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Out of the Attic

Benjamin Hallowell: Early Alexandria educator

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Image: Benjamin Hallowell

Last month's reopening of Alexandria's public schools inspired us to revisit one of Alexandria's first educators: Benjamin Hallowell. Perhaps best known as a schoolmaster for boys in Alexandria's upper class, including Robert E. Lee, Hallowell was also a founder of the Alexandria Library, the Alexandria Lyceum and the Alexandria Water Company.

Known to his contemporaries as a staunch abolitionist, Hallowell's push for progress continued long after he passed away, as his daughter Caroline Hallowell Miller became a prominent suffragist.

Hallowell was born into the Quaker faith in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. In his autobiography, he relates anecdotes of being a less than model student, including trying to skip class to go fishing, by falsely claiming to have lost his hat, which was a dress code requirement. His mother's solution of sewing her own hat onto his head with a strap cured young Benjamin's amnesia about his hat's location, and he promptly attended school with the required headgear.

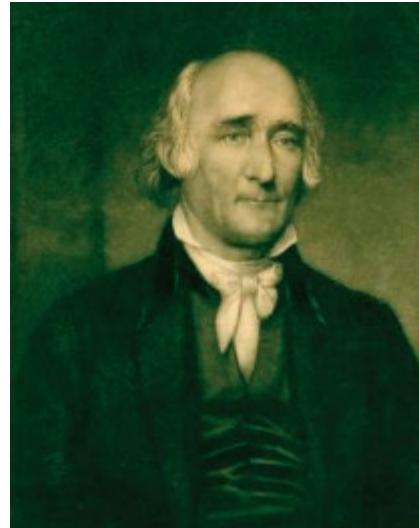
Benjamin moved to Alexandria in 1824 starting as a teacher at the Fairview School. He established his first boys' boarding school at the age of 25. The first Hallowell School was located at 609 Oronoco St., on the corner of North Washington. In 1826, he moved his residence and school to 220 N. Washington St., on the corner of Queen Street, after a trying time, which included the deaths of several of his children to scarlet fever.

Caroline was born during the time Hallowell and his wife Margaret lived at 220 N. Washington St. – or the Lloyd House as it is known today. They rented from the widow Hooe, who apparently was very lenient in collecting rent on time.

Hooe's death necessitated that the Hallowells move again, and this time, Benjamin converted the old sugar refinery and tobacco barn next door into a schoolhouse. "Brimstone Castle" as it came to be known, served as the Alexandria Boarding School's location under Hallowell's direction until 1859, although he did have to take a sabbatical for a few years for health reasons.

Hallowell's other contributions to our city include founding the Lyceum in 1834 and serving as its first president. Sensitive to the polarization of its day, the Lyceum Society had to ban discussions on politics and religion. Today, that building still stands at the corner of Washington and Prince Streets, with its Greek-revival columns outlasting the buildings that have surrounded it.

Benjamin Hallowell played an important role in making Alexandria a modern city during the first 60 years of the 19th century. But this week we highlight his work in educating both Alexandria students





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

and those who moved to Alexandria to attend his schools. Benjamin Hallowell stands as an icon in the history of education in Alexandria.

"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.