



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The German descent upon Alexandria

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Image: Detail from "Birdeye View of Alexandria, Va.", Charles Magnus 1863. Image, Library of Congress.

Within a decade of his arrival in New York following the German Revolution of 1848, Charles Magnus had already established himself as one of America's most prominent lithographers.

His firm produced more than 1,000 prints of American cities and patriotic scenes, eagerly sought by the public because of their superior technical detail and print quality. The clarity of Magnus' prints was further enhanced by a revolutionary steam printing press developed by another German associate.

Lithographs were developed by using a grease crayon to draw a scene on an engraver stone or metal plate, then by dampening the plate with water and wiping with an oil-based ink to absorb the grease and distinguish the delicate lines that emerged after the engraving process. Once pressed onto paper, the image was easily mass-produced to create large prints, letter sheets, envelopes and song sheets.

As the Civil War broke out, Magnus opened a studio in D.C. to record battle scenes and views of Southern cities associated with the war. This detail from his "Bird's Eye View of Alexandria, VA," produced in 1863, documents the King Street corridor from the Potomac River waterfront to Shuter's Hill and beyond. Unlike many of his Bird's Eye views of American cities, usually viewed from an angled perspective, this symmetrical view is focused due west and presents an almost two-dimensional view of the city.

But although only the eastern facades of most buildings are depicted, and their basic design is rather simple, the detail in recording the styles of roofs, notable architectural features and surrounding landscape detail is incredibly accurate. Even building materials are reflected through the use of color — pink and gray for masonry, white for wood frame. Notably, the record of Union Army installations throughout the city is carefully recorded in the urban scene, with some even identified by small numbers corresponding to a key in the lower portion of the map.

Well before the Civil War, the main commercial thoroughfare in





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Alexandria had shifted from Cameron to King Street, and by the 1850s, a wave of German immigration associated with that country's revolution and persecution resulted in the replacement of former artisan shops with emporiums selling mass-produced items, often by German Jews.

But surprisingly, there was little controversy associated with this new influx of Eastern European immigrants, and by the time the war broke out, Germans had firmly established themselves as an accepted part of the Alexandria community. With thousands of Union soldiers stationed or passing through Alexandria, many of these same stores were divided into two or more commercial spaces, with separate vendors hawking life's necessities and souvenirs to men who had often had strayed no farther than fifty miles from their Northern homes.

Although the city was occupied by Union forces throughout the Civil War, Magnus' view presents an orderly and safe enclave. The city appears quiet and well protected by the numerous "Defenses of Washington" forts on the treeless horizon, including Fort Ellsworth, built and named for Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth just days after his untimely death on May 24, 1861.

Just to the right of Fort Ellsworth is the large building known as Aspinwall Hall at the Virginia Theological Seminary, used as a hospital during the war. Before the Peninsula Campaign, the Seminary was the headquarters of Gen. George McClellan, who also lived on the property with his wife, children and mother-in-law.

Due to the relative safety of Alexandria during the war, many Union officers had their families join them in Alexandria, often commandeering the fine homes in the city for personal use. Rebel Alexandrians and King Street shopkeepers quietly despised these Northern wives for their arrogance and constant complaints about the scarcity and quality of goods available for sale in Alexandria.

One exception was the crocheted handgoods created by local girls who were members of a secret group known as the Society of the Golden Circle. Proceeds from their delicate needlework sold along King Street to Union soldiers and their wives were smuggled to Richmond to aid the Confederate war effort.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.