



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

A direct route to George Washington's home

Alexandria Times, February 12, 2015

Image: Great Hunting Creek. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

This week, we continue our discussion of the man-made changes to Great Hunting Creek and Cameron Run. With the construction of the Richmond Highway causeway across the creek in 1809 and then the building of a streetcar rail bridge across the wide mouth of the waterway at the turn of the 20th century, impediments to proper drainage were well in place by 1900. But within 30 years, a major new construction project would replace the elevated rail bridge with a permanent land form, further restricting the ebb and flow of natural currents and drainage flow far upstream.



At the time the streetcar rail bridge was under construction, an Alexandria business group first proposed a new roadway to link the nation's capital with the tourist haven, Mount Vernon, 15 miles away. As projected, the new highway would cross the Potomac River near Arlington House, as well as at Great Hunting Creek on suspension bridges high above the waterways, named the "Memorial Bridges" in honor of the Civil War dead and to reflect the reunification of the Union and Confederate states. In the rural wilderness of Fairfax County, south of Alexandria, the highway would include 13 rest areas, each featuring a large pavilion reflecting one of the original colonies, with landscaping, architecture and exhibits appropriate to the earliest states.

By the late 1920s, Congress finally authorized construction of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, in honor of the upcoming 200th birthday of the nation's first president in 1932 as promoted by Alexandria businessmen, albeit without the more lavish plans espoused nearly three decades earlier. This time, the plan called for a four-lane "parkway", modeled after those constructed earlier by master builder Robert Moses on New York's Long Island. The route selected began at the Memorial Bridge in Arlington, built much lower than originally conceived on a series of arched spans, and continued along the Potomac Riverfront through Alexandria, across Great Hunting Creek and into Fairfax County, where two options were proposed.

One would continue the road along the river frontage, while the other would curve a mile or so inland along a high ridge, with panoramic views across the river of the rolling hills of Maryland. Alexandria officials objected to the destruction of its growing industrial area along the city's waterfront, and ultimately the decision was made to utilize Washington Street as the parkway route through the city. Upon reaching the existing dead end at Great Hunting Creek, federal authorities finally opted to appropriate the now defunct streetcar right-of-way across the creek and along the river through Fairfax County to



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Washington's beloved home. Even the old streetcar turning circle at Mount Vernon's public entrance was retrofitted within the parkway design.

But unlike the elevated rail bridge or soaring suspension span envisioned earlier, the stone bridge across the very edge of Great Hunting Creek's bay-like mouth was built as a low span of three small arches, accessed from the south by a causeway of nearly half a mile. As seen in this photograph, which was taken in about 1990, the causeway was built within the river itself, about 50 feet parallel to the original shoreline, along the edge of the Belle Haven Country Club, whose golf course and sand traps are just visible to the left center of the image. This new obstruction, and others yet to come, would ultimately result in the development of increased silting and the twisting shoals below the waterline, also visible here, and cause significant environmental changes to the once strategic creek.

"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.