

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
COMMUNITY MEDIA

A history of New Year's Eve and Day in Alexandria

New Year's Day has been celebrated for many years, well before the founding of Alexandria. The adjustment in English-owned lands from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar occurred in 1752, three years after the founding of Alexandria as a city.

However, other countries' recognition of Jan. 1, rather than March 25, as the start of the New Year, meant that Jan. 1 was commonly, if not legally, considered the start of a new year. In 1752, the day after Sept. 2 was Sept. 14 in order to make the adjustment in the calendar.

Just because Jan. 1 was the new official start of the year did not mean the day was celebrated as a holiday. In fact, it wasn't until 1885 that all federal government employees were given the day off.

In 1860, the Alexandria Gazette described New Year's Day in New York as:

"The only Autumn or Winter Day, that shuts up everything and turns out everybody, that makes it impossible even to print a newspaper the morning after."

The description of a carnival-like atmosphere contrasted with the more sinister tradition held in Alexandria that year: Hiring Day. The Jan. 14, 1860, edition of the Gazette reprinted an article from the Boston Post, with an account of Hiring Day in:

"West End ... a straggling village, running along the Mount Vernon road." On New Year's Day, West End "is wakened up" according to the author, as those enslaved people deemed surplus to their legal owners were "hired out" usually for the year to other people.

After the Civil War, African American communities, especially churches, replaced the Hiring Day tradition – which



PHOTO/ANNA-LOUISE VIA PEXELS

Happy New Year!

often separated family members – with a happier tradition.

The Methodist tradition of Watch Night, in which congregations worshipped together and "watched" the arrival of the New Year, was adopted by African American churches as a means of protection while they waited for their Emancipation on Jan. 1, 1863.

While Emancipation Day celebrations varied in different locations, Watch Night

celebrations have been part of New Year's Eve traditions in African American churches here in Alexandria well into the 21st century.

As we move into 2026, we hope that future traditions continue to emphasize togetherness and community. We wish you all a happy New Year!

*Out of the Attic is
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