



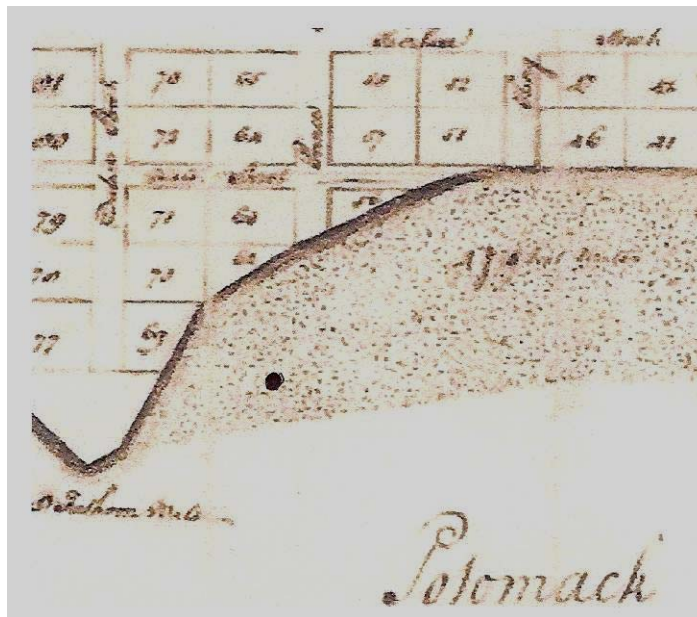
City of Alexandria  
 Office of Historic Alexandria  
 Alexandria Archaeology  
**Studies of the Old Waterfront**



## Chadwicks on the Strand

By Diane Riker  
 © 2009

In 1749, when Alexandria was founded, only the fish and the seagulls ate and drank here. Where Chadwicks stands today (203 South Strand Street), you would have been treading water or riding a shallow-draft scow onto the sandy bank that bordered a high bluff behind you.



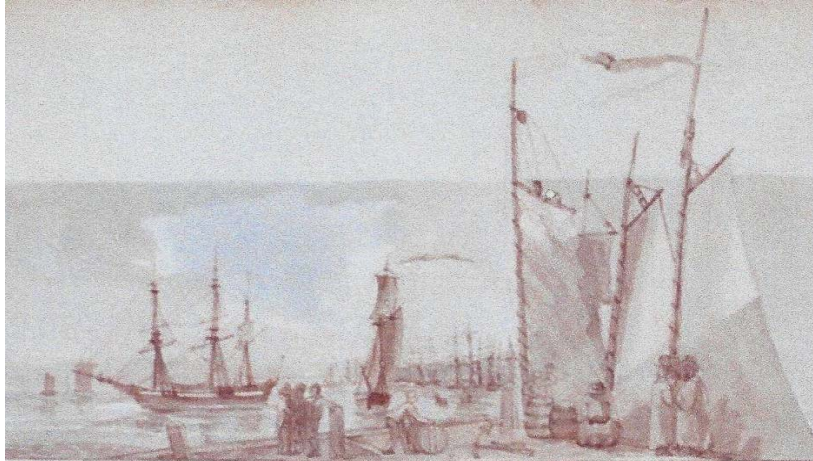
*Library of Congress*

Part of a 1749 map of Alexandria drawn by George Washington, showing the point of land at the end of Duke Street and Lot 62 on the bank south of Prince Street. “●” marks the future location of Chadwicks Restaurant

The first person to leave his mark on this southern part of the waterfront was George Gilpin. By 1769, he and Jonathan Hall owned Lots 62 and 63. Lot 62 was a quarter-acre wedge on the high river bank.

Gilpin didn't just build on this property, as had been required by an early law. Slicing into the cliff and using the excavated clay and rock to grade the slope, he created two new city blocks to the east. The town appointed him its engineer to supervise "banking out" all along the Alexandria shoreline.

By 1785, Gilpin's ground extended 220 feet from the new Union Street into the Potomac River, and enterprising merchant/shippers were renting his warehouses. At the docks, large ocean-going vessels tied up close to the river's natural channel. By 1812, the Strand was a recognized road.



*Library of Congress*  
Gilpin's busy wharf would have resembled this 1755 "Sketch of Norfolk" by Benjamin Latrobe.

Insurance records for 1796 indicate a two-story warehouse at the site of Chadwicks north of "Gillpin's Ally" and to the south of a "Publik Ally," which still exists today though blocked. Shipping merchants Benjamin Shreve and James Lawrason owned the business. They dealt in rock salt, queensware, nails and "Havanna segars."

By July 1805, the property had passed to James Lawrason, whose young partner William Fowle would come to dominate the waterfront south of Prince Street. Lawrason & Fowle were traders in tea, fabrics, molasses, "dipt" candles and other necessities of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century lifestyle. They were doubtless exporting the backcountry's principal crops: tobacco, wheat, flour and corn.

Their three-story brick warehouse with its wooden roof stood 50 feet from the river. Unfortunately, it didn't stand there long.

On the evening of Sept. 24, 1810, a candle left burning in a cooper's shop toppled onto some shavings, igniting a fire that raged for four hours and destroyed every building on the block from Duke to Prince and Union to the river. Three days later the partners ran an ad in the *Alexandria Daily Gazette* thanking the Alexandrians who raced to their aid.

**A CARD**

*LAWRASON & FOWLE tender their grateful acknowledgements to the Citizens of Alexandria, and particularly those who, at imminent personal danger, persevered in rescuing the principal part of their property from the late destructive Fire. Also to Capt. Crowell and crew of the sch'r President of Boston, who received on board his vessel a large amount of property, after it was taken from the store, which otherwise would have been all destroyed.*

The following fall, Lawrason insured a new brick warehouse facing the Strand, three stories high with a smaller brick warehouse attached at the rear, both roofed with slate and boasting iron fittings and stone door – and windowsills. The wharf in front now bore Lawrason's name.

An 1823 insurance revaluation of the property appraised the buildings at \$6,000, a sizable sum at the time. The combined dimensions of 34 by 78 feet created the same footprint as do Chadwicks' kitchen and main dining room today.

During the depression years of the late 1830s and early 1840s, Lawrason's partner, William Fowle, purchased the Lawrason properties. He and two of his sons – William Holmes Fowle and George Dashiell Fowle – took the company to great success in the boom years of the 1850s.

They were agents of the Peruvian government for the importation of guano, the nitrogen-rich droppings of Pacific seabirds, a valued fertilizer when mixed with phosphates.

**FOWLE & CO.,**  
IMPORTERS AND DEALERS IN ALL  
KINDS OF  
**FERTILIZERS,**  
OFFER FOR SALE  
**NO. 1**  
**PERUVIAN GUANO**  
IMPORTED  
DIRECT TO THIS PORT, FROM THE  
**CHINCHA ISLANDS,**

*Alexandria Advertiser 1858*

During this decade, tracks were laid along Union Street, on which the Orange and Alexandria Railroad carried goods to and from the warehouses. And gas lighting and piped water came to Alexandria, largely through the backing of the Fowle family.

And it must have been then that Fowle & Co. replaced or built onto the old warehouses to create the impressive 3½-story buildings seen in the Civil War photo below.

An 1847 tax ledger lists a “wharf and house on the alley and the Strand” with a value of \$15,000. It is this structure that, incorporating perhaps some of the 1811 foundation, left parts of its grand stone and lower brick walls to Chadwicks.

In 1860 William senior died (“a man of uncommon character...kindly though blunt,” said the January 12 *Gazette*) and in 1861 Federal troops crossed the Potomac and occupied Alexandria. The Fowle family properties were confiscated by the U.S. Marshal’s Office, among them the “brick warehouse situated on the river front, second house south of Prince and binding on an alley.”



*Alexandria Library- Local History/Special Collections*

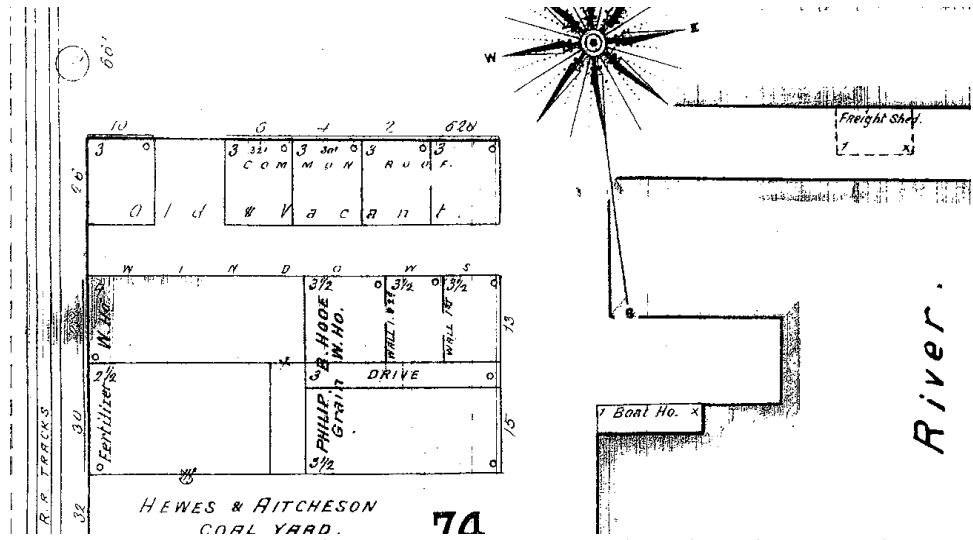
In 1864 a photographer on the roof of the Pioneer Mill at the foot of Duke Street took the first known photograph of the Strand Street warehouses. An arrow indicates Chadwicks’ location. The building is joined to a similar warehouse from which it is separated only by a barely visible enclosed 3-story “horse alley” with arched gate, formerly Gilpin’s Alley, today a glass-front atrium. The company’s office was at the corner of Prince and the Strand.

By 1870, all the seized properties were released to the family in a landmark case before the Supreme Court.

Following court action between the Fowle executors and his heirs, the warehouse and its surrounding properties passed to Philip B. Hooe, who had joined the firm in 1853 and married

one of William Fowle's granddaughters. Hooe traded in salt, plaster and fertilizers and was an agent for the Potomac Steamboat Company.

Insurance forms in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century show the building, still 3½ stories tall, divided into three sections, each having access to the public alley and used to store grain. The narrow passageway to the south was a 3-story "drive."



1891 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Alexandria Library, Local History

Hooe died in 1895, and DeWilton Aitcheson, who already owned the coal yard to the south, bought the property.

In 1897 one of the worst fires ever to afflict the city started at midnight on June 3 in a boiler room on the east side of the Strand north of Duke. Before it had exhausted itself, all but one of the warehouses on the block had collapsed and the wharves were charred pilings. All that was left of Fowle's grand structure at this site were the tall stone foundations along the drive and western wall and the lower portions of burnt and broken walls.

Aitcheson's losses were enormous: a wood and coal office, three warehouses, a planing mill. Seven years later, the site was still listed as "ruins." But on May 12, 1904, the *Alexandria Gazette* announced:

**Emerson Pump Works.**

The partly burned building adjoining the Emerson Pump Works on the south is being rebuilt by Mr. DeW. Aitcheson. It will be used by the Emerson Pump Company who have recently received about ten thousand dollars' worth of new machinery for their plant. This will be the last of the houses on that square burned in May, 1897, to be rebuilt.

Building on the 2-foot-thick solid-stone foundations and the standing bricks, Aitcheson erected the two-story structure we see today with its pitched roof and parapet.

For the next quarter century the warehouse served successively as an assembly shop (1907), a warehouse for the storage and tanning of hides (1912) and an electric-light supply house (1921). During the depression years of the 1930s it stood vacant. In 1941 it was reborn as a steam laundry.

A sign for "Aitcheson's Auto Laundry," running the length of the white-washed lower façade, was still faintly visible on photographs taken in the 1970s. The enclosed alley to the south, then just one story tall, housed Aitcheson's liquid fertilizers.



*Alexandria Library - Local History/Creegan Collection*

The building on the right and the one-story shop at the center of this photo would become Chadwicks on the Strand when it opened in 1979.