



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Sullivan's Miracle Concrete Block press

Alexandria Times, June 20, 2019

Image: Auction notice, *Alexandria Gazette*, November 11, 1912.

For much of our history, Alexandrians have been eager to discover the next new thing. We are, after all, a town whose history has been intertwined with the business interests of some of its residents, including James B. Sullivan.

For much of his life, Sullivan worked as a bookkeeper for a grocery store. An immigrant from Canada, Sullivan lived with his wife, two daughters and his in-laws. Soon after concrete blocks were unveiled to the world at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, Sullivan founded a concrete block manufacturing company. He started as a one-man operation in 1907, naming it the Rowe Concrete Company after his in-laws, who presumably helped with the start-up capital.

The center of Sullivan's operation was a Miracle Concrete Block press, which will feature later in our story. Sullivan bought the plot of 205 E. Alexandria Ave. from J. Clinton Smoot in 1910, and soon built his house on it, probably by himself with concrete blocks that he created. The house is still standing. He also provided the concrete blocks for a new house for his daughter at 15 E. Alexandria Ave.

Sullivan had bigger plans than just producing concrete blocks for himself and his family. In 1909, before he built his own house, he entered into a partnership with Smoot and Frank Slaymaker.

Smoot Slaymaker owned 61 plots in the Park Addition development along both sides of East Alexandria Ave., and Frank Slaymaker was the sales agent for the entire development. Smoot Slaymaker provided the property, Sullivan the building materials and Frank Slaymaker would sell the houses.

They agreed to build a model at 207 E. Alexandria Ave. Cost overruns led Smoot Slaymaker to abandon the project, and the foreclosure on the property and the costs involved in building his own house drove Sullivan into bankruptcy. Smoot Slaymaker's wife later bought the house

R. F. KNOX Auctioneer.
BANKRUPT SALE

OF CEMENT BLOCK MAKING
MACHINE AND ATTACHMENTS.

By virtue of an order vesting in me authority so to do, entered by Walter C. Varney, Referee in Bankruptcy of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, in the matter of James B. Sullivan, bankrupt, the undersigned as Trustee in Bankruptcy, heretofore appointed in said cause, will offer for sale at Public Auction, for cash, upon the premises situated at the southeast corner of King and Peyton streets, in the City of Alexandria, at 11 o'clock, A. M.,

ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 1912,

the following personal property belonging to the estate of the said bankrupt: Miracle Cement Block Machine for making 6 x 12 x 13 x 24 cement blocks; Silo mould, 14 foot radius; benches, pallettes, tampers, wheel barrows, ornamental moulds, concrete brick, cement hoppers, sand screens, picks, shovels and a quantity of extra moulds; sheet iron stoves, stove pipe, cap, stove, and sill moulds, and a quantity of utensils for use in making cement block.

TERMS OF SALE:—This sale will be made subject to approval of the District Court of the United States for the Eastern District of Virginia, and the purchaser or purchasers of the same will be required to deposit with the said Trustee in Bankruptcy, on the day of sale, at least ten per centum of the purchase price of said property, and to pay the balance thereof to the said Trustee within ten days thereafter. Upon failure to comply with the terms of the sale, the purchaser shall forfeit the ten per centum cash deposit required.

T. C. SMITH,
Trustee in Bankruptcy in the matter of
James B. Sullivan, bankrupt.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

in a foreclosure auction for less than had been invested in its construction. That house is also still standing.

Sullivan's Miracle Concrete Block press was put up for auction in November 1912, along with the other equipment used to manufacture the concrete blocks. The construction method was soon surpassed by the use of poured concrete surrounding rebar for commercial buildings, while residences were built with the easier to use and lighter cinder block.

Sullivan returned to his life as a bookkeeper, becoming the chief clerk of the Alexandria Fertilizer Company in 1919.

“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. A special thanks to Lee Ness for his help with this article. For more information on historic buildings in Del Ray, please visit Potomacva.org.