

THE PROJECT

In 1967, two thirds of the 500 block (south) of King Street were demolished as part of the King Street Urban Renewal Project undertaken by the City of Alexandria. A parking lot occupied the empty space until the fall of 1977, when construction of a new Courthouse and an underground parking lot were due to begin. The 500 block south redevelopment was the last of six urban renewal projects planned by the City of Alexandria.



Fig. 1: Demolition of 518-532 King Street in 1967
(ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 2: Corner of King and
St. Asaph Streets in 1967
(ALEXANDRIA
ARCHAEOLOGY
COLLECTION)

These projects started with the reconstruction of the 500 block north, and continued with the 400 block north, the 300 block north, the 300 block south, the 400 block south, and finally the 500 block south. These blocks were respectively rebuilt as Banker's Square, Market Square, Gadsby's Arcade, the Holiday Inn, and the Courthouse.

Before their reconstruction however, these blocks were thoroughly excavated by archaeologists. The first archaeology rescue project was funded by the Smithsonian Institution in 1965 and conducted by Richard Muzzrole under the supervision of Malcolm Watkins, the Curator of Ceramics. After Smithsonian funding ended in 1972, Mr. Muzzrole was able to continue his work thanks to resources provided by the Committee of 100, a group of concerned citizens eager to fund the project.

In 1973, the City of Alexandria created the Alexandria Archaeological Commission and after two further years of service, Mr. Muzzrole left the program and was replaced by Dr. Pamela Cressey, the newly appointed City Archaeologist.

In view of the 180 year-old history of the 500 block and the encouraging results of previous block excavations, the recovery of cultural resources was expected to be significant. Thus, in



Fig. 3: Excavating a well on the 500 Block, 1977
(ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

the summer of 1977, Pamela Cressey and assistant director Katherine Beidleman began excavating the 500 block (south) of King Street. Assistant director Paul Davidson joined the effort soon after in the fall of the same year.



Fig. 4: Phase I of the excavation, excavating the parking lot (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

Phase II began when the block was turned into a construction site. During this time, archaeologists were faced with the challenging task of working with and around the bulldozers and construction crews (Beidleman 1979).



Fig. 6: Field school students, 1977 (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

The excavation process was completed in two phases. Phase I occurred before the 500 Block was turned into a construction site. The parking lot that occupied the empty block space after the 1967 demolition was in private ownership until the City was due to begin construction. However, archaeologists were given permission to excavate eight parking spaces at a time, so as not to disrupt the flow of traffic (Beidleman 1979).



Fig. 5: Phase II of the excavation, excavating within the construction site (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

Throughout the sixteen months of excavation, city archaeologists were assisted by hundreds of volunteers, students, and several temporary employees. The latter were recruited thanks to additional financial support provided by the State Historic Preservation Office, currently named the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. The 500 block excavation was the first formally registered site in Alexandria and was designated 44 AX 1.

Over 2,000 000 artifacts and ecofacts were recovered from the excavation. The finds were processed soon after the project ended, yet a comprehensive analysis of the material was never completed due to the pressing needs of other projects.



Fig. 7: Barbara Magid (in red) in the lab with volunteers (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

Nonetheless, valuable information has been gained from preliminary artifact analyses, as well as from the tremendous amount of historical research that was undertaken to supplement the archaeological data.

Located on Alexandria's main street, the inhabitants of the 500 block lived and worked in the commercial and political core of Alexandria. Since its first occupation in the 1780's, the block was characterized by social, economic, and ethnic diversity. From rich merchants to widowed wives to enslaved peoples, archaeologists uncovered the artifacts of a decidedly eclectic community.



Fig. 8: Volunteers processing artifacts (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 9: 500-512 King Street, 2006 (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

Today, the 500 Block continues to occupy a central role in the life of Alexandria. At the heart of "Old Town", it houses the City Court House and several businesses. Located two blocks from City Hall and just five blocks away from the waterfront, hundreds of locals and visitors walk by the block every day. Combining history and archaeology, this project has allowed us to discover more about those whose footsteps walked this block before ours.

[Click here for more pictures of the site before demolition, during demolition, during excavation, and today.](#)

(Written by Amanda Iacobelli, 2006)

References and Further Reading

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