

Alexandria Times

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Preserving the 600 block of North Pitt Street

In Alexandria, before new development, preservationists, historians and archaeologists work with developers to research, record and sometimes excavate the properties to ensure that the historical information is not lost. Once the research is complete, the final step is to creatively share the new historical narratives with the public so that we continue to build a deeper understanding of our collective history. Frequently, this takes the form of a historic interpretive sign. But sometimes more imaginative methods are found.

Pedestrians walking down the east side of the 600 block of North Pitt Street may notice a row of six stone pediments numbered 619, 621, 623, 625, 627 and 629. Three historic signs located around the corner on Wythe Street reveal the mystery: these are the street addresses for a row of townhouses that once stood there between the 1890s and the 1940s. The stone markers are a physical reminder that a small enclave of neighbors within the larger African American neighborhood known as The Berg once lived there. Over the years, dozens of Black working-class individuals and families resided in the townhouses, as recorded in census records, tax records and city directories.

If one were to have walked up the 600 block of North Pitt

Street on a Sunday afternoon in 1920, you might have encountered some of the 16 adults and 6 children that lived in the small cluster of townhouses. You might have waved to the 45-year-old Albert Johnson sitting on his stoop at 619. Or witnessed 24-year-old Malinda Holmes, a laundress, returning home from church at 621 with her three younger sisters and her mother, Georgia. You might have said hello to 40-year-old Edith Butler (Davis) who lived at 623 next door, taking a welcome break from her job at a nearby glass factory.

On your stroll, you might have seen Eliza Rollins with her 9-year-old son at 625. Eliza worked as a laundress and supplemented her income by subletting rooms to two itinerant laborers. At the next house at 627, Abraham and Louise Wright – also spelled Light – were raising their two young children as well as a teenage stepson and niece. Abraham supported the family by working in a nearby factory. And finally, at the northernmost house in the row at 629, you might have bumped into Jerry Simms, a 45-year-old plasterer, or one of his three male boarders. A single woman, 28-year-old Minnie Smith, recently arrived from South Carolina, lived in a separate unit in the back, working as a domestic.

Although residency in the



PHOTO/ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

The 600 block of N. Pitt Street.

six townhouses changed frequently from year to year, the enclave remained in place for some 50 years, serving as a home base to hundreds of people. The six stone pillars along North Pitt Street are a reminder that as Alexandria evolves and grows, and the physical evidence of history is sometimes erased, the memory of times past can be

kept alive if we are willing to think creatively.

May is National Historic Preservation Month. You can learn more about Historic Preservation in Alexandria at <https://alexandriava.gov/preservation>.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.