Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

A look to the north of Civil War Alexandria

Alexandria Times, December 17, 2015

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

This is another segment of Charles Magnus' famous lithograph "Bird's Eye View of Alexandria, Va.," which documents the north side of downtown Alexandria in 1863. The image is looking west from approximately Lee Street at the lower edge to Fayette Street in the far distance.

On the left is Cameron Street, bisected by the presence of Christ Church just above the centerline, and to the right is Oronoco Street, flanked a bit further to the north by Pendleton Street, which at the time did not yet extend fully east of Columbus Street.

The huge building in the top center of the view is the massive bakery constructed by the Union Army to provide bread for the thousands of soldiers occupying Northern Virginia. At this location, at the corner of Princess and Fayette streets, 200 workers working around the clock turned out 90,000 loaves of bread daily.

Just to the east of the bakery, the large building with a cupola and four massive columns is the U.S. Courthouse, built in 1838 after being designed by noted architect Robert Mills. The courthouse was the only building built by the federal government during the period of Alexandria's inclusion within the boundaries of Washington, D.C.

One block further to the southeast, in what is now the 200 block of N. Washington St., the Joseph Lloyd House, old Hoffman Sugar mill and Benjamin Hallowell's school nicknamed "Brimstone Castle" stand just to the right of Christ Church.

On the north side of Princess Street, at dead center of the view, the white building on the northeast corner of St. Asaph Street is the old Alexandria Jail with its jail yard surrounded by a high brick wall. Further east at North Fairfax Street is the former depot of the Alexandria, Loudon and Hampshire Railroad Company that by this time had been taken over by the Federal Quartermaster Department.

Barely visible is a 10-foot wooden fence which sealed off the city from a potential waterfront attack by Confederate rebels. The white building one block to the south was one of Alexandria's earliest structures built for a pre-revolutionary era store, the "House of Glasford & Company" from Glasgow, Scotland.

At the time of the Civil War, Alexandria was ringed with farms and open spaces and a number of roadways planned in the grid system of streets had not yet been formally built, with only paths occupying the public right-of-way that would be later cut through. In this portion of the lithograph, Magnus clearly

captures the Union camps that occupied several of these spaces, including one just east of the Lee family homes on Oronoco Street between North Washington and St. Asaph streets.

At the top of the image are more Union camps filled with tents from a Pennsylvania regiment, while at the southeast corner of North Royal and Princess streets there appears to be a collection of small shacks and shanties possibly occupied by Contrabands, former African-American slaves that had escaped bondage and fled to Alexandria seeking protection behind Union lines.

This became the southern edge of an African-American neighborhood that came to be called "The Berg" named after Petersburg, Va. where many residents had migrated from.

"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.