



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Alexandria's electric railway

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Image: Electric Railway station. Library of Congress

As Alexandrians spend their August vacations in destinations near and far, perhaps now is a good time to reflect on Alexandria's role as a tourist destination through the years. The proximity of Mount Vernon to Washington, D.C. meant that Alexandria always received plenty of visitors, but this influx of tourism increased as transportation technology improved. One of the key aspects of increased tourism to Alexandria at the end of the 19th century was the opening of the Electric Railway between Old Town and Mount Vernon.

The railway opened between Old Town and Mount Vernon in 1892 and expanded services to Washington in 1896. While the railway connected Alexandria to Washington, D.C., tourists valued it primarily for the access it provided to the home of the nation's first president. Indeed, well before a road was paved between Old Town and the Washington estate, a foreign guest remarked, "almost every stranger going through the country makes a point of visiting Mount Vernon."

The new railway not only provided convenience but was also a source of local pride. For instance, W.H. Snowden's "Some Old and Historic Landmarks of Virginia and Maryland," published in 1894, claimed that the railway "for thoroughness in construction, equipment, service and safety none surpassed it in the United States." Riders could disembark at the Dyke, Belmont, Wellington, Arcturus and Snowden stations among others. The trip from the Alexandria station to Mount Vernon was scheduled to take 30 minutes, and a round trip could be purchased for 25 cents. The railway served not only tourists, but residents of the areas in between Old Town and Mount Vernon, who had been isolated from each other prior to the railway opening. In 1906, the railway transported more than 1.7 million riders.

Trains left the Washington station twice an hour, and the last trains reached the ends of the line at 12:30 in the morning. Snowden paid particular attention to Arcturus station, since it was the one closest to his residence as Andalusia. The trip from Arcturus to Mount Vernon was four miles each way, a trip which he describes romantically:

"the eye may trace out the National Capital, with its towering dome and obelisk, sitting superbly enthroned in the mist and dimness of the far away hills to the north; and the grand old river flowing down in its seaward course through its setting of green slopes and plains and wooded crests gives to all the view a charm and beauty not often surpassed."

The popularity of automobiles meant that the railway stopped service between Alexandria and Mount Vernon by 1930 to make way for the George Washington Memorial Parkway. The rest of the system ceased operation in 1932. Before that though, the operation of the railway helped the growth of the Del Ray, Rosemont and St. Elmo neighborhoods, which were later annexed by Alexandria. They're a legacy that's survived the railway by more than 85 years.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

“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.