



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Alexandria's lost oasis

Alexandria Times, October 10, 2013

Image: Alexandria Brick Company. Library of Congress

Commuters rushing along South Washington Street between Old Town and Fairfax County — just across Hunting Creek — would hardly guess that in the late 19th century this area was one of the quietest and most beautiful locations in Alexandria.

It was known as “Broomilaw Point,” a name that apparently referred to the major thoroughfare beside the River Clyde in Glasgow, Scotland. “The Broomielaw” ran along one of that city’s major shipping docks.

The Glasgow street was named after Brumelaw Croft, a rural farmstead that once existed along the north side of the Clyde, at a point quite similar to that of its Alexandria namesake. By the 1790s, Washington Street reached southward only as far as the new St. Mary’s Catholic Cemetery. The land beyond was still farmed by a descendant of John Alexander.

Even the depth of the Potomac was comparable with its Scottish counterpart; both rivers were very shallow at their similarly named locations. Unfortunately, the dead-end location at the outskirts of Alexandria too often tempted residents looking to discard various wastes from the colonial settlement. The practice meant serene river views competed with the foulest of noxious odors.

It has long been rumored that — just before the turn of the 19th century — a private club or tavern was built at Broomilaw Point. According to legend, the building later moved north to the northwest corner of South Washington and Gibbon streets, where it survives today as The General Washington Club condominium.

What is certain is that in the decades before the Civil War, the property became an unofficial recreation area for residents, who promenaded there to enjoy the panoramic views and partake in outdoor leisure-time activities — including lawn parties, bowling and dances. The war put all of this to an end, though, and in 1864, the adjacent hilltop with outlooks of the Potomac was seized by Federal troops for the [Freedmen Cemetery](#).

Two decades later, the Alexandria Brick Co. began excavating clay from land adjacent to the hillside cemetery. But after 35 years the company folded, leaving the ends of coffins poking out of exposed slopes. The transformation of the site from a rural oasis to one of the country’s main transportation crossroads began with railroad and streetcar construction through the area in the 19th century. It sped up with the arrival of the George Washington Memorial Parkway about 1931 and the Capital Beltway in the early 1960s.

Unknown to harried commuters, long-forgotten memories of halcyon days are all that remain of Alexandria’s Broomilaw Point.



“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.



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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.