



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

John R. Bell: Chief steward of the USS Maine

Alexandria Times, February 22, 2022

This week's column celebrating Black History Month highlights the little-known story of John R. Bell, who spent his childhood in Alexandria, and lost his life on the USS Maine on Feb. 15, 1898, where he served as chief steward. While he grew up in Alexandria, Bell loved the sea and was determined to spend the rest of his life on ships.

Racial prejudice must have affected his naval career. Despite that, the chaplain of the ship's remark after the explosion that "more requests concerning the welfare of John Bell came to him than concerning any other crewmen" shows the affection and respect Bell garnered throughout his long career.

The Feb. 18, 1898, Alexandria Gazette reported:

"(Bell) was a colored man who formerly lived here. Years ago, he, his mother and two brothers – Orlando and Samuel who now lives here – resided in a house which stood back from the street on the north side of Wolfe Street, between Fairfax and Lee."

Bell's early years included working for a shoe store owned by R.Y. Cross. By the outbreak of the Civil War, Bell worked as a deckhand on the Washington Ferry steamer Thomas Collyer. While there is speculation that he joined the U.S. Navy during that war, later authors guess that he started his Naval career around 1871.

One of the many people who remembered John Bell was Fred Buenzle. In his autobiography, Buenzle mentions serving with Bell twice, the first time on the USS St. Louis when Buenzle was a new apprentice in 1889. The second time the two served on the same ship was on the USS Lancaster in the early 1890s.

Buenzle remembered with gratitude Bell's kindness to him when he fell off his hammock on his first night at sea. His recollections of the Lancaster include Bell procuring food for Buenzle and the rest of his mess when the sailor responsible for their food supplies absconded with their money.

The commanding officer of the USS Maine, Captain Charles Sigsbee, remembered John R. Bell as walking with a stoop and white hair. His reputation for kindness preceded him, and Sigsbee was not



John R. Bell, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture/Gift of the Lilienquest Family 1885.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

disappointed. The captain remarked on Bell's attention to duty and "his kindness to everyone who strode the same deck as he."

Perhaps clairvoyantly, Bell claimed, "I shall never die ashore. I'll be buried deep in the sea I love." The explosion in Havana harbor sadly made that prediction true, as Bell and a total of 260 crew members lost their lives.

In a 1912 salvage operation, divers found a watch engraved "John R. Bell." The stern of the ship, where Bell stood during the explosion, was removed from the harbor and buried in deeper water.

Historic Alexandria celebrates Black History Month throughout the month of February. For a listing of virtual events and celebrations, please visit alexandriava.gov/historic.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.