Alexandria’s First Wharf

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Present Waterfront and the First Wharf

It is clear that the Alexandria waterfront today is not where it was when the town was first established in 1749. Now the central waterfront is on generally level ground and runs in roughly a straight line along the Potomac River from Franklin Street in the south to Pendleton Street in the north. In 1749, however, the town was situated on high bluffs that formed a crescent-shaped bay with two points of land at each end of town extending out into the bay. The point at the south end of the bay was Point Lumley, located at the foot of Duke Street, and the northern point was West’s Point, at the foot of Oronoco Street. It was only gradually that the points were extended and the bay was filled in by a process known as “banking out.” Important to this process of expanding the land on which Alexandria was located and arriving at the waterfront as it exists today was the building of wharfs.¹

Yet where did this process begin? Where was the very first Alexandria wharf? When was it built, and who built it? This paper addresses those questions. It also examines whether the wharf had been built when the ships bearing General Braddock’s army on its way to fight the French and Indians arrived in Alexandria in mid-March 1755.

These questions are of concern now because plans currently being developed for Alexandria’s waterfront certainly will affect the site of this old first wharf.

What the Archdeacon Saw

The clearest early indication that a wharf existed in Alexandria was when Archdeacon Burnaby visited Alexandria in October 1759 and wrote: “The town is built upon an arc of this bay; at one extremity of which is a wharf; at the other a dock for building ships, with water sufficiently deep to launch a vessel of any rate or magnitude.”²

We can infer from the Archdeacon’s observations that in 1759 Alexandria had not yet begun the process of filling in its crescent-shaped bay. The town was still situated on the bluffs surrounding the bay with the two points of land at each end of town. Also, as the Archdeacon wrote,
there was then only one wharf in Alexandria, and it was located at one of these two points, although he does not say which one.

The Archdeacon also observed a dock at one of the points. In colonial America, a dock was not a structure but “a sheltered area, as a cove, where ships anchor.” While the Archdeacon does not say at which point the dock was located, he does say that it was where shipbuilding was taking place. There is no evidence that ships were being built at the northern point in 1759 when the Archdeacon made his observations, but there is documentation that ships were being built then at the southern point, Point Lumley, now the foot of Duke Street, where Robinson Terminal South is located.

Thus the point where the Archdeacon observed the wharf was the northern point, West’s Point, now the foot of Oronoco Street, the present location of Robinson Terminal North. Yet exactly when before 1759 was the wharf built at West’s Point?

Hugh West, the Warehouse, and the Wharf

West’s Point is named after the West family, a member of which, Hugh West, owned a tobacco warehouse there even before the town of Alexandria was created. West, however, did not build the first tobacco warehouse on this spot. The first warehouse was built there by Simon Pearson around 1731. In 1732, this warehouse became a public warehouse by act of the General Assembly, which substituted it for a warehouse that was to have been built on Hunting Creek, approximately a mile and a half south of Pearson’s warehouse, a location that turned out to be “very inconvenient.” The new warehouse on Pearson’s land, however, was still officially called the Hunting Creek Warehouse. Sometime between 1735 and 1739, Pearson sold his land on the point and the warehouse to Hugh West. Before long, the point became known as West or West’s Point.

After buying the point, Hugh West took over operation of the public warehouse and was operating it in May 1749 when the General Assembly ordered the establishment of the town of Alexandria on land that included West’s Point and his public tobacco warehouse. The new town also included the landing for a ferry service that was authorized in May 1740 to go from Hugh West’s land at West’s Point to Frazier’s Point in Maryland and that was expanded in 1745 to go also to Addison’s Landing in Maryland. At the same time that the General Assembly established Alexandria, it also appointed Hugh West one of the trustees of the new town.

There should have been a wharf on West’s Point long before the creation of Alexandria. The act of the General Assembly in 1730 that established public warehouses in Virginia required that there be erected on land selected for a public warehouse not only “a good substantial warehouse or warehouses” but also “a good wharf at a landing adjoining thereto.” As has been indicated, a public warehouse was first established at West’s Point in 1732, and there should have been a wharf built at the adjoining landing shortly thereafter.

Three maps drawn in the 1740s, however, show the Point and warehouses but do not show a wharf there. The maps are Daniel Jennings’ 1744 survey for the lawsuit of John Alexander v. Hugh
West,\textsuperscript{14} Daniel Jennings’ 1746 survey of the Robert Hosing Patent,\textsuperscript{15} and George Washington’s 1748 map showing the future site of Alexandria.\textsuperscript{16}

Washington’s map is especially interesting regarding wharfs. Apparently it was drawn to encourage the establishment of a town at the site of the crescent-shaped bay formed by West’s Point and Point Lumley. Washington clearly understood the importance of wharfs to the success of a town, as indicated by his writing on the map: “Note that in the Bank fine Cellars may be cut from thence Wharfs may be extended on the Flats with’t any difficulty and Ware Houses built thereon as in Philadelphia.” If there had been a wharf at West’s Point in 1748, it seems likely Washington would have drawn it there.

Then in 1752, the Justices of the Peace of Fairfax County in court sessions began to address the matter of wharves at public warehouses in the county, and from what they ordered, it was clear that no wharf had yet been built at West’s Point.

On January 1, 1752, the justices ordered that wharves be built at all warehouses in the county (“that the several and respective Landlords Build Wharfs at the Warehouses in this County where Necessary . . .”).\textsuperscript{17} Alexandria, and the Hunting Creek warehouse on West’s Point, were then part of Fairfax County. In fact, in the spring of that year, Alexandria became the county seat of Fairfax County.\textsuperscript{18}

Over a year later, on May 18, 1753, the justices: “Ordered that Hugh West, proprietor of the warehouse at Hunting Creek [West’s Point], be summoned to appear tomorrow to show cause why he hath not Erected a Wharf at the publick Landing at Alexandria.”\textsuperscript{19}

The day following this order summoning Hugh West to appear before the justices, the following entry appeared in the court minutes:

> Mr. Hugh West Proprietor of the warehouses at Hunting Creek having failed to build a Wharf at the Landing pursuant to the several orders heretofore made and being summoned to appear to show his reasons for not building the said Wharf, and he appearing and not giving sufficient reasons for failing to do the same, ordered that John Carlyle, William Ramsay, George Johnson & John Dalton Gents. or any three of them agree with some person to perform the same and take sufficient security for building the said Wharf.\textsuperscript{20}

From these Fairfax County entries, in addition to the maps referred to earlier, it is clear that in May 1753, there was no wharf at West’s Point.

Moreover, it also is clear that in 1753 the justices gave up on getting Hugh West to build one. At that time, West was a powerful man in the county. He had been a member of the Truro Parish vestry since 1744.\textsuperscript{21} As indicated earlier, he was also one of the trustees of Alexandria. In addition, in 1751 he had been elected to the House of Burgesses from Fairfax County.\textsuperscript{22} He clearly did not want to build the wharf. Perhaps he thought the he had gotten along without a wharf for so
long, he did not need one now. Certainly he would not have wanted to pay to have one built, as
seems to have been implied by the justices’ orders. Regardless of West’s reasons for not building a
wharf, the justices considered them insufficient. They decided simply to let him be and to make
other arrangements.

**Fairfax County and John West Build a Wharf**

The next mention of the wharf in the justices’ minutes is over a year later, in the minutes for
November 20, 1754.\(^{23}\) (By this date, Hugh West had died, having passed away in August 1754.)\(^{24}\)
At that meeting, the justices “proceeded to lay the County levy,” that is, they listed the county’s
expenses and levied sums to pay for them. For each item of expense, the justices listed the purpose
of the expense and the amount needed to pay for it. The amount needed was expressed not in
pounds sterling but in pounds of tobacco.

Along with items like: “To Thomas Asbury for guarding the Prison . . . 50,” one of the items
was “To Tobacco to be sold to pay John West Gent. for building a wharf . . . . 22000.” It is unclear
whether these expenses, or others on the list, were for the performance of past or future services. It
is clear, however, that by November 1754, the four men appointed earlier had selected John West as
the wharf builder.

This John West was probably Hugh West’s son, rather than Hugh’s half-uncle (both of whom
were named John West). John West, the son (sometimes called John West, Jr.), was assistant
surveyor for Fairfax County and had laid out the lots for Alexandria in 1749. In 1754 and earlier, he
was also a justice of the peace for Fairfax County along with John Carlyle.\(^{25}\)

The next mention of the wharf in the Fairfax minutes is on July 17, 1755: “Ordered that the
sheriff sell the Tobacco on Saturday next levied for paying John West Gent for building a wharf &
that he pay him ninety eight pounds current money.”\(^{26}\) This entry is the first mention in the minutes
of the exact amount to be paid John West for constructing the wharf.

The precision concerning the amount of the bill for the wharf in this entry in the minutes
strongly implies that by July 17, 1755, West had built the wharf and was ready to be paid. What
appears to have happened was that by that date, John West had constructed the wharf, thus knew the
exact amount to charge the justices, and had presented them with a bill for his services. As was set
out in the original levy of tobacco for the wharf, the justices then ordered the tobacco sold to pay the
bill for the wharf John West had built.

**Braddock’s Ships, John Carlyle, and the New Wharf at West’s Point**

From the discussion immediately above, it appears that the wharf was built sometime
between November 20, 1754, when the Fairfax County justices levied 22,000 pounds of tobacco to
pay for constructing the wharf, and July 17, 1755, when they ordered the tobacco sold to pay for the
wharf, a period of about eight months. Is it possible to say more specifically when within the eight-
month period it was built? Could it have been built in time for the arrival of Braddock’s soldiers in mid-March 1755?

Documentary evidence from another source allows us to reduce the time period when the wharf was built by half, from eight to four months. It also seems likely the period could be reduced somewhat further, but to begin with, orders issued by General Braddock in late March and early April indicate that the wharf had been built by then.

The General arrived in Alexandria by coach on March 26, several days after his army began arriving by ship. Upon his arrival, he immediately began issuing orders to his soldiers. On March 31, among other directions for his men, he ordered his artillerymen to report “upon the wharf” every day at six in the morning:

The Artillery to have their Men *upon the wharf* every morning at 6 of the clock precisely, to land their Horses [Stores?], &c and care must be taken, that they have their waggons *at the wharf* exactly at the same time, that there may be no delay--One Sergeant and 12 men from the two Regiments, to march immediately *to the wharf*, in order to assist the Artillery in landing of their Stores. This party to be relieved every morning, and to be *on the wharf* precisely at 6 o’clock. [emphasis added]

Roughly the same order to march “to the wharf” was repeated on April 2.

In addition, it seems likely that the wharf was in place about two weeks earlier when Braddock’s ships arrived in mid-March 1755. The circumstances leading to this conclusion center around John Carlyle.

In 1754 Carlyle was both a Justice of the Peace for Fairfax County and a member of the Board of Trustees of Alexandria. Also, on January 27, 1754, Governor Dinwiddie commissioned Carlyle as Commissary in charge of providing supplies (“a sufficient Quantity of Flower, Bread, Beef and Pork for 500 Men for six or eight months”) for the forces under George Washington and others destined for the Ohio River area to deal with the French heading that way. He also was to handle cannon and small arms coming by ship to the falls on the Potomac, find powder and shot for these weapons, and commandeer the boats, wagons, carts, horses, etc., necessary to transport all these goods to Wills Creek (today’s Cumberland, Maryland).

In effect, Carlyle was assigned to be the point man in Alexandria for gathering supplies and military goods there and in the backcountry of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania and providing them to the troops that were headed west. These troops included not only soldiers from Virginia but also companies of soldiers from South Carolina, North Carolina, and New York who arrived in Alexandria in May and June 1754.

Although he was allowed to hire deputies to help, it still was a very difficult undertaking for anyone, and Carlyle had his troubles completing his tasks successfully. Governor Dinwiddie wrote
letters in June, August, September, and December 1754, passing on complaints from several officers in the field, including Washington, and from the Virginia Council about lack of supplies or slowness of their delivery. The following is an example: “The Council having Complaints of y’r not having discharg’d y’r duty as Commiss’y of Stores and Provis’s, with the Exactness and Dispatch expected. . . . I cannot help saying, there has been great Neglect in this Affair.”34 In September, Dinwiddie even hinted at replacing Carlyle.35

Only a few months after being commissioned as commissary, Carlyle realized he had taken on a very big task. In July 1754, he wrote his family in England: “I Wrote you in My Last of my Appointment as Commissary of Stores & paymaster, A post of honour and Great Profit if properly managed. At present it is the most Troublesome one I ever had.”36

If supplying Washington’s troops were not enough, on December 20, 1754, Dinwiddie wrote Carlyle that two full regiments (about 1,000 men per regiment, if the regiment was fully manned) were coming to Virginia.37 This was Braddock’s army.

Carlyle must have expected that at least some of these soldiers would come through Alexandria, as had the several companies from South Carolina, North Carolina, and New York. That this was the case was confirmed on January 25, 1755 when Dinwiddie wrote Charles Dick, Carlyle’s fellow townsman and one of the new commissaries for the Will’s Creek fort, that he thought “all the Troops, w’n arrived, and the ordnance stores, will go to Alexa’a, as the Transports [ships carrying Braddock’s troops from Ireland] will go directly to y’t [that] Town, and I am in Expectat’n y’t [that] they will bring three Mo’s’ Provis’s with them from Irel’d.”38 Dick undoubtedly passed on this information to Carlyle. (Dinwiddie may have done so himself in a letter that has not survived.)

It was clear in a letter Dinwiddie wrote to Col. Fairfax in February 1755 that he expected that “Mr. Carlyle will continue to act in any Thing y’t [that] may be necessary at Alexa’a.”39 Then in a letter to Carlyle on February 20, 1755, Dinwiddie informed Carlyle that “General Braddock arrived last night in Hampton.”40 Thus his army soon would be arriving in Alexandria.

These letters indicate that Carlyle had undertaken a very difficult job, a job that he wanted to perform well. Yet throughout 1754 his customers and superiors complained constantly and pressured him continually to do better. Then in late 1754 and early 1755, he gradually learned that his job would be made considerably more difficult by the arrival in Alexandria of a great number of more troops and their supplies and that they were to be his responsibility. He must have realized then that the pressure really was on him. He must have realized also that the disembarkation of the new troops and supplies would be made more efficient and successful if there were a wharf at West’s Point.

By November 1754, the minutes of the Fairfax County court indicate Carlyle had a man (John West) to build the wharf and a source of funds (the county levy) to pay for it. He very likely would have leaned heavily on West to go ahead with the construction in time for the arrival of the new British troops and their supplies. Considering Carlyle’s important positions within the town,
county, and state, plus his being the son-in-law of the powerful Colonel William Fairfax, it would have been prudent for West to comply so that by mid-March when the first of the troops and supplies arrived, a wharf was there to help.

John West’s own experiences also may have led him to build the wharf quickly in order to help the British soldiers and the British cause. Only a few months earlier, he had himself been a British soldier in support of that cause. When George Washington led troops from Virginia and other states against the French in early 1754, John West accompanied him as a lieutenant in the Virginia Regiment. After the Jumonville Glen confrontation, Washington ordered West to take 20 men and an ensign and escort the French prisoners captured at the Glen to the jail in Winchester.

West did so and then continued on to Alexandria where he raised 21 new recruits for Washington’s army. He soon rejoined Washington with his recruits but apparently arrived too late to participate in the battle at Fort Necessity. Then in August 1754, about the time of his father’s death, John West resigned his commission. His experience serving with the soldiers fighting the French and Indians may have led him to help them and their cause by any means he could, such as by building a wharf to make their disembarkation more efficient.

That West constructed the wharf by mid-March when the first of the ships carrying Braddock’s soldiers arrived in Alexandria, thus seems highly likely. Certainly the wharf was there by March 31, and Carlyle and West had every reason to build it earlier.

The House of Burgesses, Alexandria, and the New Wharf

The story of the wharf’s original construction, however, continued beyond 1755. In 1759 some residents of Fairfax County petitioned the House of Burgesses to be repaid the 22,000 pounds of tobacco that the Fairfax court had levied for the wharf construction. The Fairfax justices opposed their having to make the repayment. In something of a compromise, the Burgesses decided to vest ownership of the wharf in the Alexandria trustees and empower the trustees to charge fees for the use of the wharf. The Burgesses also instructed the trustees to use the fees both to repay the residents the 22,000 pounds and keep the wharf in a good state of repair.

The Alexandria trustee minutes of August 17, 1761 state that the trustees had contracted with Thomas Fleming to “make an Addition to the Wharf at Point West,” indicating that they had accepted the wharf as their responsibility.

Summary

The first clear indication that there was a wharf in Alexandria is Archdeacon Burnaby’s statement in October 1759 that there was one, and only one, there at that time. Other information indicates the wharf he observed was at West’s Point, the site of Hugh West’s public tobacco warehouse and a ferry landing.
Although legally there should have been a wharf at the warehouse soon after it was established in 1732, maps in the 1740s show warehouses on West’s Point but do not show a wharf. Minutes of court sessions of the Justices of the Peace of Fairfax County in 1753 and 1754 indicate that there was no wharf there. The justices tried to get Hugh West, owner of the public warehouse at West’s Point, to build the wharf without success. They then appointed four men to arrange for the wharf’s construction and levied 22,000 pounds of tobacco to pay for the new wharf.

The appointed men arranged with John West, Jr., Hugh West’s son, to build the wharf. That he had built the wharf by July 17, 1755 is strongly implied by an order of the justices of that date that the county sheriff sell the tobacco levied, as originally planned, and pay John West a specific amount for the construction of the wharf.

It is clear from orders issued by General Braddock in Alexandria on March 31 and April 2 that the wharf was in place then. It probably had been built a little earlier, by the time General Braddock’s first ships arrived in mid-March 1755 because of the actions of John Carlyle. In January 1754, Carlyle was appointed the commissary officer for troops fighting the French and Indians. During that year he was strongly criticized for inadequate efforts as commissary, and in early 1755, he learned that he was to provide for even more troops (Braddock’s army). He was a powerful man in the county with a strong motivation to have the wharf finished by the time General Braddock’s ships arrived. There is a possibility that he exerted enough pressure in order to ensure that the wharf was completed on time by mid-March 1755.

Thus the first wharf in Alexandria was built at West’s Point sometime in the four-month period between November 20, 1754, and March 31, 1755. At that time, the “banking out” process that would produce the current Alexandria waterfront began.

ENDNOTES

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7 Ethelyn Cox, “The Founding of Alexandria” in *A Composite History of Alexandria*, eds. Elizabeth Hambleton and Marian Van Landingham (Alexandria: The Alexandria Bicentennial Commission, 1975): 7 [NOTE: This article mistakenly indicates that the act establishing the public warehouse was enacted in 1721].

8 James Bish, “Chronology of Hugh West Primary Sources” (unpublished and undated manuscript located in the Alexandria Archaeology Office, Alexandria, Virginia): 2-3 [NOTE: Bish cites a number of incidents in Hugh West’s life that are not mentioned in this paper], and Beth Mitchell, *Beginning at a White Oak: Patents and Northern Neck Grants of Fairfax County Virginia* (Fairfax, Virginia: Fairfax County Administrative Services, 1977): 36.


12 Winfree, *Supplement to Hening’s*, pp. 443-446.

13 Hening, *Statutes at Large*, vol. 4, pp. 268-270.

14 Bish, “Chronology of Hugh West,” p. 5 [NOTE: The citation in the “Chronology” to *Beginning at a White Oak* is wrong], and James Bish, “Forgotten Friends of Washington and Mason: The West Family and Their Momentous Role in the Founding and Development of Alexandria, Fairfax County, and Loudoun County, Virginia” (unpublished and undated manuscript located in the Alexandria Archaeology Office, Alexandria, Virginia): 5.


17 *Fairfax County Order Book, 1749-1754*, p. 182.


20 Ibid., p.373.

21 Bish, “Chronology of Hugh West,” p. 4.

22 Ibid., p. 13.
ENDNOTES

23 *Fairfax County Order Book, 1754-56*, pp. 164-165.


28 The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, online at [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml). While an aide to General Braddock, George Washington copied almost all of Braddock’s daily orders. At this website, digital images of Washington’s original copy are in Series 6: Military Papers, and digital images of a letterbook copy are in Series 2: Letterbooks, 1741-1799, Letterbook 1, beginning at image 105. The order quoted is in Letterbook 1, images 119-120.

Another version of Braddock’s orders was recorded by Daniel Disney, the adjutant of Sir Peter Halkett’s 44th Regiment of Foot. It is transcribed in Charles Hamilton, ed., *Braddock’s Defeat* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959): 61-126.

29 Ibid., Letterbook 1, images 120-121.


31 Ibid., pp. 48-51.


34 Ibid., p. 264.


37 Brock, *Dinwiddie Records*, vol. 1, p. 433.

38 Ibid., pp. 432, 479, 415ftn.
ENDNOTES

39 Ibid., pp. 509-510.
40 Ibid., pp. 510-511.
41 Abbot, Papers of George Washington, p. 66 fn. 5.
42 Ibid., p. 115 fn. 18.
43 Ibid., pp. 112, 118, 121.