



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Viewing the Port City from on high

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Image: Aerial photograph of Alexandria, 1919 . Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Among the earliest aerial photographs of downtown Alexandria is this 1919 view taken from above what was then the western edge of the city at about Henry Street and looking towards the Potomac River, documenting the area between Oronoco and Franklin streets. When viewed in its entirety, the photo appears to be a jumble of largely unrecognizable buildings crammed within the tight blocks of the city's street grid. Yet it actually is a remarkably detailed image, and close inspection reveals some amazing details.



For example, the keen observer will note that at the time, the Market Square area adjacent to the south side of City Hall is completely developed, and that the structure shaped like a squared number “8” just to the left of center at the riverfront is the Torpedo Factory off Lee Street, marked by the presence of two cranes and scaffolding.

And while the river itself contains several smaller sailing vessels, the massive war ships produced at the new Virginia Shipbuilding Company's new facility at Jones Point are just visible at the extreme right.

The art of aerial photography was being explored as early as the 1850s, and balloon reconnaissance over Northern Virginia was employed by Union troops during the Civil War, but few aerial images of Alexandria are known to exist from the 1800s. The two important aerial references that area historians use for reference from the 19th century are the detailed 1850s view by John Palmatary, looking southward from Washington and Pendleton streets, and the famous “Birdseye View” of 1863 produced by Charles Magnus. A sepia-tone enlargement of that view is the focal point of the Council Chambers at City Hall. Both prints are highly detailed and quite accurate, although the art of the illustrator is always subject to personal enhancement or adjustment.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

And although Orville Wright is known to have flown a test flight of his flying machine for U.S. Army officials over Shuter's Hill in Alexandria in 1909, there is no evidence he brought a camera with which to take the first actual aerial photo.

It was not until World War I that the military and planning benefits of aerial photography began to be understood and appreciated by government officials, and the practice began to be implemented nationwide.

Over the next several weeks this column will explore this aerial photograph more closely, examining details and close-up segments of specific blocks to document Alexandria's buildings and infrastructure just after the turmoil of World War I, but before the economic expansion of the "Roaring Twenties." This period records a significant transition in the city's history, as it emerged from a sleepy Southern town still struggling to overcome decades of reconstruction following the Civil War, to become an integral nexus of the Washington metropolitan region in the years before World War II.

"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.