



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Soldiers Rest compound formed a small Civil War city

Alexandria Times, September 28, 2017

Image: Soldiers Rest, Library of Congress.

When the American Civil War broke out in Alexandria in May 1861, many expected that the conflict would be short-lived, lasting only a few weeks or months at the most. But after the first year, reality set in and a prolonged conflict appeared inevitable.

As an occupied Southern city, used as a command and control center for the Union Army, Alexandria's strategic location, port and rail infrastructure was a prime staging area for the movement of troops, supplies and equipment between the opposing armies. As the war dragged on, it soon became necessary to provide a major facility for temporarily housing military personnel moving to the front lines further south, and the recuperation of men returning from those same areas after months of exhaustive service.

In 1862, Union authorities conscripted a large warehouse at Duke and Union Streets for a "rest and retreat," but a year later built a huge facility further west providing state-of-the-art amenities. Known as the "Soldiers Rest," the compound was on the south side of Duke Street, and stretched over a two-block area between Fayette and West Streets, immediately adjacent to the tracks of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad.

The site was documented in this detailed 1864 lithograph, produced by master lithographer Charles Magnus who also chronicled the city in his famous "Bird's Eye View of Alexandria." An enlarged version of this is the backdrop for the city council chambers at city hall. Magnus' remarkable attention to detail is instructive in this rendering, and instills in the viewer the sense of purpose and commitment in creating such a facility.

The Soldiers Rest complex was fully enclosed by a high fence, and accessed by four ornate wooden gates, two at the Duke Street corners, and two at the southeast railway corner, each topped by a large gilded eagle. The railway entrances were protected by a small guard house adjacent with a small Parade Ground that featured a stage for reviewing mustering troops.

The largest building on the site was the dormitory building, which provided heated lodging space for hundreds of soldiers, surrounded by a large open verandah. In the center was a large dining hall,





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

accessed from the dormitory by two covered walkways, with a huge kitchen on its west side. All three buildings featured high clerestory windows to enhance natural light and ventilation.

Store houses for meats, vegetables and grains were placed just off the kitchen wing. North of the dining hall and kitchen was a large grass oval with a tall American flag at its center, and to the west a guard quarters for those stationed at the site. Further west, along what would have been Payne Street, were sanitary facilities including a wash house, water closets and a wood working shop. The block between Payne and West Streets was occupied by a tented campground.

From May 28 to Oct. 4, 1864, the Soldiers Rest was further transformed into a hospital. By 1866, a year after the war ended, the buildings and resources of the site were auctioned off.

“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.