



Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

James Green's Mansion House Hotel: 1970's Opposition to Demolition

By Jamie Harding

In March 1848 James Green; a furniture maker in Alexandria, purchased the Bank of Alexandria building. That building had been erected by John Carlyle's son-in-law, William Herbert, in 1807, and still stands on the corner of North Fairfax and Cameron Streets. James Green's intention was to run a hotel on the property. From 1848 to 1855, the hotel prospered and Green enlarged it by

In the 1970s when many older cities considered rehabilitating depressed areas, discussions in Alexandria focused on demolishing the Mansion House Hotel (then called Carlyle Apartments). There were differences of opinion. Some Alexandria residents thought the building an eyesore and should be taken down. Not all agreed. There was serious opposition. Some remembered that through the 1960s urban renewal had swept through Alexandria, and Alexandrians had lost some of their beloved historic buildings. Still, Mayor Charles E. Beatley, Jr. accused James Green's hotel as being "a prostitution of the site." In 1971 a Baltimore contractor toured the building and pronounced it unfit for rehabilitation. He said facades of some buildings could be saved or reproduced, but not this one.



The Mansion House Hospital during the Civil War. The hospital was housed in James Green's recently completed hotel on Fairfax St. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

constructing an addition, which entirely obstructed the view of John Carlyle's house on Fairfax Street.

For over a century the Mansion House Hotel dominated the block, while the Carlyle House sank further and further into disarray. The house and hotel became known by different names over the next 100 years – the Mansion House Union Hospital (during the Civil War), Braddock Apartments, Wagar Apartments, and ultimately the Carlyle Apartments.

The Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority had purchased the Carlyle House and the apartment building in 1970 from Lloyd Schaeffer with the intent of demolishing the apartment building to completely restore the Carlyle House. Park staff believed that the apartment building hid the more valuable Carlyle House in the rear.

On the other hand some architects were against demolishing it. They thought the apartment building an outstanding example of

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The Carlyle Apartments from Fairfax St and Cameron St, under demolition in 1972. *Property of Carlyle House Historic Park.*

early American hostelry. The Department of Housing and Urban Development held a \$350,000 grant for six months for the Park Authority if it could find a buyer to restore the building. Only one prospect showed up for the tour. In 1972 bids were requested for demolition of the apartment building.

Despite the fact that there were many Alexandrians in favor of demolishing Carlyle Apartments, many residents and historians passionately opposed the proposed demolition. Some National Park Service historians said it was “a very rare surviving example of the mid-19th century, first-class American hotel.” Wolf Von Eckardt, former Art and Architecture critic for the *Washington Post*, voiced his opposition to the demolition by pointing out that when the Mansion House had been built by James Green in 1848 it was an elegant hotel. He thought that it had turned Alexandria from a muddy village into one of the finest towns in America and Fairfax Street into one of its most charming thoroughfares. So, said Von Eckardt. You would think that James Green would be forgiven after all of these years. But, he was not.

On Easter Sunday, April 11, 1971 Mrs. Sherrard Elliot, Jr., an Alexandria resident, wrote to Gordon Gray of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. She begged Gray to use his powerful influence to save the so-called “Carlyle Apartments” from demolition. Mrs. Elliot continued

that the Carlyle Apartments had historical importance equal to John Carlyle’s residence. Gray’s office thanked Mrs. Elliot for her concern and explained that the matter had been placed on the agenda for the next meeting of the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation.

Some Alexandrians pointed out that Robert E. Lee had stayed at the hotel in mid-July 1870. He wrote home to his wife that he was comfortably situated at the Mansion House and that it was “piping hot.” And, he had been honored at a reception there the previous year. In 1872 Jefferson Davis arrived in the city from Baltimore and stopped at the Mansion House.

Mr. Rodger Digillio, a local developer, commented recently (in 2011) that he was agnostic about whether the Carlyle House apartment building should be demolished. He thought that if the building could be restored for offices or shops it should stay. But, as it stood in the 1970s it had become an eyesore.

Washington architect Paul Spreiregen told the Alexandria City Council that the old hotel building should be preserved and the Carlyle House better displayed by creating an arcade in the



The Carlyle Apartments, under demolition, and the Carlyle House pictured from Lee St. *Property of Carlyle House Historic Park*

first floor to connect both buildings. One Alexandria newspaper wrote that the hassle over whether to preserve or demolish Carlyle Apartments was more than a little ridiculous. The article pointed out that Alexandria and all



of Northern Virginia will benefit from travel and tourism. Probably no other area of the nation has so many famous and interesting historical attractions as this one. It stated further that the real gem, now being developed, is the Carlyle House in Alexandria. Here, General Braddock planned the French and Indian War. Here, five colonial governors met and suggested to the British government the policy which led to the Stamp Act and the whole structure of "taxation without representation" before the American Revolution. But, the Carlyle House was hidden from view by the Carlyle Apartment building. Perhaps Carlyle Apartments are mildly interesting from an architectural viewpoint. However, as the article stated, "You can't save everything of interest. Especially, you can't save a mildly interesting structure at the expense of a finer and genuinely historical building that already has been preserved for many years by the dedicated private individuals and generous governments." Others disagreed. Captain E.K. Van Swearingen (USN Ret.), an Old Town resident and President of the Alexandria Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission, strongly urged the Council to retain the Carlyle Apartments because it was "the first successful attempt to incorporate an old and a new building on one design. He believed the Carlyle Apartments could be adapted to more desirable uses, or the city could sell it to a private hotel developer with the provision that it be restored or rebuilt."

Mr. William Lightsey, Executive Director of the Park Authority, stated that it would cost an estimated \$2,985,530 to restore the apartment house, and the annual loss of operating the building would be "in the range of \$150,000, and other members of the Park Authority wouldn't approve this budget request. The Park Authority cannot undertake a project of this kind," Lightsey explained. He said that even the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission had not objected to the demolition of the apartment building.

By 1971 it was apparent that the Carlyle Apartment building was doomed to be demolished. In April 1971, the Alexandria City Council voted

unanimously to demolish the 19th century hotel building that obstructed the Carlyle House, although the vote was considered advisory because the request was to be reviewed by the Federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation at a hearing in Washington the following week. The Council's vote was greeted with a mixture of great sadness and exalted jubilation. Demolition began. By early 1973 the Bank of Alexandria building was separated from the addition added by James Green in 1855, and the bank was restored along with John Carlyle's house. The demolition of James Green's 1855 addition had begun and the Carlyle Apartment building became history.

Today, 38 years after the demolition of the Carlyle Apartment building, the Carlyle House stands as a treasure seen from North Fairfax Street. Thousands of tourists visit the house each year and enjoy learning the history of one of Alexandria's founders, John Carlyle, and his family. Only the pictures and memories of a few Alexandria residents remain to tell the story of the Mansion House Hotel, which by the 1970s had become the Carlyle Apartments.



Carlyle House revealed. The demolished remains of the Carlyle Apartments, once James Green's stately hotel can be seen in the foreground of the image. *Property of Carlyle House Historic Park*

Sources of Information:

Carlyle House Files and Newspaper Clippings
Alexandria Archives & Records Management Files