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Out of the Attic

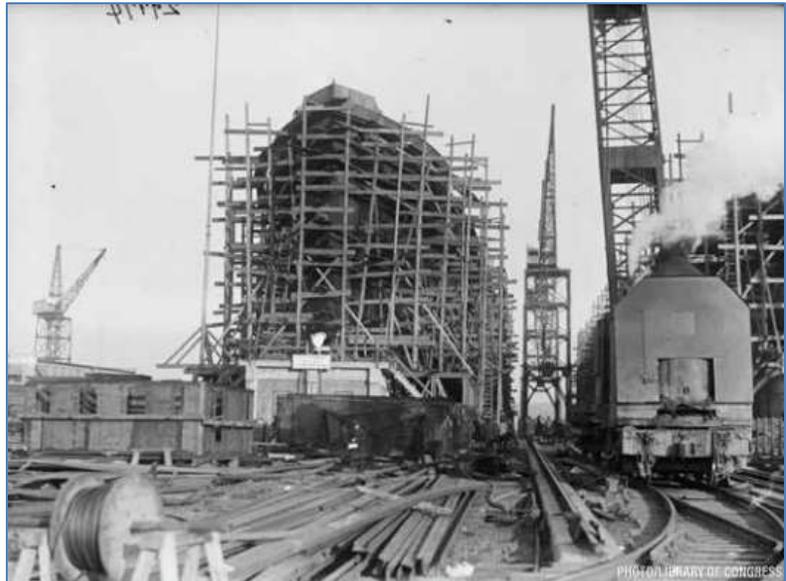
A photographic documentation of Jones Point's evolution

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Image: Virginia Shipbuilding Company, 1919. Photo, Harris and Ewing, Library of Congress.

Before the mid-19th century, the remote peninsula leading to Jones Point functioned mainly as a mariner's training exercise, the final obstacle to be avoided on the last leg of the journey up the Potomac River before reaching Alexandria.

By the time of the Civil War, the United States government had constructed a small lighthouse at the extreme end of the narrow landform, and the neck itself was the site of a rope walk. It was placed at that location so as to accommodate the long length necessary to twist hemp into rope without the usual interference of passage along the tight streets of the gridded city.



But by the early 20th century, the riverbed adjacent to the peninsula began to be filled in with dredge spoil, providing new acreage for the expanding city. This 1919 view, taken within the vast Virginia Shipbuilding Company facility built at the site, traces its two-year transition from a barren sand field into one of the capital region's major military industrial complexes.

The image was captured by the famous photography firm Harris and Ewing, established by George Harris and Martha Ewing in Washington, D.C. in 1905. In 1915, Ewing sold her share of the studio to her partner, but remained as an important advisor to the firm. Although known primarily for their portrait work of political figures, this photo is part of a large portfolio associated with the Virginia Shipyard operation, and was probably prepared for the firm's news photo service archive, developed years earlier at the urging of President Theodore Roosevelt when such facilities were unheard of.

The shipyards were developed at Alexandria as an immediate response to World War I, but by the time the portfolio was created, the war had just ended and the need for warships was largely over. Within two years, the Virginia Shipbuilding Company would file for bankruptcy, and its fleet of contracted ships would be largely sold for scrap. But as recorded here, it is clear that Harris was bewitched by the impressive consequences of American labor and ability.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

A native of Dowlais, Wales, Harris came to America at a young age and marveled at the ingenuity, spirit and determination of the American people, including the gritty workmen who labored on the first two warships built at Alexandria, the Gunston Hall on the left and the Betsy Bell on the right. A group of workmen clad in winter clothes can barely be seen in the lower portion of the photo, in the area just in front of the right-hand crane and to the left of the train car, dwarfed by the scale of their construction efforts.

A decade after this image was taken, Harris returned to his home country and said: "It is heartbreaking to see the potentialities of the Welsh nation, the excellent material from which the nation is made, all running to waste simply because the Welsh people fail, or perhaps refuse, to see the power that is within them. I am glad of the fact that the American people have no tradition and no aristocracy. Value is set upon the man rather than on his lineage or his calling."

Visitors today to the recently renovated national park at Jones Point will be reminded of the huge enterprise captured by Harris only through the interpretive vestiges and artifacts that were thankfully added to document the site. But those that venture through the dense, verdant forests to the river's edge will be even further surprised to witness the steel shipway tracks that still remain underneath their feet.

"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.