

Hotel Indigo[®] Alexandria Old Town Neighborhood Story

Beyond the boundary.

For Old Town's original residents, it was inspiration that first came off the Potomac River, and with it, the bold thinking to push the boundaries of what it means to be a working waterfront neighborhood and a welcome harbor for the world.

Back then, Alexandria wasn't much more than several tobacco warehouses and an inspection station on the high bluffs overlooking the tidal flats of the Potomac River. But spotting demand, locals saw the perfect place to store and sell mass quantities of tobacco and oaken casks of liquor. As word spread for the day's most popular goods, Alexandria suddenly overflowed with imports and exports stacked high within every available structure. Beneath the flurry of seagulls and among the rush of a new city (determined to out-do Baltimore), a shipbuilding center naturally emerged. Thomas Fleming's shipyard on Point Lumley launched "The Ranger," the first boat built here, and later the Hunter family helped hammer out the area's skipjacks, longboats, large vessels, handmade sails and hand-wound fiber ropes, entwining Old Town's maritime ways into the modern fabric of life.

Soon, the seaport rose with warehouse-lined docks as far as the eye could see. Inside were vast crates of sugar, feed, corn, fish and wheat, overtaking tobacco as the most important export item. Other buildings held exotic fare like mahogany desks, West Indian Rum and Rhode Island Cheese. This was the merchant empire, and every structure housed potential. Today, a few of the original warehouses around Gilpin's Wharf still stand and locals know where to look for proprietor William Fowle's initials stamped into its steel-plated cornerstones.

As the surrounding neighborhood grew, so did the warehouses and wharves, shaping a new shoreline. Residents expanded their lots in the only direction they could, and merchants like Thomas Gilpin looked to the water for their bravest move yet. Now the Strand, a once-boggy basin, is rumored to be filled in with old shipwrecks, creating a foundation for these merchants. Wakes of that original optimism can be felt up and down the street that was once water, and now thrives with the wonder of rejuvenated shops, greenspace and strolling locals. And like those first visionaries, visitors arrive from land and sea, look out to the horizon and in that moment, truly feel how the area retains its original dockside draw.

Today, the river rises and falls gently against the banks of a neighborhood whose energy seems to lean toward the water.