



**Denise Dunbar**  
 Publisher & Executive Editor  
 ddunbar@alextimes.com

**Margaret Stevens**  
 Sales Director  
 mstevens@alextimes.com

**Caitlyn Meisner**  
 Managing Editor/Reporter  
 cmeisner@alextimes.com

**Wafir Salih**  
 Reporter  
 wsalih@alextimes.com

**Dylan Jaffe**  
 Intern

**Laura Van Pate**  
 Intern

**ADVERTISING**

**Margaret Stevens**  
 mstevens@alextimes.com

**Marty DeVine**  
 mdevine@alextimes.com

**Patrice V. Culligan**  
 pculligan@alextimes.com

**Tina Franco**  
 Office Administrator  
 tfranco@alextimes.com

**GRAPHIC DESIGNER**

**Jessica Kim**  
 graphics@alextimes.com

**CONTRIBUTORS**

**Kerry Boyd Anderson**

**Kim Davis**

**Mark Eaton**

**Thompson Eskew**

**Kim Gilliam**

**Ryan Hopper**

**Kim Jackson**

**Lexie Jordan**

**Louise Krafft**

**Brianne McConnell**

**Jim McGrath**

**Kaitlin Murphy**

**Dr. Vivek Sinha**

**Dr. David Weintritt**

**Amy Will**

**ALEXTIMES LLC**

**Denise Dunbar**  
 Managing Partner

**The Ariail family**  
 Suzanne Brock  
 William Dunbar

**HOW TO REACH US**

1199 N. Fairfax St. Suite 401  
 Alexandria, VA 22314  
 703-739-0001 (main)  
 www.alextimes.com

# 19th-century New Year's Eve and Day in Alexandria

New Year's Day has been celebrated for many years, even before the founding of Alexandria. The adjustment in English-owned lands from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar occurred in 1752, three years after the city's founding.

In 1752, the calendar had to be corrected by 11 days because the Julian Calendar runs 12 days behind; Sept. 2, 1752, was to be followed by Sept. 14, 1752, to correct the transition from calendars. Before 1752, the official start of the year was March 25, but many in Europe celebrated January 1 as New Year's Day and it was documented as such in almanacs. With the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar, January 1 became the official start of the New Year.

Just because January 1 was the new official start of the year did not mean the day was celebrated as a holiday. In fact, it wasn't until 1885 that all federal government employees were given the day off.

In 1860, the Alexandria Gazette described New Year's Day in New York as, "The only Autumn or Winter Day, that shuts up everything and turns out everybody, that makes it impossible even to print a newspaper the morning after."

The description of the carnival-like atmosphere contrasted with a more sinister tradition held in Alexandria



FILE PHOTO

New Year's Day has changed throughout history and carries many traditions across cultures.

that year: Hiring Day. The Jan. 14, 1860, edition of the Gazette reprinted an article from the Boston Post, with an account of Hiring Day in "West End ... a straggling village, running along the Mount Vernon road."

On New Year's Day, West End "is wakened up" according to the author, as those enslaved people deemed surplus to their legal owners were "hired out," usually for the year, to other people. The author reported that:

"Men hired at from \$75 to \$110; women from \$30 to \$75:

girls from \$15 to \$25."

After the Civil War, African American communities, especially churches, replaced the Hiring Day tradition – which often separated family members – with a happier one. The Methodist tradition of Watch Night, in which congregations worshiped together and "watched" the arrival of the New Year was adopted in 1862 by African American churches as a means of protection as they waited for their Emancipation on Jan. 1, 1863.

While Emancipation Day

celebrations varied in different locations, resulting in the current celebration of Juneteenth, Watch Night celebrations have been part of New Year's Eve traditions in African American churches here in Alexandria well into the 21st century.

As we move into 2024, we hope that future traditions continue to emphasize togetherness and community. We wish you all a Happy New Year!

*Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.*