



Alexandria Times

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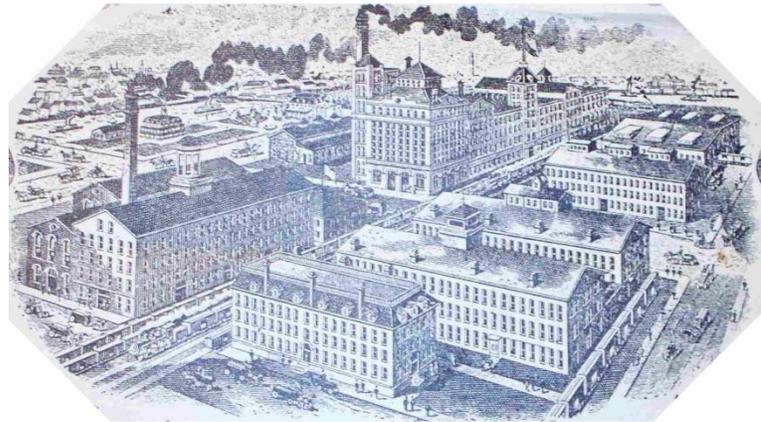
Out of the Attic

Some of those who helped rebuild the city's economy

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Image, Portner's Brewery. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

The reconstruction of Alexandria in the decades after the Civil War was a long and torturous process, and the success in rebuilding the city's destroyed economy was due to the unified efforts of newcomers, life-long citizens and those formerly at the margins of American society. Together, their pursuit of opportunity and vision for a new Alexandria opened new possibilities for a rebirth of the city that could not have been imagined before the war.



Robert Portner was a German immigrant who came to America before the war and worked in the grocery business with his brothers in New York City. Always on the lookout for the next opportunity, Portner tried his hand at retail groceries, book-keeping, selling tobacco, running a saloon and then a bakery before he arrived in Alexandria shortly after the war began.

He opened a grocery store with his friend Frederick Recker on the southeast corner of King and St. Asaph streets, but was soon attracted to brewing by the large number of thirsty Union soldiers stationed in and around Alexandria. After the war, Portner sold the store to his partner and went into brewing full time, renting the Shuter's Hill brewery to expand his operation.

Within a few years, he had found another brewing partner in Philadelphia, and built a new brewery and an icehouse of his own in Alexandria, eventually operating one of the largest industrial enterprises in the city.

This heavily manipulated engraving of the Portner brewing complex shows the area around North Washington and Pendleton streets, with the former Mount Vernon Cotton Mill transformed into the Portner bottling facility on the left. The engraving exaggerated the size and surroundings of the brewery, with the intersection actually turned perpendicular and immediately adjacent to the Potomac River and imaginary freight trains transporting brewery products along Washington Street between the river and points inland. The view was used on the label of its famous "Tivoli" beer.

Fittingly, two of Robert Portner's great-great-granddaughters, Catherine and Margaret Portner, plan to open a brew house on the West End in the summer of 2016.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Local boy Edgar Warfield was an 18-year-old drug store clerk when the Union Army entered Alexandria in May 1861. Months earlier in December 1860, he and his friend Frank Wise had formed a militia unit called the Old Dominion Rifles, drilling with other young men in the open fields north of downtown as secessionist talk intensified. After several months of drilling and showing off in new uniforms in front of local girls, they met their bleary-eyed comrades on Prince Street in front of The Lyceum and marched out of town early on the morning of May 24, 1861 as Union troops arrived.

Warfield returned four years later to war-weary and economically blighted Alexandria, but soon started up his own drug store with another friend, Frank Hall. Located at 302 Prince St. for many years, Warfield's Drug Store was a well-known gathering place for many of his former Confederate comrades. In 1907, Warfield went into business with his son and grandson on the northwest corner of King and Pitt streets, where three generations of druggists served the community in one store.

Another local person who successfully built up his business interests immediately after the war was George Seaton. Seaton was an African-American, born free in Alexandria in 1822, and had a long career as a master carpenter and builder as well as running a busy grocery store. He had many friends in town, both black and white, and was referred to in the local newspaper as a "respectable and well to do resident of this city."

Beyond his profession, Seaton took an active hand in developing post-war institutions to benefit African-Americans such as the First Free School Society of Alexandria, the Colored Building Association, the Colored YMCA and the Odd Fellows Society. His home at 404 S. Royal St., in the heart of the Hayti neighborhood, still stands.

"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.