



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Civil War heralded shift in Alexandria's societal norms

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Image: King Street at Pitt. Library of Congress.

In 1938, Kentucky-born poet Allen Tate wrote “The Fathers,” a dark novel set in Civil War-era Alexandria that documented the destruction of the economy, traditional allegiances and the way of life of the Old South, and the rise of a new, modern society that rejected the traditional values and social codes that had prevailed in the U.S. since colonial times.

Although the book received positive reviews when it was published, it was eclipsed by Margaret Mitchell’s “Gone with the Wind” and has long since fallen out of favor as a relic of a bygone age. It was a work that diminished racial fairness and justice and projected an image of African Americans as “racial types” rather than as human beings. Supposedly, this concept supported the established moral character and honor as reflected in decades of accepted Virginia culture.

The story is told through the eyes of two families — one from Georgetown and one from Fairfax County — related by marriage, but whose social mores, gradual disintegration and ultimate destruction closely mirrors that of the Confederacy itself. The dichotomy to the situation of many ordinary Alexandrians of the period is not dissimilar, with many abandoning their homes and property as they fled the arrival of Union troops in 1861.

Those that remained behind struggled to understand their new isolation and place in a world suddenly turned on its head. But unlike the fiery end of the novel, when the Virginia manor house is consumed by flames, the close of the Civil War in Alexandria brought a sense of relief and even optimism to most residents that whatever the cost, the city and its people would pick up the pieces and move on.

When the war ended in the spring of 1865, Alexandrians loyal to the Confederacy remained sequestered in their homes behind shuttered windows as Union troops celebrated for days in the streets. Returning Confederate soldiers found their tattered houses festooned with American flags and their city barely recognizable.

Many businesses, as seen in this view looking east at King and South Pitt streets, were replaced or closed, and a flood of new faces poured into town to take advantage of opportunities to rebuild the city.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

But thankfully, the possibility of a long period of guerilla warfare that would hamper reunification efforts was never realized.

Most residents and former soldiers willingly signed oaths of allegiance and accepted the new reality that nearly half of the city's population was now African-American, occupying a number of new neighborhoods in the gridded streets of the city. Many of these newcomers were former slaves who had come to Alexandria as Contrabands, but were now free to own their own home, work for wages, and provide an education for their children. The overnight transition from a slavery- to a market-based economy was not without its challenges in Virginia, but was more readily attainable within a reasonable time in urban areas.

The Civil War was undoubtedly the most significant event in the history of Alexandria, and many major changes came about as a result of the four-year conflict. Before the war, agriculture was a primary economic force in the city; after the war, the industry waned and the city struggled for decades to regain an economic foundation.

Before the war, allegiance to one's home state of Virginia was widely considered more important than a personal duty to nationhood. After the war, that perspective changed as citizens came to view at themselves as Americans first, Virginians second. And lastly, with few exceptions, residents of Alexandria made a conscious decision to rebuild and engage in their community as united Americans, slowly embracing a new social order that would provide a footprint for growth in the evolving city.

More than 150 years later, the vibrant and diverse Alexandria we know today is a direct result of the four-year abyss known as the American Civil War.

“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.