



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Mapping gay space in Northern Virginia

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In 1964, a businessman named Bob Damron began publishing what he called “The Address Book.” Inside were listings of bars and public spaces that he considered friendly to gay men at a time when much of the country was openly opposed to homosexuality.

While most of the listings were from Damron’s personal experiences in large, metropolitan areas of the United States, eventually, locations in smaller cities and suburbs made their way onto what is now known as the “Damron Guides.” Now, thanks to a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant, historians Amanda Regan, Ph.D and Eric Gonzaba, Ph.D – who met while in graduate school at George Mason University – have begun to map the listings of the “Damron Guides.”

At the moment, their project at MappingtheGayGuides.org lists all of the locations from the 1965 guide through 1980. The 1965 guide only lists five locations in Virginia: one in Roanoke, one in Richmond, one in Norfolk and two in Virginia Beach.

Damron’s readers had more options in the District of Columbia, which had 14 listings in that publication. Except for Johnnie’s Bar in Southeast, all of the listings in Washington were in the Northwest quadrant.

The number of listings expanded as time went on, although the number of cities sometimes didn’t. For example, the 1974 guide had 25 listings in the Commonwealth of Virginia, but 22 of those 25 were in Norfolk or Richmond. The first time a location in Alexandria is listed in “The Address Book” is in the 1976 guide, which was Steve’s Restaurant on what was then Jefferson Davis Highway, although the wooded area around the Iwo Jima Memorial had been mistakenly listed as an Alexandria location in the previous year’s publication.

A bookstore called the Black Fox Saddlery, Ltd. joined Steve’s in the 1979 edition before both listings disappeared from the 1980 publication. Those two listings, however briefly they stayed in business, let local gay men know that they weren’t alone in Alexandria and that there were public spaces where they could be themselves.

The internet has substantially hurt the business of printed travel guides, and the Damron Guides will soon no longer be available in paper form. Thanks to a three-year NEH grant, Regan and Gonzaba plan to map the locations from the 1981 to 2000 guides, but the effort to do so is substantially more than the first 15 years due to the expansion of the guides.

One of the most interesting aspects, when one visits the project, is to see the ebb and flow of establishments that made it onto the guide. If the number of listings reflects progress in terms of sexual orientation, then progress was not linear by any means, especially in Alexandria.

Alexandria is celebrating Pride Month this June. For more information on what the city is doing to celebrate, please visit <https://www.alexandriava.gov/LGBTQ>.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

“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.