



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



## **The Warehouses of Lower King Street**

Diane Riker  
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Almost from the founding of the city, lower King Street has played a leading role in Alexandria's commercial life. Over the years, its façades – sometimes imposing accessories to a bustling harbor, sometimes grimy and derelict reminders of trade gone elsewhere – have revealed, as in a mirror, the city's changing fortunes.

In 1749, when property for the new Alexandria went on sale, the present 100 block was well east of dry land but investors realized the potential in the cove and in positioning themselves close to its center.

Augustine Washington, writing in 1749 to his brother Lawrence, explained his purchase for Lawrence of Lots 51 and 52 on King: "I purchased you two lots near the water upon the Main street as every one along the road will be trough [*sic*] that street." Just across the road, another town founder, William Ramsay, bought lots 46 and 47.

By 1786, property along the bank had been extended by infill two blocks eastward to deep water and Union Street had been laid out. Still, some of Alexandria's citizens felt obliged to remind the county of King Street's importance.

In reply to a review of the roads from Alexandria made for the "Worshipful Court of Fairfax," which advocated a southerly route into town, they argued:

*First that the persons who viewed the road sat and determined the question. Secondly, that the present entrance in Town is into King Street, and all the Public buildings such as the Market house, Courthouse, the Tobacco warehouse and the Publick Ferry are all to the north of the present entrance into Town, and that the said entrance has been used & occupied ever since the said Town was by law established." (COB 1783-1788, July 19, 1786, page 251)*

One of the not-disinterested objectors was Dennis Ramsay, whose father had died just the year before. As early as the 1770s William Ramsay had begun dividing his holdings among his eight children.

## The Ramsays

William Ramsay, merchant and ship owner, came to Virginia from Galloway, Scotland, and became one of the original promoters of Alexandria and one of its most beloved citizens.

At the first land auction here in July 1749, Ramsay bought Lots 46 and 47 and, according to tradition, owned the first house in the new town, on the northeast corner of Fairfax and King, now the Alexandria Visitors' Center.

Unlike his neighbors, Ramsay had his house face the river, not the street. He extended lot 46 into the Potomac by "banking out" the high ground, cutting it down to fill in the mudflats (and in the process revealing the stone foundation of his own house) until his wharf reached navigable water. The land under the north side of lower King Street is Ramsay's "made ground."

Years before his death, William Ramsay began conveying this new land and his extensive other holdings to his eight children. Six of them received the property with King Street frontage, backing onto Ramsay's Alley, between Water and Union. Ownership shifted with deaths.

Early owners were as follows (using today's street numbers):

Dennis Ramsay – 101, 103, and 105

Amelia Ramsay – 107 and 109 (45-foot frontage in 1784)

Hannah Ramsay Madden (*var.* Maddin) and Michael Madden – 115 and one-half 113

Sarah Ramsay Porter and Thomas Porter – 111 and one-half 113

William Ramsay, Jr. – 117

Ann Ramsay Allison and Robert Allison – 119

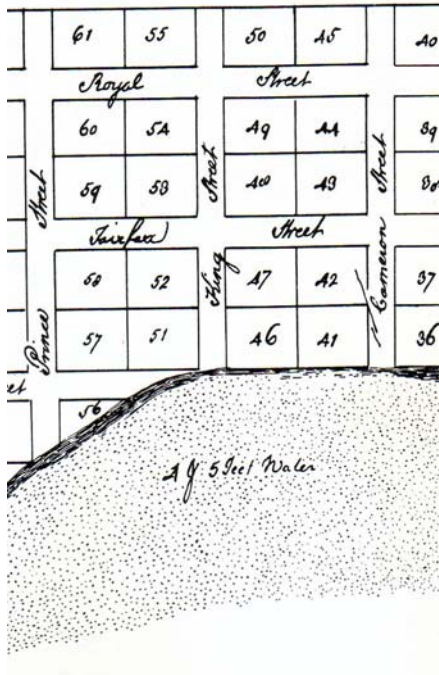
Elizabeth (Betty) Ramsay Stewart and James Stewart – 121

The earliest lots extended anywhere from 76 to 90 feet northward to Ramsay's Alley, which Ramsay himself renamed Fayette Street in 1784 and which later still became Fayette Alley (*Fairfax Deed Book P*, 354). The deeds reserved for the founder "the absolute right to take away as much earth or dirt from said ground as will be sufficient to be applied towards filling my Wharf and Piers...."

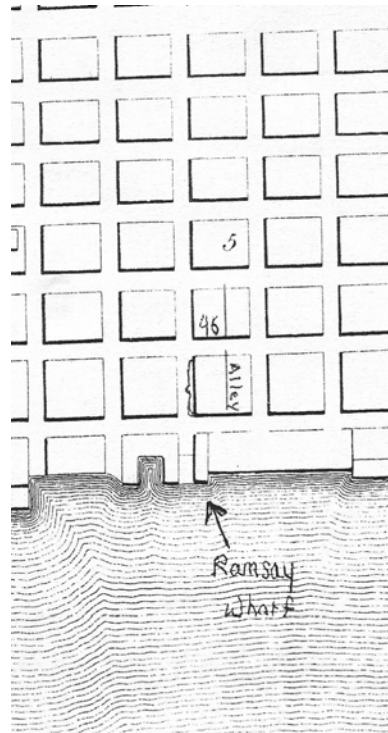
Properties today numbered 101 and 103 have a total frontage of 45 feet, as they did then; 107 and 109 measure just 22 feet six inches each; 113 was made up of two parcels, each 15 feet in breadth. Others have a 30-foot frontage on King.

In his time William Ramsay was honored as "The Romulus of Alexandria" and its honorary "Lord Mayor." When he died in 1785, General Washington walked in his funeral procession.

# A Plan of Alexan.



Section of 1749 Map of Alexandria showing Lot 46 on King St. at center



Library of Congress  
Section of 1798 Gilpin Map showing build-out to Potomac

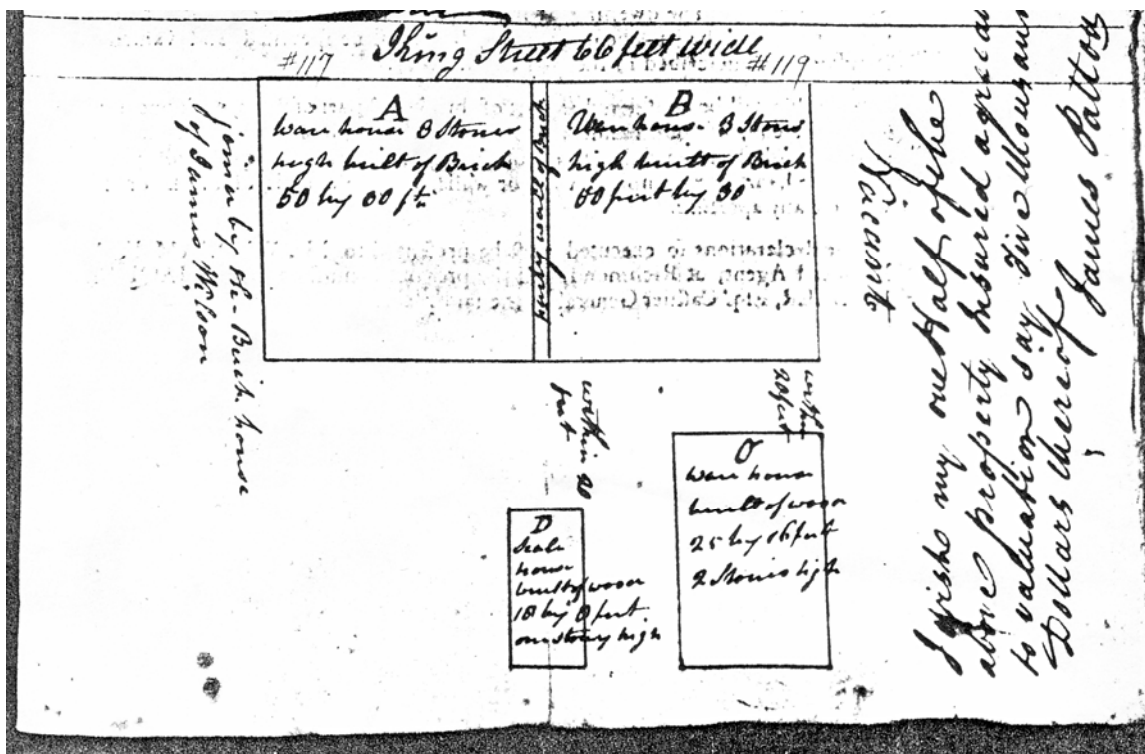
## Early Warehouses

The earliest structures along King Street were wooden stores or storehouses. As Alexandria grew more prosperous, these were replaced by brick warehouses, some with stores at their lowest level.

The oldest of the existing buildings on the north side of the 100 block went up during the boom of the mid-1790s, a phenomenon noted by a visitor in 1795:

*The town being built upon a slope from the interior to the water's edge, appeared to much advantage, as we rowed towards it from the middle of the river. But the circumstance which most struck me was the vast number of houses which I saw building as we passed through the street. The number of people employed as carpenters and masons. The hammer and trowel were at work everywhere... (Thomas Twining in Miller, T. Michael, Pen Portraits, 1987).*

Fortunately, we can visualize the upper block as it was then from surviving records of the Mutual Assurance Society, a fire insurance firm.

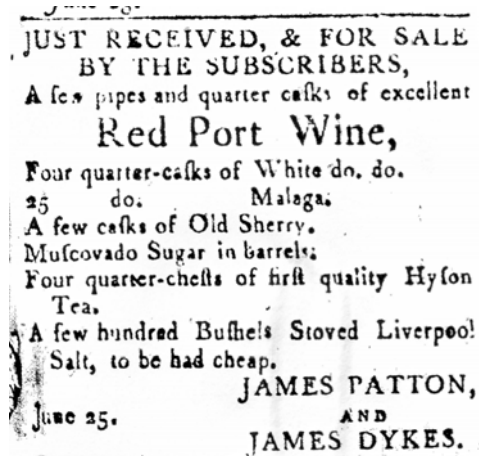


MAS record No. 69, 1796. James Patton policy. Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections  
**Water (later Lee) Street is at the right beyond the vacant lot.**

Warehouse A, above, at 117 King Street, measuring 30 by 50 feet, occupied property sold to Irish merchant James Patton and his partner David Finlay (*var.* Findley) in the spring of 1793 by Benjamin Augustus Hamp, who had purchased the land from Dr. William Ramsay Jr. in January.

1793 was the year the town paved King Street (J. Schwarzmann, *Alexandria Gazette*, August 1, 1947). The three-story brick warehouse could conceivably have been erected as early as 1793. But the tall stone walls on its lowest story, so like those of the warehouses on either side, suggest that the three were erected at the same time. It was definitely standing in June 1795 when Finlay's estate listed the building.

Patton handled the sale of raw goods for many plantations in Virginia and also imported goods from England.



JUST RECEIVED, & FOR SALE  
BY THE SUBSCRIBERS,  
A few pipes and quarter casks of excellent  
**Red Port Wine,**  
Four quarter-casks of White do. do.  
25 do. Malaga.  
A few casks of Old Sherry.  
Muscovado Sugar in barrels.  
Four quarter-chests of first quality Hyson  
Tea.  
A few hundred Bushels Stoved Liverpool  
Salt, to be had cheap.  
June 25.  
**JAMES PATTON,  
AND  
JAMES DYKES.**

*Alexandria Advertiser*, June 28, 1796:1

By 1796 when Patton insured for \$11,300 the four buildings shown above, Finlay was deceased and a second brick warehouse had been built with the same measurements as the first. It was on property sold Patton in June 1795 by Ramsay's daughter Ann and her husband, Robert Allison, "30 feet east of Water, east with King 30 feet, north parallel to Water 77 feet to Fayette Street, formerly Ramsay's alley": in other words, present-day 119 King.

James Patton's two brick warehouses were separated by a narrow brick wall. He had also built close to the back alley a third warehouse, made of wood, 25 by 16 feet, and a small wood "scale house."

His policy notes that his lots adjoin vacant land to the west (now 121 King) and James Wilson's brick warehouse to the east (115).

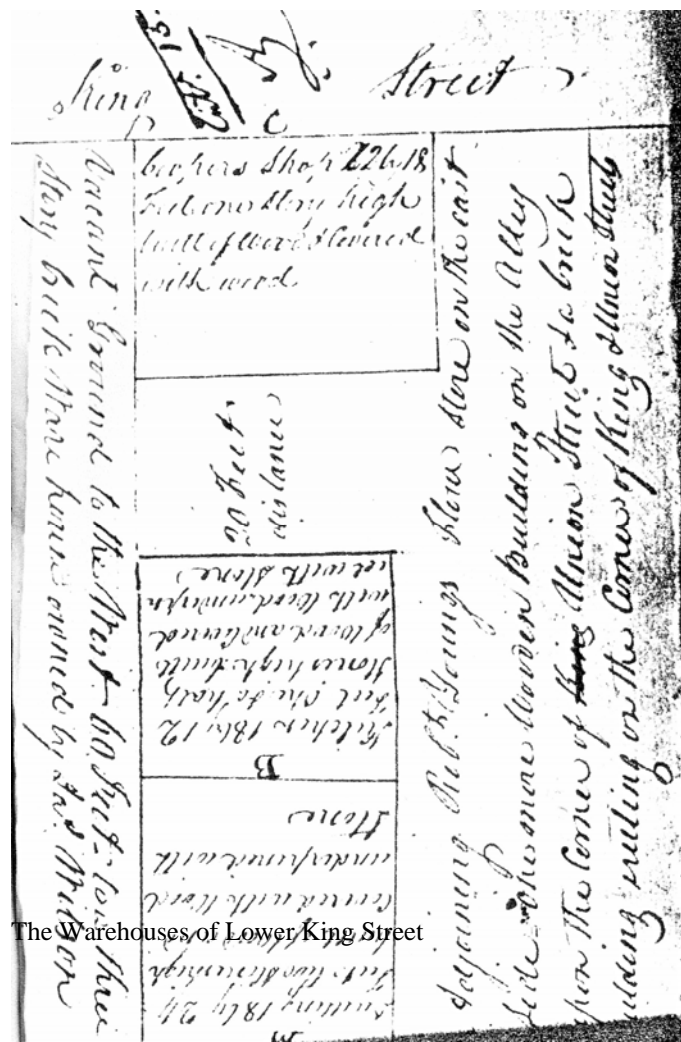
James Wilson came here from Glasgow in 1777. His ships *William and John, Drake*, and *Enterprise* did a profitable business in trading between Alexandria and Scotland.

Wilson owned what are today 113 and 115 King Street. He erected his warehouse and dry-goods store on 115, land acquired from Michael and Hannah Ramsay Madden. By November 1794 he had also acquired two parcels: a 15 by 80 foot lot which had been sold by Hannah Ramsay Madden and her husband, Michael, to James Kennedy earlier that year, and a 15 by 80 foot lot belonging to Thomas and Sarah Ramsay Porter (*Hustings Court Bk. E pp. 446 and 451*). The latter two he combined and sold to grocer Bryan Hampson.

It is reasonable to assume that Wilson's warehouse and Patton's second warehouse went up in 1795.

**JAMES WILSON**  
 Has received by the ship William and  
 John, capt. Woodhouse, from London,  
**SPRING GOODS,**  
 which will be opened and for sale imme-  
 diately at his warehouse.  
 Also—Brown Stout in casks of  
 6 doz. each.  
 May 5.

*Alexandria Advertiser, May 5, 1803:3*



Two insurance records from 1803 bring into focus the lower end of the block. In that year there are two wooden stores at 105 and 107 and a three-story brick warehouse at 101, under construction.

Charles Page, a cashier at the Bank of Potomac for 35 years and a founder of St. Paul's Church, bought his property (107) from the heirs of Amelia Ramsay in June 1794.

He declared for \$1,700 insurance three buildings including a "cooper's shop, 22 by 18 feet, one story high, built of wood and covered with wood." At the shop's rear, after 20 feet of vacant space, were a kitchen house, 18 by 12 feet, 1 1/2 stories high, "built of wood and covered with wood, underpinned with stone" and a

dwelling 18 by 24 feet, two stories high. Page rented them to Levi Talbot (*var.* Talbert).

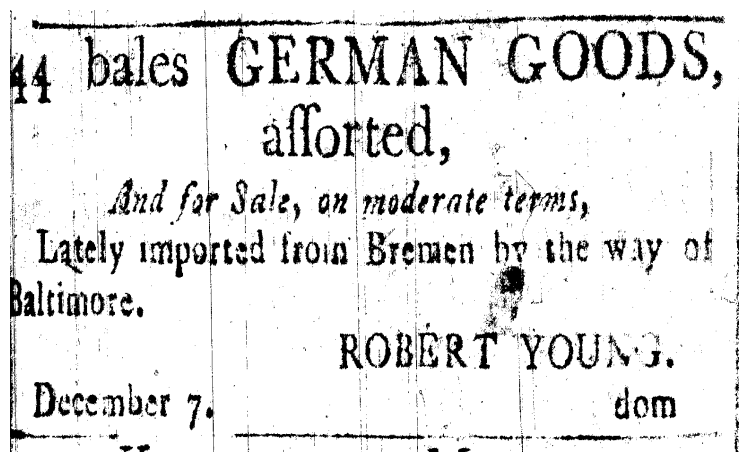
*MAS 2128, Charles Page 1803 Policy*



On Page's western boundary lay vacant ground that was purchased from Amelia Ramsay's heirs in 1805 by Captain William Yeaton, architect, surveyor, and merchant, and proceeding farther west, James Wilson's three-story brick warehouse, cited in Patton's policy above.

On Page's east (at 105) was a flour store constructed of wood and leased by Robert Young for 120 silver dollars a year. The lot had been given to Dennis Ramsay in 1784 by his father and sold to Hugh Smith for \$1,200 in 1798.

Young apparently dealt in other goods as well as flour. A merchant-soldier, he attained the rank of brigadier general during the War of 1812.



Alexandria Daily Advertiser, Dec. 14, 1805:1

Robert Young's store was "built of wood and covered with wood, one story high, thirty feet front by eighty feet long." In other words, it covered the entire lot.



MAS 2179, Robert Young 1803 policy

To Young's east were some 20 feet of vacant land (today's 103) and then Andrew Fleming's (var. Flemming) brick building (101) "erecting on the corner of King and Union," as well as Fleming's wooden outbuildings on the corner of Union Street and the "Publick Alley."

In April 1803 Fleming, a carpenter, had signed a lease on a lot 45 by 81 feet (101-103) paying \$225 annually to John Dunlop. Fleming's warehouse is most likely the present building at 101 and if the word "erecting" is exact, it can be dated precisely to 1803.

Some well-known names of the period had previously invested in that property. In 1789 Dennis and Jane Ramsay had transferred it in trust to two Georgetown land speculators and friends of

George Washington, Uriah Forrest and Benjamin Stoddard, to whom Ramsay owed more than 596 pounds. Their collateral included all of today's 101, 103, and 105, or 75 feet on King Street.

It is reported that it was at a dinner party in Colonel Forrest's Georgetown home that the original plans for the capital city had been formulated. His partner Stoddard had gone on to become the first Secretary of the Navy.

Meanwhile, at the western end of the block, there were changes in ownership and a new building.

James Montgomery Stewart, who had received his mother's land at the northeast corner of King and Water (Lee), erected a 1½-story wooden flour and grocery store there.

In 1800 James Patton "having taken the determination of removing to the country," advertised his two warehouses in the *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* (April 29, p. 3).

It was during this period that Victor du Pont de Nemours of New York City became interested in establishing a Virginia headquarters to merchandize the family's gunpowder in the south. Alexandria merchant Anthony Charles Cazenove (born Antoine Charles de Cazenove), a fellow Frenchman and a refugee from the French Revolution, acted as du Pont's agent.

The two acquired both Patton warehouses. On June 19, 1800, Cazenove purchased Warehouse B (see Patton policy above) for \$5,340, and on August 13, 1800, du Pont purchased Warehouse A for \$4,500. Merchants Bertram P. Cruger and Capt. John Tucker occupied the warehouses (*MAS No. 145, John Tucker Policy 1805*). Cazenove would eventually also buy Stewart's corner lot.

**JOHN TUCKER**  
Has for Sale  
10 punchons St. Croix Rum  
8000 lbs. Green Coffee  
1500 Spanish Hides;  
**A N D,**  
Groceries, as usual.

*Alexandria Daily Advertiser, Jan. 21, 1805:4*

By 1805, post-revolutionary prosperity had brought groceries, dry goods, and gunpowder to the block. That year, the 11 lots were under the ownership and/or occupancy of the following.

101	103	105	107	109	111	113	115	117	119	121
<b>Fleming</b> <sup>1</sup>		<b>Young</b> <sup>2</sup>	<b>Page</b>	<b>Yeaton</b>	<b>Stewart</b>	<b>Hampson</b>	<b>Wilson</b> <sup>3</sup>	<b>du Pont</b>	<b>Cazenove</b>	<b>Stewart</b>
brick ware- house	vacant	wood flour store	wood cooper shop	vacant	vacant	vacant	brick ware- house	brick ware- house	brick ware- house	wood grocery

<sup>1</sup> Fleming was renting from John Dunlop (*var.* Dunlap), who had bought the property from Alexander Smith in 1798.

<sup>2</sup> Young was renting from Joseph Riddle, who had bought the property from Hugh Smith in 1798. Smith acquired it from Dennis and Jane Ramsay in 1796.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson died in 1805.

The numbers above are today’s street addresses. In 1805, building locations were described, not numbered, e.g., “on the corner of Water and King,” “King near Union.” By the 1870s, increasing housing stock and inevitable confusion dictated the use of numbers. C. M. Hopkins’ *City Atlas of Alexandria*, 1877, starts at 7 for the King/Union corner and ends with 29 at King/Lee. A decade later, the present system was adopted.

**Early Faces from the 100 Block, Lower King Street, North Side**



*unknown artist*  
**Sarah Ramsay Porter**



*unknown artist*  
**Dennis Ramsay**



*St. Memin*  
**James Wilson**



*St. Memin*  
**Hugh Smith**