



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The long road back to prosperity

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Image: Parade for Alexandria's 150th Anniversary, 1899. Photo, Souvenir Virginia Tercentennial of Historic Alexandria, Va., Past and Present, by Alex J. Wedderburn, Courtesy, Office of Historic Alexandria

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, Alexandria drifted for decades as it tried to rebuild its pre-war economy and neglected infrastructure and adjusted to massive social changes. It was a challenging time, as the city reflected on both its loss in the 19th century competition to become one of America's great cities and its vanquished role as the northernmost Confederate city in the devastated South. Progress was very slow due to poor tax revenues and the dispirited attitude of many of Alexandria's longtime residents.



But this period also offered amazing new opportunities for those willing to invest their time and energy into creating a new Alexandria, open to all, immediately adjacent to the nexus of power in the re-United States.

Immediately after the war, the return of retail stores and development of new industries offered a modicum of hope for a largely unemployed population, exacerbated by the hundreds of Confederate soldiers returning to their tattered hometown.

But the former storefronts of city artisans now were replaced by hardware, grocery or low-quality dry goods stores, providing only the barest necessities to those unable to leave or committed to rebuild. Although racial tensions sometimes rose to the surface on city streets, the post-war population by and large quietly learned to co-exist and eventually rely upon one another in their mutual effort to prosper. For years Alexandria plodded along, with no recognizable symbols that it had finally turned the corner on the road to success. But in 1899, the 150th anniversary of the city's founding, perhaps the greatest celebration in the history of Alexandria finally turned the tide of despair.

The event was so significant, it was known locally as "The Awakening," the end of a deep, lethargic sleep which had hung over the city for so long that many younger people had no previous experience with the city's previous greatness. On May 19 of that year, *The Alexandria Times* printed an editorial that stated:

"Alexandria can have a great celebration. All that is needed is for our merchants and citizens to make up their minds to celebrate, and the celebration will become an assured fact." Seizing on this



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

opinion, within weeks Mayor George Simpson had assembled a committee to develop an event that would celebrate the city's history and promote Alexandria's potential as an emerging industrial center.

With the support of President William McKinley, the U.S. Army and Navy were asked to play a leading role in the celebration, and these forces did not disappoint.

At 7:30 p.m. on October 11, three naval vessels, the *Machias*, *Dolphin* and *Marietta* anchored in the Potomac River south of Prince Street and were individually lit, from bow to mast to stern, with thousands of small electric lights, supplemented by huge revolving searchlights, turning night into day for the cheering Alexandrians standing along the wharves.

Although the *Marietta* was obliged to leave at sunrise the following morning for the Philippines, the two remaining ships fired the National Salute at noon that day, while church bells rang and engines whistled throughout the city.

The roar of public enthusiasm could be heard throughout the city, and a writer for *The Washington Post* commented later that of all the celebrations he had seen across the world, Alexandria's 150th anniversary commemoration was the most remarkable. He boasted that virtually every building in the city was decorated with bunting or American flags to honor the occasion.

Finally, at 2:45 p.m., a two-and-a-half-mile long parade, seen here, formed at the corner of Washington and King streets, winding its way throughout the downtown streets.

The *Post* reporter summed up the scene by commenting, "The line of march was one solid mass of shouting, cheering, rejoicing humanity ... giving unlimited expression to their feelings of joy." For Alexandrians, a citywide celebration was long overdue and set the stage for growth well into the 20th century.

"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.