



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Tracing the history of the Gilpin Map

*Alexandria Times, January 23, 2014*

Image: *The Gilpin Map, 1798. Library of Congress.*

Most Alexandria residents have probably seen a copy of what area historians refer to as the “Gilpin Map” of the 18th-century city and would easily recognize the street grid that we now call Old Town. However, a closer inspection of this important document makes it all the more significant in understanding the history and development of the Port City.

The draftsman of the Plan of the Town of Alexandria in the District of Columbia 1798 was Col. George Gilpin, an Alexandria resident and close confidant of George Washington. Gilpin fought with Washington in the American Revolution and later served with the general as one of four directors of the Potomac Co., a canal project designed to link the Chesapeake Bay with the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in the hopes that Alexandria would become a major seaport.

The engraver of the map was Thomas Clarke, of New York. John V. Thomas, who maintained the *Alexandria Advertiser*, published it in late 1799. The map was completed just 10 days before Washington’s death.

One major feature of the map often is overlooked by the casual viewer — the intersection of the north arrow and directional lines that are offset at a 45-degree angle with the southern point of the District of Columbia at the first boundary stone set for the nation’s capital. Black surveyor Benjamin Banneker set that stone in 1791, immediately adjacent to the Jones Point Lighthouse where Great Hunting Creek meets the Potomac River.

Interestingly, the map not only traces all public streets existing in Alexandria at the turn of the 19th century, but none show a point of termination. Gilpin obviously anticipates the ongoing expansion of the city westward, and by adding fill into surrounding waterways, at some future date. The city also appears somewhat isolated from points north and south, a fact confirmed by records of road extensions northward from Washington Street and southward across Hunting Creek that did not occur until nearly a decade later. Only the remains of the old Rolling Road from the Little River Turnpike and what became Duke and Commerce streets provide a point of entry from the west.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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In one small section of the map, Gilpin carefully includes facts about block sizes, street widths and the depth of the river channel.

After publication, the cooper-plate for the plan was lost for nearly 150 years, and a limited edition was only republished in 1944 by Mr. and Mrs. Mangum Weeks, of Alexandria. At that time, there was only one known edition of the map.

*“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.*