



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Parkfairfax: Alexandria's other 1940s treasure

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Image: Parkfairfax, 1950s. Frederick Suffa, Courtesy of William Suffa.



In 1941, at the urging of the Roosevelt Administration, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company broke ground on the development that would become known as Parkfairfax. The garden apartments that they built are with us today as condos in what is now a National Historic District. What was once a novel idea in terms of development is now considered classic and worthy of preservation.

Metropolitan Life Insurance actually had experience in the construction and management of apartment complexes from other developments in the United States. They hired Leonard Schultze & Associates to design the buildings and Gilmore D. Clarke and Michael Rapuano to design the landscape.

The most memorable examples of their other properties were Parkchester in the Bronx and Parcmerced in San Francisco. Unlike those two developments, Parkfairfax doesn't have any high-rise buildings. Instead, 285 garden apartment units were built. The initial rental rates were \$61.25 for a one-bedroom and \$90 for a two-bedroom per month.

Notable residents of the development included future presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. The development also included a prefabricated school that opened in 1943. Metropolitan Life Insurance donated the school property to the City of Alexandria, which named it after Major General Charles Barrett of the Marine Corps, who died in service to his country earlier that year.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Parkfairfax was converted into condominiums in the 1970s. One of its residents during that period was John Szostak, a Polish-American journalist. Szostak served as a translator and unofficial guide to the future Pope John Paul II when he visited the Washington area in 1976 as a Cardinal. The future pope granted Szostak's request that he bless his home.

Parkfairfax was designated a National Historic District in 1999. Housing in the development is considerably more expensive than its original offerings in 1943.

May is Preservation Month, a time when communities across the country celebrate historic preservation locally. The City of Alexandria has been a leader in the field of historic preservation, from the creation of the country's third oldest historic district in 1946 to the start of Alexandria Archaeology in 1961.

"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 staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.