



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The city's slow recovery after World War I

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Image: 1935 aerial view, looking up King Street. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

This 1935 view of Alexandria, looking directly west up King Street, documents the sleepy city in the years before World War II, as it struggled through yet another economic crisis during the height of the Great Depression.

After the American Civil War, it took decades for the city to recover from the impact of the war, physical destruction of infrastructure and the societal and racial changes associated with the transformation from a slave-based to a free labor force. By the turn of the 20th century, a small footing had been established in new developing industries like glass factories and building materials, including the vast rail-yards on the city's western edge.

Although these developments contributed to a growing economy, there were still major challenges associated with industrialization including the environmental pollution of city air and waters, the loss of open spaces and waterfront recreation and sadly, the use of children within factory employment ranks performing work that was clearly unsafe. As the 20th century went on, city government provided sparse services to residents due to low tax revenues, political maneuvering and chronic unemployment.

At the start of World War I, the economy seemed to jump-start with the waterfront construction of the Virginia Shipbuilding Co. yards at Jones Point and the U.S. Naval Torpedo Factory on North Union Street, seen in the lower right of this image, which opened just as the war ended.

But after the war, a period known as the "Roaring Twenties" elsewhere in America, Alexandria's economy meandered along with only a whisper. It was only when the city manager form of government was introduced in the early 1920s that significant improvements began to emerge.

One of the first issues attacked by the new manager was the concept of municipal garbage collection. Within weeks of his appointment, Alexandria residents could rely on a weekly pick-up of trash at their homes, rather than burning it, burying it in their yards or carting it off to dumping grounds on the





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

edges of the city. Other improvements were soon to follow, including a uniform program of street paving, public safety initiatives, even the vaccinations of dogs who often roamed through the streets of the city.

By the mid-1920s, a new movement focused on history, historic preservation and what we now call “heritage tourism” developed in Alexandria, in response to John D. Rockefeller’s comprehensive restoration program of Virginia’s colonial capital at Williamsburg. After the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased, and moved to New York, significant woodwork and architectural features from Gadsby’s Tavern, American Legion Post 24 solidified an effort to preserve the historic site, purchasing it outright with funds secured by mortgages on members’ homes.

New history-minded residents were attracted to Alexandria, purchasing dilapidated 18th century homes and restoring them to period glory. But the promise of a restored colonial city in Northern Virginia was cut short by the stock market crash of 1929.

As this view shows, few major changes to the city’s physical streetscape occurred between the Civil War and the 1930s. In addition to the Torpedo Factory, among the few major structures build during this period were the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, which opened in 1932 after a 10-year construction cycle at the far end of King Street, and Alexandria Union Station, just to the left of the railroad bridge suspended across the yellow-brick pavers that then covered the roadway.

Just beyond the Torpedo Factory, below the tall steeple of City Hall, is the rear façade of the old Mansion House Hotel, also known as Braddock House, which surrounds the home of town founder John Carlyle, just barely visible at the roofline. Interestingly, what little waterfront access there is appears relegated to the members of the Old Dominion Boat Club, whose clubhouse stands on the shoreline.

“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 Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.