

Alexandria Times

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Happy 275th Birthday Alexandria!

In May 1749, the town of Alexandria or Belhaven received a charter from the House of Burgesses. John West, Fairfax County surveyor – by tradition, assisted by a 17-year-old George Washington – laid out 60 acres of plots. The plots were auctioned off on July 13 and 14, 1749, which led to the tradition of celebrating Alexandria's birthday on July 13.

For centuries before that, Native Americans lived in and traveled through the land that now makes up Alexandria. Today's indigenous groups and state and federally recognized tribes and nations of Virginia include the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway), Chickahominy, Chickahominy Eastern Division, Mattaponi, Upper Mattaponi, Monacan, Nansemond, Nottoway, Pamunkey, Patawomeck and Rappahannock.

In 1654, Dame Margaret Brent received a patent for 700 acres, including a large part of today's Alexandria. This year, we celebrate the 275th anniversary of the auction of the plots on July 13 at Oronoco Bay Park, at 100 Madison St., starting at 6 p.m. and concluding

with a fireworks display at 9:30 p.m. Admission is free. The city will also celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Fairfax Resolves, issued from a courthouse in Alexandria on July 18 – we'll have more about that next week.

George Washington created a new map of the lots sold between July and September 1749, which you can see here. The map lists 58 lots with their owners on the right side of the map. Some prominent names on the map include Washington's brother Lawrence, John Carlyle and John Alexander. Washington also listed the price paid for each lot. Interestingly, the prices were in Spanish "pistoles" rather than English currency. The "pistole" was a gold coin worth almost a pound, but common in Virginia before 1760. Since English colonists weren't allowed to mint their coins, they often used Spanish currency.

Perhaps the most memorable celebration of Alexandria's Birthday was the 200th, in 1949, which included a play written for Alexandria's residents. Using Windmill Hill Park as the stage, the city



A map of Alexandria 275 years ago.

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commissioned a play about our town. Alexandria carved an amphitheater into the hill, and 500 residents participated in the drama covering the first 200 years of our town. One of the major casting decisions was for Willard Scott, of later television fame, to play a young George Washington.

To celebrate Alexandria's 275th birthday, Historic Alexandria opened its new exhibition "Mapping Alexandria: Stories of a Changing City" in the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum. The exhibition celebrates the 275th anniversary of Alexandria's founding by exploring the evolution and history of our city through the words of its residents.

Mapping Alexandria centers the stories members of

our community have shared with volunteers and staff of Historic Alexandria in more than 450 oral history interviews to tell a story of Alexandria's neighborhoods, past and current. The people and places that have shaped Alexandria's neighborhoods and communities from Old Town to the West End are memorialized in the text, images, artifacts and recordings now on display.

One of the reviews of the 1949 play called it, "a work in progress." Now, 275 years into our history, one can say the same about Alexandria, with our complex and diverse history, with the goal of constant improvement.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.