



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### A Vital Waterfront Property in Peace and War

*Alexandria Times, December 11, 2014*

*Image: The Torpedo Factory, aerial photograph 1919. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.*

Highlighting another detail of what may be the first aerial photograph of downtown Alexandria, taken high above the city in 1919, is this view of the Alexandria waterfront between King and Cameron streets. The large buildings, separated by Union Street, comprise the United States Naval Torpedo Station, and the office building shaped like a number eight in that complex is still under construction, evidenced by the large cranes standing within the eastern courtyard of the structure.



At the bottom of the photo is the old Mansion House Hotel that was built in 1845, while small shops and businesses, now long gone, stand on the south side. In the early years of World War I, naval authorities scrambled to advance the development of underwater armaments, and a site along the Potomac River in Alexandria, close to the nation's capital, was selected for a major torpedo production facility. A large wharf was constructed in the Potomac River immediately in front of the factory building to accommodate the delivery of supplies and the transport of completed torpedoes to military ships by a series of small rails.

Ironically, construction on the facility began on November 12, 1918, just one day after an armistice was declared between Germany and Allied forces that ended hostilities on the Western Front. Although the signed armistice established a ceasefire in that theater of war, the conflict continued in the Russian and Ottoman Empires, which prompted the military to proceed with the planned construction.

After completion of the torpedo station, the manufacture of the armed aquatic projectiles continued for several years, but by the mid-1920s the building had largely become a munitions storage facility. It was not until World War II began that the factory started active production of underwater warheads again, and as the war effort progressed rapidly in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the facility expanded with new buildings and production facilities. A huge increase of factory workers contributed to a severe housing shortage in the city, and ultimately several trailer camps were established in and around the city for employees and their families.

After the war, the Smithsonian Institution and National Archives used the factory building for storage of museum collections and important documents, and for many years the records of the infamous Nuremberg trials were housed there.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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Finally in 1969, Alexandria resident and Art League President Marian Van Landingham proposed rehabilitating the deteriorating building as a new home for artist workshops and studios. The waterfront property was acquired by the city from the federal government and through the sweat equity of local volunteers the building was transformed into one of the nation's first, and most successful, adaptive reuses of an historic building. The nearby office building to the west was later demolished and replaced by condominiums.

*"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.*