



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandrians struggled before and after the war

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Image: Warehouses on the Alexandria waterfront. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Alexandria's role during and after the American Civil War was perhaps unlike any other American city. The city's overwhelming vote supporting Virginia's secession from the United States in May 1861, fostered suspicion among federal officials and Union troops who entered the city on the day after the election and remained within its borders until well after the war ended.

As the longest Union occupied city of the war, Alexandria's proximity to Washington, D.C., and its uselessness to the Confederacy left its residents, including those who supported the Union, in not just physical and social isolation, but in a political no man's land with an uncertain future.

Hopes for an early end to the war were quickly dashed as the military became increasingly entrenched in the city, building earthworks, denuding the surrounding landscape and establishing manned checkpoints. Within months, the civilian population was completely subservient to military authority and largely cut off from outside influences.

During the war years, residents who had not fled the city at the start were subject to restrictions on their civil liberties, including mail service and travel through and around the city. Many were required to sign an oath of allegiance to the Union or risk forfeiture of their property.

Vacant homes were considered fair game by military officers, who claimed them for military use or personally occupied them with their families. Other homes were robbed or vandalized by marauding soldiers, whose expressions of anger towards residents were largely overlooked by their superiors. Even many Union soldiers were horrified by the wanton actions of their comrades, and expressed shock and frustration at the indiscriminate destruction and damage done to the personal property of Alexandrians.

Alexandria men serving in Virginia regiments, who left the city as the war began, found themselves in an even deeper abyss, with no chance to return home on furlough and little, if any, contact with their families throughout the conflict. Upon returning to Alexandria at the end of the war, they found that life in the prosperous city they had left four years earlier had been transformed, with a new social order that offered no possibility of a return to the past.

The tidy businesses and markets that once served the resident population were now replaced by squalid restaurants, oyster houses and saloons that served the social needs of enlisted men, but whose





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

conditions repulsed ordinary citizens. Large, now desolate warehouses lined the waterfront, as seen here along Union Street. Once gracious homes and their contents were destroyed or in tatters; downtown streets were filthy, and houses of ill repute were ensconced across the city.

For many former residents, a return to Alexandria was almost too painful to bear, so they chose to rebuild their lives elsewhere. But for those that did return, the city offered great opportunities to rebuild in a new spirit of cooperation. Blacks now represented nearly half of the population, and their free status allowed them to build homes, and establish neighborhoods and relationships. Rather than engage in guerrilla warfare against their former enemy, most returning Confederates swore an oath of allegiance to the United States and willingly accepted the advice of their former commander, Gen. Robert E. Lee, for an unconditional national reconciliation and commitment to rebuild Virginia and her now devastated economy.

It would take decades for Alexandria to adjust to this new reality and rebuild itself, but each passing year contributed to the perspective that by working together, the people of the city could rise from the ashes of despair and affirm their rightful place in a new America.

“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.