

The Torpedo Factory, Alexandria, VA  
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Today, the old World War II Naval Torpedo Station in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia is an art studio. This is a rather poetic solution to the problem with the defunct remnants of our local industrial revolution.



The Torpedo Factory Art Gallery on Old Town Alexandria's waterfront, at the end of King Street started its life as the Navy's Torpedo Station. It first opened its doors in 1919 at the close of World War I. At that time, Alexandria had recently opened Union Station, and the Potomac Yard was one of the busiest rail yards on the Eastern seaboard. Before the war, Alexandria was home to a variety of industrial organizations including; the Robert Portner Brewing Company, the Old Dominion glass works, the Virginia Marine Railway and Shipbuilding Company. Large industrial buildings dominated Alexandria's waterfront. However, many buildings, including a Ford Motor Company warehouse were converted for military use during the world wars.

Housing was constructed for the workers. Chinguapin Village, during World War II, was constructed specifically for the Naval Torpedo Station employees. The development consisted of three hundred duplexes and was located three miles from the factory with shuttle service. The News of Alexandria section of the Washington Post in 1919 featured a call for skilled mechanics. The factory, only employing around one hundred people shortly after opening, was looking to enlarge its workforce by one hundred employees a month for several months. It can be conjectured that these employees were destined to become new residents, permanently changing the makeup of the community.

Factory production peaked in the 1940s in response to World War II. Until 1940, the torpedo factory “served as a munitions storage area until World War II when production on the Mark XIV (a submarine torpedo) and the Mark III aircraft torpedo resumed at an intense rate.”

When the Factory closed for good, it became a storage warehouse. “When peace was declared in June of 1945, the furious activity at the torpedo factory came to a grinding halt. Eventually, the U.S. government used the buildings for storage. Congressional documents, valuable dinosaur bones, art objects from the Smithsonian and German war films and records were stored in sealed vaults.”

In 1971, debate heated up about what to do with Alexandria’s neglected waterfront as it had become a “stinking eyesore.”



By 1974, the old storage building was yet again repurposed, but this time it was reincarnated as a haven for artists. “In 1969, the City of Alexandria bought the buildings from the Federal Government. However, it was several years before an acceptable plan for their use was adopted. Art League President Marian Van Landingham proposed a project that would renovate the building into working studio spaces for artists. Her proposal was endorsed by the Alexandria Bicentennial Commission and she became the first Director of the Art Center. It also led to the creation of the Torpedo Factory Artists’ Association.”

The community came together to turn this derelict weapons manufacturing facility into a cultural revival:

“Work began on the building in May of 1974, with artist volunteers and City personnel working together to remove the debris of 55 years. Bulldozers and firehoses were initially needed and 40 truckloads of debris were eventually removed. Studio walls were built, electricity and plumbing expanded. The entire exterior was repainted. By July, artists had converted the huge space into a complex of bright and clean studios. On September 15, 1974, the Torpedo Factory Art Center opened to the public.”

Even in the 1980s there was still debate over what to do with the remaining buildings. The factory was a complex of buildings, six total. They were purchased from the Government Services Administration back in 1969. Now the question was whether or not to sell two of the buildings to private developers. The Washington Post reported in January of 1980 that the Alexandria City Council agreed to sell two of the six Torpedo Factory buildings to the Alexandria Waterfront Restoration Group. Citizen from the adjacent communities feared commercial gain at the expense of esthetics, and the city argued that the revenue generated from the planned office space and condominiums would pay for local maintenance expenses like street repair and utility works.

Although the building was a given a fresh coat of paint in 1974, it was still had a bare bones feel. The artists were given space to work but on a tight budget. “From 1982 to 1983, the building underwent a major renovation as part of the City’s waterfront development plan... A grand reopening celebration was held on May 20, 1983.”

All of this inspired a new movement. “The Friends of the Torpedo Factory Art Center was established in 1982 as a community outreach arm of the Torpedo Factory and its resident artists....”

“Today, the Torpedo Factory Art Center is home to over 165 professional artists who work, exhibit, and sell their art. Drawing over half a million visitors a year, the Torpedo Factory Art Center attracts artists from across the region and around the world. It stands as a stellar example of how the arts can revitalize a community and serves as a prototype for visual arts facilities throughout the world.”



The Torpedo Factory of Alexandria is a beautiful example of a community's desire to cherish its past while it progresses. The city of Alexandria repurposed an irrelevant factory into a revenue generating complex that represented the new post-war personality. The munitions warehouse, turned storage facility, turned haven for artists, nearly rotted away on the Waterfront, but instead the valuable property has become a community focal point.



Pictures from: A Brief History of 20th Century Alexandria

[www.alexandriava.gov/historic/info/default.aspx?id=49454](http://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/info/default.aspx?id=49454)

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