



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Levity in a Time of War

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Image: Battery Rodgers. Photo, Library of Congress.

Much has been written about the Union Army's occupation of Alexandria throughout the Civil War and its readiness to fight if there was a Confederate attack on the city.

In the early years of the war every effort was made to protect the national capital region from possible assaults, and a comprehensive line of defenses throughout the Port City anticipated hostilities from land and sea.

In addition to a series of forts and earthworks built on the town's outskirts, several downtown streets were segmented by high wooden gates and stockades erected across the thoroughfares. There were also

many manned checkpoints that were passable only upon the presentation of an authorized pass. Wharfs filled with military transport and cargo ships and the placement of armaments along the Potomac contributed to heightened feelings of uncertainty among civilians and soldiers alike.

Though the expected Confederate attacks never materialized, the transformation of Alexandria from a prosperous trading port into a pivotal wartime command and control center only exacerbated a sense of gloom that overwhelmed the city. As the war evolved, the care of sick and injured combatants brought back from the battlefields and the thousands of contraband refugees that poured into the city only increased the mental strain of those who were striving to survive increasingly desperate conditions. Despite such dire circumstances in Alexandria, records document some attempts at normalcy, and even levity, during the period. Soldiers stationed in Alexandria are known to have built elaborately designed gateways to their camps. They even hauled logs and milled lumber from the waterfront to a point near Franconia for a large outdoor theater.

Photographs also survive of soldiers tempting fate by posing in empty coffins or behind the iron cell doors of Duke Street slave jails. This photograph, taken in mid-December of 1863, records an unauthorized and light-hearted moment at Battery Rodgers, near South Lee and Fairfax streets. It was discussed in a letter home by Union Army Pvt. Lewis Bissell:

"Tuesday Wilson Potter and myself went down to the city and boarded one of the Russian ships lying just above Alexandria ... after that ... we went to the water battery just below Alexandria [Battery Rodgers] where there is a 15-inch Dahlgren gun which weighs 49,449 pounds. At the largest part it





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

measures a little over 12 feet in circumference. A daguerreian artist had been there a day or two before. He took a picture of it with the head of one of the men sticking out of the muzzle. A small man can crawl clear to the bottom of the bore.”

The photo is a remarkable record of the time, and observers also will note that in the midst of the fun, a wild turkey landed on the muzzle of the gun.

“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.