

The ALEXANDRIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

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NEWSLETTER

MAY 2016

DATE: Wednesday, May 25, 2016
PLACE: The Lyceum, 201 South Washington Street, Alexandria, Va.
TIME: 7:30 PM
SPEAKER: Dr. Brenda Mitchell-Powell, educator and lecturer

LECTURE

Alexandria's 1939 Library Sit-in: Its Impact, Aftermath and Legacy



The five black men who staged an anti-segregation sit-in at the Alexandria Library are led out by police on Aug. 21, 1939. (Courtesy of the Alexandria Black History Museum)

African Americans in Alexandria have long been outspoken advocates for their civil rights. In 1865, just two years after the Emancipation Proclamation and days after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, a local delegation of black residents met with President Andrew Johnson to push for federal protection from restrictive state laws. Not quite seventy-five years later, black Alexandrians would take an early and decisive step in the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement by staging one of the first sit-ins in American history.

In 1939, Alexandria's 33,000 residents were served by just a single library in the 700 block of Queen Street. Public buildings throughout the South required whites and African Americans to be segregated within the same facility, but black Alexandrians were completely barred from admission to the Alexandria Library although they voted and paid taxes to support it. During the summer of 1939, a local attorney and Howard University graduate named Samuel Wilbert Tucker had five young men enter the library and request library cards, which were denied simply because they were African American. The men were arrested for "disorderly conduct," although ultimately they were not convicted. A year later, the city opened a segregated library for African Americans. Many people are familiar with the fact that a sit-down strike took place at

Please arrive early—seating is limited. Free for AHS members--\$5 for all others.

the Barrett Library. But few know the behind-the-scenes maneuvers of citizens and city officials that led to the construction of the Robinson Library, a facility built by the City of Alexandria as an alternative to integrating the Barrett Library.

Dr. Brenda Mitchell-Powell will present a synopsis of the events that led to the construction of the Robinson Library, a brief history of the impact of the library on the lives of black and white Alexandrians and a review of the aftermath of the sit-in on the City of Alexandria and its citizens. Dr. Mitchell-Powell earned her doctoral degree from Simmons College School of Library and Information Science in May 2015 as an American Library Association Spectrum Fellow. She previously worked as a freelance editor and was the founding and creative Editor-in-Chief of *Multicultural Review* and the Editor-in-Chief of *Small Press* magazine. She has served on four panels for the National Endowment for the Arts, delivered five keynote addresses and served as Senior International Correspondent for *African Link* and Children’s Literature Editor for *Social Studies & the Young Learner*. Dr. Mitchell-Powell worked as Senior Library Assistant at Gibbs College (Norwalk, CT) and as a Librarian at the Norwalk Public Library (Norwalk, CT) and is currently at work on a book version of her dissertation on the 1939 Alexandria, Virginia, public library sit-in demonstration.



AHS June Lecture

June 22: “Alexandria’s Mansion House Hospital—Stories that Inspired the PBS Series *Mercy Street*”

Join local historians Sarah Coster and Audrey Davis as they explore new insights into PBS’s new drama *Mercy Street*—and get the most up-to-date information on the program. The lecture will take place at 7:30 PM at The Lyceum on 201 South Washington Street. To register for the lecture, please visit <https://alexandriahistoricalsociety.wildapricot.org/eventcalendar>.

Alexandria Historical Society Officers and Board of Directors for 2016-2017

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Upcoming History-Related Events in Alexandria

May 21 (1:00 – 3:00 PM): “We’ve Been Burned: Alexandria Firefighters during the Civil War”



When Virginia joined the Confederacy, Union troops occupied Alexandria and it became a center for transportation, supplies and medicine. Most municipal functions were assumed by the U.S. Army under the authority of the military governor. This walking tour will explore firefighting during the Union occupation. The tour begins at Friendship Firehouse Museum at 107 South Alfred Street. Please call 703-746-4994 or 703-746-3891 for more information.

May 21 (7:00 – 10:00 PM): “Raise a Glass, Raise the Chimney”

In 1916, Virginia’s prohibition law became effective. According to local legend, Robert Downham, then-owner of the Lee-Fendall House and local liquor wholesaler, lost his license after news spread around Alexandria of his entertaining President Woodrow Wilson with lavish amounts of alcohol at a dinner party. One hundred years later, we are commemorating the occasion with a Prohibition Party in our garden. Enjoy a glass (or two) of bubbly, win something in our silent auction and celebrate the Lee-Fendall’s history! The proceeds from this event will be going toward the restoration of the chimney, which is in severe danger of collapsing and damaging other parts of the property. Over its two-and-a-quarter centuries of history, diverse dignitaries such as George Washington, Robert E. Lee and President of the United Mine Workers John L. Lewis have all enjoyed hospitality under this roof; it is imperative to protect this local treasure. Creative cocktail attire and period clothing is encouraged! Tickets are \$50 per person for cocktail party and \$75 per person for VIP (VIP guests will receive a special tour of the house, attend the cocktail party and enjoy a private reception beforehand with Mr. Downham and Woodrow Wilson – “bathtub gin” included)! The reception begins at 6:00 PM. Tickets are available for purchase at 703-548-1789. **This party is only open to guests 21 years old or older. Please bring your ID!* The Lee-Fendall House Museum and Garden is located at 614 Oronoco Street.

Volunteers Needed for Alexandria Museum

Alexandria is fortunate to have a thriving museum community, and volunteers are welcome at many of its museums. At this time, the Carlyle House is seeking volunteers. If you are interested in learning more about becoming a Carlyle House volunteer, please contact the museum by calling 703-549-2997. The Carlyle House is located at 121 North Fairfax Street.

AHS Membership

Dues for the Alexandria Historical Society are due and payable on July 1st each year. There are six membership levels. Please contact us if you are interested in either a Gift or Student membership.

- Gift
- Student -- \$10
- Individual -- \$20
- Couple (up to 2 members) -- \$30
- Sustaining (up to 2 members) -- \$50
- Patron (up to 2 members) -- \$100

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NEWSLETTER

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The AHS Newsletter is published by the Alexandria Historical Society, Inc., and mailed free to members.

To join the Society, submit your check made payable to "Alexandria Historical Society," together with your name, address, and telephone numbers, to the Alexandria Historical Society, 201 South Washington Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Annual dues are: \$10.00, Student; \$20.00, Single; \$30.00, Couple; \$50.00, Sustaining; and \$100.00, Patron. The membership year is July to June. Dues are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

The purpose of the Society shall be to promote an active interest in American history and particularly in the history of Alexandria and of Virginia.

The Society is organized exclusively for educational purposes.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE:
www.alexandriahistorical.org