



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

Alexandria's early social net

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In 1800, as Alexandria joined the District of Columbia, it purchased a large tract of land outside the city in today's Del Ray neighborhood and built an almshouse to care for the city's poor. For the next 125-plus years, it provided shelter and some food for Alexandria residents in need.

Over time, the Overseers of the Poor, a state-mandated organization, took over the administration of the Almshouse. The four board members of the Overseers were elected, and they administered both the Almshouse and, starting in 1830, the Soup House. Both institutions survived on the charity of Alexandria residents and limited support from the city government well into the 20th century.

The Almshouse, pictured, was built on a large tract of land. The building itself was on today's intersection of Monroe Avenue and Richmond Highway. The almost 20 acres of land surrounding the building were used by the residents to farm food to feed themselves. Originally designed to shelter the needy, the building was also assigned to residents who were sentenced for vagrancy or indebtedness.

In 1850, two of the building's 41 residents were African American women. Eve Dorsey was 102 years old, and Rachel Hodges was 100. In 1900, 13 of the 18 residents were African American. In 1926, the state of Virginia built a new, larger facility near Manassas, which the City of Alexandria and four neighboring counties used for their needy.

After selling the land in 1928, the city bought it back in 1935, after the property buyer defaulted on his loan. Alexandria built Eugene Simpson Stadium on the former Almshouse property and tore down the building in 1952.

Originally located on the west side of the 100 block of South Royal Street near Prince Street, the Soup House was the Overseers of the Poor's primary recipient of its fundraising from private charity. Multiple articles in the Alexandria Gazette in the 1840s and 50s both praised the individual donors to the Soup House and emphasized the dire need of the institution for more contributions.



1The Alexandria Almshouse, Alexandria Library/Special Collections.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The newspaper pulled the heartstrings of readers in a Jan. 26, 1859 column, which highlighted: "A poor little girl [who] made her appearance sometime before the usual hour to dispense the soup ... [her] family had nothing for Sunday except a portion of the soup they had got on Saturday last."

In March 1863, the building, which was already more than 70 years old, narrowly escaped destruction by a fire on its block. Unlike some of its neighbors, the Soup House sustained damage that the city repaired.

Alexandria's Almshouse and Soup House are evidence that Alexandria and Virginia provided for their needy early in the 19th century. Newer ideas of dealing with poverty in the 20th century eventually led to the end of both institutions, particularly as the state centralized its care for the needy in the decades before the Great Depression.

"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 staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.