



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A temporary bridge across the Potomac

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Aerial photo showing location of the temporary bridge. Office of Historic Alexandria.



With its sudden entry into World War II, the United States quickly found itself unprepared for war, especially as the demand for military hardware, weapons and supplies was instantaneous.

The necessary construction of equipment for the armed forces consumed huge amounts of resources, causing shortages in metals, fuel and the even the most basic of food supplies.

This fact, coupled with inadequate national infrastructure to support the war effort and protect the homeland in case of enemy attack, caused national leaders to take stock of what resources might be available across the country and identify areas where new critical needs had to be met. One vital link that was determined was an additional rail link across the Potomac River to supplement the movement of cargo and large equipment to act as an emergency alternative in case the Long Bridge connecting Arlington to the District of Columbia became unusable.

Due to the immediacy of the need and the scarcity of metal and availability of design and construction professionals, it was decided that the necessary crossing would be achieved by reusing an existing bridge located elsewhere in the country, and moving it to a new site south of the capital. A site was selected in the northern section of Alexandria, connecting into an existing rail line near Third and



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

North Fairfax streets with a site across the river just north of Marbury Point adjacent to the Blue Plains Sewage Disposal Plant.

Based on the width of the Potomac River at that location, the Army Corps of Engineers identified a bascule bridge of equal length then located across the Saginaw River in Michigan. In 1942, working under the supervision of the civilian engineering firm of Sverdrup and Parcel in St. Louis, Mo., the Michigan bridge was quickly dismantled and shipped to Alexandria for reassembly.

A copy of the firm's design drawing prepared for the move can be seen here, just above an aerial photograph showing the general location of where the bridge was to be rebuilt, with the rail termini on the east and west sides of the river. As the new bridge was considered to be only temporary, its approaches and six truss spans were supported by crude pilings of wood timbers. In the center, a doublespan swing segment was opened as necessary by an operator stationed on that section.

Although the bridge was actually resurrected in Alexandria by 1943, few people now alive remember it and no photographs of the structure have yet been identified. But rail enthusiast Walter Lofton, a lifelong resident of Alexandria, still recalls walking across the bridge on several occasions and marveling at how it was elevated just a few feet above the water's surface. However, this condition also proved to be a major obstacle to river traffic and with the end of the war, the bridge was soon dismantled. The only vestige left in this 1949 image is a light colored corridor reflected across the river bottom.

"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.