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VIRGINIA HISTORIC LANDMARKS
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JAMES W. MOODY, JR.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

December 11, 1969

To: Commission Members

From: James W. Moody, Jr., Executive Director *JWM.*

Subject: Residence of Justice Hugo Black, Alexandria

You will recall that at the December meeting I mentioned the possibility that Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black would offer the Commission an open space/historic easement on his Alexandria home which occupies slightly less than an acre at the corner of Lee and Franklin Streets.

The staff has visited the house and has made an assessment of the situation. In this I was assisted by Messrs. Fishburne and Loth of our staff, and of especial help was Mr. Elbert Cox, Director of the Commission of Outdoor Recreation, whom we invited along. George Freeman, the attorney who is so skilled in matters relating to easements, was also with us.

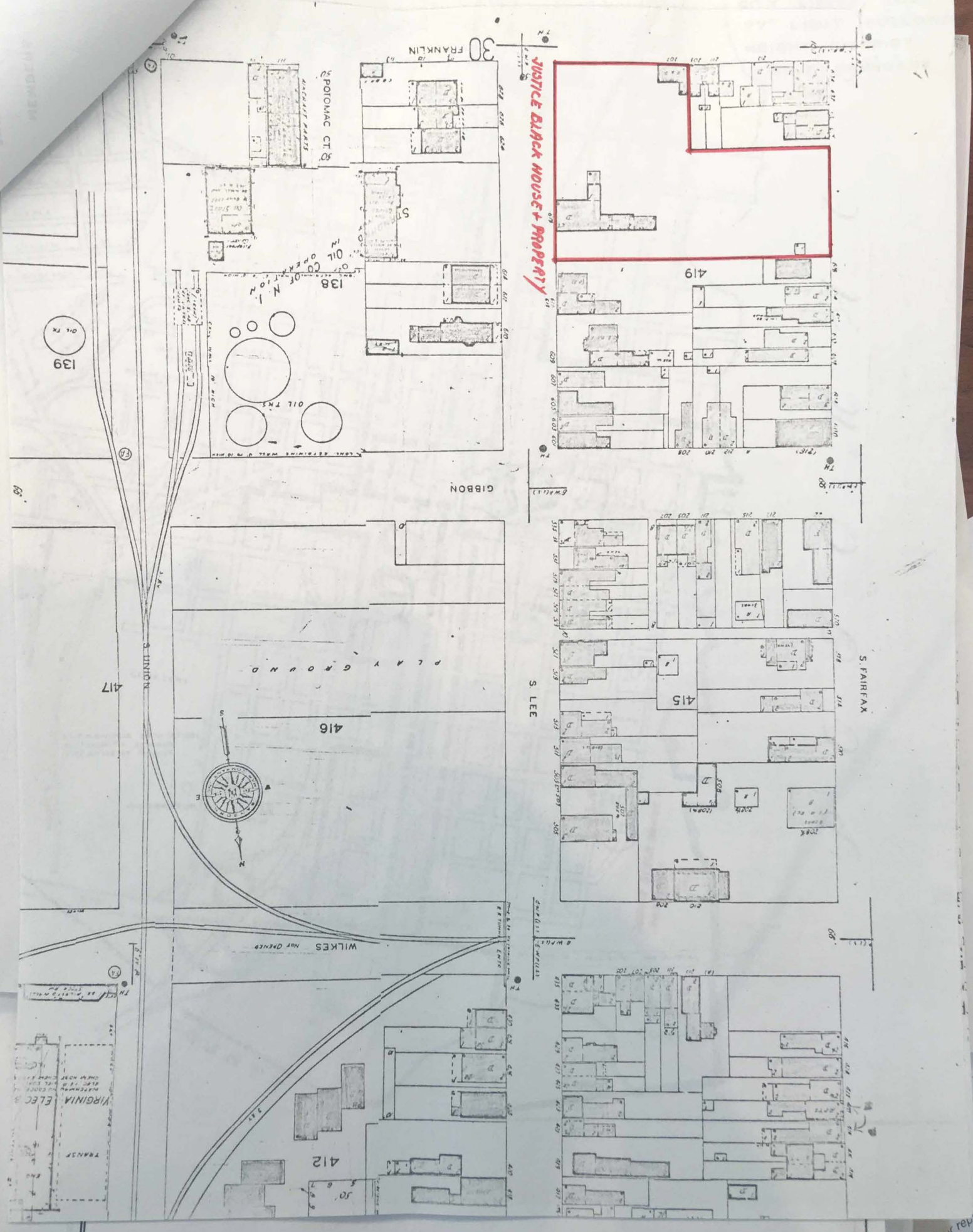
It is the unanimous and unreserved opinion of the group that Justice Black's house has ample historical quality - past, present, and future - as well as architectural distinction. Furthermore, the space around the house is an essential element in a neighborhood where every scrap of available land supports a new townhouse, some only eighteen feet wide, with a garden to match.

I am enclosing some photographs which will help you envision the house and setting, as well as other material you will find useful, including the proposed easement. I do this so that you will be good enough to give me your opinion on the proposed easement. Justice Black would like to consummate the matter before the end of the year and if it should be your pleasure to accommodate him in this regard we will not have the chance to discuss it at a regular meeting.

You will note that the proposed easement is similar in all respects to the one the Commission holds on the Old Mansion at Bowling Green and its purpose is identical: to help save a fine house in an appropriate setting that contributes much to the environment.

I enclose a ballot for your convenience and ask that you return it to me quickly. If you have any questions, please call me.

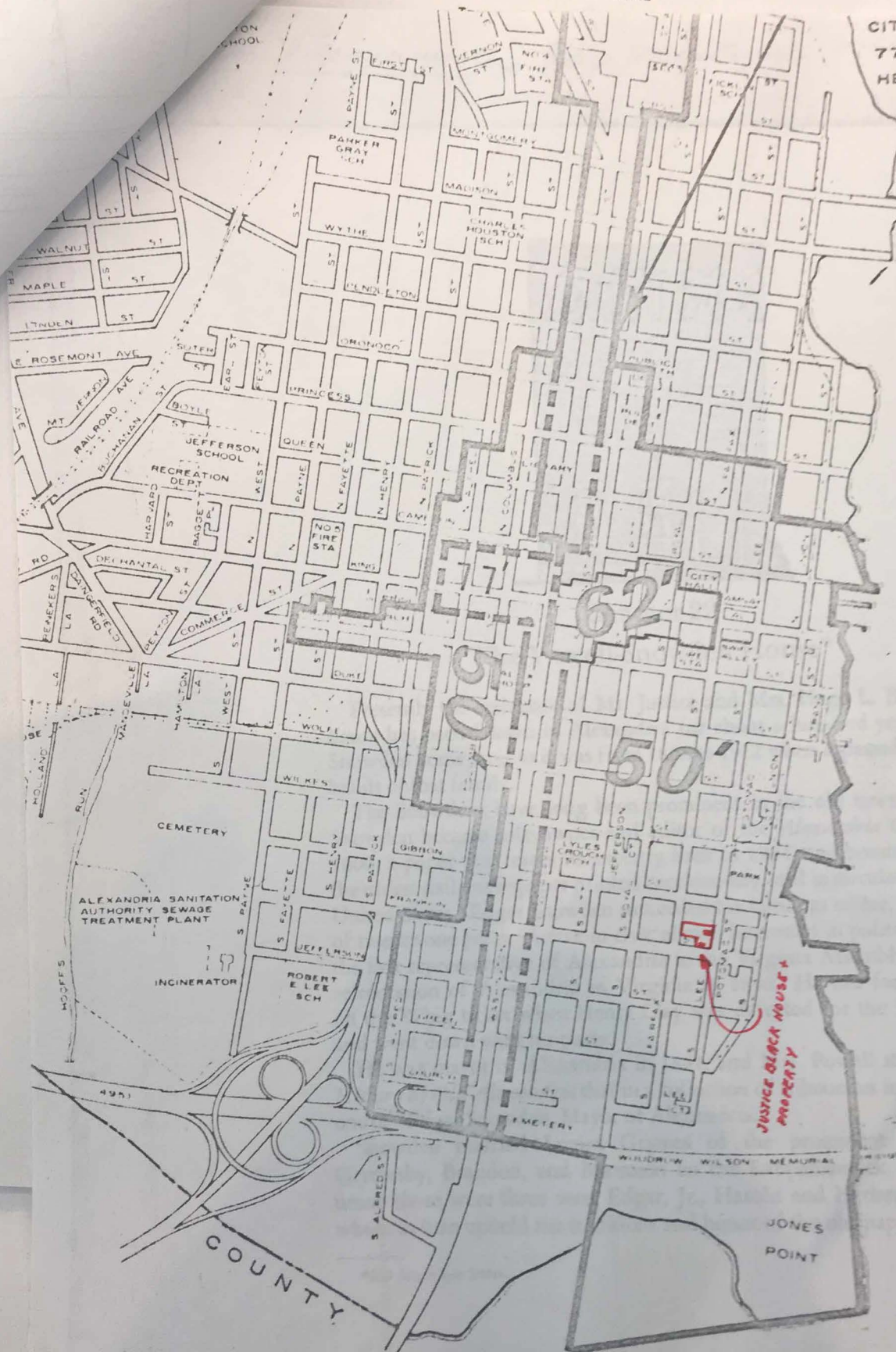
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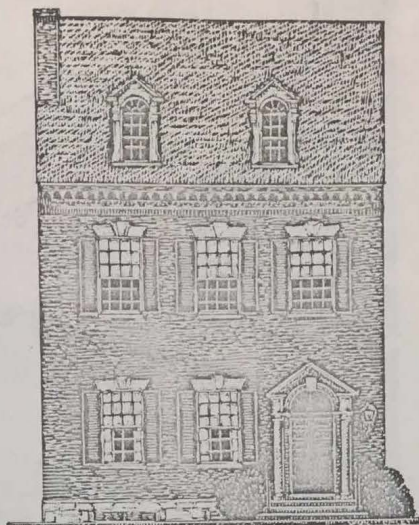
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 28212

CITY LIMITS, THE
77' LIMIT FOLLOWS
HEIGHT DISTRICT
NO.1 BOUNDARY
LINE.



JUSTICE BLACK HOUSE & PROPERTY

COUNTY



Chapter 22

The Vowell-Snowden House*

Presently the residence of Mr. Justice and Mrs. Hugo L. Black, this house has been known in Alexandria for about a hundred years as the Snowden home; and so it was from 1842 to 1912 when it passed from the hands of that family.

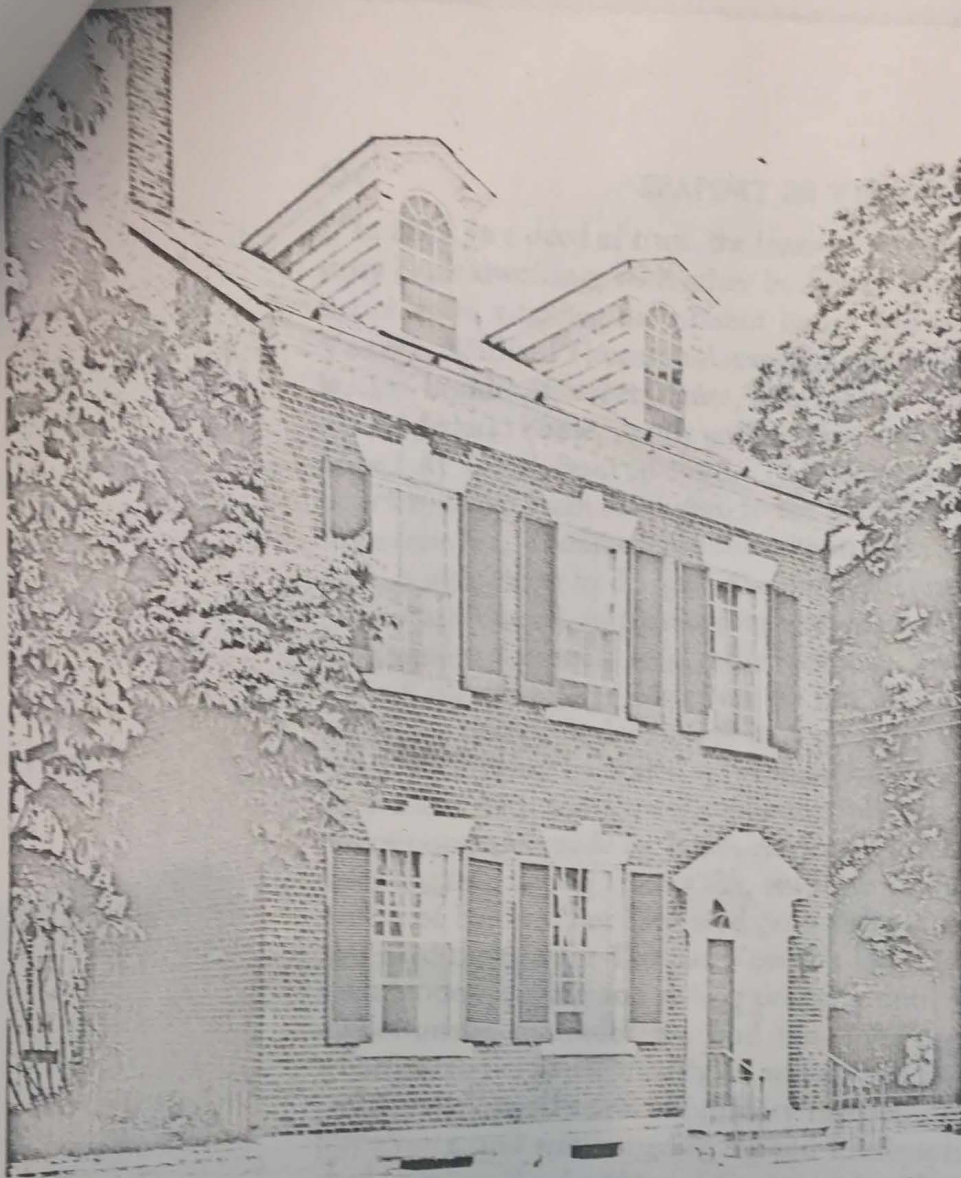
The Snowdens have long been prominent in the old town. Samuel Snowden became sole owner and editor of the *Alexandria Gazette* in 1800, a paper that traces its ancestry back to 1784, and boasts of being the oldest daily newspaper printed continuously, still in circulation in the United States. Edgar Snowden succeeded his father as editor, at the age of twenty-one years. Active in civic affairs, interested in politics, he was the first representative of Alexandria to the Virginia Assembly after the retrocession of Alexandria to Virginia in 1846. He ran for Congress on the Whig ticket when Henry Clay was defeated for the Presidency and went down with his party.

He was mayor of Alexandria in 1841, and Mrs. Powell states in her *History of Old Alexandria* that in a collection of silhouettes in London is one of "Edgar Snowden, Mayor of Alexandria."

Snowden married Louisa Grymes of the prominent family of Grymesby, Brandon, and Marmion on the Rappahannock. From this union there were three sons, Edgar, Jr., Harold and Herbert, "each of whom in turn upheld the traditions and honor of the old paper."

*619 South Lee Street.

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The Vowell-Snowden House. The widow's walk is missing

Edgar Snowden purchased the Lee and Franklin Streets property from Lawrence B. Taylor, who had the house from Thomas Vowell Jr. In a deed granted August 29, 1798, William Thornton Alexander and Lucy, his wife, let this property with all houses, buildings, streets, lanes, alleys, and so on, to Thomas Vowell Jr., for the yearly ground rent of \$61.66. The fact is cited that William Thornton Alexander had the property from his father, John Alexander. In 1802 Thomas Vowell was released from this obligation upon payment of £200.

In 1826, in a deed of trust, the house is referred to specifically as a two-story brick dwelling, with other buildings and improvements. There is doubt as to whether the present house was built by Alexander or by Vowell. William Thornton Alexander mentions in the deed of 1798, "all houses, buildings, streets, lanes, alleys, Etc." The front of the house is a typical federal house, hardly earlier than 1790 to 1798, and similar to the New City Hotel, built in 1792. The doorway is almost a replica of the doorway taken from the tavern to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and since restored. The transom above the entrance door, in a deeply recessed arch, is interesting in design. The unusual cornice excites attention.

Thomas Vowell, in partnership with his brother, John, operated for a long while a successful mercantile business. The firm of John & Thomas Vowell owned a large wharf on the east side of Union between Prince and King Streets and sent out its own ships to the far corners of the earth, advertising its wares upon their return. George Washington ran an account with the Vowells and receipts preserved at Mount Vernon tell of purchases made by James Anderson, his manager. One of Anderson's dockets, dating from 1798, reaffirms in the inscription the age-old system of barter, "For Lint seed Sold them & Salt in Exchange." Lean and hard times were Thomas Vowell's lot. He overreached himself in speculation—buying and selling property until "by reasons of losses and misfortunes in trade" we find him mortgaging his warehouse and wharf, even his house; finally he was forced to part with his home.

Thomas Vowell's first wife, Mary Harper, died in 1805, aged twenty-three years, and was buried in the old Presbyterian meetinghouse graveyard. She was the daughter of Captain John Harper; her sister, Margaret, married Thomas Vowell's brother, John. The graves of the two sisters lie near the north wall of the church, while their father's remains rest within.

The Vowell-Snowden house, in splendid condition, stands flush with the street, surrounded by a half-acre of garden, defying the elements as well as the hand of time. Much of the fine woodwork has been removed or destroyed, but the perfect proportion of the rooms is indestructible. The hall arch and stairway remain untouched and convey some idea of the former beauty of the woodwork and elegance of the house.

There are people still living in Alexandria who as children played on the "Widow's" or "Captain's Walk" that formerly topped the old mansion. A magnificent view up and down the Potomac River could be had from that vantage spot, long since disappeared.

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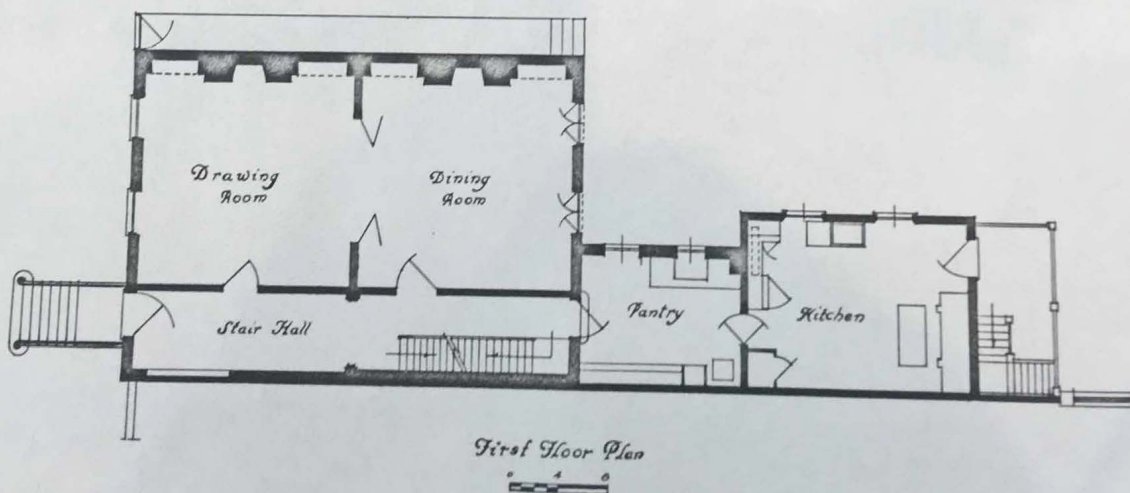
THE SNOWDEN HOUSE

Circa 1790

611 South Lee Street

Known as the Snowden House after the family which occupied it for ninety-seven years of its long existence, this fine Georgian structure was built long before their ownership. It is not known which of the Alexanders built the house, but John Alexander gave the property to his son, William Thornton Alexander, who sold it to Thomas Vowell on August 29, 1798. It later came into the possession of the Snowdens.

The massive and dignified doorway is surmounted by a pediment, and the facade cornice is unusual and of fine workmanship. Although the original mantels have been replaced, the other details of the interior trim attest to the original elegance of the structure. The kitchen was once completely separated from the house and was later joined by a brick "bridge" between the two buildings, as illustrated on page 114. That the kitchens were very frequently separate outbuildings is indicated by the fact that often when this dependency was joined to the main house the ell fell directly behind the dining room or parlor, rather than to the rear of the hall—thus forcing a servant going from the rear of the house to pass through the dining room, or parlor, in order to reach the front door. The garden of the Snowden House is lovely and it once had an unusually fine view up and down the Potomac.



Typical first floor plan of the ell type house