Uncovering the Lives & Voices of the Women of Lee-Fendall House

For almost forty-five years, staff at the Lee-Fendall House believed that the story of Lucy Fendall, only daughter of the house’s namesake, was lost to history. Research historian T. Michael Miller conducted a thorough study of the home during its bicentennial and was unable to find any record of what happened to Lucy after she married in 1837. The life and career of her brother, Philip Fendall II, were well documented; his personal and public papers are preserved in multiple institutions. But any records of Lucy’s life had seemingly disappeared.

That all changed when at the beginning of this year a letter written by Lucy surfaced on the internet. The letter was in a private collection and dates to 1844. Its contents not only revealed what happened to Lucy Fendall; they also provided rich insights into her relationships, her concerns, and her hopes for the future. Thanks to ongoing discoveries like this one, we are able to share a much fuller story of life in the past through the voices of the women themselves.

This recently discovered letter helps round out our knowledge of the many women who have shaped the house. The museum’s archives presently contain a collection of photographs and papers that belonged to Maude Downham, a young woman connected to the home during the early 1900s. Through her detailed scrapbooks, photographs, personal library, and other materials, we can paint a picture of life for a young woman coming of age during the turn of the twentieth century. This archival collection forms the foundation of our up-and-coming exhibit The New Woman: Life in Progressive Era Alexandria, 1890-1920, opening on March 28th.

Back when the museum opened in the 1970s, the story of the house was focused on the “great men” of its past, from General “Light Horse” Harry Lee to labor leader John L. Lewis. Yet a deeper look at the house’s history reveals that it was the women of Lee-Fendall who held the house together over the years. Many of the women experienced considerable hardships that would test their resolve. From mourning widows to daughters who were coming of age, the women of Lee-Fendall each had to forge their own paths in a challenging world that so often stifled their voices.

Their ability to face the harsh realities of things such as bankruptcy, wars, and ill health is a testament to these women’s strength. It is this strength that provides a continuous thread throughout the house’s history and unites these impressive women. Even during its inception as a museum we see this thread continue. It was, after all, a group of very dedicated women who saved the property from developers and set forth to open the house as a museum.
Preserving & Promoting the Role of History Today

A decade ago, the eminent historian David McCullough told The Wall Street Journal, "We're raising young people who are, by and large, historically illiterate." This bold statement is borne out by the data; surveys show that only 22 percent of college students can name James Madison as the principal author of the Constitution. Eight percent can name slavery as the most direct cause of the Civil War. Just two percent can answer any questions about Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court decision that abolished legal segregation in the United States.

At a time when many are rightly worried about a decline in historical and civic understanding, the Lee-Fendall House Museum is uniquely positioned among small museums to help start conversations about our shared history. When Lee-Fendall House was built, the Constitution had not yet been written – and we were still occupied as a family home when people first walked on the moon. That means that we can tell an expansive story, one that reflects how profoundly life has changed in Alexandria over the past two hundred years – as well as the many, fundamental ways that life hasn’t changed.

We’re excited to continue telling these stories and more in 2019. With the approaching centennial of the 19th Amendment, when American women won the right to vote, we’ll be debuting a new tour and exhibit exploring the lives of the women who lived and worked at Lee-Fendall. We’re also launching a new field trip program, The War at Home, allowing elementary and middle school students to consider the complex choices that civilians, soldiers, and enslaved individuals faced in Civil War Alexandria by using original documents as their source materials! And we’re carrying on with our many popular tours and programs covering topics from the War of 1812 to the effects of Prohibition to the lives of free and enslaved African Americans at Lee-Fendall.

Show Your Support!

You can be a part of bringing this unique and vibrant programming to the community! On Wednesday, April 10th, Alexandria will come together for Spring2ACTion, an annual day of giving specifically for supporting nonprofits right here in town. This year, Lee-Fendall House will be using Spring2ACTion to rally support and secure the resources we need to sustain our public programming throughout the year ahead.

You can help by sharing our campaign with your friends and on social media, where you can set up your own Spring2ACTion page to support us. We hope you’ll also join us for a special happy hour on Wednesday, April 3rd, from 5:30-7:30 pm at the The Light Horse restaurant on historic King Street to kick-off the giving! Enjoy a drink with friends, learn more about our new programs from board and staff – and continue the conversation about Alexandria’s past and its relevance to the present.

The New Woman: Life in Progressive Era Alexandria, 1890-1920

Thursday, March 28, 2019 | 6:00 - 8:00 pm | Lee-Fendall House

Reception is free and open to the public.
A cash bar will be available.
RSVP at www.leefendallhouse.org

Sponsorship opportunities available - please contact megan.ritter@leefendallhouse.org
Real Volunteers of Lee-Fendall House

Running a small house museum requires help from many quarters, and the Lee-Fendall House certainly couldn’t operate without one of its oldest partners – the Junior League of Washington.

This women’s charitable organization formed its Historic Alexandria Docents (HAD) committee several decades ago to supply different historic sites in Alexandria with volunteers. Members of the League’s HAD committee frequently come together to support museums in Old Town throughout the year.

Here at Lee-Fendall these ladies do a lot! League volunteers are integral to the success of many of our special events and programs. Volunteers help during events like our Easter Egg Hunt, Pumpkin Hunt, and A Victorian Christmas, frequently preparing children's crafts, guiding families, and looking after activity stations. League volunteers also help staff our annual museum fundraiser – often serving drinks and stocking refreshments for attendees to enjoy.

Not only does the League provide the Lee-Fendall House with volunteers, it makes financial contributions to the museum as well. The League has funds available each year for its HAD properties. Recently the League helped Lee-Fendall purchase a diaper changing station for the restroom and prior to that, new metal shelving for the museum’s archives.

We love working with our Junior League partners and are so appreciative of everything they do for the museum!

To learn more about the Junior League of Washington, visit: www.jlw.org/about.

Possers & Crimpers

Before the invention of washing machines, doing the laundry was hard work! It was both time-consuming and physically exhausting. Today, we hardly recognize many of the laundry implements that would have been commonplace in households just over a hundred years ago. One of these tools is the posser or plunger, which was used to manually agitate clothing in a washtub, essentially cleaning clothing through a hand-powered spin cycle. This copper posser in the museum’s collection dates from the late 1800s, but earlier versions were made entirely of wood. Its long wooden handle still retains wear marks where its users had grasped it firmly with both hands.

Another foreign-looking device to modern eyes is the crimping iron, which would have been used to create all the perfect pleats that adorned women’s clothing in the late 1800s. Iron rods were manually heated in the cooking stove and then inserted inside the double rollers. Each pleated collar and trim piece would then have to be sewn back onto the dress after laundering and ironing was completed.

Laundry was usually a task done by women. In wealthy households, servant women were the ones who would have been most familiar with using these objects. Thank goodness advancements in laundry have improved!

Our Long-Time Partner: The Junior League of Washington

New Self-Guided Tour!

Short on time but still want to explore the museum? Or, more interested in exploring the museum on your own or at your own pace?

No problem! We have you covered!

Take our new and improved self-guided tour any time we’re open.

SAVE THE DATE!

Sips & Secrets A Speakeasy Night
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2019
7:00 - 10:00 PM
VIP RECEPTION AT 6:30 PM
Wednesday, April 10

Spring2ACTion
Support the museum’s efforts to raise funds for its public programming by participating in this 24-hour giving day supporting Alexandria-area nonprofits.

Friday, April 19, Saturday, April 20, & Sunday, April 21

20th Annual Easter Egg Hunt
The museum’s garden will be blanketed with hundreds of colorful toy-filled Easter eggs! Other activities include games, crafts, refreshments, and photos with the Easter Bunny.

Saturdays, April 13 & May 25, 10:00 AM

Beyond the Battlefield - A Civil War Walking Tour
A guided walking tour of Civil War sites in Historic Old Town focusing on locations and stories associated with soldiers, citizens, and the enslaved, including the occupation of Alexandria and emancipation.

Saturday, March 9, 2:00 PM

The Women of Lee-Fendall House ★
This tour will trace the experiences of the women who have lived in and shaped the Lee-Fendall House over the centuries. Beginning in 1791 with Mary Lee Fendall, the tour will culminate in the story of the women who fought to save the house from development in the 1970s.

Saturdays, March 23 & May 11, 10:00 AM

The War of 1812 in Alexandria - A Walking Tour ★
A guided walking tour of people and places in Old Town associated with the War of 1812.

Thursday, March 28, 6:00 – 8:00 PM

EXHIBIT OPENING – The New Woman: Life in Progressive-Era Alexandria, 1890-1920
Be the first to check out this new exhibit exploring the lives of three Alexandria women and their experiences during the immense social and political changes occurring from 1890-1920.

Saturday, March 30

10:00 AM – 4:00 PM
Hands-On History Day
Join us at this open house designed to help children and families connect with history! Touch the past and discover how things like houses, food, clothing, and toys have changed over time.

Friday, April 5, 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM

Homeschool Day
Homeschool families receive discounted admission and can enjoy educational activities and tours throughout the day. Come discover how life in America has changed over the past 200 years!

Sundays, April 7, May 5 & May 19, 1:00 PM

NEW! Alexandria ROCKS! A Walking Tour ★
This guided walking tour highlights the intersection of history and geology in Old Town Alexandria. Learn about the role rocks played in the development of some of the city’s most popular sites!

Saturdays, April 13 & May 25, 10:00 AM

Beyond the Battlefield - A Civil War Walking Tour ★
A guided walking tour of Civil War sites in Historic Old Town focusing on locations and stories associated with soldiers, citizens, and the enslaved, including the occupation of Alexandria and emancipation.

Saturday, April 27, 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM

Historic Garden Week - Open House
Historic garden week tour ticketholders can visit and tour the Lee-Fendall House and garden for free as part of Virginia’s annual garden week!

Saturdays, May 4, 11, 18, & 25

10:00 AM & 2:00 PM
Pillars to Pavers: Preservation in Alexandria
Explore spaces not normally open to the public at Carlyle House, Lee-Fendall House, and two guest sites. This walking tour will explore the streets of Alexandria with stops to look at how buildings have been preserved and reused for future generations to enjoy.

Sunday, May 12

Tours & Treats for Mom!
Moms and grandmas enjoy free house tours and tasty treats at the Lee-Fendall House in honor of Mother’s Day!

Fridays, May 17 & 31, 7:00 PM

Trivia Nights at Historic Sites ★
Staff members at Carlyle House Historic Park and Lee-Fendall House Museum have combined their random nerd knowledge to create bi-weekly trivia nights in our beautiful gardens. Test your knowledge on all things from pop culture to history!

Visit www.leefendallhouse.org:
- View the most up-to-date list of upcoming programs
- Get full event details and ticket information
- Purchase tickets for your favorite events