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Out of the Attic

Alexandria and the Marquis

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Historic Alexandria commemorates Bastille Day by remembering its connection to Gilbert du Mortier, more commonly known as the Marquis de Lafayette. In 1824, James Monroe invited Lafayette, then the last surviving major general of the American Revolutionary War, to visit the country whose independence he fought for almost 50 years earlier. The trip was scheduled to last four months, but Lafayette's time was so in demand that he stayed in the United States from July 1824 to September 1825. For a substantial part of that time, he resided in Alexandria, then part of the District of Columbia.

By this time, he had not only experienced the American Revolution but the French Revolution as well. Initially a supporter of the Revolution, Lafayette enthusiastically helped author the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, often using the words of Thomas Jefferson as inspiration. He was also named the commander-in-chief of France's National Guard after the storming of the Bastille. But in 1792, the French Revolution turned on Lafayette, and he fled with his family to the Austrian Netherlands. He was captured by Austrian troops and imprisoned for five years. Later, he refused to participate in Napoleon's government or military, and while he returned to politics after the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty, he had left the legislature by the time he embarked for New York on July 13, 1824.

He arrived in the District of Columbia on Oct. 12, 1824. The Monroe administration made arrangements for Lafayette, his son George Washington Lafayette – named for his former commander and mentor – and his personal secretary Auguste Levasseur. While the group spent more time in the Chesapeake region than any other, they eventually visited all 24 states of the Union at the time. While in Alexandria, they stayed at 301 S. St. Asaph St., owned by the Widow Lawrason. Lafayette's appearances caused festive celebrations in the towns and cities he visited, and Alexandria was no different. Indeed, Alexandria's prominent citizen Benjamin Hallowell wrote a poem about the proliferation of Lafayette memorabilia in Alexandria during Lafayette's stay in our city, which coincided with Hallowell's wedding.

The house where Lafayette stayed still stands. The name of Fayette Street is an enduring reminder of Alexandria's affection for the man who left France to fight for American independence. By all accounts, Lafayette basked in the honors and celebrity that came his way during his stay. One wonders, however, if he reflected on how different our country was from the way he had envisioned it. His close



1824 Souvenir mugs from Lafayette's visit to Alexandria. *Photo by Gavin Ashworth for Ceramics in America; courtesy Alexandria Archaeology Museum.*



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

friends Washington and Hamilton had died more than 20 years earlier. Lafayette supported the abolition of slavery for philosophical reasons and cultivated connections with prominent abolitionists throughout the United States. One wonders what he thought about the expansion of the United States going hand in hand with the expansion of slavery as an institution in our country.

“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.