



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Early motoring along Washington Street

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Image: North Washington Street, around 1920. Photo, Library of Congress.

The widest street in Old Town, Washington Street, accommodated travelers long before the automobile emerged. But in the early 20th century, horse-drawn wagons and carriages, as well as bicycles and pedestrians, had to share the roads with motorized cars and trucks. From 1900 to 1920, automobile ownership in the U.S. jumped from 8,000 to 8 million, and automobile clubs sprang up to accommodate the needs and interests of car owners.

In 1912, a group of local auto enthusiasts established the Alexandria Automobile Club, which worked to improve roads and travel by car in and around Alexandria. The club first met at the Chamber of Commerce and in 1915 opened a clubhouse in the 100 block of North Washington Street next to a garage that held about two-dozen cars. Its clubhouse had restrooms, which it made available as a convenience to other motorists.

In the fall of 1915, with approval of city officials, the club placed directional signs at key intersections to aid both leisure motorists and commercial drivers. Initially the metal signs were installed at South Patrick and Franklin streets, King and Washington streets, and on North Washington Street at the city line, a few blocks north of where this photograph was taken around 1920.

In the 1910s, Washington Street became part of a popular route for motorists between Mount Vernon and Washington, D.C. In the late 1920s, Congress authorized construction of a more direct route for a memorial parkway between the two destinations. Work on the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway began in 1929 and incorporated Washington Street in its plans. By 1930, automobile ownership reached 22 million and two years later, the parkway was completed.



“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.



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These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.