



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Caring for Alexandria's merchant fleet

Alexandria Times, May 26, 2022

More than 200 years ago, Alexandrians repurposed retired merchant ships to create new land along the Potomac River, which helped make the early town a thriving international port. Archaeologists have excavated four of these ship hull remnants along the Alexandria waterfront during recent redevelopment projects, one from the Hotel Indigo site and three from the Robinson Landing site on South Union Street.

The oxygen-free and waterlogged environment of the site preserved the ship timbers, but once out of the ground the waterlogged wood posed unique preservation challenges to archaeologists. These objects keep their shape and structural integrity when wet, but if allowed to dry, they will warp, shrink and crack.

The City of Alexandria first preserved the timbers by storing all four ship remnants in pools of water. For more than five years, Alexandria Archaeology staff, interns and volunteers have kept them stable. Pools provided a shortterm solution, but longerterm options were needed, and the four ships embarked on two different stabilization journeys.

The first ship, found in 2015 at what is now the Hotel Indigo, is being conserved by Texas A&M University's Conservation Research Lab and will return to Alexandria once the process is complete. This work will result in timbers that are stable out of the water and can be studied, reassembled and exhibited.

In 2018, archaeologists excavated three large 18th-century ship remnants from the Robinson Landing construction site. The remains of these three ships are now on the next stage of their preservation journey. This month, a team of scientific divers, archaeologists and conservators from AECOM, the City of Alexandria and the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory began the process of placing the wood at the bottom of the pond at Ben Brenman Park.



1A floating dock is used by divers, archaeologists and conservators to help submerge the timbers in Ben Brenman Pond. Photo/Alexandria Archaeology.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Submerging waterlogged archaeological wood in an existing body of water is a creative preservation solution that is used around the world and is considered a best practice for caring for these artifacts while retaining options for future study and conservation. Archaeologists will reassess this storage solution after 20 to 25 years. Three interpretation signs will soon be installed at Ben Brenman Park to tell the story of the ships, their significance and why the pond was chosen for preservation.

Additional research, documentation and analysis have brought to light new information about these ships and Alexandria's maritime history. Archaeologists from Texas A&M University used cutting-edge 3D laser scanning technology to document the ship timbers and create digital and physical models of the ships. From a small work vessel to the largest 18th-century merchant ship ever excavated in the United States, these four ships represent aspects of Alexandria's maritime economy.

Scale models of Alexandria's fleet of four merchant ships are currently on exhibit at the Torpedo Factory Art Center. The preservation journeys of these ships and their histories are explored in the exhibit "SeeWorthy: Modeling Maritime Archaeology" on view through June 5 on the first floor. Visitors are invited to view this exhibit on ship construction through the eyes of maritime archaeologists and explore more in the free Alexandria Archaeology Museum on the 3rd floor.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.