



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



## **Fitzgerald's Warehouse King and Union Streets**

By Diane Riker  
© 2008



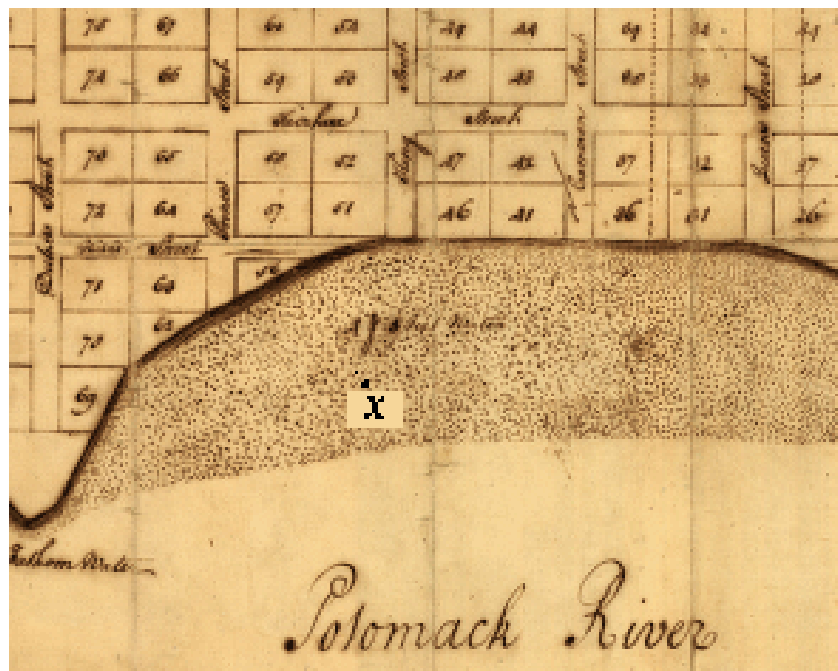
*Robert G. Whitton*

### *In the River*

At the corner of King and Union streets in Old Town Alexandria stands the largest structure the city retains from its heady days as an international port.

Although its contents have evolved from tobacco and textiles and rope to caffe latte and gifts and office space, it is basically the same building that the merchant/war hero/civic leader built as three conjoined warehouses more than two centuries ago. The stone foundations are periodically threatened by the Potomac, just as they were then, and the continuous bustle at this corner of King and Union is not so different in decibels.

Seen today from across King Street, the brick and stone warehouse built for Col. John Fitzgerald in the mid-1790s appears to tilt toward the river. And the river is where its story begins.



From a 1749 map in the Library of Congress in George Washington's hand but believed to have been copied from town surveyor John West. "X" marks the future site of the warehouse.

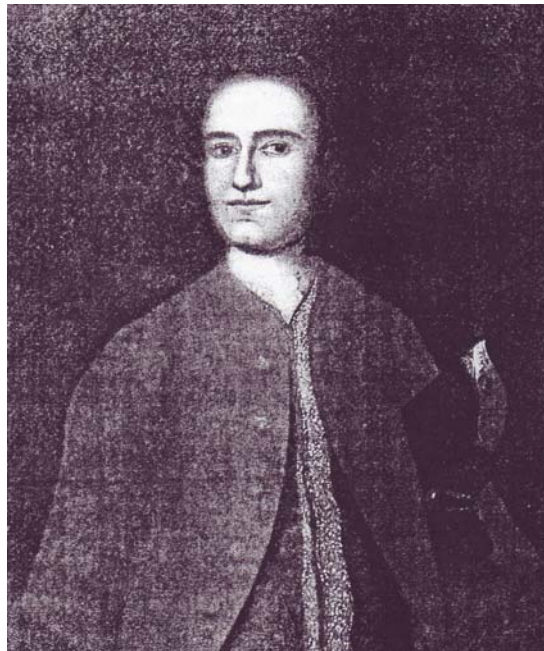
## *Water Lots*

In **1749**, Oronoco and Duke Streets extend into deep water, but between them lies an arc of swampy flatland backed by bluffs.

When the town lays out its first building lots, George Washington's half-brother Lawrence is a trustee. Because he is away during the July land sale, his brother Augustine writes to him. The chafing at waterfront prices sounds familiar.

*I purchased you two lots near the water upon the Main street, as everyone along the rode will be through that street.... The reason the lots sold so high was River side ones being sett up first.<sup>1</sup>*

The new owner pays 50 pounds 10 shillings for an acre on King between Fairfax and Water (now Lee) Street<sup>2</sup> – in today's geography, from the Burke and Herbert Bank past the Why Not? children's shop – including half the block going south.



**Lawrence Washington** (Mount Vernon Ladies Assn)

*First owner of the lots that will be extended into the river to provide footing for the warehouse and wharf.*

## *The Merchants*

**1760** Washington dies of tuberculosis in 1752, and his executors sell his lots to John Patterson and his wife, Susanna.<sup>3</sup> Although the National Park Service's *Historic American Buildings Survey* will attribute the warehouse to Patterson and date it "prior to 1765,"<sup>4</sup> Water Street is far from the channel and no record indicates that the land is filled in this early.

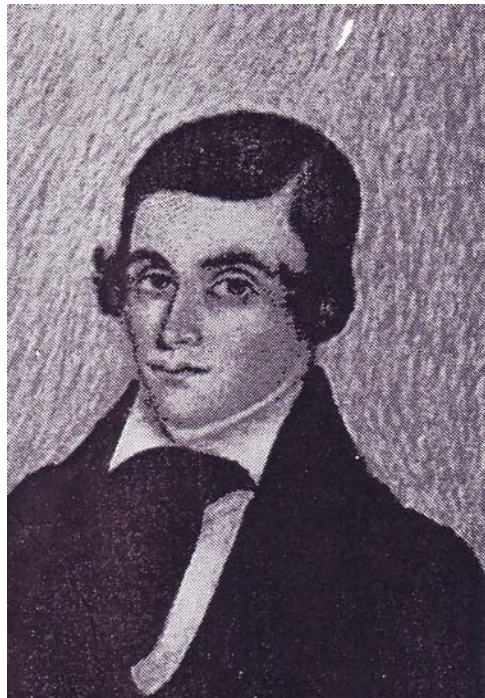
**1773** An Irish immigrant named John Fitzgerald, believed to have arrived here about 1769, is buying and selling dry goods in Alexandria ("twenty match coat blankets if you can spare so many, also 4 yards Super fine white flannell").<sup>5</sup> He is taking orders also for servants.<sup>6</sup>

**1774** Fitzgerald and fellow Irishman Valentine Peers become partners in the linen trade in the mid-1770s. They may be receiving their goods at the public wharves or on the dedicated half of Carlyle and Dalton's wharf at Cameron St.

**1776** With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, both join the Continental Army, Fitzgerald becoming a colonel, General Washington's aide-de-camp and his lifelong friend. Peers is discharged in 1777. Fitzgerald continues at Washington's side.

**1778** April 27, Patterson's widow and son sell the two lots to Fitzgerald (on leave from Valley Forge) and Peers, for 1,400 pounds.<sup>7</sup> In September, the two are granted rights by the town to the mudflats running into the Potomac.<sup>8</sup>

**Valentine Peers** (*Robert N. Richardson*)<sup>9</sup>  
*Of Fitzgerald's appearance we have only the skimpiest description. A woman visiting her husband at Washington's camp in Morris town, N.J., in the spring of 1777 calls him: "an agreeable broad-shouldered Irishman."*<sup>10</sup>





## *Making Land*

Peers and Fitzgerald are free to fill in the marshland and erect the sort of long wharf their neighbors have already built - John Carlyle and John Dalton at Cameron Street in 1759; the Kirkpatrick brothers, just north of Queen in the mid-1760s.

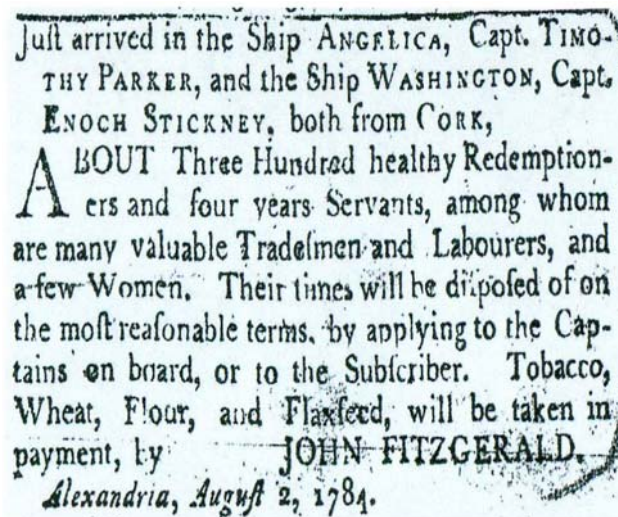
The “banking out” that precedes the driving of wooden piles for a wharf is an arduous and risky process. Earth is sliced from the bluff, loaded on wooden carts, and dumped at river’s edge. At least one worker is lost under a toppling bank.<sup>11</sup>

A discovery in November 1878 reveals the landfill process as continuous:

*workmen engaged in paving King street, between Union and the dock, while cutting down to get the grade, came across a well-paved street, about eighteen inches below the surface of the old one.*<sup>12</sup>

**1781** The merchants dissolve the partnership and divide the property.

**1782** The year the town fathers agree to extend Union Street across the newly filled land,<sup>13</sup> Trustee William Ramsay takes a census. John Fitzgerald is listed as head of a household of five whites and 12 blacks. At war’s end, he resigns his commission, resumes his business, and leases space on his wharf to other merchants.

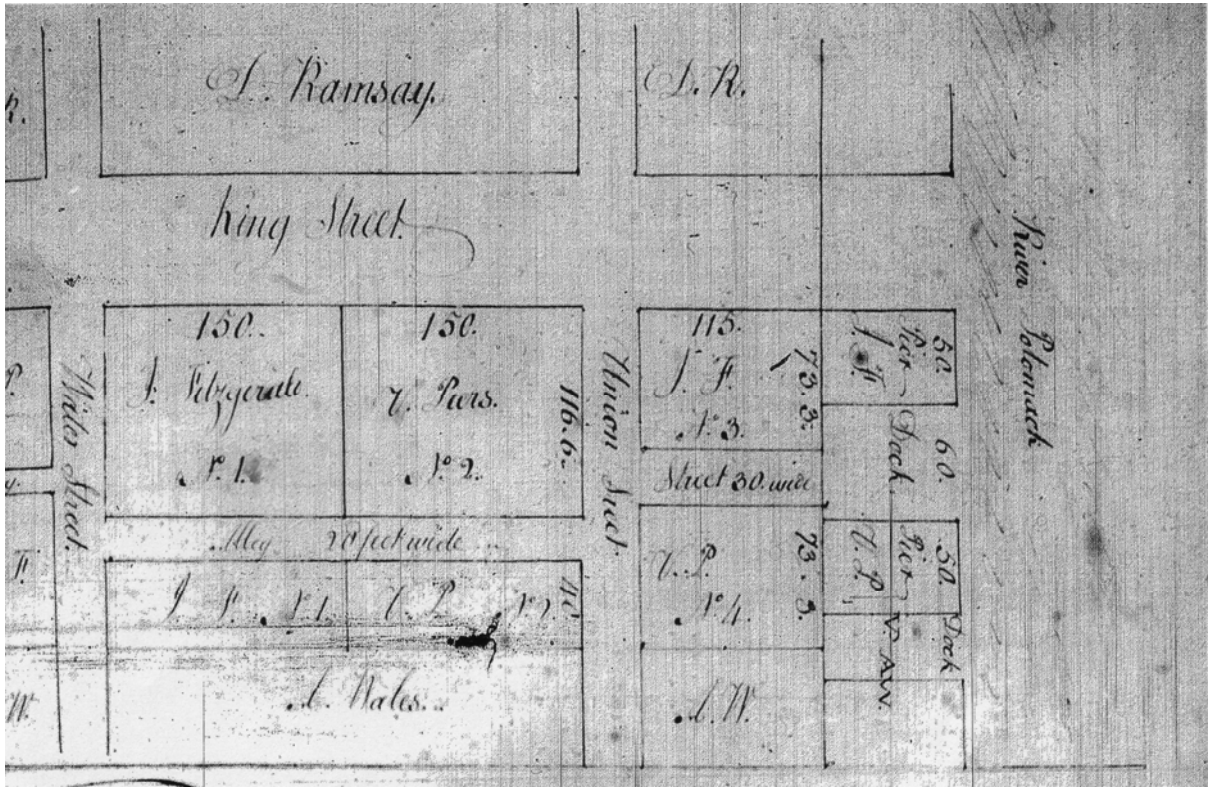


Just arrived in the Ship ANGELICA, Capt. TIMOTHY PARKER, and the Ship WASHINGTON, Capt. ENOCH STICKNEY, both from CORK,  
ABOUT Three Hundred healthy Redemptioners and four years Servants, among whom are many valuable Tradersmen and Labourers, and a few Women. Their times will be disposed of on the most reasonable terms, by applying to the Captains on board, or to the Subscriber. Tobacco, Wheat, Flour, and Flaxseed, will be taken in payment, by JOHN FITZGERALD.  
Alexandria, August 2, 1784.

*Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser, Aug. 19, 1784*

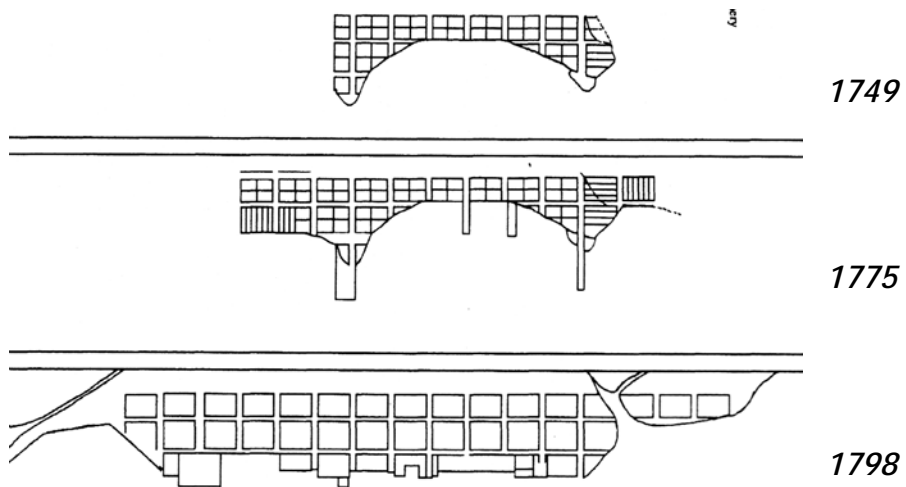
**“Redemptioners” are sold into labor for up to seven years to pay off their debts to society in their homelands and/or their passage to the New World.**

**1789** A plat drawn this year and attached to the Fitzgerald/Peers “Deed of Partition”<sup>14</sup> shows the new shoreline east of Union. A 50-foot-wide pier serves vessels. A 30-foot street (now called Wales Alley, but known in the 1800s as Fitzgerald’s Alley or Dock Street) separates Peers and Fitzgerald holdings.



Alexandria Library – Local History/Maps Collection

**1791** The bay is no more and Alexandria has lost its “amphitheater” profile.



Adapted from Donald G. Shomette. *Maritime Alexandria*, p.276

*John Fitzgerald*<sup>15</sup>



We have no portrait of him and no birthdate for him, but we do know that John Fitzgerald projected leadership.

Within a year of his arrival in Virginia, he is elected to the House of Burgesses. In the spring of **1776**, he is commissioned captain in the Third Virginia Regiment and by fall he is a colonel in the Colonial Army. During the war, he exposes a cabal against Washington and gives early evidence against Benedict Arnold.

There is a diary attributed to Fitzgerald, describing Washington's soldiers with rags wrapped about their feet crossing the Delaware in snow and sleet to confront the Hessians in a surprise attack on Christmas 1776.<sup>16</sup> The document is now considered "doubtful."<sup>17</sup>

In **1779**, he marries Jane (Jenny) Digges, of Warburton Manor, Maryland. "For many years the families of Warburton Manor and Mount Vernon exchanged visits across the Potomac."<sup>18</sup>

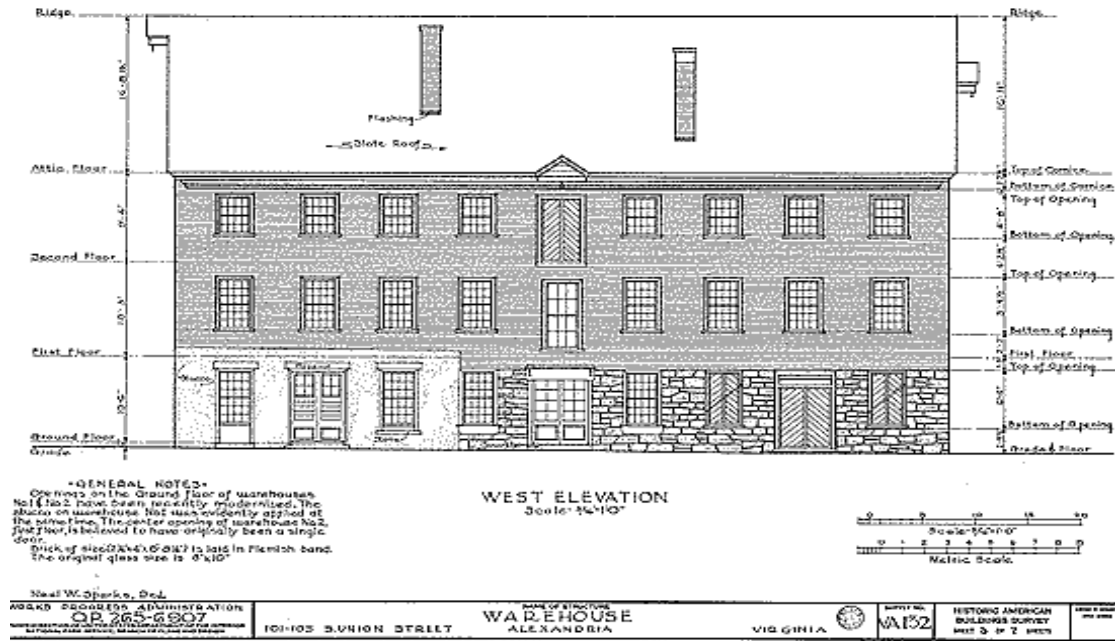
In **1785**, he is elected a director of the Potowmack Company formed to build a canal to deliver coal and other products from the Ohio Valley. The following year he is mayor of Alexandria.

In **1787**, he buys a distillery on Wolfe Street at the river. He invests in lands from the Chesapeake to the Ohio. He acquires a country seat, "Federal Spring," just outside town. (His "counting house" on Fairfax and King is plaqued inaccurately as his residence.)

Masses for the Catholic population are celebrated in his home until a church, St. Mary's, for which he is the chief fundraiser, is built in **1789**. He raises funds also for Georgetown College and is a patron of the Alexandria Academy, donating scholarships.<sup>19</sup>

There are more than 30 entries in Washington's diary of Fitzgerald's dining at Mount Vernon.

## The Warehouse



[http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs\\_haer/](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/)

**The Union Street façade of the warehouse was drawn for the WPA's Historic American Buildings Survey in 1937.<sup>20</sup>**

(Dormers have since been added and the stucco that coated the northwest corner of the building in 1937 has been removed.)

In 1959, the Survey's architect adds to the file:

*This structure is the largest and best preserved of Alexandria's once numerous examples of utilitarian buildings located along the active waterfront of the thriving port. The high basement is sturdily constructed of stone and the superstructure is brick, lighted by 8/8 and 12/12 sash....*

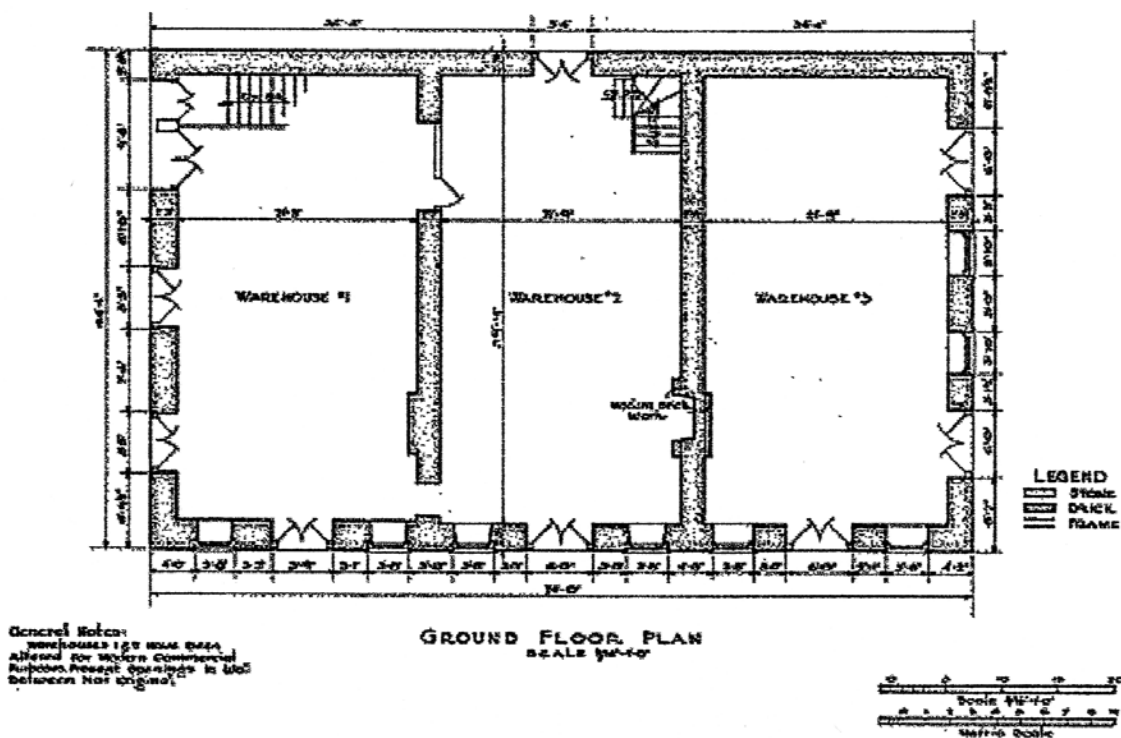
*The first two floors served as warehouse and salesroom; the top floor housed a sail loft 42 feet by 83 feet in length.*<sup>21</sup>

In fact, the first reference we have to the building is to its loft. Daniel McDougall, sailmaker, informs the public in the February 8, **1798** issue of the *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* that he is moving his sail loft "over the Warehouse belonging to Col. Fitzgerald, south east corner of King and Union streets."

The earliest warehouses here are simple one-and-one-half-story wooden structures, raised four feet from the ground, their “cribbing” filled with sand and rubbish. Soon, however, waterfront construction becomes more sophisticated.

The **1780s** initiate a period of brick warehouse construction. Another survivor, just a block away, is the Benjamin Shreve and James Lawrason warehouse on the southwest corner of Prince and Union streets, now a residence.

A list of materials used for the public wharf at Point Lumley in 1774 may give some insight into the provenance of Fitzgerald’s construction materials: stone from Great Falls, shingles from Norfolk, iron from the Snowden ironworks on the Patuxent River, tree logs from Port Tobacco.<sup>22</sup>



*“Patterson-Fitzgerald Warehouse.”*

*Library of Congress American Memory Historic American Buildings Survey*

**Fitzgerald’s warehouse is actually three conjoined warehouses as evidenced in this HABS drawing of its ground floor. Union Street is at the bottom of the drawing. The dock is 90 feet east of the east wall.**

### *Fortune and Misfortune*

Alexandria merchants prosper during the **1780s** and **‘90s**. Once Great Britain and the West Indies were the port’s principal trade partners; now trade is also with Spain, France, Holland, and

Portugal. A Frenchman visiting the port comments on “slaves clothed in livery, and their masters in silk and velvets.”<sup>23</sup>

A partial list of what was arriving at the wharf, much of it passing through the warehouse, in the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century must include:

*Freemasons’ aprons, bark (medicinal), barley, beef and blankets; candles, castor oil, cheese, chocolate, coffee, cordage, and corn; fabrics like flannel, lawns, linens, lustrings, muslins, cambricks and oznabergs, and fashions (hats, shoes, stays and shades); grain and gunpowder, indigo and ochre, iron, laudanum, lead, leather, limestone and lumber.*

*Also meal, milliners’ gauzes, millstones and molasses, nails, oil in hampers, olives in jars, vinegar in hogsheads; pepper, and pork, potatoes (New England), rope and rum, sails and salt, shad, soap and sugar, tables, tea and tobacco, wheat, wines and writing paper.*<sup>24</sup>

And this is not to mention horse carriages and harnesses, pianofortes and servants.

But Fitzgerald’s last years are plagued by misfortune.

**1793** April 13. Fitzgerald is appointed by President Washington as Collector of Customs for the Port of Alexandria under Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. In turn, the new collector appoints Vincent Gray to the post of surveyor, then as deputy collector.

Fitzgerald, afflicted by “a violent Rheumatic complaint,”<sup>25</sup> increasingly depends upon him. But Gray is “abusing”<sup>26</sup> the colonel’s signature to what will eventually be calculated at more than \$67,000.

Letters from Secretary Wolcott to Port Collector Fitzgerald grow increasingly impatient with the “unfortunate situation at your office.”<sup>27</sup>

**1799** Deep in debt, John and Jane Fitzgerald, on January 16, deed in trust to William and John Herbert of the Bank of Alexandria “a parcel east [sic] of Union and South of King Streets.”<sup>28</sup>

By year’s end, John Fitzgerald will be dead and his warehouse forfeited.

It is a grand military funeral. The coffin, followed by the colonel’s riderless horse, is carried from his house on Duke Street (in 2006, a parking lot for St. Mary’s Church) to his wharf and then by water to the Digges family plot at Warburton, Maryland. The order of procession is:

A company of Light Infantry:  
 Two companies of Infantry.  
 A company of Rifle-men:  
 The Silver Grays.  
 A company of Artillery:  
 Militia Officers.  
 Captain Simpson's Cavalry:  
 Music:  
 Guard:  
 Clergy:  
 Mourning Relatives:

Pall Bearers.

CORPS

Pall Bearers.

The Horse of the deceased, carrying his military accoutrements.

The Troop of Cavalry of which the late Colonel Fitzgerald was Captain.

The pall was supported by Col. Gilpin, Colonel Ramsay, Mr. J. Taylor, Mr. W. Herbert, Mr. T. Herbert and Charles Alexander, Esq.

At 4 o'clock, the time of his interment at Warburton, 16 guns were fired from the point by Captain Harper's company of Artillery.

*Times and District of Columbia Advertiser, Dec. 5, 1799*

Two mysteries remain: the present site of Fitzgerald's grave and the fact that Washington does not mention his old friend's death in his diary; nor is there any record of his presence at the funeral.

*New Owners*

Valuable Property for Sale  
IN ALEXANDRIA.

By virtue of a Deed of Trust made by Col. John Fitzgerald, late of this town, to us the subscribers, will be exposed to sale on Monday the 17th day of August next, if fair, if not the next fair day, on the premises,

The following very valuable Property—to wit:

A Water Lot commonly called Fitzgerald's Wharf, lying upon the south side of King street and east side of Union street, and bounded by an alley of 30 feet in width, on the south from Union street to the water. On this piece of ground are erected three Brick Warehouses, 24 feet 4 inches in front, 42 feet deep and three stories high each—Also, a SAIL LOFT above the upper story 73 feet in length and 42 feet wide upon the floor—all under one roof. Adjoining and on the east side of this house, is a piece of ground unimproved the whole length of the house, 55 feet deep, terminating on a 15 feet alley, laid out upon the front of the wharf. From the front of the wharf is a pier extended into the river 100 feet by 60 ft in breadth. Appertaining to the pier is a dock 33 feet wide on the one side and another 28 feet on the other side.

This sale is made for the purpose of raising certain sums of money which have been demanded of Robt. T. Hoce as security of Col. Fitzgerald, by the United States and the Bank of Alexandria.

Wm. HERBERT, } Trustees.  
Jno. C. HERBERT, }

**1801** On May 3, this ad for the wharf and warehouse appears in the *Alexandria Advertiser & Commercial Intelligencer*.

Two respected Alexandria merchants, John Dunlap, 46, and Thomas Irwin, 41, offer \$14,750 and "no person bidding more, (the property is) struck off to them."<sup>29</sup>



## *Fever and Flood*

**1803** This year a yellow-fever epidemic strikes the port. “I forgot to tell you that we have a great plenty of Musketoos, and that they are very troublesome on the Warm Nights,” one of Fitzgerald’s tenants had written his wife.<sup>30</sup>

We should not romanticize the waterfront. Seventy-five years later the Gazette paints this picture.

*Fill up the cove...and pile it with warehouses and dwellings that receive the sewerage from the hills above, and give it no outlet...that was the condition which surrounded the newly filled cove between Fishtown (north of Queen) and Pioneer Mills (Duke St.) in 1803. Even then the poison of the disease was spent mainly on the newly made ground, the bulk of the cases occurring below Water street and none beyond Royal street.*<sup>31</sup>

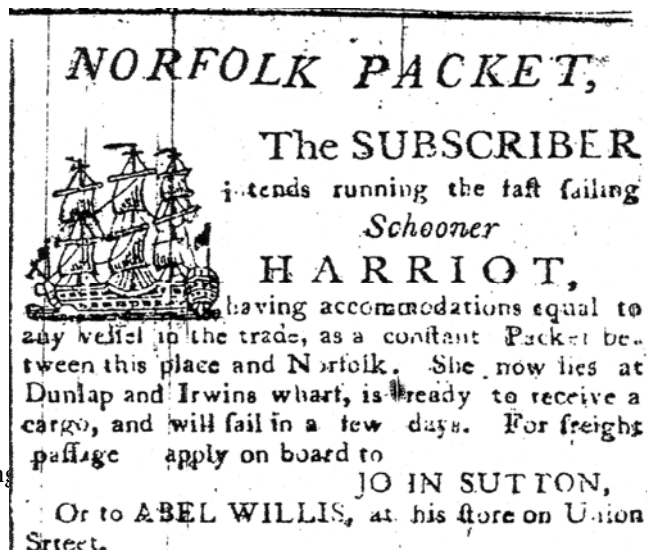
Anxious citizens take to chewing tobacco and wearing necklaces of garlic cloves.<sup>32</sup> Town physician Elisha Dick blames the infection on “a very large pile of oyster shells, some holding oysters found in a state of putrefaction emitting nauseous effluvia.”<sup>33</sup>

**1804** Flooding on lower King Street creates a problem. Trustee George Gilpin writes Charles Simms in the new collector’s office across Union from the warehouses:

*A piece of Ground which formerly belonged to Col. John Fitzgerald... laying [sic] between Water and Union Streets fronting on King is too low the water that falls on it for of a sufficient height becomes Stagnant, remedy this you are desired to have it filled up.*<sup>34</sup>

## *Irwin’s Wharf*

However, commerce does not suffer long. A new service is announced between Alexandria and Norfolk, leaving Dunlap and Irwin’s wharf:<sup>35</sup>



**NORFOLK PACKET,**  
The SUBSCRIBER  
intends running the fast sailing  
Schooner  
**HARRIOT,**  
having accommodations equal to  
any vessel in the trade, as a constant Packet be-  
tween this place and Norfolk. She now lies at  
Dunlap and Irwins wharf, is ready to receive a  
cargo, and will sail in a few days. For freight  
passage apply on board to  
JOHN SUTTON,  
Or to ABEL WILLIS, at his store on Union  
Street.

**1806** In the fall, after a long illness, John Dunlap dies at his home on Duke Street. From now until late in the century, the property will be known as Irwin's Wharf and Warehouse, as evidenced in an early ad in the *Alexandria Advertiser* on Dec. 3, 1806:

**Flour, for Family Use.**

—

A constant supply of best Superfine Flour, of Ravensworth Brand, for family use and bakers, will be kept at Mr. Thomas Irwin's warehouse, at the lower end of King street

*Also for Sale.*

A few hundred bushels of old Corn, for cash only.

**W. Wedderburn.**

December 3. 1av1stJan

### *Embargo and War*

**1807** American ships and sailors are falling prey in the West Indies to French privateers, and on the Atlantic, to a Britain anxious to reenlist in the Royal Navy its old subjects. President Thomas Jefferson declares an embargo on foreign trade. Its effect is devastating – vessels laden with goods languish at the wharves - but short-lived. The embargo is withdrawn in 14 months.

**1813** On Saturday, July 17, a public auction on the wharf makes the transition to Irwin's sole ownership final (he has already acquired one part in 1808). A trustee for Dunlap's indigent heirs sells their shares in the property to Thomas Irwin for \$5,360.<sup>36</sup>



**1814** The War of 1812 reaches Alexandria. On the night of August 27, seven ships from the British fleet, whose comrades have sacked and set fire to Washington four days earlier, dock off Prince Street.

The town scuttles all vessels in harbor and surrenders. For five days the British raid waterfront warehouses. Ironically, a letter from the British Rear Admiral to James Gordon, commander of the ships off Alexandria, calling off the siege, has not been delivered.<sup>37</sup>

No records have come to light regarding the losses at Irwin's warehouse but they must have been considerable.

The town is publicly humiliated for its quick surrender but it had no defenses.

**A British sailor carries away barrels of New England rum and the best Virginia tobacco in this detail from a cartoon by William Charles, 1814.**

## Recovery

Sometime in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Irwin builds a three-story brick store with hip roof against the east wall of the old building, extending along King Street fifty feet toward the Potomac River.<sup>38</sup> The two buildings are connected by a door on the second floor.

Goods bought and sold at Irwin's Wharf/Warehouse in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century include:

*beads, beef and bottles; candles, casks, china, cider, codfish, coffee and corn; fabric, filberts, flour, fruit, furniture; glass (tumblers, decanters and window glass); hides, iron, kettles and knives; lead, liquor, mantle ornaments, molasses and Spanish moss; oils, pork, potatoes, pots, quills, rice; salt, scythes, sheeting and soap; white and brown sugar, tar, resin and pitch, tea, tobacco and turpentine; wine, wire and wood and a schooner named "Java."*

Not to mention the Baltimore sloop *Express* and its two black deckhands.<sup>39</sup>

**1817** Among Irwin's investments is the City Hotel, later Gadsby's Tavern, which remains in the family into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has served as overseer of the poorhouse and director of two Alexandria banks.

In late November, President James Monroe passes through town, stopping for refreshment at the City Hotel and boarding "an elegant barge" at Irwin's wharf.<sup>40</sup>

**1827** On February 2, an unusually long and eloquent obituary appears in the Alexandria Gazette, of which this is only a snippet:

*On the 28<sup>th</sup> ult. departed this life Mr. Thomas Irwin, in the 65<sup>th</sup> Year of his age; a native of Ireland, and one of the oldest and most intelligent merchants of this place.... By his uniform frugality he had guaranteed his perfect independence in conduct, thought and word, and what he willed he would do, he would, regardless of all those small considerations which influence heads less strong and hearts less pure....*

## The New Generation

For the next several years, James Irwin is the most visible of the six Irwin children. He serves on the birthnight ball committee at the City Hotel. He is a director of the Marine Insurance Co. of Alexandria and a grand Master of the Alexandria Masonic Lodge. In 1838-39 he is elected to the City Council.

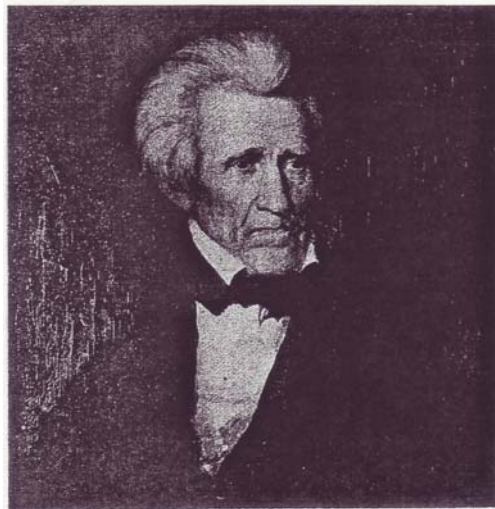
He trades with the West Indies and South America. His ads in the *Gazette* tout cheeses and chocolate, cigars and champagne, as well as more commonplace goods. The schooner *Mapsco* for Norfolk leaves from Irwin's wharf, as does the Baltimore packet line, on Sundays and Thursdays.<sup>41</sup>

**1833** James Irwin has a brief run-in with notoriety.

On President Andrew Jackson's orders, Navy Lieutenant Robert Beverley Randolph, member of an old Virginia family, is fired as purser on the *Constitution* because of irregularities in the ship's finances. Virginians are indignant. "Would Sultan Mahmoud have acted more despotically?" demands the *Richmond Whig*.<sup>42</sup>

But empathy goes only so far. On May 6, President Jackson stops in Alexandria on his way to a memorial for Washington's mother in Fredericksburg. The president is on board the steamer *Sydney*, when an enraged Randolph boards and accosts the president, by some accounts twisting his nose.

It appears that the *Sydney* is docked at Irwin's wharf because, according to a history of Alexandria's Masonic Lodge, it is James Irwin who, with a U.S. marshal, hustles Randolph from the boat where others were falling "upon him with umbrellas, sticks &c..."<sup>43</sup>



**President Andrew Jackson**

(Portrait by Ashel B. Durand, 1835, New York Historical Society)

The President as he would have looked the day he stopped in Alexandria

### *Who Owns the Strand?*

**1835** Irwin's six children divide their father's property. There are now five – not three – warehouses. The family has erected a second addition on the east side, leaving a ten- foot open

space between the eastern warehouses.<sup>44</sup> The warehouses and wharf at King and South Union and the Strand are valued at \$30,000.

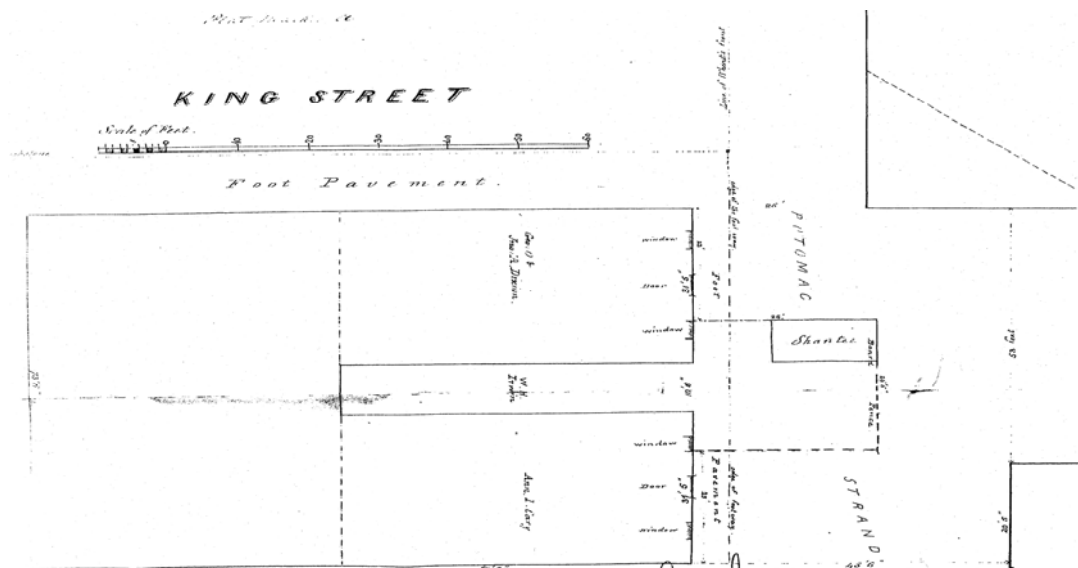
**1844** But there are disputes among the heirs and their mother, Elizabeth. James declares bankruptcy and his share in the northeast addition is sold to George O. and John A. Dixon. The name that will be most closely associated with the warehouse and wharf for the next forty years is that of James' brother William.

When a lower court orders William Irwin to remove a 10-foot fence he has built, cutting off part of the new owners' property from the wharf and darkening their interior, he takes them to the U.S. Supreme Court.

**1850** The case hinges on whether Irwin's part of the Strand is public or private property. The high court rules that "no length of time can deprive an owner of his title, nor give to the community a right to enjoin or abate the owner's fences over it as a nuisance."<sup>45</sup>

Details from *Irwin v. Dixon* provide a good picture of the Strand and Thomas Irwin, Sr.

*Horses standing there with drays and carts stamped the ground into holes; and in fly-time created great annoyance. He (Thomas, Sr.) would take a whip and go and drive off some half dozen of the carts and drays and, if the drivers grumbled at it, he would tell them to go and stand on the corporation grounds, for which they paid taxes.*<sup>46</sup>



Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections

**Note the fence enclosing one of Dixon's windows and a "shantee" on this plat used in the 1850 U.S. Supreme Court Case, *Irwin v. Dixon*.**

**1846** After 55 years as a “stepchild” of the District of Columbia, Alexandria is officially returned to Virginia. In less than a decade and a half, the population grows from 8,795 before retrocession to 15,000.<sup>47</sup>

**1850** Opening of the Potomac Canal’s last link to the Cumberland Gap brings barge loads of coal from Appalachian mines to the Alexandria wharves.

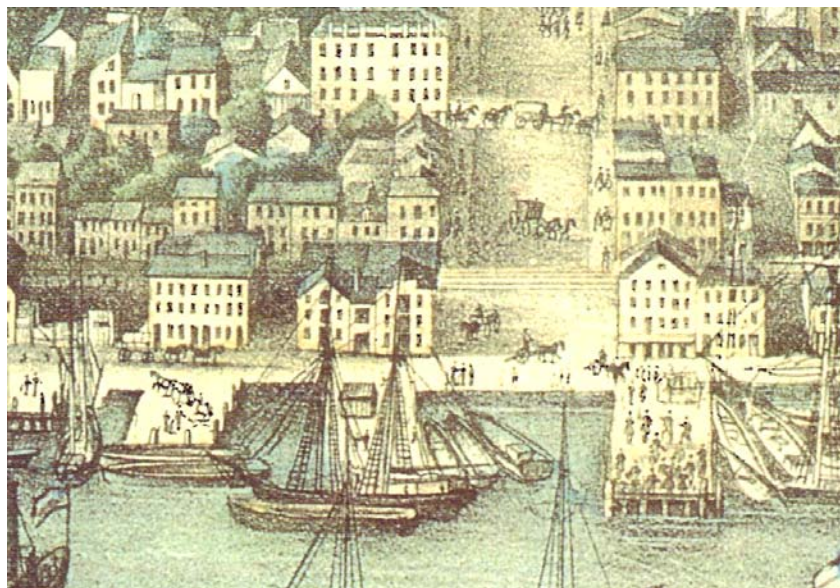
**1851** The steam railroad, the Orange and Alexandria, lays tracks along Union Street to its Wilkes Street tunnel, completing its route through the city. The first carload of flour passes the Irwin warehouses on November 23. William Irwin is a staunch supporter of the railroads.<sup>48</sup>

This is the decade that brings water and gas to the city. By August, nearly 18,000 feet of gas pipes have been laid and the first 20 of 40 planned iron posts for streetlights installed.

Excavation for the Water Works near Shuter’s Hill is under way and King Street will soon be excavated for eight-inch pipe.<sup>49</sup>

**1854** About midnight on June 4, fire starts in warehouses along South Union and the Strand, just south of Irwins’. The fire, believed to be arson, is contained before it can breach Fitzgerald’s Alley, but it must have been a long night for the Irwins.

William Irwin encloses the open space between the two additions.



**In this detail from Charles Magnus’ *Bird’s Eye View of Alexandria* (1863), the Irwins’ warehouses and wharf are at center.**



### *The Wharf in Wartime*

In **1860**, Alexandria's population exceeds 12,000 and there are almost 100 mercantile firms.<sup>50</sup> The tax books value Irwin's wharf at \$11,000, Dixon's wing at \$6,000 and William's sister's at \$3,500.<sup>51</sup> William Irwin also owns the old Fitzgerald brewery at the corner of Wolfe and Union streets.

**1861** With war clouds gathering, William and his wife, Ann, move their family to a farm in Fairfax. He becomes a quartermaster in the Confederate Army, first in Culpeper and later in Charlottesville.

According to the *Gazette*,

*the second week of April 1861 the old seaport braced itself for a deluge of rain whipped by gusty winds. Not since 1847 had the Potomac risen so high. It gushed through the intersection of King and Union streets at a depth of three feet, sweeping away lumber and debris in its path.*<sup>52</sup>

Soon far more will be swept away.

On May 23, residents vote for secession. Before dawn on the 24th, three companies of federal forces invade the city. The Marshall House hotel on King Street is the scene of the Civil War's first fatalities. Here 24-year-old Union officer Elmer Ellsworth is killed taking down a Confederate flag. His assailant, the hotel's manager, James Jackson, is in turn shot.

More forces arrive on the steamers *Baltimore*, *Mt. Vernon*, and *James Guy*. They seize all shipping in port and capture the Fairfax Cavalry, herding them under gun aboard the *Baltimore* for transport to Washington prisons.

By now, most merchants who have not already packed up their personal property (or buried it) have closed up shop and fled, leaving Secessionist flags flying in defiance. Those who remain must sign a loyalty oath.

Although Irwin's wharf and warehouses do not appear on a list of confiscated properties, certainly anything left behind is lost to the Union.

By the fall of **1861**, gloom envelops the city, best expressed by The Local News:

*But very few warehouses on the wharves are open or occupied, and Union street, next to King, the principal business street of the city, is now, except as a burthen train passes, as quiet as on Sundays....*

*All is quiet down the Potomac. There is no indication of life about the Confederate batteries. There are scarcely any vessels in the docks, and Union street...from Cameron street down, [is] as quiet as Gibbon or Pendleton, and as little business transacted....*

*The Old Custom House [across S. Union from Irwin's warehouse] has been converted into a bakery.... The government has ceased to grant passes to go South.*<sup>53</sup>

**1862** Within months, the picture changes. All is bustle and noise. Barricades are built to keep the unauthorized from the waterfront, where Army steamers, transports, tugs, and freight boats crowd the wharves. When General Slough arrives as military governor in August 1862, he finds a city in chaos, drunken soldiers, urchins hawking their papers through filthy streets, the few remaining residents who are not catering to the soldiers not even disguising their disgust.

**1865** A military map shows the southwest warehouse as a Union storehouse and the ferry to Washington operating from Irwin's wharf.<sup>54</sup>

In April, William Irwin's wife, Ann, dies of consumption in Charlottesville. Her obituary appears the same day the papers are reporting the interment of President Lincoln.

With the war over, Irwin returns to Alexandria. Among postwar products passing over his wharf are groceries, cotton, and rum, as well as the following exotica recalled by *The Washington Star*:

*The establishment of Masters & Cox and then of Masters & Son was for many years the leading West India house here. The firm carried on business near the foot of King street at Irwin's wharf, and the arrivals or departures of their vessel the brig Favorite brought West India fruits and sometimes a monkey or two, and carried back live horses and cows, and the getting the animals on board was a sight to the town lads and the occasion of many truancies from school.*<sup>55</sup>

### ***The Restaurateurs and the Ragman***

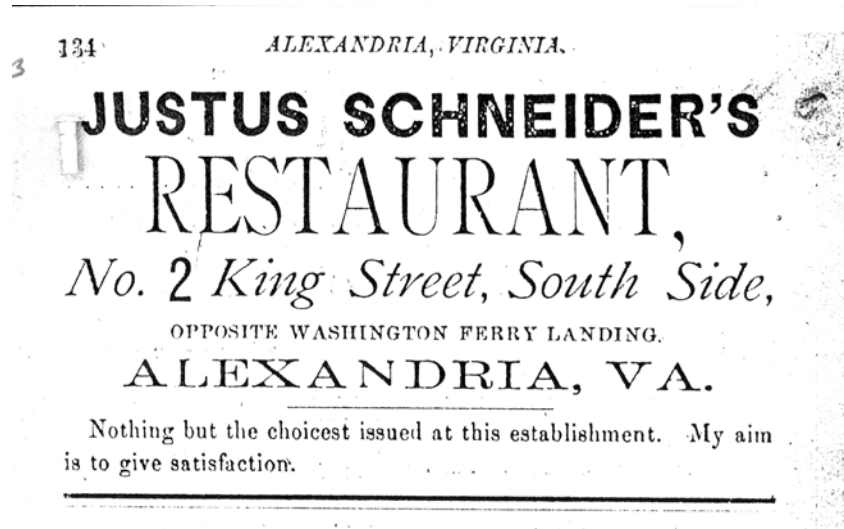
Justus Schneider is the first in a line of restaurateurs to see the potential in the King and Union Street corner with its proximity to the Washington steamer docks. A German emigrant, he arrives in Alexandria in 1862 and is operating a restaurant at 2 King Street as early as 1867.<sup>56</sup>

A vivid picture of the King Street Wharf on a summer Sunday is given in the August 24, 1868, *Alexandria Gazette*:

*The wharf at the foot of King street presented a lively and novel appearance yesterday evening. There was a Bethel Prayer meeting which was well attended, but the services were interrupted by the arrival and departure of steamers and the shrill noise of the steam whistles. A 'comico-politico' address which attracted a considerable crowd, an arrival of a Philadelphia fishing party, the departure of a party for the prize fight, and a continued stream of both sexes and colors coming from and returning to Washington....*

In 1879, Schneider is elected general manager of the Marine Railway and Shipbuilding Company here. He founds both the German Cooperative and Perpetual Building Assn., and in 1911 he is a partner in the real estate business, Slaymaker-Schneider Corp.

He and his wife are active in the social life of the city, own a “handsome residence” at 424 N. Washington St. and travel frequently to Europe, where in 1914 they are on one of the last crossings of the *Lusitania*.<sup>57</sup>



Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections  
Adv Advertisement from the 1883 Alexandria City Directory

The **1877** Hopkins City Atlas shows William Irwin in the original warehouse building and J. Schneider on King and The Strand.<sup>58</sup>

The **1883** Directory of Reliable Business Houses recommends Schneider's establishment:

*This gentleman at his first-class Restaurant, No. 2 King street, south side, near the Washington Ferry landing, serves nothing but the choicest viands and liquors at his house. The traveling public, and others, would do well to give him a call.*<sup>59</sup>

**1881** In April, William Irwin dies at his home on Prince Street and is buried at Christ Church cemetery. His obituary in the *Gazette*, headed simply “Death of an Old Citizen,” recognizes his success as a merchant dealing with the West Indies and South America.<sup>60</sup>

Meanwhile, Julius Dreifus arrives in Alexandria from Wurtenburg, Germany, with his father, Abraham. They settle into a house on South Payne, where the family will live for 70 years. The 1870 *Boyd's Directory of Washington and Georgetown* together with a *Business Directory of Alexandria* lists Abraham, junk dealer, on Union Street.

In 1881, Julius Dreifus is listed on the Strand, south of King, where a grocer/ship Chandler and agent for the Potomac Tow Co., N. Bousch, had been renting from William Irwin.

# J. DREIFUS & CO.,

—DEALERS IN—

Hides, Metal, Rags, Iron, Bones, Sheepskins, Wool,  
TALLOW, BEESWAX, ETC.,

P. O. Box 53.

Nos. 3 and 4 South Wharves.

*Alexandria, Va., Aug 9 1881*

*Alexandria Library -- Local History/Special Collections, "Business" Mss.*

**As this letterhead attests, the junk dealer's business has moved into the center and south additions. The beeswax comes from Dreifus' own hives.**

In just a few years, J. Dreifus & Co. will also acquire the southernmost of Irwin's original warehouses, as well as property across Fitzgerald's Alley.

The firm harvests the machinery and rigging from abandoned steamers,<sup>61</sup> and hides and bones from animal carcasses. One of their employees is known about town as the "horse undertaker." When the latter dies, his address is listed as "Dreifus Court."<sup>62</sup> Dreifus must be providing living accommodations for his workers.

ESTABLISHED 1859.

## J. DREIFUS & CO.,

P. O. BOX No. 53. **Junk and Hides,** TELEPHONE 72.

*Nos. 3 and 4 South Wharves and No. 6 Union Street,*

**ALEXANDRIA, VA.**

Highest Cash Price paid for Iron, Rags, Rope, Metals, Bones, Furs, Hides, Sheepskins, Wool, Tallow, Beeswax, etc. Woolen Rags a specialty. Prompt returns made on consignments. Send for Price List. Bought, sold and exchanged, Anchors, Chains, Blocks, Rope, Canvas, Smiths' and Carpenters' Tools, old Machinery, Government Goods, etc. Give us a call and you will find articles too numerous to mention.

**SPECIAL ATTENTION IS CALLED TO VIRGINIA RELICS.**

Andirons, Fenders, Clocks, Furniture constantly on hand.

*Alexandria City Directory 1883, Alexandria Library -- Local History*

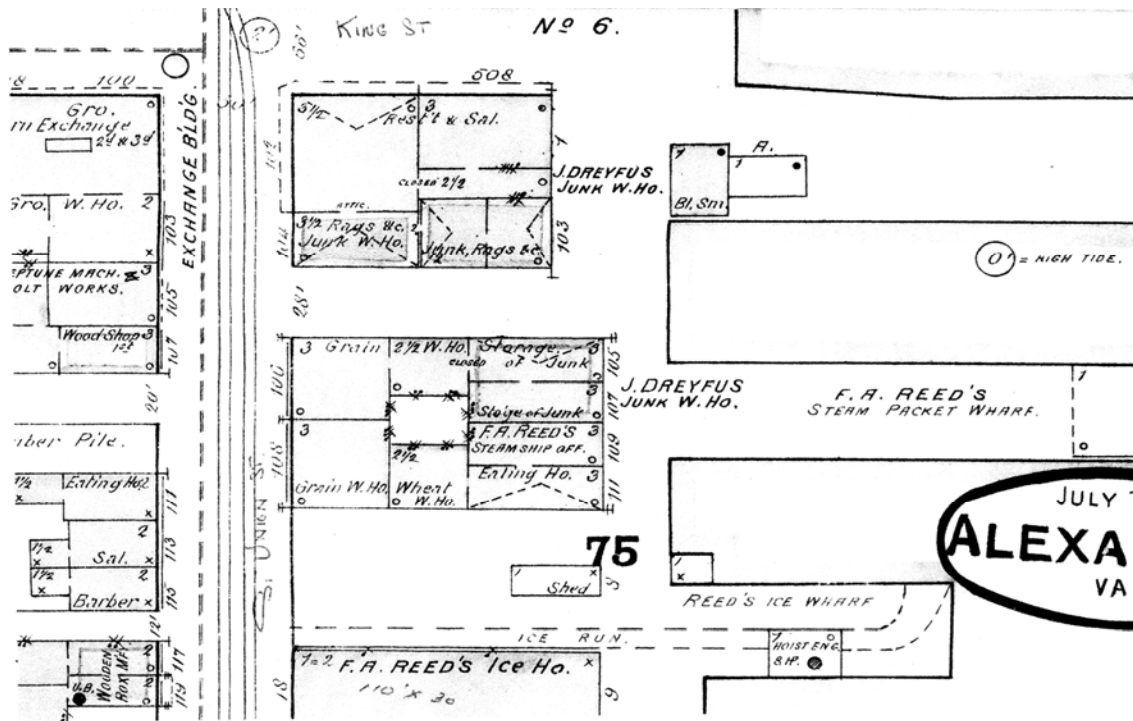


*John W. Herndon Collection, Alexandria Library – Local History, VF Union Street.- 5*  
**Some of Dreifus' goods are piled along the walls of the Irwin additions waiting to be loaded onto the hoist or into the horse-driven cart in this ca. 1890 photo of the Strand-side buildings.**

In **1890**, Julius' wife, Rosa, buys an additional warehouse at the northwest corner of Prince and Union Streets (in 2008, the Christmas Attic) and adjoining lot for \$750.<sup>63</sup> While Justus Schneider is running his restaurant in the warehouse, Jacob Brill, a native of Alexandria, is learning the trade at his brother Louis' restaurant in the Opera House on S. Pitt Street.

**1890** In July, Brill moves into "the Schneider barroom and restaurant on the southwest corner of King Street and the river strand."<sup>64</sup>





Sanborn Insurance Map, July 1891, Alexandria Library – Local History, Maps Collection

**J. Dreifus & Co is shown along the Strand. A restaurant plus saloon is on King Street. A blacksmith occupies the old shanty on the pier.**

**1893** The waterfront invites more than mariners, merchants, and diners.

*Agent Padgett of the ferry company and Jacob Brill, keeper of the restaurant at the ferry wharf, testified against a street exhorter who has been before the corporation and police courts several times for using abusive language in his wild harangues on street corners. Both said he used foul language toward passengers on the ferryboats and cars.<sup>65</sup>*

The miscreant insults the mayor and declares his intention to continue preaching but is fined and released.



*Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections*

**In this circa 1900 photo of the foot of King Street, one can just make out the signs:  
 “Brill” on the north wall of the addition and “Oysters” at the corner.  
 The ferry terminal and slip are at center. The tracks of the Washington,  
 Alexandria and Mt. Vernon electric railway are visible on King Street.**

From 1893 to 1924, there is a Brill’s restaurant at the foot of King Street, variously listed as a saloon, “oysters and fish,” or, in 1924, as a lunchroom. Some of the name changes are doubtless due to Prohibition, in force in the 1920s.

Sometimes it takes more than a sign or two to attract customers:

A curiosity in the shape of a petrified ham is on exhibition at the restaurant of Mr. Jacob Brill. The ham was found in the ground near Staunton and will be sent to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

**This item is from the *Alexandria Gazette* for April 1, 1894.  
*The Washington Post* picks up the story within days.**

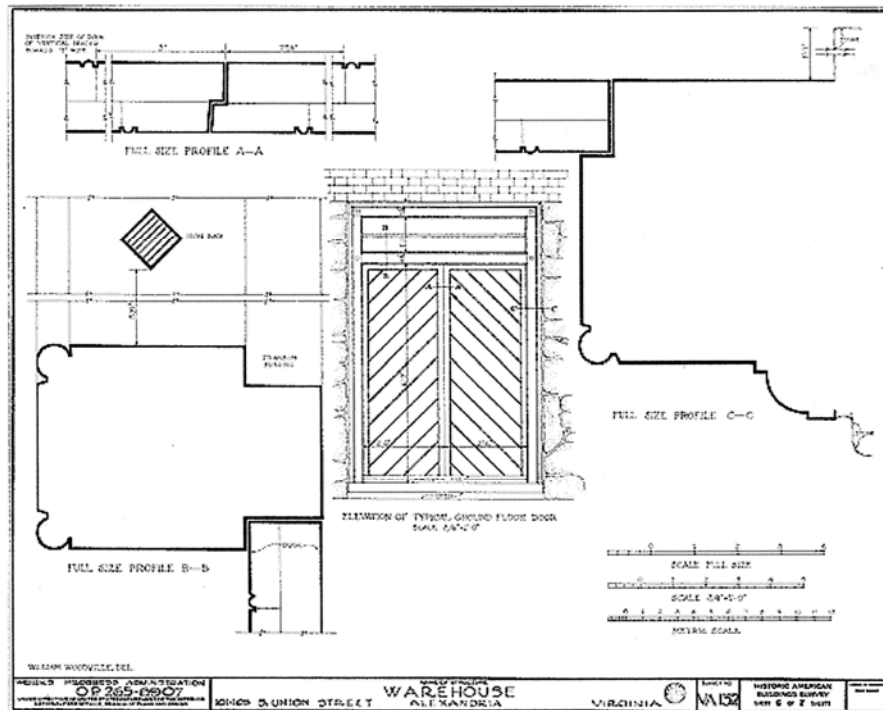
**1896** “Mr. Arthur Dixon and others sell to Jacob Brill the property occupied by him on the corner of King and the Strand for \$4,250.”<sup>66</sup>

**1902** In December, the City Council permits Brill to install incandescent lights in the restaurant “with the understanding that the proper precautions shall be taken.”<sup>67</sup>

In **1910**, Brill is a past exalted ruler of the Elks when the order’s \$30,000 home on Prince Street, with its life-size figure of an elk on the façade, is dedicated. He is also a founder of the fraternal order of the Eagles’ Alva Aerie and a member of the Businessmen’s League. He serves as a city Alderman. The family lives at 206 Duke Street.

This is a time of musicales and euchre parties for women and fraternal meetings for men. The Brills shine at both, he as a speaker, she as a soprano.

In the fall, Julius Dreifus, 70, is “stricken while sitting on the stoop in front of his residence.” *The Washington Post* reports that Dreifus was “probably the largest dealer in junk in northern Virginia.”<sup>68</sup> The paper reports that “the funeral is one of the largest ever seen in Alexandria.”<sup>69</sup> Jacob Brill is among the pallbearers.



*“Patterson-Fitzgerald Warehouse,”  
Library of Congress American Memory – Historic American Buildings Survey*

**A detail drawing of a warehouse door from the HABS portfolio.**



### *The Downside*

In the early 1900s the city's economy has turned from shipping to industry and business goes steadily westward, leaving the docks to rot and the buildings to become slums. Roadways and rails steal the ferries' passengers. And no longer do lines of wagons crowd lower King Street.

The waterfront suffers from flooding and crime.



**This Jan. 4, 1914 *Washington Post* headline is, unfortunately, not unusual.**

*The Post* reports that a “small hurricane” has caused thousands of dollars’ worth of damage.

*Veteran rivermen estimated that it was blowing at the rate of 80 miles an hour. By 1 o’clock the water was over the wharves and the strand and had encroached to the tracks of the Southern Railway, on Union street, a block away. Alderman Jacob Brill’s saloon is located at King Street and the strand. When the water reached its height, Mr. Brill had the choice of leaving or donning rubber boots. He chose the latter course; and stood by his place and the few customers who ventured inside were either likewise shod or got their feet wet.*

**1915** One year later, *The Post* suggests that Brill’s patrons use “rubber boots or rowboats.” In August, the paper reports that

*At one time the water was more than one foot deep in Jacob Brill’s saloon....several hundred watermelons washed off Roberts’ wharf and 100 railroad ties were adrift from the wharf at the shipyard.<sup>70</sup>*

And crime breeds near the docks:

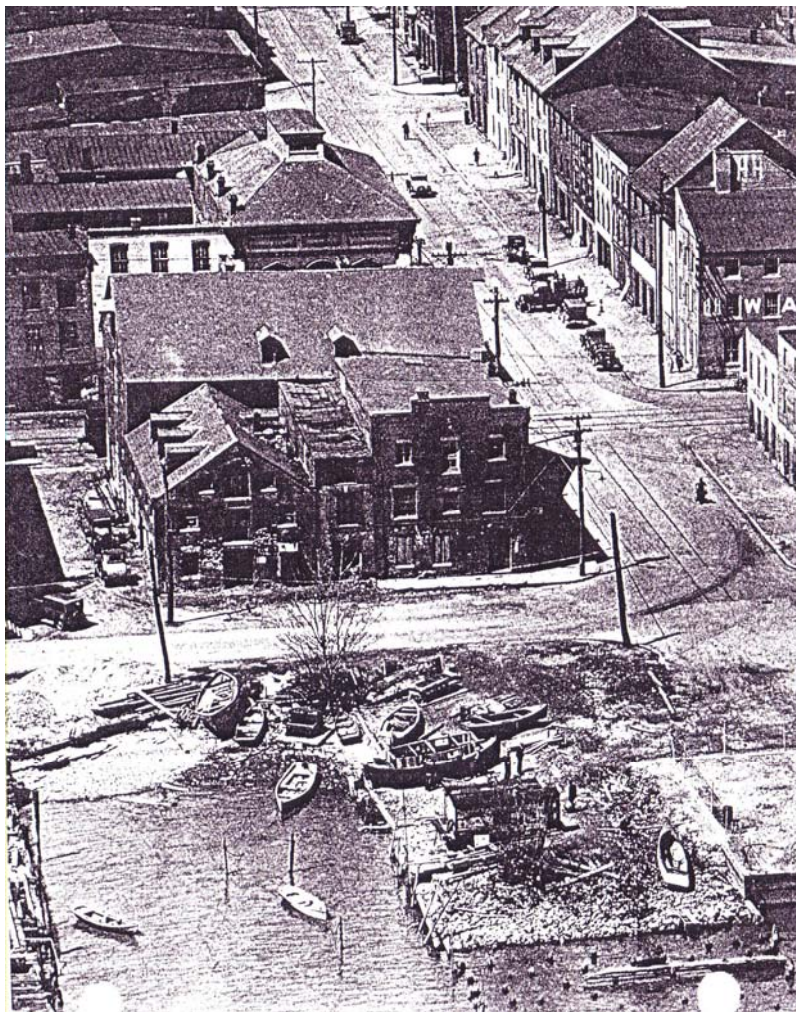
*Jacob Brill’s cafe at King Street and the Strand was broken into early Sunday morning and robbed of 18 quarts of whisky and a quantity of cigars and cigarettes. The robber gained access by smashing the glass in a front window. This is the third time within a year that Brill’s place has been entered and robbed.<sup>71</sup>*



**1921** Jacob Brill has moved to Washington but still oversees his lunchroom and soft-drink establishment at the foot of King Street. On June 24, he dies. His funeral is held at St. Mary's Church. The restaurant, under management of a Mr. Hill and then a Mr. Steiner, continues through 1930.

**1922** Late on the night of March 20, the ferry terminal across from the warehouse is discovered in flames. The building has recently been bought by the Old Dominion Boat Club and, coincidentally, their clubhouse is also torched. They will rebuild here and acquire Fitzgerald's old pier as a parking area.

**1924** Schneider dies at 88 in 1924 and for a time a playground just east of the railroad on upper King Street sustains his memory, the Justus Schneider Playground.



*Gallagher Collection Box 2 Folder 10 #39, Alexandria Library – Local History*  
**The wharf and the center part added by William Irwin in the 1850s appear to be crumbling in this 1931 photo.**

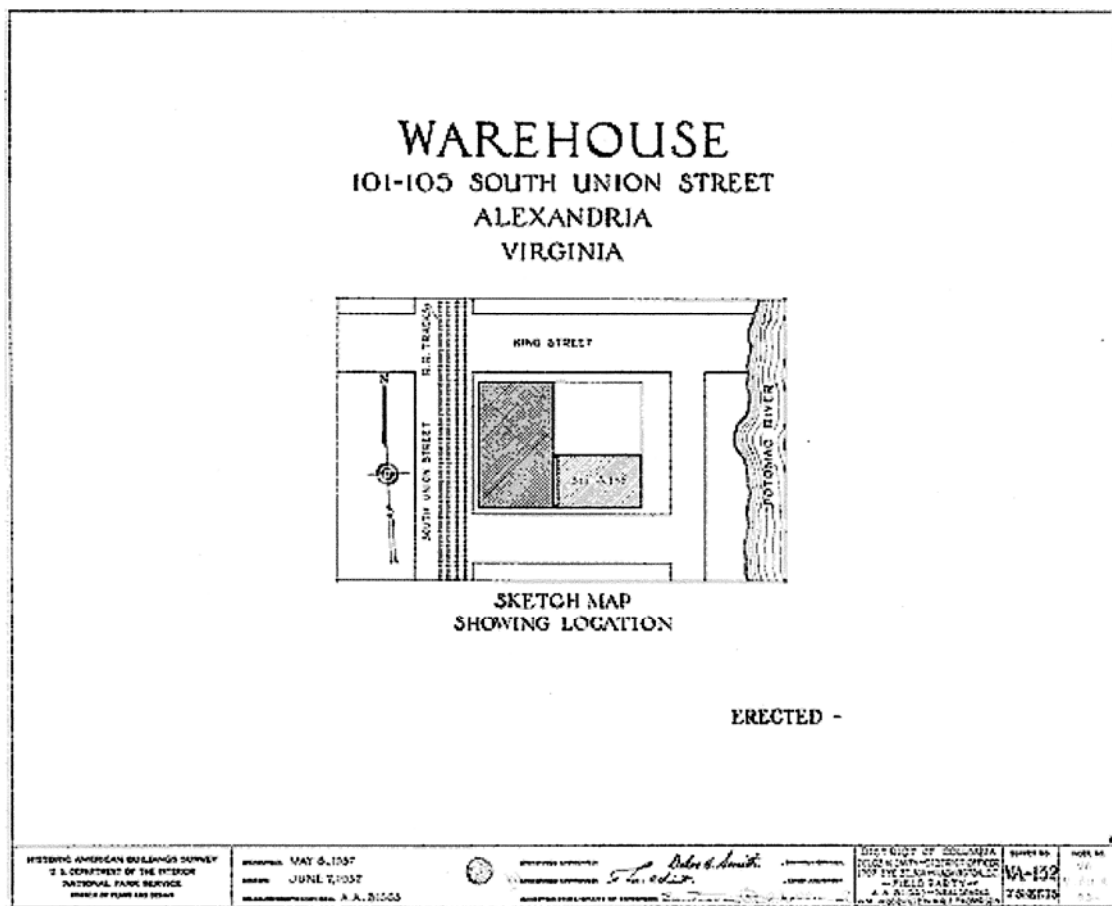


### *Bill's Old Anchor*

In **1931**, this square of buildings (listed as 101, 101 ½ and 103 The Strand and 100, 102 and 104 Union Street) stands vacant.

**1933** William E. Ketland is hired as a builder for 6 King Street.

When the HABS team makes its 1937 visit to the warehouse, they draft the following map of the location, indicating that the northeast addition and William Irwin's center structure have been removed, probably by Ketland. The southeast wing is gone by 1943.<sup>72</sup>



*“Patterson-Fitzgerald Warehouse” Library of Congress – American Memory  
Historic American Buildings Survey. (The architects get the street numbers wrong.)*

Ketland, a fisherman by trade, opens a seafood restaurant, “Bill’s Old Anchor,” at the corner of King and S. Union.



**These photographs of the interior were taken for the 1937 Historic American Buildings Survey. Note the fireplace in the loft. This would probably serve as the heating system on every floor.**



**This appears to be a shot of the third floor northeast corner.**



*Photo by Virgil Davis from Seaport Saga by William Smith and T. Michael Miller*

**The east wing is gone in this photo from the 1940s. “Bill’s Old Anchor” is on the corner. Some windowpanes appear to be missing, and a large sign for Roberts’ Feed Store across the alley is posted between the second and third floors.**

**1949** But Bill Ketland prefers catching fish to serving fish and decides to sell the building. Preliminary to closing, he is removing a fourth floor window when his workmen make a surprising discovery under the eave, “a dusty paper-wrapped package.” It contains, among other documents, numerous “faded, torn letters to Col. John Fitzgerald” and a “badly blurred account ledger.”



*The Washington Post*, Oct. 19, 1949, page B1  
**William Ketland examines his 18<sup>th</sup> Century papers.**

# Lawrence Dickers For Old Building

## W. E. Ketland's Structure May Change Hands

See Picture on Page 2

By HILDEGARDE HERFURTH

The sturdy old Colonial brick at the foot of King Street occupied by W. E. Ketland, seafood establishment, where workmen uncovered a virtual treasure chest of historical documents last week, is being sold to a Washington attorney.

Negotiations are underway to sell the structure at 6 King Street to Joseph Lawrence, Federal criminal tax lawyer, whose country place "Merriwood" is on Fort Hunt Road.

The solid four story brick stands a monument to colonial craftsmen and gives proof of standing another two centuries.

Miss Mary A. Carne, daughter of the late William F. Carne, who served as historian of Alexandria up to the time of his death in 1909, shed some light on the history of the building. A article written and published by her father in 1890 showed the land was first purchased by Colonel John Fitzgerald, a merchant and soldier of the Revolution in 1777. Shortly thereafter and before 1780 he built the present structure. Prior to this time the land was part of the river front lots of Lawrence Wash-

ington, brother of General Washington. At one time the land was also owned by William Ramsey, one of the original founders of Alexandria. Its ownership between the years following up to the time the Ketlands purchased it in 1933 is unknown.

Architecture of the building is the earliest English-Colonial style which dates back to the period between 1750 and 1790. It is constructed of Belgian and Flemish bond brick, believed to have been brought over on English ships as ballast. A seven foot stone foundation 28 inches thick underlays the brick. Some of the solid brick walls are also 28 inches thick. The timbers, all hand hewn solid Georgia Pine, measure 14 by 18 inches. The building has double flooring throughout.

One unique feature of the structure is the complete absence of nails in its original form. All of the windows, roof and timbers are held in by thick wooden pegs. They are clearly visible throughout the building. Brick and stone fireplaces adorn each room. Upstairs the tremendous chimney measures 15 feet across as it enters the roof.

The new owner says he will resell the building. The corner structure will be a steak, seafood and spaghetti house with a banquet hall on the second floor. The adjoining building will be operated as a antique shop.

Ketland, who has been a fisherman in Virginia rivers for 50 years, says he is returning to the water. He purchased a five acre oyster bed and small farm at Kilmarnock, Va. on the Chesapeake Bay and will go back to fishing and crabbing.

His son quotes him saying "I've been on shore so long my feet have started cracking open—so I'm going back to the water."

### *The Seaport Inn*

The next owners are Mr. and Mrs. Albert D. Schmutzer, who own the Old Heidelberg Buffet in Washington. In **1951**, they open the Seaport Inn at 6 King Street. It is to be “family-oriented in what had been an oyster joint” and the Schmutzers are “credited with helping reverse the long decline of the city’s waterfront into which respectable folks seldom ventured.”<sup>74</sup>



*Postcard by Jack Turner, D. Riker collection*

**The Seaport Inn is a popular venue for almost 50 years.**

In **1959**, the building contains The Fairfax Shop Antiques as well as the restaurant.

**1962** Paul H. Bynum, retired air force colonel and manager of the Seaport Inn, applies for a permit to build an addition on the east side of the warehouse to serve the restaurant and, in 1978, a new kitchen.



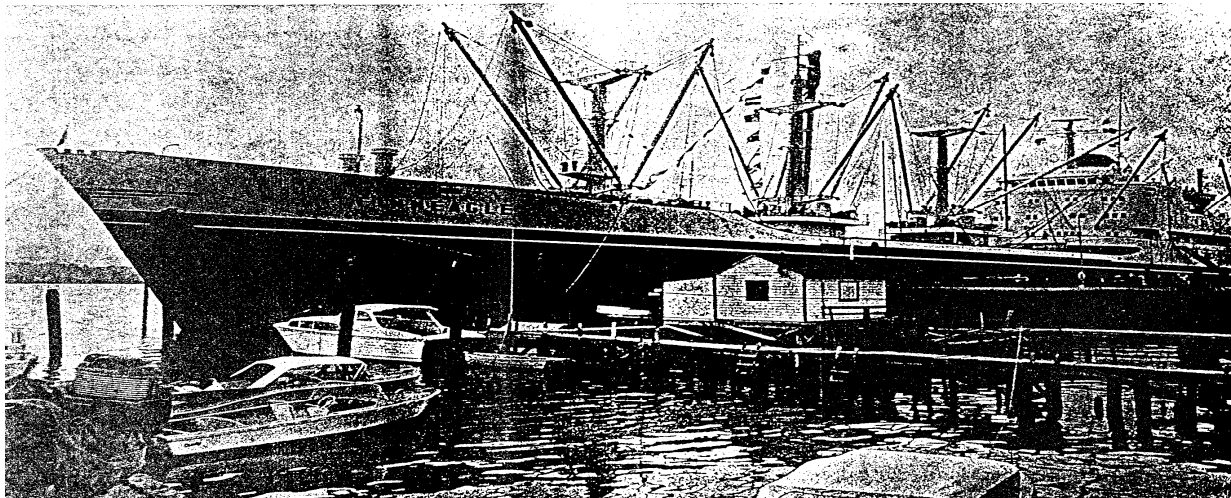
<http://pages.alexandriacity.com/TheSeaportInn.htm>



## Dockside Sales

Dockside Sales Inc., retail importers, moves into the south end of the warehouse.

*Four young men opened Dockside Sales for business in November 1961. Their guiding principle is a simple system of merchandising which is a lot closer to John Fitzgerald's 18th century operation than it is to most contemporary enterprises...About 50 percent of Dockside's shipments arrive at the wharf 200 yards from the...warehouse. A large blackboard over the sales desk announces the date of arrival of a cargo from Scandinavia and the Orient...It is pleasantly intimate to know that your folding chair just arrived on the Shighara Maru from Japan....<sup>75</sup>*



*The Washington Star, July 22, 1962*

**Just a few steps from the salesroom a Finnish ship brings cargo from Europe.**



Huge freighters pull into the docks and, for a time, the commerce and commotion of a seaport return to the waterfront, but in 1979, Dockside closes.

### *And Now*

Periodically, the waterfront captures the city's attention and plans are drafted to "revitalize" it. In **1965**, for example, proposals call for developing an inn and conference hall to seat 100-200 at Fitzgerald's old warehouse, and a marine museum on two vessels at the dock.<sup>76</sup>

**1980** Bloomvale Inc., a Los Angeles investment company, purchases 104 South Union and plans a \$1 million renovation, with construction of a three-story brick addition to the rear of the building "where there is currently a parking lot."

"We wanted to build the project then," Bloomvale's spokesman recalls in 1986, "but the Torpedo Factory was under construction and the city needed the parking lot so they put a three-year moratorium on construction."<sup>77</sup> Eventually the firm drops its plans.

**1991** The entire roof of the warehouse is removed and reconstructed.

**1996** In January, the river reaches its highest flood level in a quarter-century, sending water into the Seaport Inn and over the tops of its tables.<sup>78</sup> Later in the year, two tropical storms invade lower King Street businesses, and Bynum, encouraged by Senator John Warner, calls for a seawall.<sup>79</sup>

**2000** The Seaport Inn closes, leaving the old warehouse and its new wing empty.

**2001** Albert Schmutzer, 87, founder of the Seaport Inn, dies.

**1996 - 2001** Keith Powell, owner of Potomac Marine Co. and of 104 S. Union, where the Virginia Company occupies the first level and his company the space above, proposes a three-and-a-half story addition on the Alley.

He will connect the new and the old with a glass "hyphen," allowing a view of the east wall of the original warehouse. The permit is eventually approved.

During the hearings, the board notes the architectural influence Fitzgerald's Warehouse has had on city development.

*The character of the building at 100-104 S. Union is so identified with the historic Alexandria waterfront that it has been replicated several times, most recently for the waterfront townhouse units at Ford's Landing.<sup>80</sup>*

**2003** Meanwhile, abandoned properties on lower King Street have become an eyesore and Mayor William D. Euille in January threatens to seize them by Eminent Domain.<sup>81</sup>

**2004** Under the headline "Vacant Waterfront Buildings in Old Town May Get New Life," the Washington Business Journal in March reports that

*The empty buildings within view of the city's waterfront, at the corner of King and Union streets – which once housed the Seaport Inn...are in various stages of redevelopment. The only corner building occupied at the intersection is the Torpedo Factory art center.... Starbucks will move into a portion of the building at 6 King Street;... The 10,000 sq. ft. two-story building which is being developed by Starwood Urban is looking to fill the rest of the space with a restaurant and office....*<sup>82</sup>

**2006** Fitzgerald/Irwin's old pier is now 2 King Street, owned by Old Dominion Boat Club and used as parking for its members. In 2006, the city has put its value at \$2,588,800.

6 King Street, now the Mai Thai Restaurant, and 100 S. Union, now Starbucks, are owned by Grosvenor Urban Retail of Washington, D.C., and assessed at \$4,200,000.

The space at 104 is owned by Union Waterside c/o Grosvenor, occupied by the Virginia Shop and offices, and assessed at \$1,147,000.

1 Wales Alley is owned by Union Waterside c/o Grosvenor, occupied by the pet shop Barkley Square, and by offices, and valued at \$1,261,400.<sup>83</sup>

Who in 1749 could have predicted that from this fraction of Fitzgerald's and Peer's "mudflats" would rise land and buildings worth more than nine million dollars?

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## *Endnotes*

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