



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Rolling on the River

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Image: The railroad wharf, Andrew J. Russel, ca. 1864. Photo, Library of Congress..

Among the best views of the Potomac River in Civil War Alexandria captured by Union Army photographer Andrew J. Russell is this image taken for the U.S. Military Railroad Department about 1864.

The photograph of the railroad wharf just off Union Street, used by military authorities to transport engines and rail cars via barge to locations south of Alexandria, is a somewhat ramshackle view of the facility and belies its true importance.

At the time, this was a major component of military rail property in Alexandria that — including machine and engine shops — was valued at more than \$2,000,000, more than half the value of all military railroad property in the entire state of Virginia.

Although directed by U.S. Military Railroad commander Col. Herman Haupt to develop a visual record of property and facilities held by the Union Army in occupied Alexandria, once again Russell's interpretation goes far beyond what is expected by his superior and provides an intense dimension of scale and organized disorder at one of the more unusual military holdings within the wartorn city. The close observer will note the presence of several men at the center of the photo. They appear to preside over a facility used to enhance rail transport and speed by use of the river.

To the right are two tethered barges that served as a float for up to three steam engines or rail cars, which were loaded onto the barges from the three wooden bridges and overhead gantry at the water's edge. In the foreground is a small hoisting and pumping engine on a separate barge, which was used to provide fresh water necessary for the operation. In the background, the viewer senses the intensity of the war effort as three ships in close proximity, inevitably bound for the District of Columbia, hurriedly pass Alexandria's shore.

Russell continued to photograph in and around Alexandria well beyond the war's end in April 1865, finally mustering out in September of that year. His collection of renowned images, including many of railroad facilities and construction during the last years of the Civil War, provided him with a superb





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

portfolio of photographs with which to land employment with the Union Pacific Railroad Co. in Utah and Wyoming.

By the late 1860s he focused his skills on the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad in California. Before returning to his native state of New York, he also prepared a spectacular series of images of America's western region, compiled in 1869 as "The Great West."

"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.