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Out of the Attic

The Lyceum: From salon of learning to makeshift hospital

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Image: The Lyceum Hall Hospital, Andrew J. Russel, 1861-1865. Courtesy The Lyceum: Alexandria's History Museum, Office of Historic Alexandria.

When legendary schoolmaster Benjamin Hallowell founded The Lyceum, Alexandria's adult center for learning and knowledge, in 1839, he anticipated the inclusion of the town library, exhibits on natural history and life sciences, and lectures on topics of interest to learned people of the town.

But even Hallowell, a prominent Quaker and avid abolitionist, could not have projected the destructive forces that would tear the nation apart just two decades later, and put an end to his legacy of a local institution for popular education.



When the Civil War reached Alexandria in the spring of 1861, public expectations were high that a resolution to the conflict would take only a matter of weeks. But after the first Battle of Bull Run in July of that year, many residents realized that the rout of Union forces there meant a prolonged military commitment and escalation was in the offing.

Alexandria was soon besieged by hundreds of wounded soldiers being moved from battlefields to the west and south, with little in the way of medical facilities to address even their basic needs. Union Army authorities were forced to develop a plan for emergency care, and quickly commandeered large buildings and homes in the occupied city, and transformed them into hospitals within days.

This seizure of private property barely gave owners or building occupants time to make orderly arrangements for their possessions before eviction. In addition to the wounded, growing numbers of soldiers and civilians were sickened from deteriorating sanitary conditions, and these wrenching patients were often triaged on surrounding sidewalks awaiting room in available institutions.

The majestic Lyceum building, one of the city's finest examples of Greek Revival architecture, was one of the earlier buildings taken for medical purposes, and its contents of books and exhibits were abandoned to the surrounding sidewalks to make way for the 80 beds that were installed on both floors of the structure.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Renamed Lyceum Hall Hospital, this 1862 view of the hospital taken by the official military photographer Andrew Russell shows Union troops just within the cast iron fence around the facility. The adjacent area of South Washington Street eventually grew into a major medical and Contraband social service center serving escaped slaves who had sought refuge in Alexandria from the deep South.

Among the care facilities added were the Downtown Baptist Church, two adjoining residences at 321 and 323 S. Washington St., and a smallpox hospital near the south end of the street that at the time terminated at Great Hunting Creek. Day and night, bloodied doctors and nurses crisscrossed the wide roadway endlessly attending to their ever-growing list of patients.

The Downtown Baptist Church was closed and confiscated in 1862, after the pastor refused a directive to say a prayer for President Abraham Lincoln. It was immediately outfitted as a hospital with 150 beds, while the smaller Lyceum Hall Hospital, directly across the street, was then designated as a ward of the larger facility.

In 1863, the twin houses one block south were identified for use as the Contrabands Hospital and School, but these homes were too small and ill equipped to handle the exploding numbers of Contrabands reaching the city.

Three months after being established, the poorly resourced hospital was described by social relief worker Julia Wilbur as having only ten female patients, attended to by an untrained nurse who slept on the floor. Beds and blankets were scarce at the segregated hospital, while piles of similar government-issued supplies were stored nearby for Union soldiers.

By 1864, the deaths of Contrabands from illness rose into the hundreds, and land across from the Smallpox Hospital was confiscated for the Contrabands and 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.