

Alexandria's Original Street Names

By Pamela Cressey, PhD.



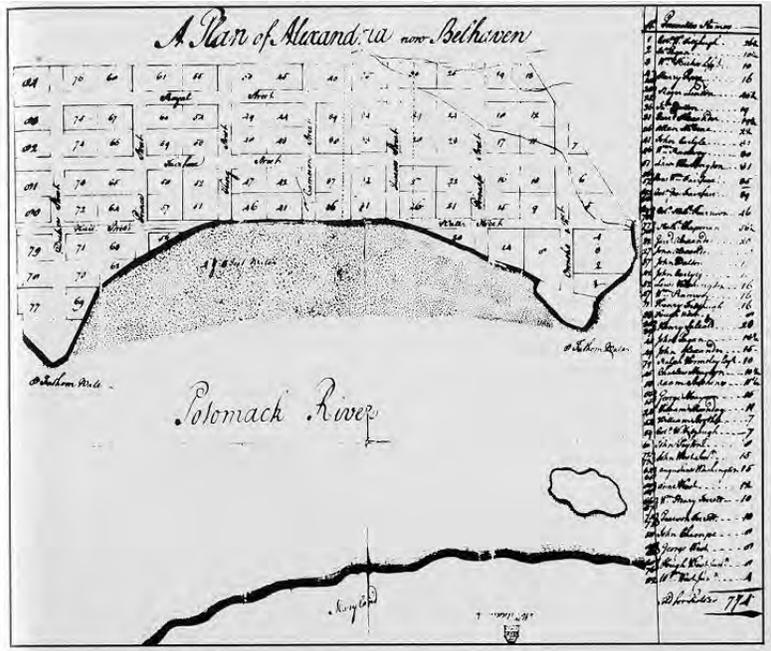
ALEXANDRIA'S ORIGINAL STREET NAMES

Historian William F. Carne writes in the *Annals of Alexandria* that “the manner of design of Alexandria was a memorial of the devotion of the Fairfax family (which only a century before had been with Cromwell in rebellion) to the Royal family of England. The plan of streets agreed upon was this:

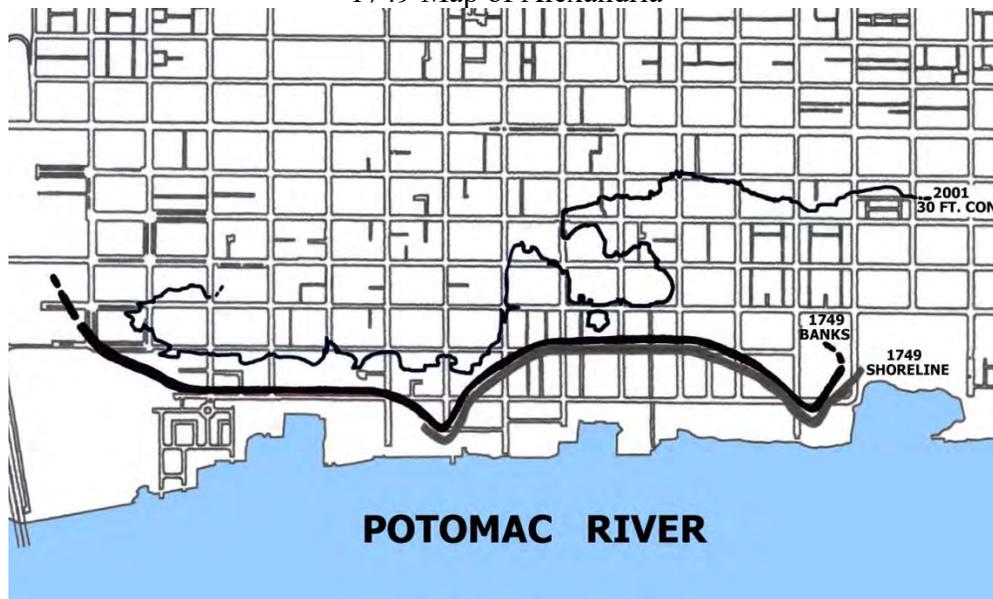
Duke
Prince
King
Fairfax CAMERON Royal
Queen
Princess
Duchess

William F. Carne, *Alexandria's Forgotten Legacy – The Annals of Williams F. Carne* (Alexandria Library, 1983), pp. 130-131

The Town of Alexandria originally had sixty acres (a parcel of lands of Philip Alexander, John Alexander, and Hugh West) on the south side of the Potomac River at the mouth of Great Hunting Creek in Fairfax County. In the spring of 1749 Alexandria town trustees hired John West, Jr., assistant surveyor for Fairfax County, to lay out the town which was divided into eighty-four one-half acre lots. The date for the sale of the first lots was scheduled for July 13th and 14th, 1749, at Hunting Creek Warehouse.



1749 Map of Alexandria

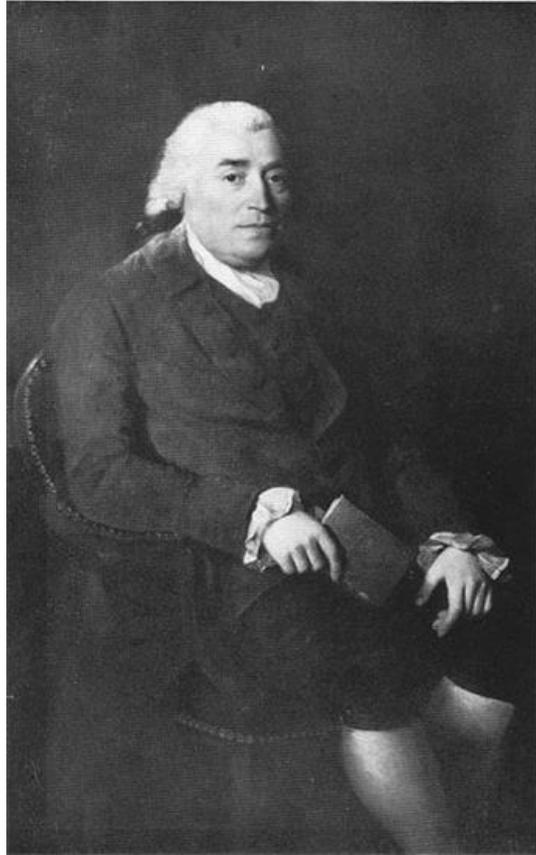


1749 Shoreline overlaid on the 2001 shoreline. *Alexandria Archaeology*

The charter issued to the trustees established a town:

“...covering 60 acres of land, parcel of the lands of Philip Alexander, John Alexander, and Hugh West, situate, lying and being on the south side of Potomac River about the mouth of Great Hunting Creek and in the county of Fairfax. ...beginning at the mouth of the first branch above the warehouse, and extending down the meanders of the said River Potomac to a point called Middle Pint, and thence down the said river ten poles; and from thence by a line parallel to the dividing line between John Alexander’s land and Philip Alexander, and back into the woods for the quantity aforesaid.” (Hening, Vol. vi, p. 214.)

Fairfax Street – One of original 1749 streets. Named after the family of Thomas, Sixth Lord Fairfax, Baron of Cameron and proprietor of the Northern Neck of Virginia. For many years Fairfax Street was considered Alexandria’s main thoroughfare.



Thomas, Sixth Lord Fairfax, Baron of Cameron,
proprietor of the Northern Neck of Virginia.
Painting by Sir Josiah Reynolds

Cameron Street – One of original 1749 streets. Named for Thomas Sixth Lord Fairfax, whose royal title was Baron of Cameron. Initially, Cameron Street extended from the Alexandria waterfront in a westerly fashion until its course was blocked by Christ Church at North Washington Street. After extensive litigation the City endeavored to seize the alley north of Christ Church, in an attempt to force a passage. Not until 1878, however, was this thoroughfare completely open for the first time in the City’s history. The *Alexandria Gazette* of May 13, 1878, describes the extensive litigation which ensued:

“Cameron Street was intended as the main street of the town and was placed in its centre. For a while it maintained this position. The court house was built upon it, the market was there, the principal hotel as was Washington’s town office. Two causes drove the business to King Street: One was that during the first half century of the town the head of Oronoko creek, pocoson, was on Cameron near Pitt Street, and made that section wet and marshy, while King Street at its crossing with Pitt although low, was easily passable. Another stop page to the progress of Cameron was the erection of Christ Church to bar its way in 1773. The movement of buildings which progressed from east to west was

completely stopped by it. So that even at this day on the square beyond the church there is not a single house, and there never have been any buildings there except a few slight frames.

When the town had taken rapid growth after the Revolution...it became important to procure a public thoroughfare near the church, and the town authorities obtained a right of way [around 1796] through a lane [Church alley] on the north side of the church. Many changes subsequently took place and a suit between the corporation and vestry settled the church line. On the 5th of October, 1852, a petition from RT. Douglas and others asking the opening of a street between Columbus and Washington Street, adjoining Christ Church on the north was read in Council and referred to Messrs. Violet, Massey, Rock and T. Smith.

On the 14th of December the committee reported a bill for opening the street, which was read and ordered to be published. [The legislation which was passed on February 8 1853, stipulated that the Corporation Attorney obtain deeds from John West Minor and wife for all the land beginning on the west line of Christ Church lot and running thence northerly with Washington street forty feet, then westerly parallel with Columbus street, then south with Columbus street to the church lot, then in a straight line to the beginning...]"

Royal Street – One of original 1749 streets. Named after the Royal family.

Duke Street – One of original 1749 streets. A male member of the Royal family.

Prince Street – One of original 1749 streets when Alexandria was surveyed. Prince, a male member of the Royal family.

King – One of original 1749 streets.

Queen – One of original 1749 streets.

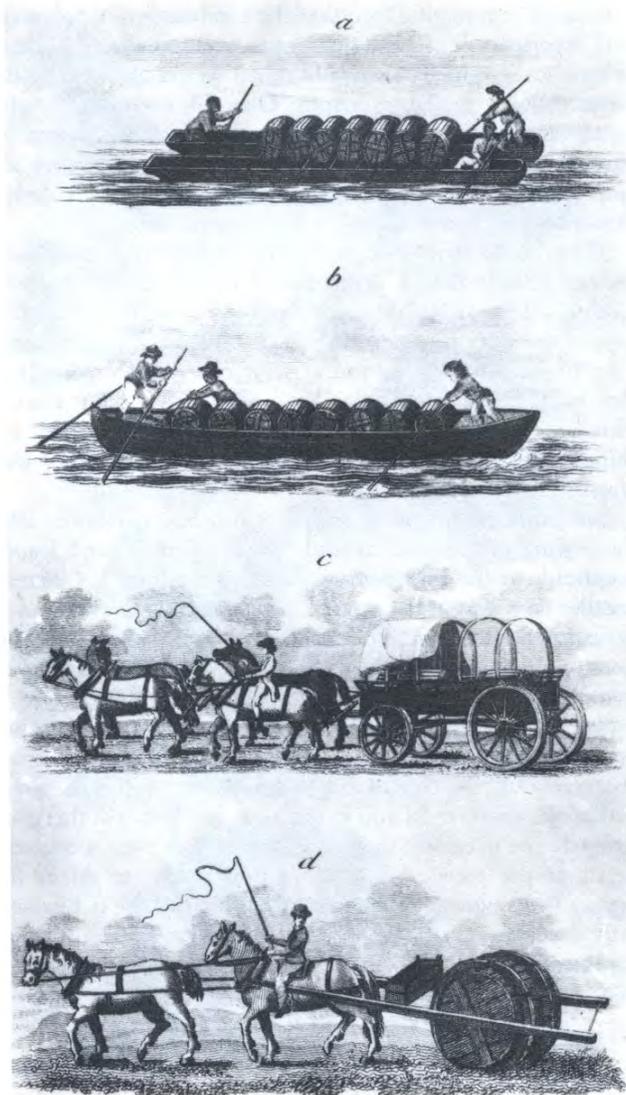
Princess – One of original 1749 streets.

Duchess – This street name would have corresponded with Duke at the south of the grid but was named Oronoko.

Oronoko Street – This street was named for a type of tobacco first produced on the Oronoko River by Oronoko Indians in Venezuela. Grown in Virginia and Maryland, Oronoko tobacco, was inspected, packed and transshipped in hogsheads to Whitehaven England and Glasgow Scotland. In the early 18th century before the establishment of the town, a tobacco rolling road entered Hugh West's Hunting Creek Warehouse from the west and wended it way to Point West, a well-known tobacco inspection station.

In examining the street grid plan for the formation of Alexandria, historians have written that Oronoko Street took the place of a thoroughfare which was formerly to be named "Duchess Street." There is no evidence to support this assertion, however, since an examination of the

early street grid plan for the town of Dumfries, Virginia, shows that town also had no “Duchess Street” but did showcase an “Oronoko Street.” If one views the present day Oronoko Street on an Alexandria street map, it does not correspond to the old rolling road named Oronoko. Indeed, it would have been impossible to roll a 1,000 pound tobacco hogshead along Oronoko Street to Point West, since for the longest time that region was a swamp known as “King George’s Marsh.” (Not until the late 19th century would the pocoson be entirely filled in. (po·co·sin /pə'kousən, 'poukəsən/ Show spelled [puh-koh-suhn, poh-kuh-suhn] Noun Southeastern U.S. A swamp or marsh in an upland coastal region.)



VI. Transporting hogsheads of tobacco to the public warehouses

Water Street – One of original 1749 streets. This was the street closest to the water’s edge. Renamed Lee Street in 1873 perhaps to honor the memory General Robert E. Lee who died in 1870. Most of the land between this street and the contemporary water line is filled-in land.

First Annexation 1762

At the urging of the local elites, the Virginia House of Burgesses passed in November 1762 an act permitting the enlargement of the town. This first annexation created several new streets and scores of additional lots which were auctioned in May 1763. Lands of Baldwin Dade, Sibel West, John Alexander the elder and John Alexander the younger which lie contiguous to the said town, beginning at the corner of the lot denoted in the plan of said town by the figures 77 (at the south side of duke St. Three lots from its intersection with Water Street on the said River Potomac, at the tower end of the said town, and to extend thence down the said river the breadth of two half acres, and one street thence back into the fields, by a line parallel to the lower line of the said town, such a distance as to include ten half acre lots and four streets; thence by a line parallel with the present back line of the said town to the extent of 17 half acre lots and eight streets, and from thence by a line at right angles with the last to the river. (Hening, Vol. vii, p. 604)

Pitt Street – Established 1762. Named after Sir William Pitt, (1708-1778), first Earl of Chatham, English statesman.

William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham [PC](#) (15 November 1708 – 11 May 1778) was a [British Whig](#) statesman who led Britain during the [Seven Years' War](#) (known as the [French and Indian War](#) in the United States). He again led the country (holding the official title of [Lord Privy Seal](#)) between 1766-68.

Pitt is best known as the wartime political leader of Britain in the [Seven Years War](#), especially for his single-minded devotion to victory over France. Victory made Britain dominant in world affairs. He is also known for his wide popular appeal, his opposition to corruption in government, his support for the American position in the run-up to the [American Revolution](#), his advocacy of British greatness, expansionism and colonialism, and his antagonism toward Britain's chief enemies and rivals for colonial power, Spain and France.^[1]

Thomas (2003) argues that Pitt's power was based not on his family connections but his extraordinary parliamentary skills by which he dominated the House of Commons. He displayed a commanding manner, brilliant rhetoric, and sharp debating skills that cleverly utilized broad literary and historical knowledge.^[2]

1. [^] Black (1992)
2. [^] Peter D.G. Thomas, "'The Great Commoner': The Elder William Pitt as Parliamentarian," *Parliamentary History*, July 2003, Vol. 22 Issue 2, pp. 145-63

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(Image is from Wikipedia. They say no copyright.)



William Pitt, first Earl of Chatham.
Painting by William Hoare ca. 1754

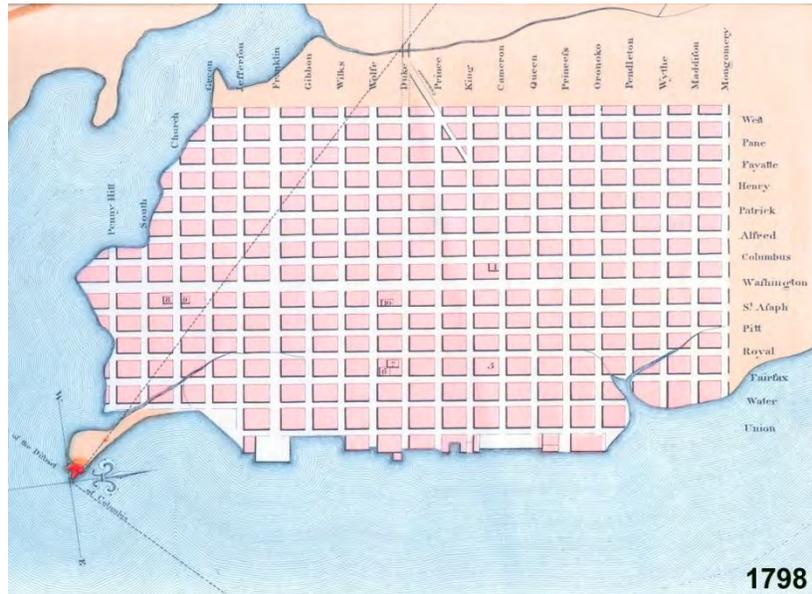
Wolfe Street – Established 1762; General James Wolfe (b. 1729, d. 1759). Killed at the Battle of Quebec, English General Wolfe's victory resulted in the removal of French forces from Canada.



The Death of General Wolfe painted by Benjamin West; engraved by William Woollett, 1776.
Library of Congress

Second Annexation 1796

With the second annexation, the town was extended on the north to Montgomery Street, to the west to West Street and to the south to the District of Columbia line. At times streets were laid out and named before the area was officially brought into the town. Alexandria was incorporated into the District later in 1796.



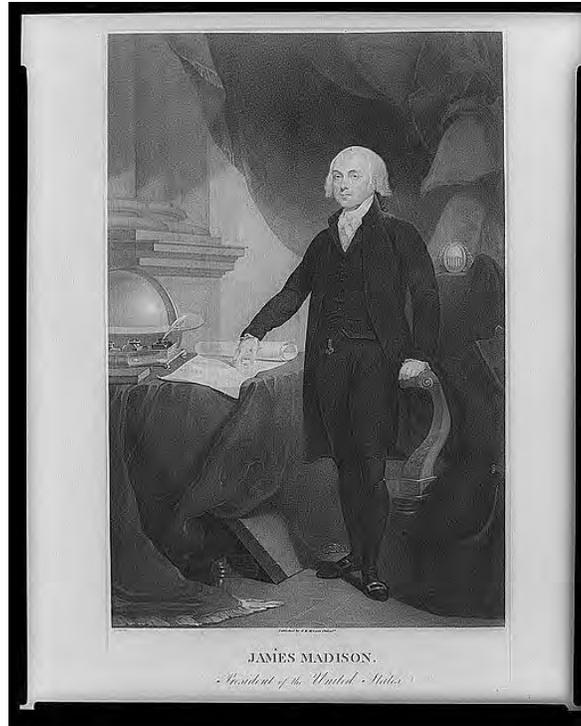
1798 Map of Alexandria after George Gilpin.
City of Alexandria, Office of Historic Alexandria, Alexandria, Archaeology

New streets included to the north: Pendleton, Wythe, Madison and Montgomery

Pendleton – Named for Edmund Pendleton (1721-1803) a jurist and patriot who as the President of the Virginia Convention of 1776 supported a resolution calling for Virginia delegates to propose independence from Great Britain.

Wythe Street — George Wythe (1726-1806), a jurist and statesman, was a renowned law school professor who taught jurisprudence at William & Mary College. Among his outstanding pupils was Thomas Jefferson who with Wythe in 1776 revised the Virginia State Constitution. Wythe signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and subsequently served as a delegate representing Virginia in the Federal Constitution Convention in 1787.

Madison – Named around 1785 for James Madison (1808-1816), the fourth president of the United States Madison was a Virginia jurist and architect of the Federal Constitution.



Engraving of James Madison by David Edwin
after a portrait by Thomas Sully
Library of Congress

Montgomery Street – named in the early 1780s for General Richard Montgomery (1738-1775), an American hero who was killed fighting at the Battle of Quebec.

New streets included to the west: St. Asaph, Washington, Columbus, Alfred, Patrick, Henry, Fayette, Payne, and West.

St. Asaph Street – Established in 1774. Some references state the street was named for Jonathan Shipley (1714-1788), the Anglican Bishop of St. Asaph Cathedral in Wales, a friend of Benjamin Franklin, and sympathetic to the American cause.

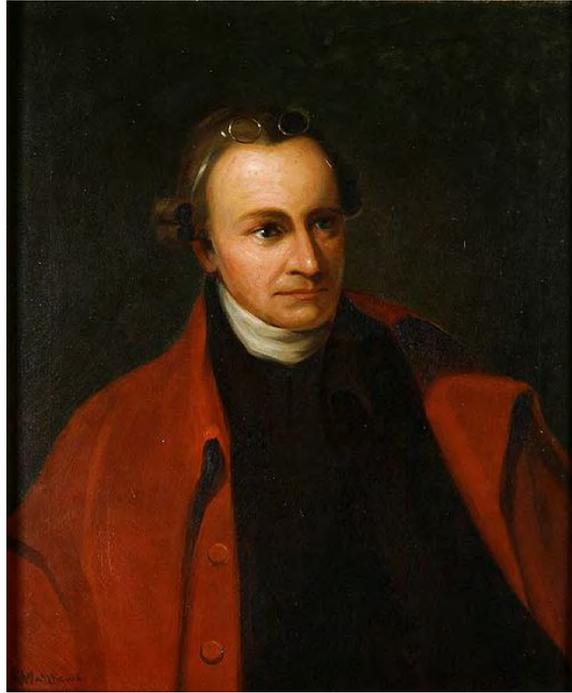
Washington Street – Established in 1783; named for General George Washington, President of the U.S., and the father of his country; one of two streets in Alexandria which is 100 foot wide.

Columbus Street – named for the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) who discovered America in 1492

Alfred Street – Named for the good British King Alfred the Great (849-899), the father of common law.

Patrick Henry – Two streets (Patrick and Henry), established 1784, were named for the renowned Virginia Governor, orator and patriot Patrick Henry (1736-1799). Henry was famous

for his “Give me liberty or give me death” speech in 1775 before the Virginia Convention at St. John’s Church in Richmond, VA.



Patrick Henry
Painting ca.1891 by George Bagby Matthews

Fayette Street – In use by 1784; named for the renown French General The Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834) who fought with Washington and the Colonials in securing their independence from Great Britain. Lafayette visited Alexandria on numerous occasions and in 1824 was honored by a grand banquet at Gadsby’s Tavern

In the American Revolution, the Marquis de La Fayette (1757-1834) served as a major-general in the [Continental Army](#) under [George Washington](#). Wounded during the [Battle of Brandywine](#), he still managed to organize a successful retreat. He served with distinction in the [Battle of Rhode Island](#). In the middle of the war he returned to France to negotiate an increase in [French support](#). On his return, he blocked troops led by [Cornwallis](#) at [Yorktown](#) while the armies of Washington and those sent by King [Louis XVI](#) under the command of General [de Rochambeau](#), Admiral [de Grasse](#), and Admiral [de LA touché Tréville](#) prepared for battle against the British.
Wikipedia



"Lafayette's baptism of fire" by Edward Percy Moran. c. 1909

Payne – Established after 1785. William Payne was a colonel in Revolutionary War, tax collector, Fairfax County surveyor, in the first Alexandria town government and a friend of and pallbearer for George Washington.

West Street – Established after 1785. The West family was one of the founding families of Alexandria. Hugh West was one of the three owners of the land on which Alexandria was founded. In the spring of 1749 Alexandria town trustees hired John West, Jr., assistant surveyor for Fairfax County, to lay out the town.

Streets included to the south: Wilkes, Gibbon, Franklin, Jefferson, Green and Church

Wilkes Street – Named for English statesman John Wilkes (b. 1727; d. 1797). English political agitator who fought the despotism of King George III, and championed the cause of the colonies.

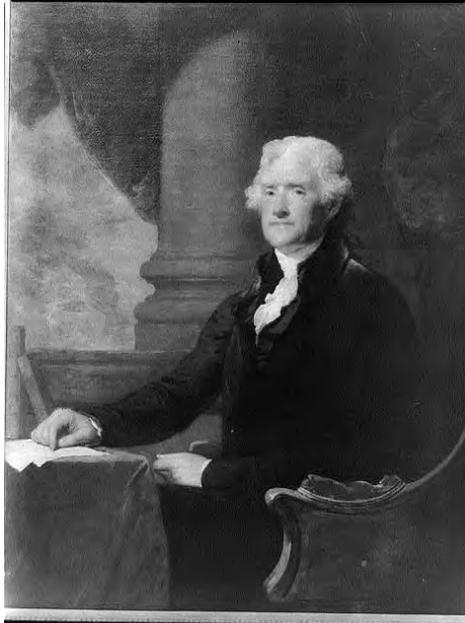
Gibbon Street – English author of *the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [1737-1794]

Franklin Street – Named for the illustrious Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (b. 1706; d. 1790) – talented inventor, philosopher, diplomat, printer, scientist — One of two early streets in Alexandria that were 100 foot wide – the other being Washington Street — The majority of streets in town measured 66 feet across with the exception of Water [Lee Street] which was about 50 feet across.



Benjamin Franklin, painting by Joseph-Siffrede Duplessis.
Library of Congress

Jefferson Street – Named around 1785 for Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States (1801–1808) — Jefferson was truly a renaissance man who wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In addition, he was also an inventor, political philosopher, amateur musician, agronomist, architect, and scientist.



Thomas Jefferson, photographic copy of a painting by Gilbert Stuart
Library of Congress

Greene Street – Named for Revolutionary War General Nathaniel Greene (1742- 1786) who commanded American and Colonial forces in the South [the Carolinas, Georgia]. A brilliant general Greene visited Alexandria in September 1783. Initially Greene commanded the Rhode Island militia until Washington appointed him a brigadier general in 1775. Serving with distinction at the battles of Brandywine and Trenton, General Greene eventually became commander of the Revolutionary Army in the South. Through his skillful exploits he drove the British out of the Carolinas and Virginia.

Theodore Thayer writes in his volume *Nathaniel Greene, Strategist of the American Revolution that*: After dining at Mt. Vernon, Greene and his aide bade goodbye to their host (Lund Washington) and started for Alexandria...When they arrived that Night, Greene was sick with a fever—He was taken to the house of Col. Fitzgerald where he lay for eight days desperately ill—Dr. Brown, a graduate of Edinburgh, attended him during his sickness during which he did not eat for six days. Many prominent men, among them Richard Henry Lee, visited him but he was too weak to enjoy their company. While he lay sick, Alexandria held a public dinner in his honor.



Major General Nathanael Green, illustration. *Library of Congress*

Church Street – Virginia’s oldest Catholic congregation met in a small chapel on the Southeast corner of Washington and Church Streets in 1795. “The chapel at Washington and Church Streets was used until 1810, when Father Neale purchased property at Chapel Alley and Duke Street, just east of the present rectory [314 Duke Street] in order to be nearer to the center of town. ...” The first burial recorded at St. Mary’s Church was that of merchant Cavan Boa who died in 1798. Subsequently, the first marriage at the Catholic Church was that of Cavan Boa’s widow, Margaret, to Matthew Robinson on April 16, 1799. The first map to be published of Alexandria by George Gilpin in 1798 depicts St. Mary’s Church and cemetery [S.E. corner, Washington & Church Street] as well as a Dutch Lutheran Church which once occupied the northeast corner of the same street face.

“Most of the streets are one chain (66 feet) wide, except Washington and Franklin streets, which are one hundred feet wide, and Union, Water and Commerce streets, which are only fifty feet wide, and Cameron street, north of Christ Church, and Potomac street, are forty feet wide. ... The streets, as laid out in 1749 and 1763, are nearly identical with the streets as now existing; but some mistakes or change led the extension of the squares between Royal and Pitt streets too far to the west, and those between Prince and Duke, and between Duke and Wolfe too far to the South; but the Council passed an act confirming these extensions, but provided that none of the houses on the old street lines should be removed until the owners chose to change them.” [*The Alexandria Gazette, August 8, 1873.*]