



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Port City's short-lived bid to become 'children's capitol of the nation'

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Image: Illustration for book series "The Baseball Kids," 1933. Office of Historic Alexandria.

The filled area adjacent to the Jones Point Lighthouse witnessed significant use during World War I when the Virginia Shipbuilding Co. began constructing major warships at the site. But the shipyard closed soon after hostilities ceased, and the land grew quiet until the early 1930s, when it was used as a Civilian Conservation Corps camp.

Then, in 1933, an ambitious plan was unveiled to transform the former shipyard administration building and surrounding area into an unusual industrial attraction: the Children's Toyland of America.

Long before theme parks and American Girl marketing concepts, children's book author Valrie McMahan announced an innovative project to manufacture dolls, toys and books at the riverfront site in Alexandria, based on her popular book series, "The Baseball Kids," seen in this 1933 illustration.

Concerned that many children had no place to pursue their sense of wonder — and that toys of the period were largely manufactured in Japan or Germany while Depression-era Americans went jobless — McMahan proposed to employ toymakers by the thousands at the Alexandria location. Within a year, new water mains, gas pipes and electricity were being laid at the site to service the necessary manufacturing processes.

McMahan also let it be known that the new factory was to become the "children's capitol of the nation," and to that end she planned to erect a huge dome on top of the building, similar to that of the U.S. Capitol, where children and their parents would always be welcomed. Her extensive plans for the site included additional buildings for childhood displays, park areas and landscaping, and even a boat service connection with Washington, D.C.

The wistful plan for Alexandria's Toyland was short-lived, however, running afoul of the federal government's plans for the area. In 1936 the U.S. Signal Corps established a communications center nearby, and in 1940, an executive order condemned the entire site as the Battery Cove Military Reservation to protect the top-secret nature of that facility.



"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.