



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The West Family and the City's West End

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Image: The West End, on the 1879 Hopkins Map. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Alexandria residents define themselves by the neighborhoods they live in, as each has its own special appeal and character. But it may surprise current residents that the name of the area known today as the West End is actually based on historical precedent and not solely as the geographical location of lands west of Quaker Lane.

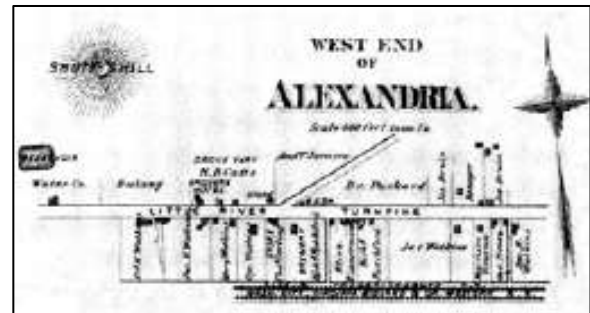
In fact, the West End moniker has referred to three distinct areas of the city over time, each of which was associated with the western border of the municipality at specific periods, but also associated the family name “West,” who owned large tracts of property within the zones. Historians still debate whether the nickname is related to the gradual annexation of land west of the city border from 1763 to 1952, or whether it is based on the ownership of West family landholdings. Most probably, the answer is that both factors contributed to the long-term naming references.

The original village of West End sprang up in the early 1800's in what was then eastern Fairfax County at the base of Shuter's Hill, now the site of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. At the time, construction of the Little River Turnpike and its extension along Duke Street forever changed traffic patterns into Alexandria from the west and south, which had previously utilized the old Colchester Road from Occaquan and entered the town on King Street. Seventeen years before Alexandria was founded, it was West who had established the tobacco inspection trading facility that stood near present day Union and Oronoco Streets.

As development progressed around Duke Street and Diagonal Road, a small center of commerce emerged to welcome agricultural, meat and resource traders seeking to sell their goods to urban residents or wholesalers, as well as domestic and international markets accessible from the Port City.

Although somewhat disreputable, the commercial establishments created along this gateway appealed directly to travelers and field hands from sparsely settled rural communities, offered taverns, a brewery, a board yard, soap factory and even a tannery.

By the 1820s, as Virginia's agricultural lands wore out and the need for slave labor declined, the area just to the east along Duke Street emerged as a major slave trading center. Here the notorious traders Joseph Bruin, Franklin & Armfield; and Price, Birch & Co. established slave jails, human pens and auction yards in former residences along a once elegant section of the street and formalized the sidewalk slave auctions that formerly occurred in Alexandria. Once sold, the wretched suffering of these individuals continued as they were marched off to continue their servitude in the cotton fields of the deep South.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Soon a rail line was built on the south side of Duke and by the time of the Civil War, the location was one of the prime passages for Union troop movements in and out of the city. As shown in this 1879 Hopkins map of Alexandria's original West End, after war the settlement was densely packed with stores, residences, a water company reservoir and a tavern operated by B.D. Catt's called the "Drovers Hotel," so named for the thousands of cattle drovers that passed the hotel annually.

"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.