



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### A jack of all trades

*Alexandria Times, January 10, 2013*

*Image: The building at 615 N. Washington St. has housed an array of businesses over the past 150-plus years. The Express Spark Plug Co. illustrated, was one of them. Photo, Alexandria Library Special Collections.*

In 1847, a group of Alexandria businessmen founded a company to build and operate the Mount Vernon Cotton Factory. They purchased an acre on the east side of North Washington Street — between Oronoco and Pendleton streets — and built a large four-story brick building, measuring about 110 feet by 50 feet, on the site.

The factory complex included several outbuildings and two steam engines to run 120 looms. The Mount Vernon Cotton Factory operated 11 hours a day and provided jobs to about 150 people, most of them women. But the factory was not the financial success that the businessmen hoped, so in 1852, they leased the factory to another company, beginning a series of sales and renewed business ventures that failed to achieve commercial success.



The Civil War interrupted factory operations when the Union seized the building around 1863 and converted it to a prison for Confederate soldiers. The building was whitewashed and a fence went up around the perimeter. Prisoners experienced crowding and unsanitary conditions, and several attempted to escape.

After the war, repeated efforts to revive operations at the cotton factory were unsuccessful. In the early 1900s, Portner Brewing acquired the property and used it as a bottling house until 1916, when prohibition became law in Virginia. In 1918, not long before this photo was taken, it was sold to the Express Spark Plug Co., which manufactured spark plugs there until 1928.

Sold again and remodeled, 515 N. Washington St. was an apartment building for more than 40 years before becoming an office building in 1981. Since 1992, the old cotton factory has been home to the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

*“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  
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

---

*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.*



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

---