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Out of the Attic

Highway project fueled West End's early development

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Image: Shirley Highway overpass, 1943. Photo, Federal Highway Administration.

Until the late 1930s, the area west of Quaker Lane remained a largely rural oasis, dotted with country houses, woodlands and rolling fields.

But by the end of the decade, the demand for housing from government and national defense workers descending on Washington began to impact the region.

Plans for residential developments, such as Parkfairfax and Fairlington, quickly got under way. A major catalyst for this change was the July 1941 decision by the Virginia Department of Highways to construct the state's first limited-access highway from Arlington to Woodbridge, slicing directly through what would become Alexandria's West End a decade later.

Construction on the new Henry G. Shirley Memorial Highway began in October 1941, just three months after the sudden death of highways department head Henry Gannett Shirley, who approved the project just weeks before he died. Built over a decade before the Interstate Highway system was even established, the project had just begun when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor catapulted America into World War II. As highway construction proceeded, cost, labor and material constraints became major concerns.

The initial design for the 17.3-mile, four-lane roadway was similar to that of Long Island's system of parkways begun two decades earlier by master builder Robert Moses. However, wartime limitations precluded the famously lavish landscaping, park amenities and man-made scenic vistas that dotted Long Island's system.

Cost issues became so severe that an overpass was originally omitted at Braddock Road, and the railroad crossing north of Shirlington was left at grade. Yet, as the original Shirley Highway's overpasses – as seen in this 1943 photo taken near Quaker Lane – featured a scaled-down version of the traditional stone-faced arched bridges first developed on Long Island but adapted for Northern Virginia to allow larger commercial truck traffic to use the roadway.

Next week we will continue the story of the Shirley Highway.



"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.