A message from the past

Who hasn't been tempted to write their name in wet cement or to carve their initials into a tree? The compulsion to leave one's mark, a physical sign of one's presence, can be seen throughout human history. For instance, archaeologists have documented hundreds of examples of graffiti at Pompeii and Herculaneum. More recently, during the Civil War, several dozen soldiers signed their names and left messages on the walls of an old house in Brandy Station, Va., known now as the Graffiti House and open for public visitation.

Not to be outdone, Alexandria now has its own example of "ancient" graffiti. During the recent redevelopment of 1300-1312 King St., now Braystone Condominiums, in one of the historic buildings the contractors discovered the names "Edith," "Herbert" and "Blanche" painted on the sheathed attic ceiling, along with the date "5/9/1900." Initially, investigators believed that this was the full name of a single person – a woman presumably named Edith Herbert Blanche; however, documentary research quickly established that the names represented three siblings, Edith, Herbert and Blanche Stansbury.

The Stansbury family lived at 1304 King St. beginning in the 1880s. The head of the fam-

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Three teenagers, Edith, Herbert and Blanche Stansbury, marked their departure from 1304 King St. by leaving their names on the attic sheathing.

ily, Daniel Stansbury, was a tinsmith who had his shop next door at 1300 King St. His wife Margaret "Monnie" Stansbury died after a short illness in 1895, leaving Daniel to raise his three children alone. In April 1900, Daniel purchased a home at 207 N. Columbus St., a house he would occupy for the next three decades. Evidently, the family formally moved from 1304 King St. two months later in June. We know this because Edith (age 16), Herbert (age 18) and Blanche (age 12) decided to memorialize the date they vacated their childhood home.

The names may have been the brainchild of the 16-year-old Edith. Based on the script, the same hand seems to have painted all three names. Edith's name is on top, and her younger sister Blanche probably helped her. The sisters may have added Herbert's name last, as it appears slightly out of line with the others and the letters are marginally smaller, seemingly to fit between the other two names.

Thanks to the clever restoration work of the Holladay Corp., the developers of the property, you can view the handiwork of the Stansbury children still today. If you pay a visit to Call Your Mother Deli at the corner of 1300 King St., take a moment to look up at the ceiling in one of the dining areas to see where three teenagers from a bygone era left us a memento of themselves to contemplate.

May is National Historic Preservation Month. You can learn more about Historic Preservation in Alexandria at https://alexandriava.gov/preservation.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.