ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

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LEXINGTON'S ALEXANDER-WITHROW HOUSE

By Royster Lyle Jr.

LESS THAN TWO YEARS after the town of Lexington was established in 1778, William Alexander, a prosperous county merchant and a member of a prominent Scots-Irish Valley family, purchased two lots in the center of the new community. A few years later, on one of these lots he built a large unusual brick building — a building that has played an important part in the development of the town of Lexington and which fortunately survives today.[1]

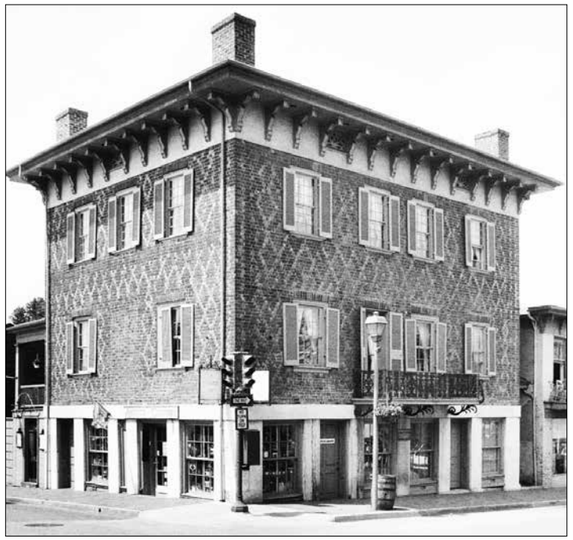
It was one of the town's first stores, the first post office and the first bank; it has been a doctor's office, a haberdashery, a meat market, a shoe store, a residence and a school. Its original design was especially distinctive, and the various architectural changes it has endured over the years have added even greater significance to this prominent downtown landmark.

In 1969 the building was purchased by Historic Lexington Foundation and exterior repairs were made after long years of neglect. It was subsequently sold to a purchaser who agreed to preserve the street façades. The building's future seems assured.

The Lexington area was settled in the 1730s by settlers who migrated from eastern Pennsylvania west and southwest into the Great Valley of Virginia after

Above: Detail of the Alexander-Withrow House (North Washington Street side), showing the diamond brick pattern, known also as diapering. Photo: Library of Congress.

1 See Rockbridge County deed book A, p. 277 (Lot #18) and p. 278 (Lot #12).



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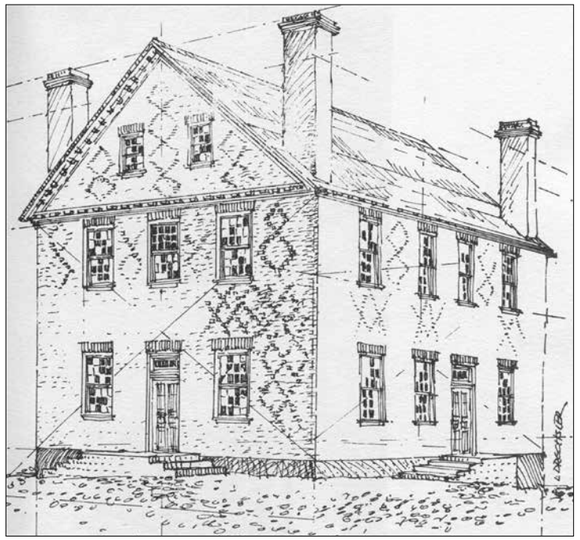


Architecture of Historic Lexington, HLF, 1977

The house that William Alexander built, now and then: Left, the Alexander-Withrow House today. Right: Conjectural drawing by Larry Dreschler, based on research by Royster Lyle Jr.

staying for a time among the Pennsylvania Germans and Swedes. The site they chose for the new town of Lexington was not exactly ideal; the plat of thirty-six lots in a simple grid was much neater on paper than it actually was when the streets were laid out. In fact, many of the streets were so steep that they were little more than muddy trails until well into the nineteenth century.[2]

William Alexander was typical of these settlers. His father, Archibald Alexander, came to America in 1737 as part of the great emigration from Ulster to Pennsylvania. William was born the next year while the family was living in Nottingham, in southeastern Pennsylvania. Ten years later, Archibald Alexander bought his family to live in the Valley of Virginia, near what is today Lexington. One account says that young William "grew to manhood amid the hardships of frontier life." As a young man he "embarked in mercantile pursuits, and kept a store at [Jordan's] Point" near the ford where the Great Valley Road crossed the North River, now the Maury. William Alexander had three sons and five daughters.[3] The Revolution broke up William's "mercantile arrangements" and he supported his large family during this period by becoming deputy to his father, the high sheriff.

During and after the Revolution, William was active in establishing Liberty Hall Academy, the antecedent of Washington and Lee University. He was one of 20 original trustees when Liberty Hall received its charter in 1782, the year the school moved from Timber Ridge, about ten miles north of Lexington, to a small frame building at the west edge of today's campus.[4]

After he bought property in the new town of Lexington, William probably first built a log cabin or house on each lot because there was a stipulation in the deed that a house must be erected within two years or the property would revert to the town trustees. Whatever the case, one of the town's oldest traditions has it that William Alexander built his large brick house and store combination in 1789 on the corner of Main and Washington Streets.[5]

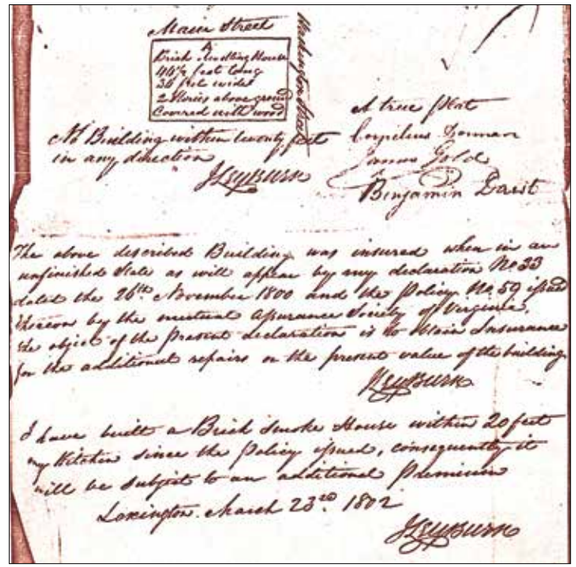
The name of the craftsman Alexander chose to build his large town house is unknown, but it is clear that he was a builder of some sophistication who was able to combine a number of architectural features that gave the building a special place in the Valley's late-18th-century architecture.

The principal influence on early construction in the Valley of Virginia was German. Much of the building culture in the immediate Lexington area in the eighteenth century came from the Scots-Irish locals, who had acquired their skills from Germans in Pennsylvania, and many stone and log buildings in the Lexington area reflected this German influence quite clearly. William Alexander's house, however, appears to have come from other influences. The builder chose to place four corner chimneys in the structure, a feature rare in the Valley of Virginia. There also appears to have been a gable roof in the beginning, facing Washington Street.

Other buildings with four angled fireplaces and corner-chimneys were put up during this period. It is clear that Liberty Hall Academy was one.[6] There, in 1793, William Cravens, a stonemason who had been brought to Lexington from Rockingham County some 50 miles to the north, built the three-story stone academy building to replace the frame building of a decade earlier. Cravens's stone building itself burned less than ten years later, but its picturesque ruins — its solid stone end walls — still stand today, a monument to the talent of its builder. It is clear that the building had four corner chimneys with corner fireplaces on each floor.[7]

Dramatically, the builder included in the brickwork an elaborate " pering" design. This pattern in the Flemish bond brickwork on Alexander's house remains a mystery.

When the house was built, brick was not even much used as a building material in Lexington. Whenever bricks were used, however, they were usually made on site, and local tradition has it that this was true of William Alexander's townhouse. In a kiln, the bricks that were closest to the fire became more deeply glazed and were known as dark headers. Perhaps an itinerant craftsman who stopped in Lexington in 1789 was adept at using dark headers to create interesting patterns.



Addendum to 1802 insurance policy. Benjamin Darst's sketch of the location, top part; John Leyburn's description of the building, lower part.

The Alexander-Withrow building was one of the few town structures —maybe the only one — to survive the disastrous Lexington fire of 1796. The building was damaged and the upper floors were later rebuilt. An insurance policy issued six years after the fire notes that in 1800 the building had still been in "an unfinished state."[8]

2 See Rockbridge County will book #1, p. 304.

Royster Lyle Jr. (1933–2007) was a key force in establishing the George C. Marshall Research Library in Lexington and was a historian and preservationist as well. He helped found Historic Lexington Foundation and was co-author, with Pamela Simpson, of *The Architecture of Historic Lexington* (1977). He wrote this article in 1972 but it remained unpublished until now.

3 His son Archibald, born in 1772 while the family lived on a farm near Lexington, became one of the most prominent figures in the Presbyterian Church, president of Hampden-Sydney College, and a founder of Princeton Theological Seminary.

4 *Washington and Lee University Historical Papers,* II, p. 13.

5 See Ruth A. McCulloch, "Rockbridge and Its County Seat," *Rockbridge Historical Society Proceedings,* Vol. I, 1941, pp. 62–77. From the scattered tax records of the town during the 1780s, Mrs. McCulloch established the 1789 date. This writer, having examined the same records, concurs.

6 See Royster Lyle Jr., "Early Corner Chimneys in Lexington, Virginia," *Pioneer America,* January, 1972, pp. 9–19.

7 *W&L Historical Papers,* I, p. 43.

8 Mutual Assurance Society policies (VSL microfilm), reel 2, vol. 19, no. 33 (1800), and reel 2, vol. 20, no. 46 (1802).

Many accounts attest to William Alexander's position as a leading member of the early Rockbridge community. Nevertheless, at one point while he was still a county merchant north of town (November 3, 1778), he was forced to appear in court, along with a number of prominent citizens, for selling liquor without a license.[9]

In addition to running the store in his large building in the center of town, William Alexander was also the first postmaster. He reported to the new Post Office Department in Washington, March 20, 1793, that he had begun collecting and distributing mail in Lexington. He held this position until his death in 1797.[10]

Following William Alexander's death, the house and lot were purchased from his heirs in 1800 by Captain John Leyburn,[11] who for the next three decades operated a store in much the same fashion as Alexander had. John Leyburn, like Alexander, was a Scots-Irishman; he had come with his family to Pennsylvania from Ulster as a child. At the age of 31 he entered the mercantile business in Lexington.

John Leyburn's youngest son, John, left a description of the house during those early years: "Our old house occupied a conspicuous place in the village [and] . . . was in most respects a pleasant abode. Its apartments, for that day, seemed spacious and airy; the prospect of the surrounding hills and majestic mountains was beautiful and grand and the great piles of blazing hickory on the capacious hearth glowed with comfort and cheerfulness, as we cozily gathered around it."

The younger John Leyburn also wrote that the building's "elevated and isolated position exposed it to the full blasts of the winter winds, which came rushing down from the snow-clad mountains, roaring in the chimney tops and rattling the windows, moaning like so many spirits in distress through every crevice and keyhole, and throwing a gloom over our little circle."[12]

> An English traveler to Lexington during this period wrote: "The town has many attractions. It is surrounded by beauty, and stands at the head of a valley flowing with milk and honey. House rent is low and provisions are cheap, abundant, and of the best quality. Flowers and gardens are more highly prized than in most places."

John Leyburn also wrote that in late summer evenings the chimney swifts in great numbers would "assemble from nobody knew where and, after floating for a long time in a wide, revolving circle around one of the high chimneys . . . would descend into its funnel and take up their lodgings for the night." Until recent years residents of Lexington continued to "stand and gaze" at the swifts circling over the house in late afternoon.[13]

A tradition that the first newspaper was published in the building stems from the fact that the office of the *Rockbridge Repository,* first issued in 1801, was located, as the masthead indicated, "on Washington Street, one door below the store of John Leyburn." In fact, the building in which the newspaper was printed was a smaller building on the property; Captain Leyburn's holdings went at that time through the block to what is today Jefferson Street.[14]

Washington & Lee Library Special Collections

The Repository was published 1801–05, initially in a dependency that was part of William Alexander's property on Washington Street.

From the Leyburn papers it is clear that the "corner room of the main floor was used for his store, since it fronted on both Main and Washington Streets." On the same floor next to the store room was a "counting room, with glass panels in its door so that the Captain or his clerk might look through it into the store."[15]

9 See Oren Morton, *History of Rockbridge County*.

10 *Records of Appointments of Postmaster,* Book I, p. 322, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

11 Rockbridge County deed book D, p. 260.

12 James Graham Leyburn, *The Leyburn Family, 1734-1960,* unpublished manuscript [lent to Royster Lyle by its author], p. 9.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Facsimile in the Rockbridge Historical Society files.

15 Until the 1971 renovation the glass panel in the door was intact.

Harry Hamilton

Dr. Graham rests in Oak Grove Cemetery

Local legend has it that John Leyburn had Lexington's first piano, and it had been bought in Philadelphia and hauled to Lexington by wagon.[16]

After Captain John Leyburn's death in 1831, his son, Dr. Alfred Leyburn, a young businessman and a physician by training who was also a member of the state legislature, took possession of the building. Too busy with other things to practice medicine, Leyburn rented out the building for a while to Dr. Archibald Graham, another Lexington physician who had his office there. Dr. Graham was also a member of the Virginia House of Delegates and president of the Lexington Board of Public Works. Alfred, who would later become a member of the boards of both W&L and VMI, and his wife bought a house elsewhere in town.

> On the death of Dr. Alfred Leyburn: "As a man he was without reproach; as a neighbor uniformly kind; as a friend, true and devoted; as a husband and father, affectionate, indulgent and considerate. In all the relations of life, whether public or private, his duties were discharged with a sole eye to his country, his neighbor and his God. He leaves few behind him who can fill his place either in society or in the community in which he lived. His death will be mourned by hundreds who have shared his generosity and charitry and he descends to the grave honored, beloved and respectd by all, without distinction of race or color."
>
> — *Lexington Gazette & Citizen,* November 1, 1878

In 1835 Leyburn attempted to sell the property where Dr. Graham made his office. He advertised in the local paper that the building would "accommodate a large family." Among the other assets he listed were "a favorable location for the merchant or tradesman, . . . a store, counting room, and lumber house, . . . a two story brick kitchen, smoke house, ice house, carriage house, stable, and cistern." Leyburn, who had a miniature plantation on his two Washington Street lots in the center of town, also indicated in the advertisement that along the Main Street side of the lot there was "ample space for the erection of another large building."[17]

This was indeed a period of considerable business activity in the town. Washington College was flourishing under President Henry Ruffner, and the old arsenal on the edge of town was on the verge of becoming a promising new operation: the Virginia Military Institute. But in spite of the town's commercial prosperity and the advantageous location of Leyburn's building, he was unable to make a sale, and Dr. Graham maintained his office there for several more years.[18]

In the spring of 1840, Leyburn began renting to Captain George A. Baker, a prominent Lexington businessman who opened a haberdashery in the building.[19] In one advertisement in the local paper, Mr. Baker said that he was keeping "constantly on hand the best and most elegant assortment of clothes, cassimeres & vestings, the market can produce, also shirts, socks, cravats, ties, collars, undershirts, gloves, of all kinds, suspenders, drawers, handkerchiefs, coat-links & india-rubber goods."[20]

Baker boasted his "tayloring was executed in the best manner and in the most Fashionable styles." All work committed to his charge "shall be done in the most workmanlike manner and *Warrented to Fit.* A fine assortment of Ready-Made Clothes kept constantly on hand. County produce taken in for work done, or clothing."[21]

16 Leyburn Family, *op. cit.*

17 *Lexington Gazette,* October 9, 1835.

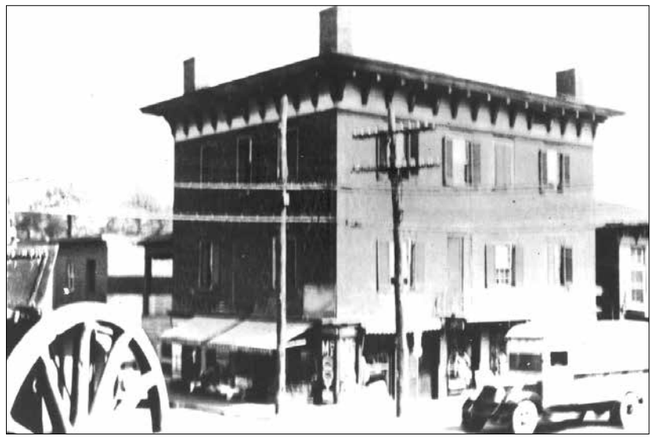
18 Ollinger Crenshaw, *General Lee's College* (Random House, 1969), p. 20.

19 Written clearly in pencil on a sill in a first-floor closet: "George A. Baker took possession of this house from Alfred Leyburn, May 27, 1840." There is no reason not to think this is accurate.

20 *Lexington Gazette,* December 1, 1853.

21 Baker ran many advertisements in the Lexington papers from 1850 to 1859.

By 1850 Baker had an impressive operation going. In addition to himself and his wife and five children in his house, Baker also boarded three young tailors: William Breedlove, age 22, and two brothers from England, George, 16, and Zebulon Brown, 20.[22] That same year Baker began including a new sales pitch: "Give me a call before you purchase elsewhere and I am sure to make a sale to you." He concluded with: "All kinds of country produce taken in exchange for work, except Cabbage."[23] This business ploy was apparently successful for a year later, in 1851, Captain Baker bought "all the houses, tenements, and appurtenances thereto" from Dr. Leyburn.[24]



McCoy's grocery, shown in this WPA photo, operated during the Depression on the ground floor of what is now known as the Alexander-Withrow House. The Withrow sisters, Lucy and Margaret, ran a school on the upper floors.

It was during Baker's ownership that Thomas Jackson, not yet Stonewall, became associated with the building. In the 1850s Jackson, a VMI faculty member, was a member of the board of directors of the Lexington Savings Institute, which constituted Lexington's first and only bank. The operation did not have an office, and used Captain Baker's store as the "place of deposit," since he was the treasurer. VMI Superintendent Francis H. Smith was president of the institution, and Washington College professor (and later General) D. H. Hill was another board member with his friend Jackson.

To this Scots-Irish community of the mid-19th century, saving money was next to Godliness, and the Lexington Savings Institute was a popular place. At one point the local paper admonished its readers: "If all who are addicted to the vice of intemperance and to moderate drinking would pay their morning visit to Captain Baker, the Treasurer of the Lexington Savings Institute, and get a *certificate of deposit* instead of a glass of whiskey, 10 years hence would exhibit fewer poor and helpless families amongst us. Will not all make the experiment?"[25]

In 1856–57 the town became involved in an enormous undertaking: the lowering of the level of streets throughout the center of town to improve the steep grades which had been a nuisance for 75 years. At Baker's building the street was graded down about eight feet. The county's land books indicate that almost all property owners along Main Street made considerable improvements to their houses in 1856–57, undoubtedly connected with the street alterations. Baker himself spent $1,000, which must have gone to underpin the building with the large stone blocks that are visible today. Also at this time the roof lines on the building were probably remodeled and heavy brackets added, giving the appearance of an Italian town house. The Italianate style was popular in Lexington in the late 1850s, and Baker quite clearly wanted the latest thing for his thriving haberdashery business.[26]

The building's commercial space opened onto both Main and Washington Streets, and most likely, entry to the residence was also through the store. But there

22 Virginia Census, "Schedules of Lists of Inhabitants, 1850," VSL microfilm, reel 85.

23 *Lexington Gazette,* June 27, 1850.

24 See Rockbridge County deed book BB, p. 346. The county land books indicate that Baker had actually begun paying taxes in 1845 as the "merchant in residence."

25 *Lexington Gazette,* March 25, 1847. The editorial was signed "Howard."

26 The Rockbridge land books, 1857, show increases to Baker's property: "value of building" to $1,000, bringing the total value of the building to $6,000, and the lot, up $1,000.

"One of the most prominent and cherished of Lexington landmarks … one of the most interesting architecturally"

— National Park Service, describing the Alexander-Withrow House in its National Historic Register listing

were also two doors along Washington Street leading to the courtyard area. The original Main Street door now opens on to an iron balcony, added during the remodeling of the 1850s.

Baker continued to operate a store in the building until 1875, when the store ownership passed to Jack Withrow. He and his two daughters, Margaret and Lucy, occupied the building for the next 80 years. For much of the 20th century, the Misses Withrow ran a school for young children in the upper rooms, and M. S. (Munce) McCoy operated a popular grocery store on the ground floor, which had been excavated and underpinned in the 1850s.

During the 1960s ownership of the building became hopelessly involved in a legal tangle. At one point during this period, one of the court-appointed attorneys complicated things further by running afoul of the law and was sentenced to prison. But finally, the building was put up for auction and the Historic Lexington Foundation purchased it in 1969.

HLF worked energetically and successfully to raise funds to rehabilitate the exterior and to make the necessary repairs to halt the building's deterioration. The courtyard had been reduced to a fraction of its original size by the construction of a 20th-century shop facing Washington Street. Historic Lexington's architect planned a small brick garden here below the mid-19th-century back porch. The entrance to the second and third story apartments is now through this attractive courtyard.

In 1971 the building was included in the National Register for Historic Places by the National Park Service

The building has attracted the attention of visitors to Lexington for more than a century and a half [now more than two centuries], and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

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