

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria's Scottish heritage

Alexandria celebrates its annual tradition of the Scottish Christmas Walk on Saturday. Dozens of Scottish clans will parade through Old Town, dressed in tartans and accompanied by marching bands and purebred Scottish dogs.

The historical connection between Alexandria and Scotland goes back to the 18th century. Scottish tobacco merchants, shut out of the Tidewater region of Virginia, came to Northern Virginia as early as 1707. By 1732, the Scottish merchant Hugh West established a tobacco inspection warehouse at the foot of today's Oronoco Street. Alexandria's early name of Belhaven honored a Scottish national hero.

Author Fairfax Harrison wrote of the Scottish merchants who settled in Northern Virginia:

"The resident agents staffing these Potomac stores soon acquired a reputation as aggressive, hardworking businessmen. They both bought tobacco and other commodities for export and sold a wide range of imported goods."

By 1740, West was joined

in this area by his countrymen John Carlyle, William Ramsay and John Pagan in the tobacco export business. The next year, John Graham established Dumfries, named after his hometown of Dumfries, Scotland. When Alexandria was established as a town, it was known as Alexandria or Belhaven, after John Hamilton (1656-1708), the second baron of Belhaven and a fierce advocate of Scottish independence in the early part of the 18th century.

Perhaps the most prominent of the Scottish merchants in Alexandria was John Carlyle. Carlyle served as an original trustee of Alexandria. He also served on the Fairfax Committee of Safety in 1774 and as a justice of the peace for Fairfax County.

Carlyle's mansion, still standing at 121 North Fairfax St., was considered the nicest in the town by British General Edward Braddock in 1755, so Braddock used it as his headquarters during the French and Indian War.

William Hunter Jr., our mayor from 1789 to 1790, founded a fraternal organiza-



PHOTO/HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

The Lord Provost Bill Campbell and the Lady Provost Yvonne Campbell with members of the Alexandria Fire Department during the Campbells' 2022 visit to Alexandria.

tion in Alexandria known as the St. Andrew's Society. The Society consisted of both native Scots and those of Scottish descent, which raised money for charitable purposes.

It met quarterly at various local taverns, and its annual highlight was the St. Andrew's Day feast on Nov. 30. St. Andrew's Society remained active until the 1840s in Alexandria, and one of its offshoots incorporated in Washington, D.C. in 1855. It is still active today.

Due to its historical connection to Scotland, Alexandria and Dundee have been sister cities since 1993. Dundee is the fourth-largest city in Scotland,

and also its sunniest.

The current Lord and Lady Provost of Dundee, Bill and Yvonne Campbell, visited our city to observe the Scottish Christmas Walk festivities in 2022. Their visit and the annual Christmas Walk are an enduring reminder of our town's long connection to Scotland.

The 53rd annual Alexandria Scottish Christmas Walk Parade is this Saturday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. For more information, please visit ALXScottishWalk.com.

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