

The Alexanders & Agriculture

Potomac Yard was once part of a vast, wooded landscape overlooking the Potomac River. The original 6,000-acre tract (about 9 square miles) was passed down through generations of the John Alexander family and divided among surviving spouses and children, each time creating smaller parcels. The Alexanders owned hundreds of acres of land and the majority of their holdings were farmed by tenants who paid rent to live on and work the property. It is highly likely that tobacco and wheat, the area's two primary crops, were grown on the land that would become Potomac Yard.

The fact that the agricultural use of the site spanned three centuries is a testament to the one-time importance of farming to the region. Alexandria and families such as the Alexanders grew wealthy from growing and shipping agricultural products internationally. However, as the country expanded and an abundance of fertile farmland became available to the west, the landscape would eventually prove more valuable as a transportation hub than for its ability to grow crops.



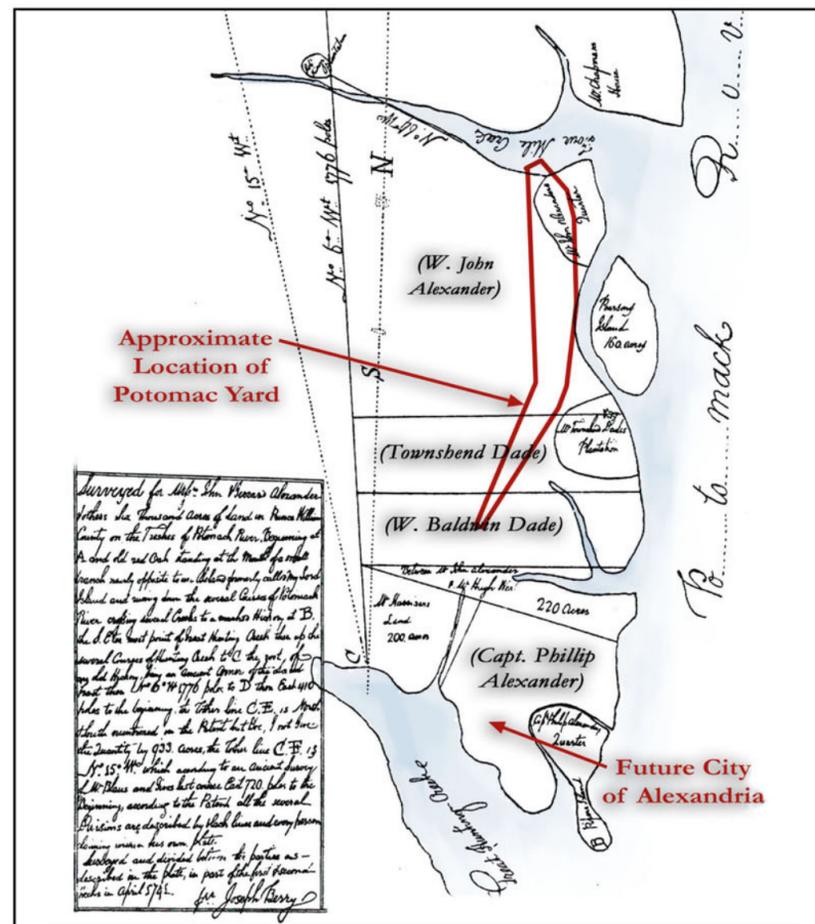
Alexandria's bustling port was a sign of its importance to Virginia's trade economy and as an early transportation hub. "A Birds Eye View of Alexandria, 1863." Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

Local and regional farmers shipped many of their goods from Alexandria.

When Potomac Yard opened in 1906, its tracks and buildings covered much of the farmland east of Route 1 effectively ending agriculture in Alexandria.

The Alexander Family

John Alexander emigrated from England in 1653 and purchased his 6,000-acre tract of land—which encompassed present-day Alexandria—in 1669 for 6 hogsheads of tobacco (about 6,000 pounds). It is likely that the City of Alexandria is named after the Alexanders. For more than 245 years, the family and their descendants owned properties that would become part of Potomac Yard.



Survey showing land ownership in 1741. The Alexanders and Dades were descendants of John Alexander and controlled much of the land that would become Potomac Yard. "1741 Howson Patent." Courtesy of The Library of Congress; image edited.

People of African descent played a major role in agricultural practices in the area. The local economy—as well as the wealth of planters such as the Alexanders—benefited greatly from slave labor.



Enslaved woman and children preparing tobacco leaves. "Tobacco Culture - Stringing the Primings." Courtesy of University of North Carolina Documenting the American South Project.

Historical records show that slaves were often considered part of an inheritance, similar to land and other property. When Robert Alexander died in 1704, his estate was divided among his two sons, Robert and Charles, who received furniture, goods, tobacco, corn, livestock, money, and a number of slaves. By the time this will was codified, transfer of individuals as property was codified as Virginia law.

"I give & bequeath unto my son Robert Alexander these Negroes foll^s. (viz.) Mulatto Grace, Cate, Dejo, Nanny his wife Caesar, Mulatto Moll, Sarah, Papa Jack & Negro Robin in Number 9, Them & their increase forever to my said son Robert & his heirs forever."

Excerpt from the 1704 will of Robert Alexander



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749

