



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Catching Fire: West Marine and Salvage Company

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Image: West Marine and Salvage Company, 1920s. Photo, Library of Congress.

When the United States entered World War I, hundreds of ships were manufactured to meet wartime needs. The war's end created a surplus of ships, including wooden vessels, which had to be disposed of. In 1922, the Western Marine and Salvage Company established an operation in Alexandria at the same waterfront location to the east of South Union Street where the Virginia Shipbuilding Company had built warships just a couple of years earlier.



Western Marine and Salvage purchased more than 200 wooden ships with the intent of dismantling them and salvaging the metal. The ships were transported from the James River to a staging area in the Potomac near Widewater, Va., and then towed to Alexandria for salvaging. A large crane with a wrecking ball and magnetized cup would be used to retrieve the scrap metal from the ships.

As soon as the first two ships, the *Alanthus* and the *Mojave*, arrived in October of 1922, the plant began hiring workers, like the men seen in this photograph. But the operation encountered problems almost immediately when the *Alanthus* caught fire just days later. Another fire in the summer of 1924 resulted in the death of a teenaged Alexandria firefighter. George Whalen suffered fatal injuries when he fell through a hatchway onto a pile of scrap in the hold of another ship that had caught fire.

Both sailors and fishermen found the large presence of these wooden hull ships in the river to be potentially dangerous. After fires, complaints, and difficulty in towing and dismantling these ships, Western Marine and Salvage moved its ships and salvage operation to Mallows Bay in Maryland. In the early 1930s, the company shut down, abandoning dozens of ships which today remain on the floor of the bay.

“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.



**Office of Historic Alexandria
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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.