Foot of King Street

The Alexandria waterfront has changed dramatically since the City’s founding in 1749. The Potomac River once flowed along high banks about two blocks west of here near Water (now Lee) Street. Two hundred and fifty years ago, the area where you are standing was much lower in elevation and covered with water. Throughout the second half of the 18th Century, merchants and landowners directed laborers—including enslaved people—to grade the banks down to the river, fill the “sunken ground” in this marshy bay area, and construct wharves to the deeper river channel.

Visitors here after the Revolutionary War would have seen a wide range of imports unloaded onto John Fitzgerald’s wharf: muscovado sugar, coffee, chocolate, cheese, vinegar, and millstones. Fitzgerald, a prominent merchant and slave owner, also acted as an agent, importing indentured servants from places such as Dublin, Ireland, a practice that existed alongside chattel slavery in early Virginia. The wharves at the end of King Street were the center of port activities for more than 200 years. Small ships, steamships, and ferries docked on either side of the street, bringing goods and people from around the world and region.

John Fitzgerald, an immigrant from County Wicklow, Ireland, with countryman Valentine Peers, supported the colonial resistance against the British before the Revolutionary War. In 1774, they auctioned a shipment of Belfast linens and donated the profit to the “poor inhabitants of the town of Boston,” whose port had been closed by a British blockADE after the Boston Tea Party.

No portrait of Fitzgerald is known to exist, but he is described in a 1777 letter from Martha Dandridge Washington to Frances Randolph as an “agreeable, broad-shouldered Irishman.” Colonel Fitzgerald served under his lifelong friend George Washington for six years as his aide-de-camp during the Revolutionary War. Fitzgerald also served the public as a member of the House of Burgesses, mayor, and port collector.

The Town Trustees granted Fitzgerald and Peers the right to fill in the muddy flats south of King Street in 1778. Over the next quarter-century, their workers and enslaved laborers created land on the south side of King Street, extending the lot from Water (now Lee) Street to about this point. From adjusting warehouses on Union Street—added in 1762—and a wharf, Fitzgerald and Peers imported goods like sugar, kine, and wine.

The foot of King Street looks quite different from a century ago. Only one building remains from that time—the brick and stone structure on the right. It was originally built as Fitzgerald’s Warehouse and eventually housed businesses serving food and drink for more than 100 years (see below). The arch over King Street led to the ferry house that burned in 1857. The U.S. Naval Ordinance Station complex (of which, only the Torpedo Factory Art Center building survives) replaced the warehouses on the left to fulfill World War II defense needs. Despite these changes, there has been one constant: the Potomac continues to reclaim its riverbed during flood events.

In a June 26, 1797 letter to David Humphreys, George Washington commented on Alexandria’s altered topography:

“Alexandria you would scarcely know; it has increased since you were there [sic]! Two water streets where Shallop [punting vessels] then laded & unladed [sic] are extended into the river, & some of the best buildings in the Town erected on Haden.”


Fitzgerald’s three-story warehouse and wharf were described in this newspaper advertisement. Sailmaker Daniel McDougall occupied the sail loft in the upper floor.

The building still stands at the southeast corner of Union and King Streets.

Alexandria Daily Advertiser Apr 8, 1856

Fitzgerald’s Warehouse, c. 1930-1940s

Historic American Buildings Survey Library of Congress