



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Spring Gardens and Alexandria's First July 4th Celebration

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Alexandria's 1798 Independence Day celebration was memorable, both for the celebration and its participants and for a disagreement about its location almost 200 years later. Attacks on American ships by French privateers prompted President John Adams to recommission George Washington as the Commander of all Armies.

Washington took that commission during the Alexandria commemoration of July 4. This would be the second-to-last celebration that Washington would live to see. In 1989, an article in the Fireside Sentinel about the location of the celebration set off a dispute between two prominent Alexandria historians, Ruth Lincoln Kaye, and T. Michael Miller.

Three accounts of the 1798 Celebration remain. Claypole's American Daily Advertiser reported:

"The 23d Anniversary of American Independence was celebrated by the inhabitants of this town...with the greatest harmony and conviviality. A dinner was prepared at Spring Gardens by Mr. John Stavely...Gen. Washington was escorted into town by a detachment from the troop of Dragoons."

A second account comes from a letter written by the Alexandria merchant David Cook. Cook describes a mock battle in which he portrayed a Frenchman. Given the events of the time, Cook and his side inevitably lost the mock battle. The Alexandria Advertiser focused its attention on the military drill portion of the program, noting:

"At Spring Garden, the military and a number of the citizens in all, between 4 and 500, partook Of a dinner provided for the occasion."

But where was Spring Garden? T. Michael Miller pointed to a March 1806 Plat signed by George Gilpin saying that the property:

"... begins at the intersection of Duke and Henry St running with the west side of Henry Street, west of Gibbon St., to the waters of Hunting Creek."

Eagle-eyed readers will note that that description is close to the location of Douglass Cemetery today. In the November 1989 issue of the Fireside Sentinel, Lincoln Kaye disputed Miller's conclusion,



*1An almost 200-year-old disagreement still simmers about one of Alexandria's earliest Independence Day celebrations. File Photo.*



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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saying that while Spring Farm Garden was located where Miller said it was, there was no legal documentation that there was a tavern at that location. Instead, she argued that oral tradition held that the tavern was located at 414 Wilkes St. Two other historians weighed in with their analysis of where the celebration took place in the same publication.

In the next issue, City Archaeologist Pam Cressey, Ph.D. weighed in on the disagreement. Cressey concluded that there was not much evidence that the 414 Wilkes St. location, also known as Peter Billy/Yates Market Garden, was used for recreational purposes in the 18th century. She noted that in a 1936 letter to the Alexandria Gazette, Walter L. Gahan explained the difference between the two sites, saying:

“At the west end of Wilkes Street was the Spring Garden, now occupied by Douglas Cemetery... Yates Garden, at the junction of Pitt and Franklin Streets was a pleasure ground with swings and Other amusements.”

The Fireside Sentinel treated their readers that year to a disagreement with multiple perspectives giving different sources different degrees of importance. Pam Cressey's conclusion seems to have settled the question about the location of one of Alexandria's most memorable July 4 celebrations, 191 years after the celebration.

*“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.*