



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Torpedo Factory was foray into the defense industry

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Image: The Naval Torpedo Station, Alexandria, around 1921. Photo, Library of Congress.

During World War I, Alexandria experienced tremendous growth in defense-related industry. Virginia Shipbuilding opened a shipyard at Jones Point, and an airplane factory with a U.S. Navy contract opened in part of the former Portner's Brewery.

But the biggest project started in September 1918 when the Navy announced plans to build a torpedo plant along the waterfront at the foot of Cameron Street.

The area occupied nearly two blocks, reaching from Lee Street to the river and south from Cameron Street to Fayette Alley. Work began in October when construction started on a 300-foot wooden pier and warehouses, lumberyards, planing mills and stables were demolished. The war ended a month later but construction plans proceeded.

A two-story structure, seen in this photograph taken around 1921, was built on the east side of Union Street facing the dock and a four-story building, visible in the background, was erected on the west side of Union. The entire project was estimated to cost around \$3 million.

The new torpedo plant offered jobs to hundreds of workers, with positions ranging from skilled mechanics to clerical staff. The first torpedo was completed in November 1920 and production continued until mid-1923 when the plant closed down. A small group of employees remained to take care of the facility and the hundreds of torpedoes stored there, and the factory opened to the public for tours on special occasions, like Navy Day. Unlike the shipbuilding and airplane factories that had closed down forever, the torpedo plant would be reactivated with the next World War.



“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.



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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.