



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

AAA historic signs point back to the early motoring craze

Alexandria Times, May 3, 2012

Image: AAA sign at Wolfe and S. Pitt Streets. Photo, Library of Congress.

With the introduction of Henry Ford's reasonably priced Model T automobile in 1908, the sport of "motoring" was finally introduced to middle-income Americans. Previously, the wealthy classes of Europe and America primarily owned automobiles. The rich would don their dusters (long canvas coats protecting against the dirt and grime of unpaved roadways) for speed-racing or periodic excursions into the countryside.

At that time, there was little thought that the automobile could be used for utilitarian duties, like commuting to work, transporting children to school or running errands.

As the popularity of motoring increased in the second decade of the 20th century, the poor condition of roadways, lack of proper directional

signage, and availability of repair and refueling facilities constantly thwarted automobile owners. For this reason, local and national automobile clubs emerged to assist the driving public with their enjoyment of the sport and to advocate for road improvements and automotive infrastructure.

By 1915 the Alexandria Automobile Club had become a major institution in the sleepy city, with a membership of 85 and new club quarters along North Washington Street, then a part of the Washington-Mount Vernon Highway. In an early tourism initiative with city approval, the club erected several metal signs along the highway directing visitors to George Washington's former home.

By the '20s, a sport once considered a frivolity had come into its own and spurred many new industries relating to road construction, traffic management, fuel distribution and land development. With the collapse of the stock market in 1929, the American Automobile Association stepped in to assist revitalization of the economy through new tourism services.

On October 1, 1930, with the help of city employees, AAA erected a series of new signs directing tourists to historic sites in Alexandria. Several of these signs remain in place, including the one in the photograph on Wolfe and South Pitt streets.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

“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.

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.