



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

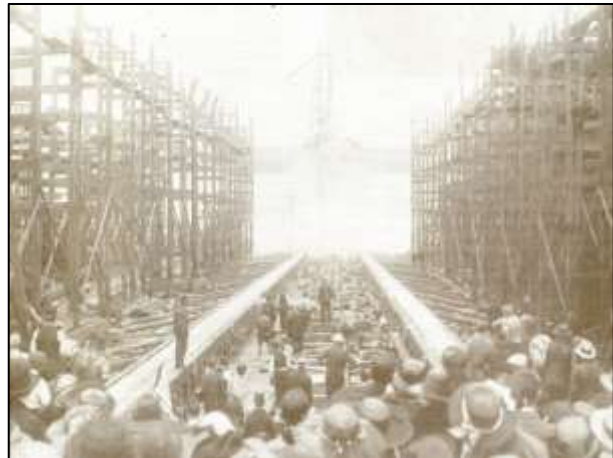
Virginia Shipbuilding Corporation

Alexandria Times, December 19, 2008

Image: Launching the Betsy Bell, 1919. Photo, Library of Congress.

In the winter of 1917-18, the Virginia Shipbuilding Corporation constructed a massive shipyard at Jones Point to produce 12 9,400-ton steel ships for the World War I effort. Thousands of men worked at the shipyard and when finding housing for all the new workers presented a challenge, the company purchased homes to accommodate as many of them as possible.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson drove the first rivet into the keel of the first ship to be built there and his wife named it the Gunston Hall. In February of 1919, the Gunston Hall was launched before an estimated crowd of 10,000. Three months later, the Gunston Hall's sister ship, the Betsy Bell, was launched and the event was captured in this photograph.



Nine of the 12 contracted ships were completed and number 10 was partially built when Virginia Shipbuilding filed for bankruptcy in 1921. Following a lawsuit, the U.S. District Court ordered that the 10 ships be sold at auction. They were valued at \$2.5 million but sold for less than \$650,000, with the Gunston Hall and Betsy Bell each selling for \$45,000. Both were later scrapped, although some other ships from the shipyard were called into service during World War II.

The huge scaffolding seen in this image, which surrounded the ships during construction, was situated upon the brick and concrete shipways. In 2000, as part of the environmental review for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, archaeologists excavated and documented the foundations of four shipways at the old shipyard.

“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.