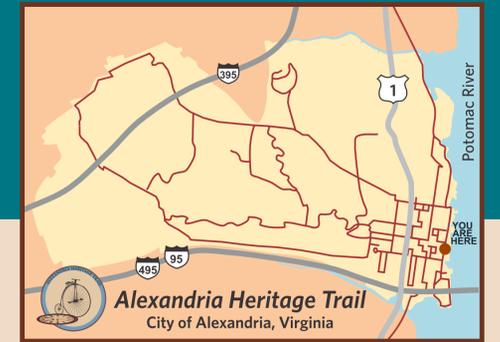


Shipbuilding at Point Lumley



Subset of M. C. Ewing's *A Plan of Alexandria Town, 1845*, which shows the original location of Point Lumley at the east end of Duke Street. The Library of Virginia



Late 18th-century ship excavated at the Hotel Indigo Site (44AX229), 2016. Alexandria Archaeology



Tools and hardware dating from the late 18th to early 19th century recovered from the site of the Hotel Indigo (44AX229), 2016. The tool on the right is a reaming iron used in ship building for opening the seams of planks so that they could be more easily caulked. The wooden cleat (bottom) may have been used to tie sailing vessels to docks. Alexandria Archaeology

An extensive amount of man-made land hides the original topographical feature that characterized the southernmost tip of Alexandria's crescent-shaped bay. This area was known from at least the 1760s as Point Lumley. As it does today, the town owned the tip of the point. The Town Trustees (the predecessors to today's City Council) funded the establishment of a road that cut through the steep bank, extending Duke Street to the river's edge. Here, the Trustees leased parts of Point Lumley for an early shipbuilding business.

Pieces of information survive to tell us about Alexandria's first shipbuilding operation. An English visitor to Alexandria in 1759 named Reverend Andrew Burnaby observed, "The town is built upon an arc of this bay; at one extremity of which is a wharf; at the other a dock for building ships; with water sufficiently deep to launch a vessel of any rate or magnitude." Burnaby very likely saw and described Thomas Fleming's shipyard located here on Point Lumley. Shipping records account for 18 ships constructed in Alexandria in the years between 1752 and 1776. Fleming likely built or supervised the construction of many of these vessels until he retired around 1780.

Between 2015 and 2018, archaeologists uncovered four ship hull remnants on either side of Point Lumley, reused at the end of their lives as merchant vessels to construct new land. Research has yet to uncover the names of these ships or their places of origin. We do know they date to the late 18th or early 19th centuries and that one was constructed of wood felled in Massachusetts. We know the kinds of cargo that merchant ships carried and the range of ports they may have visited. After they were buried, these ships became a physical piece of Alexandria.

We know something of the shipbuilding trade in Alexandria during this general period from, among other sources, a record that documents an agreement between two white men about the apprenticeship of an enslaved boy named Charles. Though the agreement dates about 20 years after Fleming left the ship building business, the document provides context for the complexity of race and labor relationships in a slave society whose economy was intertwined with the maritime trade.

In 1800, Robert Townsend Hooe signed an Indenture of Apprenticeship with John Hughes, a ship builder and sea captain in Alexandria. Hooe, a merchant, owned a warehouse on Point Lumley. The terms of the agreement included some remarkable details: "a Negro Boy" belonging to Hooe be taught and instructed by Hughes "in the Art Mystery and Business of a Ship Carpenter" and "no other Business" for a period of 12 years."

Hughes agreed to apprentice Charles to "the best of [Hughes'] abilities," after which period he would be emancipated and able to enter the business a free man. The agreement is explicit about the proper conditions and treatment that Charles should receive.

He "shall be clothed fed and lodged in that comfortable manner that is humane and suitable for such an Apprentice that he shall be found a Physician... during the whole time of his apprenticeship when ever it may be necessary and all these things done at the expense of the aforesaid John Hughes."

Upon the end of the term, Charles would be freed with a full suit of clothes and the tools necessary to start his own business, including "a broad ax, adds [adze], a sett of caulking irons and tool box."

Witnesseth that Robert T. Hooe hath this day bound and put under the care and Direction of John Hughes, a Negro Boy to him belonging, to be by said Hughes taught and instructed in the Art Mystery and Business of a Ship Carpenter, and to that and no other Business from this day to the end of Twelve Years from this day, to be kept at Work by the said Hughes, at that & no other Trade, or Business; and in that Trade & Business to be Taught and Learnd, by the said Hughes to the best of his Abilities, and

"Witness that, Robert T. Hooe hath this day bound and put under the care and Direction of John Hughe's a Negro Boy to him belonging, to be by said Hughes, taught and Instructed in the Art Mystery and Business of a Ship Carpenter; and to that and no other Business from this day to the end of Twelve Years from this day, to be kept at Work by the said Hughes, at that & no other Trade, or Business; and in that Trade & Business to be Taught and Learnd, by the said Hughes to the best of his Abilities..."

Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative, The Library of Virginia

