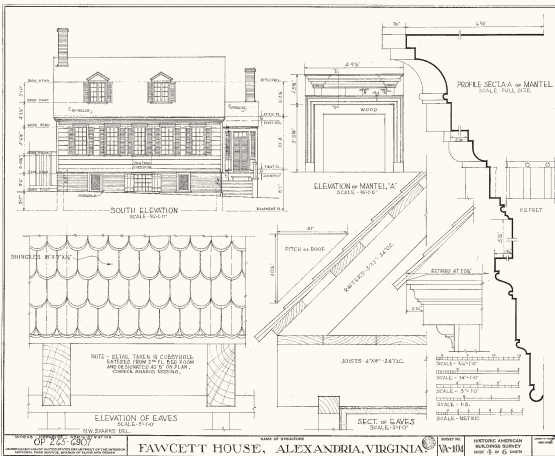


## 517 PRINCE STREET—A UNIQUE SURVIVOR

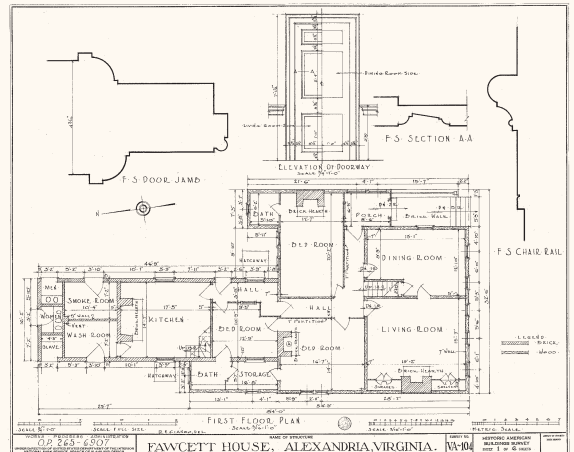
An exciting preservation initiative is moving forward now in Alexandria. The historic Murray-Dick-Fawcett House at 517 Prince Street is on track to be acquired by the City of Alexandria, with additional funding for purchase and restoration raised by the private sector. The property will be opened to the public as an historic house museum and educational center, operated by the Office of Historic Alexandria. The garden will be maintained as public open space.

517 Prince Street is one of the most interesting of Alexandria's 18th century dwellings. Dendochronology (the scientific method of dating buildings based on the analysis of the pattern of growth rings in the timbers used in its construction) has shown that the beams in 517 Prince date to 1775. As such, it is one of the earliest-surviving and possibly the least-altered 18th century home in Northern Virginia. The original 1749 boundary of the new town of Alexandria lay to the east of the future site of 517 Prince, closer to the river. Additional lands were annexed by the town in 1763, including that upon which 517 Prince was to be constructed. Patrick Murray acquired three of the four half acre lots on the square bordered by King, Prince, Saint Asaph and Pitt Streets and soon commissioned this dwelling near one corner of his property. The fourth lot on the block was purchased by George Washington for investment purposes; he built a small tenant house on his property, fronting on Pitt Street, which also remains standing today.

Murray's original frame dwelling house was one-and-a half stories above a masonry basement, five bays wide with a front entry porch rising from Prince Street to the center bay of the first floor. Prince Street was later re-graded, necessitating the removal of this porch due to its intrusion onto the sidewalk, leaving the brick foundation rising high above the new grade. By the mid-1780s, Murray, a local blacksmith, had secured enough capital to construct a shed addition across the back of his home, as well as a livery stable far to the rear of the house along St. Asaph Street. However, his financial success was short-lived; within seven years, in 1792, he was forced to sell his property to the estate of Samuel English, to whom he was indebted. For a time, the executors of the estate rented the dwelling, before it was sold in 1794 to Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick, one of the physicians who attended to General Washington at his death; Dick's tenancy was short-lived for he sold the property in 1796 to two King Street merchants. John Douglas Brown purchased it outright in 1816, adding a wing to the rear, sited perpendicular to the original front block of the house. Although the stable property was later sold off, the dwelling was occupied by Brown family descendants for



*Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) measured drawings of the south elevation of 517 Prince Street.*



*HABS measured drawings of the plan of the first floor. Note the three separate privy spaces at the rear of the building.*



*HABS photograph of the east elevation of the back building.*



*Paneled west wall of the front parlor. Photograph by Louise Krafft.*

the next 184 years. The family made very few changes to the structure during their ownership. In 1936, the structure was recorded for its historic and architectural significance by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the Department of the Interior (drawings and photographs can be accessed on-line at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=517%20prince%20street%20alexandria%20va&co=hh>).

The rooms are small within; no family today could live in this house without destroying the stories it has to tell. It is a rich document of domestic history and a veritable laboratory of old carpentry methods. The dwelling and back building are in a remarkable state of preservation, with building fabric and finishes virtually unaltered since their early construction. A vast number of little things have survived—original paint, wallpapers, hooks, latches, door hardware, traces of rudimentary bell systems and ancient glass in the old sash windows. The house is recognized by local and regional historians as a “fascinating microcosm of a complete single family dwelling, containing in addition to the usual living, dining and bedrooms and kitchen, rooms for servants and storage rooms, all under one roof.”

The property was purchased from the family in 2000 by antiquarian, Joseph C. Reeder. In 2014, he received the Alexandria Archaeology Commission award for his careful stewardship of the building and installation of modern building system upgrades without loss of authenticity. Mr. Reeder, now 89 years old, understands the importance of the building and is eager to ensure its survival without intrusive alterations. However, property values in Old Town are high; the lot alone of 517 Prince is assessed at \$1.4 million dollars; the building at \$500,000. Mr. Reeder has offered to sell the property to the City for \$1.25 million, a sum that would allow retirement of his debt on it; the residual equity would be a gift to the City. But where will the money for purchase come from, in what is always a very tight municipal budget?

The answer was suggested by an informed citizen, who knew of a grants program administered by the Virginia Land Conservation Fund. The Office of Historic Alexandria submitted a grant proposal, in the historic preservation category, for \$1.25 million. To our surprise and delight, the Board of the VLCF awarded \$900,000 to the City for the purpose of acquiring this highly significant property for public use; the remainder of the purchase price will be raised from the private sector.

HAF has pledged its assistance with this fund-raising effort and intends to give a lead gift to the project. Your financial support of *Toasting Our Town 2016* will be dedicated to this effort.