *Alan Palm*

Transcriber: *Jo-Ann LaFon*

Abstract: *In 2006, as part of the Alexandria Legacies – City Preservation Movement Oral History Project, C. Richard Bierce was asked to review his role in preservation projects in the City of Alexandria since his arrival in 1973—most notably the restoration of Gadsby's Tavern and the Carlyle House.*

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the original cassette recording exactly.

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C. Richard Bierce, 2007

Introductions	
Alan Palm:	This is Alan Palm. I'm ready to have Mr. Bierce answer the questions…
C. Richard Bierce:	I'm Richard Bierce, historical architect, talking to Mr. Palm on December 15, 2006, going through a long list of questions about my involvement in preservation work in Alexandria.
Restoration and Architecture in the 1970s	
C. Richard Bierce:	I moved here from Arizona in 1973 to work for the architectural firm of J. Everette Fauber, Jr., FAIA, who was the architect for the restoration of Gadsby's Tavern and the Carlyle House, two significant projects that were being done in preparation for the American Bicentennial of 1976. Those two projects were sufficiently involved that Mr. Fauber, who is from Lynchburg [Virginia], opened the office here in Alexandria and I became the office director and project manager. So, for three and a half years, we conducted all the research, archaeology, documentary research, and did the design and planning for the actual restoration of the Carlyle House to its 1752 appearance, and the Gadsby's Tavern project was much more of an adaptive use process whereby we converted part of it to a restaurant, part of it to a museum, and part of it the permanent quarters of the American Legion, who had owned the building prior to giving it to the City in 1972. So there were a lot of challenges in making all of those differing occupancies work together in terms of security and mechanical systems and all of those kinds of things, but I think we did and it is still working.
Carlyle House	

C. Richard Bierce:	The Carlyle House was a challenge in that it had been thoroughly changed by a succession of owners throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and some old-timers in Alexandria will remember the Mansion House Hotel, which was constructed on Fairfax Street in front of the Carlyle House. We took that down and prepared the site for the restoration in its present form that you see today. What we didn't know when the project started was that the Bank of Alexandria had been incorporated into that hotel, so our job then became more complex as we were to research and try to convince the powers that be that the Bank of Alexandria building needed to be saved as well…which they did. They understood it and the Park Authority was willing to do that but it complicated the process with respect to the Carlyle restoration…
Gadsby's Tavern	
C. Richard Bierce:	The question here about 1993 Gadsby's Tavern—I was not involved in that project. And the [19]75-[19]76 project: We did commission some archaeology in the courtyard of Gadsby's Tavern, partly to allow for the construction of the underground vault where the air conditioning equipment is installed today. But in the process of doing that, we were able to confirm the prior location of some of the service buildings that existed in the courtyard of Gadsby's, and they were later partially reconstructed by the owner of the restaurant, who started that project for the City in 1976. It's no secret and I've certainly talked to Pam [Cressey] about it a lot, but there are a number of features on that site that were identified in that survey that have never been fully explored. I mean, they're not hurting anything; they're safe, but, at some point, we all know there is a repository of untapped material about the Tavern and the 18th century development of that part of the site that, when it is done, will be an exciting process to find out things that we probably do not know and couldn't imagine. We, as I say, did not do a lot of restoration on the Gadsby's project in 1975. It had been restored in the [19]30s in celebration of George Washington's Bicentennial Birthday—1732 to 1932—the American Legion sponsored that. We did some minor bits of restoration—did paint research and reestablished some of the original colors in the public spaces of the building. So, it was in a sense restoration. But most of our work was mechanical work—safety, structural and then making the whole issue of the restaurant work, which was a challenge. It had been a restaurant, obviously, as a tavern, for much of its early history, but by the time of the 20th century, when the building was threatened, all of that had long been gone. As I say, we worked on the research of the Bank of Alexandria building. It was restored later by a private developer working in conjunction with the Park Authority, but that was an interesting project because we learned a lot about some of the players who were financing and really contributing to Alexandria's economic strength and growth in the early 19th century. William Herbert, who was John Carlyle's son-in-law, was one of the founders of that bank,

	and there are threads of continuity on down to his descendants of the Burke & Herbert Bank of today, which also was a 19th century institution. But there's a lot of linkages here that we all need to be aware of.
Origins of the Office of Historic Alexandria	
C. Richard Bierce:	Another project that I've worked on in Alexandria—after we completed the Bicentennial projects in 1976, the architectural office was closed and I needed a job. About that time, the City of Alexandria was creating the first steps of the Office of Historic Alexandria as it is known today. The archaeology program at that point was somewhat independent—not certainly within the city's hierarchy of programs—and the city had already acquired this Museum in Gadsby's Tavern which they had to run, and they'd also acquired the Lyceum and were in the process of preparing the Bicentennial Center, which was in its initial public phase in 1974. So, all of a sudden, in addition to Fort Ward, the city had a whole lot of historical programs and they needed to figure out how to manage them. I was tapped to be that Program Manager in 1976—a position I occupied for three and a half years. The most significant achievement of that period, I am proud to say, was—I had the good sense to hire Pam Cressey to run the archaeology program when it became part of the city's staff responsibility. Needless to say, she has done a fabulous job, in my opinion, in the last thirty years. That was an important contribution that we made. So, in that context, I was responsible for the management oversight of the Lyceum and the archaeology program in Gadsby's Tavern. Fort Ward, at the time, was still in the Recreation Department, and I don't think the Ramsey House had come to the department, so it was a work in progress. We did initiate some of the intensive hundred-year-old building surveys at that time, looking to preserve individual structures outside the historic district which were worthy of preservation but didn't at that time seem to be appropriate to expand the historic district—which has later happened—but in the [19]70s, it was a device that was put together by the preservation community as a way to establish some protection for significant buildings outside the historic district. In 1996, the Alexandria Historical Society sponsored a symposium in which they asked a number of us to take a look back at the changes in Alexandria's historical environment from 1976 to 1996 and, if you all who are involved in this project have not seen or have access to any of their records of that symposium, I would recommend it. It was an interesting, intentional look backwards but from a starting point of a particular event—the American Bicentennial—and the changes that have incrementally continued in Old Town from that time. It as an interesting experience. I gave a short talk on some of our work and how the changes continue to surprise us as we go through [phone call interruption].
Importance of Architecture Preservation and History in Alexandria	
C. Richard Bierce:	Why is architectural preservation and history important to Alexandria?

	Well, [laughter] it's the essence of why the city is significant. It's important for lots of reasons in a contemporary sense. But without the architectural context of Old Town and the close association with significant events in American history beginning with George Washington, Mr. Lee, and many players of lesser note in between, it's the essence of who this city is, and without it, we are just another medium-sized city of which there are dozens up and down the Eastern seaboard of equal or lesser significance. So, it really is the essence of who this town is and what its identity is in the public's mind. And the programs that the city has supported over the years—archaeology, research, BAR—all come together to re-enforce that identity and continue it as a fundamental attribute of who is Alexandria—to the world.
Early Years of the Office of Historic Alexandria	
C. Richard Bierce:	Oh yeah, you got the question of early years of the office. As I said, they hired me to manage these programs, which until that time had come to the city in different ways, and it was necessary to create a more unified management structure. We were initially located as a subdepartment of General Services because they had been responsible for the reconstruction and restoration projects and it was just kind of a continuation of that relationship. It was only later, after I was gone, that they were able to establish Historic Alexandria as a separate department of its own standing. It was an interesting time, and I'm happy I was able to be here and be a part of that. Then I left town for a few years. I took a job at the National Trust for Historic Preservation and, basically, wasn't involved too much in Alexandria most of the 1980s. After an interesting time there at the National Trust, I opened my own consulting firm in 1989 and decided, reasonably enough, that a good place to do that would be here in Alexandria where I had a lot of friends and obviously connections to the preservation community. And it's been a good relationship. I enjoy being here; it's comfortable, and I actually have done a lot of work for the city, for individuals and private organizations, other museums. I think I've probably in one form or another done work for just about every museum here in town with the possible exception of the Masonic Memorial. But all of the history museums and historic sites in and around Alexandria, I have had a hand in some way or another.
Opportunities to Participate in Historic Preservation	
C. Richard Bierce:	In terms of how to encourage people to get involved—well, there are numerous opportunities, and if a person doesn't come to the process with professional credentials, then obviously the first and easiest way to get involved is to be a volunteer, whether it's a tour guide or a docent or a processor at the archaeology lab or however you can figure out a way to get in the door. There is a place for volunteers, of any age. One of my sons volunteered at archaeology for a couple of years when he was in middle school, and he studied anthropology for a while in college. So there are lots of ways, lots of ways. But I think just being flexible and, in

	a sense, eclectic about how you act on your interests, there are a lot of opportunities here in the city to serve the community but also to learn and to grow. I remember one young man we worked with in the [19]70s—he was interested in archaeology but he wasn't really disciplined about his interest and he kind of overstepped the boundaries a couple of times, but we were able to sit down with him and counsel him and put him on a path where he is—I believe he studied archaeology and has become an archaeologist. So, you've just got to be responsive to and understand the needs of the people who are coming to you as volunteers and to channel their interest and their passions. Like I said, we had that 20-year retrospective in 1996, so I think one of the things that has helped me as an architect is to watch the evolution of some of the projects that I have worked on over the years, including Gadsby's and Carlyle. As the museum projects continue to mature, there is continuing research, new information, and new ways to present these sites to the public. Also, the technical evolution of how the preservation process works is constantly improving, as well as how mechanical, security, and prevention systems—all these things—can best be employed in some of these historic sites (which obviously were built long before modern technology was even conceived); and how best to adapt [these systems] while continuing to ensure the highest levels of protection for these buildings and sites. It's been a useful experience for me to be here and maintain close contact with some of these projects over the years. And I have a good relationship I think with the management of some of the sites; so it has been, I hope, mutually beneficial.
AP:	…And I do appreciate you being kind enough to talk with me today.
C. Richard Bierce:	Sure…anytime! [End]