

JOURNEYS ON ALEXANDRIA'S HISTORIC WATERFRONT

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Waterfront History Plan Updates

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Introduction and Background

In 2010, the City of Alexandria initiated a comprehensive plan to redevelop its historic waterfront. The waterfront plan includes the construction of a promenade, parks, and amenities that will reshape the City’s waterfront, which in turn has spurred private development. This plan includes flood mitigation in Old Town. Working closely with the City Archaeologist, the Alexandria Archaeological Commission (AAC) drafted the [Alexandria Waterfront History Plan: Alexandria, a Living History](#) in 2010 for adoption into the [Waterfront Small Area Plan in 2012](#). The purpose of the Waterfront History Plan was to provide:

a general framework and direction for the eventual Waterfront Plan as well as guidelines for interpretation developed in collaboration with art and history specialists. The plan limits the number of interpretive panels and other plaques or visual cues to avoid creating the feel of an outdoor museum, but the information and concepts here should form the core of cultural planning (8).

In 2014, the City of Alexandria hired OLIN to develop schematic design documents to envision the Waterfront Plan that “is deeply rooted in history and culture of the city” (OLIN). The design documents generally contemplated historically-inspired elements along the waterfront, but in concept only.



1. Proposed landscape and infrastructure at Point Lumley, OLIN Waterfront Plan.

After 2014, the AAC advised City Council to allot funding towards a Waterfront History Implementation Plan. This funding will develop a formal history interpretive plan for the Waterfront area. The plan will identify future upgrades (i.e. historic interpretation signage/wayfinding, etc.) that could be implemented in conjunction with the larger Waterfront Small Area Plan Implementation project. This plan is similar in nature to the [Fort Ward Interpretive Plan](#) (April 2019) – a document that graphically sets the course for new thematic, historically sensitive interpretation throughout the park. The [Old Town North Historic Interpretation Guide](#) (March 2017) is another recent and similar plan. A [Design Development guide for West’s Point](#) (north of Oronoco Street) from 2015 provided themes and interpretive ideas, but went further in the design process than this plan will.

In the meantime, historic interpretation loosely guided by the Waterfront History Plan’s themes has been realized. The City of Alexandria, private developers, and the community have added programs, signs, exhibits, art, and new uses, some of which are summarized in [Managing Alexandria’s Derelict Merchant Fleet](#) (Alexandria Archaeology, 2023). This has occurred within the area of potential effect of the [Waterfront Implementation Project](#) and on adjacent properties to the north and south. Projects that have occurred thus far (or are in progress) as part of waterfront redevelopment include the Hotel Indigo (44AX229), Robinson Terminal South/Landing (44AX235), [Managing Alexandria’s Derelict Merchant Fleet](#), King Street Park, the Old Dominion Boat Club, The Strand Condominiums (44AX237), Windmill Hill Park, and the RiverRenew Project (combined sewer outfall at Jones Point and Robinson Terminal North). These projects, and those in the future, have varying degrees of impact on the archaeological record, and documentary and archaeological studies have been produced or are in progress.

1. Recent waterfront development and associated interpretation

Project Name	Completion Date	Location	Interpretive Intervention
Hotel Indigo (44AX229)	2017	220 N. Union Street	Exhibit at Archaeology Museum, conserved ship remnant (ongoing), hardscaped shoreline marker
King Street Park	2017	1 and 2 King Street	
Old Dominion Boat Club	2018	200 Strand Street/0 Prince Street	Architecture inspired by historic structure
Windmill Hill Park	2018	501 S. Union Street	Bulkhead and shoreline restoration,
The Strand Condominiums (44AX237)	2020	211 Strand Street	Heritage Trail signs
Managing Alexandria’s Derelict Merchant Fleet (44AX229 and 44AX235)	2023	220 N. Union Street and 2 Duke Street	Signs at Ben Brenman Park, activities and interpretation related to ship timbers, Ship Science (K-12 lesson plan), social media, exhibit
Robinson Terminal South/Landing (44AX235)	Forthcoming	2 Duke Street	Exhibit at Archaeology Museum
RiverRenew	Under development	1 Oronoco Street	To be determined, currently not open to the public

The Waterfront Implementation Project has received preliminary study through several reports (see table at right) including, [An Initial Archaeological Assessment of the Proposed Waterfront Flood Management Project, Alexandria, Virginia](#) prepared by Stantec (Kreisa 2018) and [Alexandria’s Historic Waterfront: A Documentary and Geospatial Study](#) (Schreiber 2023) for the extended area bounded by Oronoco St. on the north, Duke St. on the south, and Union St. on the west. The final product of the Documentary Study is a comprehensive, chronological, block-by-block, lot-by-lot history report of this six-block area that includes a chain of title, a description of the owners and occupants, and a discussion of the land creation and use history of each block through time. This area represents the core of the port town’s historic waterfront as it evolved from a small hamlet to a full-fledged, and later industrial, port city. This report will serve as the historical guide for archaeological assessments of proposed projects and potential findings within this portion of the waterfront, as well as fulfill the documentary study requirement for future projects in this area. This research has also contributed new and important insights into Alexandria history that will inform the content and potential design of waterfront interpretive techniques.

This interpretive plan draws from the recommendations laid out in the Waterfront History Plan, the findings of the Documentary Study, the design concepts in the OLIN Plan and create recommendations for bringing history into the physical fabric of parks and promenades.

2. Studies related to the Waterfront Implementation Project

Study Name	Date	Author	Area of Study
An Initial Archaeological Assessment of the Proposed Waterfront Flood Management Project, Alexandria, Virginia	2018	Stantec	Queen to Duke, east of Union
Cultural Resources Work Plan: City of Alexandria Waterfront Improvement and Flood Management Project	2020	Stantec	Queen to Duke, east of Union
Preliminary Archaeological Assessment (PAA) for Founders Park	2022	Alexandria Archaeology	Founders Park (Oronoco to Queen, east of Union)
Geoarchaeology Report	2023	Mueser Rutledge	Queen to Duke, east of Fairfax
Alexandria’s Historic Waterfront: A Documentary and Geospatial Study	2023	Schreiber	Oronoco to Duke, east of Union

Policy Changes Since 2010

The [Waterfront Small Area Plan](#) (2012) created a set of guidelines and suggestions for instilling a sense of place into the waterfront by incorporating the [History Plan](#) (2010) and the Art Plan (2010). It divided the waterfront into seven Art and Culture Theme Areas and made recommendations for how those could be used.

A Naming Proposal Process (2012) was established to guide any name changes that were proposed for waterfront areas (not streets). This process included a set of questions and rationales for the name change. In 2018, the City used the process to rename Fitzgerald Square Park to Waterfront Park after extensive public input.

The [Art and History Waterfront Report](#) (2013) suggested eight Thematic Walks based on the themes presented in the SAP (2012). It recommended Concepts of Continuity to ensure the Pedestrian Path was a cohesive, clear, and effective means to communicate the history and art of the waterfront while also providing a safe and attractive space for social activities.

In 2014, OLIN designed a Waterfront Plan that suggested uniform lighting, benches, design themes, and landscape designs based on the SAP and input from community members. The continuous pedestrian path was a feature of the design, and many amenities and enhancements were suggested for public spaces. OLIN suggested materials and designs to be used by developers who were actively involved in construction on the waterfront.



In 2016, the City adopted the [Arts and Culture Master Plan](#) (2016) which was developed with Cultural Planning Group (CPG). This city-wide plan focused on setting forth several goals for arts and culture engagement and service across the city. It did not specifically address the waterfront, however there are many arts and culture institutions in the waterfront and those are guided by this policy.

The [Old Town North Historic Interpretation Guide](#) (2017) offered new insights into themes and modes of interpretation for the waterfront north of Oronoco Street, overlapping with the Waterfront SAP from Daingerfield Island on the north to Oronoco Street on the south. This Guide identified seven themes: African American Life, Agriculture and Rural Life, Industry, Military, Native American Life, (Sub)Urbanization, and Transportation. The content is further divided into six Thematic Narratives that include two or more of the major Themes: Enslavement, Freedmen, Commerce, Worker's Life, Mobilization, and Parkway.

The City of Alexandria responded to wide ranging racial and social inequities by establishing [ALL Alexandria](#) in 2021. The goal of the effort is to reduce and eliminate disparities for all Alexandria residents, especially residents of color who have been historically and systematically marginalized.

Development Since 2010

Private Development

There have been several private development projects that changed the waterfront since 2010. Some of these projects referred to the OLIN plan for materials and design choices. The Hotel Indigo at 220 S. Union Street opened in May 2017. The Old Dominion Boat Club relocated from 1 King Street to a new building at 0 Prince Street, which was formerly the location of the Beachcombers Restaurant. The Beachcombers building was torn down in 2016 and the new ODBC facility opened in January 2018.

The tall ship *Providence* was first docked in 2019 at the upper end of the City Marina, then moved to a permanent dock near the foot of Prince Street along the bulkhead of Waterfront Park. The ship is a reproduction of an 18th century sloop owned by John Brown of Providence, RI. Robinson Terminal South/ Robinson Landing was partially completed in 2019 and fully in use by 2022. The Watermark Condominiums at 225 Strand Street opened in the fall of 2020.

The Seaport Foundation proposes new construction (upcoming) on the bulkhead area at the foot of Thompson's Alley.

Public Development

[Windmill Hill Park](#) was redesigned and opened with new waterfront features in November 2018. A second phase of improvements to the western side of this park adjacent to the Wilkes Street Tunnel will take place from 2025-2027.

Waterfront Park was established at 1 King Street in April 2019. The ODBC clubhouse was razed in early 2018 following that club's relocation to a new building at 0 Prince Street. The King Street Park (1 and 2 King Street) which formerly occupied the waterfront area at the foot of King Street is now combined with Waterfront Park (1A Prince Street) and the former site of the ODBC Clubhouse to create [Interim Waterfront Park](#).

Point Lumley Park was reinstalled and upgraded following the construction of Robinson Terminal South/Landing and the ODBC. It was planted with grass in the spring of 2021 and is considered a temporary installation to be affected by the [construction of the flood mitigation](#) infrastructure.



Revisions to the History Plan

The 2010 History Plan and the 2012 Small Area Plan (SAP) suggest a set of seven themes that are relevant to the waterfront from Oronoco Street to Duke Street. The SAP configures these themes geographically and attached them to existing, planned, and wished for public facilities such as parks, event spaces, marinas, and streets. The themes are broad and ideological: they do not prescribe any one story over another, nor do they explicitly exclude any topics, narratives, or events. They leave room for a wide application of the themes and a practically open-ended interpretation of the waterfront and its history. All these are great features of the existing themes, as they allow for adaptation, exploration, and reevaluation of any interpretation or installation.

The SAP suggested an eighth theme for the area of Gateway North/Canal Center called “Illuminations” that was meant to connect the historical location of light companies to the modern desire for lighted works of art. Gateway North/Canal Center was included in the Old Town North Historic Interpretation Guide (2017) and therefore this theme is not relevant to the area of this study.

Themes from the 2010 History Plan

Ambitions

- Goals to reach the Ohio Valley, American West, and the wider world through canal, road and rail advancements.

Transformations

- Changes to the landscape, waterways, and built environment that changed and shaped residents’ relationship to Alexandria and the wider world.

Origins

- Early history of tobacco culture in the development of Alexandria.

Foundations

- Linking Alexandria to the genesis of the United States of America and significant historical figures such as George Washington and George Mason.

Witness to War

- Focus on the roles of different locations in Alexandria’s waterfront to national and international conflict from Braddock to the Torpedo Factory.

Gateway

- Paying attention to the transit of goods and people through history, and how those were mediated in the waterfront.

Working Seaport

- Recall the heyday of Alexandria’s port activity and how it defined the city during different time periods.

These ideological themes were useful at a time before a [comprehensive documentary study](#) of the waterfront was completed. With that work done, and with other interpretive plans in place within the City, it is useful to reimagine the themes and explore how they may be implemented in the waterfront. Rather than maintain the geographical link between the themes and locations or features of the waterfront, it is recommended that the themes instead serve as a general framework for understanding the significant and unique elements of Alexandria's past. Specific locations, e.g. parcels, structures, blocks, or sites, should instead be tied to specific people, events, or historic activities. The documentary study catalogued and organized numerous Journeys or stories that took place in specific locations on the waterfront. Following here is a collection of highlights from that study.

Journeys

On each block we highlight one significant example of a Journey that was related to the location. There are five Journey categories: African American Life, Women, War, Transportation, Industry. Each Journey could be related to one or more of the 2010 Themes as an organizing tactic or to create thematic storylines or narratives.

African American Life

- The rich and varied history of African Americans in Alexandria relates to topics from plantation agriculture, water-based commerce, work and labor, freedom, rights, and many other subtopics.

Women

- Women played important roles in the waterfront community as property owners, business people, and workers.

War

- Alexandria and its residents have felt the impact of numerous conflicts from staging for colonial empire efforts to building war machinery for global conflict in the twentieth century.

Transportation

- As a site originally chosen for its proximity to deep water and fertile land, movement of people and goods is a major theme of Alexandria's history. Changes in transportation technology profoundly affected the area, including opening the canals and establishing the railways.

Industry

- From the nineteenth century forward in time, craftspeople and industrialists chose the waterfront as a convenient location to import raw goods, process them into a finished product, and export those products.

Oronoco to Queen Street (Founders Park)

- **African American Life:** A new Heritage trail, the African American Waterfront Heritage Trail, includes two signs on these blocks that cover Fishtown and Retrocession, focused on the city's administrative history as it relates to African American history.
- **Women:** There are three documented Black property owners who operated restaurants and boarding houses out of temporary structures: William C. Beckley, Betsey Dogan, and Robert H. Dogan. The physical landscape changed frequently as fires destroyed some buildings and many owners chose to remove their buildings seasonally to make room for the coal piles that occupied the wharf in the off season.
- **War:** Alexandria's first public landing/wharf was associated with the arrival of Braddock's troops in 1755. There is documentation supporting its expansion and repair in the mid-18th century. It is associated with the original landowner Hugh West and was managed by his widow Sybil West for several years. Their daughter, Sybil West Carlyle, inherited some of this land and was associated with lots south of here due to her marriage to John Carlyle. The West and Carlyle families owned enslaved people and workers here would have operated carts, rolled tobacco hogsheads, and completed other waterfront work. The 1810 census has some laborers and seamstresses living here.
- **Transportation:** A. W. Eastlack's Ship Yard (1851-1860) built canal boats for the Alexandria Canal from this

location. This ship yard was viewed hopefully as a return to Alexandria's shipbuilding past, however it could not sustain operations through the Civil War occupation and disruption of trade.

- **Industry:** The Smoot Coal and Lumber Yard operated here for nearly 100 years, from 1865-1964. W. A. Smoot was a Confederate veteran and set up an extensive operation that included a wide range of goods including salt, wheat, corn, wool, and guano. He built a railroad switch to this property to take advantage of rail transport.

Queen to Cameron Street

- **African American Life:** John Wise operated a tavern here beginning in 1788, and his workforce included three Black teens, aged 12-16, five Black adults over the age of 16, and two white men, Jesse Simms and Joseph Werany [Merony]. John Abert took over this tavern in 1795, with a work force that included 2 white males, 2 Black teens aged 12-16, and 3 Black men over 16 years old. He claimed to have a cook who formerly worked at Mount Vernon in his kitchen, along with two waiters and two hostlers.
- **Women:** Jane Martin's story is one of the most compelling in Alexandria. As a term slave her term of service was sold to several people in succession: John Carlyle Herbert, Andrew Jamieson, John McCook, and then Andrew Bartle, a local wharf builder. She had an infant and Bartle sold her to Eli Legg, an infamous slave trader, and Martin sued for an injunction against selling her away from her baby. She won, but the rest of her story is currently unknown.

- **War:** An existing Wayfinding sign on Union Steet covers the Civil War in Alexandria. This block had the Chief Grain Depot and Chief Commissary Depot, both important parts of the Union Army’s supply and logistics operation during the war.
- **Transportation:** There are a few people involved on this block who were also involved in the railroad. Henry Daingerfield, a director of the Orange & Alexandria, owned a wharf here. William L. Powell, another director of the Orange & Alexandria, rented a warehouse and stored guano and other goods. Fowle & Co. built a large warehouse, rail switch and wharf in 1859.
- **Industry:** The business of ice collection and storage goes back to the 18th century in Alexandria, and on this block we see its evolution into a commercial enterprise and manufacturing process. The Ice Manufacturing Company of Alexandria was founded in 1892 and was co-owned by Alexander H. Smith Jr. and Louisa W. Moore; shortly after, Smith’s wife Neitah J. Smith bought a share of the company. They installed machinery including a freezing room and water cooler and operated for only three years. Ice was manufactured here until 1940.

Cameron to King Street

- **African American Life:** John Carlyle (1720-1790) was a merchant and one of the original trustees of Alexandria. He was born in England with Scottish heritage and came to Virginia in 1739. Once established, his major trade was importing coal, convicts, rum, enslaved people, and sugar,

and exporting flour, grain, lumber and tobacco. He married Sarah Fairfax, daughter of William and Sarah Walker Fairfax, in 1747 and acquired land and labor, the two keys to wealth in early Virginia, one small part of which were his town lots in Alexandria, including Lots 41 and 42 on the south side of Cameron Street, east of Fairfax, and fronting on the Potomac River. Carlyle and his business partner, John Dalton, built an early wharf on the historic waterfront, which is now west of Union Street.

- **Women:** Joseph Riddle and Joseph Thompson converted a frame warehouse to a biscuit bakery and the resulting court case left a lot of detailed records about their modifications. These records also detail typical bake house activities, including mentions of roles for types of workers, and surveyed local bake house stock. Andrew Jamieson used this bake house for several years; Peter Hewitt and his wife Jane Moxley baked biscuits for the US Navy from this location.
- **War:** The Torpedo Factory already covers this topic in numerous formats.
- **Transportation:** Ferries were an important part of the regional transport network from the colonial era, predating the founding of Alexandria. Technological and economic changes influenced the ridership and frequency of ferries over the centuries. There are many places along the waterfront that have hosted ferries at some point, but this block has significant examples during the late 19th century which are well documented.

- **Industry:** George H. Smoot apprenticed to Alexandria merchant Josiah H. Davis and became a lumber, lime, nails, and coal merchant. The wharf was the site of the near drowning of Smoot's son and of a fire in 1857 where four horses were caught in a stable and narrowly rescued. Smoot's lumber business persisted here from 1828 until 1918.

King to Prince Street

- **African American Life:** Irwin's Wharf is the site of the existing Fitzgerald Warehouse and retains a tremendous amount of documentation spanning from the late 18th century to the end of the 19th century. We have vivid descriptions of the working conditions here in the early 19th century. Enslaved and free Blacks worked on this land.
- **Women:** Jane Slacum managed property on this block after her husband's untimely death from a waterfront fire. Her tenant here, Margaret Garner, was a merchant, operated bath houses and public houses in the town.
- **War:** Andrew Wales was a brewer in Alexandria who operated here in the 18th century. He banked out the land with stipulations that further development would accommodate his "trunks" or culverts from the brewery to the river. Wales was charged with treason during the American Revolution.
- **Transportation:** John Harper banked out a large area of the waterfront and operated a successful merchant business. He passed his land on to some of his sons and daughters as

gifts. Each daughter received an enslaved woman as part of her inheritance.

- **Industry:** In the twentieth century, most of this block was used for industrial purposes from warehousing, wharf storage of gravel and sand, and production of manufactured goods. The Weber Varnish Factory, American Soktile Company (porcelain tiles), and T. F. Burrough's Son & Co. (corn and feed mill) operated here.

Prince to Duke Street

- **African American Life:** Hanson Pierson was an enslaved man who pulled George Slacum, his enslaver, from a burning warehouse, saving his life. Unfortunately, Slacum later died from his injuries, but Pierson's heroism was known in the port. The 1810 Fire devastated this block, destroying every structure here.
- **Women:** Arell's Wharf was built in the late 18th century and likely started before or during the American Revolution. It was adjacent to the public warehouse and wharf at Point Lumley. Richard Arell and his children owned significant real estate in Alexandria, and his daughters played an important role in continuing their family's influence by marrying successful local merchants.
- **War:** Gilpin's Wharf, on the south side of Prince Street, was likely built out in two massive efforts: one before the American Revolution and one after. George Gilpin became a colonel in the Fairfax County militia and served alongside George Washington during the war. He played a significant role in the early merchant community of Alexandria.

- **Transportation:** The African American Waterfront Heritage Trail interprets shipbuilding here. Mordecai Miller (1764-1832) moved to Alexandria by 1791 and established himself as a silversmith and clockmaker. He married Rebecca Hartshorne (1770-1810) and they had five sons. They owned numerous parcels of land in Alexandria and were well-connected in the local Quaker community. Mordecai Miller purchased and emancipated enslaved people and supported the free black community by helping to establish a neighborhood that later was called Hayti. This waterfront parcel was a small part of their overall land holdings, but it allowed Miller and his sons to engage in a profitable commercial venture for many years. After the 1810 fire, most of Mordecai Miller & Son's shipping took place on other wharves: Harper's, Hartshorne's, and Dundas' Wharf.
- **Industry:** Existing signage related to a Heritage Trail interprets industrial history here.

Interpretive Inspiration

The Waterfront History Plan (2010) offered several suggestions for implementation of historic interpretation. The Plan recommended a phased strategy of implementation based on time sensitivity and cost. Some of the recommendations have been superseded by policy interventions: the goals of restoring historic names to sites, alleys and wharves and renaming parks with historic names have been superseded by the Naming Process established in the intervening years. Other aspects, such as the Civil War Sesquicentennial, took place and the Heritage Trail signage remains in place on the waterfront.

Interpretive content has been added to the waterfront in the form of signage as part of the Heritage Trail Series. The Star-Spangled Banner Trail (2012), Alexandria Heritage Trail (ongoing), and the African American Waterfront Heritage Trail (2023) have contributed twelve interpretive signs on the waterfront from Oronoco to Duke Street. The City of Alexandria has installed five Wayfinding signs, which orient visitors and provide brief historical interpretation, on the same blocks east of Union Street. The existing density of interpretive signage is at, or close to, a saturation point where adding more signage may overwhelm, crowd, or otherwise negatively affect the public space available.

Since maintaining the pedestrian path along the waterfront has been a priority of waterfront planning from the earliest stages, further interpretation should capitalize on that. Thematic or topical walking and/or biking tours, be they self-guided, staff/volunteer led, or digitally enhanced via a StoryMap or similar, are an easy and

flexible way to provide historical content. The content can be changed or tailored at any time to respond to themes, anniversaries, commemorations, or new findings. Generally, a walking tour does not require permanent infrastructure, however the History Plan (2010) suggests simple marking or artwork that prompts a user to access the prepared tour content.

The pedestrian path could be the major link between the Torpedo Factory, site of the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, and a proposed history or maritime museum. The Waterfront Small Area Plan (2012) suggests installing a museum at Robinson Terminal South (RTS), Robinson Terminal North (RTN), or the block between Prince and Duke Streets. RTS was redeveloped in 2019 and is currently supporting a temporary exhibit on the ship hulls found during the 2018 site excavations: *Buried Ships of Robinson Landing*. The exhibit is designed to be viewed from the sidewalk at the Strand and Pioneer Way and will remain in place until the end of 2024. Robinson Terminal North (RTN) is currently being considered for [private development](#) and the first concept submission is under review by relevant city commissions and boards. The [proposed design](#) includes “Historic interpretation” as a consideration, but does not provide more specific detail at this stage. Finally, the historic warehouses that remain on the block between Prince and Duke Streets are all currently privately owned, while the City of Alexandria owns the waterfront areas east of the Strand. The proposed redevelopment of [Point Lumley Park](#) is part of the Waterfront Implementation Project and is currently undergoing design and review. Currently, no permanent museum or interpretive space is part of the design or plan for that park.

Connecting history and art in public spaces was an important goal of the Waterfront Small Area Plan (2012). Since then, many public art installations have contributed to that goal, such as the [Site See](#) series in Waterfront Park which has an annually rotating large-scale installation. Additional interventions in this mode are recommended. The waterfront is particularly well documented through photography dating to the mid-nineteenth century. Signs installed at points along the pedestrian trail could display a transparent rendering of a historic photograph positioned with the modern landscape visible through the transparency. Or, a digital version of this could be achieved through a StoryMap or other geo-referenced tool through which users could access historic photographs.