



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

The Road to Alexandria's Commercial Success

Alexandria Times, August 20, 2015

Image: Building collapse on Commerce Street, 1941. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Despite its short length, Commerce Street, the diagonal thoroughfare connecting King and Duke streets, between South Peyton and Fayette streets, has a long and colorful history.

The three-block long street is associated with the area known as the city's first "West End," so-named for both its geography and association with the West family. After being formally established in 1749 as a trading port for agricultural products, Alexandria quickly grew up. By 1793 Alexandria had become the third largest exporter of wheat and grains in the United States. It was the seventh largest port in America just four years later, and was considered a close rival of Baltimore.

Access to the Port City from western farmlands was facilitated by the miles-long Little River Turnpike, which is now known as Duke Street within the city limits. But the efficient grid system of Alexandria's early street layout was a major challenge for large farm wagons trying to make sharp right-angle turns to reach the waterfront wharfs. To alleviate this problem, land was transferred to the city on January 1, 1798, from several nearby landowners including John Dundas, Abraham Faw and Francis Peyton. This property was used to construct the diagonal roadway, aptly named to accommodate the growth of commerce by softening turning angles.

As downtown Alexandria grew westward in the early 19th century, the rural blocks adjacent to Commerce Street filled in slowly with new buildings. During the Civil War the surrounding area was overtaken by the Union Army's huge Soldiers Rest facility, the L'Ouverture Hospital complex and a series of massive barracks for Union soldiers and Contraband refugees. After the war -- and into the 20th century -- the area around Commerce Street transitioned from a military center into a gritty business district connecting the downtown with the new Alexandria railroad station.

In June 1941, work began to prepare the small triangular lot at King and Commerce streets for new construction. The plot was immediately adjacent to the Ting Moy laundry, located in a 19th century wood frame building just to the west. Digging for the new foundation went deep into the ground and without the benefit of bracing to prevent a cave-in.





**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

But as seen in this photograph, on June 17 at noon, the soil underneath the laundry building suddenly gave way. The entire east wall of the laundry building tore loose and fell into the pit. Floors laden with clothing and heavy washing equipment collapsed.

Miraculously, there were only three victims, all with minor injuries. The only other casualties were about 1,000 shirts that were damaged in the mishap.

Eventually, a tire service facility was built on the lot, which now contains the public art sculpture, "Sacandoga Totem," donated to the City of Alexandria by prominent sculptor John Van Alstine.

"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.