

---

# ***THE ALEXANDRIA CHRONICLE***



*Summer 1998 Vol. VII, No. 2.*

---

## **COLONIAL ALEXANDRIA LEVERS OF POWER**

by

**Effie Crittenden Dunstan**

Alexandria officially became part of the District of Columbia in 1801 after the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1789 had ceded the town and part of Fairfax County to the newly created United States for the capital city. The District of Columbia was created from a ten mile square of Maryland and Virginia bisected by the Potomac River. Alexandria, D.C. remained a part of the District until 1846 when all the Virginia land, including the present Arlington County, was retroceded to Virginia.

Location of the capital this far south was one of the many compromises worked out by the delegates of the thirteen states at the Constitutional Convention.

Among the Virginia delegates were George Mason, George Washington, Light Horse Harry Lee, each of whom owned extensive lands in Fairfax County near Alexandria.

These outstanding statesmen were members of the oligarchy of landowners in Northern Neck of Virginia, the area between the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers. They had been famous in Virginia since early manhood not only from a military point of view but also from a philosophical and governmental one. All three had profoundly influenced the formation of the United States Government. They also had great lands for a capital port city of which Alexandria would be a part.

In 1791, Alexandria was a thriving seaport with an identity of its own. It had been established in 1749 by an Act of the General Assembly entitled, "An Act for erecting a Town at Hunting Creek Warehouse, in the County of Fairfax." The structure referred to was an official warehouse of the Colony where tobacco could be inspected, graded, and stored under cover before it was shipped in hogsheads to England for sale. Tobacco was not only the cash crop of the Colony but it was used as currency. Even taxes were payable in tobacco, thus quality control of this commodity by the Colony was essential.

The Act named eleven outstanding Fairfax County landowners to be trustees-directors of the new town and gave them almost unlimited power. This self-perpetuating board of trustees included Lord Fairfax, Sixth Baron of Cameron, William Fairfax, George William Fairfax, Lawrence Washington, William Ramsay, John Carlyle, Gerard Alexander and Hugh West. There were no elected officials.

The Act further stated that the sixty acres on the banks of the Potomac should be laid out in two acre city blocks with four lots to the block; that the town should be named Alexandria; and that the buyer of a lot should build a dwelling

on it within two years or title to the lot would revert to the trustees.

It was this provision for a dwelling which may have accounted for the many flounder houses in Alexandria. A flounder served two purposes. It was comparatively inexpensive to build because it was a half-gable; it was built far enough back from the front property line to allow a more pretentious addition to be built up to that line when the owner could afford it. The name flounder connotes the supposed familiarity of the house to a flounder fish which is flat on one side and has eyes on the other.

Many of the trustees-directors of Alexandria were also Justices of the Peace of Fairfax County and thus were members of the County Court which met once a month at the county seat. Within three years of its founding, Alexandria became the seat of Fairfax County and gained a new dimension of importance and power. This vast County included the Lord Fairfax Proprietary of over five million acres in the Northern Neck.

Land in the Proprietary could be bought from Lord Fairfax for tobacco or for money, but land held by patent from the Crown could be acquired only by headright, which was the right of any settler to claim fifty acres without payment. There was a lively market in the headrights

of impecunious immigrants who traded them for passage to Virginia, or who sold them after arrival. Real estate taxes on land held from the Crown were paid to the Treasurer of the Colony, but taxes on property bought within the Proprietary were paid to Lord Fairfax who retained them. Taxes were called quitrent.

A patent (deed) from the Crown was not a warranty deed, for it simply transferred whatever interest in the land the Crown held at that time. Because there were many inadvertently overlapping patents and some inaccurate survey lines, there were many lawsuits. In fact, Virginians were known as the most litigious of all the colonists.

Fairfax County Court, the civil authority, was comprised of all the county justices, who were appointed



*Thomas, 6th Lord Fairfax came to America in 1745. He inherited Propriety right over the Northern Neck of Virginia and an estate of 30,000 acres. Portrait by Sir. Joshua Reynolds.*

by the governor for a term. A gentleman justice was a highly respected landowner on whom the governor relied to represent the dignity of the law and to enforce that law. Many of the Fairfax justices had been educated in the tradition of English gentlemen and were therefore well grounded in English history, government and law. They had a practical

knowledge of agriculture and were successful administrators of their extensive plantations. The justices served without salary or fee, for they considered the office an honor as well as a duty. This too was in the English tradition.

A justice acting alone had judicial authority to hear and decide petty criminal and civil cases in an informal court, oftentimes held in his parlor.

Once a month the justices met as the County Court in Alexandria and transacted county business--legislative, executive and judicial. The Court not only imposed county taxes, it collected them and determined how they were spent--on roads, buildings, ferries or other county projects. It enforced the law through the sheriff, a member of the Court, and also sat as a court of judicature except in the most serious cases which were tried by the General Court in Williamsburg.

The County Court was also a court of record for wills, deeds, and other documents. It appointed all officers of the county militia below the rank of brigadier. Many a man was vestryman, justice and an officer in the militia at the same time.

By mid-eighteenth century the Fairfax County Court had become practically self-perpetuating because its recommendations to the governor for appointment of a county justice was tantamount to appointment. The interests of the governor and the county oligarchy usually coincided, for both were founded on land tenure and both desired domestic peace and protection of the western border from the French and Indians. However, the governor and the oligarchy did not always agree by any means.

When the gentlemen justices

met in Alexandria to hold court, there was a festive air in town. Court proceedings were considered drama and attracted a large Court crowd and furnished an acceptable reason for both plantation owners and farmers to go to town and escape the isolation of country living for a day or two. Often whole families would visit relatives or friends close to Alexandria. Hospitality was a way of life and kinfolk visited each other for weeks at a time. Court days were also days of trading or buying crops, animals and above all land. The many taverns in town did a thriving business.

All Fairfax county officials were appointed except the two elected representatives to the House of Burgesses, the lower house of the General Assembly. This lower house together with the upper house, The Governor's Council, constituted the colonial legislature and met in Williamsburg twice a year.

Election was by the county freeholders--free, white males over twenty-one members of the Church of England who had owned for the previous year either one hundred acres of unimproved lands, or fifty acres with a house and some cultivation, or a house and lot in a town. A freeholder, with his ownership of land and his franchise to vote, had a dignity which nothing

else could give him. He was keenly aware that he and his vote mattered in government.

Election day in Alexandria drew freeholders from all over the county and it was an important event. It was also a rowdy time of greeting old friends, talking politics and drinking bumbo usually furnished by the candidates. Bumbo was a rum drink often served from barrels.

The upper house of the colonial legislature, the Council, was a group of twelve outstanding landowners appointed by the Crown to advise the Royal Governor who was appointed by the Crown. The Council and Governor also served as the General Court which had jurisdiction of cases appealed from the county court. Some cases, however, could be appealed to the King in Council in London.

William Fairfax of Belvoir was the outstanding member of the Governor's Council from Fairfax County. He came to Virginia as land agent for his cousin, Lord Fairfax, and lived for a while in Prince William County. He was a man of outstanding ability and great charm. As a delegate from that County he introduced the bill creating Fairfax County. Later he built a handsome Georgian mansion on his Belvoir plantation, the present site of Fort Belvoir. At different times he was a

vestryman of Truro Parish, a Delegate from Fairfax County, a Colonel in the Militia, Collector of Customs for the Lower Potomac, and in his later years he was President of the Governor's Council. Next to the Royal Governor, William Fairfax exercised for a while the greatest and most diverse power in the Colony. When he died in 1757 he was succeeded as land agent for the Proprietary by his son, George William Fairfax, a great friend, contemporary and next door neighbor of George Washington.

As the Church of England was the official church of Virginia, it was an integral part of government. Election to the parish vestry was often the first rung of the ladder to political success.

The parish vestry was charged by law with many welfare duties, among them the care of the poor and orphans. The parish budget, made up by the vestry, was funded as a tax laid equally upon each tithable. A tithable was any male sixteen years of age or over, or any female slave sixteen years of age or over. The parish vestry served every church in the parish. When Fairfax County was created the whole county was in Truro Parish. In some years the Truro Parish budget exceeded the Fairfax County budget, especially if a church as under construction.

Supposedly, a vestryman held office for a specified term, but often he held it as long as he wished. The vestry which met twice a year, was a self-perpetuating body of parish landowners, the squires who constituted the oligarchy.

In mid-eighteen century, Fairfax County was based both economically and socially on the landed gentry, many of whom operated plantations of hundreds of acres which produced almost all the essentials of life. There were also many small farmers who tilled their own lands, however, it was the landed gentry which was responsible for the founding of Alexandria. Three of the town trustees were young Scots who were successful factors or merchants in Dumfries on Quantico Creek a few miles south of Alexandria. They realized their port was silting up so they were instrumental in developing a new port. They were not primarily landowners but were in trade, therefore they did not at first qualify as part of the squirarchy.

These Scots were something new in the Northern Neck and they added a distinct flavor to Alexandria. John Carlyle, who married Sally Fairfax, daughter of William Fairfax, built his handsome home and extensive docks on two choice lots between the county courthouse and the river. William Ramsay built his house and docks next door to

Carlyle. Their friend, John Dalton, built across Cameron Street. Ocean-going vessels came to their docks bringing salt, sugar, rum, seeds, tools, English furniture, silver, cloths, clothing, Spanish wine and other necessities and luxuries. In return the ships took tobacco, wheat, wood, hides and other cargoes. By English law all cargoes were required to be shipped in English vessels to English ports. This seemed grossly unfair to the Alexandrians who did not always adhere strictly to the law.

Local enforcement of the law depended upon local sentiment, and the legal requirement for a county or parish official to be a member of the Church of England was winked at. Other churches were not only tolerated but were erected by the leading citizens of Alexandria. The Old Presbyterian Meeting House was completed soon after the erection of the Lower Church (later called Christ Church) in 1773 which stands at the head of Cameron Street.

There were only ten streets in the original town. The two main streets were named in honor of Lord Fairfax, Baron of Cameron. The streets to the south of Cameron were, and still are, King, Prince, and Duke. The streets to the north are Queen, Princess and Oronoco. There were only three streets running north and south roughly parallel to the river: Water (now

Lee), Fairfax, and Royal. Much of the land east of Lee Street is man-made which accounts for some of the clouded titles to the riverfront property. The boundary of Maryland is the mean high-water mark of the Potomac River on the Virginia shore.

Oronoco Street was supposed to be Duchess Street but an old road there was known as Oronoco, the Indian name for tobacco. The warehouse was at the foot of Oronoco on the river's edge and a rolling road stretched far inland from it. Farmers rolled their great hogsheads of packed tobacco over this road to market.

Farmers in the back country were often harassed by Indians aided at times by the French who were attempting to move down the Ohio River and occupy Virginia lands. This was a threat not only to the Colony, but to the Ohio Company, a stock company of twenty shares organized to develop thousands of company owned acres west of the mountains. All shares were closely held by the oligarchy. George Mason was treasurer for many years.

A dream of these men was to organize another company to build a canal from Alexandria to the Ohio River and connect Alexandria to that river as well as to the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Thus cargoes

from hundreds of miles inland could be shipped via this water route to make Alexandria the greatest seaport in all the colonies. This tremendous undertaking caught the imagination of wealthy, adventurous men who knew of the great commercial benefits England was creating by opening up the Midlands with canals.

The canal company was not organized until after the Revolutionary War but plans for it were a very real part of the thinking of many Colonial Virginians.

Protection of the western lands was essential to all the colonies but none of them had sufficient militia to act alone. Virginia petitioned the Crown for troops and was refused. In 1755 Governor Dinwiddie invited the Governors of Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts to a conference at Mr. Carlyle's home in Alexandria. All of them accepted and met with General Braddock of His Majesty's Army to plan a way to finance such an expedition against the French and Indians. This was the first meeting of colonial governors to discuss a mutual problem and they agreed that each colony should tax itself and furnish paid militia; however, when each governor returned home and asked his legislature to impose the taxes, each legislature refused.

Taxes similar to those proposed were soon levied by Parliament and fueled resentment in all the colonies. Virginia maintained that only her own Assembly had the right to impose internal taxes.

The men of Alexandria and Fairfax County who had pushed back the wilderness and had created a civilization based on slave labor and tobacco were a proud oligarchy and they did not intend to be governed by a Parliament which in their opinion was without legal authority. Most Virginians were loyal to the Crown but not to Parliament or to the King's Councilors.

For several years Virginians had been protesting the Townshend Acts but had received no redress. Fairfax County, along with many other counties, organized a Nonimportation Association and was prepared for a great loss of trade.

Finally in 1773 when George III signed the Boston Port Act, Alexandrians realized the King, himself, was against them and that he could just as easily close their port. Mason drew up the famous Fairfax Resolves which state clearly Virginia's grievances and then declare: "...our Desire to continue our Dependence upon Great Britain; and most humbly conjuring and beseeching his Majesty, not to reduce his faithful Subjects of

America to a State of desperation, and to reflect, that from our Sovereign there can be but one appeal."

The Resolves were passed in Alexandria, "At a general Meeting of the Freeholders and Inhabitants of the County of Fairfax on Monday the 18th day of July 1774 at the Court House, George Washington, Esquire Chairman..."

George Washington and Charles Broadwater took the Resolves to the Convention at Williamsburg where the document served as the model for the Virginia Association of 1774. Later that year it served as one of the models for the Continental Association approved by Congress October 20, 1774. In less than two years the colonies signed the Declaration of Independence.

[Effie Crittenden Dunstan is a native of Montgomery Alabama, where she served as Assistant Attorney General. Active and instrumental in the preservation and restoration of "Old Alexandria," she is one of the founders of the Alexandria Historical Society.

[This article originally appeared in the Twentieth Annual Washington Antiques Show Catalogue of 1975.]

## Vignettes from the Pages of the Alexandria Gazette

compiled by T. Michael Miller

**COCK FIGHTS AT THE CANAL** -- A number of cock fights took place at a temporary ring established beyond the Canal yesterday. The sports were mostly canal boatmen and the fights resulted in the killing of two of the birds. [AG: 5/9/1872]

**A ROYAL BULL FIGHT**--Arrangement are being made for a grand bull fight to come off at the West End at an early date. Two young and vigorous animals are to be procured for the purpose and are to be infuriated by the sight and smell of blood from a slaughter house. [AG: 8/24/1872]

**BRASS BAND** -- King Street was enlivened this morning for several hours by a strolling brass band which wandered up and down it, a blowing of their clarionets, and a tooting of their horns. [AG: 11/22/1872]

**PORTNER'S BREWERY** -- A magnificent four horse wagon for Portner's brewery, one of the handsomest vehicles of the kind ever seen was received here this morning. [AG: 3/31/1873] [Portner's Brewery was situated on the S.W. corner of N. St. Asaph and Wythe Streets]

A horse belonging to Portner's brewery ran away while going down the grade on King Street between Fairfax and Lee Streets this morning

and would have plunged into the dock at the foot of that street had not the driver Henry Kleindenst pulled him around so suddenly opposite Schneider's restaurant as to throw him. The driver fell off the wagon at the same time and the wagon was upset and the beer casks it contained were scattered about promiscuously. The wagon being new and strong was not injured and fortunately neither the horse nor driver was badly hurt. [AG: 8/1/1874]

The artesian well at the Portner Brewery has been sunk to a depth of 330 ft. and a vein of excellent water was struck which has risen to within 35 or 40 ft. of the surface. The well is six inches in circumference and the supply of water seems to be inexhaustible, as a pump that was put to work in it failed to reduce the quantity. [AG: 9/30/1886]

**STINK AT PETERSBURG** -- The pig sties in the locality known as Petersburg [now the "Berg"] when the wind blows from the north give rise to many complaints from persons living south of that neighborhood. [AG: 7/23/1874] [This area was settled by former slaves from Petersburg, Virginia during the Civil War]

**DISGRACEFUL** --Great complaint is made of the conduct of some young men who congregate in front of the Methodist Protestant Church every night and amuse themselves by disarranging and cutting the harnesses of horses left standing there by persons from the country who are in attendance on the revival services. [The Methodist

Protestant Church was formerly located on the west side of the 100 block of North Washington Street where the Ross Department Store is now situated. [AG: 10/4/1877]

**CONCORDIA SUMMER GARDEN**--The Concordia Summer Garden [S.E. corner of Prince & Royal Street] was opened to the public last night in grand style. The garden was brilliantly illuminated and a large crowd was present. There was a grand display of fireworks and some good music by Weber's band of Washington. The occasion was a most enjoyable one. [AG: 5/10/1881]

**OLD WATCH BOX**-- The old watch box, the last of its kind which for so long a time has stood at the S.E. corner of Fairfax and Wolfe Street has been removed to make room for a new fence which is being put up there... [AG: 7/10/1885]

**HEN HOUSE ROBBED** -- The hen house of Mr. Miles Murphy on upper Prince Street was robbed last night of 16 chickens. The thief wrung the heads of the fowls off and left them scattered over the floor of the house. The loss is severely felt by Mr. Murphy, and he has applied for blood hounds to track the thief. [AG: 4/6/1886]

**GRAVES FOUND** -- While workmen were engaged this morning in digging in the yard of the house occupied by Mrs. Richard Purcell [at 814 Prince St.], they unearthed what is supposed to have been an old vault which contained some bones and pieces of wood. [AG: 4/14/1886]

**TARGET PRACTICE** -- From the trunk of an old tree which was cut down on Mr. D.S. Watkins farm Strawberry Hill in Fairfax County near this city on Friday last, about a peck of bullets was secured. The tree during the war was used by a regiment of federal soldiers as a target. [AG: 4/19/1886] [Strawberry Hill was formerly the country house of Quaker William Hartshorne. It was situated on the south side of Duke near Wheeler Ave.]

#### **ALEXANDRIA ROCKED BY AN EARTHQUAKE on August 31, 1886--**

"...The vibrations were from southwest to northeast, ...awakening many who were asleep, and causing general alarm and consternation. The severest shock caused houses to rock, furniture to visibly move, pictures pendant on the walls to swing, ornaments on mantels, shelves to topple, clocks to stop and people to experience a feeling of nausea. In some instances men, women and children rushed from their houses in their night clothes, and in a few moments the streets were alive with persons eagerly discussing the unusual phenomenon. The chandeliers in some houses swung so as to describe an arc of six or eight inches, while chairs on rockers tilted in a direction opposite that of the direction motion, lamp chimneys shook violently and the oil in the bowls tossed about as water when shaken; the bell of the town clock struck once; a lady sitting in front of her door on Pitt Street fainted from fear and nausea, while a gentleman who tried to assist her could scarcely keep his feet on account of the vibration. The shocks were from

ten to forty seconds in duration...Some failed to realize what was going on until the danger was over. [AG: 8/31/1886]

**SPRINGTIME IN ALEXANDRIA** -- The Washington Republican says: "That historic old town Alexandria is just now a picture of springtime beauty. Washington Street is a veritable bower of beauty. Nearly two miles long and quite 100 feet wide, with pretty, clean brick residences, many of them of colonial type, on either side, yards of the greenest grass and rows of maple, elm and sycamore up and down their branches almost meeting in the middle arch like, it reminds one of some great cathedral." [AG: 5/3/1888]

**OLD HOUSE DISCOVERED** -- In digging the cellar for Mr. J.T. Johnson's new dwelling at 509 Duke Street, builder Stoutenburg found a few feet below the street level, part of an old brick house of which no person can give an account. It was built evidently before the St. Asaph Street hill was cut down and graded and certainly antedates the Revolutionary War. [AG: 5/9/1893]

**AN OLD LANDMARK GONE** -- The old toll house of the Little River Turnpike situated on the West End Road [Duke St.] at the junction of the pike with the Telegraph road has been torn down. This old landmark has been familiar to people of several generations. It was located about a mile from the city limits. [AG: 5/23/1901]

**HORSES DROWNED.**--This morning [November 17, 1886] while the wagon belonging to the Robert Portner Brewing Company, drawn by two horses was on Captain P.B. Hooe's wharf, foot of Prince Street, taking on empty kegs left there by the Norfolk boat, the steamer W.W. Corcoran touched at the dock to take on passengers for Mt. Vernon. The commotion made by the steamer coming to the wharf, especially the blasts from the steam whistle, frightened the horses, which began to back the wagon to which they were attached, toward the south end of the pier. The driver, Mr. Henry Allen, grasped the bridles and endeavored in every manner to quiet the frantic animals, but to no purpose, and the horses eventually backed the wagon and themselves into the river. The wagon, having been manufactured especially for the purpose of transporting beer kegs, is composed largely of iron, and its heavy weight caused it to sink, carrying the horses attached down with it. The water in the dock at the time was between twenty-five and thirty feet deep, and though every effort was made to save the beasts before they were drowned before they could be cut loose from the vehicle.

...The wagon and dead animals were taken from the water in the afternoon. The horses were valued at \$500. [AG: 11/17/1886]

## **Businesses of Yesteryear:**

### **The Potomac Manufacturing Company and Virginia Iron Ship Building Company**

In the 1880s, successful coal merchant John P. Agnew commenced the manufacture of boiler plate iron to support his shipyard situated near the foot of Wilkes Street. Supervised by Boston, Massachusetts mariners G.C. Goss and Capt. J.B. Archer, "the Potomac Manufacturing Co. commenced operations at their works in Alexandria at the foot of Wolfe Street in the spring of 1881, putting in Vapor Fuel Furnaces, for the manufacture of iron blooms. [a mass of malleable iron from which the slag has been forced by hammer or roller] One of these furnaces was completed during this year and the manufacture of blooms was commenced."

In 1881, the company purchased the old Pioneer flour mill near the foot of Duke Street and immediately began to repair its 2,000 broken panes of glass.

"During the year 1882 two more furnaces were put in, and improvements and alterations were made. Two hundred and

seventy-five tons of iron were made to the value of \$12,000. Mr. Archer claims that over \$30,000 was expended on the works.

In June or July of 1882, G.C. Goss, a New England shipbuilder, and sawyer turned over to the Potomac Manufacturing Company a contract to build a three-masted schooner for Capt. A.A. Duncan and others. This schooner was completed in December at a cost of over \$40,000 and employing from fifty to seventy-five men during her construction.

The wharves around Pioneer Mills [located south of the end of Duke Street] were rebuilt, bulkhead put in and filled in with earth at a cost of some \$5,000.

A shipyard was fitted up, blocks laid, launching ways put in, derrick, steam box, stage poles, brow stage built, block screws, saws, trenail machines, planer, engines and other yard tools and a building put up; all of which cost \$5,000.

In the spring of 1883 a schooner was started for Capt. Anderson and others, and completed in September,

employing some fifty men and costing \$30,000. During this time a syndicate was formed and purchased the plant of the Potomac Manufacturing Company for \$30,000 and the Virginia Iron Shipbuilding Company was organized. Two of the directors went to England and visited the Iron Shipbuilding yards there and on the Clyde, ascertaining the cost of tools and machinery required for iron shipbuilding. Some wealthy capitalists had taken stock in the V.I.S.B. Co. and it was expected that the company would put in a rolling mill and a plant for building iron ships. In the winter of 1883 and 1884 the engines were taken from the Pioneer Mills (it having been ascertained that they were not suitable for the present mode of making flour or suitable for an elevator which the company had hoped to put in) and taken over to the iron works, and granite blocks were put in for the foundation of the engines and rolling mill. The east wall of the iron mill was removed and put up 85 feet towards the river and walls started and partly completed. Before this time freights began to decline and finally reached a point so low that there was no demand for sailing vessels for the foreign carrying trade. Iron mills were

closing up all over the country and there were many failures among iron manufactures; there was no demand for iron at a price that would pay for making it.

This continued through the summer of 1884 and in November it was thought advisable by the directors of the company to suspend operations until there was a revival in business and the force that had been employed at the company's works was discharged and only two men were maintained.

In 1885 and 1886 a steam dredge was built at the works, at a cost of some \$30,000, and some thirty men were employed from July, 1885 to April, 1886.

This dredge would not have been built here if the ship yard had not been fitted with launching ways and machinery.

In March, 1886, the iron works were leased to H.H. Hains for making charcoal iron blooms, which there was a small demand, with the expectation that it would lead to other and larger operations paving the way for putting in gin rolls. The lease with Hains having been cancelled by mutual consent, the mills was leased to

O.H. Ford. Some 150 tons of blooms have been manufactured, valued at \$5,000, and it is expected that the force will be increased. The other improvements made on the works amount to some \$5,000 and the amount expended and values produced amount to \$212,000.

It has been the hope and expectation that the shipbuilding interests would revive so that it could induce capitalists to invest in this plant here in Alexandria, and it has been our earnest endeavor to keep the property clear from attachments and to avoid litigation which would deter capitalists from investing here in an enterprise which I have faith to believe will yet revive, and when it does we would like to be in a condition to improve it."

In 1887, the Arrow Ship Company purchased the old Agnew Shipyard at the foot of Wilkes Steet and soon commenced the construction of iron ships.

"Report to the City Finance Committee in reference to collecting taxes on the property of the Potomac Iron Shipbuilding Company." [AG: 12/6/1886]

## **Alexandria, Virginia-- Gateway on the George Washington Memorial Parkway--**

by

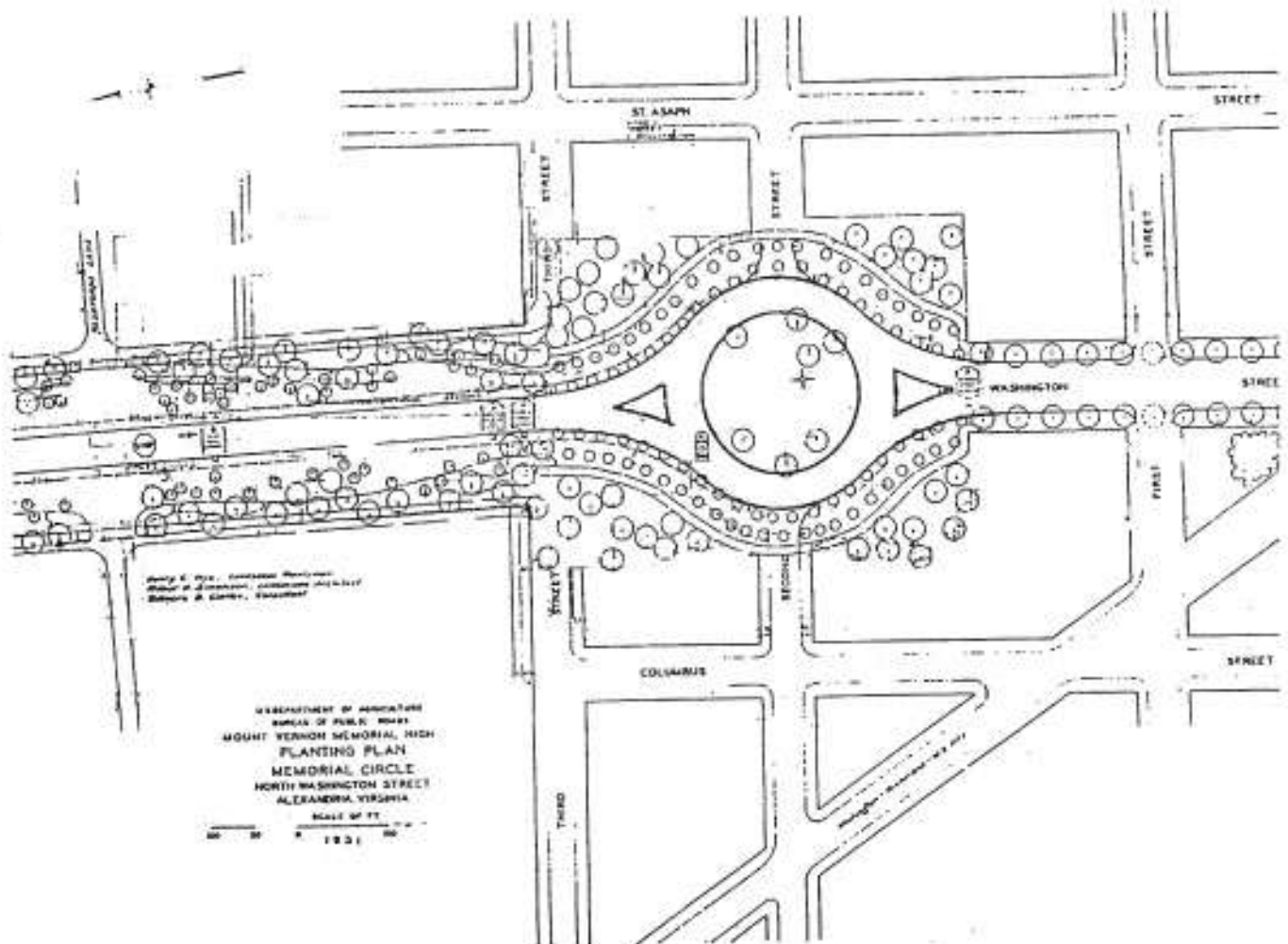
Al Cox, AIA; Ron M.  
Kagawa, ASLA; Peter H.  
Smith, Ph.D. --  
Department of Planning  
and Zoning

As early as the 1880s, proposals were made to build a memorial roadway from Washington to Mount Vernon which was a national shrine. These efforts were endorsed by the Senate Park (McMillan) Commission in 1901 and culminated in the plans to construct the George Washington Memorial Parkway in the late 1920s to commemorate the bicentennial of the birth of George Washington. Construction was begun in 1929 and the first section, from the Arlington Memorial Bridge to Mount Vernon, was completed and dedicated in 1932. The Parkway was innovative in a number of respects and provided a chance for the Federal government,

through the Bureau of Public Roads, to demonstrate the principles of modern highway design. For example, it included limited access construction;

surrounding countryside to emphasize vistas and make driving appealing.<sup>1</sup>

In the years leading up to



*Original 1931 plan for the Memorial Circle on the George Washington Memorial Parkway*

overpasses to eliminate congestion; broad, tree lined rights-of-way; and full integration between the roadway and the

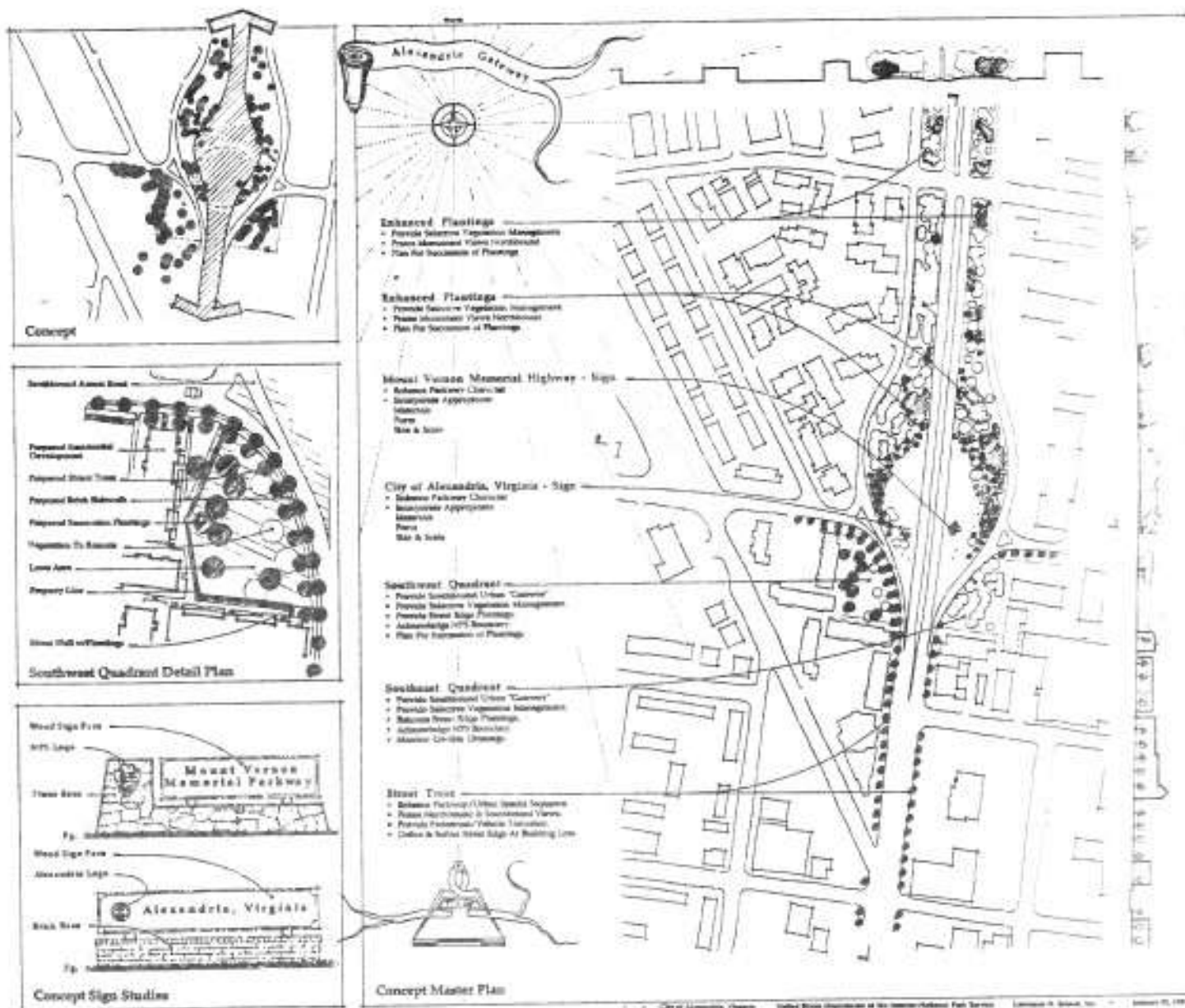
construction of the Parkway a number of alternative routes were considered. The City of Alexandria strongly desired that

the Parkway be routed through the City along Washington Street because it perceived that there would be substantial economic benefits accruing to the City as a result. For example, in 1929 the Alexandria Gazette reported the routing directly along Washington Street "will mean that the vast majority of the visitors en route to Mount Vernon traveling over the boulevard will stop over in Alexandria and visit the points of historical interest."<sup>2</sup> A number of people expected that one of the principal sources of income to be derived from the Memorial Parkway would be from tea rooms which would be established to feed the "countless thousands" who would visit Alexandria's historic "shrines" as part of their pilgrimage to Mount Vernon.<sup>3</sup>

So anxious had been the City government to ensure that the Parkway would be routed along Washington Street that the City Council passed a resolution in May of 1929 that they would refuse to consider any applications for new gasoline service stations along Washington Street until the agreement with the Federal government had been completed.<sup>4</sup> In return for agreeing to such a routing, the

Federal government required the City to take certain zoning measures and to control signs along Washington Street in order to maintain the memorial character of the Parkway.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the Parkway capitalized on the City's real associations with George Washington and the Washington Street route for the Parkway passed alongside buildings that Washington had actually known, such as Christ Church. Thus, the Parkway captured a sense of "instant history" by choosing the Washington Street alignment.<sup>6</sup>

As originally conceived, the two entrances to Old Town at Second Street on the north and at Hunting Creek on the south were to be marked with rotaries symbolizing the transition from the pastoral stretches of the Parkway into the urban atmosphere of Alexandria. Of these two circles, only one, at the north end of Old Town, was actually constructed. The siting of this circle was designed to shift the axis of the roadway to permit a vista directly north to the Washington Monument in the District of Columbia, thus further tying the Parkway to George Washington.



**1995 Master Plan for the replanting of the Memorial Circle approved by City Council and the National Park Service**

As originally conceived, the circle was 250 feet wide and the plantings within and around the circle were the most formally arranged of any along the Parkway and were specifically designed with a memorial character. In the center, seven Elm (*Ulmus Americana Sp.*) trees were planted to represent the seven Virginians who became U.S. President. Around the edges, Linden (*Tilia Sp.*) trees were planted to represent Alexandrians who had died in World War I. When the circle was eliminated, the memorial nature of the circle was lost as well as the sense of transition from a planned Parkway to the urban street grid of Alexandria. While the dramatic vista of the distant Washington Monument remains intact, the travelway configuration has been modified to accommodate a greater volume of traffic. As early as 1953 there were calls to eliminate the circle as a traffic safety hazard. However, it was not until 1962 that this proposal was realized and the circle removed and replaced by cutting Washington Street through in a straight line to accommodate increased traffic demands.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the roadways of the 1931 traffic circle are a largely vanished feature. However, the general topography, spatial sequence and fragments of the former plantings remain intact. Most notably, the grade and elevation of the traffic circle remains and is reinforced by surviving Linden (*Tilia Sp.*) trees in the southeast and southwest quadrants, as well as Zelkova (*Zelkova serrata Sp.*) trees, believed to have been planted as Dutch Elm disease resistant replacements for the original American Elm (*Ulmus americana Sp.*) trees. Although substantially fragmented when compared to the original 1931 plan, current topographic features and vegetation patterns, collectively retain some semblance of the Parkway's spatial integrity and overall character.

In 1996, the City of Alexandria undertook a planning effort designed to re-establish the ceremonial gateway into the City of Alexandria from the George Washington Memorial Parkway. The project was initiated by staff of the City of Alexandria Department of Planning and Zoning when the developer of the parcel adjacent to the southwest quadrant of the site, Lawrence N.

Brandt, Inc., offered to improve the condition of the existing plantings and to install street trees and sidewalks in the public space adjacent to a residential development project. City staff collaborated with the National Park Service to investigate the history, relative current conditions and possible future stewardship strategies for the site. City staff suggested a landscape architectural alternative which recalls the form and spirit of the historic memorial traffic circle by using materials sensitive to the original 1931 Parkway plan -- without revising current road conditions. Specific component recommendations are addressed on the concept master plan drawing.

This master plan, prepared by city staff, was approved by the developer, the National Park Service, the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review and City Council. The approved plan has been adopted as an amendment to the National Register of Historic Places listing of the Memorial Parkway and has been deposited in the National Archives. Although initial steps toward implementation were begun in 1997, the project

remains unfunded and completion is dependant on contributions from the public and adjoining property owners.

#### Endnotes:

1. Barry Mackintosh, Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, June 1980 and, Historic America Building Survey, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Highways in Harmony, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Virginia, Maryland, Washington, D.C., c. 1994.
2. "River Route is Favored for Mount Vernon Boulevard," Alexandria Gazette, January 22, 1929, p. 1. Hereafter, AG.
3. "Citizens Give Views on Zoning Ordinance," AG, June 23, 1931, p. 1. The article quoted V. Ward Boswell as saying: If Alexandria is to be benefitted next year from the countless thousands coming here it must be through tea houses and places of like character on Washington Street. The people of Alexandria, he declared, cannot live on simply seeing visitors going through. Tea rooms were a popular phenomenon of the first three decades of the 20th century. They were part-home, part-business that were operated by women and provided a very real alternative to eating in ~~restaurants~~ and bars. On the tea room phenomenon, see, Cynthia A. Brandimarte, "To Make the Whole World Homelike, Gender, Space, and America a Tea Room Movement," Winterthur Portfolio, v. 30, No. 1, Spring 1995, pp. 1-19.
4. "Halt Any More Gas Filling Stations on Washington Street," AG, May 17, 1929,

p. 1.

5. Memorandum of Agreement between the City Council of the City of Alexandria and the United States of America, represented by the Secretary of Agriculture, dated June 20, 1929.

6. See, EDAW, Inc., Cultural Landscape Report, Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, v.2, pp. 97-100.

7 Robert E.L. Baker, "Proposal to Eliminate Circle Protested." Washington Post, 12/21/1953. Actually eight not seven Virginians became U.S. Presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, Madison, Harrison, Tyler, Taylor and Wilson. "Look Quick! Soon No Circle!," AG, 1/3/1962, p. 1.

---

Editor: T. Michael Miller

Editorial Committee:

Marilyn W. Burke  
James H. Johnson

---

Copyright 1998 -- All Rights  
Reserved --Alexandria Historical  
Society

Published through the  
support of the J. Patten Abshire  
Memorial Fund



ALEXANDRIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.  
201 SOUTH WASHINGTON STREET  
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA 22314

NON-PROFIT ORIG U S POSTAGE PAID Alexandria, Va Permit No. 622
--