



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The growth of education in Del Ray

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Image: Mount Vernon School and George Mason High School, 1929. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

After the opening of the original Mount Vernon School in 1900, children that attended the school had more than their fair share of responsibilities and challenges, even despite being aged between 5 and 12 years old. School was called to order each morning with the ringing of the school bell high in the octagonal cupola.

All children walked to school, some from as far afield as the St. Asaph Racetrack in the north to Powhatan Street just across the Potomac Rail Yards to the south. Most children also walked home for a hot lunch prepared by their stay-at-home mothers and returned to school soon after.

Those children coming from the north had to walk by the notorious racetrack Gambling House, which by 1905 employed nearly 40 people and attracted about 1,800 gamblers daily, who often harassed innocent schoolchildren as they passed. Those traveling from Powhatan Street were subjected to the daily horror of crossing the neglected Monroe Avenue railroad bridge, where unsecure handrails and deteriorated boards from the pedestrian walkway were known to frequently give way and crash onto the speeding trains below.

Once over the bridge, children then had to deal with the infamous Hattie Duncan, an elderly woman who lived near the intersection of Monroe and U.S. Route 1 and who was constantly on the lookout for schoolchildren using her property as a shortcut to upper Mount Vernon Avenue. A frequent visitor to the school principal's office, her feisty temper and quick sprint resulted in adding 10 minutes to the average walk of those students unable to outrun her.

Prior to 1915, D.C. provided a tuition-free high school education to any student interested in attending, and students from the Del Ray area made that daily commute. But when that practice was discontinued in the same year, area residents proposed sending their children to closer Alexandria schools instead, at public expense. Alexandria officials seized on this proposal, seeking an opportunity to expand city boundaries by annexing the town of Potomac, created only seven years earlier by combining the Del Ray and St. Elmo developments.

But at hearings held to discuss the issue, Potomac residents objected to the takeover and Alexandrians fretted over the cost of expanding its high school facilities, particularly after it was opined that Potomac's existing Mount Vernon School was "probably the most expensive building in the [Alexandria] county, and cost something like \$30,000."

The annexation plan died soon after and instead plans were developed by Potomac officials to create a permanent high school in Del Ray, first in the former home of Richard Lloyd, and again in 1923 with the construction of George Mason High School, just to the north of the earlier Mount Vernon School,





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

seen in the distance in this 1929 photo. When the image was taken, the 14- room school was staffed by a principal, an assistant principal and 10 teachers, with a graduating class of just 29 students out of about 350 in total.

The capacity of the junior/ senior facility was designed to achieve projected enrollments of the town of Potomac decades into the future. But in 1930, still over the objections of many residents, the area was successfully annexed by Alexandria, and in 1935 George Mason High reverted to become part of the Mount Vernon School. The original Mount Vernon school building was demolished in 1968 and is now the site of the school playground.

“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.