



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### The discovery on Gibbon Street

*Alexandria Times*, July 6, 2017

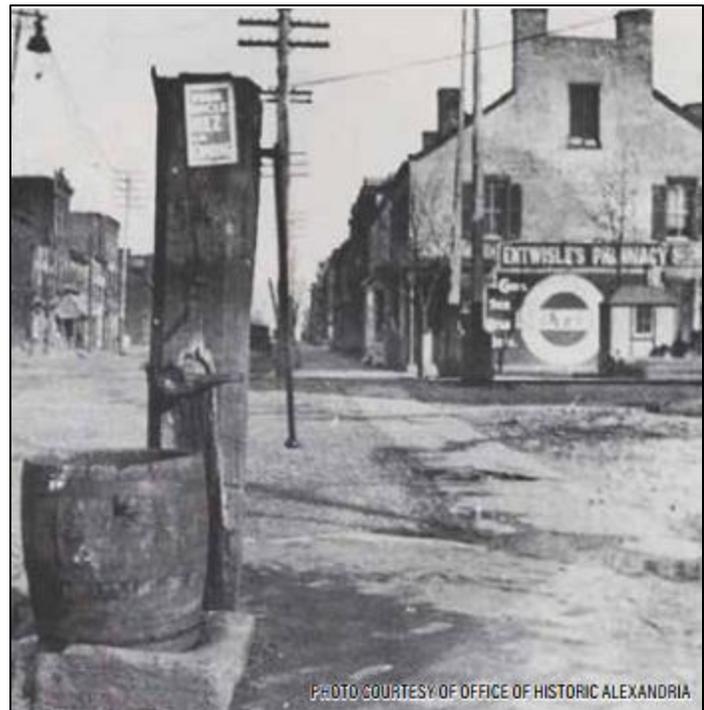
Image: Municipal fire well, Courtesy, Office of Historic Alexandria.

In March 2006, archaeologists at the Alexandria archaeology division of the city's Office of Historic Alexandria received a call that something unexpected was found beneath the street surface and might be of interest. This was a common occurrence, as city workers routinely contact the agency when artifacts or evidence of underground structures is discovered during the installation or maintenance on city streets. In this case, it was a sewer line being installed at the corner of Gibbon and South Pitt streets.

Steven J. Shephard responded to the call and was surprised to find what was later identified as a 19th century municipal fire well, left almost completely intact below ground after it was abandoned in the first half of the 20th century. Such wells were routine in Old Town during this time, and the above-ground section of the water pump apparatus included at least two levers to pump water. As seen above in this image of a similar Alexandria pump from the period, a one-foot iron lever (just above the barrel) was available to the public for general use, while a larger 42-inch iron lever high up could quickly pump huge amounts of water into fire equipment during a conflagration.

The Gibbon Street well was a circular dry-laid brick cylinder, nine feet in diameter and eight feet deep, and was found filled with water. The top of the well was covered with wide wooden boards.

Laid over rough timber supporting joists in the center of this decking, there was a hole cut through to provide vertical access to the pump, fashioned out of a nine-foot-long, one-foot-diameter wooden pole, bored with a 2-and-a-half-inch hole through its length. The bottom of the hole was plugged with a wooden dowel and another two-inch hole was drilled crosswise through the diameter of the pole about a foot from the bottom. When either pump handle was pulled, water would be drawn into the horizontal hole, and then upward through the vertical shaft to fill the void of the displaced air inside, emptying at the water facet just above the street.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

---

Above the street surface, the top two feet of the pump shaft consisted of a cone-shaped piece of wood with an iron collar at its bottom end and its narrow end tapered at the top.

A separate piece of wood was fitted over the upper end of the pump timber, which had been tapered to a narrower diameter to fit into this second piece. The two pieces were then tightly bound together, appearing as one single timber. At Gibbon Street, when the pump was abandoned, the top portion was simply broken off, preserving the below grade technology under the street, which extended far under the sidewalk as well. The weight of the waterlogged pump was estimated at about 400 pounds.

The fire well was one of 284 such wells across Old Town recorded on Sanborn Insurance maps of the period. An investigation of late 19th-century Sanborn maps found that the Gibbon Street well was not present in 1891, but was located on the 1896 map, providing the five-year window for the date of its construction. After the well was dismantled and investigated in 2006, the bottom of the well was sampled and found to contain gray sand. No artifacts were observed inside the well. The water was then pumped out and archaeologists appropriately recorded the structure, as is the city standard procedure. The brick well-structure was left intact in the ground and was filled with gravel to allow for the installation for the sewer line.

*“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.*