



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Flooding in Alexandria, past and present

Alexandria Times, October 19, 2017

Potomac River flooding, June 11, 1889. Alexandria Library, Special Collections..

After fire, flooding is the most frequent natural disaster in Alexandria. This isn't true just in Hunting Creek, but also along the waterfront, due in part to the filling of land into the Potomac. Two floods that took place in the 19th Century warrant special mention.

The first started on April 8, 1861, when northeasterly winds slowed the flow of water from the Potomac into the Chesapeake and from the Chesapeake into the Atlantic. The subsequent storm lasted two days. What started on the 8th with a few timbers floating off, and the small boat *Ellinor* being dashed against some logs and broken into pieces near the ferry slip turned into something much worse on the 9th, when the upper coal wharves were flooded completely, as were the marshes and lowlands.

By 5 p.m., Fishtown, a temporary village erected during the peak fishing season of March to June with wooden boards, was submerged, with multiple structures being carried off. Residents tried to flee either by boat or by climbing on the roofs of nearby houses. The dock at Queen Street overflowed into Union Street, and streets such as Cameron, Queen, The Strand and Union became streams where one could navigate a boat. The flood of 1861 would probably be more ingrained in the memories of its residents if Confederates hadn't attacked Fort Sumter three days later.

The second flood was in June 1889, a week after the unveiling of the Appomattox statue on Prince Street. Local papers reported that "all along the Strand from the lower shipyard to the old American coal company, several feet of water were on the first floors of every building, while Union Street from Prince to the cove above Fishtown was an unbroken canal, suggestive of a scene in Venice."

In part because of the decision to fill land into the Potomac, floods are an all too common historical companion of Alexandria's waterfront. Despite modern techniques to control floods, the flooding of the past couple of years reminds us that flooding at the Alexandria waterfront is probably not confined to our historical past.



"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



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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.