



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

A Civil War print of the Union-occupied city

Alexandria Times, November 5, 2015

Image: Detail from the "Bird's Eye View of Alexandria, Va." Charles Magnus, 1863. Library of Congress.

When Charles Magnus arrived in America soon after the German Revolution of 1848, he settled in New York, where he quickly enhanced his skills as a map-maker and illustrator. The quality and accuracy of his work was second to none and although he had a small workshop, he soon became known as one of that city's finest lithographers. Magnus was obsessed with detail to an almost fanatical degree, and when he began to prepare views of American cities from an elevated perspective, which he labelled "Bird's Eye" views, no physical element was too small to be overlooked by his keen eye.



The intricacies involved with his level of detail is nothing short of amazing, as he could include not just the accurate shape and scale of individual city buildings but also record fenestration, roof type, building materials and significant architectural and landscape features on specific properties. But Magnus was also not above exaggerating the artistic detail within his work to support his personal interest and viewpoint in the understanding of the finished product.

Despite his important ties to Germany and the promotion of German culture in America, Magnus was a proud New Yorker and he wasted no opportunity to promote his adopted home town or his new country. When the Civil War broke out, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the Union cause and expanded his art to include patriotic battle scenes and urban landscapes poised as command centers of the conflict.

His magnificent 1863 print, "Bird's Eye view of Alexandria, Va.," is an excellent example of his focus on the war effort and the Union occupation of Alexandria during the war years. At first glance, the casual viewer of the print will note what appears to be a prosperous Southern city in the mid-19th century, almost an exclamation point documenting the triumph of civilization over the wilderness and surrounded by rolling fields and farms. Vessels move in all directions along the riverfront, and carriages ply city the gridded streets in their daily parade.

But the idyllic scene belies the actual circumstances of Alexandria in 1863, which by then had been occupied by the Union Army for two years and seen more than two thirds of its original residents replaced by soldiers or Northern entrepreneurs and its landscape largely denuded.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Only a year earlier, the sale of intoxicating beverages had been banned in the city, due to the almost daily occurrence of murder and mayhem. In May, 1863, local authorities raided a dwelling at 48 N. Henry St. that was being used as a brothel, ordering four women working there to immediately leave town. Prices of even the most basic goods were rising exponentially, and residents that had not sworn an oath of allegiance to the United States were virtual prisoners in their homes.

This close-up segment of the Magnus Alexandria print documents the Market Square area between King and Cameron streets.

In the upper left-hand corner is the famous Marshall House at South Pitt and King streets, with its huge rooftop flagpole that contributed to the untimely deaths of Col. Elmer Ellsworth and proprietor James W. Jackson. Although the hotel is not known to have had an advertising broadside written on its east wall, Magnus has provided one, even spacing the lettering to avoid being hidden by the gable peak next door, so that there is no mistaking the site of the first Civil War deaths from violence.

On the extreme right in the center of the image is the Alexandria City Hall, correctly fronting North Royal Street across from the City Hotel where it stood until its destruction by fire in 1871. The trees to the left and east of City Hall are all that remain of the original 1752 marketplace which has largely been built out with homes and shops towards King Street. The five-story Mansion House Hotel, by then transformed into the city's largest Union hospital, is shown just below City Hall.

The careful observer will also note the presence of Union troops marching in formation along King Street, and a crowd of pedestrians gathered on the corner across from the Marshall House, perhaps listening to the latest news from the front.

“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.