



**Shuter's Hill**  
A Wealth of History



Detail of J.T. Palmatary's view of Alexandria, 1845.

(Alexandria Library, Special Collections)

*front cover:* Alexandria Archaeology volunteers excavate the Shuter's Hill site.

## SHUTER'S HILL: A WEALTH OF HISTORY

Located on the grounds of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia, the Shuter's Hill site occupies a bluff overlooking Old Town, the city's historic downtown area on the Potomac River. The use of the name Shuter's Hill for this prominent landmark dates back to the late eighteenth century, perhaps a reference to a "Shooter's Hill" in London or to a local resident by the name of Shuter who lived in the area in the 1740s. Registered as an archaeological site (44AX175) with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, the property has been investigated by Alexandria Archaeology since 1995. Volunteers, field school students, and summer campers have worked with City archaeologists, slowly scraping away the more recent soil layers and peeling back the pages of history. They found that this prominent landmark has been visited and inhabited by people for over 5,000 years. As the 20th-century deposits were scraped away, the archaeologists uncovered evidence of a mid-19th-century estate, artifacts associated with Civil War occupation, vestiges of a late 18th-early 19th-century plantation, and traces of Native American activities.



Alexandria Archaeology volunteers and staff excavate the Shuter's Hill site.

## NATIVE AMERICAN OCCUPATION

Artifacts found on Shuter's Hill by local residents during the 1930s provided the first evidence of activities prior to the arrival of Europeans. The artifact types, including spear points and one fragment of pottery, indicate that the property was sporadically visited by Native Americans over a period of 5,000 years. The discovery of a crude hand ax and a spear point confirmed these earlier finds. Throughout the millennia, hunters in search of game would have traversed the bluff top, which



Left-handed hand ax

was probably thickly wooded with oaks and hickories during prehistoric times. They may have occasionally set up a temporary campsite near the head of a small stream that once ran through the property but has since been filled.

## THE MILLS/LEE/DULANY PLANTATION 1780s-1840s

European settlers initially used the hilltop for agricultural purposes, and archaeologists have found soil stains of plowing that occurred in the 18th century or even earlier. John Mills, a merchant, constructed the first known historical residence, an elegant frame mansion, on the property in 1781. A 19th-century sketch depicts the structure as a magnificent two-story residence with a large portico and two one-story wings. Overlooking the expanding 1749 town of Alexandria, the Mills plantation operated with the labor of nine enslaved African Americans. A 1784 advertisement for rental of the property after Mills's death highlights

the “beautiful situation and the absolute perfection of plan” of the mansion house.

Ludwell Lee – a lawyer, politician, and planter – purchased the estate in the 1790s. Lee’s daughter, Matilda, described this impressive home:

*The house was large and roomy. You entered a large passage; to the right was a spacious dining room elegantly furnished. A large press with glass door held the silver, glass and china. Across the passage on the left was an elegantly furnished drawing room with mirrors down to the floor, before which I danced many a day. We were waited on by three stately servants in livery which was blue turned up with white, with buckskin short breeches with shoes and stockings.*

In 1797, Lee took out fire insurance policies on the house and two small outbuildings (a laundry and a gardener’s house) for \$10,300. These policies provide archaeologists with information about the dimensions and construction materials of the 18th-century buildings on Shuter’s Hill, but contain no information about their exact locations.

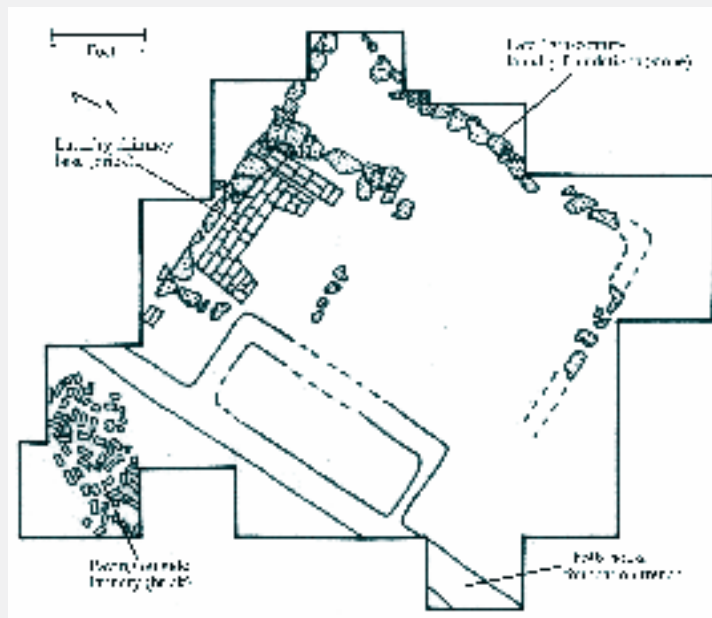
Ludwell Lee sold the property to Benjamin Dulany in 1799. A wealthy planter, Dulany used the property as a summer home for his family; his main residence was in town on Duke Street. According to an article in the *Alexandria Gazette*, the mansion caught fire and burned down on February 7, 1842. Within two years, another,



19th-century sketch of the Mills/Lee/Dulany mansion  
(William F. Smith Collection, Alexandria Library)

much smaller house was built on the property. Rebecca Dulany, great-granddaughter of Benjamin, wrote in 1844 that she was “living in a very small house which my grandmother has erected since the fire.” No known additional reference is made to this structure until 1873, when there is a small notice in the *Alexandria Gazette* that this house, “unoccupied...[with] a little hay in one of the rooms,” also burned down.

## THE PLANTATION LAUNDRY



Scale drawing of the plantation laundry. The western edge was destroyed by construction of a brick house in the 1850s.

While the City archaeologists have yet to discover the remnants of the large 18th-century mansion or small house built for Rebecca’s grandmother, they have found the stone foundation of an outbuilding on the Mills/Lee/Dulany property. When the foundation was first uncovered, its function was unknown, but a variety of clues led the archaeologists to conclude that it once supported the plantation laundry. A stone foundation pointed to a late 18th- or early 19th-century construction date. According to architectural historians, stone was rarely used for this purpose in Alexandria after 1830. In addition, dates of the artifacts found within

the structure confirmed that it had been occupied in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The finds included numerous buttons, thimbles, needles, pins, and a lead bale seal for a bolt of cloth, all types of artifacts that can be expected in a plantation laundry.



Lead bale seal for a bolt of cloth

The laundry was one of the structures that Ludwell Lee insured in 1797; it was described in the insurance documents as "built of wood, one story high, 16 by 16 feet." When the excavations revealed that the stone foundation measured 16 feet on a side, it became clear that the building dimensions were compatible with those of the structure insured by Lee. The size of the structure, the date of the foundation and associated artifacts, and especially the types of artifacts, all led to the interpretation of the building as the plantation laundry. Putting together the information obtained from the historical documents with information gained from the excavation thus allowed for a more complete understanding of the discovery.

The laundry originally had a chimney supported by a stone foundation, but this was later replaced by one constructed entirely of brick. An area of flat bricks, just outside the laundry structure, served as an outdoor work area. Unfortunately, the western edge of the laundry foundation had been destroyed by the construction of a house in the mid-19th century.

The running of a plantation prior to the Civil War relied upon the hard labor of numerous enslaved African Americans. In the laundry, slaves sewed, mended, and cleaned the clothes for the residents of the plantation. A 19th-



Bone lice comb from the laundry



Washday on the plantation. Photograph by Rudolph Eickemeyer, c. 1887  
(National Archives)

century account describes the work of doing laundry as a dreaded “Herculean task.” The washerwomen carried a total of at least 50 gallons of water, weighing about 400 pounds, to wash, rinse, and boil just one load of clothing.

Remnants of daily life discovered during the excavation indicate that slaves were living, as well as working, in the laundry. The investigation yielded thousands of ceramic sherds from many different, unmatched types of pottery, including refined dinnerwares (creamware and pearlware imported from England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries) as well as locally manufactured earthenware and stoneware for more utilitarian purposes, such as food storage. The recovery of wine bottle fragments suggests that the inhabitants of the laundry consumed alcohol, perhaps given to them as an allotment of spirits from the plantation owner. Plant and animal remains recovered at the site—such as pig, chicken, and fish bones; oyster shells; and seeds—provide information about the diet and nutrition of the slaves living in the laundry. Other artifacts, such as a toothbrush and lice comb, attest to concerns about personal hygiene, while fragments of tobacco pipes made of white kaolin clay conjure up images of relaxation after a grueling day of work.



Information about the daily lives of enslaved African Americans is rarely available in written records. Archaeology helps fill in these gaps in knowledge of the past. The laundry is highly significant as one of the few places in Alexandria where an assemblage of artifacts directly related to a slave household has been discovered.

### **PROFILE OF A WASHERWOMAN: FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM**

Historical documents indicate that a washerwoman named Esther may have lived and worked in the Shuter's Hill laundry. The story of Esther provides a glimpse into the hard work and perseverance that led to liberty for many enslaved African Americans, whose relatives often spent years saving to purchase their family members and friends in order to grant them their freedom. William Hepburn, a wealthy businessman, purchased Esther from Benjamin Dulany and fathered three children with her. On February 1, 1816, Hepburn sold Esther and the three children (along with a fourth child) to Hannah Jackson, Esther's sister, for \$1,000. Esther and the children received their freedom a few days later, shortly before her death. Esther's son, Moses Hepburn, went on to become a prominent member of Alexandria's free African American community prior to the Civil War.

### **THE FINAL DULANY YEARS, 1850-1905**

Another large house was built on the site, probably during the 1850s. A photograph of Shuter's Hill taken during the 1860s shows the large brick structure (with a wing, tower, and portico) dominating the landscape. The property was still owned by the Dulanys, and a member of the family presumably occupied the home after its construction. However, a search of historical documents has not yet revealed the name of the



Gas lamp fixture from the "rubble-filled trench" related to the 1850s mansion

residents during this period. The owners of the site at the time, Rebecca and Richard Henry Dulany, were living in Loudoun County at "Welbourne," a mansion (still standing)

reputed to be a reproduction of the Mills mansion. In 1866, Rebecca's brother Hal (Henry Grafton Dulany) gained ownership of the house, which eventually met the same fate as the other Dulany residences on Shuter's Hill. As reported in the newspaper in 1905, "sparks from the chimney...fell on the roof...Nearly everything combustible in the structure was consumed."

The City archaeologists identified the location of this 1850s house and a nearby outbuilding. Artifacts associated with these structures include a silver-plated spoon, scarab jewelry, and purple transfer-printed ceramics, which reflect the social status of the site's inhabitants. Archaeological evidence for the foundation



Brass opera glasses

of the main residence is unusual in that almost all of the bricks for the footing are no longer in place. Apparently, after the house burned down, the bricks of the foundation were removed for use at another location, and the rubble from the demolished structure fell into the emptied foundation trench. Dubbed the “rubble-filled trench,” this feature yielded a preponderance of brick and mortar fragments and nails, the remnants of house demolition, along with a few other artifacts, including a gas lamp fixture and opera glasses imported from Paris. Numerous odd-shaped fragments of glass, the result of melting, attest to the heat of the fire. A long, narrow outbuilding, perhaps a stable or kitchen, was situated to the north of the main house, as evidenced by the presence of intact brick foundations forming a rectangular outline about one foot below the ground surface. A bowl-shaped depression northeast of the house provided clear evidence of a buried well associated with the residence; excavation of the upper levels revealed that after it was no longer in use, the well had been filled with refuse, including bottles, rusted cans, broken china, car parts, and a 1920 Mercury dime.

## **CIVIL WAR, 1861-1865**

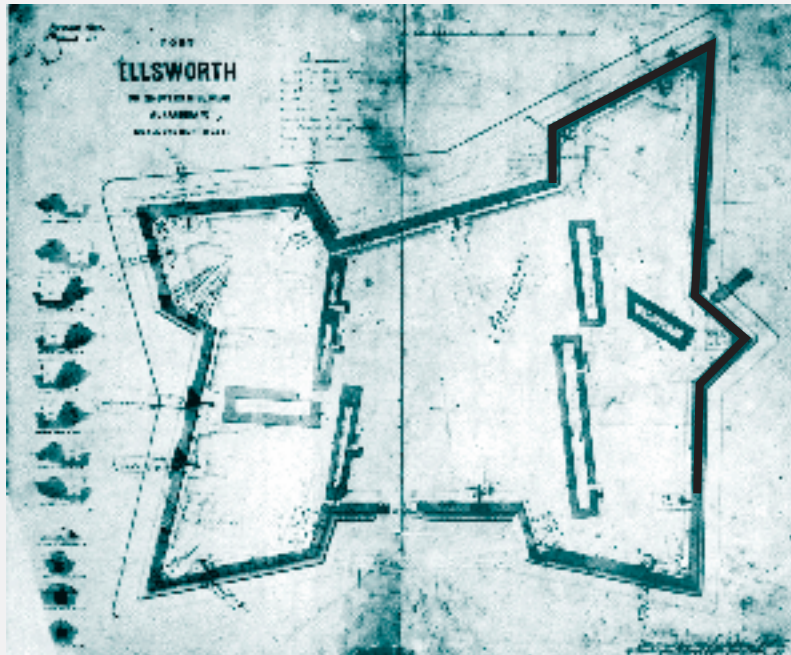
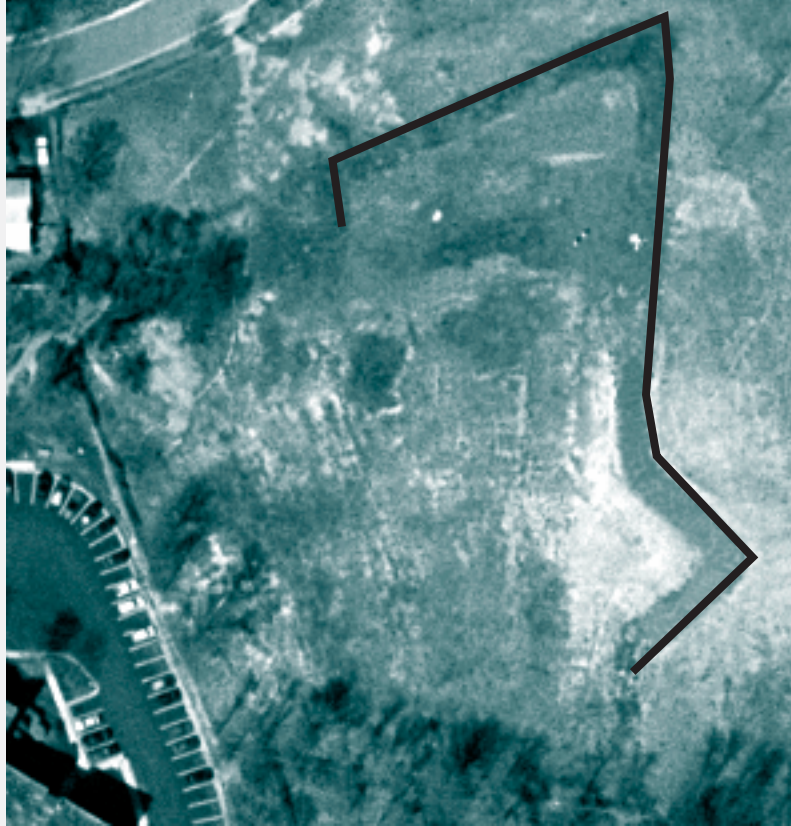
Life in Alexandria was greatly affected by the Civil War, and Shuter’s Hill was one focal point of military activities. On May 24, 1861, the day after Virginia seceded from the Union, the Federal army invaded Alexandria. The city remained occupied throughout the war. It was a major supply depot, railroad center, and hospital/con-



Photograph of the 1850s mansion, Civil War officers’ quarters, barracks, and mess/cook house (Alexandria Library)

valescent station as well as a location for assembling and transporting troops. The day following the capture of Alexandria, work began on the construction of two fortifications on Shuter's Hill, Fort Dahlgren and Fort Ellsworth, which eventually became part of the ring of more than 160 forts and batteries built to protect the capital. The hill was a commanding position, providing defense of the two major arteries (King and Duke streets) running westward toward Confederate-held territory. Fort Dahlgren, a battery of about four guns, was constructed by the New York Naval Brigade on the northeast slope overlooking King Street. Fort Ellsworth, with a perimeter of 618 yards and four bastions, occupied the southwestern portion of the hilltop and had emplacements for 29 guns. Just east of this fort, the Union Army built a number of structures, including three small officers' quarters, two large barracks for enlisted men, and a mess/cook house. The outline of the northeast bastion of Fort Ellsworth is still visible today on the grounds of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial.

The troops also occupied the Dulanys' large brick house on the hilltop. As John Peyton Dulany, one of Benjamin's descendants, wrote to his daughter in 1861, "The Northern Army have taken possession of Shuter's Hill and have nearly ruined it." The structure may have quartered soldiers and served as a hospital at times. Its tower was probably used as a Union observation post and signal tower. In the excavations surrounding the large brick house and outbuilding, archaeologists found evidence of the occupation of Shuter's Hill by Union forces, including munitions and U.S. military uniform buttons. One musket ball found on the site had been fashioned into a die, perhaps by a soldier whiling away his off-duty time.



An aerial view of the northwest bastion of Fort Ellsworth (*above*) today (City of Alexandria) compared to a Civil War engineering map of the entire fort (*lower*) (National Archives)

## THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A golf course was laid out on the property in 1900, and by 1908, the site was divided into lots for a residential subdivision, to be named George Washington Park. However, houses were never built. Instead, members of the Alexandria Washington Masonic Association purchased most of the lots for the development of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. Construction of the building began in 1922, and the official dedication took place on May 12, 1932. Saved from the encroachment of the surrounding suburban development, portions of the memorial grounds remain relatively undisturbed to yield their buried secrets to the archaeologists' trowels. An exhibit of the archaeological findings is located on the ground floor of the Memorial. With the ongoing interest and support of the Masons, excavations by Alexandria Archaeology continue on Shuter's Hill, along with site tours and hands-on family activities.



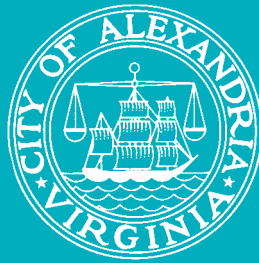
Summer campers screen dirt to recover artifacts.

Photographs and drawings from the Alexandria Archaeology collection, unless otherwise indicated



## **Alexandria Archaeology Museum**

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Alexandria Archaeology is a division of the  
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