

# Docent Dispatch

February 2018

## The Early Years of Alexandria, Virginia

January 31, 2018 by Julie Stoner

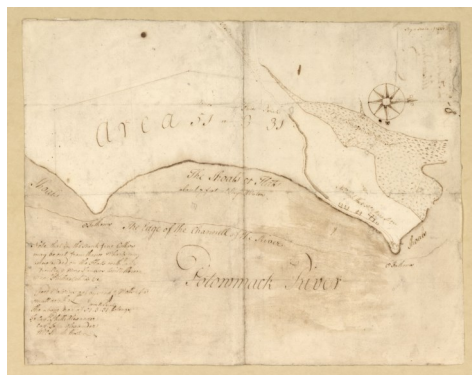
*The following post is by Ed Redmond, a cartographic specialist in the Geography and Map Division.*

The city of Alexandria, Virginia traces its roots to the establishment of a tobacco inspection warehouse at the foot of current day Oronoco Street in Old Town Alexandria. The purpose of the inspection warehouse was to provide quality control over tobacco exported from the colonies to England. Instrumental to the early mapping of Alexandria was none other than George Washington, who was an accomplished surveyor and cartographer. In 1748, at the age of just 16, the future president helped map the outline of the new city to be created around the tobacco inspection warehouse.

At the town's founding in July 1749, the town held its first sale of lots and George Washington created a second map showing the street grid in the new city. Washington also listed on the right side of the map the 58 town lots sold between July 13th and September 20th, 1749, providing the proprietors' names and the prices paid in Spanish gold coins called "pistoles."



*A plan of Alexandria, now Belhaven. George Washington, 1749. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.*



*Plat of the land where on stands the town of Alexandria. George Washington, 1748. Manuscript Map. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.*

By 1798, as shown on George Gilpin's *Plan of the town of Alexandria in the District of Columbia*, Alexandria's waterfront had expanded significantly due to dredging of the Potomac River and using the fill to create new land.



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(Right) Plan of the town of Alexandria in the District of Columbia. George Gilpin, 1798. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.

How did the city transform from a tiny settlement into a busy port town? One of the major reasons was the establishment of the Alexandria Canal Company in 1838. The Alexandria Canal formed the southern half of a canal system that linked Cumberland, Maryland with Alexandria, which was then part of the District of Columbia. The canal system allowed barges to travel via the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal from Cumberland to Georgetown, in D.C., and then cross the Potomac River at Georgetown by means of the Potomac Aqueduct. This aqueduct enabled the boats to cross the Potomac River without descending to the river level, allowing barges to continue the journey without unloading their cargo. The Alexandria Canal then ran south from Rosslyn on the western bank of the Potomac, past the current site of the Pentagon and Reagan National Airport, and on to the north end of Alexandria.

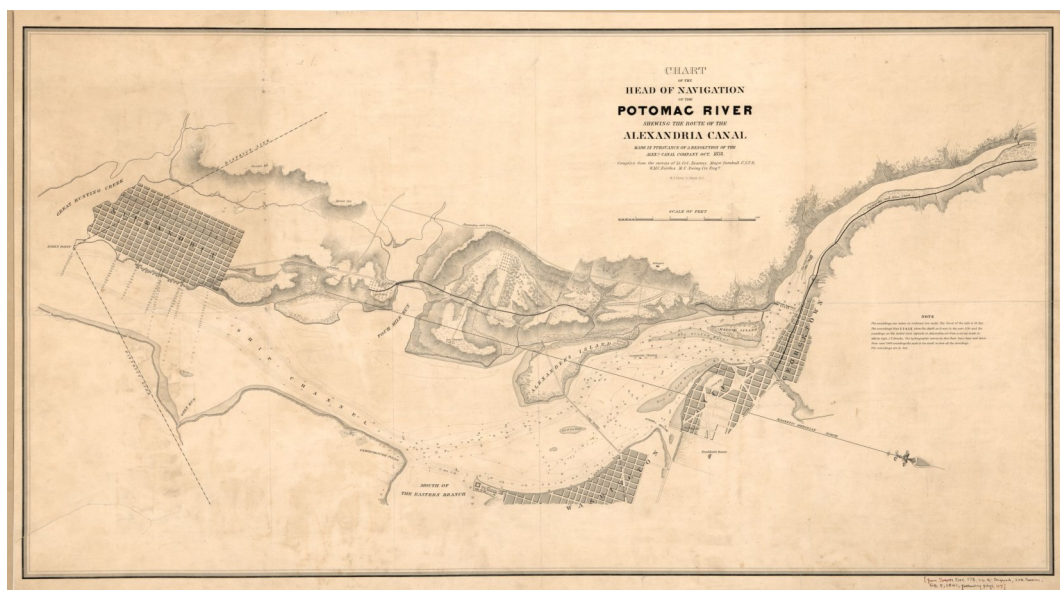


Chart of the head of navigation of the Potomac River shewing the route of the Alexandria Canal. Alexandria Canal Company, 1841. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.

The completion of the canal allowed business to flourish in Alexandria in the mid- to late-19th century. The canal was abandoned in 1886, later becoming the location of an electric trolley line. Though no longer the busy colonial port of its past, Alexandria's proximity to the nation's capital has allowed it to continue to flourish and grow today.



*Bird's eye view of Alexandria, Va.* Charles Magnus, 1863.  
Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.