



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### “Female Impersonators” entertain at Capitol Theatre

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In the 1930s, Black nightclubs in large cities like Washington D.C. and New York regularly featured “female impersonators” who entertained audiences with their singing, dancing, and glamorous appearance. Labeled as “pansies” by the Black press, these gender nonconforming performers attracted diverse audiences that included Black and white ticketholders, men and women and straights, gays and bisexuals.

While the “pansy craze” is mainly associated with big cities, Alexandria occasionally hosted performances by female impersonators at the original Capitol Theatre at Queen and North Henry streets.

Please note that some performers at the time may have identified as female and, by today’s standards, some might have considered themselves to be transgender, but historians studying this time and these performers caution against applying such relatively recent labels and instead generally refer to them as “gender nonconforming.”

The theater, having undergone renovations and changes in ownership and name, was under new management when it reopened as the Capitol in late 1932. The Capitol served the African American community and in addition to offering motion pictures, it also hosted live entertainment including performances by local gender nonconforming artists. Accounts from the Washington Tribune provide a look at two of these shows.

In spring 1934, Henry Roberts, a young man from Alexandria, performed as “Heneritta” at the Capitol’s amateur night. After singing “I Want You, I Need You” and “Stardust,” he returned to the stage for an encore when audience members chanted “We want Heneritta.” According to the Tribune, Roberts had the orchestra play “The Carioca” and “Heneritta gave the Alexandrians some new lessons on snake hips and the shim-sham” while offering a “few feminine dances.”

A year later, the Tribune covered the appearance of Louis Diggs at the Capitol Theatre. The Tribune referred to Diggs with female pronouns in quotation marks, writing that “Mother” Diggs “sang and danced ‘her’ way to the title of Alexandria’s queen,” “flirted with the audience” and ran “up and down the aisle, switching ‘her’ lovely dress as if ‘she’ were Mae West.” After the show, Diggs reportedly had to navigate through a crowd of men, women and children to reach a waiting car. His popularity perhaps may not have been that surprising because although Diggs lived in Washington, he had strong family connections to Alexandria.

Diggs was not only one of the most well-known and successful performers, but he also publicly defended female impersonators after a columnist for the Afro-American newspaper called the “pansy craze” a “parading of filth and perversion” and the performers an “army of freaks.”

Diggs wrote, in part, “I have developed into a Louis Diggs that I alone have created – and to a generation that would have me no other way.” Diggs added, “Through the history of civilization, psychology tells us that there have always been homosexuals. No normal male – man or boy, would be influenced to become effeminate by viewing female impersonators unless he was already in a stage of developing into an invert. Why then, are we criticized as social menaces?”

Although media and public interest in these performers subsided, drag shows continued within the gay community as they had before. The old Capitol Theatre closed in the late 1930s and was



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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replaced by a new theater with the same name. Henry Roberts died in Philadelphia in 1957 and was buried in Alexandria's Bethel Cemetery. Louis Diggs, who continued to work as an entertainer, died in Washington D.C. in 1996.

*“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.*