



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Stockades built by escaped slaves bolstered Union cause

*Alexandria Times, June 21, 2012*

*Image: Union stockades on Duke Street. Photo, Library of Congress.*

When Alexandrians voted 9-1 in favor of Virginia's succession from the Union on May 23, 1861, many thought the Civil War could still be avoided. The truth came the following morning at 5 a.m. when Union troops entered the city by land and water and occupied it for the duration of the war.

Alexandria was a key command-and-control center for the war effort, offering a superb port facility, extensive warehouse space, and major transportation links to the west and south. Although the city never saw actual fighting, this was due largely to the extensive preparations made to protect Washington, D.C. and the surrounding region from Confederate advances.

Among the steps taken in Alexandria to defend the nation's capital was the construction of several forts and defensive lines, such as Fort Ellsworth atop Shuter's Hill, now the site of the George Washington Masonic Memorial, and Fort Ward off Braddock Road in what was then Fairfax County. Within the small city, residents who had not fled south were required to take an oath of allegiance to the United States and use passes to travel from one part of the city to another. But perhaps the most visible defensive strategy involved the construction of massive wooden stockades that blockaded major roadways into the city.

This photograph documents the huge stockade built to block Duke Street and the large railroad complex that existed on its south side. The stockade and adjacent trench were built from the thousands of trees cut down around the city and erected largely by "contraband" – former slaves who had escaped to Alexandria from regions farther south to find refuge behind Union lines.

In the early years of the war, before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, contraband status indicated that although such a person was still considered property and not actually free, they would receive protection by Union forces.



*"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.*