



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

All dried up

Alexandria Times, February 5, 2015

Image: Aerial photograph. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

This week we continue we continue the story of the evolution of Great Hunting Creek, and how a flowing tributary that once allowed deep water ships to pass westward, at least a mile from the Potomac shore, was reduced over time to a shallow trickle.

Before the creek, also known as Cameron Run, was straightened in the mid-20th century, it meandered from near Springfield through the wooded hills and farms that once covered the west side of Alexandria. The creek twisted and turned through the dense forests, reaching well northward of its current banks, eventually draining to the Potomac River along a course parallel with its currently alignment.

The first major obstruction occurred in 1809 when a bridge was built across the mouth of the creek towards Richmond, evidenced as the center diagonal slice across this 1927 aerial photograph. Originally built of wood and stone, the piers of the long, curving bridge were spaced close together and the embankments at each end were partially filled to shorten the length of the structure itself.

Over the next century, a semi-circular shoal had developed underwater behind the bridge, caused by swirling currents, and this feature is easily visible on the northwest side of the bridge. The creating of mills further upstream, and then the city's first water system designed by Benjamin Hallowell in 1852 that pumped several miles from Cameron Run to Alexandria, further restricted the flow of the creek.

Then in 1892, a rail line was added directly across the mouth of the creek with the construction of the Washington, Alexandria and Mount Vernon Electric Railway, the first streetcar line in Northern Virginia. Although the primary purpose of the line was to transport Washington tourists to the home of George Washington about 15 miles away, it also opened up commuting options between the nation's capital and its sleepy suburbs across the river. The rail bridge is the thin black line extending across the lower right hand corner of the aerial image.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Once the electric railway left Alexandria's downtown street grid and headed south, the track bed ran through a rural area along Royal Street and passed over Hunting Creek at the old city pleasure ground known as Broomilaw Point. Now the site of the Hunting Towers apartment complex, the old river edge where the trolley tracks once ran is just at the spot where a long concrete sidewalk on the east side of the buildings runs parallel to the river frontage.

"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.