PUBLIC SUMMARY

In 2014, CAS Riegler envisioned rehabilitating a historical Alexandria building known as “the Cotton Factory” and its lot into a modern residential unit. Plans for the Cotton Factory property at 513–515 North Washington Street in the Old Town district included renovation of the standing Cotton Factory, construction of a residential building (known as the Annex), and development of a park for the neighborhood. CAS Riegler has already converted the original Cotton Factory into apartments and is now adding the Annex and the public park. Archaeological and historical investigations were required by the City of Alexandria Department of Planning and Zoning, Stantec Consulting Services Inc. (Stantec) and EHT Traceries, Inc. (EHT Traceries) provided the archaeological and historical services.

Property History

Historical research showed no evidence of buildings on the property before the Mount Vernon Cotton Factory was built in 1847. This original building held 124 looms with 3,840 spindles. Two 30-horse-powered steam engines ran the equipment. Most of the 150 workers were women who labored 11 hours a day and earned 12 to 17 dollars a month. Support buildings included a picking house, an engine house with a repair shop, an office, and a waste house.

Alexandria witnessed an economic boom in the late 1840s and early 1850s, and the Mount Vernon Cotton Factory was one of a number of new industries established in the city. But it and other cotton mills in Virginia had a hard time competing with mills in New England, some of which had been operating since the 1700s and were far more experienced and efficient. By 1852, the mill’s owners were trying to sell the property. In 1858, they finally sold the mill for 35,000 dollars.

The Cotton Factory operated until the Civil War, when the federal government occupied Alexandria and confiscated the mill buildings. The property became a military prison that housed both captured Confederate and Union soldiers convicted of disorderly conduct and desertion. At the war’s end, the mill briefly served as a barracks for convalescent soldiers before being returned to its owner later in 1865. The mill sold was in 1866 by John Rosencrantz for 34,000 dollars to Abijah Thomas who intended to resume cotton manufacture. But the difficulties of the post-war economy doomed the project. Thomas was forced to sell in 1877. The buyer was a cotton manufacturer from Maryland who bought the Alexandria mill simply to prevent another competitor from restarting it. As a result, the property sat vacant until 1902, when representatives of the Portner Brewing Company finally bought it.
Robert Portner had emigrated from Germany and set up as a brewer. Although the Civil War had led to financial difficulties in his earlier ventures, Portner changed his focus to lager beers and found success. His company’s purchase of the old Cotton Factory was a result of his increased production and need for more facilities to handle the added work and storage requirements. The old Cotton Factory became a Portner bottling plant. Again, circumstances seemed to conspire against the property. Virginia passed a prohibition law in 1916, and Portner’s brewery was closed. The old Cotton Factory and other buildings were soon sold to the Express Spark Plug Factory of America. The factory supplied spark plugs to other regional companies and, like the old Cotton Factory, employed mainly women. In 1928, however, the company closed its Alexandria facility and sold the property.

The new owner spent several years deciding how best to use the property. In 1934, he petitioned the city to rezone the land as residential so he could convert the old Cotton Factory into an apartment building. The city approved the change, and renovations on the new Belle Haven Apartments began in 1935, including the addition of a portico around the entrance and dormer windows on the top floor. The building remained residential until 1981, when a company bought it and redesigned it as office space. CAS Reigler’s project returns the property to residential use.

Archaeological Finds

Stantec’s investigations began with a review of previous archaeological projects near the old Cotton Factory and identifying already recorded archaeological sites. An 1888 topographical map was compared with a modern map to see if the property might have been graded or had fill added to it. The results showed no evidence of grading that could have removed archaeological deposits. Instead, the results indicated that around 2–4 feet of fill were on the property.

To see if archaeological deposits were present in the area of the Annex, five trenches were excavated with a backhoe. Four parallel trenches were excavated across the Annex’s footprint. The fifth trench cut across the four trenches to open a wider area for the archaeologists to study. The first four trenches revealed a cut-stone-and-brick foundation and a brick floor, and historical plans of the building show these were part of the north wall and floor of the engine house. The engine house held the steam engines that ran the equipment. The fifth trench also
uncovered part of the east foundation of the engine house, a stepped-brick platform that supported a steam engine, a well for the engine wheel, and several drains. Shovels were used to excavate further into the trenches, but they revealed only a few artifacts.

Only forty artifacts were found during the archaeological investigations. These include fragments of ceramic dishes, milk bottles, and unidentified bottles (but likely not beer), nails and window glass, spark plugs, and unidentified pieces of metal. Most of these artifacts probably relate to the Cotton Factory, the Spark Plug Factory, and the Belle Haven apartments. None seem to be associated with the Civil War prison or the Portner Brewing Company. The absence of brewing-related artifacts might reflect the cleanliness needed in the bottling plant or how well the building was stripped of its brewing supplies when Portner’s sold it.

The excavations have yielded significant information on the organization, nature, and changing use of the Cotton Factory, and provide information on mid-nineteenth-century manufacturing facilities in the Mid-Atlantic region. However, the extent of excavations suggests there is little potential for additional features within the Annex footprint. As such, Stantec recommended no additional archaeological investigations within the building footprint.

The excavations also show the larger property could yield significant information on the history of manufacturing in Alexandria. As such, the Cotton Factory property is a significant archaeological and historical resource. The site retains the potential, not at present demonstrated, to yield information on the Civil War prison, the Portner Brewery, and the Express Spark Plug factory as well. Any plans for excavations outside the footprint should take the high potential for the presence of significant archaeological resources into consideration.