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GUNPOWDER, FLOUR, FIRE and HEIRS: A WATERFRONT BLOCK FROM DUKE TO WOLFE STREETS

by Ted Pulliam

If you stand at the foot of Duke Street, between Union Street and The Strand, in Old Town, Alexandria, and look around, what you see today is very different from what you would have seen on that same spot in April 1749, before there was a Duke Street and before there was even an Alexandria.



Looking east toward Lumley Park and the Potomac River, on Duke at Union Street, 2007

Moreover, had you returned to that spot from time to time during the intervening years not only

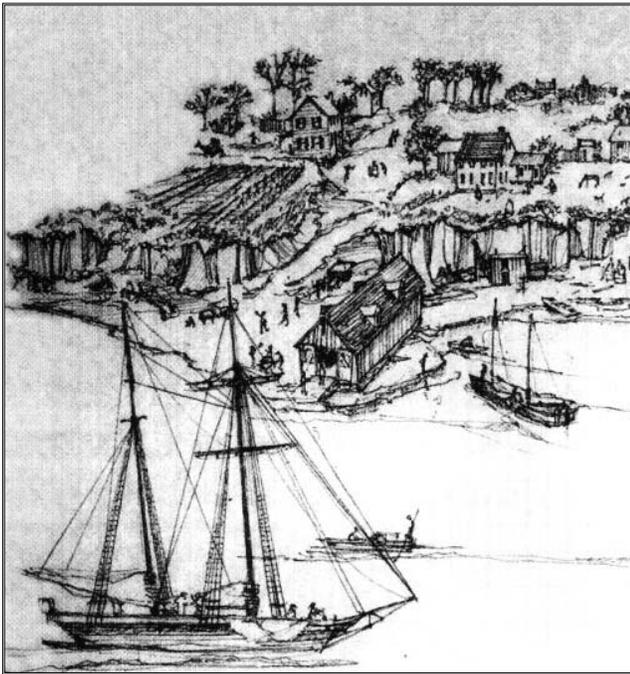
would you have seen the changes taking place but you would have met a variety of singular people. The following describes the changes and tells the stories of some of those people.

The Land

Today at the foot of Duke Street, only a small park separates you from the Potomac River to the east. Looking north toward Washington, you see three bedraggled buildings used for the storage of small boats, a narrow street called The Strand, and a long, red brick warehouse containing part of the Art League School. To the south, toward Mt. Vernon, are the dock, office building, and large warehouses of the Robinson Terminal Warehouse Corporation. To the west, Duke Street crosses Union Street and, bordered mainly by houses, then goes up a gradual incline to Lee Street.

In April 1749, Alexandria existed only as a name. There were no streets and no buildings. An earthen bank about 15-20 feet high, roughly level with present-day Lee Street, stopped about 60 feet on the river side of Union and fell steeply to dry ground. The dry ground stretched east from the foot of the bank until it ended in a rounded point with the river on both sides. This point was named Point Lumley after a Captain Lumley who used to moor his ship just offshore.

Going north from Point Lumley, the high bank curved gradually inward and then gradually out again to another point at the end of present day Oronoco Street.



Pt. Lumley, Alexandria, the south end of the crescent bay, 1760, (Alexandria Archaeology)

At the foot of this curved bank washed a shallow, crescent-shaped bay. Along the bank's top were built the first streets, houses, and stores of Alexandria. (See the map at the top of page 3.)

Colonial Period

In 1749 most of the undeveloped lots in Alexandria were sold to private investors; however, the Alexandria town trustees retained Point Lumley to use for public purposes. In 1751 the trustees cut Duke Street through the bank to open up the Point for business. At roughly the same time, the trustees leased Point Lumley to Thomas Fleming, a young ship's carpenter from Annapolis.

Fleming saw a future for himself in the new town. He saw a seaport in need of ships but without a shipyard to build them. He moved to Alexandria and by 1752 finished his first ship, the *Ranger*, a 154-ton, eight-gun ship manned by a crew of twelve, built for a trading company from Whitehaven, England. By 1754 Fleming had constructed a few buildings on the Point to help with his shipbuilding operations, probably walls and a roof to cover a large pit and protect

men working on a hull in the pit regardless of the weather, a tool shed, and some small support buildings. These were the first of many buildings constructed on and around the Point. Sometime in the late 1750s, Fleming also built a dock at the Point to help with ship construction.

Thomas Fleming prospered. In 1763 he bought the lot on the river just south of Point Lumley and began "banking out." He leveled off the lot's bank and piled the dirt removed from the bank into wooden structures grounded in the river adjoining his land to make a wharf and eventually new land. The same year he was appointed a trustee for the town of Alexandria. In 1770 he bought the lot adjoining Point Lumley to the west and conveyed his old lot to his son-in-law, keeping it in the family.

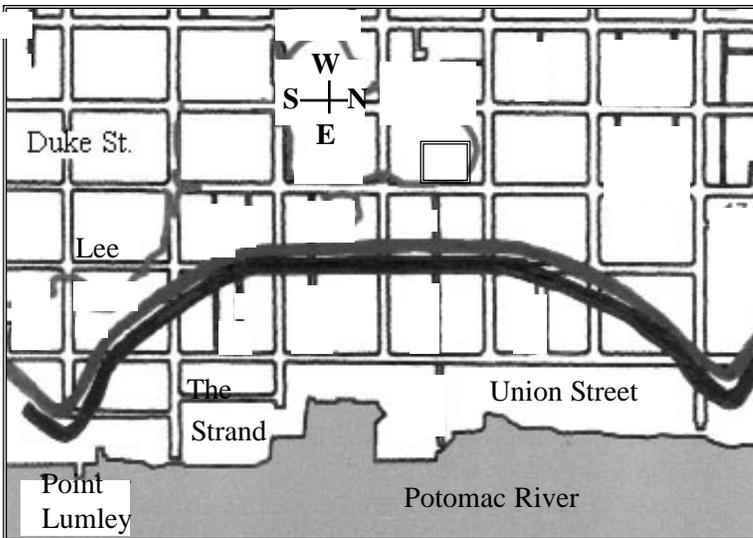
Soon afterward, however, Fleming's ship-building operation faltered, then failed. In 1771 Alexandria merchant Harry Piper wrote: "I believe Ship building is done at Alexandria, as there is no Timber to be got"¹ and in 1774 Piper wrote again: "we have no Vessels a building, nor likely to have any."²

Revolutionary and Post Revolutionary Eras

During the American Revolution and shortly afterwards, the banking out process extended Point Lumley and created an area of wharves and useful land adjoining the Point to the south, between Duke and Wolfe Streets. As the banks were leveled, the character of the area began to change.

In 1780 Alexandria trustees leased property on the Point to Robert Townshend Hooe and Richard Harrison, who soon built a warehouse of stone and wood on the wharf there and established the very successful commission merchant firm of Hooe and Harrison. That same year, 1780, Hooe became the city's first elected mayor when Alexandria changed its form of government from appointed trustees to elected council and mayor. He was also a militia colonel during the Revolutionary War and later a friend of George Washington's who dined often at Mt. Vernon.

Hooe and Harrison were cousins, and they first began working together in the very early days of the Revolutionary War. In fact, their efforts contributed to the success of the American patriots. At the start of the Revolution in June 1775, Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, had been forced to flee Williamsburg in a British man-of-war. Directing



Alexandria's crescent-shaped harbor in 1749. The shoreline is the curved line closest to the Potomac River, the bank is behind it. The 1749 shoreline is at Lee Street. In the 1760s Thomas Fleming banked out the shallow water south of Point Ludley. In the mid-1780s Union Street was cut through. And, in 1802 the Strand was continued across Duke to Wolfe Street, the next street south. (The Potomac River is on the east.) (Stephenson, 2006)

the ship, Dunmore captured Norfolk and began to harass shipping along the Chesapeake Bay and to raid rebel homes. Understandably, the revolutionaries in Baltimore and Alexandria feared for their safety, in part because they knew they were unable to defend themselves -- they lacked the basic military supplies of gunpowder and muskets.

At that time Robert Townshend Hooe was part of the firm of Jenifer and Hooe. The Jenifer of the firm had the unusual name of Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer. He lived in Port Tobacco, Maryland, and was chairman of the important Maryland Council of Safety.

In an attempt to obtain material to defend the colony, at the end of 1775 and in early 1776, the Maryland Council of Safety dispatched several ships to the then-neutral French island of Martinique. Because the French and British were not at war with each other, French ships could come and go from the island carrying gunpowder and other military supplies without being seized by the British. It was believed that at Martinique the colonists could pick up supplies more easily than by sailing to France and risking confrontation with the numerous nearby ships of the British navy.

The Council's plan was to sell the goods on board their ships; use the funds received to buy gunpowder, muskets, and other supplies from the French; and then return without being intercepted by the English. To handle transactions between Maryland and the French in Martinique, the Council dispatched the young Baltimore merchant Richard Harrison.

At the same time Robert Townshend Hooe in Alexandria, working with Jenifer and the Maryland Council, began corresponding with Harrison in Martinique. On the Council's behalf, Hooe bought a ship and loaded it with goods to sell in Martinique. He also procured goods for two other ships bound for Martinique, including one owned by his own firm Jenifer and Hooe.

The ships' chances of arriving in Martinique and returning safely, however, still were not good. As an American merchant wrote to the Maryland Council of Safety, a number of American vessels were being seized in the West Indies by the British, and "I tremble for such vessels as is destined for St. Eustia and Martinico."³

One of Hooe's three ships arrived safely and returned with a load of valuable supplies. The second, however, was chased into the neutral French port at Martinique by a British warship. There, Harrison cleverly camouflaged the ship's ownership and destination, loaded her with gunpowder, put on board several Frenchmen to pose as crew, and sent her out again. Fortunately she made it back safely to the Potomac, and some of her powder was sent to Alexandria. The third ship was captured by the British, taken into Martinique, and sold as a prize. But the creative Harrison arranged for a Frenchman to buy her at the sale, loaded her with gunpowder, and ordered her to return home. This time she arrived safely in the Potomac.

This flagrant American activity caused the British authorities to complain to the French governor of Martinique and to single out Harrison as the Americans' head conspirator. However, even though the French were not then at war with the English, they were finding the war between the English and Americans profitable both politically and commercially. The French governor blithely wrote back denying that arms or powder "for the rebellious subjects of His Britannic Majesty" had been procured as alleged. Moreover, he wrote that Richard Harrison, instead of

being some sort of American agent, was in fact but “a young man of 20 (he actually was 26), come in the ship *Baltimore*, to St. Pierre (in Martinique) in order to be treated for venereal disease.”⁴ Hooe and Harrison continued their activities.

Hooe and Harrison,

Have for Sale at their Store,

Osnaburgs, Ravens duck, brown rolls, Russia duck, Holland’s ditto, white-lead, red ditto, Spanish brown, red ochre, yellow ditto, white vitriol, verdigrease, brimstone, sand-glasses, spy-glasses, sheet-lead, sheet-copper, German steel, loglines, deepsea ditto, houseline, marline, hamberline, sail twine, seine ditto, sheet-tin in boxes, steel wire, tar, turpentine, English and Dutch cordage, anchors of different sizes, mould candles, hyson, bohea and souchong tea, black pepper, single refined and double refined sugar, candies ditto, gin in cases, muskets, butter pots, water pitchers, queen’s china, glass ware, delf bowls, long and short pipes, violins, looking glasses, hatchets, carpenters’ and joiners’ tools, scythes, bolting-cloths, blankets, flannels, hats, cotton stockings, yarn and worsted ditto, diaper napkins, cambricks, lawns, check shirts, gauze handkerchiefs, old hock in bottles, &c..

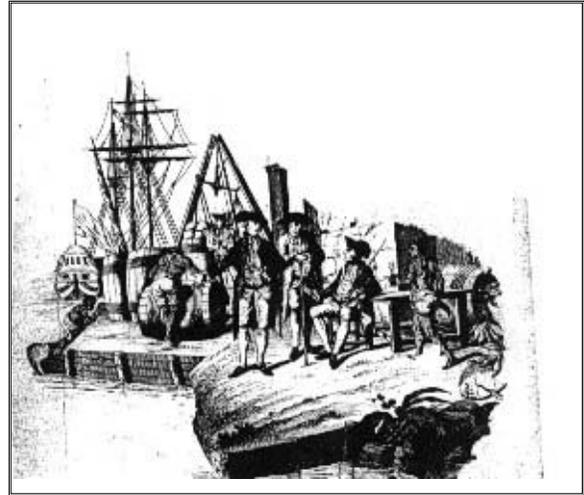
Alexandria, Jan. 26, 1785.

The Virginia Journal & Alexandria Advertiser,
February 3, 1785

Later in the Revolutionary war, Harrison became the acting consul representing America in Cadiz, Spain. Thus he developed, through his wartime experience, good connections with Alexandria’s two major foreign trading areas at that time, the West Indies and Europe. Harrison and Hooe impressed each other and toward the end of the war entered into a partnership that continued well into the 1790s.

From their wharf just south of Duke Street, the shipping firm of Hooe and Harrison would fill orders for Alexandria’s main export commodities -- wheat, flour, Indian corn, and tobacco. The firm would buy flour, for example, that came into Alexan-

dria by the wagon load from Loudon County and other back country areas. To pay for these goods, the partners would draw on funds that the firms placing the orders deposited in banks in England, Philadelphia, and later in Alexandria. They also would draw their commissions from these funds. Then they would load



Conducting business as was done at the foot of Duke Street
(Fry-Jefferson Map, Library of Congress)

the goods onto tall sailing ships at their wharf and send them on to their destinations.

At times ships would arrive with goods to sell, and then Hooe and Harrison would act as the ships’ agents, selling the cargo — anything from muskets and anchors to violins, flutes, hand mirrors, Spanish wines, and rich cloth — and taking their commissions from the proceeds.

While this type of shipping activity was taking place on the wharves located between Duke and Wolfe Streets, the part of the block, away from the water’s edge was crowded with businesses that supporting shipping, including a ship chandler, a barrel maker and a ship’s biscuit baker. People lived above some of these establishments and filled several tenements nearby. At one time this part of the block was divided into as many as 22 separate parcels.

Union Street was cut through the block between 1782 and 1785. As the banking out process proceeded, in 1802 the street called The Strand was continued south across Duke Street and on through the block to connect Duke and Wolfe Streets.

In 1809 R. T. Hooe died. He had been a hard-nosed businessman who not long before his death wrote an unusual will. In it he said he was making a will because if he did not he was afraid his property

would go to “what in Law is called an Heir.” He was concerned that this “Heir” might be “a person whom I, in my life time disliked, and would as soon have given any thing to a puppy.” He then listed those types of persons: “The Card Player, the horse racer, The Beau, The Fop, are among others, the Beings in human shape, whom I detest, and look upon as a Pest to Society, and as such ought to be driven from among the honest part of Mankind.”⁵



**Barbary Coast
Corsair**

After forming the partnership with Hooe, Harrison continued to live abroad. In 1784 he was still the acting American consul in Cadiz, as well as being a private merchant, when an incident involving him and a ship from Alexandria led to the first treaty between the United States and a Muslim country.

The treaty came about as follows. In October 1784, the brig *Betsy* from Alexandria docked in Cadiz. After her crew unloaded merchandise for Consul Harrison, they refilled her hold with salt and dry goods and set sail for Tenerife in the Canary Islands. On board as second mate was the consul’s twenty-three year old nephew and namesake, Richard Harrison. Later the nephew related in a deposition what happened next.

The *Betsy* had not sailed far out into the Atlantic when her crew saw a ship approaching. It looked like the English ship that had docked near them in Cadiz. Only when the ship got closer could they see that the crew wore the turbans of the dreaded Barbary pirates. By then it was too late to flee, and swiftly the corsairs captured the *Betsy* and took her to Tangier.

All was not lost, however. The pirates were from Morocco and Morocco’s Sultan, Sidi Muhammad, desired a treaty with the United States. (Seven years earlier, in 1777, the Sultan had been the first head of state to formally recognize American’s independence.) Capture of the *Betsy* was his way of getting the new nation’s attention. As an indication of his good will, the Sultan treated the captives well and returned them, including the consul’s nephew, to

Richard Harrison in Cadiz less than a year after their capture. In 1787 negotiations between the United States and Morocco produced a treaty regularizing relations between the two countries

Richard Harrison, the former consul, eventually settled in Alexandria and married the daughter of George Washington’s physician and friend, James Craik. Shortly after his term as consul, John Adams referred to him favorably as “a Gentleman of much Merit.”⁶ Later President George Washington appointed him Auditor of the Treasury, a position that he held for forty-five years until his death in 1841 at the age of 92.

Mid 19th Century

Just before the Civil War, the waterfront block between Duke and Wolfe Streets began to take on a more industrial character. By 1851 railroad tracks had been laid down Union Street from the Wilkes Street tunnel to Oronoco Street, separating the block from the rest of Alexandria, and intensifying its industrial character.

In 1853 two Alexandrians, William H. Fowle and his younger brother George, teamed with several New York City investors to lease much of the block for 99 years to build a steam-driven flour plant called Pioneer Mill. It was finished in 1854 and at six-stories high was one of the largest such plants in the United States and one of the tallest buildings in Alexandria. It could take wheat straight from the dock into the plant, and there mill the wheat into flour at a rate of up to 800 barrels a day. Most of that flour was sold in New York City.

William H. Fowle, the chief operating officer of the company, was literally a marked man. Twenty-five years earlier his face had been badly disfigured in a duel fought with another Alexandrian, Lewis A. Cazenove.

In 1827, when both Fowle and Cazenove were in their twenties, there was a fire at a local business called Ladd’s Mill. Cazenove wrote his brother in Boston describing the fire and said that he had seen William H. Fowle and his father standing by idly while neighbors fought the fire to keep it from destroying the mill. Even worse, he added, the Fowles were seen “looking on with apparent self-satisfaction.”⁷

This story circulated in Boston, where the

Fowles had connections, and made its way back to Alexandria. The Fowles were infuriated, and the younger William H. tried to get Cazenove to retract his statement. Cazenove did retract it to some extent, but not enough to satisfy Fowle. To preserve the family honor Fowle challenged Cazenove to a duel. Seconds were appointed, pistols chosen, and a date and place set for the confrontation: December 26, the day after Christmas, across the river in Maryland.

Fowle was a militia officer and had some



Pioneer Mill, 1864-65

(Alexandria Library Special Collections)

familiarity with weapons, but Cazenove, according to a letter written by his father just after the duel, had never held a loaded pistol in his hand until late the night before the duel, when someone convinced him to do some practicing..

At the appointed time, the two squared off and fired. Each side's witnesses said that their man fired first. Nevertheless, Fowle's bullet completely missed while Cazenove's hit Fowle in the face.

For a few days there was doubt whether Fowle would survive. He did, but his face was badly disfigured. As for Lewis Cazenove, a friend wrote his father: "There is no harm in being thought a great shot provided it does not become a habit, and I strongly advise Lewis to let it rest there, if only that he may not injure his reputation by a bad shot."⁸

Both men continued to live in Alexandria. Inevitably from time to time they must have met each other walking along a street.

Civil War

Later in life, William H. Fowle was more successful, becoming a director in the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, president of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company, and president of the Bank of the Old Dominion. However, he was as unlucky in the flour business as in dueling. His company's flour plant, Pioneer Mill, located between Duke and Wolfe, was reasonably successful for seven years, from 1854 until 1861. In 1861, when the Civil War began in Alexandria, Union forces took over the mill and turned it into a warehouse for army commissary goods.

In addition, President Lincoln blockaded Alexandria from commercial imports or exports as part of his blockade of all southern ports, although he permitted military goods to be imported and exported on behalf of the Union. The blockade of Alexandria was not lifted until September 1863, after the battle of Gettysburg, and after Alexandria became the capital of a revised state of Virginia, which consisted of that part of Virginia controlled by the Union and the part of the state that later became West Virginia. Apparently, Alexandria was by then considered safely under Union control.

Late 19th Century

Alexandria was slow to recover from the Civil War. In 1869 the city council was unable to pay principal and interest on its bonds. As a result, to secure payment to its creditors, the city turned over to trustees much of its real property, some of its personal property, and all rents from leases of that property. Included in the transfer were the jail, Market Square, the fire department buildings as well as the department's horses, horse harnesses, fire engines, and Point Lumley. Over the following years, the property in trust was either sold or returned to Alexandria.

The Duke-to-Wolfe block was part of this slow recovery. If a person owned property on the block before the Civil War, almost without exception that person or the person's heirs owned the property until the 1870s or later. In 1875, Pioneer Mill finally was sold at a fraction of its original price.

The block was to suffer a further setback. In

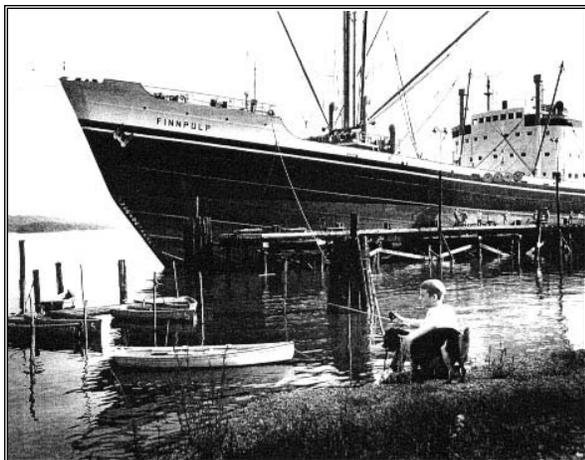
the dark early morning of June 3, 1897, a fire started in the block just north of Duke Street and spread to the Pioneer Mill with devastating results. When light came later that day “a mass of smoldering ruins” was all that was left of the towering, long-standing Alexandrian landmark.⁹

Early 20th Century

During the early part of the twentieth century, the block began a slow comeback. It was used for light industrial activities such as oil storage, a railroad freight depot, a lumber yard, second-hand machinery sales and repair, and automobile production. In 1906 one of the first automobiles built in Virginia was built on this block by the Emerson Engine Company.

In 1939 much of the block was bought by the Robinson Terminal Warehouse Corporation, a company that specialized in storing and shipping newsprint and copy paper for newspapers. Until the early 1970s, the corporation also unloaded small arms from ships for Interarms, a neighboring gun merchant. In 1982 Robinson Terminal Warehouse Corporation was sold to the Washington Post Company.

At the height of its shipping activity in the early 1980s, 60 freighters a year unloaded goods at the terminal on Duke Street or at the one on Oronoco Street. By contrast, only one freighter docked at the facility in 2002. Today, transportation of company goods is by rail and truck.



Finnish ship unloads its cargo at the dock at the foot of Duke Street, 1950s

(Alexandria Library Special Collections)

Today

Today the Robinson Terminal Warehouse Corporation owns the entire block. The company still



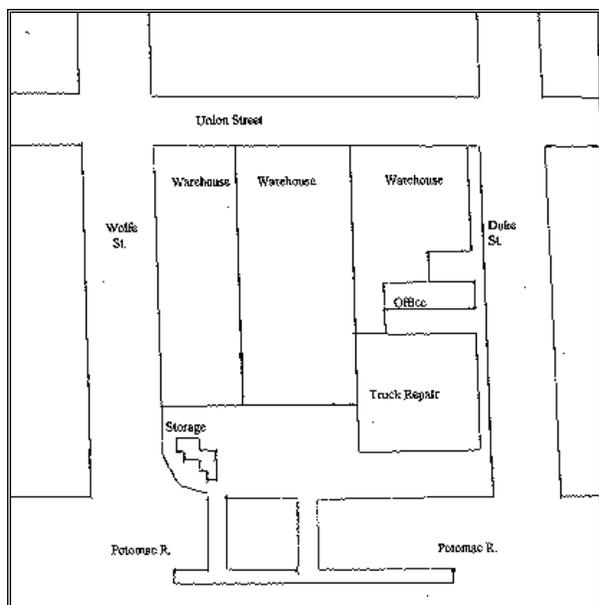
The Robinson Terminal Warehouse Corporation, office building, South Terminal, 2 Duke Street, 2007

deals primarily in paper products, newsprint, copy paper, and “food grade paper” -- paper like that used to wrap MacDonald’s hamburgers and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Parts of its Duke Street facility also are used by a local man to repair rowing sculls for area rowing teams and by the Alexandria Seaport Foundation for its boat building program.

The facility in the block between Duke and Wolfe consists of six buildings: three warehouses, a building for storing and repairing forklifts and trucks, a small equipment storage building, and an office building. (See layout illustration on page 8.)

Although some of the warehouses may contain parts of earlier buildings, for the most part, the buildings you see today were built in the twentieth century. The warehouse on Wolfe Street was built between 1937 and 1939, while the middle warehouse and the warehouse on Duke Street were built in the 1960s. The forklift and truck repair building (the brick building just south of Lumley Park where Pioneer Mill was once located) was built in the 1940s. The small storage building near the foot of Wolfe Street was built in stages, probably the newest part in the 1940s, and other sections at an earlier time.

The office building at 2 Duke Street may be more than 100 years old, although its facade is much newer. It stands roughly where the old Hooe and Harrison stone warehouse stood but seems not to be the same size, in precisely the same location, or of the same material as that earlier building. However, a building the same size as the current building is shown



South Terminal: Wolfe Street on the left, Duke on the right, and the wharves and Potomac River at the bottom.

on the 1877 Hopkins map of Alexandria and on an even earlier Civil War map. On the latter, its use is indicated as a “Soldiers Messhouse.”¹¹

It would be surprising if the office building actually survived the 1897 fire that destroyed Pioneer Mill then located not far away to the east, toward the river. However, Willie Taylor, operations manager of Robinson Terminal Warehouse Corporation, said in the summer of 2006 that several years earlier he had been in the office building’s attic and seen scorched beams in the ceiling of the attic’s northeast corner. This scorching could have been caused by the 1897 fire, which would indicate that the building was there at the time of the fire and survived. If the maps are accurate, it may date back to before the Civil War and the time of William H. Fowle.

Although goods are shipped now from this block by truck, the Corporation reports it is making efforts to have ocean-going freighters use the Point Lumley facilities again. From time to time, Coast Guard vessels and an occasional tall ship tie up to the Robinson Terminal Corporation’s dock. Then, old Point Lumley briefly appears somewhat like it did when Hooe and Harrison loaded flour, wheat, corn, and tobacco on board ships bound for Baltimore, Martinique and Cadiz.

Endnotes

¹Edith Moore Sprouse, transcriber, *Harry Piper Letter Book 1767-1775*, Alexandria, Virginia (publisher not listed, 1991), pp. 168-169.

²*Ibid.*, p. 291.

³William Bell Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of The American Revolution*, Vol. 3 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), p. 1162.

⁴William Bell Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of The American Revolution*, Vol. 4 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 433.

⁵Will of Robert Townshend Hooe, Alexandria Will Book C, page 186 (probated March 23, 1809).

⁶Letter from John Adams to John Jay, Secretary of State (London, February 25, 1787), National Archives, Record Group 360, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, R113, Item 84, Vol. VI, fol. 427.

⁷Circular, “TO THE PUBLIC,” January 22, 1828, a reprint by Lewis A. Cazenove of a circular published by William Fowle (copy located in the Cazenove folder in the “vertical files” in the Local History Special Collections, Barrett Library, Alexandria, Virginia), pp. 3-5.

⁸B.G. Du Pont, translator, *Life of Eleuthere Irenee duPont from Contemporary Correspondence, 1819-1834*, Volume Eleven (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1926), pp. 199-200.

⁹*Alexandria Gazette*, June 3, 1897.

¹⁰Interview with Robert W. “Willie” Taylor, Operations Manager, Robinson Terminal Warehouse Corporation, July 6, 2006 (Duke-Wolfe Street research files, Alexandria Archaeology Museum, Alexandria, Virginia).

¹¹Map, “WHARFS STOREHOUSES ETC.,” a Civil War era map showing buildings between Prince and Wolfe Streets on the waterfront, drafter not listed (located in Map Drawer 4, Special Collections Room, Barrett Library, Alexandria, Virginia).

Note: The Hooe and Harrison ad on page 4 was retyped in modern English for ease of reading. The first item listed for sale are osnaburgs. According to Wikipedia, osnaburg was a popular, coarse, plain textile manufactured in Scotland and exported to the British colonies and elsewhere in the mid-18th century. Lawn is a fine linen used especially for bishop’s sleeves, according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

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Common Council of Alexandria to William H. Fowle and George D. Fowle, lease, February 26, 1853 (Alexandria Deed Book Q-3, p. 317)

Alexandria Gazette and *Virginia Advertiser*, June 14, 1841 (obituary of Richard Harrison); June 3, 1897 (Pioneer Mill fire).

Depositions of Richard Harrison (Fairfax County, 1785), National Archives, Record Group 360, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, R125, Item 98, fols. 290-303.

Letter from Richard Harrison to John Adams (London, 1787), National Archives, Record Group 360, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, R113, Item 84, Vol. VI, fols. 431-436.

Letter from Alcaid Driss, Secretary of the Emperor of Morocco, to Richard Harrison (Morocco, 1784), National Archives, Record Group 360, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, R125, Item 98, fols. 35-36.

Map, "Alexandria, 1860-1870" (located in Map Drawer 4, Special Collections Room, Barrett Library, Alexandria, Virginia).

Map, "City Atlas of Alexandria, Va.," published by G.M. Hopkins (Philadelphia, 1877).

Also see footnotes and for additional sources consult Ted Pulliam, pulliams@starpower.net

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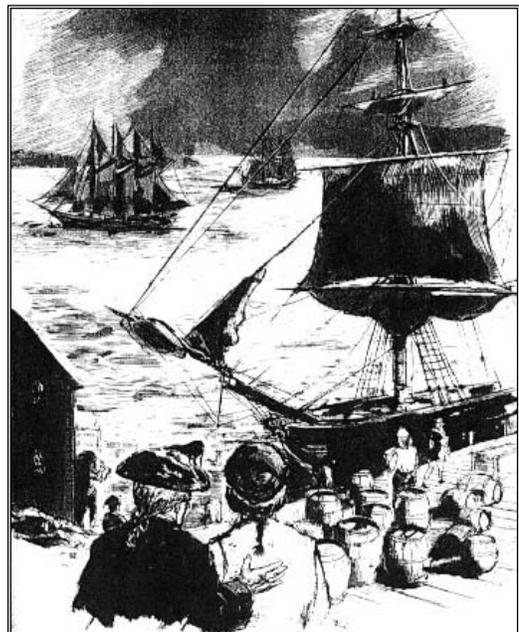
A publication of monographs about historical Alexandria, Virginia.

The Alexandria Chronicle

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In the next issue of the *Chronicle* Carole L Herrick, author of *August 24, 1814 Washington in Flames* tells the dramatic story of how the War of 1812 took its toll on Alexandria.



In this issue of the *Chronicle* learn how a number of singular people shaped the early history of Alexandria
(Life in Colonial America)