The Town of Potomac

When the Washington, Alexandria & Mount Vernon Railway announced plans in 1892 that included tracks between Washington, D.C. and Alexandria, the flat, open land north of Alexandria became a logical site for a new community. The development firm of Wood-Harmon bought two large plots of land in 1894 --- a larger one called “Del Ray,” from the estate of John Lloyd, and a smaller one called “St. Elmo” --- separated from each other by a racetrack. The Town of Potomac, Virginia, was chartered in March 1908, bounded on the east by the Washington & Alexandria Turnpike (now U.S. Route 1), on the north by Old Georgetown (now Glebe) Road and Braddock Avenue (now Ashby Street), on the west by the electric rail line (now Commonwealth Avenue), and on the south by Bellefonte Avenue.

Del Ray and St. Elmo are early examples of commuter suburbs, since one of the first interurban electric railways in the country provided a rapid means of travel for workers going between Washington and Alexandria. The Town of Potomac was also one of the first recipients of federal highway funds in 1915 when modernization of Mount Vernon Avenue met the needs of an emerging automobile culture. Ease of transit between Potomac and Alexandria was no doubt a factor in the decision of the City to annex the town. The first annexation effort in 1915 failed, but a second one launched in 1927 succeeded. At the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Day, 1930, the Town of Potomac ceased to exist and became the Del Ray neighborhood of Alexandria.

Alexandria County (which became renamed Arlington County the next year) established a Health Department in 1918 and constructed one of its clinics in Potomac in 1922 at 374 Mount Vernon Avenue. The clinic was open every weekday a week, concentrating on maternal and child health problems. The clinic received federal funding in the 1930s under the Tuskegee Project, which studied African American health. This was one of the first efforts to understand the health needs of African Americans. The clinic was later expanded and became part of the Virginia Health Department in the 1950s.

A massive railroad strike began in 1905 and the strike lasted for years. The railroad strike led to the creation of the Potomac Reading and River Railway in 1908. The railway connected the town with Alexandria and Washington. The railway was later acquired by the Washington & Alexandria Turnpike, which became the modern-day U.S. Route 1.

The Town of Potomac was formed around two subdivisions, Del Ray and St. Elmo. Other subdivisions followed through the 1920s, but only one (Del Ray Section 2) was added after World War II. The west end was built first, followed by the east end in the 1950s. The subdivision was designed with a mixture of houses, including bungalows, ranches, and smaller houses, providing a variety of housing options. The subdivision was designed to be a walkable community with public transportation, and the area was annexed by Alexandria in 1930.