



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandria's Union Station, a historic hub

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Image: Early postcard of Union Station.

One of Alexandria's latest entries on the National Register of Historic Places is Union Station. Still very much in use, the station is a reminder of the golden era of rail travel. Built in 1905, the colonial revival architecture stands out as the only of this style among Alexandria's public buildings.

While its official address is Callahan Drive, the site was chosen for its proximity to Duke and King streets, which brought cattle and agricultural produce from the western parts of Virginia along Little River Turnpike and Leesburg Pike. Like other stations with the same name, Union Station was so named as it was used by a number of different railroads. Alexandria's station served three railroads: The Chesapeake and Ohio, Washington Southern Railway and the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railway.

There are two interesting facts about the station we'd like to highlight. The first is that the name of the original architect has been lost to history. The blueprints for the station that are available list the architect as the Office of the Chief Engineer of the Pennsylvania Railroad in Philadelphia.

Those blueprints reflect their segregated times, with separate waiting rooms and restrooms, which have long since been integrated. This historic building, which is unique to us, was just one of many built from these blueprints at the time of its construction.

Second is the fact that while Union Station is part of Old Town now, it was originally in Arlington County. Alexandria didn't annex the land until 1915.

The decline of rail travel in Northern Virginia has a multitude of causes. The Great Depression, the rise of personal automobiles and the construction of George Washington Memorial Parkway in 1932 all played a role in the loss of importance of passenger railroads.

The station was taken over by Amtrak in 1971, and after the construction of the King Street Metro station next door in the 1980s, the City of Alexandria restored Union Station in 1997. Modifications that had been done in the name of utility were reversed to restore the building's aesthetic charm. The station still operates today, and has regained its place as a passenger hub for commuters. In 2016, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.



"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



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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.