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Out of the Attic

Amidst the hustle and bustle, a piece of Civil War history

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Image: Aerial photograph of the former Richard's property, 1937.. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

To the thousands of busy shoppers that descend on the Shops of Foxchase each day, the thought of walking in the footsteps of history is probably the last thing on their mind. But the site of the Harris Teeter supermarket and the Hong Kong Express takeaway on Duke Street in Alexandria's West End is indeed a site replete with a significant past, not only for its agricultural heritage but its unusual role in the American Civil War.

Located along the north side of the old Little River Turnpike about three miles west of downtown Alexandria, just east of Holmes Run, the property was once the home of Felix Richards and his family, and called Volusia. Richards had acquired ownership of the 155-acre parcel through his wife Amelia, who he married in 1851. Amelia was the daughter of Allen and Ann (Nancy) Terrett Macrae, and the site of Volusia was part of a much larger parcel once owned by William Terrett, Mrs. Macrae's father.



When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the hills of what was then eastern Fairfax County were soon occupied by Union troops, as residents that supported the Confederates abandoned their homes and fled south. However, the slave-owning Richards family supported the Union cause and willingly shared their property with Army officers and soldiers. Although the Richards' family remained at their home throughout the war, their front parlor was used as a headquarters for Union operations and soldiers camped across their property, helping themselves to wood, livestock, produce, tools and even the slave labor that was available.

As resources grew more scarce in the war-torn environment, wooded areas on the property were felled for firewood and to construct makeshift cabins. Within months the site was almost totally denuded of trees and even the split-rail fences were pulled up for use by the Army. After the war ended, the Richards sought compensation from Congress for damage and other losses to their property. Four decades later, Congress finally authorized an expenditure of \$5,300 to reimburse the family. Sadly, the compensation was awarded to their heirs and appropriated five years after Amelia's death in 1896. But more significant than the financial amount, the award was recognition of the Richards' loyalty and sacrifice to the preservation of the Union.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

This 1937 aerial photograph of the former Richards' property, then the property of local attorney Chester Gwinn, provides a view of Volusia before its demolition and development in the late 1940s for an apartment and retail complex called Shirley-Duke.

The pentagon-shaped field at the center in the lower portion of the image is the section of Volusia now occupied by the shopping center. The driveway into the property ran along the western boundary, paralleling Holmes Run, and ran up to the former Richards homestead, adjacent to where Strathblane Place is now located. The servants' house and outbuildings were northwest of the family home at the top left of the image, near the intersection of what is now Taney Avenue and North Latham Street.

"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.