

# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### More about early movie theaters in Alexandria

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Image: Top: Virginia Theater. Above: The interior of the Virginia Theater as it appeared on an advertisement for General Electric. Office of Historic Alexandria.

The decline of the movie theater business in Alexandria, especially that of the Alexandria Amusement Corporation, had multiple causes. In 1949, after a 16-year legal process, the Supreme Court ordered movie companies to divest themselves of their movie theaters. Major films were expensive to rent from the individual distributors, so movie houses that were on shaky financial footing often skipped the blockbusters, and sought alternate films, sometimes of dubious morality.

Television was a major factor in the decline of attendance in movie theaters. According to historian Kevin Ruffner, television accounted for 70 percent of the decline in movie theater attendance during the first two years of the 1950s. A third factor in the decline was the growth of drive-in theaters in Arlington and Fairfax counties. What had been strengths for Alexandria's movie theaters before World War II became liabilities afterward.

The rise of drive-in theaters hurt traditional movie houses nationally, not just in Alexandria. In 1946, there were only 102 drive-ins in the country. By 1956, that number was 5,000. In the middle of 1956, more than half of all movie patronage in the United States was at drive-ins. The decades-old theaters owned by Harmon Reed had trouble competing. Their locations, at the junction of old residential areas and business districts, held little appeal to younger moviegoers, who increasingly had access to automobile transportation.

For many years, the only theater to open in Alexandria was in the newly annexed West End. Once named the Shirley-Duke, it was renamed the Foxchase. The new theater opened in 1964 in the





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Shirley-Duke Shopping Center. Perhaps this foreshadowed the tradition of placing movie theaters in shopping centers.

The opening of the Shirley Duke couldn't prevent the demise of the movie theater industry in Alexandria. The Ingomar had closed in November of 1953. The Richmond held out until 1972. Then, in 1976, the Reed, the Vernon, and the Virginia all closed. The Virginia had a last gasp as a live-show venue, but that only lasted one year. It was torn down in 1978 to make room for hotel expansion.

The Reed, once Alexandria's finest movie theater, was demolished the next year. The gentrification of Old Town in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to the renovation of the Richmond, which was renamed the Old Town. You can still see it on King Street today, see it on King Street today, although it too has suffered as the consumption of media has changed over time.

*"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.*

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