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 inlaws. 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.
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.