



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

All roads lead to, and around, Alexandria

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Image: Maskell C. Ewing map of Alexandria, 1845. Library of Congress.

This section of a map prepared by Maskell C. Ewing in 1845 documents the north side of Alexandria, then a town within the boundaries of D.C., stretching from Cameron Street on the left all the way to what is now Monroe Avenue and Slaters Lane to the right. North Washington Street, at the dead center, terminates at Montgomery Street adjacent to the 90-degree bend of the Alexandria Georgetown Canal. The roadway then connects with the Alexandria-Washington Turnpike, now called Powhatan Street.

The turnpike was built in 1809, six decades after Alexandria was founded, to link the two early counties that first formed the

Federal District, Alexandria County with Washington County on the opposite site of the Potomac River in what was part of Maryland. Ultimately much of the turnpike, built over portions of an early Native American trail, was incorporated into what today is part of U.S. Route 1 that stretches from Fort Kent, Maine to Key West, Fla.

This map shows a proposed parallel roadway to the north, indicated by the dotted lines ending at Patrick Street, and confirms that an additional north-south route through Alexandria was planned well before the Civil War. Within two years after this map was prepared, Alexandria County would be retroceded back to the Commonwealth of Virginia and became an independent municipal government once again.

Although the gridded street plan for Alexandria was firmly set by 1845, many streets were still not paved or totally connected, resulting in rough, muddy pathways through open fields in what were then sparsely settled rural areas around the outer edges of the downtown. Even the old Catalpa Lot at North Washington and Wythe streets, named for the native trees that surrounded a two block open field, still functioned after decades of use as the city's unofficial parade ground and militia drilling area.

The area detailed here was once such a location and while streets are laid out all the way westward to what was appropriately named West Street, streams and creeks still made their way hither and yon across the area. The curved shoreline at Oronoco Bay was the outlet of one of the largest streams that ended at Ralph's Gut, a feature that created swampy conditions near the shore, sometimes stretching all the way back to the intersection of Cameron and North St. Asaph streets.

This often contributed to noxious smells wafting through the area during warm weather, and ultimately forced the development of King Street as the town's major thoroughfare due to often impassable conditions along





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Cameron Street one block north. These conditions, combined with over a decade of major construction on the nearby canal project, led to the slow development of the area until Union forces occupied the city during the Civil War.

Soon after the arrival of the Union Army in Alexandria in May 1861, attention turned to outlying sections of the city for new support facilities and the placement of the constant stream of Contraband refugees that came to Alexandria starting in 1862.

It was during this wartime period that several new African-American neighborhoods developed in this area including "Uptown," on the west side of Washington Street; "The Hump," just to the north along the Alexandria Turnpike; "Cross Canal," adjacent to the canal locks; and "The Berg" just to the south, named after the City of Petersburg where many refugees had fled from. Although these sections were largely settled by refugees living in tents and makeshift homes within the open lots, over time more permanent residences were built and real communities developed, with churches, schools and stores being created beyond the traditional downtown core.

"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.