



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Alexandria cotton mill that became a Civil War torture chamber

*Alexandria Times, May 11, 2017*

Image: The Mount Vernon Cotton Mill, 515 N. Washington Street, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Although Alexandria's Civil War hospitals were places of pain and suffering throughout the Civil War, their place was secondary to the misery experienced by prisoners in the city's prison system, also created on a moment's notice using buildings not designed for this purpose, but often conscripted and put into service within days. Although the war's most notorious prison for the neglect and inhuman treatment of Union troops was at Andersonville, Georgia, where 13,000 Union troops died within a fifteen month period, a report prepared at the war's end confirmed that Confederate deaths in Northern prisons actually exceeded Union fatalities recorded in the south. Alexandria's loathsome prisons were far from models of prison management, and jailed both Union deserters and Confederate soldiers, often side by side.



Five prisons have been identified in Alexandria during this time, with only two actually having been used for human incarceration previously; the old City Jail on St. Asaph Street and the Price, Birch Slave Jail at 1315 Duke St. The others were large buildings housing the former Green furniture factory at Prince and South Fairfax Streets, the Odd Fellows Hall at 218 North Columbus St., and the massive Mount Vernon Cotton Mill at 515 North Washington St., renamed the Washington Street Military Prison. These facilities were under the command of Capt. R.D. Pettit.

Rufus Dudley Pettit was born in the small Hudson River town of Cold Spring, New York and was orphaned at a very young age. At age 18, he apprenticed with an architect, but within four years had offered himself for service in the Mexican War with Company A in the 1st New York Volunteers. He returned to Cold Spring as a farmer, but when the Civil War broke out in 1861, he recruited a company of like-minded men from New York State and left for Virginia, seeing action Peninsula Campaign, Antietam and Fredericksburg. He was forced to resign his commission for health reasons, but in July 1864 he was pressed into non-combat service to oversee prisons in Alexandria. As part of his duties, he was directed to report to the military headquarters every three days on the status of prisoners, their diet and rations, the discipline of the guard and financial reports on the cost, savings and efficiencies of the facilities.

At first, Alexandria's prisons were well-regarded and, unlike many other cities, access to proper food, clothing and supplies was not a problem. But it did not take long for Pettit's temper and impatience with individual prisoners to boil to the surface. In November 1865, he was court marshaled for inhumane treatment and brutalizing prisoners at the Washington Street and Prince Street prisons just months after assuming control.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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To exact admissions and confessions from prisoners, Pettit would have their hands handcuffed behind their backs and dangled by a rope above the floor for hours on end. To add to their torment, prisoners would be suddenly dropped and twisted, with their breasts or faces only a foot or two off the floor, then they would be kicked and beaten, breaking bones and noses in the process.

Pettit was convicted of the charges against him, and dismissed from military service. He returned to Baldwinsville, New York where, possibly as a result of his military trial, he took up law. A collection of his prison papers is archived at the Alexandria Library Special Collections.

*“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.*