



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

From Opulent Home to Military Hospital and Back Again

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Image: Tuscan Villa (left) and the Vowell-Smith house, or Wolfe Street Hospital (right). Photo, Matthew Brady, National Archives and Records Administration.

The massive Italianate villa dating back to the Civil War visible in this photograph still stands at 510 Wolfe St.

In the early 19th century, a much smaller, two-story wood-frame house — owned by John Vowell, a local merchant — occupied the parcel. The property later was transferred to his daughter, wife of one of Alexandria's wealthiest and most influential lawyers: Francis L. Smith.

The well-known attorney replaced the Vowell homestead with one of the largest homes ever built in Alexandria. The three-story brick structure was topped by a roof deck, which offered sweeping views of the Potomac and rolling hills of the countryside to the west and south.

At the start of the Civil War, Smith and his family fled Alexandria for safer environs in Richmond. Federal authorities quickly seized the home — as well as other elegant houses around it — for military use.

Smith's dwelling initially was converted into the headquarters of Gov. John Slough, an aggressive, idiosyncratic man known for his peculiar behavior and hostile temper. Once a member of the Ohio legislature, Slough was expelled after assaulting another lawmaker.

His military career proved more fruitful. He advanced rapidly after defeating a Confederate force in New Mexico. The victory led to his appointment as military governor of Alexandria.

The promotion came despite the fact that he launched his successful attack in New Mexico in defiance of his superior's direct orders. President Lincoln, eager for positive news from the front, overlooked the blatant disregard for military discipline.

As the war waged on, the Smith home was transformed again, this time into a [military hospital](#) where upwards of 100 soldiers recuperated in its opulent rooms. Several of the sick and wounded men allegedly carved their names in the substantial woodwork. The towered [Tuscan villa](#) in the background of the photograph, also served as a hospital ward.

Smith returned to Alexandria after the war and restored his sacked dwelling as a residence. It is there, in 1870, that Smith explained to his well-known client Robert E. Lee the tremendous challenges





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

associated with regaining the title to his wife's family estate known as "Arlington," which had been seized and converted into a national cemetery.

As a major Alexandria landowner, Smith was no stranger to such issues. A parcel of his property at Church and South Washington streets also had been confiscated to create the Freedmen's Cemetery.

"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 Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.