



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Still Busters

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Image: Still busters in Alexandria, 1921. Photo, courtesy Dayle Durrer Dooley.

In 1914, Virginia voters got to choose whether the state would go “dry” and ban the sale and production of liquor or allow localities to decide for themselves. Alexandria voters overwhelmingly denounced the “dry” referendum, voting three to one against it. But the statewide results were different and prohibition passed.

The new law went into effect November 1, 1916, three years before the 18th

amendment outlawed the sale, manufacturing and transport of liquor nationwide. Alexandria was impacted significantly, with nearly 40 businesses licensed in alcohol production or sales being affected, including dozens of saloons and Portner’s Brewery, a large local employer.

Prohibition did not eliminate the demand for alcohol, and illegal liquor production in Virginia wasn’t limited to remote mountain hollows. Local police had to pay particular attention to activity along the waterfront as boats in waters beyond the state line housed distilling operations and liquor imported from Maryland and Washington, D.C.

In the 1920s, police and prohibition agents conducted raids on distilling operations in Alexandria and neighboring Fairfax County. Still busters, as these law enforcement officers were known, seized dozens of stills and thousands of gallons of liquor including mash and whiskey. In October 1921, Alexandria police seized a 20-gallon still from a home across the street from the city jail. Two months later, Alexandria police officers Patrick L. Magner, left, and Haywood J. Durrer, federal prohibition agent J.J. Hudgins, and Constable Frederick J. Wease of Fairfax displayed some of the 11 stills seized in a single week.

In October 1933, Virginia ratified the 21st amendment ending federal prohibition. The same month, Virginia voters elected to end state prohibition, with Alexandria supporting the repeal by a four-to-one margin.





**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

“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.