



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Finding the right location for the Port City

*Alexandria Times, January 29, 2015*

Image: View from Shuter's Hill, ca. 1864. Photo, Library of Congress.

When the colonial Virginia's General Assembly considered the establishment of a new port settlement north of Fredericksburg in the late 1740s, the choice narrowed to two areas about a mile or two apart, both where tobacco inspection stations had already been established. With Virginia's agricultural economy largely focused on tobacco in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was critical that it be weighed and inspected for quality before it was exported overseas, and that early legacy, including visual representations of a set of scales and a ship on the open water, survive on the official seal of the City of Alexandria.



The two areas considered for a permanent settlement in the northern reaches of the colony each had their own band of supporters. One area was an existing cluster of rudimentary structures in an area called Cameron, located along the northern shoreline of Great Hunting Creek, about a mile west of the Potomac River and near to the point where Telegraph Road now crosses the Capital Beltway.

At the time, the creek had a wide mouth and was quite deep, allowing ships to navigate easily inland from the Potomac at high tide. But soon after the Hunting Creek tobacco inspection station was built there, it was considered by many to be inconvenient and subject to challenging conditions for navigation during low tide and even extended periods of dry weather.

Within two years, the inspection station was moved — with its name unchanged — to a new site along the Potomac, near Ralphs Gut, another creek that traversed the lands once owned by Ralph Platt, at the current end of Oronoco Street. It was here that after 1732, Hugh West operated not only the inspection station and tobacco warehouse, but also a tavern and ferry to Maryland as well.

Once the new town of Alexandria was selected and established south of the West warehouse in 1749, the settlement remained somewhat isolated, except by water and the two turnpikes that rolled westward to the hinterlands beyond King and Duke streets. It was not until 1809 that new roads were built



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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to more easily access the new city of Washington to the north and Richmond to the south, with the highway to Richmond accessed via a long bridge across the Great Hunting Creek.

In this Civil War view taken around 1864, the old Hunting Creek bridge can be seen as a thin line across the waterway in the upper third of the photo. It appears that the photo is taken from atop Shuter's Hill, then occupied by the camp of the New York 44th Infantry, and looks southeast across Duke Street, the adjacent railroad line, as well as Union Army barracks and hospital buildings.

In the foreground, the close observer will note the many tree stumps that remain in the soil after the scenic hillside was hastily denuded of trees to improve visibility for the soldiers. The old community of Cameron would have been just off to the right.

*"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.*