



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Alexandria's role in the Poor People's Campaign

Alexandria Times, April 3, 2014

Image: Poor People's Campaign in Alexandria, near the Duke Street Freight Depot.

At a May 1967 South Carolina retreat of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. Martin Luther King announced the launch of a second phase of the civil rights movement focused on human rights and economic justice for America's poor. Following several years of rioting in major cities, King proposed a nonviolent revolution to address the desperate plight of Americans living below the poverty line, black and white, urban and rural.

Planning began at once for an assertive, but peaceful effort known as the Poor People's Campaign and a march on Washington scheduled for the following spring. The idea was to bring thousands of poor individuals to the nation's capital, either by foot or in marginally operating vehicles, including battered trucks and mule carts. Once in D.C., participants would be housed at a "Resurrection City," which would be created by erecting makeshift tents on the National Mall. There they would stay until their demands to Congress, which included a massive anti-poverty and full employment bill, low-income housing and a guaranteed annual income for every American, were met.

King's assassination on April 4, 1968, just as the campaign was to begin, did not dissuade Southern Christian Leadership Conference leaders from moving forward with the march. They forged ahead even though many involved considered King essential to its effectiveness.

On May 13, a small train of mule carts left Marks, Miss., beginning the 1,100-mile trek to the District with plans to pass through major southern cities. They hoped to arrive in Washington in time for a "Solidarity Day" rally on June 19.

But the rickety carts and over-worked mules proceeded at a snail's pace. By mid-June they were only as far as Atlanta.

Plans quickly were made to transport the entire entourage — mules and all — by an overnight Southern Railway train to Alexandria, where the final six miles of the march would be resumed. Upon arriving in the Port City on the morning of June 18, the carts were reassembled, a moment captured in this photograph taken at the Duke Street freight depot near South Henry Street.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

After an inspection by a local veterinarian, five of the 28 mules and four horses were deemed unfit for further travel and sent to a farm in Waterford. Finally, just before 3 p.m., the 13-cart mule train with 127 marchers left the city, slowly rambling up Washington Street to the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Despite delays caused by a broken cart wheel and a confrontation with an irate motorist snarled in the ensuing traffic, the trip to a maintenance yard on the Virginia side of Arlington Memorial Bridge took three hours.

After five weeks of brutal travel, the entourage never made it across the Potomac for the rally. SCLC leaders determined that the procession's arrival would prove confusing and disruptive. The caravan was delayed until after the close of ceremonies.

Ultimately, the campaign did not have the impact leaders intended, as Congress scoffed at their demands and officials fortified the city in the event of riots. The day after the rally, U.S. Park Police and National Park Service personnel cleared the National Mall of all remnants of its temporary residents and their demonstration in the name of social justice.

"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.