



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### *A Time of Change 1940s Alexandria*

By Linda Greenberg

From 1942 through 1944 Alexandria was overtaken by World War II. In 1939, Alexandria was the eighth largest Virginia city, with four banks, ten public schools (including two high schools – one for whites and one for colored), one newspaper, seven railroads, and 43 churches including 12 denominations. From 1942 to 1944 the city's population doubled, increasing from 33,000 to 67,000 in two years.

Not all newcomers worked in Alexandria; many worked at one of the nearby military bases such as Ft. Meade or Ft. Belvoir or in Washington, D.C. Where were all these people to live? One answer was to declare Alexandria a "critical rent area." Landlords were subject to rent control and had to register their properties with the War Housing Center. The first Alexandria War Housing Center opened in the 100 block of South Washington Street. It referred newly-arrived military and defense-related workers to listed furnished rooms or apartments.

In addition, President Roosevelt asked Metropolitan Life to build a large garden apartment complex at Parkfairfax and the Defense Homes Corporation, part of the Federal Housing Administration, to build similar units at Fairlington Village. These home-building projects were exceptional because of the critical materials shortage. It was virtually impossible to get concrete, wood or metal for "non-essential" (residential) building. Fairlington Village included a large tract of land – 534 acres -- that had been owned by John Carlyle. Carlyle acquired the land in 1756 to use as a farm, and when Carlyle died in 1780, the land passed to his grandson, Carlyle Fairfax Whiting. The property, named Torthorwald, remained in the hands of Carlyle heirs for 150 years or until 1942. It was at Torthorwald that in 1756 Carlyle constructed a plantation house. Later its name changed to Morven and in 1879 to Hampton. Today the house would have been near the intersection of 30<sup>th</sup> Street South and South Columbus Street in Arlington.



*Fairlington Village Development, 1943.*

The property that John Carlyle owned in Alexandria also underwent a number of changes. By 1942, the Carlyle House, at 121 N Fairfax St, would have been unrecognizable to him. The Wagar Apartments, a four-story plain, white-painted brick building with ornamental cornice and decorative balcony, had been built as a hotel in 1855 by James Green, a successful, local furniture maker. The hotel had subsequently become a hospital during the Civil War, a hotel again in 1865, and then, in 1906, when bought by Ernest Wagar, an apartment building. When originally built, the hotel completely blocked the view of the Carlyle House to the passerby on North Fairfax Street.

Lloyd Diehl Schaeffer, a Virginia businessman, purchased the Carlyle House and the Wagar Apartment building in 1940 and was instrumental in saving the Carlyle House from demolition during the

#### **CARLYLE HOUSE**

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1960s. Schaeffer eventually sold the entire property to the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority in 1969. In the 1940s, too, the west side of the 100 block of North Fairfax Street began with a dilapidated assortment of frame buildings before you reached 132 North Fairfax or City Hall. The frame buildings were later taken down to create the open and inviting Market Square.

Just one block away from Wagar Apartments, the Torpedo Factory (several buildings) operated seven days a week, 24 hours a day. It produced the Mark XIV submarine-launched torpedo. The factory had been



*Aerial photograph of the Torpedo Factory, notice the rear of the Carlyle House in the background. Courtesy of the Torpedo Factory.*

built in 1918 (just as the World War I ended) and occupied nearly two blocks, from Lee Street to the river and from Cameron Street to Fayette Alley. After the factory was completed, manufacture and maintenance of torpedoes continued for several years. Operations resumed in 1937. During World War II from 5,000 to 6,000 workers were employed at the factory producing torpedoes. It closed in 1946, and in 1969 the city of Alexandria bought the complex.

In addition, two local firms worked on parts used in creating the first atomic bomb: Southern Iron Works at 2 Duke Street, (part of the Robinson Terminal complex today) and the subcontractor J & H Aitcheson, machinists, at 116 King Street. Southern Iron Works (SIW) fabricated structural steel for the Washington and Baltimore areas. It operated two plants, occupied 94,000 square feet and employed about 125 men. The operation relied on a railroad spur that ran along Union Street from the Wilkes Street tunnel to Oronoco Street. Southern Iron Works provided fabricated steel for local buildings such as the Vernon Movie House, the AB&W Transit Company as well as mall structures, such as Landmark Mall. SIW president Carlyle Boguess sold the factory building on Duke Street in 1955 to Mr. Robinson of the *Washington Post* and moved the

business to Springfield, where it fabricated steel until very recently. W.A. Smoot & Co., at the corner of Cameron and Union Streets, sold building material, coal, lumber millwork, sand and gravel.



*Buildings at #1 Duke Street in the 1940s.*

Rationing during the war affected the quality of life of people in Alexandria and throughout America. Rationing began in the spring of 1941. Alexandria's War Price Rationing Office (WPO) was located in various buildings: first the Chamber of Commerce, then 815 King Street, then the Post Office and then the Odd Fellows Hall in the 400 block of South Columbus. Everyone, including infants, was issued a ration book.

Rationing was a problem. If, for example, you used up your month's allotment of gas coupons before the end of the month, you had to appeal to the board and justify your request for more coupons. Among rationed goods were gas, rubber (one of the items in shortest supply), bourbon, tin, cheese, oil, meat and butter. Interestingly, by October of 1943 over 6,000 people had registered for special liquor ration books. They registered a "special need" for liquor, i.e., they were invalid or sick, and their request was accompanied with a physician's certificate.

In addition to rationing, there were salvage drives. People saved paper, iron and tin and other metals for the war effort. Leisure driving was discouraged because it used up gas and potentially increased the need for new rubber tires. In 1943, John L. Lewis, head of the United Mine Workers, and resident of today's Lee-Fendall House, at 614 Oronoco Street, was charged with violating the pleasure driving ban when he visited his 84-year old mother in Illinois. When Lewis was asked to justify his trip, he explained that he undertook the 1,600 mile trip "to investigate several coal mines..." and that the visit to his mother was only possible because of the important business he conducted for the government in Illinois.



Occasionally, too, there were shortages. In 1944, there were no turkeys for Thanksgiving in Alexandria and, in December, no gas for the Christmas holidays. If your car ran out of gas, it was towed.

Front page news in *The Alexandria Gazette* on October 1943 was a vote by Congress to increase the allowance for the children of servicemen from \$12 a month for the first child and \$10 per month for each additional child to \$30 and \$20 respectively. The \$50 allotment for the serviceman's wife was not increased. Alexandria provided nearly 3,000 men to the war effort; of whom



*Duke Street at the Potomac.*

135 died. *The Gazette* also offered household tips: "To cut down on the amount of ironing of the family wash, hang all clothes straight on the line, so that the fewest number of wrinkles are dried in." Montgomery Ward, at 906-908 King Street, advertised "lovely Rayon hosiery" for 75 cents a pair in *The Alexandria Gazette* on October 1943. Rosenberg's Department Store was at 41 King Street, and the Alexandria Print Shop at 317 King Street in the Gazette Building.

School children helped in the war effort as well. *The Alexandria Gazette* reported in October of 1943 that "City Schools Setting Pace" in reaching war fund goal. Alexandria Community War Fund chairman Frank H. Fannon reported that school children had exceeded their quota toward the city's \$95,739 goal. T. C. Williams, the Superintendent of Schools, reported the student's contribution was \$2,656.20.

The government was involved in most facets of life

during the war. USOs or United Service Organizations were established to be a home away from home, to cheer up and boost the morale of military and government workers living away from home. In 1942, Alexandria's USO was located in the Armory in the 200 block of South Royal; it then relocated to 1605 Cameron Street. The Cameron Street USO boasted "a spacious lounge and log-burning fireplace." It was operated by 600 volunteers and a paid staff of eight. During September 1944 14,994 service personnel were entertained at this USO.

Movies were also popular entertainment, particularly in the summer time. The Vernon Theatre featured "Hi Diddle Diddle" in October 1943 and advertised its "scientifically air conditioning" (sic) at a time when very few buildings and homes were air-conditioned.

When Joan Poland, daughter of Carlyle Boguess, President of Southern Iron Works, thinks of Alexandria in the 1940s and 1950s – before it was referred to as "Old Town" -- she remembers that her parents forbade her to go east of Washington Street. Lower King Street was not considered safe or proper. In fact, Alexandria was sometimes referred to as "Shag Town," and the Ramsey Visitor's Center was a bar where the winos hung out. Still, she did work at Southern Iron Works when she was in high school as a switch board operator. And, occasionally she went over to King Street. She remembers going there one time to listen to Johnny Phillips practice with his band in the alley behind the Ramsey House before he gained fame as the song writer for the Mamas and the Papas. The Mamas and the Papas were popular in the mid-1960s and one of their big hits was "Monday, Monday."

She also remembers when her father rented a crane to move the Memorial Fountain from the intersection of North Fairfax and Cameron Streets to its present location in the garden next to Gadsby's Tavern Museum. The fountain was a gift to the city from the Mt. Vernon Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The inscription on the top basin of the multi-level fountain is dated 4/1/1912 and is "in memory of the Colonial and Revolutionary Events of the Town of Alexandria, Virginia."

**Selected Sources:** *Alexandria Gazette, Carlyle House Restoration Report, The Fireside Sentinel, The Carlyle Connection.*