



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Forming one of Alexandria's Most Iconic Parkways

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Image: 1962 aerial Photograph showing Hunting Creek. Photo, City of Alexandria.

As we Last week's column described the centuries-long isolation of the area at the mouth of Great Hunting Creek, where the tributary met the Potomac River.

Until 1930, the creek formed a large bay at the edge of the Potomac. It was bridged by a narrow causeway first established in 1809 to link Alexandria with the vast agricultural lands of Fairfax County and Richmond to the south and the rail trestle of the Washington, Alexandria and Mount Vernon Electric Railway just to the east.



However, in planning for the George Washington birthday bicentennial in 1932, major changes were in store for the area as the long-delayed construction of a four-lane commemorative parkway to Mount Vernon finally began. After consideration of two major routes through Fairfax County — one directly along the riverbank and another along a ridge about a mile to the west — the riverfront route was selected.

To avoid the destruction of wharfs and industries along Alexandria's waterfront, the project used the existing Washington Street. Parkway extensions connected that roadway with Washington to the north and Mount Vernon to the south. The dead-end termination of Washington Street at Hunting Creek was finally eliminated by using the railway's old route, which then proceeded eight miles south to the first president's estate and ended in a large traffic circle that previously was used to reverse the direction of southbound trains.

However, rather than deciding to reuse the old train trestle structure, National Park Service officials opted for a stone bridge across a small section of Hunting Creek that continued southward via a causeway adjacent to the Belle Haven Country Club. While scenic, the causeway had some unforeseen consequences, including restricting the natural flushing of the creek and backing up the winding Cameron Run to the west, causing serious flooding during periods of heavy rainfall.

The situation was tolerated for several decades in what was still a rural area along the creek. But, by 1960, the construction of the Washington Circumferential Highway and the Jones Point Bridge — later



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

renamed the Capital Beltway and the Woodrow Wilson Bridge respectively — filled in huge swaths of the former bay area to support elevated ramps to U.S. Route 1.

Thus, as documented by this photograph taken around 1962 during construction of the Beltway, within a period of three decades a large open bay was reduced largely to a clogged, silt-laden marshland. Ultimately, the flooding required a massive investment to straighten and widen Cameron Run, moving water through concrete culverts to a passage into the Potomac.

“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.