



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

An early history of Alexandria's waterfront

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Image: Library of Congress

As Alexandria prepares for the visit of the *Godspeed* (a replica of one the three original ships that sailed from England to Jamestown) this October, the Office of Historic Alexandria thought it pertinent to talk about Alexandria's early waterfront history:

In 1984, a Louis Berger & Associates archaeological survey discovered prehistoric tools that point to American Indian fishing at Jones Point as early as 3000 BC. Other archaeologists suggest this as the time period when salinity levels in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries stabilized. Constant salinity levels allowed the Bay to support large oyster populations, as well as anadromous fish, such as American shad and white perch, to successfully spawn. In the days before European contact, shad and perch went as far up the Potomac River as Great Falls during their spawning seasons.

The first people that Europeans encountered on the site of present-day Alexandria, the Doegg (an Algonquian people also known as the Tacci) called Jones Point Assamaomeck, which means "middle fishing place." Around 900 AD, archaeologists believe that fish increased its role in the local Native American diet. Local peoples became increasingly sedentary and sought food that could be stored.

The local fish runs coincided with the seasons that saw crop and nut supplies run out. During high tide, the river would rise and cut off Jones Point from the mainland.

The 1984 study did not find evidence of native settlements on Jones Point between 900 and 1600 AD, but the John Smith map of 1608 lists a seasonal village on the south bank of Hunting Creek named "Assamaomeck."

The Doegg used a variety of methods to catch local fish. One method was luring the fish to the surface for spearing by setting fires in dugout canoes at night. They also trapped fish by building fish weirs, which used wooden stakes to direct the fish as they swam. While some of these engravings show weirs that were used farther south in Virginia, it is important to note that Europeans who came to present-day Alexandria noted their use. One wrote in 1705:

"The larger fish, that kept in deeper Water, they were put to a little more Difficulty to take, But for these they made Weyr's; that is, a Hedge of small riv'd Sticks or Reeds, of the Thickness of a Mand's Finger, these they wove together in a Row, with Straps of Green Oak, or other tough Wood, so close that the small Fish cou'd not pass through ... (they) contrived so, that the Fish could easily find their Passage into those Cods (pockets) but not see their Way out again." Weirs have been used for fishing by many





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

different peoples, including those that lived near the famous Twin Heartshaped Weir in Penghu, Taiwan, and in regions as diverse as Chile, Ireland and Kenya.

The Doegg also used fish nets for large catches. In his diary, Smith noted that the Doegg men confined their activities to “fishing, hunting, wars and such manlike exercise,” whereas “the women and children do the rest of the worke.”

As far as we can tell, the history of humans in Alexandria has always included a relationship with the Potomac. The Doegg used it not just as a means of transportation, but also as a major source of food. Later Alexandria residents would find a way to commercialize the river’s abundant resources.

“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 staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.