



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

After the War, Alexandrians flocked to shopping centers

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Image: The old Powhatan Shopping Center. Office of Historic Alexandria.

Alexandria emerged as Northern Virginia's leading retail destination in the years following World War II. King and Washington streets provided almost every shopping experience imaginable, including national chain department stores, elegant dress shops, fine menswear emporiums, and small mom-and-pop variety stores.

Yet shopping downtown was largely a pedestrian experience.

Customers often had to find parking and then walk from store to store — often blocks apart — to meet their personal needs. As more and more regional shoppers came to downtown Alexandria, local residents looked for alternatives to hasten their acquisition of basic necessities, such as food, pharmaceuticals, clothing and services.

One of the revolutionary retail trends that began before the war, but truly boomed afterward, was the advent of the commercial shopping center. These outlets were home to a wide variety of stores; shops were grouped along the strip facade of a large one- to two-story building.

These new centers — located at major intersections somewhat removed from downtown areas — appealed primarily to automobile owners, who took advantage of the easy access and acres of free parking. By 1950, Alexandria had three major shopping centers: the Arlandria along Mount Vernon Avenue, Fairlington Centre along Fern Street and Powhatan Shopping Center along Powhatan Street, just east of the old Monroe Avenue Bridge.

Although the Powhatan Shopping Center was the newest of the three — built about 1949 — it had the shortest lifespan and was demolished in the 1970s. This outlet was built on the west side of Powhatan Street along a curving alignment that once served as the northern gateway to what is now Old Town, providing a direct link between the Monroe Avenue Bridge over Potomac Yard and North Washington Street.

Although once one of the busiest corners in the city, the center's original location — where Argall and Rolfe places intersect — is a quiet area of residential townhomes, far removed from the streaming traffic one block west on Route 1.





**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.