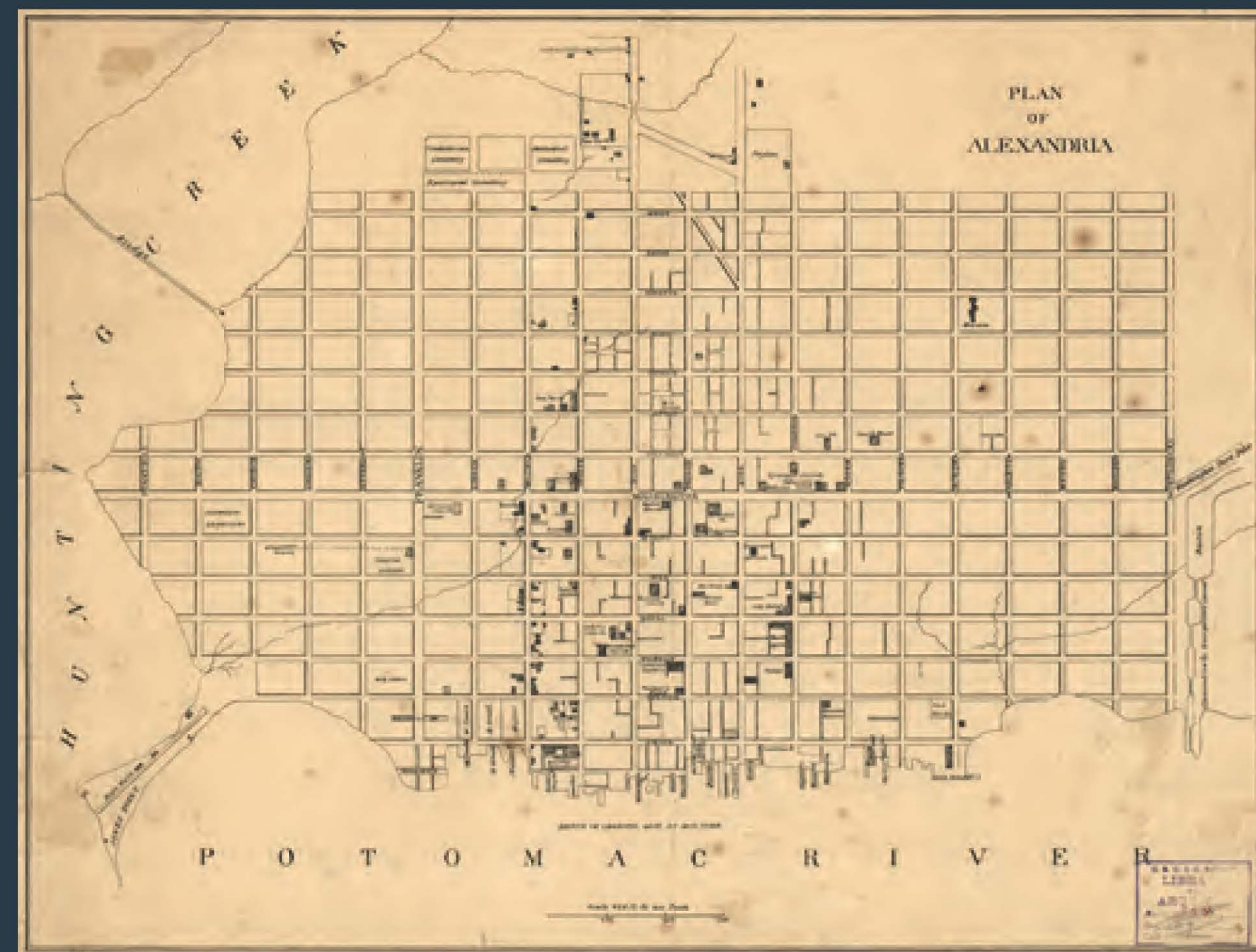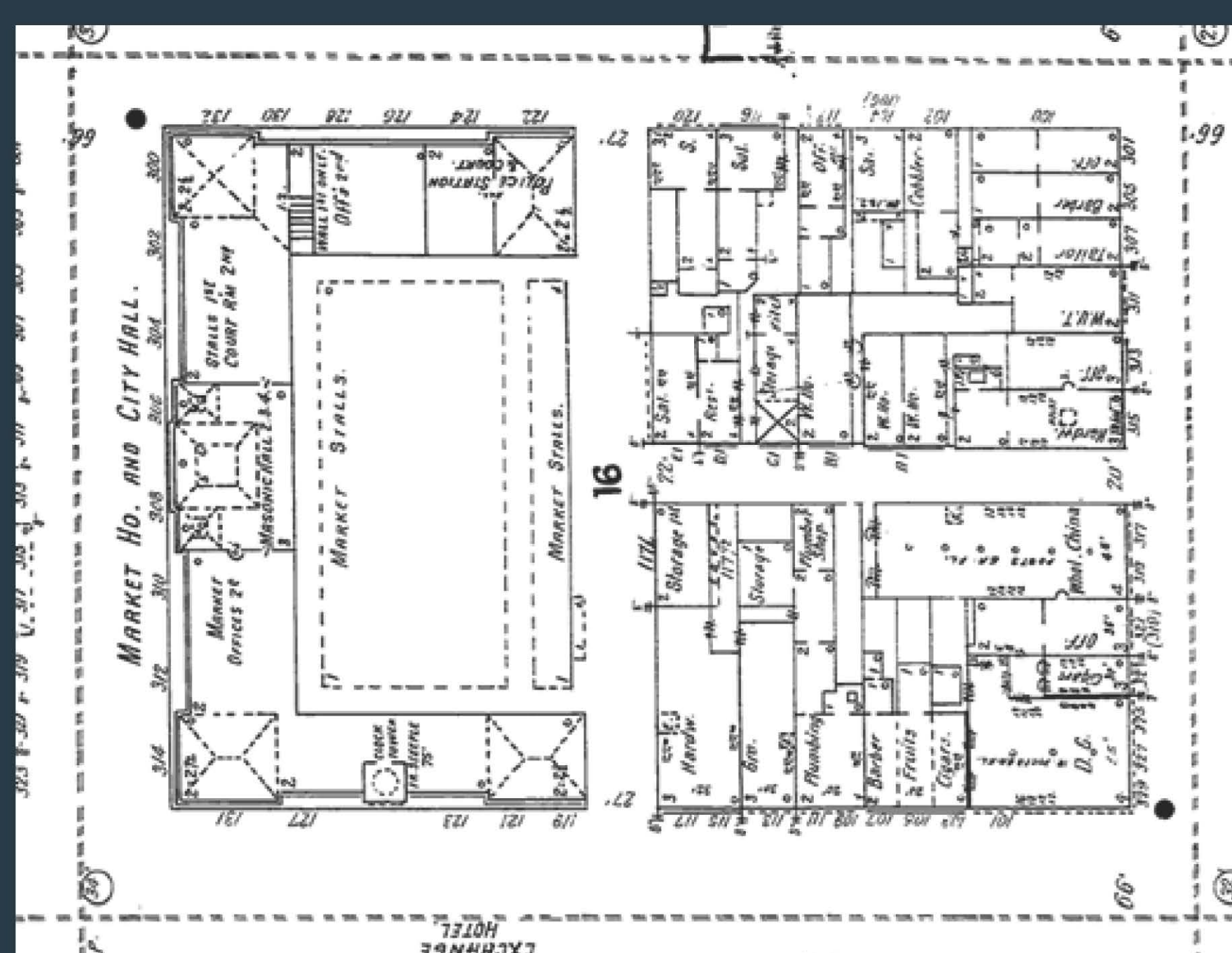# MARKET SQUARE

Alexandria's Market Square was established only a few years after the town was founded in 1749. The site selected was centrally located in a prime block of the colonial settlement, immediately adjacent to the City Hall. At the time, Cameron and North Fairfax Streets were the main avenues in Alexandria, and that intersection was considered one of the most important in Northern Virginia.
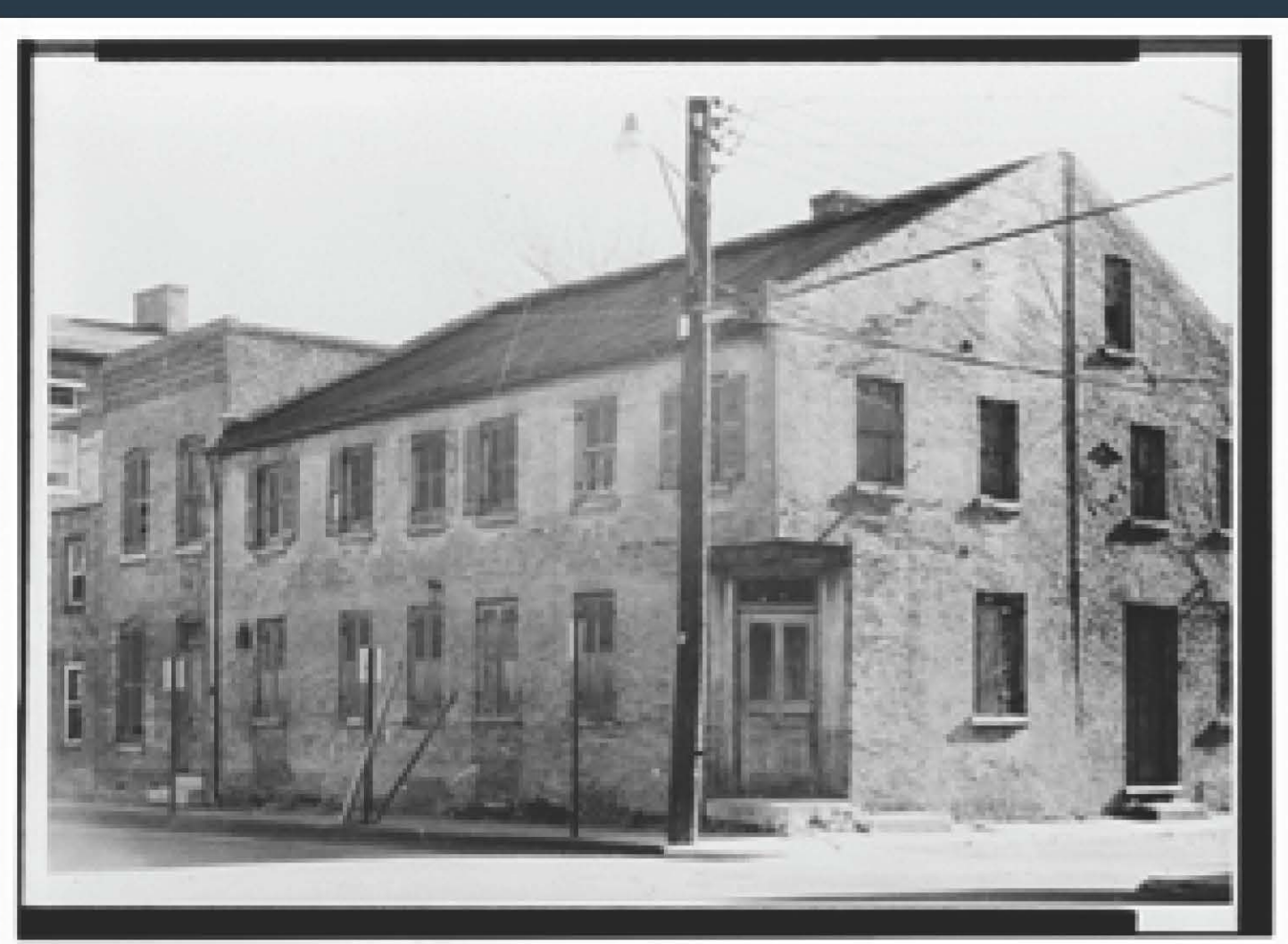

1862 MAP OF ALEXANDRIA

1902 MARKET SQUARE SANBORN MAP

Originally, Market Square was little more than a scruffy field where housewares, foodstuffs, animals, meat and local farm products would be sold to local townspeople or those coming to Alexandria from its rural hinterlands. The area was also used for other purposes, such as the sale of African slaves imported through an established process of global trade, and the mustering of local militias to maintain the town's security and military order in the region. But by the late 18th century, the square itself began to be developed with permanent structures and buildings, providing a premier location for prospering shops, taverns and warehouses, which often included a residence for their owners.
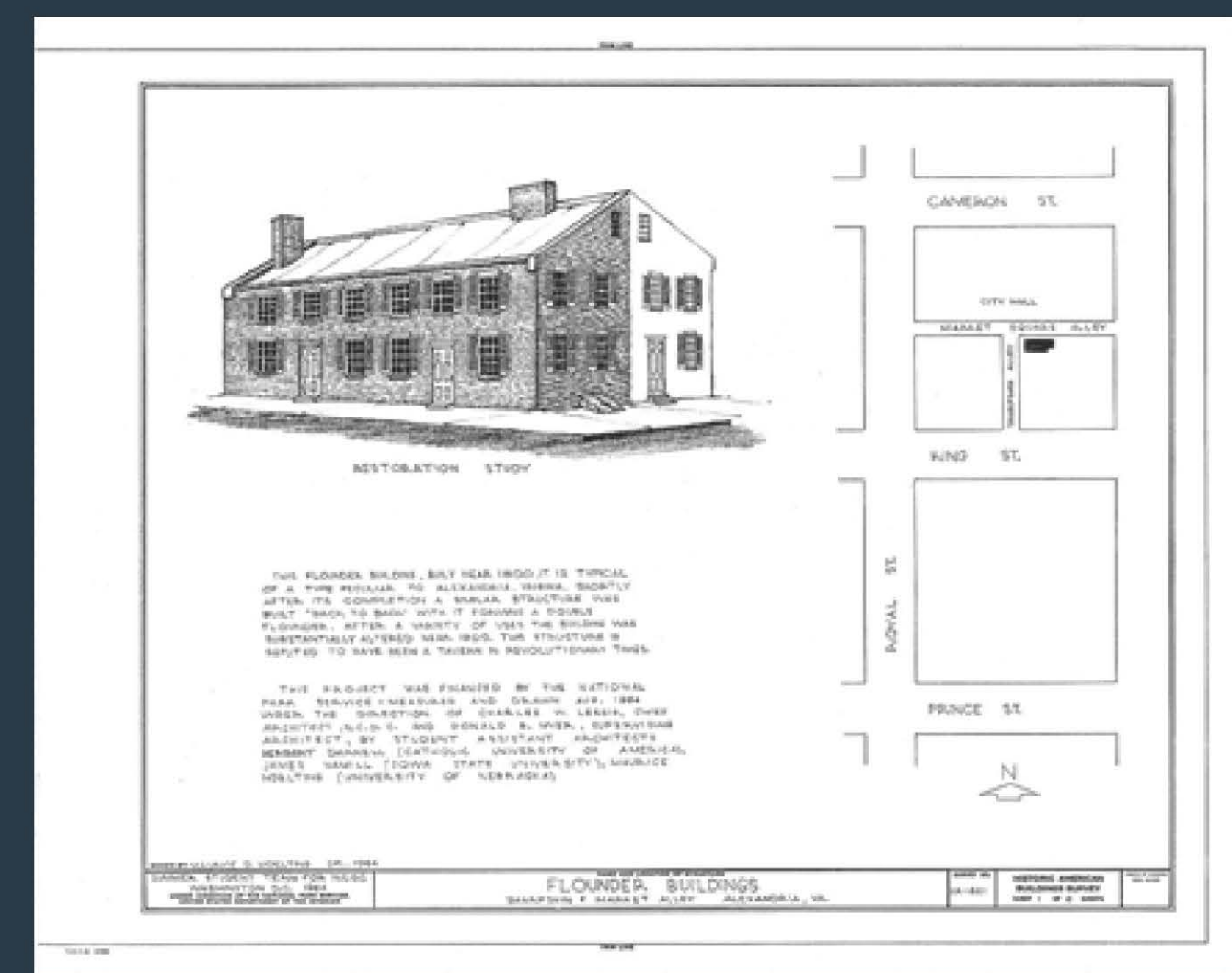

1919 MARKET SQUARE AERIAL

By the start of the Civil War, buildings framed the block fronts of the square, with the marketplace reduced in size to an interior courtyard accessed by two small alleys. Sharpskin Alley connected the mid-block space between North Royal and North Fairfax Streets, and Market Alley linked Sharpskin to King in the direct center of the block. Within this confined space, supplemented by open stalls built at the rear of City Hall, a huge variety of commercial activities took place, often spreading out on the public sidewalks outside the square. The area was even the early home of the Friendship Fire Company before its move to South Alfred Street in 1855.

Flounder Building in the 1930s

Flounder Building, mid-20th century

1964 Flounder Building HABS Drawing

Until the mid-20th century, commercial activity at Market Square businesses thrived as Alexandria maintained its role as Northern Virginia's most important urban center. However, by the 1950s, development of new residential and commercial centers in outlying suburban areas caused Alexandria's downtown to decline. Within the next decade, a large urban renewal project was implemented to revitalize the downtown business district, resulting in the demolition of dozens of buildings to recreate the openness of the original public square. Instead of an open field, the current brick plaza and fountain serve as the focal point of a new, modern Alexandria, and a multi-level parking garage is provided beneath this public square.

1890s Market

Market Square Today

The Old Town Farmers' Market has been held year round each Saturday morning at the Market Square Plaza for more than 260 years; George Washington sent his produce from Mount Vernon to be sold at the market. In fact, Old Town Farmers' Market is the oldest farmers' market in the country held continuously at the same site. Today, the market offers residents of and visitors to Alexandria a way to reconnect to the past, while participating in an ongoing local and national tradition. During the peak season, more than 70 vendors sell an abundance of items, including fruits and vegetables, meat, poultry, cheeses, breads, pastries, fresh pasta, pickled vegetables, cut flowers, potted plants, soaps, fabric art and paintings.