



City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Archaeology
Studies of the Old Waterfront



A Timeline of Alexandria's Waterfront

**By Diane Riker
July 2008**

In the life story of a city, geography is destiny. And so, it is no surprise that Alexandria was destined to become, at least for a time, a major seaport.

Here, close to the Potomac's headwaters, the river's natural channel touched shore at two points. Between the two lay a crescent of bluffs, backed by abundant woods and fertile fields.

Millennia before the town existed, grasslands bordered a much narrower Potomac, providing hunting and fishing grounds for the earliest Americans. Our timeline begins with a remarkable find in the summer of 2007.

Prehistoric Alexandria



Alexandria Archaeology Museum

11,000 B.C. In 2007 a broken spear point dating back an estimated 13,000 years is uncovered by archaeologists at a Civil War cemetery above Hunting Creek. The Clovis Point is Alexandria's oldest artifact.

Similar tools, also made of quartzite, have been found in Europe and antedate the Paleolithic period. Perhaps the first Europeans here were not who we thought they were.

9,000 B.C. Following the melting of the glaciers, sea levels rise and the Potomac River becomes much wider. Ancient spear points have been found at Jones Point where native Americans probably hunted deer and other mammals.

1,000 B.C. Charred hearthstones and bowl fragments indicate a more settled population. The river runs with shad and sturgeon. The tidelands provide rich soil for cultivation. At Jones Point in 1990 indications of a "village" are found.



Adaptation of an engraving by Theodor de Fry, Virginia Historical Society
East Coast Native Americans building dugout canoes, as interpreted by a Colonial-era European artist.

17th Century - Age of Discovery



1608 On June 2, when spring planting is done in the new colony at Jamestown, Capt. John Smith and 13 others set out in an open boat to explore the Chesapeake. He enters the “Patawomeck Flu” (Potomac River) on June 14 and two weeks later reaches the future site of Alexandria. He notes an Indian fishing camp at Hunting Creek.

Assn. for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities
Portrait by Simon de Passe, colorized.

1621 and 1632 Capt. Henry Fleet, a fur trader and reportedly the first European to set foot in what is now D.C., makes two expeditions up the Potomac and notes “deer, buffaloes, bears, turkeys, the woods do swarm with them.”



National Geographic Society

Margaret Brent in a Maryland Courtroom by Louis Glanzman

1654

Dame Margaret Brent, first suffragist for her bid (predictably unsuccessful) for a “voyce and vote allso” in the Maryland legislature, receives a grant of 700 acres extending along the Potomac from Hunting Creek to present-day Queen Street.

1669

Oct. 21. In return for transporting 120 new colonists to Virginia, Welsh sea captain and tobacco merchant Robert Howson is granted by Governor William Berkeley 6,000 acres “in the freshes of the Potomack” (mistakenly including Brent’s property).



Maritime Art Museum, Greenwich, UK

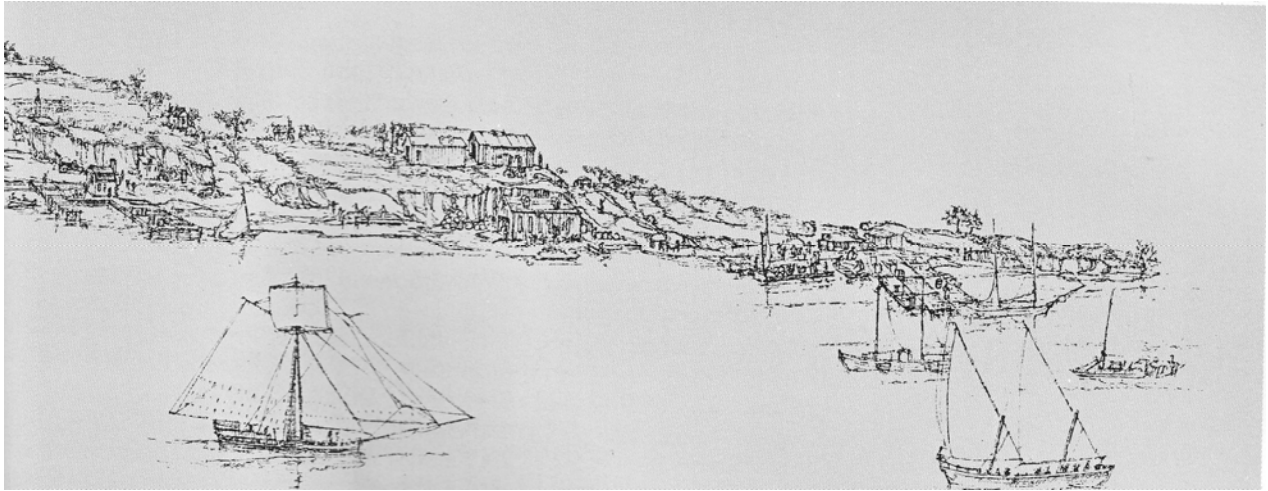
Virginia Governor William Berkeley

In November, Howson sells the land for “six thousand pounds of tobacco and cask” to Scotsman John Alexander. Later Alexander will pay the Brent heirs another 10,500 pounds to clear title to their slice of the waterfront.

1699

Cadwalader Jones, a trader and mapmaker established a trading post on what is now called Jones Point.

18th-Century Alexandria



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Part of a conjectural drawing of early Alexandria by Elizabeth Luallen

Hugh West's warehouse and wharf and simple frame cabins are on and below the bluffs at the town's northern point. Some call the little settlement Belhaven.

1730

The Virginia legislature calls for inspection stations along major tributaries to ensure the quality of tobacco exported to Britain.

1732

Hugh West has established a tobacco warehouse, one of three at the northern end of Alexandria (West's Point), as well as a tavern and a ferry service to Maryland.

Hogsheads of tobacco are rolled or towed down to the point to be weighed, inspected and shipped overseas.



From Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson. Detail of a Map of the Most Inhabited Part of Virginia, 1775.

A planter negotiates with the ship's captain while his slaves load the hogsheads.

1748

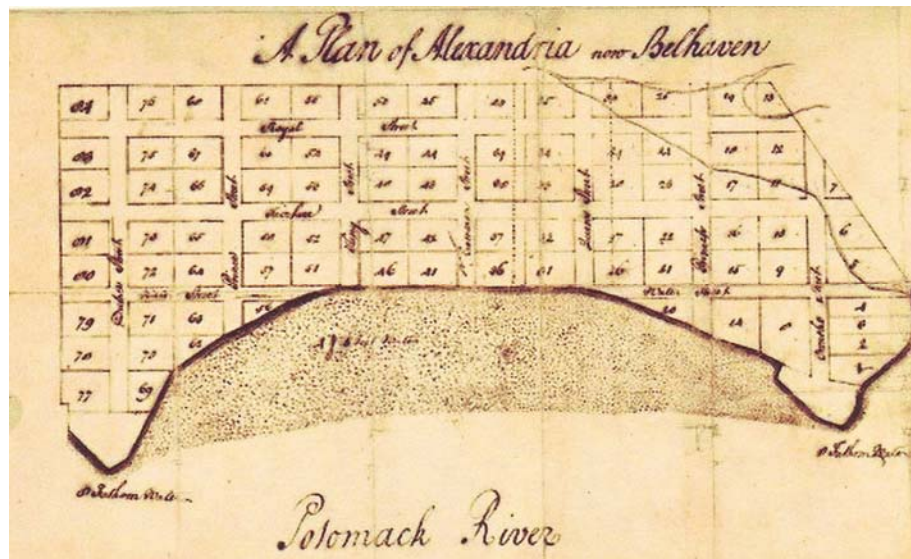
Early traders including John Pagan, John Carlyle, and William Ramsay, Lawrence and Lord Thomas Fairfax petition the Virginia General Assembly for the right to establish a town in October 1748. Their petition was passed May 11, 1749 creating the town of Alexandria.



Harper's Monthly, Feb. 1880

George Washington as a young surveyor

17-year-old George Washington surveys the shoreline here and comments on its improvability.



Library of Congress

Washington's copy of the plan for Alexandria

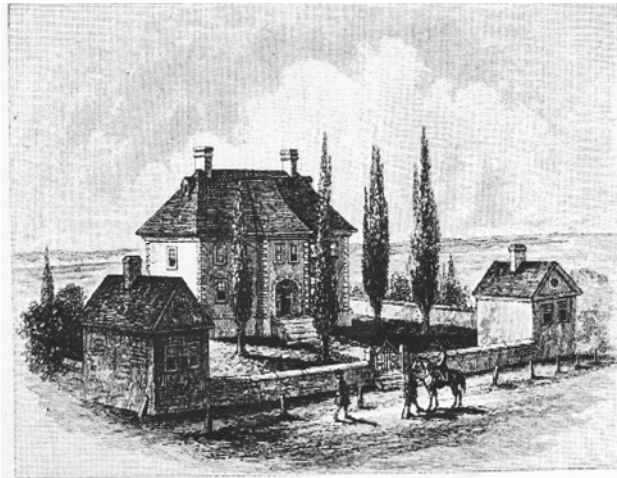
1749

On a sultry July morning, eleven trustees appointed by the Virginia Assembly to govern the new town meet at West's warehouse and proceed to the surveyor's mark at Cameron and Fairfax streets,

where the first two of 84 half-acre lots are sold to John Dalton with sales to others in turn.

1752

Merchant John Carlyle's four-gun scow *Alexandria*, first large vessel to be built here, is launched.



Harper's Monthly, Feb. 1880
John Carlyle's House

1753

Carlyle builds a mansion at Cameron and Fairfax streets with sandstone from nearby Aquia Creek.

1755

In March, 17 British warships offload 1200 men in red coats at West's Point, more than doubling the local population in one afternoon and intending to drive the French and Indians from the western Pennsylvania frontier. General Braddock and his entourage lodge at Carlyle's house.



In what Carlyle calls the "Grandest Congress ever known on this Continent," five colonial governors meet at his house on the bluff to plan the ill-fated campaign.

The heavy cannon brought by the British but deemed unfit for the overland trip to the Ohio are abandoned in Alexandria.

Thought to be Braddock's cannon, converted by the DAR in 1912 for use as a fountain on North Royal

Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections, Tisara Collection

Carlyle builds a one-story frame warehouse for the town at Point Lumley (foot of Duke St.). Thomas Fleming establishes a shipyard under the bank.

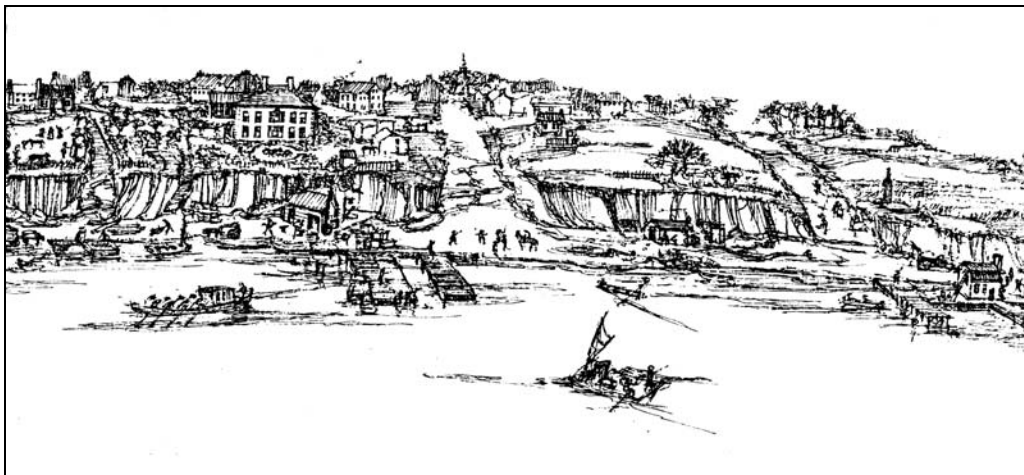


Early Point Lumley as imagined by artist Elizabeth Luallen

Alexandria Archaeology Museum

1759

Carlyle and Dalton are granted the right to build a “good and convenient landing” between Cameron and King across the tidal flats and into the channel. Half the wharf will belong to the public.



Alexandria Archaeology Museum

1760

In May, Washington visits Fleming’s shipyard to witness the launching of Capt. Isaac Littledale’s 200-ton six-gun ship *Hero*. The 257-ton *Recovery* is also built here. Ship launchings bring people from the backcountry into town.

1760s

Charles Jones, a tenant of the Alexander family farmed the point south of Alexandria sometimes known as Piper’s Point but today known as Jones Point for over 20 years. Although historians differ, many believe the point is named for him.

1762

Thomas Kirkpatrick has a shipyard at West’s Point. In 1764, John and

Thomas Kirkpatrick will be granted the right to build wharves and warehouses north of Queen. The slave trade flourishes here for the next 100 years.

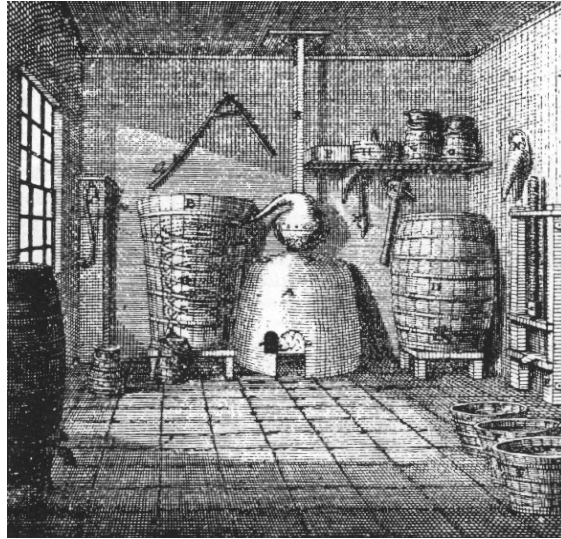
2 *Alexandria, Sept. 4, 1762.*
JUST IMPORTED,
In the Royal Charlotte, Capt. Bartholomew Fabre,
A PARCEL of very healthy **GAMBIA SLAVES**, to be Sold very reasonably for Bills of Exchange or Cash. The Sale will begin at **ALEXANDRIA** on Monday the 13th Instant, and continue till all are Sold.
JOHN and THOMAS KIRKPATRICK.
N. B. Will be Sold to the Highest Bidder, at **ALEXANDRIA**, on Tuesday the 21st Instant, **A SCHOONER** that carries 2000 Bushels of Corn, not a Twelvemonth Launch'd, compleatly Rigg'd, and fitted for Sea. The particular Inventory may be seen at any Time by applying to
J. and T. KIRKPATRICK.
 A large Quantity of Rum and Molasses for Sale.

Virginia Gazette, Sept. 6, 1762

- 1763** In the first expansion of the town, fifty-eight additional lots are offered for sale. The population exceeds 1,200. Property owners live along the bluff looking down on their wharves and warehouses.
- 1769** George Washington is shipping the plentiful fish caught at Mount Vernon to the Caribbean on Alexandria merchant ships.
- 1771** Andrew Wales builds a brewery on what was then called South Water Street (now Lee Street) and will install "trunks" to the Potomac to supply it with water.

A T
Andrew Wales's
 BREWERY,
 In ALEXANDRIA,
 May be had, on the most reasonable Terms,
 Excellent
B E E R,
 Of different Qualities.
 The Inhabitants of this Town and its Vicinity,
 Masters of Vessels and others, may be supplied with
 any Quantity and Quality of Beer on the shortest
 Notice.
 Yest and Grains may be had at said Brewery,
 where the highest Price for **BARLEY** and **HOPS**
 will be given, as usual.
 Jan. 26, 1786.

Daniel Roberdeau, who will become a colonel in the Continental Army, builds a distillery at the foot of Wolfe Street.



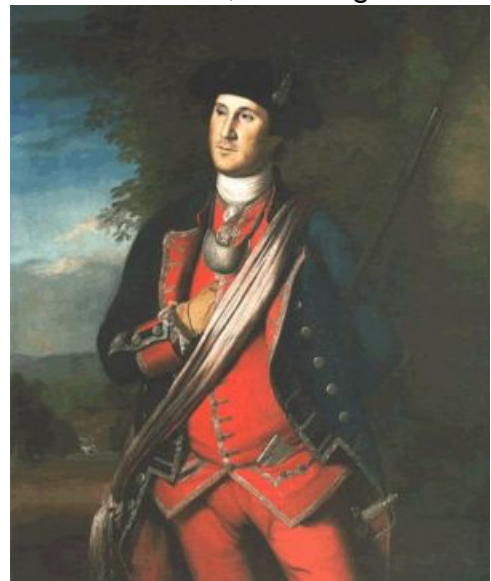
West Virginia University
A Colonial Distillery

Anger is growing in the colonies over British taxation. When the ship *Hope* arrives from Belfast carrying Irish linen, the cargo is auctioned by merchants John Fitzgerald and Valentine Peers to benefit Boston. Fitzgerald will become a colonel in the Continental Army and Washington's aide-de-camp.

1775

On his way to Philadelphia and thence to the Revolution, Washington boards the ferry at West's Point.

He will not return to Mount Vernon until late 1781, en route to the battle of Yorktown.



Charles Wilson Peale's 1772 portrait of Washington as a colonel in the Virginia militia.

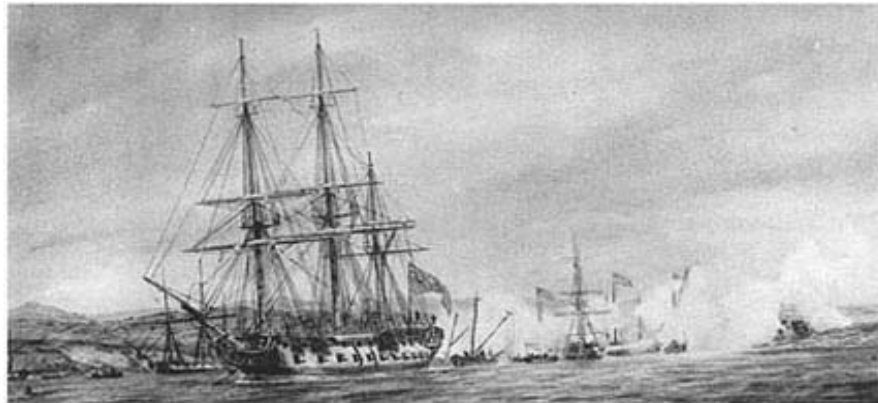
Washington and Lee University

1776

The Declaration of Independence is signed. The British blockade the opening to the Chesapeake Bay, but waterfront merchants prosper, selling supplies to the Continental Army and wheat to the colonies.

1777

In July, the British 44-gun square-rigger *Roebuck* is sighted sailing toward Alexandria but turns back below the town. Toward war's end, a small fleet of British ships flying French flags as a disguise appear off the docks but do not stay.



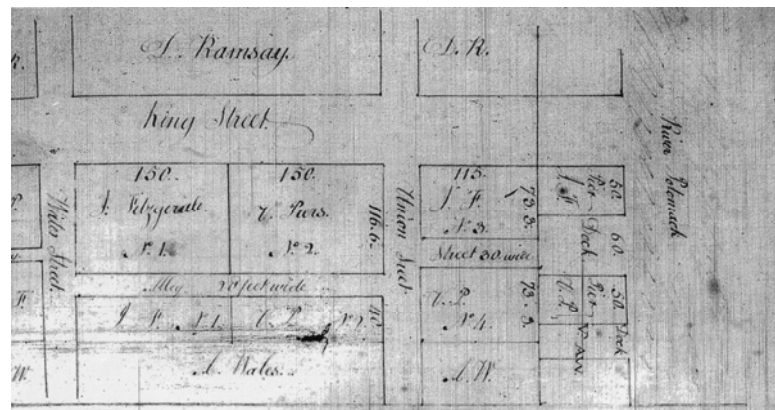
The British ship *Roebuck* in 1776

1779

On October 4, 1779 with the passage of the Act of Incorporation, the town's oligarchical trusteeship government was replaced with a mayor-council system. Twelve elected officials formed a Board of Aldermen and Common Council. Soon they petitioned to be the site of a Customs House.

1782

Property owners have cut away the riverbank, providing fill for the cove. The General Assembly of Virginia authorizes the town to connect the two sections of Water (Lee) Street and to create Union Street by landfill.



Fairfax Deed Book Y-1:85

In this map showing King and Union streets and the river, dry land extends 400 plus feet beyond the original shoreline.

1783

The cannons are silenced and the last British ship leaves the American coast. The British have largely ignored the seaport and it has survived.

1784

The Virginia Port Bill establishes Alexandria as the one official port of entry on the Potomac River. An intercoastal packet begins service to Baltimore. In 1786 another packet makes the run to Norfolk. Others follow.

Washington's dream, the Patowmack Company, is formed to build a barge canal connecting Alexandria to Ohio.



Official Seal of the Canal company founded by Washington

Captain John Harper, in West Indian and South American trade, builds warehouses at Prince and Union streets and the first of the houses along "Captain's Row." Across Prince Street, Benjamin Shreve and James Lawrason erect a warehouse (still standing).



Russell Jones Photo, 1960

Lawrason/Shreve Warehouse before the building was renovated and Union Street rail tracks removed

The Constitution is ratified and the waterfront explodes in "fireworks and illuminations."

Wharves and warehouses line the river, with small frame buildings tucked between for workers' homes and taverns.

Evan M'Lean,
At the Sign of the *ORANGE-TREE*, on *Harper's*
Wharf,
BECS leave to inform his Friends and the Public,
that he has opened an **OYSTER-HOUSE**,
where gentlemen may be provided with Oyster Sup-
pers, in the genteel manner and on the shortest
notice.—He has also laid in an assortment of the best
Liquors, which he hopes will enable him to give sa-
tisfaction to those gentlemen who may be pleased to
honor him with their company.
Alexandria, October 23, 1788.

1789

George Washington is inaugurated as the new nation's first president.

Alexandria's population reaches 3,200. The port is the fifth busiest in the U.S. Many new blocks have been created by "banking out." A waterfront lane, the Strand, extends from Cameron to Duke.

1790

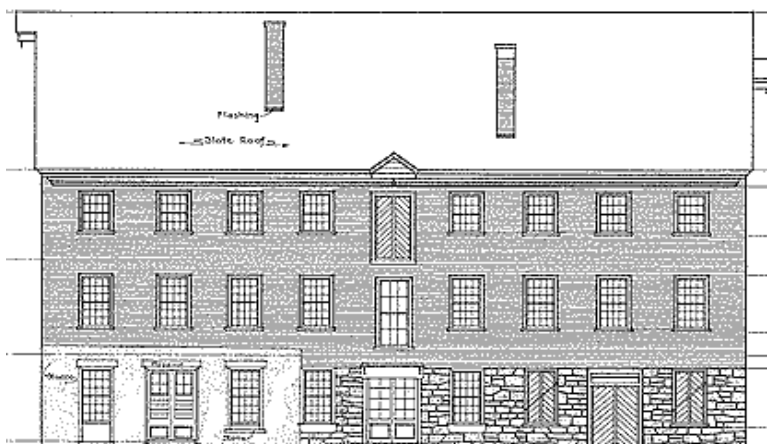
The decision is made to locate the national capital on both sides of the Potomac with Alexandria within its boundaries. Alexandria officially became part of the District of Columbia on February 27, 1801 when the US Congress formally accepted it.



A boundary stone is set in the seawall at Jones Point, April 16, 1791.

1796


Colonel Fitzgerald builds three warehouses under one roof at King and Union streets (still standing as 100-104 South Union Street).



U.S. Parks Service 1937

Union Street façade of Fitzgerald warehouse.

The first direct route to Georgetown, Alexandria's sister port on the Potomac, is running daily from Harper's Wharf.



**THE
GEORGE-TOWN
PACKET-BOAT,**

Leaves the County Wharf every morning, half an hour after sunrise (Sundays excepted) for Alexandria; touching in her way at Greenleaf's Point, and starts from Alexandria for George-Town, by the same rout at half past three in the afternoon. Passages may be engaged by applying to Mr. Robert Henderson, Harper's Wharf, Alexandria, and to Mr. H. G. Ludington, County Wharf, George-Town.

THOMAS QUAID.

May 10. 3rd

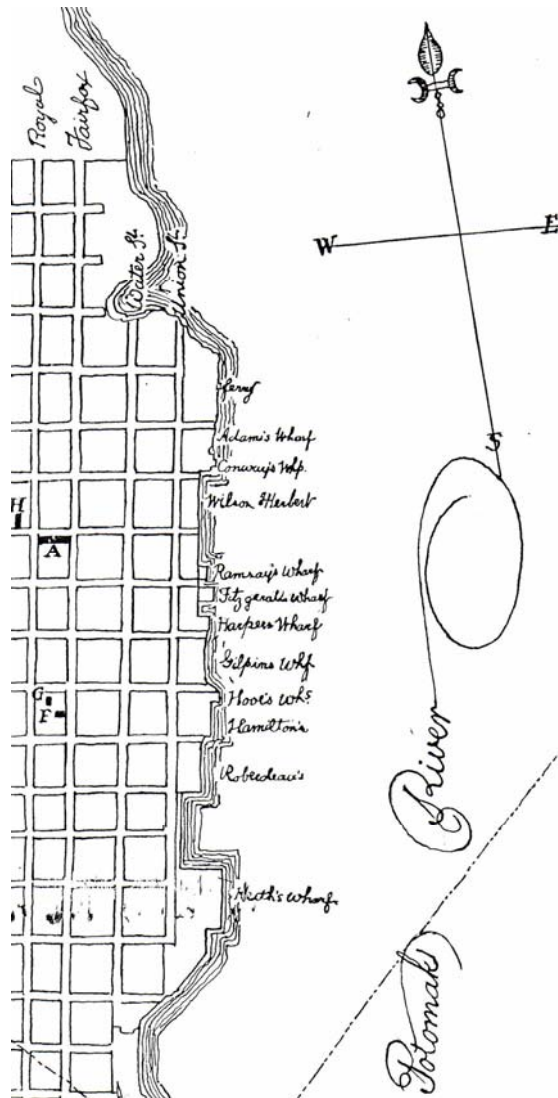
Alexandria Gazette May 26, 1796

1799 The year begins festively but ends in mourning. On Feb 11, Washington reviews a birthday enactment of a battle featuring "enemy" ships landing "foreign" troops at Ramsay's Wharf (King St.) and Keith's Wharf (Franklin St.).

On Dec. 14, Alexandria's first citizen dies at Mount Vernon.



19th Century – Pre-Civil War



From 1803 Plan of
Alexandria in Territory
of Columbia State by
unknown author

The map lists 11 wharves
from Oronoco to Franklin:
Adams's, Conway's,
Wilson and Herbert's,
Ramsay's, Fitzgerald's,
Harper's, Gilpin's,
Hooe's, Hamilton's and
Roberdeau's.

*Alexandria Library –
Local History/
Special Collections*

1803 In July yellow fever visits the port. Three thousand flee the city. Of those who remain, 200 will die, all of them, according to the *Gazette*, having lived or worked east of Royal Street.

1807-1808 President Jefferson's Embargo closes American ports to foreign ships, with disastrous effect on Alexandria merchants.

1810 Fire, started by a fallen candle in a cooper's shop, consumes nearly every building along the east side of Union Street from Prince to Duke.

1814

The War of 1812 reaches Alexandria on August 28 as the 38-gun frigate *Sea Horse* under Capt. James Alexander Gordon and six other armed British vessels anchor off Prince Street. The unfortified town surrenders.

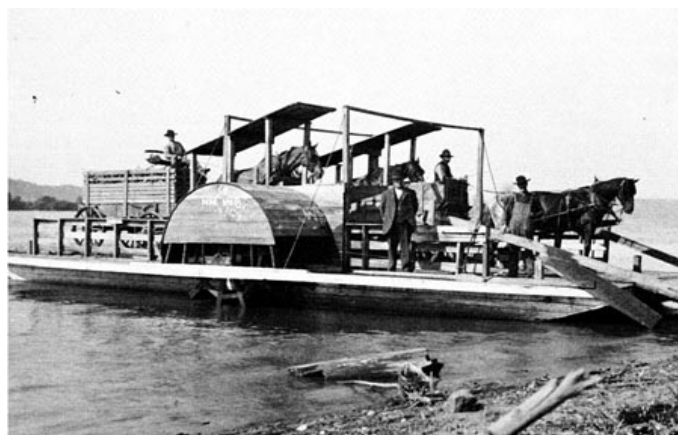


A contemporary cartoon mocks the Alexandrians (kneeling at left with hair on end) for surrendering their boats and goods without a fight.

For five days a barge transports a ransom of flour, tobacco, cotton, wines, and sugar to the *Sea Horse*.

1815

Steamboat ferry service between Alexandria and Washington begins from the King Street dock. Soon steamers are leaving also for Philadelphia and Boston.



Early paddle wheelers are sometimes powered by horses as in this ca. 1900 photo of a New York "team boat."

1820-1840 The port suffers a depression. The one trade flourishing is in slaves. From 1827 to 1837, traders Franklin and Armfield run ships *Tribune* and *Uncas* every 30 days to the “Cotton South” (Charleston, Mobile, New Orleans). Birch and Price succeed them. The Bruin Company, also on Duke, is shipping slaves in the 1840s.



Library of Congress

Slaves are rowed out to a ship in this view of the Alexandria waterfront from an 1835 antislavery broadside.

1827 On Jan. 18, a freezing, windy day, “The Great Alexandria Fire” engulfs houses and warehouses on lower Prince and Union streets. The news travels almost as fast as the flames, and even Congress is adjourned so that members can come here to help.

1833 May 6, Robert Beverley Randolph, infuriated by his dismissal from the Navy, assaults President Andrew Jackson onboard the steamer *Sydney* tied up at King Street (by some accounts twisting the president’s nose).

1840 Alexandria is the registered home port of 39 oceangoing ships engaged in foreign trade, the largest being the 677-ton *George Washington*.

1843

On Dec. 2, the Alexandria Canal opens, with four lift locks lowering canal boats 38 feet to the Potomac. The final link to Cumberland, Md., will be completed in 1850.



National Archives

Alexandria Canal Lock and Pool No. 1 (ca. 1861)

1846

Alexandrian soldiers board the steamer *Phoenix* to join President Polk's campaign to annex Texas. Two years later, they return as heroes.

1847

Alexandria is declared independent of the District and retroceded to Virginia. Flags fly from every mast in the harbor.

1850

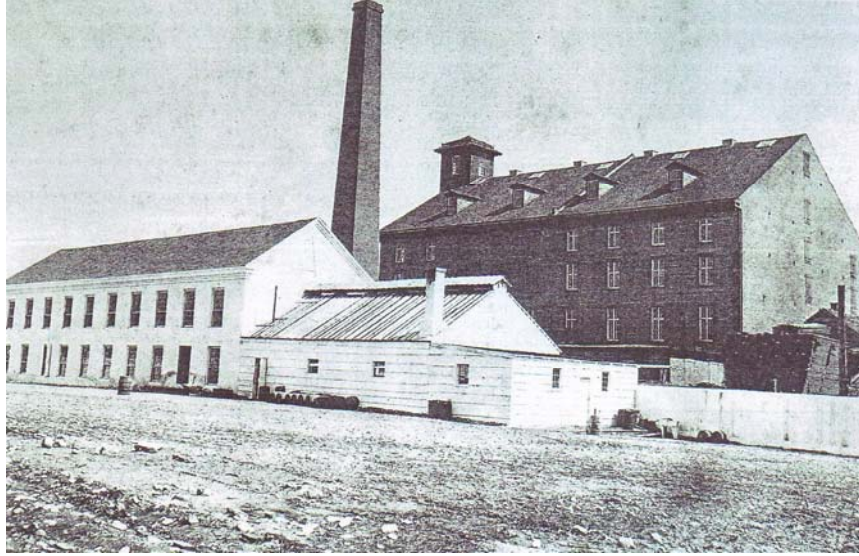
The first two canal boats arrive from Cumberland coal mines. "Black gold" piles up on the wharves. Another lucrative product is guano from Peru, sold as fertilizer.

The Orange and Alexandria Railroad lays tracks down Union Street to serve the wharves and warehouses and runs a ferry from King Street to the capital.

May 30, Smith & Perkins Locomotive Works opens its vast plant, employing as many as 200, at Union and Wolfe streets.

1852

The Alexandria Steam Flour Company erected a splendid facility at the foot of Duke Street along the Potomac River. Known as Pioneer Mill it was six-stories high, had twelve run-of-burr millstones and a 250 horse-power engine capable of turning out eight thousand barrels of flour per day. During its peak period of operation, it was considered one of the largest flour mills in the United States.



Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections

The new Pioneer Mill stands an impressive six stories tall on the Strand at the foot of Duke Street. View from South Union Street.

1854

Early Sunday morning, June 4, Alexandrians are awakened by three explosions along the waterfront. They come from gunpowder stored in one of the warehouses on Union Street between King and Prince streets. During the night a section of warehouses south of Fitzgerald's Alley (now Wales' Alley) are consumed by fire with their contents of flour, guano, groceries, and gunpowder.

1856

In 1852 Congress appropriates \$5,000 to purchase land and erect a beacon at Jones Point. Four years later on May 1, 1856, its whale-oil lamp is guiding river traffic.



Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections

Jones Point Lighthouse, ca. 1929

1858

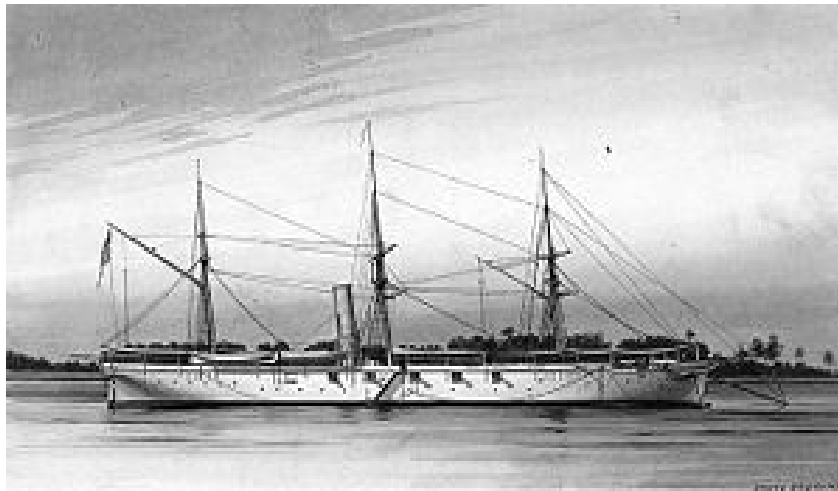
John Agnew establishes the Alexandria Shipyard and Maritime Railway companies at the foot of Franklin Street.

1860

At year's end, the *Gazette* reports that 1,042 schooners, 67 brigs, and 225 steamboats have visited the port this year.

1861

CIVIL WAR



USS Pawnee with a torpedo at her bow

For days the federal gunboat *Pawnee* is a menacing presence as it stands off Cameron Street wharf. Its Dahlgren guns aimed at the city. On May 16 it seizes the schooner *Indiana* with a cargo of nails for Alexandria.

On May 23 citizens of Alexandria vote to ratify secession and the Potomac becomes the great divide between Union and Confederacy. Just before dawn on the 24th, an officer of the US gunboat *Pawnee* entered Alexandria under a flag of truce and ordered the city's military forces either to evacuate or surrender.

A resident of the town, Benjamin Barton gives this account dated June 14, 1861. "...at daylight in the morning, without opposition - the Virginians leaving as the northern soldiers entered, - it would have been done without blood shed had not Col. Ellsworth too hastily taken down a Southern flag, flying over the Marshall House, south east corner of King and Pitt Streets,... James Jackson, the proprietor of the Hotel, met the Colonel on the stairway and in the altercation shot him dead, one of the soldiers accompanying Ellsworth, immediately shot Jackson dead, so two daring men fell at the onset: since then some few casualties have happened, yet our City remains quiet and we feel compairtively [sic] safe from harm: Sentries are placed in every part of town."..