



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

The Murray-Dick-Fawcett House at 250

Alexandria Times, May 12, 2022

The Murray-Dick-Fawcett House at 517 Prince St. is 250 years old, and although it is the least-altered house in Northern Virginia, this year the 1896 tin roof is being replaced and some wood repaired. The house, which is on the National Register of Historic Places as part of Alexandria's historic district, is unique because each owner added something but left previous construction in place. Piedmont oak cut in 1772 still holds up the roof of the two-room-plus-attic section. Original cabinets, woodwork and heart-pine floors remain.

Irish immigrant Patrick Murray's "well-timbered" farm near Winchester may have supplied wood. Murray added two rooms in 1784, repurposing windows and encapsulating some of the earlier roof. Then he opened a stable. The kitchen, smokehouse, laundry and privies attest to his dreams of business success. Alas, he ran into financial trouble, and in 1794 physician-investor, later mayor, Elisha Cullen Dick bought the house. The next year merchants William Newton and John Thomas Ricketts purchased it and added an ell around 1797.

In 1816, John Douglass Brown, an import-export merchant, bought the house for \$3,000, 25% less than William Smith paid in 1806. Brown recorded repair expenses in a notebook. The biggest change he made was moving the front door from Prince Street to the east side. Brown lived in the house with his family and enslaved people. His wife Mary kept her own book with recipes and homemade cures for illnesses.

Brown, also a tobacco agent, entertained clients at his house. In 1816, he paid \$34.17 for coffee "for Tav" – a merchant did not need a tavern license. In 1825 he paid \$36.06 for 128 gallons of whiskey, more than 1,000 shots!

Brown's descendants lived in the house for 184 years. John and Mary Brown's daughter Jannett married second-cousin J. Wallace Hooff in 1853 after a secret courtship memorialized in a letter found in the house in 1907. The rare stamp on it sold for \$2,850 then and \$1 million in 2019. Hooff added indoor plumbing and a "water closet" in 1854 and gas lights in 1858. During the Civil War, he worked for the occupying Union troops quartermaster, procuring food and supplies.

His daughter, Mary, married dentist Edward Stabler Fawcett. "Grampa" lived with them and their children. With 11 children, one son was eventually sent to live with relatives because it was crowded, until moving to "a little shantie" for privacy. Hooff died at age 90 after a 54-year career with the War Department.



J. Wallace Hooff, seated in chair at left, lived in the house during the Civil War and worked for the quartermaster of the occupying Union troops. This photo was taken in front of the Bank of the Old Dominion, now the Athenaeum. Photo/National Archives.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Fawcett's son Lewis opened the house for the American Historical Buildings Survey in 1936, documenting 18th-century features. When C. Joseph Reeder bought the house in 2000, he removed kitchen fireplace plaster and found metal hardware to hold pots.

Murray's half-acre lot today is .3 acres. The garden once held businesses – a painter, carpenter and a Chinese-owned laundry – and from 1912 to 1969 a two-story brick church building. Now, it is a city-owned park for visitors to enjoy while admiring the sturdy construction of a pre-Revolutionary War house.

"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.