



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Testing facility led the way to railway improvements

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Image: Southern Railway System's headquarters, 409 S. Henry St., mid-1940s. Library of Congress.

The Southern Railway System's headquarters for the Washington Division Superintendent's Office — photographed here in the mid-1940s — once stood at 409 S. Henry St. Although similar in appearance, the two five-bay, brick buildings were built separately, in 1917 and 1926.

The earlier building, on the left, combined offices and testing laboratories to determine the compatibility of all products

used to support the rail system in the metropolitan region. With the growth of rail travel in the 1920s, a second building — with a more formal public entrance — was added for general office operations while the earlier building remained home to the testing department. Behind the building complex were two small storage structures: one for laboratory equipment and the other for volatile chemicals.

Vendors pitching products to Southern Railway delivered samples for consideration to a team of inspectors housed in the lab. Samples were then subjected to a series of rigorous experiments, so the building was specially equipped with emergency showers for workers exposed to dangerous chemicals and contaminants.

The building also contained one of the earliest climate-controlled rooms in Alexandria, built specifically for experiments involving temperature and humidity. Without such diligence, even a quart of untested oil had the potential to destroy an entire locomotive or switching facility, causing incalculable harm to people and property.

The engineer in charge of the department authorized procurement of a product only after an extensive evaluation had been successfully completed. Alexandria resident Walter Loftin, who worked as a lab assistant at the facility in the mid-1950s, recently recalled that the engineer he reported to — L. Stanley Crane — was such a pioneer in the railroad equipment testing industry that he eventually became chairman and CEO of Southern Railway and Conrail.

Although a large facility, the complex was dwarfed for decades by the massive rail operations that surrounded it, extending well along Duke and South Henry streets. Today, the few vestiges associated with rail history at this location are several street names in the Old Town Commons townhouse complex, which occupies the site.



“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.