



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A local photographer who started young

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Image: Virginia Shipyard, by George William Harris . Photo, Library of Congress.

George William Harris, the internationally-known photographer, was born in 1872 in Cardiff, Wales, and came to America at the young age of 9 years old. His family moved to Pittsburgh, where he enrolled in school and, in the absence of child labor laws, the youngster soon took work at a local steel mill.

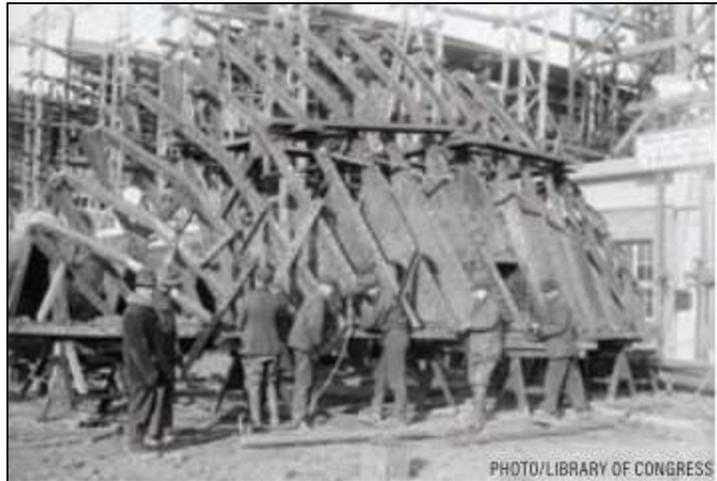
Although his spare time was very limited, what little he had was enjoyed by participating in a local theatrical group where he could escape the drudgery of day-to-day life. During one production, a photographer arrived to take a portrait of the cast, and when he arranged the troupe, Harris complained that they would appear stiff and unappealing.

The photographer challenged Harris to do better, and when he did so with astounding results, he immediately offered the boy a job as an apprentice. By the time he was 17, Harris knew enough about the art of photography to break out on his own.

When the South Fork Dam in Pennsylvania collapsed on May 31, 1889 and released 20 million tons of water from Lake Conemaugh, the resulting cascade of water completely wiped out the landscape of small towns along the Conemaugh River Valley, right down to bare rock. It slammed the town of Johnstown about 20 miles away just under an hour later.

The flood bore down on the city with a wall of water 60 feet high and traveled at 40 miles an hour, ultimately killing over 2,200 people unable to escape the debris-filled torrent. Living nearby, young Harris was one of the first photographers to reach the scene and his dramatic photos of what was at the time America's worst disaster were sold to newspapers across the country. Harris was particularly adept at integrating light and shadow within his images, extenuating their textural quality and artistic unity, while adding an intense dimensionality that transfixed the viewer.

Within several years Harris had moved on from Pennsylvania, opening a photo studio in Arkansas and then traveling on to San Francisco where he furthered his craft as a news photographer. A huge break occurred when he was offered employment at one of the country's most popular publications, "Lesley's Weekly" in New York, where he fine-tuned his skills as a photo artist before becoming the nation's foremost professional photographer of his time.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

In 1905, Harris opened a small photography studio at 1311-1313 F St. NW with Martha Ewing, a colorist he had met earlier during his time in California. Their partnership executing photographic portraits for presidents and celebrity politicians was so successful that by 1924 they replaced their original building with a larger edifice which is still standing at that location, the name still visible on the building's façade.

In 1919, Harris and Ewing began a photographic portfolio of Alexandria, including a collection of images taken at the new Virginia Shipyard built at Jones Point to support America's role in World War I. The gritty images, as seen here, of tough men assembling the complex infrastructure needed in a new age of naval warfare stand in stark contrast to those romantic visions long associated with Alexandria's heritage of traditional shipbuilding.

"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.