

# Documenting Alexandria's Murray-Dick-Fawcett House

Tax records, maps, newspaper ads, family papers, and receipts, all help document chronology of the house and the lives of its residents.

SOURCE: HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA FOUNDATION

Passing by 517 Prince Street, at the intersection of Prince and S. Saint Asaph streets, you may have noticed the scaffolding, archaeology, and restoration in progress. The Murray-Dick-Fawcett House as it stands today was constructed in several building phases, beginning in 1772. The house and garden were acquired by the City of Alexandria in 2017 with the support of the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and then owner Joe Reeder. Administered by the Office of Historic Alexandria and opened for special programs and Preservation Month tours, plans are in progress for it to open as a museum in the future. Joe Reeder, who purchased the property in 2000, continues to live in the home as a life tenant.

Since the acquisition of the property, Office of Historic Alexandria historians have been researching the history of the house. Through archival sources including tax records, maps, newspaper ads, family papers, and receipts, the building chronology of the house and the lives of its residents are being documented. For example, Mary G. Brown's daily journal dated 1821 provides information on the household accounts, diet, and health of the John Douglass Brown family — including information on their enslaved labor.

The next step in the research process, according to Gretchen Bulova, Director of the Office of Historic Alexandria, is the physical examination of the house itself through a Historic Structures Report (commonly referred to as an HSR). "As the primary artifact, a building's materials, construction techniques, and chronology, and historic finishes help identify its construction history, room uses, and alterations over time." The Murray-Dick-Fawcett house, while having many residents, stayed in the same family from the time of merchant John Douglass Brown's acquisition of the property in 1816 to the house's sale to Joe Reeder in 2000. Many of the home's furnishings and rooms were not altered for close to 200 years!

The detailed documentation and analysis of the site's historic fabric are funded thanks to the generosity of the Historic Alexandria Foundation. The Foundation, which provides more than \$25,000 annually to local museums and research efforts, has made its largest donation to an Alexandria preservation



Photo courtesy of the Historic Alexandria Foundation.

effort — \$100,000.00 — to fund a historic structures report for the Murray-Dick-Fawcett House.

"The Murray-Dick-Fawcett house is perhaps the most significant 18th-century domestic structure in Alexandria," notes Dr. Morgan D. Delaney, President of the Historic Alexandria Foundation.

"It is remarkably unchanged over 250 years because of its long occupancy by one family. Historic Alexandria Foundation is very excited about contributing to the preservation of this building through its funding of a detailed Historic Structures Report, which will help guide its conservation."

The firm of Glave and Holmes Architecture, which specializes in historic preservation and restoration, has been awarded the project. Historic Preservation Architect Steven Blashfield, Principal and Cultural Studios Director, will lead the project. "As we unearth the history of our communities through the lens of our historic properties, we have an exciting opportunity to learn about the places we live and work," says Blashfield. "It will be an honor for us at Glave & Holmes to have this opportunity to work at the Murray-Dick-Fawcett House and we look forward to what it reveals."