



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### A small slice of automotive history

*Alexandria Times, December 15, 2016*

Image: \_\_\_\_\_, Alexandria Library.

Americans love their cars and trucks, and this was never more true than in the middle of the 20th century.

Following the very hard years of the Great Depression and World War II, the country emerged as the primary industrial, military and financial power on the planet. Americans were ready to buy things and enjoy life again, and they passed these desires onto their children, the Baby Boomers. This first post-war generation began to reach driving age in large numbers in the early 1960s, but the sports cars that were available in those days were mostly European, relatively expensive and notoriously unreliable.



General Motors caused a stir when the rear-engine Chevrolet Corvair was introduced in 1960, and the sportier Monza version rapidly became popular with college students. GM's arch-rival, the Ford Motor Company, took notice.

In 1964, Ford introduced its own sports car to this new market, the Mustang. Small, light and quick, the car was more conventional with a front engine under a long sleek hood. It was also affordable, yet was available with a long list of options, which appealed to Baby Boomers who were used to having a lot of choices. Ford hoped it might catch on, and it did as they sold 22,000 of them the first day. General Motors needed to come up with an answer to this wildly popular new car, and their Corvair was not going to be a long-term solution.

The all-new Chevrolet Camaro reached dealers in September, 1966, including Alexandria's Aero Chevrolet, which had stood at the corner of King and North Henry streets since 1920. Seen in this picture taken September 27, 1966, 16-year-old Mary Jean Austin — who must have truly been the envy of her friends — took delivery of the first Camaro that Aero sold.

Not content to challenge Ford's Mustang only in the showroom, Chevrolet began making plans for a racing version of the Camaro. While sportier versions of the car existed from the beginning with special engines, suspension and tires among many options offered, a new model was developed that was intended to be a race car and was not initially sold to the general public. The first Camaro Z-28 rolled off the assembly line on December 29, 1966 and was shipped to a dealer who had a special customer waiting to take ownership: Aero Chevrolet in Alexandria.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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Aero's anxious customer was Hugh Heishman, who owned the Volkswagen-Porsche dealership in Arlington and had been actively involved in racing for many years. He had seen a Mustang perform at a track in Virginia, and was interested in the Z-28 Camaro as an exciting new competitor. In January, 1967, Heishman took delivery of this first-ever Z-28, though he didn't know that it was the first one at the time.

Together with his service manager and fellow racer, Alexandrian Johnny Moore, Heishman prepared the car to race in the new Trans-America Series events, with the first being at Daytona, Fla. on February 3. Rule changes for competition were due to take effect the following year, so after just six races, Heishman sold the car to the letter carrier who served his dealership and bought another Camaro.

Many years later, California sports car enthusiast Jon Mello went to look at an old Camaro for sale, on behalf of a friend who needed parts for his project car. Mello noticed that the car must have had a racing history, as modifications had been made to change it into a street-legal automobile, and he decided to purchase it himself. As his restoration of it began, he found racing stripes and Johnny Moore's name underneath coats of paint. After tracking down and talking with Moore he confirmed the Camaro's history, and when Mello researched the car's vehicle identification number, he discovered that it was the first production Z-28. Now fully restored, Jon Mello's Camaro Z-28 is a fine example of automotive and racing history, and serves as a small piece of Alexandria history, as well.

In honor of the 50th anniversary of the Camaro, ACME Trading Corp. has produced a highly-detailed 1/18th-scale die cast model of the first Z-28, painted in the authentic racing colors and markings of Hugh Heishman and Johnny Moore's car. These collectible pieces are available just in time for Christmas at The Lyceum museum store at 201 S. Washington St.

*"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.*