



City of Alexandria  
Office of Historic Alexandria  
*Alexandria Legacies*  
**Oral History Program**



**Project Name:** *Alexandria Legacies*

**Title:** *Interview with C. Richard Bierce*

**Date of Interview:** *March 26, 2001*

**Location of Interview:** *Unknown*

**Interviewer:** *Unknown*

**Transcriber:** *Lindsay Blackford*

**Abstract:** As part of the development of a Lyceum exhibit commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Bicentennial, C. Richard Bierce was interviewed in 2001. During this interview he shares his thoughts on Alexandria in the early [19]70s, just prior to the Bicentennial, in terms of the City's historical consciousness or attitude toward historical preservation.

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<b>Introductions</b>	
Interviewer:	[Tape begins just after the interviewer and interviewee are introduced.] When did you first come to Alexandria? How long have you been in town?
C. Richard Bierce:	1973.
Interviewer:	Right before our project then. I'll make a note of that.
C. Richard Bierce:	Which [project]?
Interviewer:	The Lyceum Project.
C. Richard Bierce:	I was involved in that?
Interviewer:	You weren't?
C. Richard Bierce:	Not at that time.
Interviewer:	Later on the conversion. Did you work on that to City Museums? [19]80 to—
C. Richard Bierce:	Well, it was a state until [19]83.
Interviewer:	Right. Then there was that...
C. Richard Bierce:	I had Jean's [Federico] job from 1976 to 1980. So staff was ours, but the building was still state funded.
Interviewer:	Was still run...okay, that's right.
C. Richard Bierce:	So [19]83, I don't know who was here. Susan or Jean might have been here by then.
Interviewer:	[Sound of agreement] I think she started in [19]83.
C. Richard Bierce:	So that part of it... you know I had some a good time. [Laughs.]...
Interviewer:	...All right. Basically the questions I have—this is for possible use in the exhibit that we're putting together on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Bicentennial in Alexandria. And a large part of the story is going to have to do with the Lyceum as Bicentennial Center as well as the restoration of Carlyle and Gadsby's as Bicentennial projects. Well, community projects done with an eye toward the coming Bicentennial. So, I guess first I wanted to get your thoughts and feelings on Alexandria in the early [19]70s, just prior to the bicentennial in terms of maybe historical consciousness or attitude toward historical preservation. Any comments you have along those lines.
<b>Thoughts on Urban Renewal and the Carlyle/Gadsby Projects</b>	
C. Richard Bierce:	As I said, I arrived here in 1973, and I had been hired by Everette Fauber to run the field office for his architectural firm out of Lynchburg. He had been granted—awarded—two projects in Alexandria preparing for the

	Bicentennial. Both the Carlyle House restoration, which was a restoration in the true sense of the word, and the Gadsby's Tavern rehabilitation project, which involved some restoration but mostly consisted of upgrading mechanical/electrical systems and installing a period restaurant. So, he had been in a good place at the right time to land these projects in early 1972. So it was clear that the town was—public sector and private sector—was gettin' ready for the Bicentennial, They correctly saw that a lot of the events that would be commemorated had direct relationship to the history of the city. So they were prepared to take center stage and they did.
Interviewer:	So when you came in then, they were already...
C. Richard Bierce:	It was rollin'.
Interviewer:	Getting a lot of attention...
C. Richard Bierce:	[Softer and interrupting] It was rollin'.
Interviewer:	It was very anticipated, was very much anticipating these projects...
C. Richard Bierce:	Absolutely.
Interviewer:	As major landmarks. Okay.
C. Richard Bierce:	Gadsby's is a National Landmark and Carlyle is on the National Register independently, and events prior to the Revolution at both properties were well-known and well appreciated.
Interviewer:	To what extent do you think there was a connection between the approaching Bicentennial in those days and the end of widespread urban renewal in Old Town? Was there any connection? Or had urban renewal kind of run its course by that period of time?
C. Richard Bierce:	Well—I think it probably had because the architectural disasters that was the result of urban renewal. I mean I think there were still projects still in the pipeline, but the Holiday Inn site, 400-block King Street, had not been initiated at that point, nor had the 500 block for the Courthouse site, but they were both pretty much predetermined at that point. And in fact, I hired the City Archaeologist in 1976 with a specific objective, her first project being the 400 block and then 500 block as the last part of that urban renewal.
Interviewer:	That was Pam [Cressey].
C. Richard Bierce:	Demolition derby. Yes, it was Pam Cressey, who is still here today. Best thing I ever did for the city [Laughs].
Interviewer:	So then what w[ere] the conditions that you faced in the beginning, both the Carlyle project and Gadsby project? What do you remember about the condition of each site prior to the beginning, as those projects began?
C. Richard Bierce:	You mean physical conditions primarily?

Interviewer:	Yeah. What were you faced with in terms of restoration and rehabilitation.
<b>Carlyle House</b>	
C. Richard Bierce:	<p>Well, starting with the Carlyle House—it was a wreck. It had been deteriorating over its entire life span, and its succession of owners had tried various Band-aid kinds of fixes, but none was ultimately completely successful. And those of the community who remember, of course, it was almost completely and was in fact for a while, completely encapsulated by the Mansion House Hotel. [The Mansion House Hotel was] built by James Green in phases beginning in the 1850s. An early so-called restoration, early in the twentieth century, removed one wing of that hotel, which physically abutted the north face of the Carlyle House, but the creation of the hotel involved tremendous change in elevation of the native grade. And so at the time we got the house, it was sitting on a little stump here that completely surrounded the house, but it was about twelve feet above the then prevailing grade. So the whole structure was teetering precariously on this pile of stone [laughs a little] and it was in a pretty sad shape. The first task that the Fauber firm had was to document the hotel prior to its demolition, which was in itself a major, major controversy that was pretty well done by the time I got here, but the proponents of “Save Everything” thought tearing down this nineteenth-century hotel—which was a fine example of its type—was a sacrilege. But the prevailing sense was that the Bicentennial and the events leading to American Independence had a higher value. Park Authority pushed and won that point of view. And why it was so controversial, because a large part of their accusation and early development funding was through HUD [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development]. So, there was a layer of review that far exceeded the normal that you’d expect from the Alexandria Government and Board of Review. So that was the challenge. The physical challenge, as well as the political and financial challenges of dealing with that whole half block, which resembled in 1973 nothing at all like it did in anything in the eighteenth century. And then it wasn’t a total surprise to some, but the fact the Bank of Alexandria had been encapsulated by that hotel and survived under it all with a high degree of integrity surprised a lot of people, so that caused a major change in the development direction for the Park Authority. They had to save the Bank building and they weren’t prepared to do that. So it set from that point on for another six or seven years before some private/public partnerships put it back together. So restoration of the house to the best of our scholarly ability was the objective, but the changes in landscape, changes in topography, and the fact that a portion of the original Carlyle property had been sold off and had been built upon by commercial property to the south really prevented that sense of regaining the site in its historic configuration. Even though the bank building was built by the Carlyle son-in-law, it and in the early</p>

	nineteenth of course had defaced the eighteenth-century context [Laughs]
Interviewer:	And the house itself you say was a real wreck.
C. Richard Bierce:	Physically, it was in dire straights and on the verge of collapse, quite literally.
Interviewer:	Was it being taken care of at all at that time or was it completely neglected?
C. Richard Bierce:	Well [Interrupts the interviewer] it was shown to the public on some bases throughout most of the twentieth century as the site of this great confrontation meeting between General Braddock and the colonial governors in seventeen—what was it? — fifty-five. Well, maintained but not really, with a strong act to its conservation needs.
Interviewer:	So in the shadow of the hotel it really was...?
C. Richard Bierce:	Yeah, completely engulfed and visible only fleetingly from Lee Street through overgrown nineteenth-century garden, that further obscured the eighteenth century. The house is built of fire [?] stone of course, a notoriously deficient building material, and probably some of the poorest area cord was put into this house. And to counter that deterioration, the natural deterioration of the fire [?] stone the house was stuccoed sometime in the late nineteenth century, and succeeding applications of stucco simply covered up the fact that the structural sandstone walls were eroding into powder. And exasperated by the fact as I mentioned, the lowering of the grade around the house created pressure on the foundation so it was spreading out and who knows how long it would have been before it collapsed internally.
<b>Gadsby's Tavern</b>	
Interviewer:	What about the Gadsby property?
C. Richard Bierce:	Well, Gadsby, of course, the buildings had been rescued in the early [19]20s by the American Legion Post when they were threatened with demolition. After the long period of decline after the Civil War, they reached, I guess, a point of economic non-viability, but after the Legion and with the help of a lot of civic groups, the DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution], and lots of folks in Alexandria, they at least rescued it and stabilized the complex and had used it for their clubhouse and a small museum operation from the [19]20s through the early [19]70s. So, there was not a physical sense of disaster, although they had only really rehabilitated about a third of the large hotel built and used just the lower floors. They had experienced in the small building, the Bicentennial of Washington's birth [in]1932 a so-called restoration, so that that was the main focus of their museum. But on the whole the structure was in good shape it. It had no air conditioning and it had analytic heating and electrical systems. But it was not derelict.

<b>Challenges of the Projects</b>	
Interviewer:	What would you say in each case—Carlyle and Gadsby—were the biggest challenges that you faced and were overcome in each project?
C. Richard Bierce:	In a very real sense the biggest challenge, Carlyle, was trying to get a handle on what the eighteenth-century appearance really was, because so much had changed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So, [through a] combination of below-ground archaeology and architectural archaeology we determined the floor plans. We determined the placement, if not the profile, of most of the specific decorative elements, but there are still gaps in there. So it became a restoration with some conjectural fill-ins. We did have enough of the architectural fabric to get at least a partial paint analysis. Which has been substantiated by later research by Matt Moscow, but at the time the, well, one of the challenges was political. The large parlor that had always been known as the “Blue Room,” so someone in the twentieth century had painted it a bright Prussian blue; I mean a dark cobalt blue. And when the paint research was done on the original fabric it was found to be a really bright aquamarine blue—the original shades. Of course, that was scandalizing everybody, who couldn’t imagine this flamboyant color was used by the staid people of mid-eighteenth-century Alexandria, but it was and that’s been found elsewhere as well. But at the time it was shocking. At Gadsby’s the biggest challenge was inserting modern systems—air conditioning and the whole restaurant operation—into a building that had retained exceptional integrity over its lifetime without doing further damage to it, and, of course, there were compromises. But, on the whole, retention of the eighteenth-century appearance, where it existed, and where some fill-in restoration was done. I think that was fairly successful, although I know the compromises are [Laughs].
Interviewer:	The fourth floor, I guess, was one area that was kind of sacrificed for it; I mean it had to go somewhere.
C. Richard Bierce:	We couldn’t use the fourth floor, because of accessibility. So it became, yes, the sacrificial ground for placement of equipment and also a source for mining historical material—flooring, trim work, and so forth that was used elsewhere in the building for restoration purposes.
Interviewer:	What about the restaurant aspect of that project? What do you remember about that? Problems or pitfalls or...
C. Richard Bierce:	Well, the biggest problem was space. It had a low ceiling. We did some lowering of the floors, but the major patricians were stone foundations that couldn’t be moved around to suit the needs of the kitchen designer. So that was a real challenge just from a real mechanical and functional standpoint. As we know since then, of course, environmentally mixing that kind of dirt, smoke, heat kind of environment with a museum has proven to be a difficult challenge. We thought we had the best designers

	at the time, maybe they did their best, but it didn't always work.
Interviewer:	What other examples did you look at in terms of how this would work in this space? Were you...
C. Richard Bierce:	Mechanically?
Interviewer:	Just in overall, putting a restaurant in a historic, museum environment? Were there examples at Colonial Williamsburg that you could view or place a city tavern in Philadelphia, or was that later?
C. Richard Bierce:	The people who designed the initial installation at Gadsby's had been on contract at Colonial Williamsburg, so we just pulled them right out of the chute to—they had just finished Christiana Campbell's I think. Now the difference, of course, is [that] those are not museum buildings; they're replicas or restoration, but they do not have the dual occupancy. So, that was the unique aspect of Gadsby's and that was and still is a challenge [laughs].
<b>Thoughts on Public Involvement</b>	
Interviewer:	To what extent do you think, and maybe this has more to do with your job after the Bicentennial, to what extent do you think the public sense of community history was enhanced by these projects or by the Bicentennial itself?
C. Richard Bierce:	I can't really tell how much it was enhanced, but when I got here in 1973 it was in one sense—there was so much community interest and activism that we could hardly do our jobs because they were at our every step. They were looking over our shoulders as we did the architectural probing, the archaeology. My staff and I were constantly speaking to the Association, the Foundation, other service groups; they wanted to know what was going on. They were intensely interested. So there was—someone had done a terrific job of generating civic pride in this whole process, and there was genuine widespread interest in it. Now it may well be that is simply a reflection of the whole town's interest in its history beginning with the Bicentennial of its founding but, I mean, the "Our Town" show was a signal event, [in]1949. That kicked off a lot of renewed interest in the city's history. So it could've been building from that point on. I don't know. But, when, like I say, when I got here it was rolling. [Laughs.]
Interviewer:	The grassroots campaigns were in full...
C. Richard Bierce:	It had to be, I mean look at what you were economically. The fact that the city was undertaking restoration of, well the rehabilitation of Gadsby's, a multi-million dollar project. They had agreed to save the Lyceum for the Bicentennial Center, which was partially state funded, but it couldn't have happened without solid local support and the Park Authority doing Carlyle. These were all public projects, and that ultimately had some impact on the taxpayers' support. And they did, they



	<p>supported across the board. Now there was obviously some critical input from private groups, like the Historic Alexandria Foundation who beat the drums and did the research and promoted it far and wide, but it had to be accepted.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>And what about that period just after the Bicentennial? What do you remember about those years, those few years the late [19]70s to 1980? In terms of interest in history, interest in historic sites, interest in programs that feed off the Bicentennial.</p>
<p>C. Richard Bierce:</p>	<p>I think that's a good observation. There was still a high level of interest; the push for major development was eased a little bit. Although, we forgot to talk about the Lloyd House, which was a city project prior to the Bicentennial as well, and its use as the special collections and research for the library. I think it belongs in that spectrum as pre-Bicentennial projects that the city paid for. After the Bicentennial I think there was a period of consolidation. Big challenge at Gadsby's was, after it all got done—and we did make the schedule I'm pleased to say—we had to have the restaurant and the museum open by GW [George Washington] birthday celebrations in 1976, and we made it [laughs]. But, because that date was so firm, the Park Authority, in a spirit of competitiveness, says we're going to have the Carlyle House open in January, and we made that [laughs]. But as I say, getting the operations at Gadsby's—that is the museum—up to professional standards from where it had been as fundamentally a non-professional operation. We began that and of course it's still in progress, but it took a while to even get the idea across that it should be run as a professional museum. The community needed some education in that regard with respect to how they interacted with the museum and how they contributed to it.</p>
<p><b>Thoughts on Old Town and the Legacies of the Bicentennial</b></p>	
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>[Sound of agreement] One of the themes, kind of sub-themes, we're picking at in this exhibit is the extent to which the Old Town which we know and enjoy today is a by-product of the Bicentennial either physically or psychologically—there's, that mindset changed a bit as a result of the Bicentennial. With an emphasis on community history and a reawakening of interest in community history. Because a lot of the older residents that you talk to will say that up to and including the most of these 1960s, well we know the lower parts of Old Town—the three or four blocks from the river were not any place that you wanted to be, and all of a sudden we wake up the last few decades of the twentieth century and Old Town as we know it is lower Old Town. Things from Washington Street down are the real heart of, you know historic area and what people think of as Alexandria they think of Old Town.</p>
<p>C. Richard Bierce:</p>	<p>If I hear your question, I'm not sure I've got the perspective to evaluate how much of that is attributable to the Bicentennial. I think there was a general sense of economic prosperity in the late [19]60s and early</p>

	[19]70s. —It had its own momentum, It’s certainly reasonable to think the Bicentennial contributed to that. I’m not sure I can go as far as to say it was a primary cause of the Old Town revitalization. Every renewal for all that we see that isn’t pretty; it certainly sparked an interest in and focus on the economic aspect of Old Town’s revitalization, so it’s probably more complex then I’m able to address. Quite honestly. [Laughter]
Interviewer:	What would you say, would you guess, is one of the legacies of the Bicentennial in Alexandria, thinking of those years and how far we’ve come since then? Are there threads that come up then and have continued?
C. Richard Bierce:	There are several. Obviously, the fact that four major buildings were rehabilitated or restored that remain in public—in a public venue—and the programs that they each contribute. I think, although the archaeology project had been started under the auspices of the Smithsonian, as well as the group of citizens who supported Dick Musreel [Sp?]. The fact that we have in Alexandria a strong public archaeology program is, I think, related to that it came in that same period of where, and the need for archaeology as vital to the process was understood and the city paid for it. Each of those programs, well, the Office of Historic Alexandria, a direct result of that. The city decided -- once it agreed to accept the American Legion proposal to rehabilitate and restore Gadsby’s Tavern -- the city was going to get into the cultural management business, and they decided to do it and did it right. And that’s, I think, a distinguishing characteristic that couldn’t be, couldn’t happen without the citizens’ support for it, and whether its checking an “Aye” or a “No,” there’s always a little of both. So for a city of its size to have A: the number of monuments and public property in its possession and management, it’s a real tribute to the civic attitude about the whole process of history and public programming.
Interviewer:	There aren’t certainly too many cities in the country that that own and maintain a collection of historic sites, let alone...
C. Richard Bierce:	[Interrupts] Not like this. Not of this quality. [Laughs].
Interviewer:	Let alone a city department that exists to...
C. Richard Bierce:	Yeah, that’s true. I think, in a general sense, it would be fair to extrapolate some very strong lingering influence. From the general period, but it’s hard for me to get too specific about that.
<b>The Lloyd House and Concluding Remarks</b>	
Interviewer:	[Sound of agreement] Well, those where my main questions. Do you have any other thoughts? Has this stirred any other thoughts about the period or anything I’m omitting? You said the Lloyd House is definitely part of the story. We’ve talked about including that; we’re just not sure how to do that.

C. Richard Bierce:	Talk to Jean Plitt, she was there when it was being pulled together. I don't know if she was the primary mover on the subject [or with] the Library Society as a citizen advocate. I don't know if they're still around. Like the Lyceum was seriously threatened, the Lloyd House could have been [too] because the last private owner -- He threatened at one time, that if he didn't get his way he was just going to redevelop the whole site and he was eventually persuaded to sell it. There again with HUD funds, so you had the outside influence of a federal government that was willing to subvert some of the...
Interviewer:	They were looking for projects?
C. Richard Bierce:	I don't know lookin,' but like "Mission '66," that was a whole movement that pushed local entities into restoring things and becoming more aware of it then the Bicentennial a few years later, the big National Parade. So, yeah, they were infused with the need to publicize and pay for some of this. So would it have happened without federal help? Some may not have or might not at the scale that it did. 'Cause these were big project for the time. I mean it doesn't mean anything to say, "Okay, Gadsby's was a million point five," something like that, and Carlyle was about the same -- but those were 1975 dollars.
Interviewer:	Today it would be four or...
C. Richard Bierce:	Yeah, exactly.
Interviewer:	All right. Great. [Tape ends ]