Shirley Highway, constructed in the early 1940s, provided residents and visitors easier access to the Pentagon and Washington. After the West End annexation became effective in 1952, part of Shirley Highway, or Route 350 as it was also known, traveled through Alexandria, just as U.S. Route 1 and the George Washington Memorial Parkway did in the eastern part of the city. To accommodate travelers, dozens of motels, including the Key Motel, opened along these busy roads in Alexandria, Arlington and Fairfax.

The Key Motel was located at 6022 Duke Street, at the Shirley Highway interchange with Route 236, and was owned by brothers Lewis S. and Jerome W. Keyes. The brothers also had a neon sign company, which very likely produced the motel’s memorable sign. A similar establishment, the Lincolnia Motel, was located nearby, on the north side of Duke Street. Both motels were targets of robberies in the 1950s, with the Key being held up four times in seven years, and police shot and killed one suspected robber during a stakeout at the Lincolnia Motel in 1954.

In the early 1960s, work began to expand Shirley Highway, widening it and improving it so that it would meet national interstate highway standards. Around the same time, development dramatically changed the land around the Key Motel. New apartment buildings and a large shopping center called Landmark were constructed. The Key Motel was eventually closed and in 1966, new apartments were constructed. Today, the Key Towers Apartments occupies the site where the Key Motel once welcomed guests.