

ALEXANDER'S ISLAND

By

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When you examine a current map of Arlington County you will not find any area labeled Alexander's Island because such an island no longer exists. However, several maps prepared in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century clearly identify a piece of land which is now within the boundaries of Arlington County as "Alexander's Island." This area of approximately 500 acres is located at the approach to the twin highway bridges on Routes 1 and I95, land adjacent to the Pentagon and the Washington National Airport and now occupied by a maze of highways, park land, and the Marriott Twin Bridges Motel.

Although now obliterated, Alexander's Island has had an exciting history as the site of a residence of one of the early Alexanders, the aborted Jackson City development, the subsequent Jackson City gambling and race track area, and the old Washington Airport. It was also the subject of several legal disputes in regard to jurisdictional ownership over a period of many years.

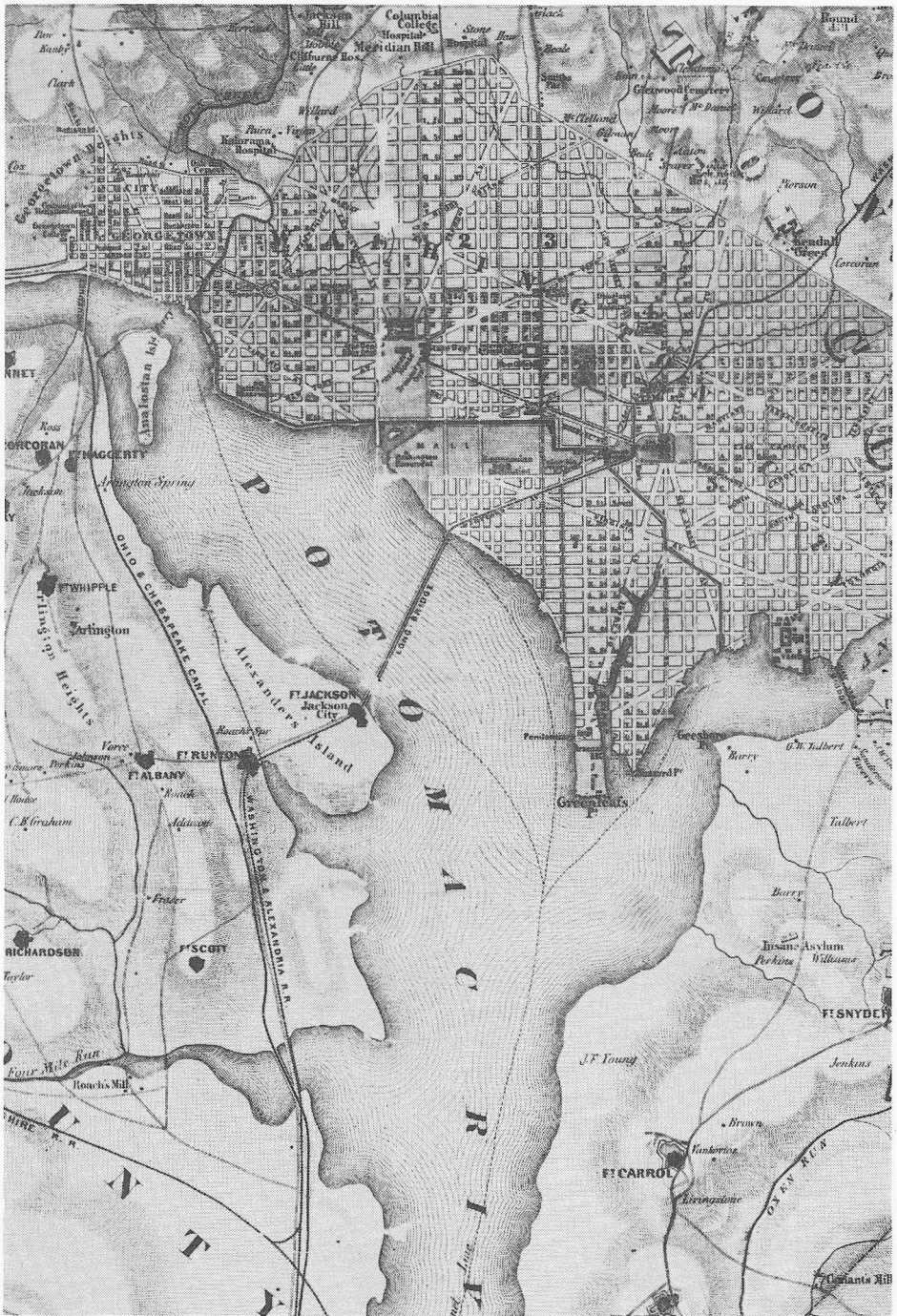
Colonial Period

As with any history of Virginia, our story of Alexander's Island starts with Capt. John Smith. When Capt. Smith sailed up the Potomac River on his voyage of exploration in June, 1608 he sighted an Indian village on the Virginia shore on land which subsequently came to be called Alexander's Island.¹

The next historical reference to this land is in the famous Howson Patent. This grant of 6,000 acres was recorded on October 21, 1669 and less than a month later, on November 13, 1669 Howson sold this land to John Alexander for 6,000 lbs. of tobacco. This tract included the City of Alexandria, extending northward to include Alexander's Island and the present Fort Myer area.

There is no evidence that John Alexander or his son ever lived in the area described as Alexander's Island or the area now covered by Arlington County. This tract was inherited by Major Robert Alexander, a grandson of John Alexander, the original owner. When Robert Alexander died in 1735, the land south of Four Mile Run went to his son John and the land north of Four Mile Run to his son Gerrard. The Jennings Survey of 1746 shows Gerrard Alexander living on Holmes Island which was the name of this land prior to its being called Alexander's Island.

When Gerrard died in 1761, his sons Gerrard, Robert, and Philip inherited the land. Philip got the portion which included Alexander's Island. When Philip died in 1790 his will devised to his eldest son Philip "the island and plantation whereon I now live as far as the road that goes from Alexandria to Georgetown." This Philip in 1808 deeded a part of this tract lying near the river, to his youngest brother Charles, and in 1811 conveyed the balance of his land to William Henry Washington.²



This is a section of the Arnold map of 1862, clearly identifying Alexander's Island at the entrance to the Long Bridge.

Jackson City, 1835-1847

Around 1835 Alexander's Island was purchased by the Jackson City Association, apparently composed of developers or land speculators and contemptuously referred to as "the New York men." These developers had grandiose plans for building a great commercial city on Alexander's Island, a port of trade for goods from the west, which was expected to be brought down on the C. & O. and Alexandria canals. The "city" was dedicated on January 11, 1836, and when, a few weeks later, application was made to Congress for a charter, the enterprise was denounced as a pecuniary speculation, connecting the name of the President "with the bogs and swamps and frogs of Jackson City." It was necessary to obtain Congressional approval as this area was then a part of the District of Columbia.

Congress not only failed to place its approval upon the scheme, but also failed to support the President's ambitious plan to replace the bridge with a new structure to cost one million dollars. The following year (1837) came the great financial panic, and in that trying time whatever vitality the enterprise had oozed out.³

Considering all the changes that have taken place on the south side of the Potomac in this century it is hard to visualize the size of this land which was called Alexander's Island. The engineer for the developers cited it as 572 acres.

Here is a sample of the language used by the developers: "There can scarcely be a more beautiful position for a city than these grounds afford. It rises gradually from the river to a height of 144 feet, but the general elevation of the plain is from fifty to sixty feet, and may be rendered perfectly healthy with the exception of the marsh of Gravelly Creek, which it is proposed to remove or cover with gravel. There is no low ground in the vicinity and no cause whatever of disease. On the contrary, its elevation and exposure are conducive to health and comfort."⁴

The project had from the start roused the suspicion and jealousy of Georgetown and Alexandria which feared the competition of another port along the Potomac River waterfront. Georgetown, in particular, was always careful not to endorse any project that might tend to take away from her wharves and warehouses even the slightest bit of commerce and Jackson City was expected to do considerable of this. The editors of Georgetown newspapers figuratively threw monkey-wrenches in every direction, hoping that one might land in a vital spot, and perchance kill the whole project.

The placing or laying of the foundation stone of Jackson City was a notable event in local history. The population of the District (which then comprised the original ten mile square area, including Alexandria County) at that time was around forty thousand and judging by the reports nearly everybody turned out to witness the parade and the ensuing exercises, in which the idol of the people, for whom the city was named, played a conspicuous part. The parade started from Brown's Hotel in Washington with every conceivable organization represented and the Marine Band leading it.

President Jackson joined the procession at the east end of the Potomac bridge and at twelve o'clock he arrived at the scene of the dedication. After the "foundation stone" was laid, the President and the gentlemen who accompanied him were conducted to a platform from which George Washington Parke Custis addressed the

crowd.



Andrew Jackson

The life of Jackson City was brief, except in name, and nearly twelve years later it was being offered for sale through an advertisement in the *National Intelligencer*. This notice promoted the land as ideal “to be cultivated as a dairy farm” and also very valuable as a fishery, stating that “both shad and herring have been taken in annually increasing quantities for several years past, and in such numbers as to prove it to be one of the best fisheries upon the river.” The notice indicated improvements consisting of a comfortable dwelling house with stables and other out-buildings, and a well of good water next door.

That this place was actually a city on paper is confirmed by an engineer’s drawing of the city as planned which included 500 or more building lots, taking in the entire island and some adjacent land.

Dormant Years, 1848-1888

Little is known about how the land was used in the years immediately following the failure of the proposed Jackson City housing and commercial development. However, in the period between the demise of the old Jackson City and its revival as a gambling center in the 1890’s, Alexander’s Island was involved in two significant events.

During the Civil War, the Alexander's Island area was prominent in the defenses of Washington because of its location at the south end of the Long Bridge. The Arnold map of 1862 clearly shows Alexander's Island with Fort Jackson right at the approach to the bridge and Fort Runyon at the other end of the island.

An article in the *Arlington Historical Magazine* of October 1960 by C. B. Rose, Jr. described Fort Jackson as "little more than an outpost for pickets of a small force stationed at the District end of the Bridge." However, Fort Runyon was the largest of all the forts surrounding Washington.

Of course, Alexander's Island received a lot of traffic during the Civil War because of its location at the end of the Long Bridge. Nearly all of the troops of the Army of the Potomac marched this way from and to Washington. There is a photograph showing Sherman's army crossing the Long Bridge by way of Jackson City for the grand review of May 24, 1865.⁵

In the late 1860's the old Virginia-Maryland boundary dispute flared up again, a dispute that was to be revived off and on for another sixty-five years. In regard to Alexander's Island the problem was whether it was owned by the District of Columbia or Virginia which in turn was based on the question of whether it really was an island.

Alexander's Island was embraced in the original ten miles square ceded to Congress by Maryland and Virginia. At that time the boundary between the two states had not been definitely decided though it was generally agreed that the islands of the Potomac belonged to Maryland in accordance with the original grant to Lord Baltimore in 1632. Alexander's Island was an island only at high water; at low water it was joined to Virginia. As Congress ceded back to Virginia only what it had received from it, the island belonged to either the District or to Virginia according to the old water question.

This subject will be discussed further in another section of this article.

The Race Track and Gambling

Alexander's Island and Jackson City came into the limelight again in the 1890's with a flourishing race track on the island along with nearby gambling joints. In this period there were two tracks in Alexandria County, St. Asaph's sponsored by the Virginia Jockey Club and Alexander's Island operated by the Old Dominion Jockey Club.

The first reference I discovered in regard to the legal basis for the tracks is an act of the General Assembly of 1888, "An Act to incorporate the Alexandria Gentlemen's Driving Club for the purpose of establishing a driving park and race course in the county of Alexandria for pleasure riding and driving, racing and other entertainments . . ." I suspect that the use of the title "Driving Club" was an euphemism to cover up the real purpose---horse racing and gambling.

An article in the *Evening Star* on February 1, 1895 indicated that "Racing at the Alexander Island track ceased yesterday after a continuous meeting of more than eight months, to be resumed next month, when it is said, racing will be continued indefinitely." This one month holiday from racing apparently resulted from a law suit against the track, the details of which are unknown to the author. The

Star on January 24, 1895 had a story headed, "Terms of the Compromise as to Alexander Island." It stated, "The following agreement was reached by the counsel in the case of the Alexander Island race track at Richmond, Virginia yesterday, and was signed by the Attorney General for the Commonwealth and by Messrs. Burke and Smith for the defendants:

First: Racing pool selling, and bookmaking of every kind and description to stop during the month of Feb.

Second: On the 1st of March the defendants to be permitted to exercise the rights, priveleges, etc. conferred by their charter, that is, the Grange, Camp Association Charter, and the laws of the Commonwealth."

On March 1, the race track was back in full swing.

The Alexander's Island race track was having plenty of trouble in 1895 which probably had something to do with the temporary closing. There was an arrest by police in early January which brought up the question of the jurisdiction of the island. And on January 29, there was a story in the *Star* headed "Judge Chichester Scores the Disorderly Element in the County." ". . . in his charge to the grand jury he touched upon the gambling and other lawlessness which is going on from day to day without intermission, even on Sunday. He criticized Governor O'Farrell . . . the governor had signed a bill legalizing horse racing and bookmaking, which had scattered this form of gambling through the county instead of confining it to Jackson City where it was at least altogether and could be watched over . . ."

In May of 1895, the Washington Board of Trade entered the fight against the Jackson City gambling places, Virginia passed laws against gambling, the Governor of Virginia was appealed to for assistance and raids were made on the gamblers. However, the conditions existed there for several more years.

Apparently there was a fairly good quality of horses running at the track in Alexandria County in the 1890's. As the *Thoroughbred Record* said, in 1895, "with indications that there will be racing in the East but in Virginia, the prospects for the spring meeting are very satisfactory." However, it seems amazing that the sport was popular enough for racing to continue even in winter conditions. The *Star* sports writer continually made snide remarks about the racing in his regular articles, such as:

Jan. 15--Over a track frozen hard beneath and with a shallow coating of mud above, the efforts of the Old Dominion Jockey Club in the encouragement and promotion of the breeding of thoroughbred horses were continued at the Alexander Island track yesterday. Other pursuits were also promoted and encouraged at the same time. The cold weather had as little effect upon the attendance as the dangerous condition of the track had on the managers of the club.

One of the jockeys who rode at this track was Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons who many years later became world famous as a trainer of champion thoroughbred race horses.

The reform elements had apparently made headway by 1896 when the General Assembly approved legislation to "prevent pool selling and so forth, upon the re-

sults of any trials of speed of any animals or beasts taking place within the limits of the Commonwealth.”⁶ This Act didn’t put an end to gambling in Jackson City, two other events did:

1. The new Constitution of 1901 which forbade gambling.
2. Commonwealth Attorney Crandall Mackay’s famous raid on Jackson City and Rosslyn.

After Crandall Mackay took office on January 1, 1904, a special Grand Jury was empanelled to investigate gambling activities and especially betting at the race tracks. None of the witnesses summoned could be persuaded to testify so the members of the jury themselves attended a race meeting at St. Asaph’s, placed bets, and secured the evidence necessary to indict the operators of the track.

The area around Jackson City was dealt with in a different manner. A posse headed by Mackay armed itself with axes, sledge hammers, and other instruments and boarded a train in Washington after arranging with the engineer to slow down long enough to let them off after it had crossed the Railroad Bridge. They then entered the establishments where illegal activities were conducted, broke up the furniture, and generally wreaked havoc.

Amusements and Airports

After the demise of the Jackson City establishments a part of Alexander’s Island became the horse show grounds for the National Capital Horse Show Association.

Then in 1923, some of this land became the location of Arlington Beach and Amusement Park. The park included a sandy beach, bath houses, dance pavilion, merry-go-round, Ferris wheel and other amusement park features. A photograph of the park appears in the 1979 edition of this magazine with an article by Ruth M. Ward, the Arlington Historical Society archivist.

The next big change in the Alexander Island area came with the rapid development of the airplane in the 1920’s. Hoover Airport started operations in 1926 in a pasture at the south end of the 14th Street Bridge, on land which if not on the original Alexander’s Island was adjacent to it. (The author received conflicting information as to whether any of the Hoover Airport land was actually on what had been Alexander’s Island. Evidence is lacking to substantiate the different viewpoints as at that time there was no longer any vestige of the former “island.”)

In 1927 another airport known as Washington Airport or Capitol Airport began operating on the land that definitely had been the site of the old race track and horse show grounds on Alexander’s Island.

There is no need to repeat the airport story here as this has been adequately covered in Vol. III, No. 3 of the *Arlington Historical Magazine*. Accompanying this article by Arven H. Saunders is a photo showing the amusement park, both airports, and the yacht basin.

The Jurisdictional Problem

Off and on for scores of years a problem arose in regard to the ownership of Alexander's Island. The primary issue of the dispute was whether it was really an island. It was the contention of Maryland and subsequently of the District of Columbia that all islands situated in the Potomac River were included in the grant to Lord Baltimore in 1632. Alexander's Island, as stated before, was an island only at high water; at low water it was joined to Virginia.

In 1870, the legislatures of Virginia and Maryland authorized the appointment of Commissions to study the boundary dispute. The study included land in contention along the whole length of the Potomac River, including Alexander's Island. During the years 1872 and 1873, the Commissioners were very active studying documents, taking dispositions, etc. But, alas, an acceptable compromise could not be reached, so the two Commissions recommended to their respective states that the whole controversy be referred to a board of arbitrators whose decision should be final. This was done with a specific pledge by each state that it would accept its award as fixed and conclusive.

A distinguished board of arbitrators was selected consisting of:

Judge Black who had been Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and later U.S. Attorney-General and Secretary of State.

William Alexander Graham, thirtieth Governor of North Carolina and a former U.S. Senator and Secretary of the Navy.

Charles J. Jenkins, the twenty-sixth Governor of Georgia and a former Justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia.

Governor Graham died before the completion of the study and he was replaced by James B. Beck, a member of the United States Senate from Kentucky.

After full consideration of the various claims and arguments and evidence submitted, the arbitrators gave their award under date of January 16, 1877. This award of the arbitrators with accompanying map was approved, confirmed, and ratified by the General Assembly of Virginia and the General Assembly of Maryland and was also given the consent of Congress.

As a result of the decision of the arbitrators, Alexander's Island remained a part of Virginia and it was assumed that the question was settled permanently. Nevertheless the issue arose again as the result of an arrest made at the Alexander's Island Race Track. At this time the laws of Virginia permitted race track betting whereas the laws of the District of Columbia prohibited it.

On January 24, 1895, the *Washington Star* reported that the District Commissioners "are strongly of the opinion that Alexander's Island, or, as it is commonly called, 'Jackson City' is a part of the District of Columbia and with this in view today wrote a letter to the Attorney General of the United States requesting that the matter be judicially determined."

Apparently nothing came of the request because of the 1877 decision of the arbitrators.

The author thought this ended the Alexander's Island jurisdictional controversy but the problem resurfaced again in 1934 and a Virginia-D.C. Boundary Commission was created by an Act of Congress. The central issue again was whether

Alexander's Island was never really an island.

It was argued by Virginia that Alexander's Island had never been an island in the proper sense of the word. An intervener's brief maintained that "numerous maps show conclusively that the designation of Piper's Island (Jones Point), Pearson's Island (Dangerfields Island) and Holmes Island (Alexander's Island) were misnomers, unsupported by the elements which make island de facto." The brief also referred to the Jennings Survey of 1746, stating that there "is clear evidence that Jennings did not find an open chanel or stream back of the so-called island."⁷

The United States government submitted arguments to show that Alexander's Island had at one time been an island, but there was no doubt that in 1935 no island existed. In the end, it was conceded that Alexander's Island belonged to Virginia by prescription, although this was not the case with much of the other land in dispute in this 1935 case.

Stetson in his book, *Four Mile Run Land Grants*, written in 1935, referring to Alexander's Island said "There stands on the northern part of this tract, close to the Alexandria and Georgetown road a fine old brick house, consisting of a central building, wings, and a large outbuilding. The house was until recently the property of the Honorable Phil Campbell. It must have been built by one of the Philip Alexanders probably toward the end of the eighteenth century. It is the most impressive memorial left of the Alexander tenure of the Howsing patent." But, now this last vestige of Alexander's Island no longer exists.

As we tour this area today there is no evidence of an island to be seen, which clearly makes this land a part of Virginia and Arlington County. Nevertheless this so-called island has seen some stormy times and has played an important role in the history of this area.

Acknowledgment: Arlington County's Virginiana Librarian Sara J. Collins cheerfully provided great help with the research required in the preparation of this article.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Cornelia B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County, Virginia: a History*. Baltimore, Port City Press, 1976.
- ² Charles W. Stetson, *Four Mile Run Land Grants*. Washington, D. C. Mimeoform Press, 1935.
- ³ W. B. Bryan, *A History of the Nation's Capitol*, Vol. II, 1815-1878. New York, MacMillan, 1916.
- ⁴ John Clagett Proctor, *The Sunday Star*, Washington, D. C., June 5, 1932.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, December 4, 1938.
- ⁶ *Acts of the Assembly*, 1896, pp 579-80. "An Act to prohibit winter racing in Virginia."
- ⁷ Intervener's Brief On the Virginia-District of Columbia Boundary Case.
- ⁸ Stetson, *op. cit.*

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