



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### A blessing and a meal with a future pope

*Alexandria Times, November 26, 2015*

*Image: Cardinal Karol Wojtyla visited Alexandria in 1976. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.*

Pope Francis' recent trip to Washington was undoubtedly one of the big events of this year. Political posturing, road closures and winning Halloween costumes at the White House trick-or-treating event were some of the many inevitable outcomes of the papal visit.

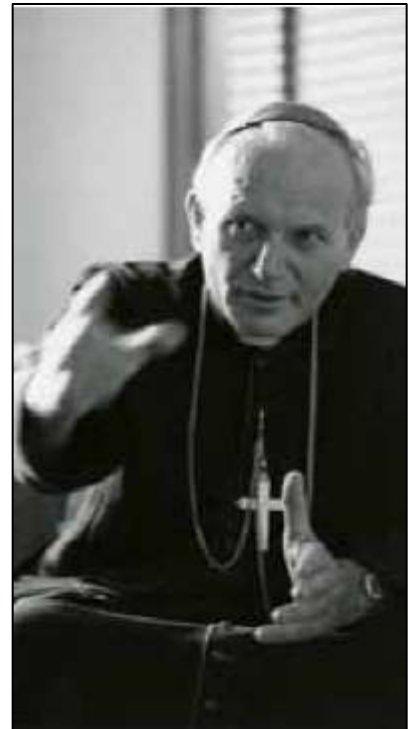
But did you know that a future pope once visited Alexandria, blessed an apartment and ate lunch at Gadsby's Tavern? Polish-American journalist John Szostak, who developed a personal relationship with the future Pope John Paul II when he was still the Archbishop of Krakow and was known as Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, tells the story.

In his book "In the Footsteps of Pope John Paul II," Szostak relates that he had been in correspondence with the future Pontiff for over a decade, but they hadn't met until a visit to the United States in 1976. The Cardinal came to deliver a speech at Catholic University and visited Polish-American Catholic communities along the East Coast.

After finally meeting the future Pope in person after he delivered his speech, Szostak was asked to show the Cardinal around the D.C. area the next day. Szostak writes that on this visit to Alexandria, it was just Wojtyla, himself, and the Cardinal's driver. While they drove down I-95, Szostak had the inspiration to ask the Cardinal to bless his home, which was a custom in Poland. Szostak remembered that it was one of the few times that his wife took his two children to McDonald's, so it was only the future pontiff and himself at their residence in Parkfairfax on Valley Drive.

The family hadn't expected the visit, and en route Szostak wrote he was worried the apartment "might be a mess, which it was," and the future Pope almost fell after stepping on a Batmobile toy car. Szostak's account records Wojtyla's gracious response to this mishap as "a sign of a happy home."

After the Cardinal's brief blessing of the apartment, he asked to use the phone. Szostak remarked that it must have been the first time that the Cardinal used a wall phone. He was especially fascinated by the telephone's touch dial, rather than a rotary dial. Szostak's wife, Connie, didn't return until after the visit, and was both excited by the Cardinal's blessing of their home and exasperated that the visit occurred "the one time she had said to heck with everything and taken the kids to lunch at McDonald's," Szostak wrote.





**Office of Historic Alexandria  
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

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Szostak wrote he got another chance to show the future Pope around Alexandria, after visiting Philadelphia and Baltimore with the Cardinal and a delegation of 19 bishops as Wojtyla's press liaison. Szostak wrote he brought them to Gadsby's Tavern, which was a draw to the delegation not just because George Washington had eaten there, but so had the Polish Revolutionary War hero, Tadeusz Kosciusko.

The Cardinal spied a shop sign across from the restaurant, announcing "Old Warsaw Galleries." The gallery owner was an old friend of the future John Paul II from Krakow, Szostak wrote. After the Cardinal returned to Gadsby's, he was awarded a key to the city by then Vice-Mayor Nora Lamborne.

*"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.*