CELEBRATING 50 YEARS
OF
ARCHAEOLOGY
IN THE
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA
1961–2011

Alexandria Archaeological Commission
Presentation to City Council
September 27, 2011
FROM THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA
ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTIONS

AMERICAN INDIANS IN ALEXANDRIA

Artifact #1 Clovis Spear Point
Quartzite
Paleoindian Period (11,000 B.C.–7,500 B.C.)
Excavated: Freedmen’s Cemetery

This quartzite Clovis point is the oldest artifact found in Alexandria at up to 13,000 years old. It most likely was broken during manufacture as its maker attempted to form the tip. Clovis points, named for a New Mexican site, are identified by their concave base, bifacial blade, and fluted channel, which allowed the points to be attached to a wood-handled spear. During the Paleoindian Period, Indian hunter-gatherers moved frequently. This point is the first indication of their presence in Alexandria. Thousands of stone artifacts from Alexandria’s pre-Colonial Indian occupants have been excavated at Freedmen’s Cemetery, where this point was discovered. During the Civil War, graves at the cemetery were dug through the prehistoric tool-making site.

Artifact #2 Kirk Spear Point
Quartzite
Early Archaic Period (8,000–6,500 B.C.)
Excavated: Jones Point

This Kirk point is the second oldest artifact found in Alexandria. It is easily identified by its serrated edges. It dates to as early as 9,000 years ago, when the transient hunter-gatherer lifestyle continued while a warming climate changed floral and faunal species. As glaciers retreated and sea levels rose, widespread deciduous forests and smaller, more diverse game proliferated. This point was discovered on the banks of Great Hunting Creek.

Artifact #3 Triangular Point
Quartz
Late Woodland Period (900–1,600 A.D.)
Excavated: Jones Point

This small, triangular point emerged among the vestiges of Alexandria’s first house—an oval-shaped structure defined by about 25 posts and several refuse pit features. Woodland Indians built the “house” by draping mats over bent saplings to form a 12-foot oval—small compared to others of the same period, when life became more sedentary. This size likely indicates a small group lived here to exploit the plant and animal resources of Great Hunting Creek.

Archaeologists recovered all three points during excavations for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Improvement Project and Contrabands and Freedmen’s Cemetery Memorial, funded by FHWA, VDOT, and the City of Alexandria.
ENSLAVED ON A PLANTATION:
THE LIFE OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WASHERWOMAN
From the City of Alexandria Archaeology Collections

Enslaved on a Plantation:
The Life of an African American Washerwoman

The George Washington Masonic National Memorial stands on what was known from the late 18th century as Shuter’s Hill. American Indians first traversed the site more than 5,000 years ago. Then, from the 1780s until the 1840s, the Mills, Lee, and Dulany families successively operated a plantation here. At the onset of the Civil War, Union troops built two forts on the hill and occupied the plantation house.

The City of Alexandria has excavated the property since 1995. Work has uncovered the laundry outbuilding (pictured above), dating to the late 18th/early 19th century. Finds include buttons, thimbles, needles, pins (pictured below, left), and scissors—associated with laundry activities—and thousands of unmatched ceramics for food storage and serving, plant and animal remains, and pipe fragments. These finds document that enslaved African Americans lived and worked in the structure.

Artifact Group #1 Bale Seal, Buttons, Pins, Scissors, and Thimble

Group #2 Dinner/Serving Ware Sherds and Pipe Fragments

Late 18th/Early 19th century
Excavated: Shuter’s Hill, George Washington Masonic National Memorial

The plantation owners relied on slaves to sew, mend, and clean their clothes. A 19th-century account describes doing laundry as an “Herculean task.” Washerwomen (pictured at top) carried at least 50 gallons of water, weighing about 400 pounds, to wash, rinse, and boil just one load of clothes. According to historical documents, Esther may have been one of these women. She was enslaved to Benjamin Dulany. Esther received her freedom shortly before her death when Hannah, her sister, bought her and her three children for $1,000. The story of Esther provides a glimpse into the hard work and perseverance that led to freedom for many enslaved African Americans, whose relatives often spent years saving to purchase family members in order to free them.

Lead bale seal for bolt of cloth
Sugar Refining in 19th-C. Alexandria &
The Role of African American Labor
Artifact Group #1  Syrup Jar and Sugar Mold Sherds
Earthenware
Early 19th century
Excavated: Moore-McLean Sugar House, 111 N. Alfred Street; 900 King Street

“J. MILLER / ALEX” stamp on syrup jar (matches mark on box’s bottom sherd)

The Moore-McLean Sugar House was one of two sugar refineries operating in Alexandria in the early 1800s. Alexandria ranked third nationally for volume of sugar produced.

Seven slaves—five men and two boys—using “one pan, one cooler, and one cistern and about five thousand molds, and the same quantity of pots” labored at the Sugar House. Sugar production—from field to factory—was accomplished with enslaved labor. In Alexandria, African Americans toiled to refine sugar in oppressive and dangerous working conditions.

Imported raw sugar and water boiled in huge vats. The syrup was poured into cone-shaped molds placed on large jars (pictured at top). Wet clay topped the sugar. Water in the clay percolated through the sugar, washing the syrup and leaving a cap of dried clay on top. The syrup filtered down through the sugar as it hardened and trickled out into the jars (pictured above). After several days the sugar was removed from the molds and left to dry. Cakes of the refined white sugar were wrapped in paper and sold. The end product was expensive and used mainly for special occasions. Other sweeteners, such as honey, molasses, and brown sugar, were more common.

Excavations at the Sugar House were the first at any sugar refinery in the U.S. City archaeologists found over 10,000 sugar mold fragments. Then, archaeologists discovered hundreds of syrup jar fragments in a brick-lined cellar a half-block away from the Sugar House, at 900 King Street.
FROM THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTIONS

ALEXANDRIAN STONEWARE: “WELL KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY”

Artifact Group #1 Vessel Sherds
(one of pitcher)

Stoneware
1825–1867
Small sherds excavated: Wilkes Street Pottery, 621 Wilkes St.; pitcher: Coleman site, 412–418 S. Royal and 417 S. Fairfax Sts.

“Its wares are well known throughout the country, and considered the very best of their kind.”

The Wilkes Street Pottery received the above praise from the Alexandria Gazette (April 10, 1867) for its beautiful decorative ceramics. Wilkes Street Pottery is the modern name given to Alexandria’s most successful stoneware factory, which operated on the 600 block of Wilkes Street from around 1810 to 1876. The Virginia Research Center for Archaeology conducted rescue excavations for the City on this site in 1977, recovering thousands of pottery fragments, pieces of kiln furniture used to stack the pots, and part of a brick interior arch from a kiln, where the pots were fired.

Tildon Easton manufactured stoneware for a very short time, between 1841 and 1843. His kiln, on the 1400 block of King Street, was excavated in 1985 (pictured at top). Over 5,000 sherds were recovered. He may have worked at the Wilkes Street Pottery before opening his own.

Note the finger-sized void in the blue decoration on the small, orange sherd. It is possible that the potter touched the cobalt oxide pigment before it was dry, leaving a nearly 200-year-old impression.
FROM THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA
ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTIONS

CIVIL WAR SOLDIER LIFE

From left: Union camp scene with chimney architecture (Leslie, Famous Leaders and Battles in the Civil War, 1896); archaeological remnants of Crimean oven at Quaker Ridge site; mechanics of tent oven (Wally Owen)

Artifact Group #1 Minié Balls
Lead
Group #2 Knapsack Hardware
Metal
Civil War, 1861–1865
Excavated: Quaker Ridge, 3517–3543 Duke Street

Excavations at the site of a Civil War Union encampment and hospital in Alexandria’s West End revealed a well-preserved brick Crimean oven (pictured at top), which likely would have heated the camp hospital tents. This oven, and a second one nearby, are the only archaeological examples of Crimean ovens to be discovered in the United States.

Minié balls were found at the site. The 38th New York infantry regiment likely occupied the militia camp in the fall of 1861. In 1849, French military officer Claude Minié invented the conical-shaped projectiles that bear his name. The bullets revolutionized warfare, increasing a rifle’s accuracy, range, and velocity.

This knapsack hardware (pictured at left) belonged to a standard-issue canvas pack used between 1853 and 1872. It would have included buckles, hooks, studs, and triangular fittings. Enlisted men found the knapsacks of limited use, often discarding them, preferring to store items in blanket rolls.

Artifact #3 Horn Insignia for Hat
Brass
Artifact #4 U.S. Plate for Cartridge Box
Brass
Excavated: Smucker Property, 108 N. Quaker Lane
Artifact #5 Eagle Plate for Cartridge Box Strap
Brass
Excavated: 1400 Janney’s Lane
All Civil War, 1861–1865

This “looped” horn insignia (pictured below) was the symbol for Civil War Union Army infantry hats issued with the full dress uniform. Soldiers often removed the horns from their dress hats and put them on their forager hats, known as kepis.

This U.S. plate (pictured above), which matches one dug at Fort Ward Historical Park in 2010–2011, once was attached to a leather ammunition box cover worn at a soldier’s waist. The eagle plate attached to the box’s strap, which was slung over the shoulder and across the chest. Soldiers often removed these accoutrements in battle, as the shiny brass plates provided targets for enemy sharpshooters.
BREWING (& DRINKING) BEER IN
HISTORIC WEST END VILLAGE
FROM THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA
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BREWING (& DRINKING) BEER IN HISTORIC WEST END VILLAGE

Artifact Group #1 “Robert Portner Brewing Company” Bottle and Ginger Ale Bottle
Glass and stoneware
Mid- to late 19th century
Excavated: Shuter’s Hill/Englehardt’s Brewery, 2016
Duke Street

In 1979, earthmoving during development of the Carlyle neighborhood in historic West End Village—Alexandria’s first suburb—revealed the ventilation shaft of the lager vault of Shuter’s Hill/Englehardt’s Brewery, which opened in 1858. Archaeologists unearthed additional brewery and tavern remains (pictured below, left) and nearly 7,000 artifacts. Many related to the tavern: bottles bearing brewery names, such as “Robert Portner Brewing Company” (1868–1916), stoneware bottles for ginger ale or mineral water, and glass beer mugs and tumblers. This brewery was probably the earliest lager beer brewery in Virginia and the largest VA brewery of the Civil War period. Shuter’s is one of a few American breweries with an intact mason beer cellar studied by archaeologists, the best preserved brewery site in Alexandria or even the region, and one of a few brewery sites in the country from pre-Civil War lager-brewing days.

Arrows mark Shuter’s Hill Brewery on 1879 map of West End and Civil War-era photograph

By May of 1868, German immigrants Henry Englehardt and Gottlieb Kaercher had opened a “biergarten” on King Street at the foot of Shuter’s Hill. Beer gardens functioned as open-air taverns; patrons often brought their own food and purchased beverages. Some beer gardens served food, frequently offering salty fare intended to inspire the purchase of another round of drinks. While some beer gardens attracted gamblers and prostitutes, it is unknown what sort of clientele favored the Englehardt and Kaercher establishment. The beer garden did not last, but Englehardt is listed in the 1870 and 1871 Alexandria directories as having a tavern on Duke Street. Tavern and brewery closed in 1892. The vault, filled with concrete slurry, remains intact under the eastbound lanes of Duke Street.

Henry Englehardt’s 1876 business directory ad for his brewery

Archaeological remnants of brewery and tavern
Until the beginning of the 19th century, dentistry in the U.S. lagged behind Europe—to put it mildly. Barbers routinely performed extractions. Prior to the 18th century, quack “toothdrawers” pulled teeth in the street. In 1840, the scene of American dentistry changed when the first dental college opened in Baltimore. Dentistry in Alexandria firmly established itself shortly after. From the plethora of toothbrushes at sites of a wide socio-economic range, it appears that most people at the time were concerned about the health of their teeth. Handles were carved from the upper leg bones of cows. Hog bristles (see above) came from northern China and Russia, principally Siberia.

Standards of cleanliness were different in the 19th century than today. Many people washed their hair only twice a year even though they slept on mattresses stuffed with insect-ridden straw. Combing one’s hair was a necessity not an exercise in vanity. Double-edged lice combs often had fine teeth for removing insects and dirt and wide teeth to separate hair strands (bottom in box). While the most common comb materials by the mid-19th century were bone and vulcanized rubber, factories like Thomas Mount’s Fancy Hardware Store and Comb Manufactory in Alexandria also dealt in horn, ivory, and tortoise shell. Mount’s opened next to Gadsby’s Tavern in 1809. He moved to King Street in 1816 and operated through 1838. The box’s top comb was found in the vicinity of the Mount factory.

Cosmetic bottles and jars discovered in a Lee-Fendall House privy speak to the make-up of the home: wealthy women. Mary Elizabeth Lee Fleming, direct descendant of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, lived in the house in the 1870–1880s. Her three sisters lived there until 1905, followed by the Downham women (pictured above) until 1931. It appears most of the artifacts date to this last period, making it likely that some of these cosmetic containers belonged to the famous Mai Downham. Before her marriage, Mai toured America, singing in musicals and operettas. The Gazette said she had a “voice of rare quality.” She was a celebrity in her day.