



Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia

Alexandria Times

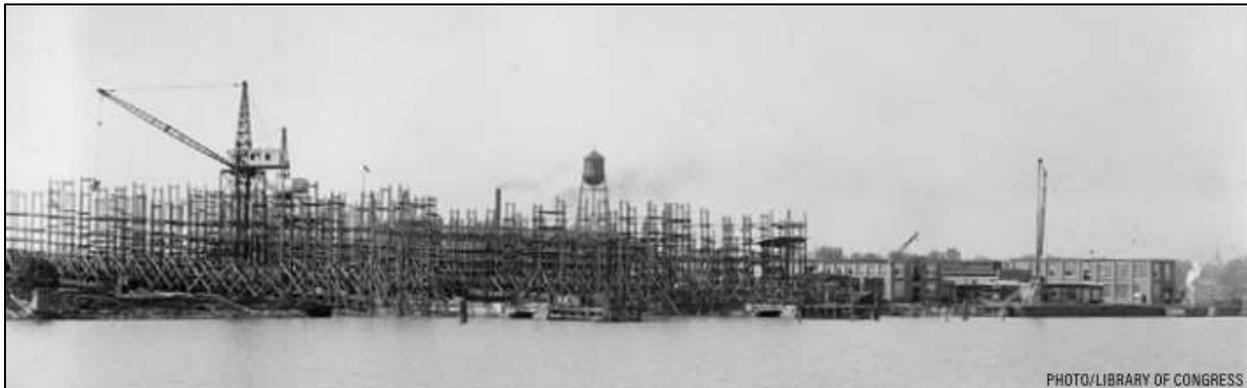
Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

A World War 1 era photographic documentation of the city

Alexandria Times, May 5, 2016

Image: *The Virginia shipyard, 1919. Photo, Library of Congress.*



The city of Alexandria has a very rich photographic heritage, and almost since the birth of the artistic form some of the nation's greatest photographers have recorded its impressive moments in time.

Renowned photographer Andrew J. Russell actually learned the collodion wetplate process of creating early images in Alexandria soon after he arrived in the city during the Civil War as a captain in the New York 141st Volunteer Regiment at the end of 1862.

Russell soon became the Union Army's official photographer, and although his charge was to simply document buildings, equipment and military resources for the U.S. War Department, he quickly gained a reputation for his careful perspective and the unusual sense of humanity he recorded in even the most mundane photo image.

Three decades after Russell's tenure in Alexandria, the young Washington socialite Frances Benjamin Johnston opened a professional photography studio in the nation's capital as one of America's earliest female photographers. Johnston's interest in the craft began when she was presented with the gift of a camera by George Eastman, a family friend and founder of the Eastman Kodak Company.

With her extensive connections to East Coast society and the D.C. political scene, Johnston learned the art quickly and made a name for herself as a major portrait photographer, photographing Alice Roosevelt's wedding, Admiral Dewey, Susan B. Anthony and Booker T. Washington. An early feminist, she also served as the official White House photographer for five administrations. But Johnston also loved architecture and landscape scenes and spent much of her time in the Virginia countryside, including Alexandria, recording significant historic buildings and sites.

Another major photo record of Alexandria over time was compiled by the firm Harris & Ewing, which by the mid-1930s had emerged as the largest photographic studio in the United States. Founder



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George Harris first gained notoriety as a young photojournalist in 1889 recording images of the infamous Johnstown Flood in Pennsylvania.

After a short stint working at the Hearst organization in San Francisco, he joined the press entourage covering President Theodore Roosevelt and later in 1905 opened a studio in D.C. at 1313 F St. NW. Financing for the venture was provided by his partner Martha Ewing, a photo assistant and colorist that he had previously worked with.

The firm rapidly gained a following among national politicians for its portrait work, but was always a full-service studio, and maintained a news service organization as well. Harris and Ewing practiced extensively in Alexandria, documenting an extensive photo image of the city that was remarkable for its time. It is believed that the firm took the first aerial image of Alexandria's downtown from an airplane flying high above the rail lines in 1919.

This image of the Alexandria waterfront, taken in 1919 from the Potomac River just off Jones Point, records the massive Virginia Shipyard operating at the site during World War I. Harris and Ewing performed an extensive documentation of the shipyard, its facilities and the hard-working employees who built state-of-the-art American warships.

At the time this photo was taken, the ships Betsy Bell and Gunston Hall were in the final stages of construction. Over the next several weeks, this column will continue with a series on Harris and Ewing's efforts to record the vast operations occurring at that site, now a verdant national park with few remaining remnants from the military industrial complex.

"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.