

Alexandria

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Robinson Terminal North: History, Archaeology and New Buildings

An inside look at the role archaeology plays in development in Old Town.

BY GRACE KENYON MAY 17, 2024 7:25 A.M.

If the name “Robinson Terminal” rings a bell, that’s probably because Robinson Terminal South, the site which now includes the Robinson Landing development, yielded one of the city’s biggest archaeological finds in recent years.



The land at the site had preserved, among other structures and artifacts, the remains of three 18th-century ships. These ships, archaeologists believe, were used to build out the land along the waterfront.

Now, the other Robinson Terminal — Robinson Terminal North — is set for redevelopment.

In November of 2020, AlexRenew demolished the Robinson Terminal North building that was on the east side of N. Union Street as a part of the RiverRenew project.

Rooney Properties, which owns the property, submitted plans in 2023 to replace the current building with mixed-use residential buildings and a park.

Eleanor Breen, city archaeologist, and Garrett Fesler, deputy city archaeologist for the City of Alexandria, say the role that archaeology plays in development plans in Old Town, and particularly the waterfront, is significant.

What's Underneath Robinson Terminal North?

“I think the general public thinks, ‘Oh, well, there's going to be ships everywhere we look, right?’” Fesler said, “And I’m not sure that’s the case.”

Here, Fesler is referring to Robinson Terminal North (RTN), a similar but not identical site that spans both sides of Union Street at the north end of the waterfront. Both Robinson Terminal sites mark the two ends of the historical Alexandria waterfront. There have been numerous plans to develop RTN and the newest project is still in the concept phase.



Robinson Terminal North warehouse at North Union and Pendleton streets in Old Town.

And although archaeologists are unlikely to find more ships, there are other archaeological possibilities.

One of the reasons Robinson Terminal North might not be as fruitful as the Robinson Landing location, archaeologically speaking, is that there was more heavy industry at the north site. Previous buildings are likely to have disrupted and possibly destroyed artifacts that might be of interest, Fesler said.

John Mullen is an archaeologist for D.C.-based environmental and cultural resources consultant [Wetland Studies and Solutions Inc.](#) During the course of a previous development project, he was hired to write the initial documentary study required by the city's archaeological protection code. The project was put on hold and eventually fizzled out, but Mullen still wonders what might be found at the RTN site.

Here are some of the things we do know: The RTN location, which is sometimes referred to as West's Point, was named for the family that owned a tobacco warehouse there before the town of Alexandria existed. At different points in time there would have been a wharf at that location — a place for ships to load and unload goods — but there is some mystery about when the first wharf would have been built.

After the Civil War, the waterfront was caught up in a wave of industrialization. From 1900 to the 1960s there was an Alexandria Fertilizer and Chemical Company fertilizer processing plant, one of several such plants that existed along the waterfront.

There are some gaps in what archaeologists and historians know about that location. For example, Fesler said they don't have many maps of the area prior to the Civil War. There is a chance that once development begins, more clues could be found.

How does the Archaeological Protection Code work?

Since 1989, the City of Alexandria's Archaeological Protection Code has required large construction projects to investigate the history of the property and determine whether significant archaeological discoveries could be made. Here's an overview of how that process works.

When a new development is proposed under a Development Site Plan

or Developmental Special Use Permit, the city archaeologists do a quick review of files and maps to find out what is known about the site. If there is anything that seems immediately interesting, they take note at this stage.

City archaeologists take a look at any previous developments that have happened at that site to see if there is anything that would disrupt the archaeological record. For example, if there has been an underground parking lot or a large basement built, there might not be many archaeological remains left intact. At this point, if they determine that they can't do any archaeology, they can still help developers appreciate and understand the history of the land.

Upon completion of this review, if the site seems to have archaeological potential, city archaeologists give the project a set of archaeology conditions.

For projects that receive archaeology conditions, the developer hires a consultant to conduct a documentary study, preparing an overview of the history of the property and assessing the archaeological potential of the property through something called an "Archaeological Evaluation."

If the documentary study was promising, archaeologist consultants, in collaboration with the city and developers, conduct small preliminary studies. This could involve things like digging test trenches or test holes to look for artifacts or structures at the property.

If the preliminary studies are promising, the consultant plans for a full excavation. As data is collected, the developer continues to work with hired consultants and with the city to integrate the archaeological process into the development process.

The complete report of findings is reviewed by Alexandria Archaeology for review. The developer also works with the city to communicate their findings to the public through signage, brochures, public presentations and more.

The intersection of Development and Discovery

When it comes to developing in Old Town or along the waterfront, archaeology simply comes with the territory. Fesler says that while there is sometimes a learning curve for developers who are new to Alexandria, veteran developers accommodate and even embrace the opportunity to partner with archaeologists.

“It is an opportunity for developers to really begin to understand and be able to develop their property in the spirit of the history of Alexandria,” Fesler said. “And they become stewards of the history by having archaeology and background studies done.”

Different developers choose to reflect the history of the site differently, but Fesler and Breen say most developers want to find a way to pay homage to the past and make history a prominent part of the experience of living in Alexandria.

Robinson Landing, a development located at Robinson Terminal South, was developed by RT South Associates, LLC, an EYA LLC affiliate company. Greg Griffin, Former Vice President of EYA Multifamily LLC, said that when they work in communities like Alexandria, they know that history is going to be baked into both the design and the process of any development. As developers build new buildings on top of sites with long histories, Griffin said they see themselves as participating in 200 years of history.

“We're builders. We respect builders from the past,” Griffin said. “And we knew that we were discovering things that would have been buried and lost forever, but for the fact that we were following the tradition and building another building on this historic site.”

What does this mean for Robinson Terminal North? If and when development plans for RTN move forward, archaeologists would be included in the first few steps of the process. They will determine if there is enough potential to find artifacts and will attempt to formulate a research question that probes deeper into our understanding of Alexandria's history. As for what they might find, only time will tell.

by [Grace Kenyon](#)

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