



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Early fast food joints made North Washington Street home

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Image: Little Tavern, 828 N. Washington St. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

This week we continue the discussion of North Washington Street's rapid evolution into a center for what we now call roadside culture in the late 1930s and 1940s.

This area, centered within the 700 to 900 blocks of the thoroughfare, catered less to Alexandria's pedestrians and more to the throngs of motorists traveling along the new George Washington Memorial Parkway, which opened in 1932 and linked Mount Vernon with the District. During this time period tourism increased substantially in Alexandria, and the addition of new motels, chain restaurants and ice cream stands provided reliable and affordable options to the traveling public.

In the summer of 1940, a quaint Tudor-style structure appeared on the west side of North Washington, appropriately named the Little Tavern. The chain of Little Tavern Shops sold inexpensive hamburgers in and around the nation's capital. The burger joints were the brainchild of Harry F. Duncan, who opened the first such restaurant in Louisville, Ky., in 1927. The stores were very small, as most customers dined in their cars or left for other destinations with their meal.

Initially, the shops were built of block construction with a crenelated roofline, but these were often confused with the similar stands of the White Castle and White Tower chains. To make his brand stand out, Duncan changed the design to incorporate other features reminiscent of "Merrie Olde England," including a steeply pitched roof, shed dormer, leaded windows, gothic entryway and ornate decorative hardware. In Alexandria, the roof was sheathed with the chain's signature bright green shingles, and the siding was brick, covered two decades later with white porcelain panels in a nod to changing standards of hygiene.

The motto of Little Tavern Shops was "Buy'em by the bag," and its signs promised "Cold Drinks & Good Coffee." Duncan sold the chain in 1981, and the last Little Tavern closed in 2008, but the Alexandria location has maintained its overall integrity, despite numerous subsequent owners.



"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.