



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A growing city's growing water supply.

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Image: Alexandria Water Company, ca. 1948. Souvenir Virginia Tercentennial 1607-1907 of Historic Alexandria, Virginia, by Andrew J. Wedderburn (Alexandria, 1907). Courtesy, Office of Historic Alexandria.

In the first century after Alexandria's founding in 1749, the town's new citizens essentially used polluted water for the essentials of daily life. Drinking water was obtained from both public and private wells installed near homes and businesses, only feet away from where human and animal wastes were deposited into privies or buried just under the surface of the ground.

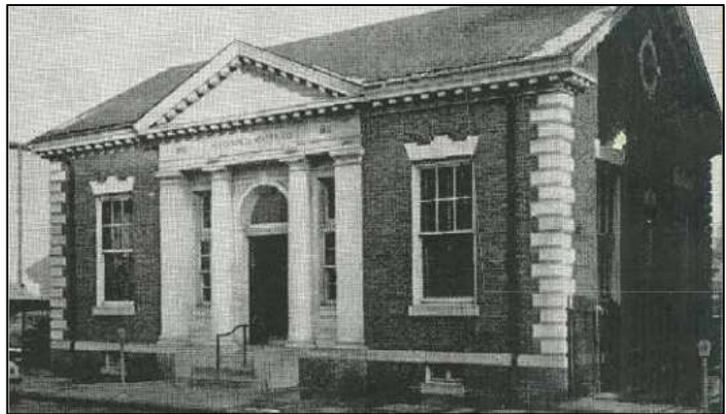
This situation, combined with poor drainage on local streets, fetid streams of slow-moving water passing through sparsely developed areas and a lack of even basic trash collection routinely caused unsanitary conditions and health crises, particularly in the warm summer months.

It was not at all unusual for townspeople of means to maintain a summer residence on the outskirts of the growing city. In the early years, these secondary residences were often built just a few blocks to the west, outside the densely built downtown area towards Shuter's Hill and eventually moving further out to the rural wilds of eastern Fairfax County near the Episcopal Seminary.

After 101 years of using questionable well water, the Alexandria Water Company was chartered by the Virginia General Assembly on March 22, 1850. The concept of clean, potable water available to all was the brainchild of Alexandria schoolmaster Benjamin Hallowell, who envisioned the transport by gravity of fresh water seven miles eastward from Cameron Run, a watercourse that meandered to the Potomac River southwest of the city.

Hallowell's simple idea revolutionized public health and safety in the decade just before the Civil War and laid the groundwork for the city's growth and expansion during that period. When the war years of the early 1860s completely overwhelmed the city's health care facilities, one can only imagine the death and devastation that would have occurred without a dependable supply of clean water.

Construction of the water system began in 1851, and the first water was pumped to Alexandria through cast-iron pipes in June of the following year, the same month that the incidences of seasonal diseases historically increased in Southern cities. The first water mains originated at a pumping station constructed near Telegraph Road and Cameron Run, just beyond its confluence with Holmes and Backlick Runs.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

An existing 9,000-foot millrace was used to connect to the pumping station, providing enough head to not only provide an adequate flow of water to reach Alexandria, but also to power an overshot water wheel to pump water to a large storage basin created on an adjacent property where it reached an elevated flow line level of 96.5 feet.

Once the system was activated, water flowed continuously to the growing city, fed entirely by gravity. In 1855, a steam engine and boiler were added to supplement the water wheel, and those features remained in place until the 1950s. At that time, the Alexandria Water Company maintained its main office at 107 North St. Asaph St., seen in this image taken in about 1948.

In around 1874, a second storage basin was added next to the first, thereby doubling capacity for the large industrial complexes being developed at the waterfront and rail yards at that time.

By the turn of the 20th century additional sources of water were needed, so eventually the Barcroft Dam was built in Fairfax County, and later water was tapped from a reservoir at Occoquan in Prince William County. By 1933, the gravity-fed system was replaced by pumps to sustain the ever-growing need for water.

“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.