

ARTIFACTS, ADVERTISEMENTS
AND ARCHAEOLOGY

by

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Foreword

The Alexandria Archaeology Publications series is composed of papers on various aspects of research conducted under the auspices of Alexandria Archaeology, a division of the Office of Historic Alexandria, City of Alexandria, Virginia. The authors include professional staff members, university students and Alexandria Archaeology volunteers. Editing of the papers has been kept to a minimum. It should be understood that the papers vary in tone and level of technicality, since they were originally directed toward many different audiences.

We are pleased to offer the papers within this series and in so doing are opening our “manuscripts on file” - including professional conference papers, background documentary studies, student course papers, and volunteer research papers - to professionals and public alike.

This publication was originally written to accompany an Alexandria Archaeology exhibition “Artifacts, Advertisements and Archaeology” which opened on May 18, 1985.

Pamela J. Cressey, Ph.D.
City Archaeologist
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The City of Alexandria, founded in 1749, grew and prospered as a Colonial port, and the merchant played a vital role in many aspects of its development. Many of Alexandria's early city fathers, like John Carlyle, William Ramsay and John Alexander, were Scottish merchants who settled in the Potomac Valley and made their fortunes, as well as their place in local history, through mercantile trade.

During the Federal Period, Alexandria sought to become a major trading center like New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Between the years of 1791 and 1795, Alexandria elevated its national status from 11th to 7th in total amount of goods exported from its port; and it was reported in one sea captain's ledger that at any time there were "seldom less than 20 square-rigged ships riding at anchor, and often more."¹

Alexandria was typical of pre-industrial revolution port-cities in America: the merchant class was the elite, trend-setting segment of society. The merchant's livelihood was dependent upon dealings with foreign inventors, businessmen and banks; therefore, Colonial merchants in Alexandria, and other cities were the center of finance before the advent of banking in this country. Merchants often extended long term credit or loans to their customers, and frequently bartered merchandise for produce or other home-made goods. Because gold and silver were scarce and paper money was virtually worthless, barter was considered to be the most reliable means of exchange. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century Alexandria merchants gladly traded merchandise for produce and raw materials, and frequently stated their terms of exchange in newspaper advertisements. Trading goods for goods assured both parties that they were getting an even exchange. Besides banking, merchants like Robert Miller invested in shipping lines, canals, railroads, utility and insurance companies and participated in local government.

As America expanded its frontiers, ports like Alexandria became distribution centers for goods imported from Europe and the Orient. In the early nineteenth century, however, northern cities began to industrialize and by the mid-nineteenth century, northern merchants had expanded into manufacturing as well as distribution of these goods. Alexandria merchants like Piercy and Miller had pottery manufactured for their stores, as well as limited distribution to outside markets, but not on the large scale of the northern merchant/manufacturer. The natural deep water harbors of coastal cities were easily accessible to larger and faster ocean-going ships, and great quantities of manufactured goods could be exported and imported at relatively low cost. Despite the importance of antebellum Alexandria's port to this region, its location on an inland tidal river, competition from the railroad in Baltimore and dependence on largely slave-oriented, agrarian economy offered little incentive for large manufacturers to locate in Alexandria. Thus, Alexandria became a secondary port dependent on the larger mercantile houses of the north to supply it with manufactured goods rather than maintaining the status of a primary source to hinterland markets.

Alexandria, like other emerging cities, relied on its port for commerce, transportation and news. The almost constant flow of travelers from Europe and other domestic ports, as well as traders and farmers from the hinterland made port-cities like Alexandria centers for information as well as commerce. The *Alexandria Gazette*, published since 1784, chronicled day-to-day events, world news, and of course advertisements. Early newspapers owed their existence to advertisers, and in the more business-oriented papers, as much as nine-tenths of the space was devoted to advertisements.² The *Gazette*, like other papers of the day, depended upon advertising for both its daily city and tri-weekly country editions. Many Alexandria merchants, like R.H. Miller, took advantage of the extended hinterland markets and advertised their wares in

country papers at competitive prices. For example, in 1837, Miller directed an advertisement to country merchants in several West Virginia and western Maryland papers announcing the impending arrival of earthenware, china and glass from England. A portion of the advertisement states: “Country merchants within reach of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal will find it to their advantage to purchase of the subscriber, as they will be carefully packed and forwarded.”³

Records existing from ancient times indicate that both verbal and written announcements have always been used to advertise the sale of goods. Eighteenth century essayist John Addison poked fun at the lengthy lists of goods that merchants published in the newspapers. He commented that advertisements were used “to inform the world where they might be furnished with almost everything that is necessary for life.”⁴ Clearly, early Alexandria merchants used their share of newspaper space to announce the arrival of seasonal goods, and meticulously list the quantity, variety and quality of each shipment. Alexandria businesses depended on shipping as the primary means of transporting goods to and from the city. Early merchants included the name of the ship, and often of the captain, in their advertisements when goods were received. Some merchants owned their own ships and booked transport for both cargo and passengers to Europe, the Orient, the West Indies or the intercoastal American cities.

Newspapers like the *Alexandria Gazette* prove to be some of the best sources of information on merchants, as well as the variety of goods stocked in their stores. Documentation in local histories, ledgers, ship manifests, and other business or personal correspondence provided valuable information on Alexandria businessmen; however, the newspaper is a slice of life. By studying the advertisements of Alexandria merchants, we can observe the subtle changes that can only be seen on a continuum. The *Gazette* advertisements also allow for objective observation as Alexandria business evolves: small general stores emerge; partnerships

form and dissolve; businesses thrive or fail; new merchants compete with established shops; and sons carry on the family business.

One of the most distinctive changes to occur in mercantile trade was the transition of the general merchant who was willing to “sell anything that offered a profit,”⁵ to the commission merchant of the mid-nineteenth century who sold a limited range of specialized goods. Almost simultaneously, it appears that advertising techniques became more sophisticated: wording of the announcements was more succinct and less flowery; and the size of the advertisements became more compact. By the mid-nineteenth century merchants geared their advertisements to specific customers and often purchased several spaces announcing specific sale items rather than list one complete inventory of each shipment; and the concept of standard pricing of merchandise, or “one-price-for-all”⁶ evolved as department stores appeared in larger cities and towns.

Thorough study of the old *Gazette* is almost like stepping backwards in time. The writing of the news, articles and advertisements reflect the way of life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: what was fashionable and sophisticated then, seems antiquated today. For example, the nineteenth century apothecary Henry Cook issued advertisements testifying to the miraculous curative powers of “Balm of Life” and other remedies. Today, nineteenth century patent medicines like these are the brunt of snake-oil jokes; although people still spend money on cures of unsubstantiated medicinal value. It proves the old adage “As much as times change, things remain the same.”

Although King Street stores were the focal point of commercial activity in the city, Alexandrians did not limit their shopping to these establishments exclusively. The weekly Saturday farmer’s market at Market Square is a tradition that has continued from the earliest

days of the city. Since 1753, Alexandrians have bought items ranging from produce to shoes at the stalls crowded next to City Hall. Eighteenth and nineteenth century Alexandrians also purchased items from the vendue merchant, or auctioneer, directly from the wharves and warehouses along the waterfront.

The history and economic growth of Alexandria revolved around the waterfront; although today the port is used primarily by recreational craft. Exotic goods from foreign ports of call are no longer auctioned off to merchants on Alexandria's wharves, and merchant/entrepreneurs like Carlyle, Ramsay and Alexander are names in the city's history; however, the mercantile environment as a desirable, interesting place to live and work has revived interest in Alexandria as a commercial center and community with a vital and important history.

Footnotes

¹Elizabeth Hambleton and Marian Van Landingham, *A Composite History of Alexandria* (Alexandria, VA: The Alexandria Bicentennial Commission, 1975) I, p. 46.

²Thomas C. Corchran, *Frontiers of Change: Early Industrialism In America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) p. 49.

³*Alexandria Gazette*, November 29, 1837, Vol. 14.

⁴Raymond H. Bauer and Stephen A. Greyser, *Advertising in America: The Consumer View* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1968) p. 5.

⁵Glenn Porter and Harold C. Livesay, *Merchants and Manufacturers: Studies in the Changing Structure of the 19th Century Marketing* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1971) p. 17.

⁶Daniel Pope, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1983) p. 187.

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