



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Another 19th century city panorama

Alexandria Times, August 25, 2016

Image: "View of Alexandria, VA," by J.T. Palmatary, 1853. Alexandria Library, Special Collections.

In the 19th century, well before the days of motion pictures and television, a popular form of entertainment was viewing prominent works of art, often depicting notable landmarks and panoramas.

John Vanderlyn's 165-footlong mural, "Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles," completed in 1819 and now in the American Wing collection of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, is one of the greatest examples of the genre. The masterpiece actually was painted in his studio at Kingston, N.Y., not the rear terrace of France's most famous historic site.

Similar versions of the art form gained popularity with the public, and soon saleable panoramic views of American cities at higher elevations began to be produced by painters and lithographers of the period, including two here in Alexandria.

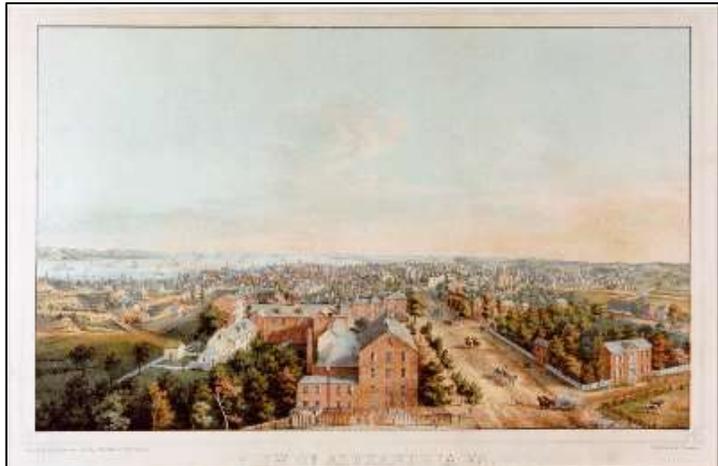
Of course, the best recognized is Charles Magnus' "Bird's Eye View of Alexandria" from 1863, a huge copy of which is installed on the rear wall of City Council Chambers in City Hall. But the smaller, equally important view seen here was prepared about a decade before by a renowned artist from Ohio.

James T. Palmatary was active throughout the 1850s and mastered the art of creating large, panoramic aerial views of towns and urban areas across the country. In 1853, Palmatary began a trek to many cities and large towns to depict townscape scenes, which he funded through subscriptions.

One of his first visits was to Alexandria, and as Palmatary traveled from city to city, he prepared sketches and sold subscriptions to copies of the finished work even before it was completed.

Major clients were home and business owners in the area whose properties were included in the illustration with a very high level of detail. This allowed the artist to receive partial funding in advance to pay for travel and living expenses, develop marketing opportunities and to gain insight into the public interest for the final composition.

The 1853 view seen here is from a point high above the intersection of North Washington and Pendleton streets, looking southward toward where Portner's Brewery would be built in 1869.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The building in the immediate foreground with a cupola is the Mount Vernon Cotton Mill, at the time one of the largest buildings in the city that would be used as a warehouse and jail during the Civil War years.

Directly behind the mill is the Lee-Fendall House on Oronoco Street, painted to resemble a masonry building, although the structure actually was built completely out of wood. To the left, immediately adjacent to "Lee Corner" is the Edmund Jennings Lee House, which also still stands today. Also pictured to the right side of Washington Street in the distance is the Joseph Lloyd House, Hoffman Sugar House and Brimstone Castle, the former school of Benjamin Hallowell. The columned building with the tall cupola further to the right is the federal courthouse, built in 1838 and designed by Robert Mills, the original designer of the Washington Monument.

On the left side of the painting, the tall spire of Benjamin Latrobe's City Hall clock tower can be seen rising in the distance, and farm fields still abound north of town.

Ship activity on the Potomac River documents the prosperity and global influence of Alexandria in the decade just before the city would be consumed by 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.