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Out of the Attic

A city decimated by the Civil War

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Image: Rail barns in Alexandria, Andrew Russel, ca. 1865. Photo, Library of Congress.

In April 1865, the Civil War ended with more than 620,000 casualties out of a national population of about 32 million people. After four years of Union occupation, the city of Alexandria lay physically intact, but deep psychological and emotional scars remained for those that survived.

The civilian population in the city that had supported Virginia's secession was a fraction of what it had been, and many of their former homes had been commandeered for the war effort or were occupied by Union officers, often joined by their families. A massive influx of refugees, including thousands of African-Americans who had fled from southern Virginia and the Deep South seeking protection behind Union lines flooded the city, overwhelming its health care and social networks and filling every available vacant lot with makeshift temporary housing. Death and disease were rampant and the city's economy was in virtual ruin.

This image, probably taken in early 1865 by the official photographer for the U.S. Military Railroad, Andrew Russell, records the bleakness of the city in the days just before the end of the war. The view is taken from the vicinity of Duke and South Henry streets, looking to the northeast, with the 1779 steeple of Christ Church visible in the upper far right of the photograph. The taller steeple just to the left is actually a rare view of the original spire of the Friendship Firehouse, built just 10 years earlier but already wreaking havoc with the smaller building on which it stood. By 1871 that steeple, which twisted and turned with every strong gust of wind, would be dismantled and replaced with a smaller cupola.

At the direct center of the photo, the long buildings that extend eastward are a series of railcar and engine storage buildings, built by the USMRR to repair and protect the valuable rail engines and cars under its jurisdiction. The unpainted wood-frame buildings, capable of housing 60 rail engines, were built hastily out of vertical board-and-batten siding, with nine over nine double hung windows extending across their length for light and ventilation. At each end of the rail storage buildings, huge double doors were installed to admit and secure rail equipment. The doors were comprised of rough-hewn diagonal pickets, possibly from the same materials that were used to construct the heavy stockade fences that can just be seen in the center background

of the image, extending westward from the rail barns. Such fences were built at strategic points throughout Alexandria that were deemed vulnerable to Confederate attack. The military rail facility in the city was considered one of the Union's most important resources and no effort was spared to protect it.

The rail barns in Alexandria were also used to construct an elegant railcar to transport the President of the United States in his travels around the country, which was to be introduced after the war ended. Although the rail car was largely completed by January 1865, the beautiful car was never used for presidential service. Instead, the car was used to transport the body of Abraham Lincoln from Washington to Springfield, Ill. for burial after his assassination on April 14, 1865. Exactly one week later, the railcar began the long route back to Illinois, a reverse of Lincoln's inaugural journey to the nation's capital just four years earlier.

"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.