

ALEXANDRIA

Gazette Packet



Early wharf remains show changed shape of waterfront

June 2, 1994



The Carlyle Dalton Landing was built in 1759 into the muddy flats to provide a good commercial port. Eventually land was made between wharves, and the Landing was preserved underground.

By Pamela J. Cressey

As you walk along Alexandria's waterfront today, can you imagine the way the town looked 240 years ago? The land to the east of Lee Street has changed more than most other places in the historic urban area. In the 1750s, you would have walked through a muddy tidal flat area when going from Duke to Oronoco streets along Lee Street. A lofty bluff would have towered over you, demarking the shoreline.

Lee Street was originally named Water Street, because it literally went into the crescent bay. Can we still see any evidence of this early landscape? Where is our colonial heritage buried awaiting discovery?

Early residents in the town of Alexandria reshaped the crescent bay between Oronoco and Duke streets to serve their economic needs. In 1759, just 10 years after the town was established, the Alexandria Trustees granted John Carlyle and John Dalton the right to construct a "good and convenient landing at Cameron Street." Both Carlyle and Dalton were Trustees during this period.

There was not the same separation between government and private citizens as we see today. The Trustees in granting the two merchants the right to build the wharf, retained half the ownership for the town. Dalton and Carlyle kept the other half "in consequence of the expense they will be at."

The landing was constructed across the tidal flats from the shoreline into the deeper channel of the Potomac River. Although you cannot see the landing when you stand at the intersection of North Lee and Cameron, it has survived six feet underground.

The Carlyle Dalton Landing was discovered during the construction of the Torpedo Factory Residences in 1982 by the Alexandria Waterfront Restoration Group. Logs which formed the side of the cribbed structure were found running parallel to the 100 block of Cameron Street. Six logs had been placed on top of each other to form the side of the Landing. Bark was still evident on the logs, identified as yellow pine by the U. S. Geologic Survey. Some logs had been notched and a hand wrought spike secured another log into one notch. The high water table can be credited with the remarkable preservation of the wood.

Artifacts found within the wharf fill included many water-worn pottery sherds from the third quarter of the 17th century, prior to known occupation of the area by Europeans. Most interesting were fragments of Iberian storage jars and majolica. These artifacts may have been in the sandy ballast picked up by a ship on the Iberian Peninsula before coming to 18th century Alexandria.

Eventually the Carlyle Dalton Landing became useless with increasing sedimentation. A new block was made between King and Cameron streets by filling between wharves. By 1790, many new blocks had been made in this fashion. The original bay was filled, and new wharves extended farther into the Potomac. Eventually Smoot's Lumber Mill and, later, the Torpedo Factory were constructed over the Landing.

John Carlyle's house still stands majestically overlooking the Lee and Cameron intersection as it once did. If you take a peek at the brick wall on the 200 block of Cameron Street when you walk on the north side, you will still see the remnants of the bluff on which John Dalton's house was built. Look for the City archaeologists, volunteers and the teen summer camp crew excavating the Carlyle yard for evidence of the warehouse which once held the molasses, sugar, rum, coffee and linens imported to Alexandria at the Carlyle Dalton Landing.

Pamela Cressey was the Alexandria City Archaeologist.