



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The origins of the Dixie Pig restaurant

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Image: The original Dixie Pig on Powhatan Street, before 1940, Alexandria Library.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Alexandria's economy was still rebounding from the devastation of the Civil War, but was very much culturally aligned with its former sister states that had dared to secede from the Union a half-century earlier. Even until the 1960s, signs at the entrance to the city were marked by the crisscrossed images of both the United States and the Confederate States flags, and proudly welcomed visitors to the "Gateway to the South."

During this time, fine dining opportunities in the city were few and far between, largely due to restrictions on alcoholic beverages. Along the King Street corridor, most restaurants were marginal greasy-spoon luncheonettes that catered to city government workers or local shoppers. The profit margin of these limited-menu cafes was so close that most were identified by signs promoting the logos of popular soft drinks, like Coca-Cola or 7-Up, offered at no or reduced price by national bottlers.

Hungry tourists passing through Alexandria on their way to Mount Vernon satisfied their palates at better-known chain restaurants like Howard Johnson's, Hot Shoppes and the Little Tavern at the north end of Washington Street, where several motels could also accommodate an overnight stay. This area was particularly attractive to investors mindful of the increasingly motorized public, as it was located at the juncture of the old Alexandria-Washington Turnpike, built in 1809 along what is now Powhatan Street, and the George Washington Memorial Parkway, which opened in 1932. Until the realignment of U.S. Route 1 at the Monroe Avenue railroad bridge circa 1970, Powhatan Street was the primary entryway to Alexandria from the north.

In 1924, Emma Griffin Robinson opened one of Alexandria's most popular food service establishments adjacent to this important intersection, the famous Dixie Pig. This was the first of several barbeque emporiums built in Alexandria and nearby Fairfax County by members of the Griffin and Robinson families. The original restaurant, seen in this 1926 view, was a small, crudely built affair, but was able to increase its capacity by offering curbside service to those willing to eat in their cars. Even the over-the-top signage, featuring the ubiquitous Coca-Cola logo, was designed to be seen by speeding motorists with an urge for locally-made pulled pork, hot coffee or delicious Virginia Maid ice cream.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The reference to “Dixie” in the name clearly denoted that this establishment served “Southern” barbeque, which not only appealed to local residents but also attracted tourists who longed for this unique fare normally not found in Northern climes. Though the origin of the word is still debated, historians generally agree that it evolved from the ten-dollar note used by the Citizens National Bank in New Orleans, labeled “Dix” in French, or from the 1763 Mason-Dixon line drawn by Jeremiah Dixon which resolved a boundary dispute between free and slave states.

The Dixie Pig flourished at this location until about 1940, when it was sold and re-opened as Kaus’s Barbeque. Nine years later, another Dixie Pig with an even more prominent neon sign was opened at Powhatan Street and Bashford Lane by Arthur “Pid” Griffin and his wife Anne, better known as “Sis.” References to this iconic restaurant have been included in major films and television shows such as “Remember the Titans” and “West Wing.”

“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.