

Flour and the Port of Alexandria Around 1810

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In 2011 we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of Philip Carper's purchase and initial operation of the new brick mill on the Colvin Run. In 1810 only a handful of persons lived near the new mill. One neighbor was William Sheppard, a person known to George Washington, who had built the new mill on speculation, with the cooperation of the executors of Washington's estate. Washington owned the mill site and surrounding land at the time of his death in 1799.

At the time of Washington's death, the manufacture and export of flour was a growth industry and Alexandria was a leading center for the buying, selling, inspection, storage, and export of flour. Washington's mill site was a property that was rapidly growing in value. The value was based in the quality of the Colvin Run water source, the location of the site on the Middle Turnpike (Leesburg Pike), and the access to the Potomac waterway. The Turnpike and the Potomac waterway connected the future mill to the port of Alexandria and the flour export business, and to the granary of Loudoun County to the west.

Alexandria was established as a town about 1750 just as Virginia planters were shifting from tobacco to wheat as their money crop. After 1750 flour manufacture and export would become one of early America's leading growth industries. Being in this industry was a significant way to acquire wealth and prominence. It was a way for new cities to grow and for individual entrepreneurs to flourish. Both Alexandria and Philip Carper were leaders in the northern Virginia scene.

At the end of the 18th century, Alexandria competed favorably with Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Richmond in the flour trading and export business. At that time, Alexandria had about 5000 people, exported about 50,000 barrels of flour each year, and had over 10 commercial wheat buyers and warehouses. From 1801 to 1815, Alexandria shipped over 1,000,000 barrels of flour to markets in Europe and the West Indies. The flour came largely from the mills of Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William counties. Philip Carper's mill, in 1810, was one of the over 100 mills of this northern Virginia region.

From 1790 to 1820, the population of Alexandria grew from just under 3,000 to over 8,000 persons, about 25% of whom were slaves. In 1800, the population of Richmond was about 6,000 persons. By 1830, the population of Richmond had grown to over 16,000 persons and Baltimore to a level that was four times that of Richmond.

In 1810, Alexandria was the trading hub of a flour production industry consisting of the grain fields, the over 100 mills, and the connecting infrastructure of turnpikes, rivers and canals. The Middle Turnpike, now called Route 7, and the Potomac River connected the fields and mills of the region to the port of Alexandria.

All was not always a smooth working economic machine. Markets fluctuated with wars and embargos, roads were not always passable, the canal at Great Falls failed, and there was stiff competition from Richmond and Baltimore. In fact in the years leading up to the Civil War, Alexandria lost market share, of the flour inspection and export business, to Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.

The legacy of the leading flour merchants of Alexandria remain in the names such as Hooe, Hartshorne, and Fitzgerald that appear on our street signs and buildings.