

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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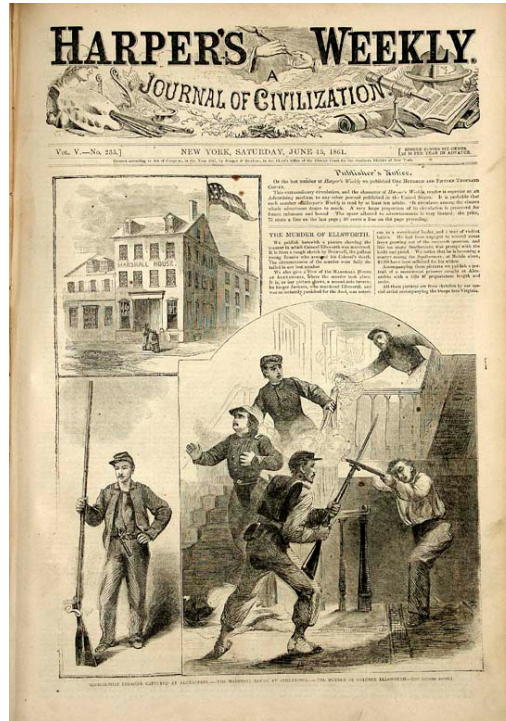
The Occupation of Alexandria, VA during the Civil War

By Rebecca Downes

On February 13, 1861, 152 delegates from the state of Virginia met for the Virginia Convention of 1861. The delegates debated for two months about whether Virginia should secede from the Union. Finally, on April 17, 1861 the delegates produced the Virginia Ordinance of Secession, which officially stated Virginia's intent to join the Confederacy. A month later on May 23, the citizens of Virginia approved the ordinance by a popular vote of 132,201 to 37,451, making Virginia the eighth state to secede from the Union. James Green (the son of the James Green who built the hotel in front of Carlyle House), who

was living at the Carlyle House at the time, described the event in his diary as "the most quiet election I ever saw in town."

Union forces arrived in Alexandria the following morning, thus marking the beginning of a four year long occupation of the city. Alexandria would later become the longest occupied city in the entire Confederacy. The swift arrival of Union soldiers in Alexandria demonstrated President Lincoln's urgency to develop a line of defense for the city of Washington. Without sufficient protection, the capital city would be left vulnerable to attack. Strategically, Alexandria was in the perfect position to shield Washington from encroaching Confederate



Harper's Weekly, June 1861

forces. Likewise, Alexandria represented a major hub of transportation on both the Potomac River and the railroad system, making it an ideal location to dispatch supplies and troops to areas in need.

On May 24, 1861, Union forces entered Alexandria by multiple routes. The 1st Michigan Regiment, led by Col. Orlando B. Wilcox, marched into the city on foot from the direction of Arlington, Virginia. Meanwhile, Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth and the 11th New York Zouave Regiment arrived by steamer at the Alexandria wharf. The

soldiers immediately began efforts to secure Alexandria's telegraph office and railroad station. However, Col. Ellsworth's time in Alexandria would be short lived. Ellsworth was fatally shot after removing a large Confederate flag from the roof of the Marshall House, an inn located at the corner of King and S. Pitt Streets. His assailant was James Jackson, the proprietor of the inn. Corporal Frances E. Brownell, also of the Zouave Regiment, witnessed the attack and

CARLYLE HOUSE
Sarah Coster, Site Administrator
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The Marshall House

retaliated by killing Jackson. In death, Ellsworth became a martyr for the Union. Northerners recognized his service by naming a fort, streets, and towns after him. Similarly, James Jackson became a martyr for the South.

Although it was occupied by the Union, Alexandria remained relatively peaceful until the aftermath of the First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) on June 21, 1861. The battle, a victory for the Confederacy, produced hundreds of wounded and dejected Union troops. Many of the Union survivors made their way to Alexandria after the skirmish. A letter, written by a resident of Alexandria during the Civil War, details the arrival of the Union soldiers after the battle:

“It was a cold and very stormy day - soon the town was full of soldiers. They were pitiable creatures as you can imagine - they came in squads without officers and knew not where to go. Many were so exhausted by their march from Centreville to the battlefield, then the fatigue of this battle and that long retreat (25 miles), through mud and rain that they could scarcely stand. Most of them had not eaten since Sunday morning; tired, hungry, footsore, drenched with the rain, they sat on doorsteps and curbstones from one end of our streets to the other.”

The presence of sick and wounded Union troops following the First Battle of Bull Run demonstrated the need for several hospitals in Alexandria. Many privately owned buildings, such as the Mansion House Hotel located directly in front of Carlyle House, were seized by the Union in order to serve as hospitals. James Green, the owner of the Mansion House Hotel, received a letter from the government in early November stating that he had three days to vacate the premises. Even with the help of workers from Green’s furniture factory, they exceeded the three days.

Despite the Union’s efforts, the hospitals located in Alexandria were simply not large enough or equipped with enough supplies and staff to care for every patient. As the war progressed, Alexandria’s hospitals were quickly filled to capacity. Mary Phinney Von Olnhausen, who worked as a nurse at the Mansion House Hospital, described the result of the over-crowded hospitals after the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1862:

“The whole street (Fairfax Street) was full of ambulances and the sick lay outside on the sidewalks from nine in the morning till five in the evening. . . They reached town last evening, lay in the cars all night without blankets or food, were chucked into ambulances, lay about here all day, and tonight were put back into ambulances and carted off again.”

Despite the best efforts of the doctors and volunteer nurses, countless soldiers perished due to illness or wounds. The soldiers who died in Alexandria hospitals were of the first to be buried in the Alexandria National Cemetery, which was established in 1862.

By the end of the Civil War, Alexandria was much different than the city it had once been. One of the most striking changes was a large shift in the city’s population. Many of the town’s residents fled south, only to be replaced by waves of Union officers,



soldiers and civilians who volunteered their service and support. Contrabands, or fugitive slaves, also moved to Alexandria to seek refuge in the Union's newly occupied city. With the shift in Alexandria's demographics also came changes to the city itself. Private homes, churches, and other large buildings were not only transformed into hospitals, but to military barracks as well. The construction of ammunition batteries and military fortifications would also contribute to the changing landscape. Eventually, Alexandria would come to be sandwiched between the Potomac River to the east and south, and a long string of Union forts to the west.

With changes to Alexandria's landscape also came alterations to the laws and regulations that the city's inhabitants were expected to follow. The residents who had not fled Alexandria following the Union takeover were required to obtain passes in order to travel into Washington. Likewise, mail was often intercepted and read before being delivered to its rightful recipient. In 1862, General John P. Slough, the Military Governor of Alexandria, established a nightly curfew and banned merchants from selling alcohol to soldiers. This ordinance was met with resistance, as the sale of alcohol to soldiers was considered a lucrative business. Slough rebutted the merchants' complaints by remarking that the streets and docks of Alexandria were filled with drunken and disorderly soldiers. "The streets were crowded with intoxicated soldiery;" Slough said, "murder was of almost hourly occurrence, and disturbances, robbery, and rioting were constant."

Although Slough's regulations subdued some of the chaos that plagued Alexandria, they did little to quell the long-term damage that the Union's occupation had brought to the city. Union troops, supporters, and government officials who had long resided in Alexandria began to pack their belongings in the summer of 1865, leaving the city destitute. Businesses that once thrived before their seizure during the Union's occupation were left floundering

in what would become a severe economic depression. At the same time, racial tension abounded as Alexandria saw the return of



The steam frigate, Pensacola, on the Potomac River near Alexandria during the Civil War.

long-departed Confederate families and became the new home of refugees, many of them former slaves. Although the Union occupation lasted only four years, it would be many decades before Alexandria was restored to its original splendor.

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