



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Alexandria and iron working

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Image: The old Alexandria Iron Works building, which was located on the site of the current Old Town Safeway. Photo, Russell Jones, Alexandria Library/Special Collections.

When Thomas S. Jamieson advertised himself as a “general machinist” and “iron founder” at the foundry on the corner of South Royal and Wilkes streets in the 1850s, he built on a long history of selling iron in Alexandria.

The merchant company of L. Bent & Co. advertised in 1792 that they sold “Swede’s Iron” at their Fairfax Street location, and the cabinet maker John Bogue advertised a “general assortment of iron mongery” at his business on Princess Street near Adam’s wharf. Blacksmiths also populated Alexandria’s business directories, including James King and Edward Lewis.



That Alexandrians demanded iron shouldn’t come as a surprise, given the building that went on in the latter half of the 18th and first half of the 19th century. What made Jamieson unique was his foundry’s success after the Civil War.

In 1858, he was granted a patent for an improved mode of operating valves in steam engines. Just before the Civil War broke out in the spring of 1861, he announced he was able to produce stationary steam engines, boilers, mill gearing, pulleys and hangers, drill presses, wrought and case iron railing, pipes and “machinery of every description.”

Although Jamieson died in 1862, his brother operated the foundry in the late 1860s. G.W. Jamieson and C.H. Collins advertised as iron and brass founders and started using the name Alexandria Iron Works. In 1880, Jamieson and Collins reported employing up to 27 people, and in 1883 they claimed to have the largest collection of patterns “this side of Philadelphia.”

In 1890, the foundry was purchased by Curtin & Butts, who incorporated the business in Virginia as Alexandria Iron Works in 1902. The factory expanded in 1903, after a fire destroyed a sash factory that had occupied a lot to the north. The above photograph, taken around 1960, shows the building constructed on that corner, close to the entrance of the Wilkes Street railroad tunnel.

During the early 20th century, Alexandria Iron Works contributed to projects that supported the war efforts and to noteworthy pursuits locally. Alexandria Iron Works produced ornamental grillwork for apartment buildings and stylish homes built by Morris Cafritz in Washington, as well as for the White House and the George Washington Masonic Memorial, a return to the decorative iron work that was prevalent in Alexandria in the 1790s.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The foundry's buildings were demolished in 1961 after the closure of Alexandria Iron Works and a Safeway supermarket was built on that site.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.