



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### A key Potomac River slave trading port

*Alexandria Times, January 12, 2017*

*Image: 1836 woodcut illustration taken from a broadside advertisement of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Library of Congress.*

**F**rom its earliest days of colonization, America depended on the toil of European indentured servants and African slaves to perform manual labor.

With little thought to the inhumane nature of the practice, colonists justified it as necessary to build towns and cities all along the East Coast, and to develop and maintain the farms and plantations needed to sustain the population and economy.

Initially, slavery was not only legal but was encouraged throughout the colonies. After the American Revolution, President George Washington believed that the abundant natural resources of the fledgling United States would become the “bread basket” of the world, feeding the populations of far-away countries through agricultural enterprise and ever-expanding trade routes.

Alexandria was a significant participant in this economic model, and developed an efficient system of trade between England, Africa and the Caribbean, moving artisan, agricultural and human cargos in a circular route between these places. In fact, the site for the town of Alexandria was determined in 1749 to be located near Hugh West’s 1732 tobacco inspection station, once at the foot of Oronoco Street, which weighed and affirmed the quality of Virginia tobacco before it was shipped to England.

Once that commodity made its way across the Atlantic, ships were reloaded with goods and supplies largely unavailable in America, and the vessels moved on to Africa, where human chattel were forced onboard, housed below decks for the long voyage back to Alexandria in intolerable conditions.

A variation of this trade route included Caribbean islands where harvested sugar cane would be loaded to be processed as sugar and liquor back in Alexandria by slaves who had arrived earlier. The cycle repeated monthly, with thousands of enslaved Africans coming to Alexandria and then being dispersed for forced labor throughout Virginia.

In the 18th century, the sale of slaves arriving in Alexandria was spontaneous. Slave traders would hold previously unannounced auctions on street corners of the city, or in the marketplace near City Hall, but by the early 1800s circumstances changed that resulted in the sale of slaves becoming one of Alexandria’s major industries. In 1808, due to the growing resistance to slavery from industrializing





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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Northern states, Congress passed legislation that forbid the importation of African slaves into the United States.

At the same time, decades of tobacco production finally exhausted Virginia lands and invention of the Cotton Gin caused a massive demand for labor in the Deep South. Thus, the movement of slaves by the thousands began between the ports of Alexandria, then part of the District of Columbia, and New Orleans. Slaves were moved southward by ships, wagons and even by walking through the dreaded Natchez Trace, an old Native American forest trail that extended over 400 miles through Mississippi and Tennessee.

Pictured here is an 1836 woodcut illustration taken from a broadside advertisement of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which documents the notorious chattel trade taking place at the Alexandria waterfront. It describes the scene of a packet vessel preparing to sail as follows: "In January, 1834, J. Leavitt, Editor of the New-York Evangelist, visited the "Tribune," then in port and preparing to sail with a cargo of human beings next week... The hold is appropriated to the slaves and is divided into two apartments. The after hold will carry 80 women, and the other about 100 men. On either side were two platforms running the whole length, one raised a few inches, and the other about half way up to the deck. They were about five-and-a-half to six feet deep. On them they lie, as close as they can stow away."

*"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.*