



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Electric railway created streetcar suburbs

Alexandria Times, March 17, 2011

Image: Streetcar, probably on N. Columbus near Cameron Street, 1920s. Photo, Alexandria Library Special Collections.

Alexandria's electric streetcar system, the Washington, Alexandria & Mount Vernon Railway, was established in 1892 between Alexandria and Mount Vernon. In 1896, the line extended into Washington, crossing the Long Bridge where the 14th Street Bridge is today.

The line traveled from Mount Vernon Estate into Alexandria, up South Royal St. and, for a time, South Fairfax to King Street, then west to Commonwealth Avenue and north across Four Mile Run, into Arlington and Washington. The tracks on King once reached across Union to the waterfront but in 1910 they ended at Fairfax. Between Columbus and Payne, streetcars ran one-way with opposite direction tracks on Cameron. This photograph, probably taken in the 1920s, shows a car on North Columbus near Cameron.



The stops in Alexandria and beyond, in Del Ray, then located outside the city limits, allowed connections to railroads operated by Southern and Washington & Old Dominion. They also encouraged the growth of Del Ray, St. Elmo and Rosemont as streetcar suburbs, served by several stops along Commonwealth Avenue.

Trains ran regular schedules, traveling from Alexandria to Washington about twice an hour between 6 a.m. and 11 p.m., Monday through Saturday, with less frequent service on Sunday. In 1906, 30 daily trains between Mount Vernon and Washington carried 1.7 million passengers, a number that was likely boosted by the opening of an amusement park along Four Mile Run with its own station.

By 1930, as automobiles gained in popularity and roads were improved to accommodate them, service to Mount Vernon was abandoned south of Alexandria to make way for the Memorial highway. Soon the Federal Triangle development in Washington resulted in condemnation of the railway station there, leaving streetcars from Virginia without a Washington station. On April 9, 1932, the electric railway service ended.

“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.