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A STROLL THROUGH HISTORY:

A Walking Tour of Historic South Lee [Water] Street

by T. Michael Miller

Lined with many original brick and wooden dwellings, Water Street, which was renamed for General Robert E. Lee in 1874, remains one of Alexandria's oldest and most charming thoroughfares. A tour of this street offers the casual visitor or antiquarian an opportunity to sample Alexandria's broad spectrum of political, social, and maritime history. Its worn brick sidewalks and alleys have witnessed the tread of salty sea captains, brewers, glassmakers and political savants as they strolled upon the stage of Alexandria's long and distinguished history.

In 1782, the Virginia General Assembly passed an ordinance which gave the Alexandria City Council permission to extend Water Street both north and south the entire length of the town. In October 1801, while advertising a 2-story house on

Water Street between Prince and Duke Streets, George Coryell, the town assessor, wrote that in a "short time the street would be handsomely paved and it will render Water Street more "eligible and pleasant." [AG: 10/1/1801] By 1857, a citizen recommended that City Council improve Water Street which was described as then being unsafe, unsightly and in bad condition. [AG: 8/4/1857]

Improvements to Lee [Water] Street were also undertaken in the late 19th century when it was paved by Messrs. Kelly and Studs from Duke to Wolfe in October 1897 and repaved from Prince to Duke Street in November 1898. When the city tried to remove the old cobbles from Lee Street between Duke and Wolfe Streets in September 1897, residents objected to the program and the project was terminated. [9/18/1897;

619 S. Lee: From 1839 to 1912 this house was the residence of the famous Snowden family of Alexandria. The Snowdens purchased the Lee Street property from Thomas Vowell, Jr., a prosperous merchant, who built this Federal dwelling between 1798-1800. Vowell was the treasurer of the Washington Bridge Company and served as the President of the Bank of Potomac in 1806. When advertised for sale in 1817, "619" was described as: "28 feet front and 40 feet deep, with covered way, pantry, a large kitchen, a smoke house, and ...a brick stable, carriage house, etc." [AG: 9/1/1817] Edgar Snowden who succeeded his father Samuel as the editor of the Alexandria Gazette owned the house by 1842. Edgar also served as Mayor of Alexandria [1840-1843] and was the city's first representative to the Virginia State Assembly after Alexandria had been retroceded to Virginia in 1847. Snowden constructed a large room south of the main block for use as an archives to house copies of the Alexandria Gazette, the nation's oldest daily newspaper. A terrible storm blew down the chimneys of "619" in September 1896 and crushed the roof in several places. [AG: 9/30/1896] In April 1897, Louisa J. Snowden, Edgar's daughter died here. She had served as a flower girl during General LaFayette's famous visit to Alexandria in 1824. By 1919, the Snowden house had been converted into apartments and was known as the Hotel Vowell. [AG: 3/19/1919; 9/20/1919] It caught fire in January 1922 and was struck twice by lightning in June 1924. [AG: 6/9/1924] In 1932, this lovely house was restored by Mr. & Mrs. B.B. Cain and opened for a special tour arranged by Mrs. Charles R. Hooff for Mayor Edmund Ticer and City

Council.

From 1939, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black resided in this beautiful Federal mansion until his death in 1971. Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1926 and 1932, he played an important role in establishing the Tennessee Valley Authority. Black was nominated to the Supreme Court in 1937. If the walls of "619" could talk, many secrets concerning the deliberations of the Court would emerge. Upon Justice Black's death, his private notes concerning his years on the Court were burned. The Blacks opened their house to the public in April 1940 for a tour to benefit the Alexandria Association. "Surrounded by half an acre of gardens, this is truly a charming estate. Although much of the fine woodwork has been removed or destroyed, the hall arch and stairway remain untouched and convey some idea of the former beauty and elegance of the residence. The house was once adorned with a widow's or Captain's walk which was entered by a ladder leading from the attic to the roof." The residence's old brick stable is still located at 209 Franklin Street.

In the 1850s, "OLD ICE HOUSE HILL", located on the east side of the 700 block of Lee Street, served as a sanctuary for relaxation and fun. The hill which offered a panoramic view of the Potomac River was the scene of 4th of July festivities where "gleeful children and their friends spent many happy Easter days, and where hundreds walked and drank of the water of the old "white pump" on Sunday evenings." Below the precipice was Baptism Cove, the site where African Americans performed many baptisms. [AG: 4/28/1881]