

Historic Alexandria Quarterly



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Gunston Hall Apartments, 900 block of S. Washington Street.

The George Washington Memorial Parkway-- A Statement of Policy on Memorial Character by the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review

by
Peter H. Smith

The George Washington Memorial Parkway is treasured by those who use it, as it has been called one of the nation's most beautiful roadways. This road is not without controversy, however, as buildings along the Parkway, specifically in Alexandria, at times have threatened its memorial character.

The most recent controversy involves a proposed office building in the north end of Old Town that has been designed for construction in place of the current Old Colony Inn. The original design elicited negative reaction from local citizenry and the Old and Historic Alexandria District of Board of Architectural Review (BAR). On recommendation from the BAR, the design was scaled back and has received conceptual approval by the BAR. Currently, the

application for the Development Special Use Permit, which is required for the large-scale building, has been recommended for denial by the Planning Commission. City Council makes the final decision regarding the permit application, which is scheduled to be heard by Council on September 18, 1999.

In 1928 the U.S. Congress authorized the creation of a "suitable memorial highway" leading from Memorial Bridge to George Washington's Mount Vernon.¹ The George Washington Memorial Parkway was constructed by the federal government as a memorial to Washington on the bicentennial of his birth in 1932. The authorizing legislation did not set any parameters to the memorial highway other than defining its purpose as a memorial road for visitors to

Mount Vernon. As a result, the practical definition of the roadway was left largely in the hands of the original highway's engineers and landscape architects.

As the road and its attendant supporting facilities were designed, the architects and engineers envisioned a roadway that would provide a pastoral, inspirational, and patriotic automobile route from the nation's capital to Mount Vernon. The goal was to create a scene that would arouse a contemplative mood to encourage reflection on George Washington and his importance and significance to our nation.

The George Washington Memorial Parkway was designed to go along Washington Street, the main street of Alexandria. In order to blend the Washington Street section of the Parkway with the desired character of the entire Parkway project, the federal government, acting through the Bureau of Public Roads, entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with the City of Alexandria in 1929.² The agreement provided that the city would undertake certain zoning measures to ensure that building activity along the Parkway would be "of such character and of such types of building as will be in keeping with the dignity, purpose and memorial character of said highway." While this noble goal was agreed to by both the federal government and the City of Alexandria, there has never been a written operating definition of conditions that would apply to a building that protects the memorial character of the Parkway.

This lack of a clear policy has created controversy throughout the years. In an attempt to abate the controversy and decrease the confusion, a firm set of parameters and guidelines have been established by the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of

Architectural Review. The BAR is the local city body which reviews and approves designs for buildings along Washington Street. This article is based on this organization's Statement of Policy on the definition of keeping with the Parkway's memorial character. This statement is meant to supplement the BAR's adopted *Design Guidelines*³ for Washington Street. The policy statement provides background information for buildings that have been erected on the Parkway since 1932 and derives design principles for proposed new buildings that could be erected on Washington Street in the future.

In the original developmental plans for the Parkway it appears the designers divided the roadway from Memorial Bridge to the entrance of Mount Vernon into three sections: from the bridge to the memorial circle in Alexandria, paved with asphalt; the section that traverses Alexandria as Washington Street, paved with brick; and the southern boundary of Alexandria to Mount Vernon, which was paved in concrete. This construct allowed the designers to respond to the different site and environmental conditions found in each of the three areas.⁴

The Bureau of Public Roads in the Department of Agriculture was responsible for the development of the Parkway, but there was one segment of the sectioned roadway where the agency's engineers and landscape architects were not autonomous, and that was within the boundaries of the constructed City of Alexandria. The alignment of the route passed directly through the City of Alexandria along Washington Street as it does today. The geography posed somewhat of a challenge because Alexandria was primarily an industrial city in the 1930s, and the passage of the Parkway through the urban areas of the city did not befit the goal of a quiet and

reflective parkway. The urban nature of the city was fundamentally at odds with the pastoral setting of the Parkway, and the designers had little influence over the landscape within the Alexandria street grid. The project designers were placated, however, by a few conditions and qualifications that existed.

First, because there were extant buildings in Alexandria that were associated with the life of George Washington, the new Parkway was automatically given an historically accurate character. For example, Christ Church, the Alexandria Academy, the Dulaney House, and the Carlyle House were buildings which Washington knew and/or visited during his lifetime, and which were on or near the proposed parkway. Thus, the physical preservation of structures associated with Washington was of paramount importance to routing the Parkway through the urban fabric of Alexandria, and the designers recognized that.

Second, the designers knew the memorial character of the Parkway in the city would be maintained because future buildings constructed along Washington Street would have an architectural quality that would contribute to the memorial character. The document which proposed this concept was the 1929 Memorandum of Agreement. This agreement gave the federal government a perpetual easement, or control of property, over Washington Street, and was viewed as the chief instrument to guaranteeing that only the construction of "residential or business development of such character and of such types of building as will be in keeping with the dignity, purpose and memorial character" of the Parkway would be permitted.

Third, the distinction between the pastoral and romantic Parkway and the rigid grid of the

Alexandria street system was reconciled by the design of memorial circles at the north and south ends of the Alexandria grid. These circles served as a physical transition to and from the undeveloped pastoral areas of the Parkway to the highly constructed city. In the end, however, only the memorial circle at the north end of the city grid was actually constructed. It is not known why the memorial circle on the south end was not constructed. It is possible that a roundabout at the south end of the city at Hunting Creek may not have been deemed necessary for two reasons: in this area in the 1930s there was more of a gradual and natural transition from the deliberate urban grid to the curvaceous and quiet Parkway because at the time there was no development south of Green Street. Another possibility is the thought that visitors heading northbound, and consequently away from Mt. Vernon, did not have as much of a need to maintain a sense of contemplative reverence since they would be going away from, and not toward, the object of veneration.

Evidence suggests that the City of Alexandria was cooperative with the design and goal of the Parkway, as even before the completion of the Parkway in 1932 city officials had begun routinely referring for comment to the federal government city building permits involving projects which fronted on Washington Street. Initially such permits were referred to the Department of Agriculture. Gradually, the National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (NCPPC) received the permits, and finally the National Park Service was the agency responsible for commenting on the building permits. This confusing process involved these different government organizations as a result of the federal government reorganizing its planning and preservation functions.

After construction of the Parkway was

completed, during the mid to late-30s and into the early 1940s there was a strong burst of residential construction activity in Alexandria and the surrounding metropolitan area, as the federal government launched massive programs to first combat the Great Depression, and later to increase military power with the imminent threat of World War II. Virtually without exception, the participating federal agencies applauded the construction of residential apartment complexes adjacent to the Parkway in Alexandria.

Some of these complexes consisted of extremely large buildings, such as the Mason Hall Apartments on West Abingdon Drive and Hunting Terrace at Washington and South Columbus Streets. Others were smaller and reflected the garden apartment movement, like the Williamsburg Apartments at Washington and Green Streets.



Gunston Hall Apartments, 900 block of S. Washington Street

Despite the variance in size and slight differences in architectural style, all of these complexes shared a common construction vocabulary of a red brick finish with punched window openings. The red brick finish is an important design concept because this style became the ideal architectural characteristic of Washington Street buildings.

While it gave enthusiastic support to the

architectural style of much of the residential construction along Washington Street, the federal government was considerably less sanguine regarding commercial buildings and the advertising signs which had begun to crop up along Washington Street. The National Park Service was so concerned with the commercial character of Washington Street that following World War II officials proposed the construction of an elevated freeway along the waterfront of Alexandria in order to divert Mount Vernon-bound traffic away from Washington Street, which was considered to have lost its semblance of memorial character.



603 S. Washington Street.

Furthermore, the National Park Service considered condemning property along Washington Street that did not meet the desired memorial nature of the Parkway. Either one of these proposals would have been disruptive to the city and would have seriously affected the economic base of Alexandria. In response to these proposals, Alexandria's City Council enacted the third local historic district ordinance in the nation in 1946.⁵ One of its chief purposes was "the preservation of the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Highway" as a means of protecting the city's tax base and also to placate the federal government. While construction proposals along Washington Street still continued to be referred to the National Park Service for comment, it was now the city's Board of Architectural Review that assumed the major burden of protecting the memorial

character of the Parkway after 1946.

At the same time that the Park Service became concerned about the lack of memorial character on Washington Street, the pastoral setting of the Parkway north of Four Mile Run, too, had been inalterably transformed by the federal government with the expansion of what would become National Airport. The airport was constructed immediately adjacent to the ruins of Abingdon, the estate where Eleanor "Nellie" Custis, the adopted daughter of George Washington, was born and which burned to the ground in 1930. The original designers of the Parkway considered Abingdon to be an important component to the sense of reverence along the road to Mount Vernon. During Parkway construction, a scenic overlook was created at the site of the Abingdon ruins that allowed "pilgrims," as Mount Vernon-bound travelers were called, on their way to the "shrine" to view a physical site that pertained to Washington's life. The scenic overlook also provided a sweeping panoramic vista of the broad expanse of the Potomac River to the southeast, which served to remind the viewer of the importance of this waterway to the 18th century world of Washington.

During the 1939 construction of National Airport, however, the Parkway was re-routed slightly to the west, and portions of the original Parkway became a roadway internal to the airport itself. As a result, the important symbolic overlook of Abingdon was abandoned. Today, the foundation has been stabilized and remains in the Ronald Reagan National Airport complex between two new parking garages. The site is accessible to visitors and features interpretive signage, but its significance to the Parkway has been overlooked by airport developers.

Directly to the south of the Abingdon ruins,

the Bureau of Public Roads, the very agency responsible for the design and construction of the Parkway, constructed an office and road testing facility on a 54 acre site in 1936. This facility consisted of a U-shaped collection of Georgian Revival style brick buildings that strongly resembled a college campus. At that time, the Parkway passed immediately to the east of the facility on the side closest to the Potomac River. A glimpse of the facility drew comparisons to the reconstructed Governor's Palace at Colonial Williamsburg or the Wren Building at the College of William and Mary. By designing this facility, the Bureau of Public Roads clearly established the preferred theme for the architectural treatment of new construction along the Parkway--buildings of the aesthetically pleasing Georgian Revival style. Indeed, the design of the complex was approved by the Commission of Fine Arts, which praised its architectural treatment.

When the airport was constructed a few years later and the Parkway relocated westward, the orientation of the complex lost its significance because a motorist's view was now of the backs of the buildings, and the colonial flavor of the facility could not be viewed and appreciated. The complex is still extant today, and it serves as a maintenance support facility for Ronald Reagan National Airport. Its original context has been lost completely, and the facility is located amidst the airport surface parking lots and garages.

Moving the Parkway westward during airport construction counteracted an important design element of the original Parkway. One of the principal reasons of keeping the original Parkway alignment eastward and nearer the River from a design standpoint was to avoid the visual intrusion of the Potomac Yard, a railroad classification facility constructed in 1906 which stretched from the area of the

Fourteenth Street Bridge (or Long Bridge) well into the City of Alexandria. By the time the Parkway's construction was proposed, Potomac Yard was reportedly the largest railroad classification facility in the country.⁶ The rail yard created not only a visual blight but also an audible intrusion for travelers in their pre-air conditioning automobiles, and the original designers proposed a thick growth of trees on the west side of the Parkway in an attempt to mitigate these negative effects. Thus, the construction of the airport disrupted much of the original design intention of the Parkway when the roadway had to be relocated westward of its original alignment and immediately adjacent to Potomac Yard.

The memorial character of the Parkway has been substantially eroded in other sections as well, specifically to the north of Alexandria, with the construction of highway bridges, office buildings, and parking garages, many of which were built by and for federal government agencies in the last 20 years. For example, the highway bridges that carry the Fourteenth Street Bridge and I-395 over the Parkway do not in any way resonate with the memorial character of the roadway; the structures of METRO immediately adjacent to the Parkway likewise make no concession to the memorial landscape of the Parkway nor to the natural palette of materials used for structures along the Parkway; similarly, Crystal City, the massive office and residential complex adjacent to the Parkway and directly west of the airport, thwarts any contemplative nature. In addition, the prefabricated metal industrial buildings at the maintenance facility constructed by the National Park Service, which is adjacent to the Parkway and directly west of the airport, can hardly be deemed compatible with the memorial character of the Parkway.

As evidenced by the aforementioned

government sponsored projects, the interest of the federal government in protecting the Parkway has waxed and waned since the 1929 agreement with Alexandria. Its interest has often been tied to the personal predilections of the various administrators of the government agencies charged with enforcing the agreement. By contrast, the City of Alexandria has generally proved consistent in its attempts to maintain the vision of a designated memorial Parkway along one of its principal commercial arteries. Through both governmental action and the intense scrutiny of citizen activists, there has been a strong preference for buildings designed in a Colonial Revival style. While this style has been interpreted loosely at times, it normally consists of constructed red brick buildings with doorways framed by pediment surrounds,



First Union at 330 N. Washington Street.

multi-light punched wood windows, and often wood rooftop cupolas.

There have been, however, some noticeable lapses in the city's original embrace of the 1929 agreement, most of which are readily visible at the south end of the Parkway in Alexandria. Gerrymandering of the boundaries of the historic district in 1970

permitted the construction of the Humro office buildings in the 1100 block of South Washington Street (built in 1983), as well as the Porto Vecchio complex (1979). Because both projects were constructed outside the historic district, the Board of Architectural Review did not have jurisdiction to review the designs. Following the construction of these buildings, the boundaries of the historic district were returned to their former points in 1984 and now once more encompass the land where these structures exist. Both the current Zoning Ordinance and the *Design Guidelines* of the Board of Architectural Review would preclude their approval if these designs were proposed today.

There are a number of other buildings on Washington Street which were approved in the past by the Board of Architectural Review that today are considered to detract from the memorial character of the Parkway. These buildings include: the Harris Building at 1201 East Abingdon Drive, which has ribbon windows, an overly large mansard penthouse, and surface parking exiting directly onto the Parkway; the Jefferson Building at 901 North Washington Street, the only overtly modernistic building fronting on Washington Street;



Jefferson Building at 901 N. Washington Street.

and the United Fruit and Vegetable Growers building at 727 North Washington Street with

its ground floor interior parking exiting directly onto Washington Street. These buildings were approved because the BAR was not using the protective guidelines that are used today.

In the attempt to ensure that the memorial character of the Parkway is perpetuated, the City of Alexandria's Zoning Ordinance has mandated design standards for the construction of new buildings on Washington Street since 1990. These standards are even stricter than those applied elsewhere in the historic district. In the last several years there have been a number of new buildings constructed on Washington Street, and all have met the high design standards required by the Zoning Ordinance and the *Design Guidelines*.

Some building designs that have not been approved by the Board of Architectural Review because its members did not think they contributed to the memorial character of the Parkway have been built anyway due to approval by City Council on appeal of the Board decision. This was the case with the Atrium Building at 215 South Washington Street, which uses Colonial Revival detailing on a gargantuan scale coupled with a two story mansard roof. Another example is the building at 300 North Washington Street, which consists of seven stories in height and visually overwhelms its section of the street. Its approval was the result of ineffective height restrictions in the Zoning Ordinance. Since its approval and construction, the height limit along all of Washington Street has been considerably reduced to a maximum height of 50 feet, or approximately four stories.

This review of the history of the George Washington Memorial Parkway on Washington Street shows there is no single standard of what constitutes the Parkway's

memorial character. However, several principles can be derived from original goals and the styles and guidelines that have worked in the past, which should be used as aids and examples for defining memorial character of the Parkway as it passes along Washington Street:

1. Preservation of Historic Properties

Of utmost importance is the physical preservation of all properties actually associated with the life of George Washington or his family. This principal is in concert with the City of Alexandria's goal to preserve historic and architecturally important buildings along Washington Street. Consequently, the preservation and interpretation of these buildings binds together the purpose of the Parkway with Washington Street.

2. The Memory Test

The principal overriding design objective for new construction on Washington Street is to create buildings which are not overt visual intrusions on the established cityscape. Such buildings must be predominately background buildings that do not seek to make a strong impact on the Washington Street vista. This includes ensuring that these buildings are not visually jarring in scale, mass, materials, or color. The intention of the memory test lies in the concept that by the time one traverses the Parkway and enters Mount Vernon, the principal memory of buildings in Alexandria will be of the surviving historic buildings associated with Washington and not of modern constructs.

3. Red Brick with Punched Windows

As demonstrated by this article, due to the lack of a clear policy in the past there is no single architectural building style that is mandated for Washington Street in order to maintain the memorial character of the

Parkway. There are highly regarded examples of historic architectural merit that range from late 18th-century wood frame Federal style townhouses to high style center hall Georgian buildings to a limestone Art Deco style office building constructed in 1930. The designs of these buildings vary, and as a result it should be noted that mere replication of Federal or Georgian style buildings on an exaggerated scale for late 20th-century use is not normally considered to contribute to the architectural patrimony of Washington Street. There should be serious design consideration for Washington Street buildings so that all proposed buildings are not automatically Federal style replicas.

The most common building type on Washington Street, and therefore the one most likely to meet the memory test described in the second principal, is a building which visually expresses the historic red brick in a traditional load bearing manner. In other words, the red brick must be of structural masonry construction that appears to actually bear the load or weight of the building. On Washington Street windows for this building type grew from small Georgian style multi-pane sashes to proportionally larger openings.



700 S. Washington Street.

This trend evolved as improvements were made in glazing technology, and it is reflected in window openings found in buildings of the

Chicago School or Beaux Arts style. In each instance the windows are surrounded by masonry and appear to be "punched" through a solid load bearing masonry wall. By contrast, ribbon windows (a continuous horizontal band of windows) and glass curtain walls that are found on modern office buildings are not appropriate treatments along Washington Street.

The historical treatment of building facades along Washington Street has established a materials palette largely consisting of red brick with surface modulation that includes vertically punched windows which are proportionally appropriate. These traditional building treatments, in addition to a quietude of facade treatment rather than an exuberance of surface ornamentation, give a sense of timeless solidity to construction along the Parkway and a sense of connection to the building materials of Washington's lifetime. In this way, the memorial character of the Parkway can best be maintained, which, as most will agree, is a unique and important historical gift from Alexandria to its residents and visitors.

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About the Author

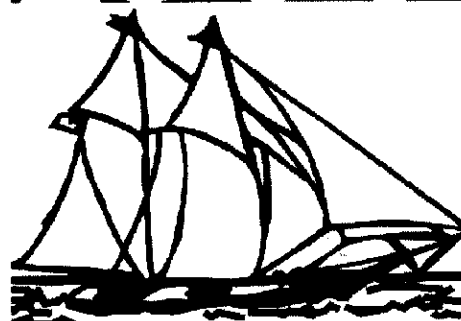
Peter H. Smith is the Principal Staff for the Boards of Architectural Review in the Department of Planning and Zoning. He has a Ph.D. in American Studies from George Washington University. Mr. Smith has written previously for the *Historic Alexandria Quarterly*.

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End Notes

All photographs are courtesy of the Department of Planning and Zoning.

1. United States Congress, May 23, 1928, "An Act to authorize and direct the survey, construction and maintenance of a memorial highway to connect Mount Vernon, in the State of Virginia, with the Arlington Memorial Bridge across the Potomac River at Washington."
2. Memorandum of Agreement between City Council of the City of Alexandria and the United States of America, represented by the Secretary of Agriculture, June 20, 1929, Council Chamber, City Hall.
3. City of Alexandria Design Guidelines, Chapter 7 "Washington Street Guidelines," pp 1-10. Adopted by the Boards of Architectural Review, May 25, 1993.
4. EDAW, Inc. for the National Park Service, Cultural Landscape Report, Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, 8 vols., ca. 1985.
5. Ordinance No. 470 to amend Chapter 28, of The Code of the City of Alexandria, Virginia. Sec. 33 "Certificate of appropriateness; its purpose," August 13, 1946.
6. Cox, Al, Historic Structure Report, An Analysis of the Alexandria Union Station, City of Alexandria, Department of Transportation and Environmental Services, 1995, p. 25.



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Alexandria's 250th Anniversary Calendar of Events

August, 1999

August 1, 8, 15, 22 and 29

Mount Vernon Chamber Series. Free. The Lyceum. 3:00 pm.
703/838-4994, 703/799-8229.

August 2 and 9

Waterfront Park Concerts. Free. Waterfront Park. 7:00 pm.
703/883-4686.

August 4, 11 and 18

Lunch Bunch Concerts. Free. Market Square. 12:15 pm.
703/883-4686.

August 4

through September 6

The Art League's "The American Landscape Show." Opening reception on August 8. The Art League Gallery, Torpedo Factory Art Center. 703/683-1780.

August 5, 12 and 19

Music at Twilight Concerts. Free. Fort Ward Park. 7:00 pm.
703/883-4686.

August 6

through September 28

"George Washington: Profile of a Patriot." New exhibit featuring 19th-century prints of Washington, including *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze and other famous, stirring images of the nation's first President. Traveling exhibit from the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. The Lyceum. 703/799-8229.

August 6 and 20

Colonial Games. Children are invited to learn how to play 18th century games. Suggested donation of \$1 per child. Carlyle House. 10:00 am-Noon. 703/549-2997.

August 6 and 20

Alexandria Citizens Band Concert. Free. Market Square. 7:30 pm. 703/838-4844, 703/883-4686.

August 7

The Friendship Firehouse Festival. Displays and demonstrations on fire safety and rescue operations. Children will receive balloons, fire hats and birthday cake. Free. The Friendship Firehouse. 10:00 am-3:00 pm. 703/838-3814, 703/883-4686.

August 7

Alexandria Archaeology "Dig Days." Help archaeologists excavate a site. \$5 per person. Reservations required. 10:00 am and 1:30 pm. 703/838-4399.

August 8

Production of "1776," benefit event for the Alexandria 250th Anniversary Celebration. \$20 per person. Little Theatre of Alexandria, 600 Wolfe Street. 8:00 pm. 703/838-4554.

August 11

Alexandria 250th Anniversary Music Series. Come dance the Lindy! Second Story, Worldbeat, blues and swing music. Free. Landmark Mall Food Court. 6:00 pm-9:00 pm. 703/941-2582.

August 13

Alexandria Harmonizers Concert. Free. Market Square. 7:30 pm. 703/838-4844, 703/883-4686.

August 14

Irish Festival. Music, dancing, vendors and food. Free. Waterfront Park. Noon-6:00 pm. 703/838-4844.

August 21

Victorian Tea. 19th-century parlor games and tea for young ladies and their dolls. \$20. The Lyceum. 2:00 pm. 703/838-4994.

August 21

American Indian Festival. Music, dancing, vendors and food. Free admission. Market Square. Noon-6:00 pm. 703/838-4844, 703/883-4686.

August 21

Library Card Protest Commemorative. On August 21, 1939, five young African-American men from Alexandria staged a peaceful protest for library cards in the city's Queen Street (Barrett) Library. Honor the courage of these young men on the 60th anniversary of this protest which led the City to build the Robert Robinson Library for African-American citizens in 1940. Alexandria Black History Resource Center. 2:00 pm. 703/838-4356.

August 24

through September 19

"WIRED" exhibit. Potomac Craftsmen Gallery, Torpedo Factory Art Center. 703/548-0935.

August 29

through September 25

"250 Years of Alexandria Faces: Historic and Contemporary Portraits." Free. The Athenaeum, 201 Prince Street. Wed-Fri, 11:00 am-3:00 pm; Sat, 1:00 pm-3:00 pm; Sun, 1:00 pm-4:00 pm. 703/548-0035.

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