

PRESERVATION PERSPECTIVE ON ALEXANDRIA WATERFRONT PLANNING

Endorsed by:

Alexandria Archaeological Commission

Alexandria Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission

Historic Alexandria Resources Commission

Greater Alexandria Preservation Alliance

Alexandria was a crescent bay enormously fruitful in fish when, centuries ago, Native Americans fished, camped and traded here. By 1749, European merchants had petitioned the crown for establishment of a town. They set about filling in the bay to reach the channel and provide footing for houses and warehouses. Ships from the West Indies and Europe unloaded their goods on our docks and took away Virginia tobacco and wheat. George Washington shopped here; the boy Robert E. Lee played here. Alexandria's waterfront had a role in the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and in both World Wars. Alexandria was home to free blacks who worked along the waterfront and also was a guilty partner in the slave trade. Today the waterfront the founders created from bluff and marshland is a precious asset of our National Historic Landmark District. Each block has a story to tell. It is our hope that the groups planning our waterfront's future will use the following principles as a basis for their discussions and decisions.

Preservation Planning

Enhanced Heritage Tourism: The public benefit of a preservation perspective cannot be over-emphasized. Preservation planning together with planning for interpretive/visitors services will enhance heritage tourism.

Economic Benefit to Waterfront Cultural District: The public will be served by the resulting economic benefit and by having a cultural district that complements the character of our City and provides a link to the surrounding historic districts. We envision planning that builds upon the success of the Torpedo Factory Art Center and works to make the waterfront a truly distinctive location that befits this authentic historic town.

Resource Inventory, Research, GIS

Historic Structures and Sites Inventory: All good planning starts with knowledge and information. A complete inventory of all the historic buildings and sites currently along the waterfront is needed.

Waterfront Properties and Structures Research: Research in photos, maps, deeds and other court documents must be completed and synthesized with past reports.

GIS Project and Uses: The GIS project, which has been funded by private sources and has not been finished, is of great importance. Overlay maps would be helpful in understanding the evolution of the waterfront over the years.

Need for Comparative Studies of other Historic Waterfront Cities: While recognizing that Alexandria is unique and will not replicate other cities, comparative studies of what has been done in other historic waterfront cities -- what works and what does not -- is extremely helpful.

Water-Related Organizations Inventory: Inventory all historic and current organizations that engaged in water-related activities.

Historic Interpretive Planning

Thematic Planning based upon Waterfront History: Thematic planning should be the foundation of the following: designing historic signs, activities, education, and tours; and considering land uses, building restoration and new design. By laying out key themes and time periods that represent waterfront history and are central to the character of the Alexandria waterfront, the public will have an enhanced experience and tourism will be better promoted.

Preservation as an Interpretive Whole must be Recognized: Preservation should not be seen on the basis of a single building or lot, but as part of a larger, interpretive whole that hangs together and is engaging. Key decisions should not be made prior to the collection of relevant material.

Protection Measures

Promotion of Easements: Easements should be strongly encouraged through promotion and seminars.

Adaptive Reuse of Historic Structures: Saving the existing historic buildings through adaptive reuse should be a priority. The greatest number of extant buildings are located south of King Street, between King and Duke Streets. This block comprised the central waterfront, with more wharves and commercial activity and with greater urban density and character. Other areas of the waterfront would be better utilized for parks and open space.

Preserving Historic Interiors: In addition to saving the historic buildings, many interiors have been altered by renovations. Often these renovations irrevocably change the use and destroy the historic fabric of the building and should be discouraged. (An example is that of the open floor space in the second story of the warehouse buildings that were used for markets.)

Preserving Historic Advertising: The building exteriors with early advertising painted on them are of importance to the character of the waterfront.

City Acquisition of Historic Structures: Sometimes the purchase of historic buildings by the City for adaptive reuse is the only way to save the building.

Supporting Water-Related Organizations: Provide a supportive environment for organizations engaged in water-related activities.

Historic Landscape

Invest in Appropriate Landscaping: The waterfront would benefit from a "sprucing up" initiative through a public and private partnership endeavor.

Streetscape and Hardscape within Historic Context must not be Omitted from Planning: Both the "streetscape" and the "hardscape" need to be planned within the historic context. Brick, stone, and historically correct materials should be used.

Lighting and Signage: Lighting is important, as is consistent and attractive signage throughout the City.

Intersections Importance to Historic Character: Other historic cities have found that intersections are critical in evoking the character of an area.

Open Space Considerations: Open space is desirable and is defined not only as parks but also space surrounding buildings such as courtyards and gardens.

Corridors and Arteries

Definition of Waterfront Area to be Incorporated into Planning: Because of the infill that occurred on the waterfront since Alexandria was founded, Lee and Fairfax Streets also can be considered as part of the waterfront and should be treated as such in any planning.

Preservation and Use of Historic Alleys: The alleys are of interest and historic significance as well. We have lost many of the alleys that served as arteries to the river. Identifying, designing and using the existing alleys would make the waterfront more accessible and evoke the historic context. Re-connecting the Strand for north-south pedestrian movement is paramount.

Recognize Importance of Rail Transportation to Waterfront: In addition, rail lines ran along the waterfront, providing transportation to and from the docks. Exploration of the history of (and future use) of rail in the City to improve transportation would be beneficial. Jones Point and the canal are the "bookends" of the waterfront.

Historic Commerce

Commercial History of Waterfront Development: Commercial development should reflect Alexandria's location on the river and maintain the link to the commercial history of the waterfront. Until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a large part of the commercial nature of the central waterfront was small-scale: homes and working places for traders, tavern keepers, artisans, as well as sailors and ship workers. Our seaport heritage is paramount even to our infrastructure. Wide wharves were used as streets.

Flood Levels

Planning for Rising Sea Levels: The impact of rising sea levels in the future must be taken into consideration in any planning. This will impact the viability of parks and commercial development, the cost of insurance and the cost to the City of protecting the waterfront from damage.

Living History

Living History Interpretation of the Waterfront: We endorse interesting and lively interpretation of the waterfront through a variety of means that are planned in a unified manner, such as living history, stories, film/photos, and signage. Imagine seeing military reenactments (major military intrusions during the War of 1812 and the Civil War occurred on the waterfront), shipbuilding, and sailors singing sea shanteys; and meeting individuals such as George Washington, John Carlyle, Edward Stabler, Robert E. Lee, and Peter Logan (a free black ship carpenter who became town crier) as you visit the waterfront.

In summary, our vision for the future must be rooted in the past. The Alexandria waterfront has evolved over the centuries. It is a mosaic, with each time period having interest and value. Our planning should enhance and celebrate the history of Alexandria so that its distinctive and unique qualities are understood and enjoyed.

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