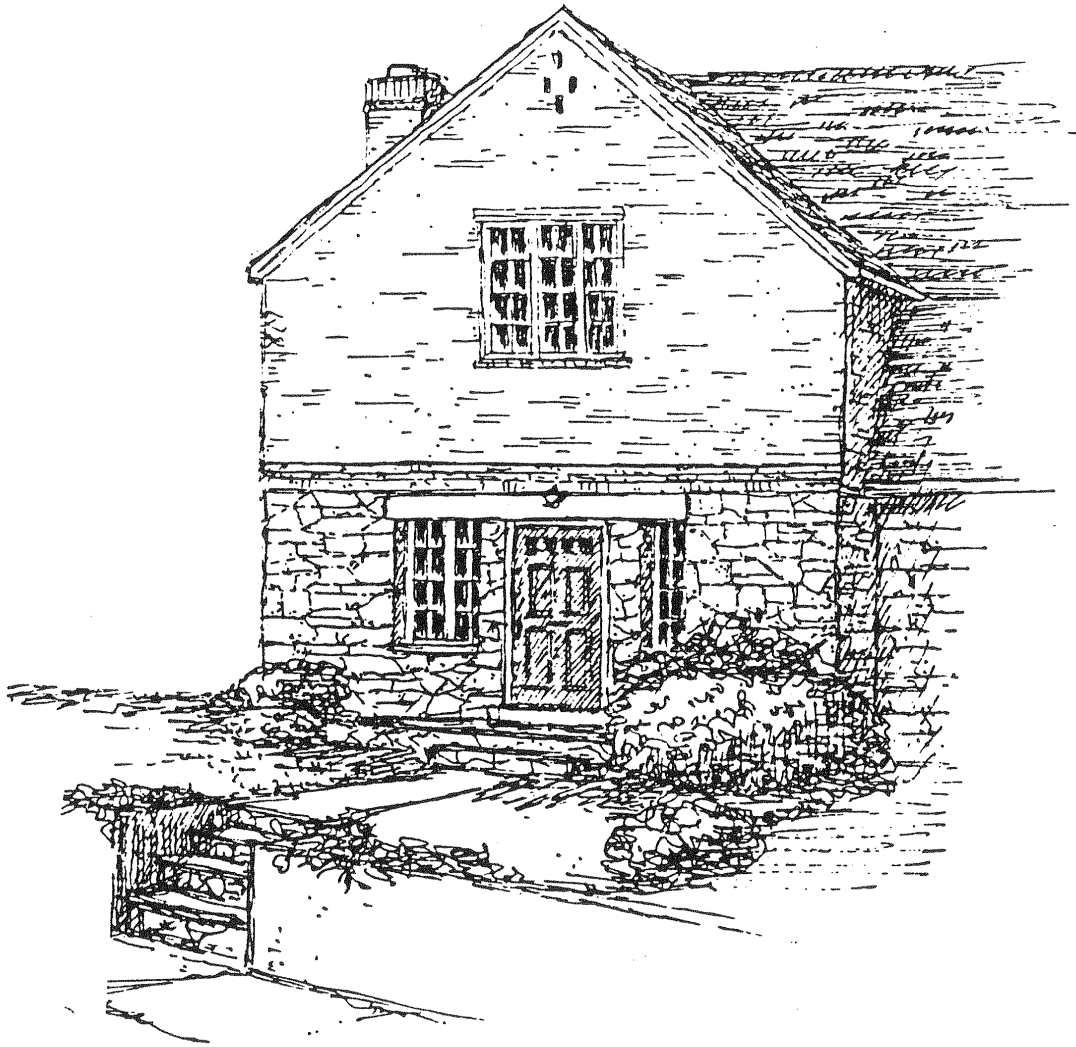


Fagelson's Addition



A Brief History of
an Alexandria Community

Fagelson's Addition: A Brief History of an Alexandria Community

Hidden beside a stretch of the George Washington Memorial Parkway is a half-century-old Alexandria community of Shakespearean-flavor stone cottages—each marked by a signature wooden beam resting over its front door. This distinctive pocket of homes on the northern lip of Old Town is inhabited by a dedicated mixture of senior citizens, young couples, singles, and young children. It goes by the name of Fagelson's Addition.

"I've lived in Alexandria all my life and I didn't know it was here," a census taker once marveled to Kitty Bush, an original owner who bought her Devon Place home in 1940.

"While other subdivisions have a sterile look, ours is cozy," says Susan Ball, who moved onto Michigan Avenue in 1970. "And we don't have any of those restrictions on what colors you can paint your house."

Bellevue of the Potomac

As far back as the 18th century, the land that would sprout this unique neighborhood appeared on maps and figured in the social and economic life of a young Alexandria. At the intersection of what is now East Abingdon Drive and Slater's Lane stood Bellevue, the fine "country seat" of William Hodgson (1765-1820), a prominent Alexandria merchant, and his wife, Portia Lee (1777-1840). Their 12-acre estate, with its sweeping view of the Potomac River, was the setting for many elegant parties and receptions in the early 19th century. Shortly after moving to Bellevue in 1801, Mrs. Hodgson wrote that "the situation is Beautiful" and described an abundance of wild blackberries on the property.

In 1831, construction began on the seven-mile Alexandria Canal, which ran directly through what is now Fagelson's Addition. From 1843-1886, the waterway serviced the 183-mile Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, which carried tons of coal from Western Maryland, moving it through Georgetown to Alexandria's wharves, from which it was shipped to such points as San Francisco and Panama.

In 1840, Bellevue and the surrounding meadow-and-prairie-like area was purchased by John Slater, who turned it into lush farmland. He cultivated greenhouse flowers, cabbage and rhubarb, and his strawberries became a fixture on the menus of restaurants in Alexandria and Washington. Slater would give his name to a street that had previously been Poorhouse Road, after the home for the indigent that existed since the early 1800s on the current Monroe Avenue site of Simpson's Field. In 1852, a portion of the area around Slater's property was officially annexed to Alexandria.

The Fagelson Family

In 1915, a Jewish immigrant from the Baltics named Samuel Fagelson (1896-1987) purchased the land and converted it to a dairy farm. He and his wife Matilda (from a family of old Washington "cave dwellers" named Becker) raised their children in a house that endured until the 1970s near the site of the current Airborne Express outlet on Powhatan Street. The Fagelsons sold produce at the farmer's market in Old Town and retailed groceries at a store on Duke Street. (They supplied milk and food for the protesting World War I veterans during their famous "Bonus March" in Anacostia in 1932.)

Their son Bernard Fagelson, now a prominent Alexandria attorney, recalls that while growing up in the '20s and '30s, he and his friends played cowboys and Indians on the cow pastures. They floated wooden toys on the remnants of the Alexandria Canal. "We used to walk across the canal to the river and talk to people who owned houseboats," he says. Fagelson also recalls how when he was 5 years old, the older boys from the Lamond family, owners of the Potomac River Clayworks on the site of what is now Marina Towers, used to escort him on the 3-mile walk to Mt. Vernon School. "Clyde and Slater Lamond were the closest thing to gentry in those days," he says.

The neighborhood's economic activity revolved around the Potomac Yards facility of the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad. Framed wooden flats in the neighborhood were inhabited by railroad workers. Beginning in 1908, the laborers were served by Johnson's Store, or the "old railroad store," on Powhatan Street, which was fashioned from wood and metal rescued from a railroad refuse pile. Johnson offered frozen foods, hardshell crabs, watermelon, fish bait and tackle. (Second-generation owner Morris Johnson operated it into the 1980s. It is now empty and for sale.) A slaughterhouse and sausage factory were located behind Johnson's Store. During the Depression, hobos who hopped freight trains were frequently given meals by Johnson, Mrs. Fagelson and other locals.

In 1923, according to deeds at the Alexandria and Arlington land records offices, Fagelson sold a portion of the property to a Lithuanian immigrant fruit grower named Stanley Guokas. In 1924, he sold another portion to a Polish immigrant couple named Anthony and Katherine Sadouskas. And in 1925, he sold a portion to the city for use as a public street, (The Goukases and Sadouskases would intermarry and for decades shared a duplex wood frame house off of what is now Chetworth Park.) After Arlington became independent from what was called "Alexandria County," the area that would become Fagelson's Addition was officially annexed to the incorporated City of Alexandria in 1930.

In 1932, the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway (later named the George Washington Memorial Parkway) was completed, easing access to Alexandria from Washington, D.C., (the old route had been Powhatan Street, formerly the Washington and Alexandria Turnpike.) "The boulevard," as locals would call the parkway, made residential development more feasible for commuters who worked in the District. Most of the area, however, was still rural enough for quail hunting.

In 1935, a builder created 14 houses on Second Street and Colonial Avenue (behind what is now Firehouse No. 4 built in 1961) in the style that would characterize Fagelson's Addition. Seeing their success, developer J. Garrett Beitzell and the Mt. Vernon Construction Co. (chartered in 1892) then repeated the stone with wooden beam motif in 84 units on 56 lots purchased, beginning in 1938, from the Fagelson, Goukas and Sadouskas families, and from a nonresident owner named Jacob Roberts.

The area since the 1920s had been called "Fagelson's Addition to Dempsey's Subdivision" (real estate documents still use the full name). W.H. Dempsey was a 19th-century homeowner in the Potomac Yards area who is believed to have made unsuccessful forays into development. (Records show that in 1891, Dempsey bought the property that is now bordered by Slaters, Powhatan, Upper Chetworth and East Abingdon Streets.)

Beitzell's labors bore fruit in 1939 and 1940. Nestled among long-established trees, the rows of three-floor townhouses of two and three bedrooms stood out in the region for their gray-brown stone, slate roofs, steel casement windows, dual-level fireplaces, skylights, pine-paneled family rooms and the brightly colored bath fixtures and tile so fashionable at that time. Artisans were brought from Philadelphia to lay the hardwood floors, and the opening of the homes merited an architectural write-up in The New York Times. Marian Weaver, a 34-year veteran of the neighborhood who has lived both on Chetworth and Devon Place, recalls having a contractor install an outdoor faucet and hearing him remark upon the high quality: "I haven't had to go through a wall this thick in years," he said. Many of the homes were fronted with handsome stone retaining walls.

Only \$500 down

As later residents would note, Beitzell's project was a planned community, much like Reston, Va., in the 1960s. The purchase price was \$5,200 plus \$500 for the title search, according to Thelma Bontz, an original owner on Michigan Avenue. The majority were FHA-financed (typical down payment: \$500), and the main buyers were mid-level government employees and junior military officers. Many new owners on Michigan Avenue enjoyed a view of the Potomac from their bedroom windows.

Beitzell used the same stone to fashion a convenience store on Bashford Lane, and designed a larger house at the corner of Bashford and West Abingdon Drive that he used first as a model, and later as the home where he and his wife, Ruth, a realtor, raised their children. "In those days, developers didn't mind living in their own subdivisions," Bernard Fagelson says. The surrounding area was also being developed. In the early 1940s, the subdivision called "Virginia Village" was built along Powhatan and Portner Streets. Margaret J. Bashford, who owned extensive land on the river side of the George Washington Parkway, sold off a series of properties in the '30s and '40s. (The street named for her family was originally called Bashford Street, and later became Bashford Lane.)

Beitzell was an anglophile, and his subdivision's streets would bear the British monikers of Devon, Chetworth and Avon Place. Over time, many of the streets would change names. Dempsey Street became Portner, and Terra Cotta Lane became Bernard (pronounced BERnerd) for the younger Fagelson. Michigan Avenue was originally named Fagelson Avenue, but during World War II, some neighbors, according to Thelma Bontz, felt that a street should not be named for a living person, so they renamed it for the state from which many of them hailed. Bernard Fagelson recalls coming home from service in the War and being asked by Alexandria Mayor Capt. Billy Wilkins whether he minded the name change. "Since my father said he didn't care about publicity, I said I guess that would be all right," Fagelson said.

Because housing was scarce during wartime, the land surrounding Fagelson's Addition (present-day Chetworth Park, Seaport Lane and Chetworth Court) was run as a trailer camp by Joyce Dowell and her brother, both neighborhood homeowners. For years it was the last trailer court in Alexandria, home to well-regarded military families until the 1970s, by which time it was plagued by possums, gravel and mud. The postwar period also brought what would become another familiar sight: the Alexandria Traffic Control Department facility on Bernard Street.

10-cent Bus Fare

Residents of Fagelson's Addition became accustomed to the nightly sounds of railway cars moving coal from the riverside PEPCO plant to the RF&P yard. They caught buses downtown from "the boulevard" and in front of Johnson's Store. Fare was only 10 cents, and buses were much more frequent than they are today, according to Mary Stein, who has lived on upper Chetworth Place since the late 1950s. Locals frequented the shopping center situated across Powhatan Street (now the embankment of the Monroe Avenue Bridge), which included a People's Drugs, Lash's Hardware, a candy store, a barber shop, and a Shell and an Esso station.

In the '60s, many residents joined with neighbors on Powhatan to form the Northport Garden Club, which organized garden tours and gave bulbs to schools (Northport is thought by some locals to have been the area's name in George Washington's day). Morris Johnson of Johnson's Store was informally elected honorary Mayor of the development by the Northeast Citizens Association, which was founded in the early '50s and incorporated in 1986. Fagelson's Addition residents were also active in other local organizations, according to longtime activist and Powhatan Street resident Jean Caldwell. One group fought off proposals to widen Route 1 and build a cloverleaf exchange (which threatened the neighborhood with augmented through-traffic) and another work to ease the process of local racial integration in the 1960s.

By the 1970s, Fagelson's residents included several children of original owners, as well as several flight attendants who commuted to nearby National Airport.

Individual homes in Fagelson's Addition have displayed special character. Ed and Alva Jacobs on lower Chetworth had their amazing topiary featured in The Washington Post and Journal newspapers. The end unit at 700 Chetworth Place became known as the "honeymoon cottage" because each owner or tenant since World War II, when it was inhabited by brides whose husbands were at war, has become engaged or married while living there.

Lee's Market

All of Fagelson's residents have shopped at Lee's Market on Bashford Lane, which was built with the same stone as their homes. For most of its history, Lee's was owned by Harry and Sylvia Fisher, who ran it like a supermarket, with a meat section, two check-out lines, home delivery and even general products such as costume jewelry. For a while, it was part of the DGS chain, and was almost as fancy as the current Sutton Place Gourmet, says Mary Stein. It also merged for a period with Chauncey's market on King Street. Harry Fisher "had the gift of gab and was a good salesman," recalls Jewel Horn, who bought on Bashford in the early 1960s. One time Fisher was robbed, and the culprits tried to lock him in his meat freezer. After playing dead, he was able to extricate himself.

The cleaners next to Lee's Market was for years run by the Baldwin family, which still operates a fabric care store on Fairfax Street. After passing to an owner named Cooper, Lee's Market was purchased in 1974 by the Kim family. "Mr. Kim is more accommodating, and very decent," says Jewel Horn. Kim keeps remarkably long hours; he's open 13 hours for six days a week, and only slightly less on Sundays. He also grows vegetables on the land beside the store. For several years, Kim leased the cleaners to Sunny's Cleaners before turning it over to his son and daughter to start the current All Cleaners.

The Dixie Pig

Visitors following directions to Fagelson's Addition often navigate using a most visible local landmark: The Dixie Pig barbecue restaurant, at Bashford Lane and Powhatan Street. It was built in 1949 on the site formerly occupied by a school for children of black rail workers and a grocery store run by another branch of the Johnson family, according to a history of the restaurant posted by the door. Beginning in 1926, the Griffin family of Alexandria ran a barbecue at the triangle intersection of Powhatan and N. Washington Streets (now the building occupied by the American Academy of Physician Assistants). The father and mother then outfitted their children each with his own Dixie Pig barbecue, one on Richmond Highway across from Beacon Mall, one in Fredericksburg, and the other, run by Arthur Griffin, on Powhatan Street. Proprietorship of the Powhatan Pig was carried on by Griffin's daughter Adelaide Arthur until 1983, when her retirement was featured on Channel 9 local news. The current owners are Ed and Aura Arcilla. The Pig offers "50s chic" ambience, authentic right down to the radio, and boasts the oldest intricate neon sign in Alexandria. Beginning in 1989, an effort was mounted by some in the neighborhood to close the Dixie Pig. They lobbied against renewal of a 40-year-old zoning variance. After other citizens rose to the Pig's defense, the restaurant was given a reprieve, at least temporarily, when the City Council voted it a special permit until 1996.

Surrounding Improvements

Through the decades, loyal residents of Fagelson's Addition have watched their surrounding neighborhood change. The Mason Hall Apartments on West Abingdon Drive were built in 1951, rising to block the view of the parkway, recalls Kitty Bush, who used to sit and enjoy watching cars on "the boulevard." But most changes were seen as improvements. In the late 1970s, the trailer park gave way to the townhomes on Seaport Lane and Chetworth Court.

On Portner Street, off Bernard, the Pre-Cast Stone Manufacturing Co. was replaced with two rows of townhouses in 1979. Lucy Smith, who bought on Devon Place in 1958, recalls how the citizens voted to minimize through-traffic in the neighborhood by erecting barriers at the end of upper Devon Place and upper Chetworth to separate them from the new townhomes. An aging apartment complex on Bashford Lane was torn down in stages, beginning in 1981, to make room for the townhouses of Nethergate. (Earlier in the century, this was the site of the Portner brewery.)

Joining with residents of nearby developments in the Northeast Citizens Association, Fagelson's residents have been active in protecting the neighborhood from high-volume traffic, working successfully to oppose a plan for a large-scale, twin-span replacement for the Monroe Avenue Bridge. (A more manageable version of the bridge was completed in 1988.) Many fought for adjustments in a high-density plan offered by the RF&P to develop nearby Potomac Yards (the Alexandria 2020 project), and in 1992 they succeeded in winning removal of billboards on the open field at Powhatan and Washington Streets that had been in use since the 1920s. (Known as the Kass property, the field was once the site of traveling carnivals, according to Bill Bontz.) Many area residents actively opposed the since-abandoned proposal to build the new Washington Redskins stadium at nearby Potomac Yards.

Following lobbying by parents during the mid-1980s, the vacant field off upper Chetworth Place (used as a "victory garden" during and after World War II) was christened Chetworth Park by the city and outfitted with benches and playground equipment. Since 1985, the Chetworth Park Children's Co-op has been a community resource for shared babysitting and family social life.

Children and Scenery

The number of children in Fagelson's Addition has greatly fluctuated. For the first decade, there were few, explains Marian Weaver, but kids became more plentiful in the '50s and '60s, most of them attending the Ficklin School (1950-1912) across the parkway between Pitt and Royal Streets. Soon after the school was torn down (it's currently the site of Watergate of Alexandria), children again became scarce. When members of the baby-boom generation began moving in during the early '80s, they spawned what is known nationally as the "echo boom:" the scampering footsteps of children again became common in Fagelson's Addition,

For residents of all ages, life in Fagelson's Addition seems richer than in typical suburbia. The location only minutes from Old Town, the airport, the river and the Metro subway system allows a pedestrian to see boats, trains, and planes, as well as industry, office buildings, retailers and nightlife. With its diverse color schemes and well-manicured yards, it's a perfect spot, as 36-year-resident Ed Jacobs puts it, from which to sit "and watch the world go by on the boulevard."

Written by Charlie Clark
800 Devon Place
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This essay is intended as part of a broader local history being planned by the NorthEast Citizens' Association.

A Note on the Sources: The author is indebted to A Seaport Saga: Portrait of Old Alexandria, Virginia, by William Francis Smith and T. Michael Miller (The Donning Co., 1989); historical maps from Alexandria's Lloyd House; "Small Area Plan for Historic Preservation: Northeast," Office of Historic Alexandria, October 1990; Primary source documents collected by Elizabeth Poel; Short History of the Dixie Pig by Bonnie Medrano; Private History of the Honeymoon Cottage by Nancy Vaughnan; "Old Railroad Store an Eyesore to Some," by Denis Collins, The Washington Post, March 12, 1981; Alexandria Office of Land Records; Files of Marian Weaver; and 10 interviews with local residents. The manuscript was reviewed by several longtime residents, Ellen Clark, citizens association president Bob Maslyn, and Lloyd House historian T. Michael Miller.

Fagelson's residents: Please bequeath a copy of this history to future owners and tenants of your home.