



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### The origins of Alexandria

*Alexandria Times, November 9, 2017*

Map, Library of Congress. Portrait, Carlyle House Historic Park.

Two of the most frequently asked questions of the Office of Historic Alexandria are “Where did Alexandria get its name?” and “What brought the Scottish founders of Alexandria to Virginia?” For years, the answers to both questions vexed staff of the city’s comprehensive history agency, as there appeared to be no definitive answers. But a variety of theories, including one developed just recently, provide some perspective on the questions.



MAP/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
IMAGE/CARLYLE HOUSE HISTORIC PARK

The naming quandary has traditionally been settled by recognizing that members of the Alexander family, whose name is derived from the ancient Greek ruler, were probably the city’s namesake. Several members of the Alexander clan had settled in the area some years before the city’s founding, and may have needed some cajoling to accept that their farms would be needed in support of a proposal to develop an 18th-century trading port in Northern Virginia.

The original name of the area was “Belhaven,” as indicated on a 1749 map of the new town’s site, seen here, drawn by a 16-year-old surveyor named George Washington. Belhaven was abandoned in favor of the Alexandria name even before a final decision was made to select the site over a nearby competitor along Cameron Run by the colonial legislature.

Another good possibility is the city was named after Alexandria, Scotland, a small town in the region along the River Clyde, from which many of our city’s founders hailed. Some historians argue that these same founders may actually have aspired to associate the new town in Virginia with the ancient cultural center of knowledge, Alexandria, Egypt. It is a safe bet that a combination of all of the above may have been at play.

Addressing the reason Alexandria’s founders first came to Virginia, and later sought to develop a port, is quite simple: no religious zeal or lofty political aspirations here, it was simply a matter of money, or lack of it. History evolves from both circumstance and event, and in Alexandria the event primary to its



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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founding is the 1710 Treaty of Union that unified the Kingdom of England and Kingdom of Scotland as Great Britain in May 1707.

For the first time, Scottish investors were permitted to trade with the British colonies in America, and at the time Virginia tobacco was the most lucrative trading commodity available. This newfound opportunity was particularly attractive to men from established, well-heeled families, but who were legally disqualified from a financial inheritance due to the status of their birth order, such as second-born son John Carlyle, seen here in the insert.

These individuals jumped at the chance to secure wealth outside of the traditional structure of the British Isles that constrained their personal economic prosperity.

The circumstance that clinched the bond between Scotland and Virginia were the natural trade winds across the Atlantic Ocean that whisked sailing vessels from the colonial coast to the region around Glasgow, Scotland and the River Clyde. A crossing was weeks shorter to Glasgow than to other international ports. This weather occurrence solidified the strategic connection between the two locations, as raw tobacco could be transported from America and processed for sale in European cities much sooner than at other ports.

In turn, this increased the opportunity for reverse trade in Scottish products, including woolens and rugs, badly needed in the fledgling colony. The westerly trade winds back to Virginia were best accessed off the coast of Africa, sadly resulting in the nefarious triangular trade route that supported the unbridled importation of captured African slaves to North America. A century later, this would lead to Alexandria's status as America's second-largest slave trading center.

*“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.*