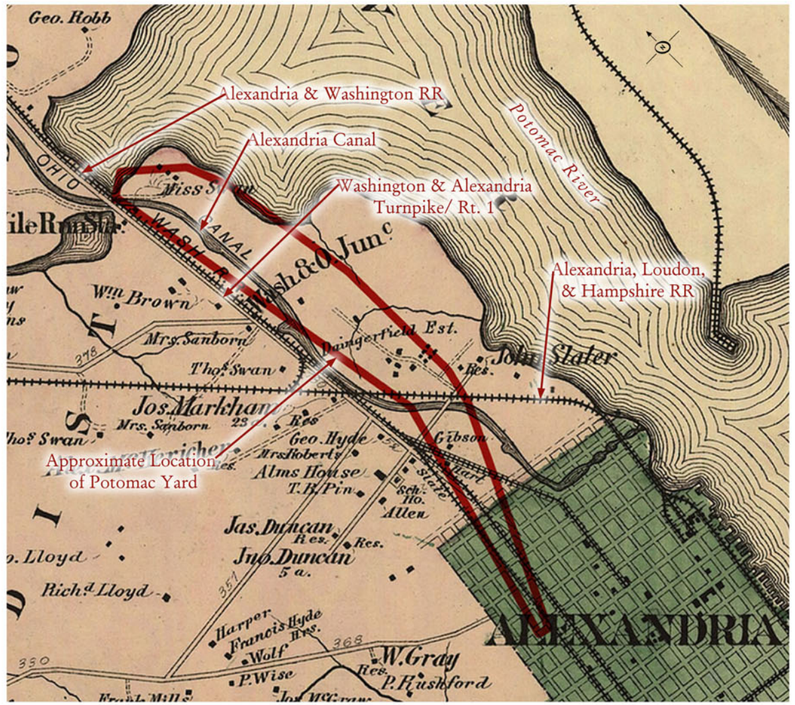
Crossroads of Transportation

The Potomac Yard site has historically been an intersection for transportation because of its location between Washington D.C. and Alexandria and the availability of open, level land near the river. Even before Potomac Yard was built, the property hosted a canal, turnpike, and two railroad lines, all of which were intended to draw precious freight and trade income into Alexandria from competitors Washington D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland.



"Atlas of fifteen miles around Washington, including the counties of Fairfax and Alexandria, Virginia, 1878." Courtesy the Library of Congress.

The 1878 map of the Alexandria region above illustrates the numerous forms of transportation that criss-crossed the future Potomac Yard site. When this map was made, the canal had been abandoned for more than 10 years, but the canal channel remained intact.

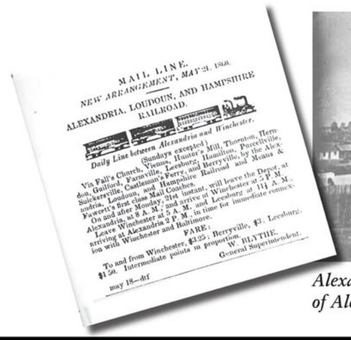
Turnpikes and Roads

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, physical barriers to Alexandria's trade with western territories—such as the Blue Ridge Mountains and falls of the Potomac River—were addressed by the construction of roads. One of the most important roads was the Washington and Alexandria Turnpike. Begun in 1808, the turnpike connected Alexandria with Washington, D.C. and helped draw both trade goods and new residents to the Alexandria area. The turnpike would eventually become part of Route 1 in 1926; one of the first interstate highway systems in the United States.

Washington & Alexandria Turnpike in 1894. Image located in "New Roads and Road Laws" by Roy Stone, published 1894.

Railroads For Passengers and Freight

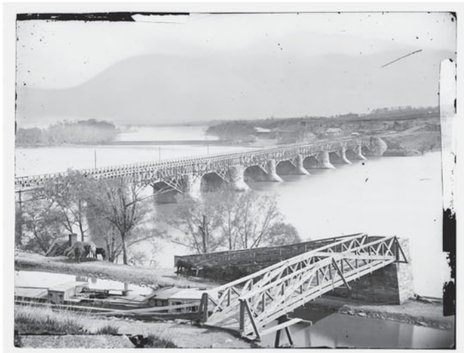
Two railroads marked the beginning of train travel in and near Alexandria and foreshadowed the construction of Potomac Yard: the Alexandria, Loudoun, and Hampshire Railroad (AL&H) beginning in 1853 and the Alexandria and Washington Railroad (A&W) beginning in 1854. The AL&H linked the shipping port of Alexandria with the fertile farmlands to the west. The A&W transported passengers from a station at nearby St. Asaph Washington, D.C.



Alexandria Passenger Station for the AL&H Railroad. Courtesy of Alexandria Library Barrett Special Collections.

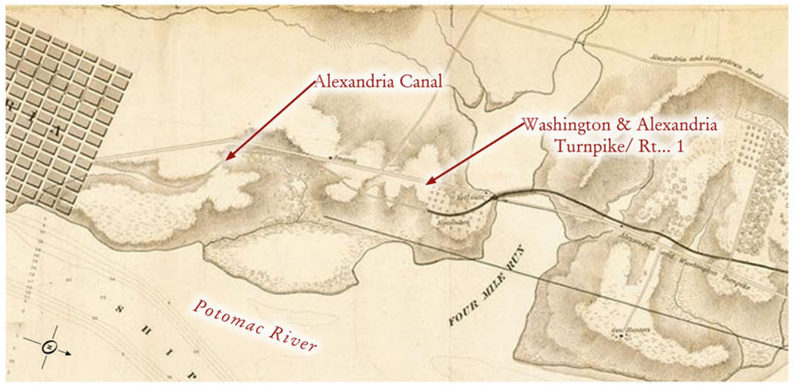
Canals, Locks, and Aqueducts

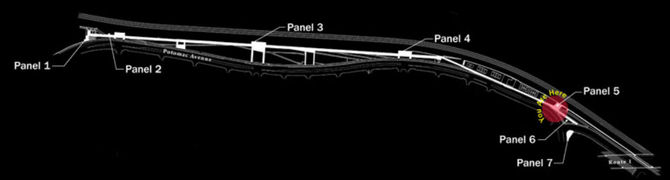
The Alexandria Canal was constructed between 1831 and 1843 to supplement shipment of freight via roads. Boats on the Alexandria Canal carried primarily coal and agricultural products such as corn, flour, wheat, and whiskey. When a vital aqueduct bridge over the Potomac was drained during the Civil War (1861-1864), the canal fell into disrepair and was never again fully utilized. The canal was officially abandoned in 1886, after more than 40 years of use, because of high maintenance costs and reduced demand due to an increase in railroad traffic.



The Aqueduct Bridge over the Potomac River, shown at left, is similar to the aqueduct that allowed canal boats to float over Four Mile Run toward Alexandria.

"Closer view of Aqueduct Bridge, with Chesapeake and Ohio Canal," ca. 1860. Courtesy of The Library of Congress.



1838 Map showing route of Alexandria Canal north and south of Four Mile Run. The canal ran through the future site of Potomac Yard. Courtesy of The Library of Virginia.

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