



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Expanding power for an expanding city

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Image: Power Plant. Photo, Library of Congress.

In 1949, Alexandria celebrated its bicentennial and the city published a booklet highlighting the remarkable achievements that occurred that year. One major construction project of which the city government was then extremely proud was the new Potomac Electric Power Company plant, which was just nearing completion on the shore of the Potomac River. Until that time, electrical service in Alexandria was



provided by the Potomac District facilities of the Virginia Electric and Power Company, described as “your business managed taxpaying servant,” at its Alexandria Generating Station on West Glebe Road.

Due to the ever increasing electrical demands in the region, this facility had tripled in size since the 1930s and included a Central Service Building for personnel built at a cost of over \$1 million in the early 1940s. Still capacity could not keep up with demand, and in 1947 a search began for an additional plant site at a location by the river.

After a careful aerial search for an appropriate plant site along the Alexandria waterfront, ultimately a site was selected at the east end of Slaters Lane along the tracks of the Washington-Old Dominion Railway, where a new 160,000 kilowatt plant could be built with the capacity to expand over time to 400,000 kilowatts as electrical demand increased. The site chosen covered about 40 acres, and was located in a rapidly growing area of the city that already included a number of new apartment complexes, such as Harbor Terrace and Riverview, and new tourist facilities along the George Washington Memorial Parkway to Mount Vernon, such as the Colonial-style Towne Motel, Howard Johnson’s and a Hot Shoppes restaurant.

Construction on the power plant began in 1948 and the initial segment with only two smokestacks was completed by 1950, as seen in this photograph. The plant was fed from massive piles of coal, dumped from railcars at the southern end of the site which was fed into large hoppers as needed. The vertical hoppers shook the coal and compacted it for transport through an underground concrete tunnel leading to the bulldozer room. That large space was aptly named for the large equipment that moved the coal onto an exterior covered conveyor belt that reached seven stories in height, where it dropped the fuel into coal furnaces located in the boiler room of the plant.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The boilers themselves heated water transported from the river by two 1,000 gallon-per-minute DeLaval pumps housed in a pump house at the Potomac's edge. The scalding water that came out spun several huge turbines on the west side of the building, producing electrical power for the city and surrounding areas. Within two years, additional turbines were added and over time the plant gradually met its projected capacity.

It is interesting to note the change in public opinion of the riverfront utility over the 50-year period before and after the plant's construction. In 1949, the facility was heralded as the latest sign of great progress and expansion in Alexandria's quest for industry after a long and sputtering economic recovery from the Civil War era. However, by the turn of the 21st century, residents and city leaders had soured on its aesthetic appearance and resultant pollution at a major gateway to the now prospering city. Recently closed, the site now presents an unusual opportunity for future redevelopment along the evolving waterfront.

"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.