



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Uptown: From 1796 Platt to National Historic District

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**A**fter last week's column on "Colored Rosemont," it would seem remiss of us not to feature the Uptown/Parker-Gray Historic District to which it belongs. Although the streets of the district were laid out in the 1796 street grid of Alexandria, the area known initially as "Uptown" didn't experience extensive development until after the Civil War.

Though it's now associated with the two Parker-Gray Schools, the area was also once the bustling center of African American businesses in Alexandria. Today, its designation as a historic district reflects Alexandria's desire to celebrate and preserve its African American history. The designation as a National Historic District also reflects residents' concern about the speed at which development in the city is progressing.

While the district was on the 1796 street grid, the first time insurance maps show any large-scale building is in 1877. The initial development was bounded by First Street to the north, Princess to the south, with North Patrick and North West streets to the east and west.

By 1902, the maps show significant development, with rowhouses and their accompanying outhouses in a density that conformed with the rest of Old Town. Uptown's large area included two African American neighborhoods with distinct names: "The Hump," and "Colored Rosemont." The large geographic area of the district meant that not all of its residents were African American, but a 1939 Works Progress Administration survey map listed a total of 33 out of 38 blocks as having greater than 70% of their residents of "a race other than white."

Uptown was more than a residential district to Alexandria's African American community during the days of 20th-century racial segregation. Queen and North Henry streets were the hubs where African American dentists, lawyers and small business owners set up their offices and stores.

The 1100 block of Queen Street, between N. Fayette and today's Richmond Highway, was sometimes referred to as "The Block" and had a particularly high concentration of businesses catering to African American residents of Alexandria.

The opening of housing restrictions in Alexandria, especially the adoption of a voluntary open housing resolution by City Council in 1967, increased the housing and business location options for African American residents and business owners.

While the initial demographic response according to the census shows an even higher concentration of African American residents in what has become known as the Parker-Gray District through the 1980s, the census also shows lower population numbers as a key factor in that trend. Indeed, the majority of new African American residents in Alexandria moved west of Quaker Lane, into suburban developments like residents of other races.

One interesting side effect of the 1984 designation of Parker-Gray as a historic district separate from the Old and Historic District was the preservation of some of its newer buildings. In particular, the Capitol Theatre at 1101 Queen St. and the Carver Theater at 1120 Queen St. represent the mid-century modern evolution of the district in the middle of the last century.

There's much more to the history of the Uptown/ Parker-Gray District, including the history of how it became a National Historic District. For more information on Parker-Gray, please visit



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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[https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/VLR\\_to\\_transfer/PDFN\\_oms/100-0133\\_Uptown-Parker\\_Gray\\_2011\\_FINAL\\_amended\\_nomination.pdf](https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/VLR_to_transfer/PDFN_oms/100-0133_Uptown-Parker_Gray_2011_FINAL_amended_nomination.pdf)

*“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.*