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ALEXANDRIA HISTORY

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Alexandria, Virginia



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Cover Design: By Sue Ogdin Lynch

Inside Covers: Pages from Harry Piper Letter Book,
1767-1775. Reprinted by permission of
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Virginia, Charlottesville.

FOREWORD

This is the first issue of ALEXANDRIA HISTORY. A new organization is bringing forth a new publication.

Our purposes are:

To provide information about the history of Alexandria.

To encourage those who have something to say about Alexandria's history to write it down and impart it to others through our publication.

Our standards are high. We want well-researched, well-thought-out, and well-written articles.

We hope that you, our readers, will also be our contributors, and that you will give the Editorial Committee your ideas of how ALEXANDRIA HISTORY can best serve the society's purposes.

W. B. Hurd
PRESIDENT
Alexandria Historical Society

THE "PRECARIOUS TRADE" OF A VIRGINIA TOBACCO
MERCHANT: HARRY PIPER OF ALEXANDRIA, 1749-1776

by
THOMAS M. PREISSER

Given the importance of Scottish merchants in the founding and development of Alexandria, it is strange that we know comparatively little about them. Men such as John Carlyle, William Ramsay, Robert Adam, and John Dalton left few records, therefore students of Alexandria's history owe a considerable debt to Harry Piper, an emigre merchant from northwest England who wrote a detailed account of his activities in the Potomac community from 1767 through 1775. Although his letter book focuses on economic affairs, it also provides some fascinating glimpses of life in early Alexandria.¹

Of the initial block of eighty-four town lots sold at auction in July 1749, Piper bought those numbered four and forty.² Whether he built on these lots or lived on them is not known, but we do not know that he resided in Alexandria until his death in the late 1770s.

Situated just below the falls of the Potomac, Alexandria proved ideally located to serve the needs of those who settled the northern Virginia Piedmont and Valley regions. The growth of trade, the town's lifeblood, paralleled the opening of the Virginia frontier. Although we lack a census of the Potomac town before the late 1780s, Alexandria's population probably stood at about 1,700 as early as 1755; it had increased to approximately 2,000 by the mid-1770s.⁴ By the latter date, perhaps two dozen town merchants competed for a share of the local trade, but few of them enjoyed greater success than Piper, a tobacco buyer and resident factor for the mercantile firm of John Dixon and Isaac Littledale of Whitehaven, England.



ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA: 1775

NOTE: All wharf dimensions are approximate.

SOURCE: See footnote three.

From 1749 until his death at the end of the 1770s, he served as their agent in Alexandria. His most important responsibility was buying tobacco and shipping it to Whitehaven in vessels chartered by his employers. Piper also advised Dixon and Littledale of the types and amounts of goods they should send to their store in Alexandria; provided them with current information on the state of the tobacco trade; acted as their local attorney; and collected debts due the company. The firm occasionally called on Piper to sell commodities they shipped to Alexandria, such as coal and indentured and convict servants, but this sort of request rarely occurred.⁵ Piper had little to do with selling consignments from England as John Muir, another of the firm's salaried employees, usually had sole responsibility for that task.

Piper shipped a great deal of tobacco to Whitehaven in the years immediately preceding the Revolution. He purchased approximately thirty to forty hogsheads of the leaf annually from each of his suppliers.⁶ During the years 1767 through 1775, he sent his employers more than five million pounds of tobacco. Thus, his yearly average shipments were about 616,178 pounds, or more than twice the amount exported by the typical British factor in the Chesapeake Bay region during the late colonial period.⁷

The Dixon and Littledale ships carried more than just tobacco. From 1767 through 1775 they also transported over 46,000 barrel staves, 20 barrels of flaxseed, a small quantity of oak boards, and 142 tons of pig iron.⁸

In a profession characterized by a rapid rate of turnover of manpower, Piper's long association with Dixon and Littledale was extraordinary. The tone of his letters shows that a close personal relationship existed between the three men during Piper's residence in Alexandria. This certainly contributed to his extended tenure. His astuteness and diligence also assured his retention; he was obviously a first-rate tobacco merchant. Although good at his job, Piper rarely found it an easy one. In the opening pages of his letter book he referred several times to the difficulties confronting a local tobacco buyer. He remarked that the habitually unsettled state of the tobacco market rendered "this trade so very precarious that I am heartily sick of it." Several paragraphs later he returned to the same pessimistic note: "I am quite tired of a Business which there is so little satisfaction in."⁹ An examination of Piper's discontent provides a sense of the complications encountered by the tobacco merchants of early Alexandria.

Many of Piper's difficulties stemmed from the intensely competitive nature of the tobacco trade. The local agents of the great mercantile houses of Glasgow created problems because of their unorthodox business practices. The Glaswegian merchants sent large numbers of vessels to the Potomac each year. In their rush to load

their employers' ships quickly and thus minimize the turnaround time, the Scottish factors recklessly bid up the price of tobacco. Piper and other buyers had to suffer the consequences of this action.¹⁰

Anxious to corner the market on Potomac tobacco, the Scots not only paid handsome prices, but also offered very attractive rates of exchange between Virginia currency and English pounds sterling. After a particularly disastrous encounter in which his rivals outbid him, Piper wrote that "I could not conceive they would give somuch [sic], as I think there was no occasion for it, but they are determ.d to have the whole Trade." With more than a degree of justification, he commented in 1772 that "some of the Scotch seems to envy any one that has the least share of the Trade."¹¹ The cut-throat competition for local tobacco forced Piper to adopt tactics that he realized were unwise. Basically, these involved paying prices he regarded as unrealistically high for his tobacco.¹²

Piper's difficulties did not all originate with the competition of his Scottish counterparts. Although the governor of Virginia appointed inspectors of proven integrity to check and approve all tobacco exported from the colony, the inspection system occasionally worked badly. Piper did everything in his power to avoid accepting hogsheads from Acquia [Aquia] Creek because the inspectors there were sometimes "rather careless," and at other times "great Villains." In the spring of 1772, he wrote that he hoped they would "soon be turned out."¹³

From time to time Piper complained to his employers about the rising incidence of theft in Alexandria. This involved more than just the occasional loss of a few pounds of tobacco. For example, although in April 1769 he had partially completed the process of fitting out a fishing craft, he found his work slowed by the repeated disappearance of his supplies. He advised Dixon and Littledale that "I have no house to put any Thing into, & it is now become common to Steal everything from the Craft. . . ." Piper also suffered from the curse of counterfeit money. In a letter to Whitehaven in 1773, he remarked that he had recently lost more than two hundred pounds in Virginia currency through his acceptance of "nicely done" counterfeit bills.¹⁴

The Alexandria merchant often encountered difficulties in the shipment of tobacco to Whitehaven. Occasionally things went smoothly, as they did when the "very obliging & industrious" Captain Rothery and his "very good crew" loaded the *Wells* with 340 hogsheads of tobacco in only fifteen working days.¹⁵ At the other extreme, rarely did things go as badly as in the fall of 1772 when the

Olive arrived for a consignment of tobacco. Piper's description to his employers of the sequence of events conveys his frustration superbly:

The Cap.^t [Captain Morrison] has been continually Drunk & Stupid, I have scarcely ever seen him, but in such a situation, that it was needless to speak to him—the Mate & People I suppose were unacquainted with stowing the Ship, so that she has fallen inconceivably short, & what is most provoking [I] was never made acquainted with it till the very last; I told them all along they were to leave room for the load the Flatt was down the River for, but to my great mortification [I] was obliged to land 11 HHDs [hogsheads] that were stowed to return to this Warehouse before it would be taken in;...

Piper added that the slipshod loading of the *Olive* had left him with over forty hogsheads of tobacco he could neither ship nor sell. He concluded bitterly that "it is hard I must draw for this when I thought I was guarding as much as possible ag.^t[against] having any tobacco left...."¹⁶

Disasters of this sort undoubtedly strengthened Piper's resolve to return to his native England.¹⁷ He never abandoned that dream, but he lived out his life in Virginia.

Considering the precarious nature of his health, Piper accomplished an incredible amount. Malaria was apparently endemic in colonial Virginia, and the Potomac merchant periodically reported being ill with fever or "my old complaint, the Bilious Cholic."¹⁸ In the early autumn of 1770, he advised his employers that "I have been confined almost 3 Weeks with a Fever, I am just now able to crawl, but far from well, in this Sickness my Eyesight is so much Impaired, that I can scarce see to write, . . ." He concluded with a request that his correspondents "send me a pr [pair] of the best Spectacles to suit a Person of my Age."¹⁹ This particular fever proved to have an unexpected benefit. Dixon and Littledale had previously sent Piper a coat and breeches that fitted badly. He quickly advised them that the coat and sleeves were completely unusable and that the breeches were "too narrow over the hips" and would not "meet to button by four or five inches." He despaired of the clothing fitting anyone, adding that it would probably have to be discarded. However, when he wrote in November, after his illness, he commented that the coat and breeches now fit quite well with only minor alterations!²⁰

Piper remained a bachelor during his long stay in Alexandria. The only surviving relatives mentioned in his will, which was drafted in 1774 and discovered in 1780 by William Ramsay and John Muir, were his sisters Elizabeth Sargent and Jean Walker.²¹ A perusal of his

letters leaves no doubt that he had many good friends among his fellow citizens in Virginia.

Piper took an unusual interest in the machinery of local government. During the 1750s and early 1760s, he served as a juror in many, if not most, of the trials held in Fairfax County. His name often appeared as the jury foreman. Appointed an Alexandria trustee in 1763, he brought to his new position the same degree of hard work that he applied to his trade.

The coming of the Revolution found Piper firmly committed to the patriot cause. His inclination to proceed with caution, and his conviction that the English were at fault in the quarrel, found expression in a letter written to Samuel Martin, a Whitehaven merchant, in October 1774: 'I think the Americans are exceedingly ill used by the late Acts of Parliament, but I wish matters may not be carried to too great lengths. . .'²² Piper did not desert his adopted country when it carried matters to their ultimate conclusion in July 1776. He died in Alexandria during the Revolution, leaving one thousand pounds sterling to several beneficiaries, a gold watch to John Dixon 'as a small token of my friendship,' and a gift of freedom to his only slave, Charles.²³

FOOTNOTES

1. Harry Piper Letter Book, 1767-1775 (Manuscripts Department, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville: microfilm). The most complete account of the colonial Virginia merchant is Robert Polk Thomson, "The Merchant in Virginia, 1700-1775" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1955).

2. For a complete record of the initial owners of Alexandria lots, see Thomas M. Preisser, "Eighteenth-Century Alexandria, Virginia, before the Revolution, 1749-1776" (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1977), Appendix A. (Alexandria Public Library, Alexandria, Va.)

3. Source of map: Proceedings of the Board of Trustees Town of Alexandria, Virginia, 1749-1767 (Office of the City Manager, Alexandria, Va.) and 1767-1780 (Alexandria Public Library, Alexandria, Va: photostat); John W. Reys, *Tidewater Towns: City Planning in Colonial Virginia and Maryland* (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1972), p. 210.

4. See Preisser, "Eighteenth-Century Alexandria," Table 2, "Population of Alexandria, 1775-1790."

5. Piper Letter Book, July 13, 1773, and Aug. 31, 1774 (coal shipments); July 19, 1768; May 12, 1769; and June 15, 1772 (indentured and convict servants).

6. A hogshead was a barrel in which tobacco was packed for shipment; it weighed about 1,060 pounds.

7. Carville V. Earle and Ronald Hoffman, "Urban Development in the Eighteenth-Century South," in Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn, eds., *Perspectives in American History*, 10 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 23.

8. See Preisser, "Eighteenth-Century Alexandria," Table 3 for a detailed breakdown of Piper's shipments to Whitehaven.

9. Piper Letter Book, July 23, 1767.

10. *Ibid.*, May 12 and Aug. 24, 1769; Dec. 11, 1770; Nov. 27, 1771; and Jan. 10, 1772.

11. *Ibid.*, Dec. 11, 1770 (first quote); Jan. 10, 1772 (second quote). For a lucid discussion of rates of exchange between sterling and Virginia currency, see James H. Soltow, "The Role of Williamsburg in the Virginia Economy, 1750-1775," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 15 (October 1958): 467-82.

12. Preisser, "Eighteenth-Century Alexandria," pp. 79-80.

13. Piper Letter Book, Aug. 2, 1770 and June 15, 1772. For the tobacco inspection system, see Percy Scott Flippin, *The Royal Government in Virginia, 1624-1775*, Studies in History, Economics and Public Law: Edited by the Faculty of Political Science of Columbia University, vol. 84, no. 1 (New York: Columbia University, 1919), pp. 279-82. For an unflattering assessment of the Virginia tobacco inspectors, see Arthur Pierce Middleton, *Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era*, ed. by George Carrington Mason (Newport News, Va.: Mariner's Museum, 1953), p. 103. Aquia Creek emptied into the Potomac River about forty miles downstream from Alexandria. A fine map of the Chesapeake colonies in 1775 is on p. 5 of Lester J. Cappon, ed.-in-chief, *Atlas of Early American History: the Revolutionary Era, 1760-1790* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

14. Piper Letter Book, Apr. 15, 1769 and Feb. 20, 1773.

15. *Ibid.*, July 13, 1773.

16. *Ibid.*, Nov. 17, 1772.

17. *Ibid.*, Aug. 24, 1774.

18. Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, "Of Agues and Fevers: Malaria in the Early Chesapeake," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 33 (January 1976): 31-60; Wyndham B. Blanton, *Medicine in Virginia in the Eighteenth Century* (Richmond: Garrett & Massie, Inc., 1931), p. 67; Piper Letter Book, Sept. 26, 1773.

19. Piper Letter Book, Sept. 28, 1770.
20. *Ibid.*, Sept. 28, and Nov. 3, 1770.
21. Fairfax County, Virginia, Will Books, D-1, Nov. 22, 1780 (Ar-
22. Piper Letter Book, Oct. 26, 1774; June 8, 1769; July 25 and Nov. 11, 1774; and Dec. 5, 1775. The "late Acts" referred to are the Coercive Acts of 1774.
23. Fairfax County Will Books, D-1, Nov. 22, 1780, pp. 162-64.

Thomas M. Preisser was born in New Orleans in 1939. He received his BA in Political Science from Stanford University, his MA in History from Northwestern University in 1968, and his doctorate from William and Mary in 1977. He has been on the faculty at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio since September 1973.

A CANAL FOR ALEXANDRIA

by

VIVIENNE MITCHELL

In November, 1978, a team supervised by Alexandria City Archaeologist, Pamela Cressey, cut a trench through the dirt and rubble covering the outlet lock of the old Alexandria-Georgetown Canal. The trench exposed the large, granite stones of the lock which had been covered over many years ago. This excavation was done at the instruction of the Alexandria Archaeological Commission to confirm that material evidence of the outlet lock still exists. Confirmation of this fact was necessary in order to meet the requirements of the Virginia Landmarks Commission and thus nominate this important archaeological site to the National Register of Historic Places.

The lock is on the river side of the Ramada Inn, between First and Montgomery Streets in Alexandria. It is the last of four locks built between Pitt Street and the Potomac to lower barges to the river and raise them from the river on their return trip northward.

Because of the rise and fall of the tides in the river, it was necessary to have an outlet lock which would enable barges to be lowered from high tide level in the lock basin to low tide level. The other locks were actually lift locks, and each lifted or lowered barge approximately ten to twelve feet. The remains of these other locks are now buried under filled-in land and buildings.

The Alexandria-Georgetown Canal, more commonly known as the Alexandria Canal, played a short, but important, part in the history of commercial navigation on the Potomac River. The Potomac Company was organized in 1785, with George Washington

as president. His dream since the late 1760s, and the primary objective of the company, was to bypass the falls of the Potomac River above Georgetown by means of canals. In addition, locks were to be built at Great Falls and Little Falls to lift the barges. In the level stretches of the river, navigation was possible by poling the barges.

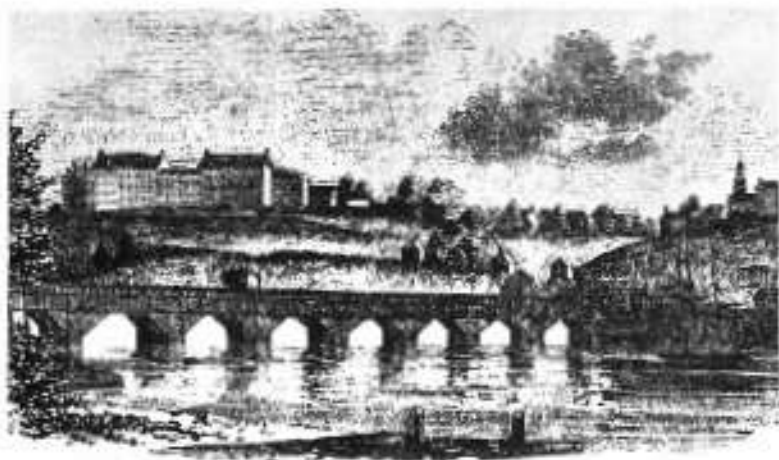
The Potomac Company went out of business in 1828, and its charter and rights were assumed by the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company.¹ The objective of this company was to build a continuous canal instead of a series of canals that merely skirted the falls. It would be entirely on the Maryland side of the Potomac River. By 1850, it extended all the way from Georgetown, D.C. to Cumberland, Maryland.²

Merchants and shipowners of Alexandria were envious of the vast number of cargo ships sailing past their town to Georgetown, which had become the prosperous port for the nation's capital. They envisioned these ships stopping at the wharves of Alexandria to unload their cargoes and to pick up products for export. They also hoped to ship their goods westward on the new Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and to tap the coalfields of western Maryland. Therefore they saw the need for a canal between their city and Georgetown to connect with the terminus of the C & O Canal. An ingenious crossing of the Potomac River via an aqueduct bridge was planned.

Alexandria was a part of the District of Columbia from 1791 to 1846, at which time the Act of Retrocession was approved and Alexandria again became part of Virginia.³ Therefore it took an Act of Congress, dated May 26, 1830, to grant a charter to the Alexandria Canal Company "for the purpose of building a canal from the terminus or other point on the C & O Canal to such a place in the Town of Alexandria as the Board of Directors shall appoint." The act further stipulated that the canal was to be forty feet wide at the water surface and twenty-eight feet wide at the bottom. There was to be sufficient width along the entire length for a towpath to accommodate horses or mules to pull the barges.

The Alexandria Canal, when completed in 1843, was approximately seven miles long. It crossed the Potomac on an aqueduct bridge over 1,000 feet long between Georgetown, D.C. and Rosslyn, Virginia, then ran on level land to Alexandria, crossing Four Mile Run on a smaller aqueduct bridge, and reaching the Potomac River in Alexandria by means of four locks.

The Potomac Aqueduct Bridge, built under the direction of the Army Engineers, was supported by eight solid masonry piers.⁴ It was considered a great engineering feat of its time, and it stayed in operation as an important river crossing long after it ceased to be used to carry the canal across the Potomac. It finally went out of operation with the construction of the present-day Key Bridge in 1923.



POTOMAC AQUEDUCT BRIDGE from *Our Whole Country*
.....by John W. Barber and Henry Howe, 1863, p. 610

From its beginning the canal imposed a financial burden on the citizens of Alexandria. On July 23, 1830, the Common Council of Alexandria passed an act "to subscribe 500 shares of one hundred dollars each to the capital stock of the Alexandria Canal Company."⁵

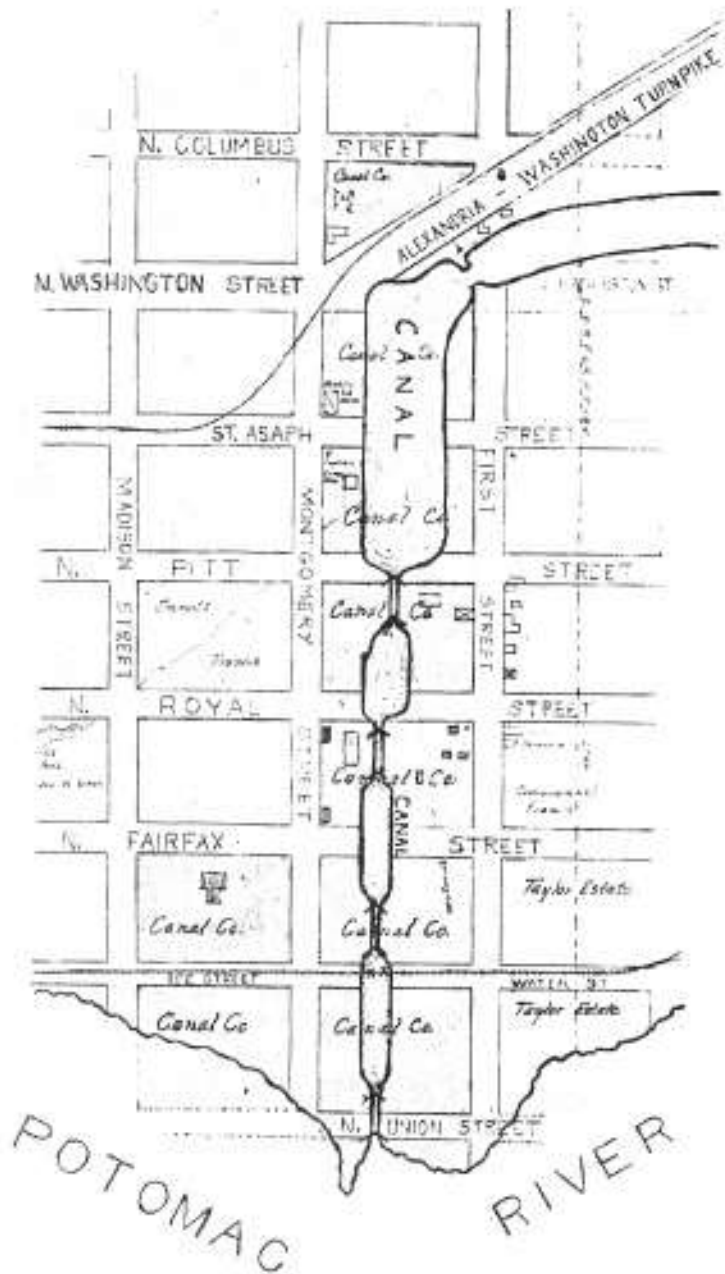
Other acts were passed by the Common Council authorizing further subscriptions, one on May 2, 1835, for five hundred additional shares:

The mayor and president of the council be, and are hereby authorized... to borrow the sum of \$50,000 at such time as they may deem necessary at a rate of interest not exceeding 6%.... That to provide sufficient means for the payment of the interest on the sum borrowed, there shall be levied with the taxes of the current year, till the said stock shall be redeemed and paid, a tax at the rate of twelve cents on the hundred dollars of the assessed value on all real estate (including all ground rents in fee simple)...⁶



Excerpt from a map of the route of the Alexandria Canal from G. M. Hopkins' *Atlas of Fifteen Miles Around Washington, D.C.*, 1878, pp. 66-67. On this map and others the canal is erroneously called the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal.

Courtesy of Library of Congress



Map of locks of the Alexandria Canal from G. M. Hopkins' *City Atlas of Alexandria, Va.*, 1977, pp. 47, 51.

On July 9, 1836, an act was passed to authorize the Common Council's subscription to 2,500 additional shares of stock. A real estate tax sufficient to pay the interest on the sum borrowed for this purpose was to be levied. Another subscription was authorized on May 3, 1843. This time a thousand additional shares called for a tax of twenty-four cents on every hundred dollars of the assessed value of real property. And again, on February 4, 1845, another five hundred shares of stock were authorized by the Common Council, accompanied by a tax of twelve cents on a hundred dollars of assessed value of real and personal property.⁷

Construction of the Potomac Aqueduct Bridge began in 1833 and was completed ten years later. The first canal boat reached Alexandria on December 2, 1843, and the December 4 issue of the *Alexandria Gazette* describes the celebration:

On Saturday last, the Alexandria Canal, connecting this town with the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, was officially opened for trade and navigation.

After all the trials and difficulties that have accompanied the work, the day, at last, arrived when the Canal boats could float across the Potomac, over a splendid and permanent aqueduct, and be brought to the town of Alexandria, along a Canal seven miles long, without a single lock or other interruption.

On the 4th of July, 1831, the first spade full of earth on the Canal was thrown up--and on the 2nd of December, 1843, the first Canal boat reached town. The locks bringing the Canal into the river, are now in the course of construction, and will be finished next year.

The President and Directors of the Canal Co., the Mayor, and a large number of our fellow citizens, went up to the Potomac aqueduct in the morning, and there with the Engineers and other officers of the Company, embarked in the Canal Boat *Pioneer*, and after a pleasant and short passage of a little upwards of an hour, down the Canal, reached its terminus at the Corner of Washington and Montgomery streets. The boat stopped amidst the cheers and congratulations of a large crowd assembled to witness the interesting sight, and the heartiest tokens of satisfaction were given on the ground and throughout the whole town.

In honor of the event a salute was fired, the national flag was hoisted at the Public Square, and the vessels in port were decorated with flags.

We repeat, now at the completion what we said at the commencement of the Canal.--May this important work succeed and prosper--may it more than realize our warmest hopes--and may it RESTORE and PERPETUATE the TRADE and PROSPERITY of ALEXANDRIA.

Business flourished for a while on the two canals, and, in 1850, the C & O Canal was completed to Cumberland. From then on, coal



TWO-TIERED AQUEDUCT BRIDGE

Courtesy of Frederick Tulp

from the western Maryland mines became the most important commodity to be shipped via the canals to the Potomac River wharves in Alexandria. These coal shipments continued until the abandonment of the canal, interrupted only by the Civil War. Other typical products shipped by canal were reported in the *Alexandria Gazette* of July 2, 1847. For the period from April 21 to June 26, 1847, shipments included:

| DESCENDING | | ASCENDING | |
|--------------------|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| Boats | 151 | Boats | 140 |
| Wheat | 31,266 bu. | Fish | 2,264 bbls. |
| I. Corn | 73,083 bu. | Salt | 220 half-tons |
| Oats | 4,355 bu. | Plaster | 427 3/4 tons |
| Bran, Shorts, etc. | 11,492 bu. | Lumber | |
| Whiskey | 158 bbls. | Shingles, etc. | 213 half-tons |
| Corn Meal | 10,424 bu. | Fresh Fish and | |
| Flour | 15,207 bbls. | Sundries | |

However, financial difficulties continued because of the frequent need for repairs on the canal. A letter of October 23, 1850 from the Office of the Alexandria Canal Company to the City's Common Council described one such situation:

I am instructed by the Directors of the Alexandria Canal Company to say that they had hoped and did believe that they would not require further aid from your body, but unforeseen events have rendered it necessary for them again to apply to you.

The late rain has caused considerable damage to the berm bank at Wauhopin, and a portion of the new embankment at the four mile run continues to settle, while at the same time the bottom of the canal leaks at this point.

In the absence of the Engineer of the Company the Board estimates the cost of repairs at the points designated at from three to four thousand dollars, and respectfully request a further loan of as much as may be necessary to put the canal in a complete state of repair, not to exceed the latter sum.

Very respectfully,

Jos. Eachus
Pres. A. C. Co.8

During the period of the Civil War, the canal was forced to cease operations. The occupation of the Virginia side of the Potomac River by Federal troops was essential for the defense of Washington and for the movement of men and supplies. The canal's Potomac aqueduct bridge played its part in effecting this Federal occupation. Colonel (later Major General) J.G. Barnard of the U.S. Army Engineers reported in 1871: "The crossing of the Potomac took place on the night of the 23rd of May, 1861, in three columns--one under command of Major Wood, by the Georgetown Aqueduct; another under Major (now General) Heintzelman, by the Long Bridge; and another under Colonel Ellsworth by water to Alexandria...."⁹

Major Wood's troops marched across the aqueduct bridge along the towpath of the canal, obviously an inefficient passageway, as Colonel Barnard said in his report:

Two bridges were necessary, even if the liabilities to destruction of one by accident or the incendiary had not been, in itself, a decisive motive. The towpath of the aqueduct would indeed furnish a narrow passageway, to horsemen and footmen, but this was far from adequate to the military exigencies. Accordingly, early in the winter of 1861-62, the water was shut off from the aqueduct, its trough converted into a double-track wagon road, the floor being overlaid with 4-inch planks and long inclines, or trestles, forming connections with the roads on either side.¹⁰

Traffic on the canal resumed after the Civil War, as Alexandria's economy slowly revived. Shipments of fish, oysters, ice, millwork, groceries, plaster, and other items were carried northward on the canal. The foreword of the *City Atlas of Alexandria, Va.* of 1877 describes a flourishing coal trade, with shipments going from Alexandria directly to Aspinwall [now Colon in the Republic of Panama] and San Francisco, for the use of the steamship lines operating in the China and Japan Seas. The atlas reports "the fine facilities afforded at Alexandria for its storage and shipment."¹¹

The Alexandria Canal Company continued to be plagued by financial difficulties. During harsh winters the canal often froze over and became impassable for long periods of time. The *Gazette* repeatedly reported repair problems. Whenever repairs were needed, canal traffic would be stopped, and financial losses would be suffered by shippers and merchants.

In 1846, when Alexandria was ceded back to the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Federal Government had refused to assume the debt of the canal company. The Virginia General Assembly, however, pur-

chased a large block of stock and guaranteed some of the company's bonds.¹² In 1866, the Virginia General Assembly passed an act requiring the City of Alexandria to dispose of its stock in the Alexandria Canal Company and authorized the Board of Public Works to dispose of the Commonwealth's interest.¹³ The canal was then leased to Messrs. Henry H. Wells, William W. Dungan, and Philip Quigley, under the name of the Alexandria Railroad and Bridge Co., for 99 years at \$1,000 a year. The lessees were required to keep the canal in repair and navigable condition. In 1867, the lessees were authorized to construct a highway toll bridge above the canal trough on the Potomac Aqueduct Bridge, making it a two-tiered structure. Although traffic continued on the canal and toll bridge under the administration of the lessees, the operation was never lucrative.

On September 21, 1886, the *Alexandria Gazette* reported: "A serious break in the Aqueduct bridge occurred yesterday afternoon which let all the water at that point in the canal into the river, and which will probably cause a suspension of traffic over the canal for a week at least...."

A week later, on September 27, the *Gazette* gave the following report: "Since the fall of a portion of the Alexandria canal aqueduct trunk there has been considerable anxiety as to the safety of the bridge....They say that in the present condition of the woodwork the weight of water in the aqueduct cannot safely be added to the weight of the bridge...."

There is no evidence that barges used the canal after the September 1886 break. At that time there was also a great deal of pressure from the citizens of Georgetown for a free bridge across the Potomac in place of the aqueduct toll bridge. Accordingly, the bridge was sold to the Federal Government and from then on became toll free. The wooden structure was removed and an iron truss bridge was built upon the old stone piers.

On October 22, 1886, the *Alexandria Gazette* printed this item entitled "Last of the Canal," by the Washington Correspondent of the *Baltimore Sun*:

The creation of a free bridge at the Georgetown Aqueduct, under the plan now agreed upon destroys the Alexandria Canal as a waterway....It seems, however, to be agreed on by all hands that the conditions of modern transportation are such that the Alexandria Canal...has outlived its usefulness....

It was to substitute horsepower for pole pushing that the aqueduct and the Alexandria canal were made. But the modern expedient of steam tugboats on the river has rendered the canal unnecessary for several years. Many canal boats have passed the outlet lock and gone to Alexandria by river....It is said by Cumberland shippers that it costs only 28 cents more per boat to go from Georgetown to Alexandria behind a tug than to be dragged by mules along the canal and pay toll....

Thus the operation of the Alexandria Canal came to an end. For a short time it played an important role in the history of commercial navigation, but competition from railroads and steam-propelled vessels, as well as the high cost of repairs, contributed to its failure. During its short existence, the canal satisfied a need in the transportation picture of the region, but it became obsolete as more efficient means of transport supplanted it.

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4. Letter from the Secretary of War Transmitting Captain Turnbull's report on the survey and construction of the Alexandria Aqueduct, May 25, 1836. U.S. Congress, 24th, 1st sess. doc. 261, p. 4.
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6. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-35.
8. Alexandria Canal Company and Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company, *Financial Reports of Construction and Other Correspondence with Common Council and Mayor, 1827-1866* (Alexandria Public Library, Alexandria, Va.: Sweeney Papers, microfiche).
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11. G.M. Hopkins, *City Atlas of Alexandria, Va.* (Philadelphia: F. Bourquin's, 1877), pp. 47 and 51.

12. John Hammond Moore, "The Retrocession Act of 1846: Alexandria and Arlington Return to the Fold," *Virginia Cavalcade*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1976), p. 131.

13. Maxine Goff Morgan, "A Chronological History of the Alexandria Canal," pt. 2, *Arlington Historical Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 1, (1966), p. 17.

NOTE

Recognition should be given to Terry Klein and Paul Davidson of the city archaeological staff for their part in this excavation.

Vivienne Mitchell, who attended the College of William and Mary, is Vice-Chairman of the Alexandria Archaeological Commission. She is also a director of the Archaeological Society of Virginia and a contributor to their *Quarterly Bulletin*, a member of the Society for Historical Archaeology and of the Virginia Canals and Navigation Society.



RECENT PUBLICATIONS ON ALEXANDRIA

Karen G. Harvey and Ross Stansfield,
ALEXANDRIA: A PICTORIAL HISTORY.
Norfolk, Va. The Donning Co. Publishers,
1977. 208 pp. \$15.95.

The foreword by Jean Elliot introduces a brief text, illustrated by 350 old and modern photographs. This volume is one of the **PORTRAITS OF AMERICAN CITIES** series published by this firm.

Frederick Tilp, **THIS WAS POTOMAC RIVER.**
Published by the author, 124 Quay Street,
Alexandria, Va., 1978. 358 pp. \$24.00 plus postage.

The author records, in text and photographs, the many facets of a way of life that existed on the Potomac. A subject bibliography and detailed index complete the volume.

Reviews by George J. Stansfield

The first issue of a new journal, **NORTHERN VIRGINIA HERITAGE**, will be published early in 1979 by George Mason University. For a subscription to this periodical, which will appear three times a year, write to: History Dept., Box NVH, George Mason University, Fairfax, Va. 22030. The price is \$4.00 a year.

A PRIZE FOR STUDENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY

The Alexandria Historical Society has established an annual prize of one hundred dollars for the Alexandria high school student who submits the best historical essay or research paper on local history. The paper will be published in **ALEXANDRIA HISTORY**, and the author may be invited to give an oral presentation to the Society. The judging committee may recognize other deserving students as well. Submission deadline is April 1 of each year.

Invitations to participate and rules and criteria for judging have been sent to principals of nine public and private high schools in the city. Several acceptances have been received.

Dear Sir

Alexandria, July 24/1797

I have your several favours by the Dr. of England
& Boston, such as they are chiefly replied to in the
Company's Letters which add but little else present -
I have spoke to Thomas Fleming at the Bridge as you
asked? He says he expects to go to
New York this Winter, we have not mentioned any price
but what is customary, I should be glad if he
bring it, as he is in Debt for Goods, & Debt. I am
sure to get Payment, It will undoubtedly be re-
solving to have a London - When I find she is
going forward it will be time enough to send for
Wicks & Ragging, as it looks as if there would be
little use for Flute with you - I have tried
all I can to get Lowest Prices, but can't - I
dread a good many at Norfolk if to be got there
for the Store - I have put down the Plantation
to the Sold at these Warehouses, as for the lower
Warehouses I had with the Store, though don't know
the Plantation - I send you 72 Shillings by Express
Bills as I have pick up from different hands, I hope
they will go safe to you & please, I probably
may get you some more against next year
if must again depend all prospects of getting things
that it is now selling as low as Portland at 15 & 16/1
it is a great many will not take such prices as
the demand is so great it is hard to know what
will stop - I have put in your order of Lumber
which if can be got for the Store is ordered - It
gives me pleasure that you have so good a Bargain in
the

is being - with regard to some letters of credit
I don't say they would not be known, they have appeared
before me every year, indeed every time it occurs in
them, so that they will scarcely get any thing I
should be afraid to have them in that manner again
I distinguish, as our Laws are our own laws -
we have had no Parliaments for a good while, I don't
know how they might answer - I observe which of
way with regard to your conduct, I have already
told you it is impracticable to read the Law with
John as it has so unfortunately stood in long before
get here - I think Capt. Pava has been long the
I believe he will not complain for want of employment
you will receive by him the same of George & James
from the which is to go in part discharge of bonds
which they had in the Bay, I hope it will be
they promise to let me have some more to put in
the Bay - The Rigging by the Parliaments I have told
to Mr. Adams it is to go to the West Indies & can't
give him 12 Months credit, he can't take any of it
he proposes to send it to the West Indies & I can well
with do - They send me some here for I can not see
it, & when you will get paid for this is very uncertain,
but I did not know what to do with it - The whole
amount is £139.7.7 1/2 for which I have his Bond
pay 12 Months after date. I am, Dr Sir,
Yours Isaac Litchfield Junr. Of your Obedt Servt
in the name of the Parliaments
Capt. Pava -

J. Pava