



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Short Golden Age of Streetcars

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Image: Laying streetcar tracks at Royal and Franklin Streets. Photo, Mount Vernon Ladies Association..

As The Washington, Alexandria and Mount Vernon Electric Railway became the first streetcar line in Northern Virginia when it was constructed in 1892, and is credited with transforming Alexandria into a bedroom suburb of D.C. from the turn of the 20th century onwards.

Organizers originally wanted to create a way for tourists visiting the nation's capital to get to the former home of George Washington, about 15 miles south of the District, in Mount Vernon. During the tourism offseason, planners expected local traffic would bring in additional revenue.

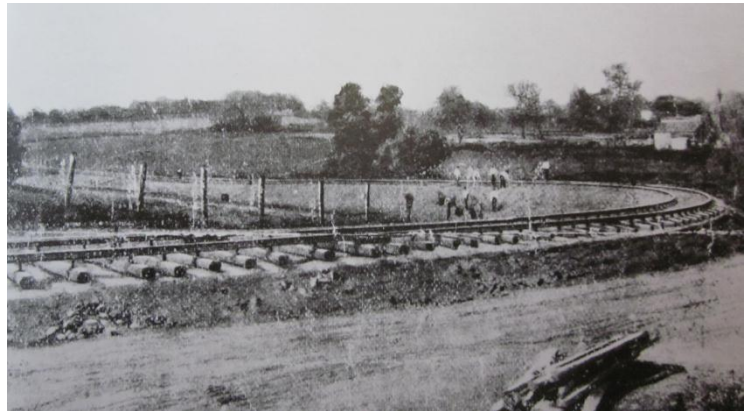
Built in stages, the streetcar line eventually crossed the Potomac River from Washington, ran through Rosslyn and across Four Mile Run before stopping in Alexandria along what is now Commonwealth Avenue.

After entering the downtown area along King Street at Union Station, the rail tracks wound along several downtown streets — including Cameron, Columbus and Royal — as it headed south toward Mount Vernon. A station at the intersection of Prince and Royal streets was the last stop in town before the streetcar crossed Great Hunting Creek and entered Fairfax County. The turn-of-the-century photograph seen here captured the recently installed track bed along a rural area of Royal Street near its intersection with Franklin Street.

Once over the creek, the line ran parallel to the shoreline and finally ended at a large turn-around at the Mount Vernon estate that still exists. During World War I, the route was extended to reach Camp Humphreys, now Fort Belvoir, which was a short distance away.

Within several years of its construction, the streetcar line saw commuter communities like Del Ray, St. Elmo and Rosemont spring up alongside its tracks as new residents poured into the area. Waterfront hamlets south of the city flourished as seasonal, recreational and residential use increased. Ninety-two trains were operating along the line every day by 1906.

However, the success of the early streetcars paved the way to their demise. New residential developments increased the demand for interurban and suburban vehicular transport, achieved by the reduced cost of automobiles because of the development of assembly line techniques.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

"Motoring" quickly changed from a recreational sport for the wealthy to an essential element of middle-class life. By 1920, private cars and public buses provided a popular alternative to streetcars in the region.

The last streetcar plied the route through Alexandria in January 1932. Soon after, the rails south of the city were removed to make way for the new George Washington Memorial Parkway.

"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.