



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A park fit for a president

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Images: *Laying the cornerstone at George Washington Park.. President Taft, Whitehouse.gov*

On Feb. 5, 1908, a member of the George Washington Monument Association proposed that the organization purchase Shuter's Hill and the Spring Park properties, which were part of Fairfax County, for the purpose of erecting a monument to the first president. The proposal also included the establishment of a park. The members asked the secretary of the organization, A.J. Wedderburn, to find out how many of the lots could be sold to citizens in order to raise funds for the project.

Initially, the plan was to sell half of the 140 acres for the building, with the other half going to the park. Three days after the proposal, Wedderburn had already sold 65 of the prospective 70 lots. More lots were opened for sale, and by Feb. 25, \$40,000 had been raised from the real estate sales.

As the sale of lots progressed, a by-now reorganized association announced in January 1909 that it would sponsor an old home week and parade to raise additional funds for the monument. That celebration included thousands of Alexandrians, members of Congress and the then-President of the United States, William Taft.

After the celebration, Taft and his entourage moved to Shuter's Hill for the laying of the cornerstone of George Washington Park. Taft gave a brief speech before visiting the residence of William B. Smoot, the head of the Park Association.

The park was used for citywide celebrations even before it formally became part of the city. For example, the June 9, 1909 Washington Evening Star records a mock battle between factions of the Alexandria Light Infantry. The group was training for "a three day tramping expedition to Warrenton, Va."

The June 23, 1910 edition advertised the city's "Safe and Sane" July 4th celebration in the park, promising attendees outdoor sports, speechmaking and pyrotechnics. The newspaper expected "many





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members of the younger generation to participate in a genuine old-time celebration.” Another edition promised attendees a “base ball game at 3:30.”

In 1915, Smoot and Wedderburn tendered use of the park to the public and suggested that the City of Alexandria purchase it from the association. City council discussed the proposed deal in September, and agreed to purchase eight acres of the park for \$6,500. The Masons later purchased the site from the city in 1921, for their own memorial to George Washington, and broke ground in 1922. The building's exterior was completed in 1932.

Today, the George Washington Masonic Memorial looms as a reminder of the first president's connection to Alexandria. But it is now private property. It's been almost a century since a president of the United States came to Alexandria to help open a municipal park.

“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 staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.