



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### From rural to urban: the West End's rapid transformation

*Alexandria Times, December 5, 2013*

*Image: Aerial photos, 1960 and 1963, City of Alexandria*

In June 1963, the city's planning and urban renewal department issued a report documenting the need for vast community facilities, particularly in the West End.

The report documented the explosive growth in the city in the late 1950s and early '60s, fueled by an expanding federal government (and an increasing workforce), the movement of young families from urban centers to suburban communities and the construction of highways in formerly rural areas.

The central premise of the proposal was that the city needed to take swift and decisive action — within three years — to acquire enough land for schools, parks and government facilities to serve a projected population of 165,000.

A little more than a decade earlier, in 1952, officials nearly doubled the city's size by annexing more than 4,800 acres west of Quaker Lane from Fairfax County.

Although the annexation was spurred by hopes of fostering new growth and development opportunities — as well as increased tax revenues — the West End remained dotted with large forested areas, farms and open spaces in 1955. As an example, of the 2,935 birth certificates recorded in the city that year, only 77 infants were from Alexandria's new western areas.

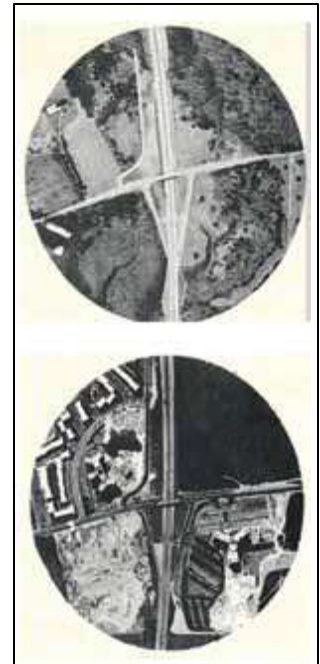
But within a decade, residential, commercial and industrial development would begin to transform the western wilderness into a series of high-density suburban corridors.

The two photographs selected for the document's cover, seen here, demonstrated the massive transition at the intersection of Seminary Road and Shirley Highway, now Interstate 395, within a three-year period.

In 1960, large country homes and woodlands still surrounded the interchange — built at this location in the early 1940s.

Three years later, huge high-rise apartments replaced the landed estates. Southern Towers is visible at the lower-right side and a shopping center under construction can be seen to the left. The future site of the Mark Center complex and Alexandria Hilton hotel is the virgin forest to the upper right.

Yet even the new plan could not project the increasing complexities involved with this automobile-centric development process. Within a decade, development at this intersection would become so intense that it would be reconstructed to three levels, with Seminary Road passing well above the weaving motorists entering and exiting the highway.





**Office of Historic Alexandria  
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

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Today, with higher traffic levels anticipated because of the presence of Washington Headquarters Services, plans are underway to modify the interchange once again.

*“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.*