



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Preserving Privies

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Virginia Archaeology Month is celebrated every October through special events and programs that focus on the importance of preserving the state's buried history and sharing information learned through professional archaeology with the public.

Alexandria is a national leader in community archaeology and the preservation of its non-renewable cultural resources. Soon it will be the first city in America to have a 311 service request option for sinkholes caused by privies and wells. Privies are shafts marking former locations of outhouses used before the introduction of indoor plumbing. They were also handy receptacles for the trash of daily life prior to regular garbage pickup. Remnants of privies and other shaft features often appear as sunken depressions in a yard or alley. Professional archaeologists scientifically excavate and study privies to better understand what people ate, how they decorated their homes and how communities formed and changed over time. For historically marginalized people, careful excavations like these are often the best source of information about their lives. This is true for the community of Hayti, one of Alexandria's oldest free Black neighborhoods.

Hayti, pronounced hay-tie, was established in the early 1800s. In the 1980s, city archaeologists excavated the Coleman Site, located in the heart of Hayti, along the 400 block of South Royal Street. The site was excavated using scientific methods and all objects and information remain preserved for future researchers and the public. The Coleman Site excavation uncovered tools, children's toys, remains of meals, and household goods that provide valuable insight into the lives, homes and communities created by Black Alexandrians occupying the neighborhood. While tax records helped identify the names of Hayti residents, the careful archaeological excavations illuminated the experiences of each family and individual on that section of the block.

The lives of many other Hayti residents remain unknown and are currently in danger of being lost by the unsafe and destructive practice of bottle digging. For years now, non-professional bottle diggers have targeted historic privies and wells in and around Old Town, including in the Hayti neighborhood. For bottle diggers, artifacts are sought out for their monetary value or for the thrill of the hunt. For archaeologists, they are invaluable pieces of evidence that combine to tell the story of people in the past. When a non-professional digger destroys a privy in search of bottles, critical data from Alexandria's



An aerial shot of the Coleman Site. Photo/Alexandria Archaeology



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

shared historical dataset is lost forever. It is like removing the only copies of maps and letters from a historical archive. Alexandria Archaeology and other professional archaeologists recommend that undisturbed privies remain that way. If they are sinking, city archaeologists are available to provide free recommendations and support to safely fill those areas and protect them for future generations.

Privies, and the artifacts and stories they contain, are precious, non-renewable resources. When a privy is dug by a non-professional, we lose a piece of Alexandria's history that has yet to be discovered or written. Residents are urged to become a steward of the city's buried history and the people who once walked their same streets by reaching out to city archaeologists with the new Alex311 service request, available online or over the phone. More information about backyard privies can be found at <https://www.alexandriava.gov/archaeology/backyard-archaeology>. More information on Hayti as seen in the free publication, *Across the Fence but a World Apart: The Coleman Site, 1796-1907*, can be found on the Projects and Publications section of the Alexandria Archaeology website.

“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.