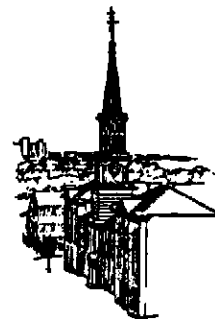


Historic Alexandria Quarterly



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THE EDUCATIONAL USE OF THE PROPERTY AT 218 NORTH COLUMBUS STREET, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA[©]

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Introduction

The building at 218 North Columbus Street and the land on which it is located have a colorful history.¹ Before the building was constructed, the land was owned by many people of historical significance. The owners include: Mistress Margaret Brent (a 17th century women's rights advocate), John Alexander (after whom the City of Alexandria was named), another John Alexander (a Trustee of the City of Alexandria and a member of the Virginia Assembly just prior to the Revolutionary War), Charles Alexander (a signer of the Fairfax Resolves and a Member of the Fairfax County Committee of

Safety just before the Revolutionary War. Charles Alexander also served as the Fairfax Commissioner for State Aid during the Revolution, and later as the President of the Fairfax Board of Overseers for the Poor). Another Charles Alexander (founder of the Washington & Alexandria Turnpike Company and a friend of George Washington) also owned this property.

The building served variously as the first free girls' school in the Commonwealth of Virginia, a major center of worship for Black Methodists in Alexandria, the first home of the Alexandria Lyceum,

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a Union prison during the Civil War, a major military academy, and the meeting hall of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. The complete history of the property is addressed elsewhere, and this article examines only the building's use as a school during the nineteenth century.²

The Female Lancasterian Free School

On June 26, 1812, Charles Alexander and his wife Mary sold the land to the Trustees of the Alexandria Academy for \$461.87½. The reason for the Alexandria Academy's purchase of the land was to establish a female Lancasterian school.

The Lancasterian system of education was established by an English Quaker named Joseph Lancaster. Lancaster developed a simple yet effective system of educating large numbers of pupils in reading, writing and arithmetic. The system was so effective that by 1808, King George IV (then Prince Regent) and a few noblemen founded the Royal Lancasterian Society to establish schools on Lancaster's model all over England. The schools quickly became popular in the United States. Among the first such schools in this country were those in Georgetown and Alexandria.³

In 1812, before the Academy's purchase of Alexander's land on North Columbus Street, the Common Council of Alexandria had adopted a resolution authorizing \$2,000 to be spent to build "a proper room upon the Academy lot [418 South Washington Street], for the purpose of being used as a Lancasterian School, for the improvement of the hearts and minds of those whose unfortunate poverty is a bar to their mental improvement." The school opened on September 12, 1812, charging \$2.50 per quarter, and educating poor children at no charge.⁴

Based on the advice of the teacher of the Lancasterian School in Georgetown, the Alexandria Academy decided against educating both boys and girls at this school, and instead purchased the land on North Columbus Street from Charles Alexander, erecting there a brick building in which to house Virginia's first female free

school.⁵ Like the boys' Lancasterian school, this school was under the control of the Trustees of the Alexandria Academy.⁶

The girls' school also benefitted from several additional bequests. The school was the beneficiary of an endowment established by Mrs. Elizabeth Washington (the wife of Lund Washington) of Hayfield, Virginia,⁷ who,

"will[ed] and bequeath[ed] to the Washington Society of Alexandria ten shares of Potomac Bank stock, also my share in the Potomac Company, the annual proceeds of which they are to apply to the education of such poor girls as they may think proper -- nor can I forbear on this solemn occasion to greet them in the name of our Holy Father, and invoke his benediction upon their efforts to rescue from poverty and the sinks of shameless immorality those sweet tho' wild blossoms, which under their fostering care and virtuous inculcations may add much to the store of human happiness. I confine this donation to my own sex because I believe that human happiness has material dependence upon our moral and religious worth."⁸

The girls' school also benefitted from the largesse of the Washington Society of Alexandria. On February 9, 1813, the Society voted to disburse to the "Washington Lancasterian Free Schools" the sum of \$500.⁹

On February 15, 1814, the Society not only appropriated another \$500 to support "the male and female Washington Free Schools for the present year" but also voted to disburse to the school \$150 from Mrs. Lund Washington's bequest.¹⁰ Similarly, on February 22, 1817, the Society is reported to have appropriated \$600 of its own funds to support the "Washington Lancasterian Free School" and "two hundred twenty dollars, the interest on the legacy of the late Mrs. Washington of Hayfield... towards the support of the Female Lancasterian free school."¹¹ George Washington's nephew Bartholomew Dandridge also contributed to the endowment of the girls' school.¹²

Miss Rachel Judge was appointed the first teacher at the girls' school,¹³ and it was subsequently run by Mrs. Fitz John Porter.¹⁴ The Lancasterian System apparently was not a continuous success in Alexandria, for, as early as December 22, 1814, the Board of Trustees of the Alexandria Academy appointed a committee to investigate the condition of both the boys' and girls' Lancasterian schools "and to enquire into their decline, if they should be found to be less prosperous than formerly."¹⁵

The history of the girls' school is enigmatic, but clearly it did not prosper as well as the boys' school, having to share space successively with another school, several teachers, and another tenant -- and ultimately losing the property due to nonpayment of taxes.¹⁶

As early as July 22, 1822, a "Hamiltonian School" run by Jonathan T. Wheat was also using the North Columbus Street address when advertising for students.¹⁷ At least part of the building appears to have been used to house teachers by the late 1820s.¹⁸ In either 1829 or 1835, the Alexandria Academy (which had been running both the boys' and girls' Lancasterian Schools) passed into private ownership, and, as a result, the Lancasterian Schools fell under the control of a special commission appointed by the Alexandria City Council.¹⁹

The City tax rolls continued to describe the building as a school through 1837, after which it was simply listed as "H[ouse] & L[ot],"²⁰ thereby indicating that the girls' school had moved by that time. The ultimate indication that the school had fallen on hard times is the fact that, on March 28, 1838, the property was "exposed to sale at public auction...to pay the arrears of taxes then due thereon to the... Common Council of Alexandria."²¹

In 1839, the building served as the first home for the Alexandria Lyceum, and was completely refurbished with the intent that it would be the Lyceum's permanent home:

We understand that arrangements have been made for thoroughly repairing and fitting up the Lancasterian School Room on North Columbus street which is to be used permanently as the hall of the

Lyceum. It is hoped that this building will be large enough to accommodate all those who may be disposed to attend.²²

However, the members of the Lyceum quickly realized that the building was too small to accommodate the large audiences for their programs, and the organization instead built a new home at 201 South Washington Street, into which it moved by 1840.²³ Mr. Hugh C. Smith purchased the property in 1840, and sold it the following year to the trustees of the Potomac Lodge No. 8 of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.²⁴

Saint John's Academy.

In October 1866, the Odd Fellows rented out the first floor of the Lodge to Saint John's Academy, a boys' military school of considerable repute in Alexandria.²⁵ The students used to engage in military drill on the empty lot between the building and Cameron Street. The boys also played baseball there until the Mayor forbade it because of the danger to passers-by. After Alexandria established a public school system in 1871, the number of local students attending St. John's Academy dropped significantly, but the increase in boarders more than made up for the loss.²⁶

Beginning in 1873, Saint John's Academy made week-long summer trips to Shepherdstown and Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, on the C&O Canal. After 1877, these trips were made by boat or train. The school had debating and drama societies, and competed with other local schools in football and baseball.²⁷ In 1877, the school had also rearranged and refurbished its class rooms to "exhibit ... all the most improved appliances now used in education." The August 31, 1877 *Alexandria Gazette* gives the following thorough description of the school's renovated quarters:

HANDSOME SCHOOL ROOMS.

The work of rearranging the school rooms in the Odd Fellows [illegible, Hall?], North Columbus street, used by St. John's Academy, is nearly completed, and the result is a suite of rooms equalled in elegance by few in the country, and by none, perhaps, in this section of it. Entering through the vestibule, which constitutes

the armory, and in which the bright barrelled rifles, in three neat racks, glitter against the blue tinted walls, you first enter the Senior class room. This is wainscoted three feet high, with alternate strips of walnut and yellow pine, highly varnished and [illegible, capped?] with walnut. Above this is a wall blackboard, running entirely around the room, four feet in height; the other five feet to the ceiling is covered with a beautiful rose tinted paper, relieved by a fine border of crimson and gold; the ceiling being paneled with a dead white, separated by slightly gilded fresco moulding from the stile of which is of a pale rose tint. All the wood work is grained oak and varnished, and the clock set into the north wall [illegible] the hours. The furniture is the newly invented "Victor" from the factory of Mr. M.C. Hodgdon, Baltimore, and possesses an advantage over any heretofore used here in folding up into a very small compass. The frame is iron, and the book box is in the lower part of the wood work, and the desk lid, by drawing two spring bolts, is made to fall and close over it, and may be locked securely, preserving the books from all depredation or dust. The seat for each desk is attached to the desk behind it, and folds up to its front. Both desks and seats are made of alternate bands of ash and walnut, handsomely finished in oil. The teacher's desk is of similar construction, but is, of course, larger, and is of walnut, with an oak arm chair. Sliding doors separate this room from the intermediate class room, immediately behind it. This is arranged and furnished like the Senior room, except that the walls are covered with dove colored paper with a high border, and that the panel of the ceiling is cream colored, stile light blue, separated by a mazarine blue moulding. Alongside of this room, though not communicating with it, is the Junior class room, with stone colored paper and paneled ceiling to match. This opens by very wide sliding doors into the lecture room, which also communicates with the Senior room. The walls are of a light green tint and the ceiling has a light panel with stone colored stile. Around the walls are arranged cases containing the fine philosophical and other instruments belonging to the Academy, and the large cabinet of minerals collected by Benjamin

Hallowell for the Alexandria Boarding School. The lecture desk is the one formerly used by the Principal in the large school room, but so rejuvenated that the old students will scarcely recognize it. It contains a spacious tank to serve as a pneumatic cistern and for other purposes. All the cases, &c, are handsomely grained in imitation of oak and painted inside a deep green to display the instruments. The carpenter's work, &c, was done by William F. Vincent; the brick work by Richard Javins; the painting and graining by Thomas L. [illegible, Monroe?]; and the paper hanging by Richard H. Rudd. The rooms are now open for inspection of our citizens and strangers visiting the city, and are well worth a visit, exhibiting, as they do, all the most improved appliances now used in education.

By 1877, Saint John's Academy had supplemented its curriculum sufficiently to qualify its graduates for admission to the University of Virginia.²⁸ In 1879, the school began administering tests (akin to today's college board examinations) in English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, and history.²⁹

Due to the school's continued growth, the school moved from the building on North Columbus to quarters on the corner of South Columbus and Duke Streets in September 1884.³⁰ During the school's residence on North Columbus Street, Richard L. Came was appointed the first City Superintendent of Public Schools (in January 1871),³¹ and his brother and fellow teacher, William F. Came, compiled and wrote the first systematic history of the City of Alexandria.³²

End Notes

1. The building now contains not only the townhouse at 218 North Columbus Street, but five other townhouses as well — at 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12 Muirs Court.
2. See "The History of the Property at 218 North Columbus Street, Alexandria, Virginia," by Roland M. Frye, Jr., on file at the Alexandria Public Library, Lloyd House, North Washington and Queen Streets, Alexandria, Virginia. See also an abbreviated version of that paper, published under the same title in *The Fireside Sentinel* (1990).
3. W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lan-casterian Schools," *William & Mary Quarterly*, (Second Series, 1941), Vol.

- 21, p. 114.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112, quoting verbatim the resolution passed on April 7, 1812, reported in *The Alexandria Gazette*. (April 10, 1812). See also *Resolution of April 11, 1812*, reported in *The Alexandria Gazette*, (April 15, 1812). The lot's address is identified in J. Macoll (ed.), Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900, (Alexandria Historical Society, 1977), p. 101. Also see "Alexandria Academy: The Birth of Universal Education in America," *The Plaque*, (Historic Alexandria Foundation: Autumn 1987). Vol. 2, p. 12; *The Alexandria Gazette*, (April 10, 1812); W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lancasterian Schools," p. 111.
 5. R.L. Carne, History of the Alexandria Academy -- Superintendent of Schools Report (August 31, 1889), p. 11-12, located in Lloyd House, Alexandria Public Library. W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lancasterian Schools," p. 114; "Alexandria Academy: The Birth of Universal Education in America," *The Plaque*, (Historic Alexandria Foundation: Autumn 1987); pp. 10 and 12. R.L. Carne, History of the Alexandria Academy; E. Cox, Historic Alexandria, Virginia, Street by Street: A Survey of Existing Early Buildings (Alexandria Historical Foundation 1976), p. 12; T. Michael Miller, "Prison Life in Civil War Alexandria," *Northern Virginia Heritage*, October 1997, pp. 9-10; J. Heitmann, A History and Manual of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows: A History of Odd Fellowship in Virginia, (Accotink, Va. 1927), p. 168; "Potomac Lodge No. 38," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (May 1927), Vol. 10, No. 5, p. 5; "Potomac Lodge No. 38," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, Vol 7, No. 4, p. 5 (April 1924); "History of Potomac Lodge, I.O.O.F.," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (April 1922), Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 6; "Demolition of an Old Schoolhouse," *The Alexandria Gazette*, (May 14, 1888); Macoll, Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900, pp. 101-102. Macoll intimates that girls may have attended the boys' Lancasterian school for a short time "[i]f any girls went with the boys to the new schoolhouse, they were not there for long," but he provides no substantiation for this conjecture. *Ibid.*, 101.
 6. W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lancasterian Schools," p. 114. See also "Demolition of an Old Schoolhouse," *The Alexandria Gazette*, (May 14, 1888).
 7. T. Michael Miller, "Prison Life in Civil War Alexandria," pp. 9-10. The bronze plaque currently affixed to the building incorrectly identifies this donor as Martha Washington. This error in identification was also made in "Recycling Hits Churches, Lodge Hall," *Alexandria Post Packet*, (January 4-10, 1978) "endowed by Martha Washington and W.B. Dandredge..." J. Heitmann, A History and Manual of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows: A History of Odd Fellowship in Virginia, p. 168; "Potomac Lodge, No. 38," *Virginia Odd Fellow* Vol. 10, No. 5, p. 5 (May 1927); "Potomac Lodge No. 38," *Virginia Odd Fellow* Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 5 (April 1924); "History of Potomac Lodge, I.O.O.F.," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 6 (April 1922).
 8. *The Alexandria Gazette*, (February 19, 1932), quoting *The Alexandria Gazette*, (February 19, 1814). This language is also quoted in W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lancasterian Schools," p. 117, and W.B. McGroarty, "Elizabeth Washington of Hayfield," *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*, Vol. 33, (1925) p. 162. See also R. W. Eaves, "A History of Educational Developments of Alexandria, Virginia, Prior to 1860," *William & Mary Quarterly*, (Second Series, 1936) Vol. 16, p. 128.
 9. Manuscript entitled "The Alexandria Academy," dated August 11, [19]28, and located in the "Alexandria Academy History" folder in Lloyd House, Alexandria Public Library.
 10. *The Alexandria Gazette*, (February 19, 1932), quoting *The Alexandria Gazette*, (February 19, 1814).
 11. *The Alexandria Gazette*, (February 25, 1817), quoted in W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lancasterian Schools," p. 117.
 12. T. Michael Miller (ed.), Alexandria's Forgotten Legacy: The Annals of William F. Carne (1983), p. 211 (located in Lloyd House, Alexandria Public Library). But see M.G. Powell, The History of Old Alexandria, Virginia (William Byrd Press, Richmond, Va. 1928), referring to Mr. Dandridge as Martha Washington's nephew on p. 156 and as her brother on p. 274; K. G. Harvey and R. Stansfield, Alexandria: a Pictorial History, (Donning Co., Norfolk, Va., n.d.), p. 61; J. Heitmann, A History and Manual of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows: A History of Odd Fellowship in Virginia, p. 168; "Potomac Lodge, No. 38," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (May 1927), Vol. 10, No. 5, p. 5; "Potomac Lodge No. 38," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (April 1924), Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 5; and "History of Potomac Lodge, I.O.O.F.," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (April 1922), Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 6. Mr. Dandridge was later appointed consul to one of the West Indian Islands; *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (May 1927), Vol. 10, No. 5, p. 5.
 13. Macoll, Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900, p. 102; R.L. Carne, History of the Alexandria Academy; *The Alexandria Gazette* (July 31, 1859).

14. K. G. Harvey and R. Stansfield, Alexandria: a Pictorial History (Donning Co., Norfolk, Va., n.d.), p. 61. Mrs. Porter was the widowed mother of General Fitz John Porter. J. Heitmann, A History and Manual of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows: A History of Odd Fellowship in Virginia, p. 168: "Potomac Lodge, No. 38," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (May 1927), Vol. 10, No. 5, p. 5; and Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 5; (April 1924), "History of Potomac Lodge, I.O.O.F.," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (April 1922), Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 6.
15. R.L. Carne, History of the Alexandria Academy, p. 12, Macoll, Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900 p. 102; *Alexandria Gazette*, (July 31, 1859). Unfortunately, the committee's report does not appear in the minutes of the Board of Trustees.
16. Macoll, Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900, p. 102. Both schools were still in operation in 1817. E. Cox, Historic Alexandria, Virginia, Street by Street: A Survey of Existing Early Buildings, p. xix.
17. *The Alexandria Gazette* (July 22, 1822). See also T. Michael Miller, "Prison Life in Civil War Alexandria," pp. 9-10.
18. Macoll, Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900, p. 102.
19. One authority reports the date as 1835. W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lancasterian Schools," pp. 111, 115). However, an article in *The Alexandria Gazette* reports the date as June 12, 1829. *The Alexandria Gazette* (July 31, 1859).
20. Alexandria City Land and Personal Property Tax Assessments, Ward 3, page 11 (1829, 1830 and 1831: "Lancasterian School"), page 13 (1832: "School House"), page 11 (1833: "Lancaster. Academy"), page 11 (1834: "academy"), page 11 (1835: "school"), and page 11 (1837: "Female Lanc. School H."). The building is not listed in the 1836 tax rolls. Alexandria City Land and Personal Property Tax Assessments, Ward 3, page 11 (1838), page 12 (1839), page 13 (1840), and page 13 (1841).
21. Alexandria Deed Book "A-3," page 183. At least one authority surmises that the Lancasterian system may have been dropped by the girls' school prior to the sale of the Columbus Street property in 1840. W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lancasterian Schools," p. 115, n. 1. In 1841, the school occupied a small part of the Orphans' Asylum at the southeast corner of Wolfe and Pitt Streets. Manuscript by Charles McNett, Jr., entitled "Education in Alexandria to 1900," at p. 2, assigned card catalogue reference number "Va. Ref. 370.9755 M" and located in the "Alexandria Schools -- Early" folder, Lloyd House, Alexandria Public Library; Manuscript entitled "Culture on the Potomac: The Arts and Learning in Old Alexandria, 1790-1860" (author's name not given), located in the "Alexandria Schools -- Early" folder, Lloyd House, Alexandria Public Library.
22. *The Alexandria Gazette*, (January 3, 1839).
23. *The Alexandria Gazette*, (January 15, 1839): At a meeting of the Lyceum, held January 9th 1839 it was resolved, "That no lads under the age of sixteen, shall be admitted -- and that the money of such as may have purchased tickets be refunded on their returning the same. The Lyceum have been compelled to adopt this unpleasant rule, on account of the size of their Hall." See Alexandria City Land and Personal Property Tax Assessments, Ward 3, page 13 (1840), indicating that the building at 218 North Columbus Street was vacant in 1840.
24. Alexandria Deed Book "B-3," pp. 210-213 (recorded January 14, 1842). See also W.B. McGroarty, "Alexandria's Lancasterian Schools," p. 115; E. Cox, Historic Alexandria, Virginia, Street by Street: A Survey of Existing Early Buildings, p. 12; J. Heitmann, A History and Manual of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows: A History of Odd Fellowship in Virginia, p. 168; "Potomac Lodge, No. 38" *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (May 1927), Vol. 10, No. 5, p. 5; and Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 5 (April 1924), and "History of Potomac Lodge, I.O.O.F.," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (April 1922), Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 5-6.
25. J. Heitmann, A History and Manual of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows: A History of Odd Fellowship in Virginia, p. 168; *Alexandria Port Packet* (January 4-10, 1978), p. 3. See also "Potomac Lodge, No. 38," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (May 1927), Vol. 10, No. 5, p. 5; and Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 5 (April 1924); and "History of Potomac Lodge, I.O.O.F.," *Virginia Odd Fellow*, (April 1922), Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 5; all three of which sources refer to the lease of the "lower floors." Given that all other records indicate that the building had only two floors at this time, the use of the plural in the word "floors" may be assumed to be a typographical error. A.W. Robbins, "History of Saint John's Academy, 1833-1895," *Alexandria History*, (1983), Vol. V, p. 29. Mr. Robbins' article provides an interesting history of the school.
26. *Ibid.* See also Manuscript by Charles McNett, Jr., entitled "Education in Alexandria to 1900," at p. 7, assigned card catalogue

reference number "Va. Ref. 370.9755 M" and located in the "Alexandria Schools -- Early" folder, Lloyd House, Alexandria Public Library. In fact, Saint John's Academy advertised itself in 1877 as "the oldest boarding school in Virginia." *The Alexandria Gazette* (August 31, 1877).

27. A.W. Robbins, "History of Saint John's Academy, 1833-1895," *Alexandria History*, (1983), Vol. V, p. 29.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid, pp. 29-30.
30. Ibid. The 1884 departure date is further corroborated by the July 1885 Sanborn Map of Alexandria (sheet 5), which indicates that, as of that month, the first floor of the building was vacant and the second floor was being used as the "I.O.O.F. Hall," and by St. John's Academy's advertisements in the *Alexandria Gazette* from August 4 through September 5, 1884, announcing the school's new address as Duke and Columbus Streets. See page 3 of all issues of *The Alexandria Gazette* during this period except for August 29, September 3 and September 4, where the advertisement appears on page 1. See also *The Alexandria Gazette*, (August 4, 1884 news report of St. John's Academy's move to "more commodious quarters." But see E. Cox, Historic Alexandria, Virginia, Street by Street: A Survey of Existing Early Buildings, p. 14, reporting that the school purchased the new quarters in November 1888. Although Ethelyn Cox is generally a reliable source, I nevertheless must give credence to Robbins' statement because his statement is corroborated by both the Sanborn Map and the *Alexandria Gazette*, and because Mr. Robbins' study specifically addressed the history of Saint John's Academy. Cox's book, on the other hand, was far more general in scope and intent, providing a summary history of numerous Alexandria buildings.
31. K. G. Harvey and R. Stansfield, Alexandria: a Pictorial History, (Donning Co., Norfolk, Va., n.d.), p. 62; R.L. Carne, History of the Alexandria Academy.
32. *The Fireside Sentinel*, (October 1987), Vol. 1, p. 64, citing W.F. Carne, Alexandria's Lost Legacy -- The Annals of William F. Carne.

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