



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

An occupied city and the misfortunes of war

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Image: *The Mansion House. Photo, Library of Congress.*

After four years of war and the Union occupation of Alexandria, news that the war had ended with Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865 was received by Alexandrians with a mixture of relief and joy, disbelief and sadness. The economic and social costs of the war were huge, and most residents must have known that life in the city was changed forever, meaning a blend of huge challenges and major opportunities.

Alexander Hunter, who left school with so many of his classmates to fight in the 17th Virginia Infantry, recalled Lee's own words to him immediately following the surrender. "Your first duty," Lee told him, "is to go home and make your mother's heart glad, and your next is to Virginia. She needs all her sons more now than ever." Hunter also wrote that Lee urged his former soldiers to "commence a new life and be good citizens."

Judith McGuire, whose husband had been Hunter's principal at Episcopal High School, was more despairing.

"I only feel that we have no country, no government, no future," she wrote. "The Northern officials offer free tickets to persons returning to their homes — alas! To their homes! How few of us have homes! Some are confiscated; others destroyed."

Those feelings of gloom that April were added to by the stunning news of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Alexandria Gazette editor Edgar Snowden reported that, "the rumor was at first discredited. No one believed that such an awful tragedy did or could happen...As the particulars became known, men gathered in groups — heard with wonder and amazement — and expressed their indignation. Nothing else was thought of or talked of." Occupation had been a mixed blessing for Alexandria; the city avoided destruction from actual fighting, but its economy and commercial infrastructure suffered nevertheless. It has been estimated that as many as a third of residents left town before and during the war, some never to return.

Many of the homes, businesses and other private property, such as James Green's Mansion House Hotel seen here, of known or suspected "secessionists" had been seized by the army, often on the questionable basis of unpaid taxes by their absentee owners, and were then sold after the war.

Countering this population loss was the now permanent settlement in the city of many Contrabands: former slaves who had streamed into Alexandria by the thousands soon after the war began and now made up approximately half of the city's population as free citizens. Joining the pre-war





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

communities of The Bottoms, Hayti, and Fishtown were new African American neighborhoods called Petersburg (later simply “The Berg”), Uptown, The Hill, The Hump and Cross Canal.

Many businesses remained shuttered, including some of Alexandria’s largest enterprises such as the Mount Vernon cotton mill, the Pioneer Mill and the Smith & Perkins foundry right next door. Port and rail facilities and equipment had been used hard by the Army, and the Alexandria Canal needed extensive repairs.

Alexandria had become the seat of the Restored Government of Virginia in late 1863, made up of those portions of the state under Union control. Gov. Francis Pierpont and the 13 members of the General Assembly met in the city’s council chambers, working on a new state constitution that abolished slavery and denied the vote to former Confederates until they swore allegiance to the federal government.

Under President Andrew Johnson’s Reconstruction plan following Lincoln’s death, Virginians were able to repeal the loyalty oath provision in the state constitution, allowing Alexandrians to return many former Confederates to city government in the elections of 1866 and 1867.

“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.