

# WATERFRONT ARCHAEOLOGY

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF A WORKING SEAPORT

The archaeologists tasked with researching this property on the 200 block of South Union Street used a host of sources such as historic photographs, lithographs, deeds, court cases, newspapers, maps, and other primary documents to better understand what what took place on this property in the past. Armed with this information, archaeologists then conducted excavations to locate the physical remains of the buildings and warehouses that once stood here, and to recover the artifacts that accumulated over time.



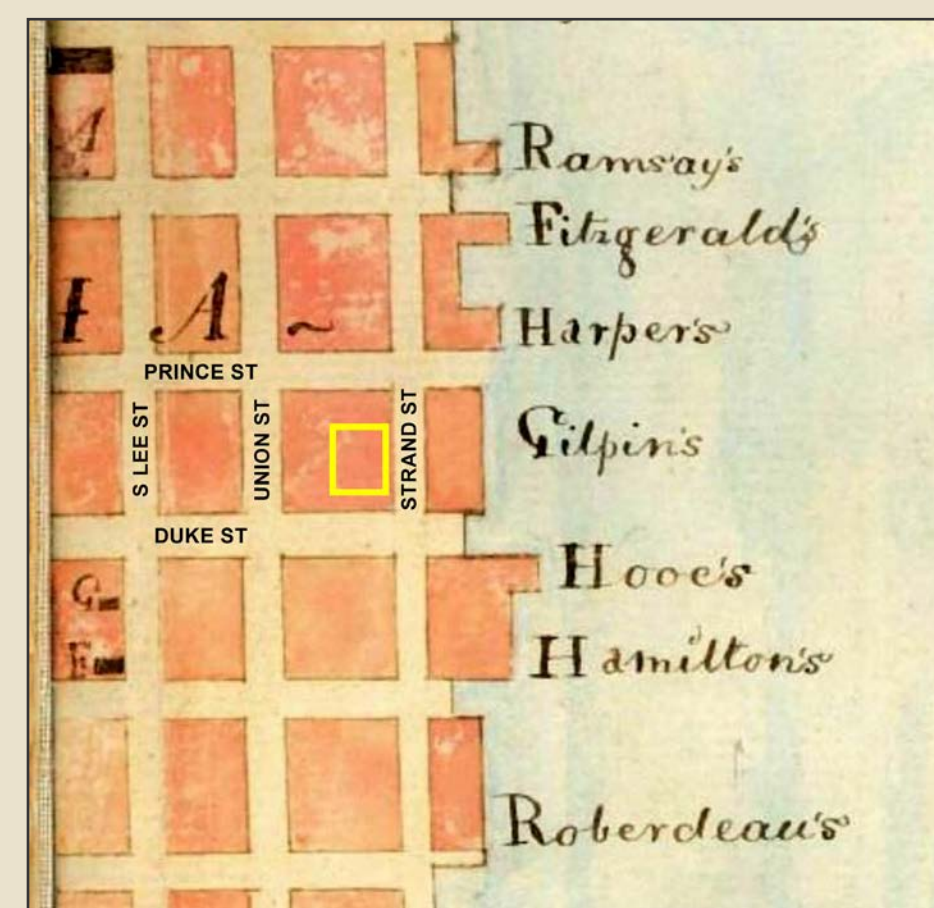
A Plan of Alexandria, Now Bellhaven [1749]. (Courtesy of Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division with modern street overlay and property boundaries by Wetland Studies and Solutions, Inc.).

In 1749, in preparation for the development of a new town on the upper reaches of the Potomac River, John West Jr. surveyed the land north of Hunting Creek. George Washington, a 17-year-old surveyor's apprentice made a copy of West's map which showed most of what would become the 200 block between South Union St. and Strand St. submerged in a shallow bay. The bay would not last for long.

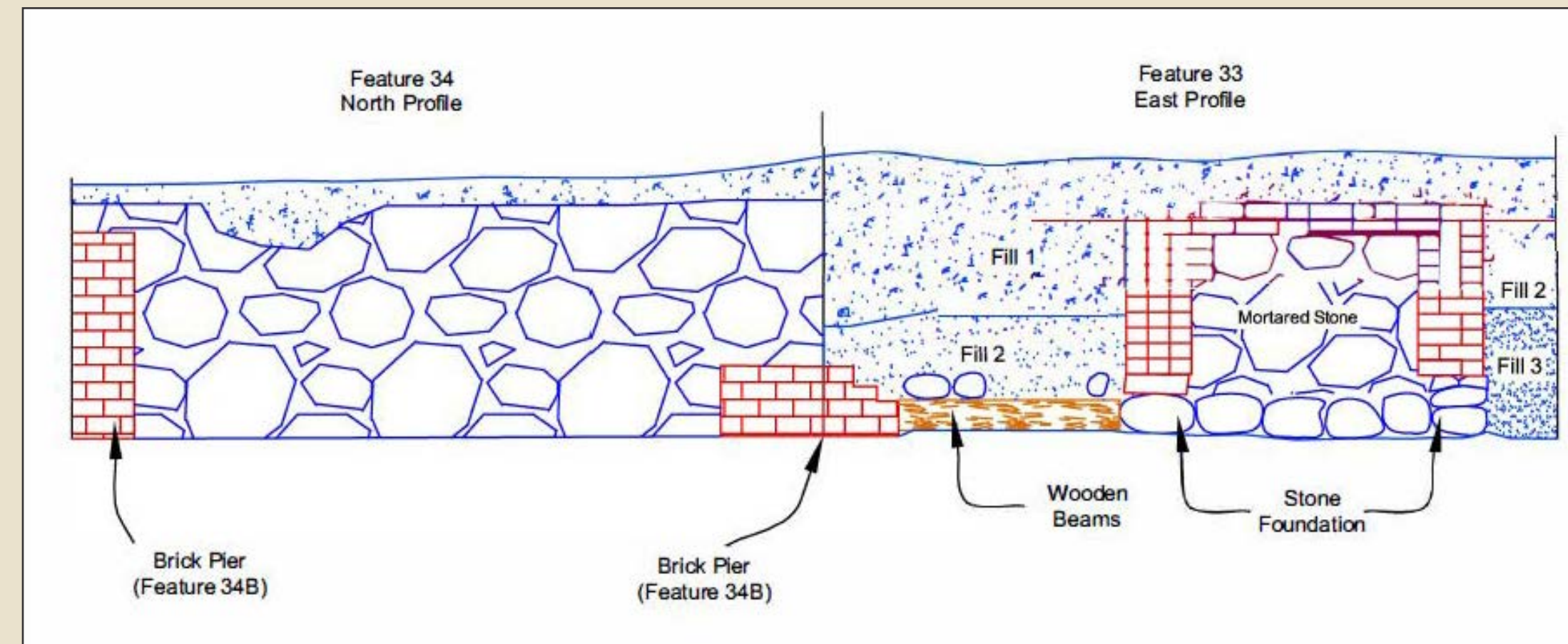
*“every purchaser of Riverside Lotts by the terms of the sale was to have the benefit of extending the said Lotts into the River...”* – Town Trustees, 1760

## BANKING OUT

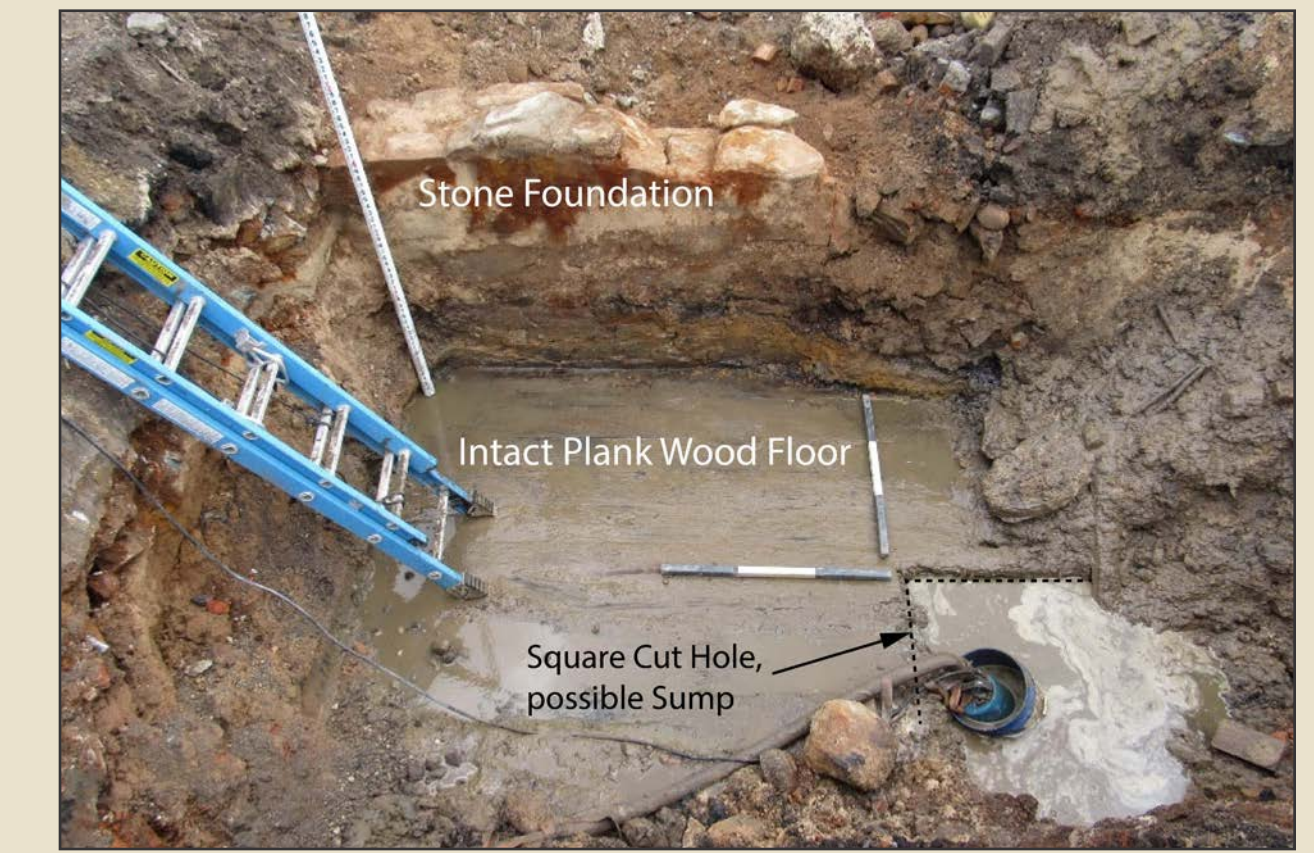
In 1760 the town Trustees decreed that waterfront lot owners could extend their properties to the east by leveling the 10-15 foot high bluffs and infilling the crescent bay below, a process that became known as “banking out.” George Gilpin was one of the first landowners to bank out land on this block. By the 1790s his wharf took up the entire 200 block of South Union Street. Of course, Gilpin himself did not fill in the block. Enslaved and free African Americans played a critical role in the expansion and success of Alexandria. Over the course of several decades laborers literally filled the crescent bay with soil. A conservative estimate is that workers moved approximately 300,000 cubic yards of soil, which is equal to more than 14 football fields, each 10 ft. deep.



By the early 19th century the waterfront had been banked out so that there was no longer any evidence of the shallow bay. (A Plan of Alexandria in the Territory of Columbia, State of Virginia [1803], Courtesy of Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center).



On the left, the north foundation wall for an early 19th-century structure, Building 3. On the right, an internal wall with a possible fireplace. In the 18th and early 19th century, builders in Alexandria commonly used stone from regional quarries for building foundations. By the middle of the 19th century builders switched to brick for their foundations. The foundation depicted above was built with stone, and later modified with brick piers. (Wetland Studies and Solutions, Inc.).



Intact wood floor in Building 3, facing south. (Wetland Studies and Solutions, Inc.)



## EARLY 19TH-CENTURY FOUNDATIONS

The map to the left is a fire insurance policy issued to James Lawrason in 1815 for his 3-story warehouse at 203 Strand St. (outlined in red). The policy describes eleven additional buildings within the vicinity, two of which are mapped on the policy: Peter Saunders' warehouse at 2 Prince St. and Thomas Lawrason's warehouse at 205 Strand St. (outlined in orange). Archaeologists identified the foundations of three structures (blue dashed lines) within the project area (yellow dashed line) that date to the early 19th century. These three buildings are not depicted on any historic maps and are known to us only by archaeology and may be those referenced in the plat.

According to tax lists, William Harper, an enterprising merchant, and John Dixon, a baker by trade, may have owned Buildings 1 and 2 and used them as warehouses. Building 3 may be one of the earliest buildings on the block, possibly built by Richard Arell after the American Revolution and subsequently destroyed by a fire in 1810 that leveled most structures on the block. Because of the modern construction technique used at this site, some of these foundations remain preserved in the ground for later generations.

1815 Mutual Assurance Society policy plat (not to scale) (Courtesy of Alexandria Library Special Collections).

