



The Fireside Sentinel

The Alexandria Library, Lloyd House Newsletter

March 1988

Vol. 1, No. 3



North End Wharves and Warehouses

Before focusing on the history of Alexandria's numerous wharves, it is imperative that a distinction be made between the terms: wharf, pier and dock. Dr. John Hammond Moore, a local historian, has written in "A Historical Background of the Alexandria Waterfront" that:

local residents (1783-1820) viewed a wharf as a man-made, built up structure along the shore line, filled with earth and stone and perhaps parallel to the channel. A pier extended out from a wharf into the river and often was flanked by a basin or docking area (all water) sometimes called merely a 'dock' ...

WEST'S POINT WHARF -- (Point West) -- The County Wharf -- East end of Oronoco Street

The first wharf facility under review is the West's Point and County Wharf. As early as 1732 Hugh West had established a warehouse in the vicinity of Oronoco and Fairfax Streets. By 1740 one of the first ferries in the region plied the Potomac River from the Hunting Creek Warehouse to Frazier's Point on the opposite Maryland shore. On March 1, 1753, the Alexandria town trustees designated lots 9 and 10 for possible construction of warehouses. From West's Point thousands of hogsheads of tobacco were inspected and transshipped to London, Whitehaven, Glasgow and Liverpool. The quantity of tobacco on hand at the warehouse varied from 1757 to 1771:



| | | | |
|--------------|-----------|------------|--|
| Oct. 1757 -- | 3,709 lbs | present | |
| Nov. 1759 -- | 887 lbs | present | |
| Sept. 1760 - | 1,000 | hogsheads | inspected |
| Oct. 1760 - | 3,980 lbs | of tobacco | left |
| | | to cover | notes |
| Oct. 1761 -- | 5,005 lbs | of tobacco | left |
| Oct. 1762 -- | 3,870 lbs | " | " |
| Sept. 1763 - | 4,065 lbs | " | " |
| Sept. 1768 - | 224 lbs | " | " |
| Sept. 1770 - | 2,544 lbs | " | " |
| Sept. 1771 - | 1,117 | hogsheads | of tobacco |
| | | received-- | room for only 350 more - |
| | | | additional housing to be constructed |
| | | | for 400 more (Abstracts of Fairfax |
| | | | County Court Order Books, Sprouse, et. al) |



"Generally two planters of each county were chosen...as tobacco inspectors."

Generally two planters of each county were chosen by the local court to serve as tobacco inspectors. Their salaries varied from L25 to L60 per annum. They were charged with "examining all the tobacco brought in, receive such as good and merchantable, condemn and burn what appears damaged or insufficient." (Wm. & Mary Quarterly, Series I, Vol. 14, p. 90) A list of 18th century Fairfax inspectors who worked at the County warehouse included: John Minor, Richard Sanford, John Moss, Presley Cox, Thomas Harrison, Thomas Sanford, Benjamin Sebastian, John Rhodes, Daniel Talbott, Thomas Triplett (Abstracts of Fairfax County Records).

Thomas Fleming, a local shipbuilder, was granted permission by the town trustees in August 1764 to construct a warehouse "under the banks of Point Lumley (foot of Duke Street) as near the bank as convenient." In return he was ordered to make additions to the Public Wharf at West's Point:

The wharf work was to be completed and finished in a workmanlike manner. Twenty-six feet wide from the outer end to the length of the wharf on shore and to be supported by said Fleming in good repair during the space of seven years. (Alexandria Trustees Minute Book, 1749-1767, pp. 44, 45)



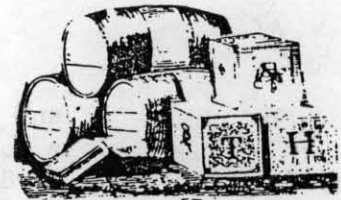
FLOUR-DEALER

Due to the large increase in flour and grain trade, new wharves were constructed.

As trade increased other facilities were constructed on West's Point. The trustees decided on December 30, 1769, that "from the large increase of the flour and grain trade there seems a necessity to make buildings under the bank." (David Flaherty, "Alexandria Waterfront Litigation" pp. 40, 41, 47) Built by Robert Adam this warehouse was finished February 7, 1770. Capital for the project had been furnished by private subscribers who earned 6% interest on their returns. Unfortunately the trading center at West's Point fell into a state of disrepair. City officials remonstrated with Fairfax County in 1771 concerning the "ruinous condition of the county wharf." The county in turn directed that town trustees ask permission of the Virginia Assembly to charge wharfage to such vessels "as were not taking off tobacco from said wharf." With the passage of a statute by the Assembly in February 1772 this goal was soon realized. The law averred:

And whereas it is represented by the said trustees that the wharf at Point West, in the said town, originally built by the public, was afterwards rebuilt by them, at a considerable expence, and that the same is now in a ruinous condition, occasioned chiefly by ships and other vessels heaving down and

mooring at the said wharf; and the said trustees have petitioned that such a wharfage may be imposed upon such vessels as will enable them to repair and extend the same: Be it therefore enacted, by the authority aforesaid, That from and after the passing of this act, the said wharf shall be, and the same is hereby vested in the said trustees, and their successors, forever, and that they, or the major part of them, shall, from time to time, have power to lay and assess such wharfage on all ships, and other vessels ... to be by them applied to and for the uses and purposes of repairing and extending the said wharf: Provided always, that the said wharfage shall not extend to any county craft, or vessel bringing tobacco to or taking it from the public warehouses in the said town, but that such craft shall, at all times, have free access to the said wharf, clear of any expence whatever, and moreover shall have the preference in loading and unloading at the same: Provided also, the public shall hereafter be exempted and discharged from any future expence or cost in rebuilding, repairing, or enlarging the said wharf... (Henings Statutes at Large, Vol. 8, p. 615).



In 1771, John Carlyle had a new storage facility built to store the large number of tobacco hogsheads.

As the result of the large concentration of tobacco hogsheads situated at the warehouse in September 1771 (1,117), John Carlyle presented a plan to the court to construct a new storage facility measuring 70' x 28'. Upon completion, Thomas Laurson of Messrs. Taylor & Thornton supplied the weights for the new warehouse in August 1772. (Abstracts of Fairfax County Records)

David Flagherly in his "Draft Memorandum on the Alexandria Waterfront" reports that there were two houses or structures on the County wharf in 1787. "One house had a stable, and another an excellent cellar for liquors." Capt. Richard Conway, merchant and mayor of Alexandria in 1783, also built a large mansion called Beverly which was located at the end of Oronoco Street on its north side. This lovely home burned on December 3, 1856. (See: January 1988 issue of the Fireside Sentinel)

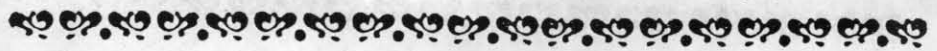


As the production of tobacco moved west and south, Northern Neck farmers began to cultivate large quantities of wheat and grain. By the mid-1790's Alexandria was the third largest exporter of wheat in the U.S. It was this wheat trade during the latter half of the 18th century which fueled Alexandria's economic prosperity. As the production of tobacco declined, the warehouses at West's Point were no longer needed and were replaced.

"By the mid-1790's, Alexandria was the third largest exporter of wheat in the United States"

ICE House

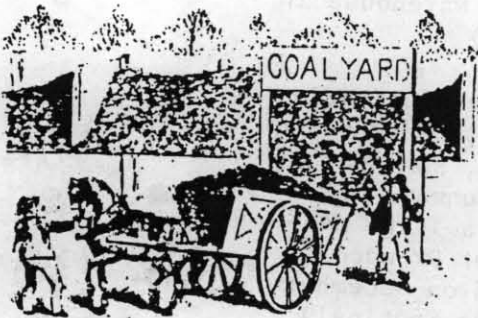
Other industries soon emerged on the waterfront. The 1877 Hopkins City Atlas of Alexandria reveals that an ice house straddled the north side of lower Oronoco Street below Union.



Coal
Co

and
e coal
nearly
ined."

In addition the American coal company occupied the block bounded by North Union, Oronoco, Pendleton and the Potomac River. With the opening of the canal to Alexandria in 1843, the town became a prospective market for the lucrative coal trade. By May 1856 there were, on the north side of the Alexandria canal (First Street), three coal companies (the Allegany, Frostburg, Borden) which received over 70,000 tons of coal in 1855. (Alex. Gaz., 5/26/1856, p.3) The Corporation of Alexandria, the owner of the wharf at West Point, agreed to lease it to the American Coal Company in December 1858. The terms of the contract specified that the company construct wharves and the "work to be done in the best and most substantial manner." (Alex. Gaz., 12/1/1858, p.3.) The American Coal Company conducted business at this location until the Alexandria canal closed in 1887. During this interval thousands of tons of coal were shipped by barge from Cumberland, Maryland. In June 1868, it was reported that Capt. Wm. J. Boothe, the superintendent of the American Coal Co., employed more than 100 laborers and a number of horses at the depot. (Alex. Gaz., 6/1/1868, p.3.) The hustle and bustle at the local coal wharves can hardly be imagined. It has been described thusly:

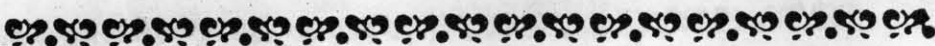


"...more hard work is done at the coal wharves in Alexandria, in one week, than in ten rural Court houses in a month."

...Idle men are out of place among the Black Diamonds of the coal wharves. Every man there, especially at this season of the year, earns his bread, literally "by the sweat of his brow". It is not too much to say that more hard work is done at the coal wharves of Alexandria, in one week, than in ten rural Court houses in a month.

Passing through a herd of mules and horses that gather near the outlet lock in any part which happens to be shaded from the sun, you reach the elevated platforms which have been built above the wharves, and may survey the busy scene around. At this one wharf six vessels are receiving their cargoes. The whirl of the "running tackle," and the noise of the coal as it is "dumped" into the hole of the vessel, mingles with the roar of waters, that--after an inland travel of many miles--tumbles over the outer lock-gate, and after a long separation rejoins the Potomac. Now and then, comes up the laughter, or the songs of the never tiring workmen or the crack of the whip that urges up the laziness of some horse that does not move fast enough for the busy trade.

Below, close to the wharf, lies a canal boat, while immediately outside the boat is moored a sea-going vessel. A tackle arranged either on the wharf, or in the riggin of the vessel, affords a



"purchase" for the heavy iron buckets which convey the coal from the boat to the vessel, whilst a horse, driven to and fro upon the wharf, gives the power which hoists and lowers the buckets. The coal heavers are divided into "gangs" of nine persons each: a driver, who attends to the horse, a "guysman" who adjusts the tackle and gives the order to hoist or lower, a "hooker-on," who hooks on the buckets when filled; two "dumpers" who empty the coal into the hole of the vessel, and four "fillers" who labor with shovels in filling the empty buckets. To each loading vessel there are two "gangs," one employed at each hatchway so that hundreds of tons of coal speedily change places, under these busy hands, from the boat to the vessel. From the moment the driver cracks his whip and starts his horse, till the load is transferred, there is no intermission of work. Occasionally, one of the workmen may stop to "wet his whistle" with a bit of potheen, that lies "convayniet" taking care to wipe the mouth of the bottle with his coal grimed shirt sleeve, before he, with genuine hospitality and a smack of his lips, hands it to his neighbor. This is repeated at every vessel, and there is sometimes forty loading at once.
(Alex. Gaz., 8/10/1860, p.3.)



"From the moment the driver cracks his whip and starts his horse...there is no intermission of work."

During the great flood of 1889, "the American coal wharf ... was considerably damaged, much of the earth being washed out which required a considerable outlay to repair."
(Alex. Gaz., 6/3/1889, p.3.)

Subsequently the Alexandria Fertilizer and Chemical Company built a sulphuric acid plant on the site circa 1893. The building was 100' x 280' and contained: sulphuric acid chambers, an office, laboratory, furnaces and other structures involved in the manufacture of acid. The main Chemical Company was formerly situated on the north side of Princess Street between Lee and Union. Established in 1892, it manufactured 2,000 tons of fertilizer that year. The September 16, 1893 Gazette states that:

*Fertilizer's
Chemical
plant*

The business of 1893 will reach 15,000 tons. Their plant has been running for the last six months night and day. The size of the main building is 300 feet long and 92 feet wide. They employ an average of 50 men per day, and have an average pay-roll of \$1,500 per month. Their product is shipped to New York State, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North and South Carolina and Georgia.

"Occasionally, one of the workmen may stop to "wet his whistle" with a bit of potheen..."

The first floor of their main building is 300' x 92', including a mixing room measuring 87' x 117'. The grinding room and bone room are each 50' x 100'.



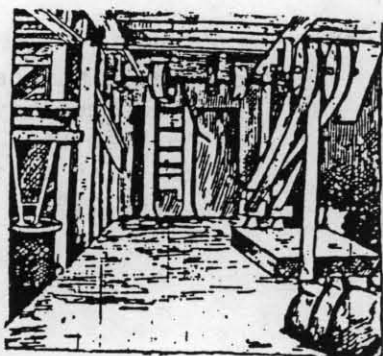
"They have a storage building adjacent to their factory proper with a capacity of 12,000 tons."

They receive their crude phosphate -- land phosphate from Florida and South Carolina, and it is from 60 to 70 per cent solubly pure.

They purchase their sulphur from the Isle of Sicily, and their pyrites from the Virginia mines. A large quantity of their materials are purchased from the slaughter houses of the West, including dried blood, tankage azotine and raw animal bone. Their potash comes from Germany and their nitrate of soda from Sicily. They get all the orders for the sale of their superior fertilizers direct from the jobbers. They have a storage building adjacent to their factory proper with a capacity of 12,000 tons. There is twenty feet of water at their wharves and can accommodate five vessels at a time with a tonnage of 1,500 tons each. They can ship 400 tons per day. Private side tracks run into the works adequate to accommodate 45 freight cars. Their factory is located within 100 feet of the R & D freight depot. The firm owns sulphur acid tank cars, and runs them directly into their works from the R & D tracks, and loads directly from the factory on the cars. They intend to build an acid chamber in the near future which will be located on the wharf north of the present plant. (Alex. Gaz., Sept. 16, 1883, p. 18)

A serious fire destroyed the Alexandria Fertilizer and Chemical Plant on October 18, 1896. It was rebuilt almost immediately, however, and remained in situ until the mid-1950's.

TAYLOR'S WHARF -- South of Oronoco Street



"A serious fire destroyed the Alexandria Fertilizer and Chemical Plant..."

To the south of the County warehouses Jesse Taylor, merchant, operated a wharf and ferry from the 1790's until his death in October 1800. Alexandria deedbook D (January 22, 1790) states that Taylor and his heirs could hold the lease on the wharf for 99 years provided that logs be laid on the south side of the lot and an alley must be left between the county wharf and his property. The vacancy between the two lots was to be "filled with earth or gravel." After Taylor's death, his wharf and ferry were offered for sale at the Coffee House on April 1, 1802:

A Valuable Lot of the following description:

Beginning at the distance of 140 feet east from Union street, and running thence east parallel to Oronoko street 100 feet to the river Potomac, thence

north parallel to Union street and binding on the river 100 feet, thence west parallel to Oronoko St. 100 feet, thence south with Union street to the beginning, with privilege of a 10 foot alley through the ground belonging to the heirs of Jesse Taylor, deceased.

This lot comprehends the whole front of the wharf commonly called Taylor's wharf; the depth of water is about 28 feet. It is situated at the upper end of the town of Alexandria and is one of the nearest wharves to the City of Washington and George Town. The navigation of Potomac being now completed renders it an advantageous situation for business-- the wharf is sound and substantial. A Ferry is established from the lot to the Maryland shore, which rents for L 20 per annum, and is daily increasing in value. ... Samuel Craig (Alex. Adv. & Commercial Intelligencer, Feb. 26, 1802, p. 4.)

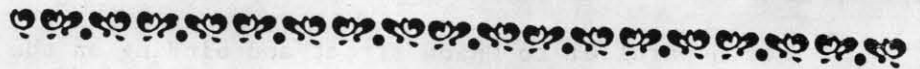
HUNTER AND ALLISON'S WHARF AND FERRY -- Lot No. 14 --
Northeast corner of Princess and Lee Streets

Wm. Hunter and John Allison, wholesale and retail merchants, imported an assortment of dry goods from London, Jamaica and Antigua including rum, gin and teas. (Va. Journ. & Alex. Adv., March 10, 1785, p.3) Their store was located on Fairfax Street and contained a counting room, a back shed, good cellar and stable. On May 1, 1784 Thomas and Ann West conveyed to Hunter and Allison a portion of lot 14. The conveyance included the right to wharf into the river along with the possession of a ferry and several buildings. (Alex. DB: E, p. 22) By October 1, 1784, the partnership between the two merchants had been dissolved. (Va. Journ. & Alex. Adv., 8/5/1784, p. 3.) However, in December 1789 both gentlemen at their own expense, "extended and filled in a wharf into the river and erected thereupon a warehouse" which stands on the west side of Union street. Encumbered by debts, Wm. Hunter Jr. mortgaged his wharf and ferry to Wm. Hodgson, an Alexandria merchant from Whitehaven England, in 1791. Hunter was unable to reimburse Hodgson, whereupon the latter offered the wharf and ferry for sale on March 14, 1793:

...I shall expose to sale for ready money at public auction at the public ferry landing, in this town on the 20th day of next month ...one undivided moiety of the FERRY LANDING AND FERRY ... Also one undivided moiety of the wharf adjoining thereunto, and of the warehouse, situated on part of said Wharf...(Va. Gaz. & Alex. Adv., 3/14/1793)

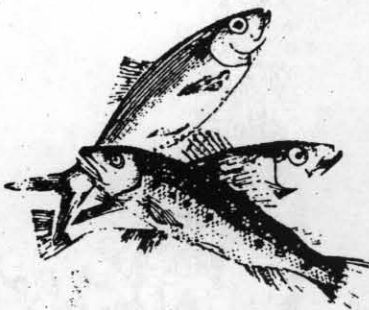


"Wm. Hunter and John Allison... imported an assortment of dry goods... [as well as] rum, gin and teas."



By 1803 the merchant firm of Jamieson and Anderson operated the ferry slip once held by Wm. Hunter. (Alex. DB G, p. 197)

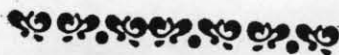
During the 19th century Andrew Fleming, a prominent Alexandria merchant and businessman, owned an extensive parcel of real estate fronting the river east of North Union between Oronoco and Princess Streets. For many years this was the site of the notorious "Fishtown". An excellent profile of this landmark was published in the April 19, 1860 Alexandria Gazette:



"No sooner had the pile of fish on the wharf attained a moderate size, than three negro women...took seats beside the fish."

...The change which early in March comes over the waterside of this city, ranging between Princess and Oronoko Streets, is as great as that which visits the fields and the forest when the magic of Spring replaces snow with the green grass, and covers the limbs of the trees with luxuriant foliage. From a quiet almost deserted suburb, Fishtown springs in a few days to be a mart full of business and fish..

One of the peculiarities of the modern city is the manifest repugnance, everywhere exhibited, to cut a board in twain, or even to chop off a projecting timber. The timber of which Fishtown is built is nearly all hired and the houses spring up in March with the wheat and disappear in June before the harvest. ...Some twenty new buildings which have in this fashion sprung up will disappear with the season, and the uncut planks find other uses. Some of these tenements are used as salting houses, or for the sale and packing of fish spawn. But the major portion are eating houses with drinking accommodations of which the County Court has licensed ten for the Fish Wharf alone ...On one of the warehouses is a sign -- SHAD ROE FOR SALE HERE ...



FIRESIDE SENTINEL
is published monthly
by the Lloyd House,
Alexandria Library.

Editor:

T. Michael Miller

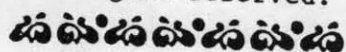
Graphics and Design:
Barbara E. Nicely

Copy Editor:

Virginia Kahl

Copyright © 1987
by the Alexandria
Library.

All rights reserved.



The Fish Wharf yesterday morning was alive with business. Here comes a pungy schooner rigged alongside the wharf. Her cargo was quickly cried, and sold, and in less time than it takes us to tell it, a block tackle was rigged, two men got into the hold of the vessel among the fish and filled a couple of large buckets as fast as they could be hauled ashore and emptied on the wharf. No sooner had the pile of fish on the wharf attained a moderate size, than three negro women ..took seats beside the fish. ...The negro women with sharp knives were soon busy at work cleaning the fish. A few yards above are another group; here a fish agent with his book and the agent of the wharf renter with his book are settling their accounts...

(To be continued in a future edition)