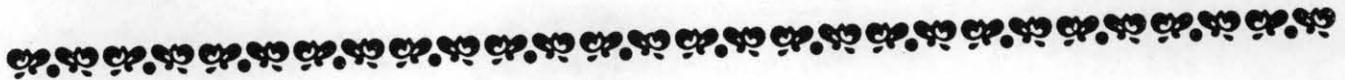




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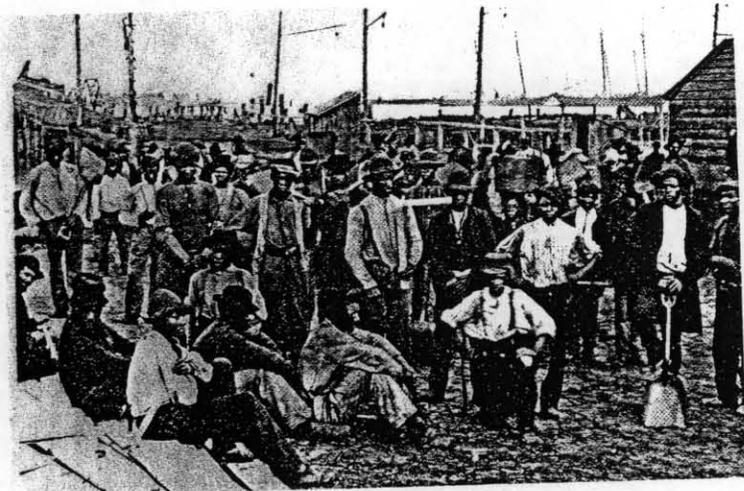


WINDMILL HILL

by T. Michael Miller

One of the most picturesque vistas in the old port city of Alexandria is centered around the beautiful park known as Windmill Hill. Bounded by Lee Street on the west, the Wilkes Street Tunnel on the north, Union Street on the east and Gibbon Street on the south, this recreational retreat overlooks the broad Potomac River. On a sunny day the casual visitor is entertained by the sound of young children frolicking on swing sets and seesaws, the shouts of young men running to dunk a lay-up on the basketball court and the conversations of tourists as they admire the flotilla of ships sailing on the river.

What is known about the early history of this park and why is it called Windmill Hill? Perhaps the answer lies in the actions of a young man from Alabama who had a plan to construct a windmill on the banks of the Potomac in 1843. *The Alexandria Gazette* of June 9, 1843, offered a clue to the derivation of the hill's name when it noted: "We understand that a gentleman from the south, with a novel and ingenious plan for a windmill is about to have the matter practically tested in this section, by the erection of a mill on the banks of the Potomac, at the southern end of the town, which will, probably, go into operation in a few weeks." [AG: 6/9/1843] John R. Remington of Alabama was the precocious gentleman upon whose plan the windmill was constructed on the



Dock Workers on the Waterfront, c.1864. Courtesy of the National Archives.

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA
**ALEXANDRIA GAS, STEAM FITTING
 AND
 PLUMBING HOUSE.**
 ESTABLISHED 1848
WILLIAM COGAN,
 Practical Plumber, Steam & Gas Fitter,
 No. 15 North Royal Street,
 ALEXANDRIA, VA.



AGENT FOR HALLADAY'S WIND MILL
 Keep constantly on hand Rich Table, Wash Closets, etc. Also, various
 Hydraulic Hoists for counter, hoists, hoist, and hoist, etc. See list
 sent on
 LAMPS, OILS, CHANDELIERS, &
 Plans for building houses, etc. See list sent on request.
 Water. All repairs promptly done. For the Agency, H. and J. Halladay,
 RAILROAD SUPPLIES & SPECIALTIES.

"The Windmill, on Miller's
 Cliffs, will soon be finished
 and put into operation..."



500 block of Lee Street. Mr. Milburn of Alexandria served as the superintendent of the enterprise and was the overseer of its completion. [AG: 7/20/1843]

Apparently, steep cliffs still existed along this section of the Potomac River in the 1840s. On July 11, 1843, it was reported that "the Windmill, on Miller's Cliffs, will soon be finished and put into operation. Mechanics, and others who have examined it, say it will answer. If so, it will be a great thing for the farmers in the adjacent counties, especially in dry weather. The whole affair is something new in these parts and is well worth looking at." [AG: 7/11/1843] No doubt the windmill was built to furnish the town with a source of good water, since a public reservoir was not constructed on Shuter's Hill until 1851. How long the windmill remained in operation is not known.

In antebellum days, there had been a lone brick structure on Windmill Hill. It soon acquired an unsavory reputation during the Civil War as one of 70 brothels which catered to the sensual desires of some of the 10,000 to 15,000 Union soldiers who bivouacked in and around Alexandria. Writing to a friend from Suffolk, Virginia in 1863, Lt. Charles E. Grisson of the 26th Regiment Michigan Volunteers described the scene as follows: "I did Patriot duty in the City of Alexandria until April 20, 1862. Oh, if we didn't have gay times--- there were about 75 houses of ill fame in that illustrious city and our sworn duty compelled us (officers) to visit them to see that every thing was quiet, etc. The girls would do anything for us in order to keep on the right side of us for if we chose we could clean them out without ceremony. Suffice, I never had so much *fun* in my life." ["Lt. Charles E. Grisson to E. N. Wilcox, Lieut., 1st Reg. U.S. Infantry, June 2nd 1863," Civil War vertical file, Alexandria Library, Lloyd House]

During the civil conflict, Windmill Hill was also home to contraband [former slaves] who sought refuge by the thousands in Alexandria. A number of black settlements named Grantsville, Petersburg, Richmond, and Cross Canal sprang up as African Americans migrated to Alexandria. Many worked on the wharves unloading hay and munitions for Federal military authorities while others toiled at the U.S. Military Railroad facility located at Duke and Henry Streets. While most of these people lived in housing provided by the U.S.

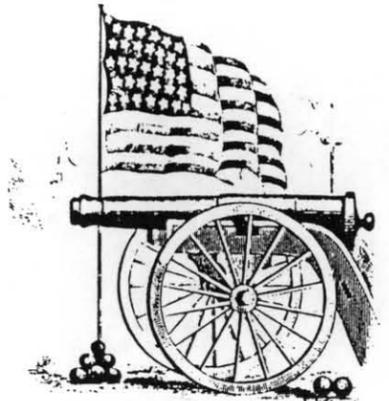
Government, others saved money and built small houses throughout the city. One small settlement germinated on Windmill Hill and was served by a local church under the cliffs. Known as Zion Church, this edifice was moved to Lee and Jefferson Streets around 1873.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century Windmill Hill was the scene of many political rallies, as flags were raised on huge poles, and silver-tongued orators addressed masses of Alexandrians who gathered there to listen to their fiery speeches. Large bonfires were kindled for warmth and the rallies were frequently punctuated by the firing of the old salute cannon. James Jackson, the proprietor of the Marshall House Hotel and the first Virginia officer killed during the Civil War, had placed the cannon in the front lobby of his hotel, vowing to shoot anyone who tried to remove a Confederate banner from the roof of the building. When the Federals occupied Alexandria on May 24, 1861, John A. Rudd, the owner of the cannon, stashed the artillery piece in a well, where it remained to the end of the war. The cannon is presently owned by the Alexandria Washington Lodge.

During the 1868 presidential contest between U.S. Grant and Horatio Seymour, the Alexandria Democratic party raised a huge flag to Seymour and Blair, the vice presidential nominee, on Windmill Hill. It was reported that "The beautiful flag ... is a conspicuous object from river. At the mast head is a large U.S. Flag, and under it the Seymour and Blair flag. It was erected by many conservatives of the First Ward, assisted by their fellow citizens from other wards. We noticed, yesterday, that it was cheered heartily by the crews of several vessels as they passed it." [AG: 9/21/1868]

Not to be outdone, Republicans also hoisted a flag to commemorate General Grant on the hill. Furthermore, they purchased a cannon and christened it the "Nelly Grant," after the General's wife. On November 5, 1872, after Grant's presidential victory, his Alexandria supporters brought out their guns and fired a salute just before midnight.

In the 1880s the cliffs on the eastern edge of Windmill Hill presented a safety hazard to town inhabitants. One afternoon, several first warders seated on the banks of the old hill, listened to the music of the



Windmill Hill was the scene of many political rallies.



Not to be outdone, Republicans also hoisted a flag to commemorate General Grant on the hill.



buzz saw and watched the construction of a new ship at Agnew's shipyard. They barely escaped with their lives when the cliffs collapsed, nearly burying them alive. [AG: 8/30/1882] Corrective action was taken in October 1882 when the dangerous precipice was carved down to prevent its caving in. [AG: 10/10/1882]

In 1873 the Southern Railroad Company constructed a ferry slip at the foot of Wilkes Street and made further improvements. As the legal owners of the northern half of Windmill Hill, the railroad evicted a number of African Americans who resided in shanties there. Later, in 1890, the Midland Railroad Company filled in the chasm which existed between Windmill Hill and the eastern end of the Wilkes Street Tunnel. The railroad also installed a fence which extended from Lee Street east along Wilkes Street to prevent pedestrians from falling into the gorge.

In the Gay Nineties, Windmill Hill became a fashionable place for Alexandrians to promenade during the sultry summer months. [AG: 7/21/1890] However, the quietude of the knoll was interrupted in 1891 by groups of rowdy boys. On July 17, 1891 "Mr. Frank Waddey's infant child was struck on the head and seriously injured by a stone thrown by one of the juvenile pests who congregate on Windmill Hill every evening. Complaints are frequent of the rowdy conduct of these boys who make quiet people, who desire to enjoy the cool air from the river, miserable. A gentleman, while sitting on the hill a few evenings since, was struck on the shoulder by a brick thrown by a boy. The police have been notified and some examples are to be made." [AG: 7/18/1891]

During the early twentieth century, many of the small houses which once dotted the thriving settlement just south of Windmill Hill fell victim to arson and fire. In March 1916 it was reported that "half a dozen of what are believed to have been incendiary fires" have occurred in the swampy bottom below the Hill, obliterating the settlement. [AG: 3/21/1916]

Windmill Hill has remained a focal point for festivities during much of this century. After Charles Lindbergh flew his famous solo flight to Paris in 1927, he returned to the United States and made an excursion to Washington aboard the U.S. cruiser *Memphis*. In order for



In the Gay Nineties, Windmill Hill became a fashionable locale for Alexandrians to promenade during the sultry summer months.



Alexandrians to welcome America's new hero, Mayor William Albert Smoot sent a telegraph to the Captain Lackey of the *Memphis*. It read:

"Alexandrians are anxious for an opportunity of greeting and seeing Colonel Lindbergh while your ship is passing this city and would greatly appreciate your asking him to be on the bridge."

Elaborate preparations were made throughout the city for Lindbergh's appearance. City Manager Paul Morton had the city bells peal for one-half hour before Lindbergh was scheduled to pass, Superintendent of Schools R.C. Bowton agreed to permit public school children to gather at the foot of the shipyard at Franklin Street and railroad officials were willing to place two Southern locomotives on Union Street, one at the tunnel, to cut loose with whistles when the *Memphis* passed. [AG: 6/10/1927] On Saturday, June 11, 1927, when the *Memphis* passed Alexandria about 10:30 "a Presidential salute of 21 guns boomed out from Windmill Hill and a bedlam of factory and boat whistles gave the hero a foretaste of a real American welcome." [AG: 6/11/1927]

In June 1945, Messrs. Hulburt and Thompson deeded the Windmill Hill tract to the city for a park with the proviso that if the property were not utilized for a park or playground for 25 years, it would revert back to the owners. [City Council Minutes, June 12, 1945, p. 373]

Four years later, Alexandrians celebrated the bicentennial of their city with a historical drama called "Alexandria, Thy Sons," which was staged at the Windmill Hill amphitheater on July 11-17, 1949. The play was written by nationally-known playwrights T. Beverly Campbell and Howard Southgate. Mr. Southgate had staged over thirty outdoor dramatic spectacles. Richard Bales, Alexandria's renowned composer and conductor of the National Gallery Orchestra, composed the music for the celebration. Scenery was designed by Alexander Wyckoff, a scenic designer for numerous Broadway productions.



Richard Bales conducts the National Gallery of Art's String ensemble.

[Richard Bales Photograph Collection, Alexandria Library, Lloyd House]

Nationally-known weatherman Willard Scott played George Washington in the production of "Alexandria, Thy Sons."



"We get drunks, bootleggers, fights and deaths there all the time."

The production depicted the epic story of Alexandria from its founding in 1749 to 1949. Highlights of the play included General Braddock's 1755 conference with the colonial governors, George Mason and the Fairfax Resolves, the Washington Birthnight Ball of 1799 and the Lee family's association with Alexandria. The drama was mounted in a specially built outdoor facility with a 100-foot stage called the King George Meadow Theater. Five hundred actors participated and a staff of forty back stage technicians monitored the equipment and moved scenery.

Among the actors was a young Willard Scott, now a nationally-known weatherman, who played George Washington. "The first act also contained the largest battle scene to be staged since the Yorktown sesquicentennial." [AG: 7/11/1949] Of the two-hour play, the *Gazette* wrote: "A small but enthused first night audience gave the drama commendable rounds of applause... The play, though not yet razor sharp, is to be given a rating of "good," and although the first-night turn-out was disappointing to many of the participants, the older hands of the theater world considered it typical of opening night audiences." [AG: 7/12/1949]

Parents of children who played on Windmill Hill complained bitterly in 1956 to city officials about attempts by residents of nearby Barge Wharf or Owens Beach to molest their kids. Located at the end of Wilkes Street and east of Union, the beach was known as a gathering place for tramps, vagrants, alcoholics and drunkards and a hangout for other law violators. Major Russell Hawes, Police Chief said: "We get drunks, bootleggers, fights and deaths there all the time. We've had every building on the place padlocked more than once, but that's only good for one year. The trouble is, the ownership has never been resolved." On January 12, 1956 a special Grand Jury of the Alexandria Corporation Court returned an indictment against the city and two local companies [the Southern Railroad and the Virginia Public Service Company] for allegedly allowing a public nuisance to be maintained along the Potomac waterfront. [AG: 1/12/1956]

In February 1956, in order to improve the blighted property, two men, with the cooperation of the City of Alexandria, planned to develop an attractive boating marina on the Barge Wharf. Before action could be taken, however, City Planning Director Dennis Cahill