



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### The forgotten ubiquity of the Zouaves

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*Image: Children's Zouave-inspired spelling game, late 1800s. Fort Ward Museum collection. Photo, Melanie Gonzalez, Fort Ward Museum.*

With the 160th anniversary of the Marshall House incident this year, many will reflect on the first Union and Confederate casualties of the Civil War. While Colonel Ellsworth and James Jackson center the story, less focus is placed on the makeup of Colonel Ellsworth's regiment, the 11th New York Infantry, known as the Fire Zouaves.



Though Zouave units were used by both sides during the Civil War, they were not American in origin. Starting in the 1830s, the French Army created a class of infantry regiments based on the dress and fighting style of North African cultures, like the Zouaoua tribe in Algeria.

Unmistakable in a uniform of baggy trousers, short open-front jacket, sash and fez, the Zouaves distinguished themselves with a fast, agile, almost theatrical fighting style that earned them many accolades. Zouave units were used sporadically in Britain, Poland, Spain and Brazil, fighting in local disputes as well as the first and second World Wars. The last Zouave unit was disbanded from the French Army after the Algerian War in 1962.

The "Blue and Gray" has become synonymous with the Civil War and led to the marginalization of Zouaves in American culture. The Zouaves found prominence during the war after the death of Colonel Ellsworth, when commemorative objects such as pins, envelopes, poetry and ceramicware, exploded onto the market.

His death also led to the creation of other Zouave units, the 44th New York Volunteer Infantry was even known as 'Ellsworth's Avengers.' Zouave popularity was not confined to America and was a larger part of their contemporary cultural zeitgeist than is commonly realized.

Zouave representations can be found on cigarette brands, have shown up in TV and movies like Buster Keaton's "The Playhouse" and Margaret Mitchell's "Gone With the Wind," been depicted by artists such as Winslow Homer and Vincent Van Gogh, and used in children's toys like the spelling game pictured here. A statue, "The Zouave," still stands on the Pont de l'Alma bridge over the Seine in Paris and is used by locals to gauge its water levels, a monument to these once great cultural influencers.

Almost 60 years after the last Zouave unit disbanded has seen them fall from the collective conscious. The Fort Ward Museum collection has several Zouave jackets and associated militaria, as well as objects from Ellsworth's memorialization. When Fort Ward Museum reopens, visitors will be able to see exhibits on Zouaves in "Fighting in Style" and "The Marshall House Incident."



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

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*“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 and invited guests.*