Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia

Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

Christmas of the 1880s and 90s in Alexandria

Alexandria Times, December 16, 2021

Image: Alexandria's Christmas traditions have changed since the drum and fife bands and shots from firearms shook the night air on Christmas Eve in the 1880s and 1890s. Photo, Sam Kittner for Visit Alexandria



The end of Reconstruction in 1877 led to a version of Alexandria seeking to establish a new normal and reestablish a hierarchy that existed before the Civil War. The development of new Christmas traditions during the 1880s and 1890s served as a means to reset what Christmas meant to a segregated Alexandria.

These new traditions also reflected larger trends about Christmas that Americans both in the North but especially in the South embraced, as many sought to forget the upheaval of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The Alexandria Gazette consistently noted the continuation of the role of social clubs in the celebration of the holiday. The newspaper also chronicled the tradition of drums, fireworks and firearms use that has fortunately faded from normal practice in our city in its Christmas reports between 1880 and 1895.

The Gazette's Christmas reports in 1885, 1890 and 1895 mention that not only did many citizens of Alexandria hold open houses on Christmas, but so did several social clubs. The 1890 report specifically mentioned the "Bachelors, Alexandria, and Literary Clubs" as examples of this social club hospitality.

The newspaper also emphasized the consumption of "turkey, cold ham, plum pudding, and mince pie," both in familial and social settings. While the newspaper mentioned religious services in connection to the holiday, they garnered only a passing mention.

Frequently mentioned and perhaps unfamiliar to modern readers was the use of musical instruments, fireworks and firearms to make noise, especially during the night before Christmas. As the 1895 article stated, "Parties with drums and fifes paraded the street hours before daybreak, and those whom the cannon crackers and shotguns failed to arouse were awakened by martial music." After dark that year, the Gazette noted that "numbers of young men paraded the streets and discharged blank cartridges from guns and pistols."

Historic Alexandria wishes all viewers of this column the company of family and friends, whether that be virtual or in person. We also wish you Christmas Eve and Night without the interruption of drums, firecrackers and firearms that earlier residents experienced.

"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.