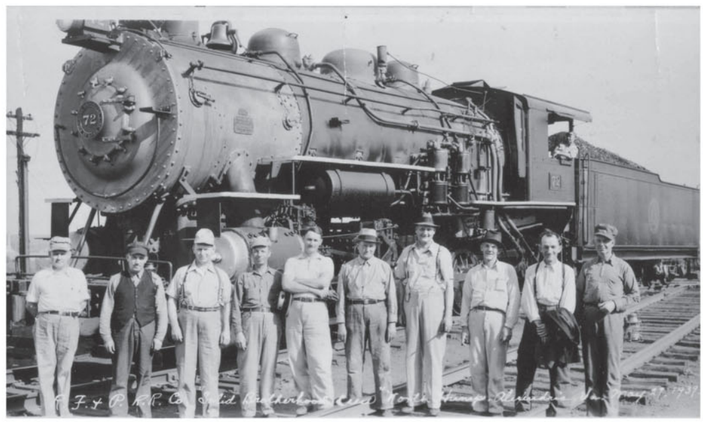
The People of Potomac Yard

When Potomac Yard opened in 1906, it employed 1,200 people. At its peak during World War II (1941-1945), yard expansion increased the workforce to almost 1,500 people. Inspectors, brakemen, switch operators, locomotive engineers, mechanics, and carpenters kept the trains moving. Clerical employees sorted through waybills and paperwork while managers routed trains to their final destinations. Potomac Yard even had its own police force that kept an eye out for trespassers and hobos and inspected the freight cars. Potomac Yard operated every day, 24 hours a day to meet demand; this required 3 work shifts including an overnight shift. Employees worked long days that frequently exceeded 8 hours and through all types of weather in order to get each task done.

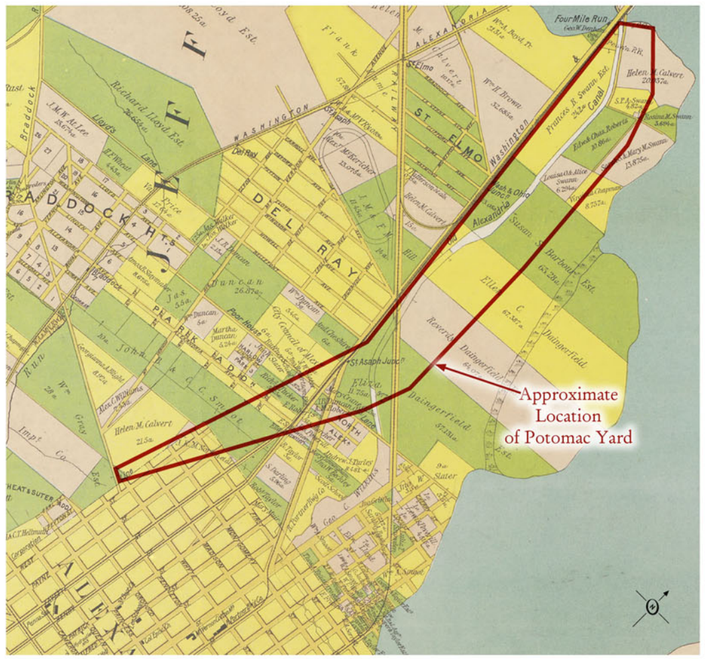
Courtesy of the Alexandria Library Potomac Yard Collection.

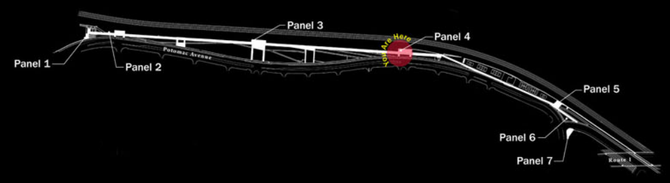
Working at the Yard

Employees of Potomac Yard described themselves as being a close-knit group. Workers often lived in the same neighborhoods, raised their children together, and worked with family members. The work was stable and it was, for many years, the single largest employer in Alexandria. Often, multiple generations of families worked at the Yard. Young people frequently began as messengers and rose to become managers through on-the-job training, hard work, and assistance from more experienced employees.



The Del Ray and St. Elmo neighborhoods grew along with the Yard's prosperity. Constructed in 1894 as planned subdivisions, they were built to take advantage of existing commuter railroads and trolleys that led into Washington, D.C.Del Ray and St. Elmo, however, did not flourish until the 1910s and 1920s when a combination of Potomac Yard workers and federal employees began moving to the area.



Drawn in 1900, this map shows the Del Ray and St. Elmo neighborhoods west of Route 1 and the properties that would soon become Potomac Yard. "Map of Alexandria County, Virginia." Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

"It was a great life, a great life. I had one of the best jobs in the country, and certainly the best railroad job in the country. It was one interesting and challenging career." *Jack McGinley, Last Superintendent of Potomac Yard*