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Out of the Attic

The Woodrow Wilson Bridge. What's in a name?

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Image: Woodrow Wilson Bridge opening ceremony. Photo, Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project

The construction of the original Woodrow Wilson Bridge from Alexandria to Oxon Hill, Md., was proposed for many years.

Congress finally authorized building the overpass as part of the Washington Circumferential Highway — now the Capital Beltway — in September 1955.

Until then, the only connections from Northern Virginia to Maryland suburbs were by ferry or via bridges through downtown Washington, D.C. However, even before the advent of the interstate highway system, regional road planners believed a circular roadway around the nation's capital was necessary to bypass the heavy traffic that routinely clogged downtown roadways.

Originally named the Jones Point Bridge, the proposed 5,900-foot-long bascule structure was renamed in 1956 to honor the 100th birthday of former Democratic President Woodrow Wilson. He signed the Federal Aid Road Act in 1916 establishing a national policy to improve roads. He also found driving very relaxing and spent on average about two hours a day riding in an automobile.

Interestingly, in 1918 Wilson drove the first rivet into the keel of the warship, *Gunston Hall*. The vessel was built at the Virginia Shipbuilding yard, almost the very point where the new bridge would touch the Alexandria shoreline.

Construction began in 1958, and the Woodrow Wilson Bridge opened on Wilson's 105th birthday — December 28, 1961 — at a cost of \$14,925,000. Wilson's wife Edith, though gravely ill, had planned to attend the opening ceremonies but died that very morning.

Within eight years after opening, the bridge reached its design capacity of 75,000 vehicles daily. In 1983 it was entirely re-decked, but structural weaknesses only increased as capacity reached more than 200,000 vehicles daily by the '90s. If the bridge wasn't totally replaced at that time, planners concluded truck traffic would have to be eliminated.

After construction of the replacement Woodrow Wilson Bridge, the last remains of the original structure were dynamited in 2009.



“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.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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.