

Early Roads in Arlington County

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Transportation has changed greatly within this century; this change has influenced Arlington County more than is generally realized. In the early days, travel to a large extent was by water. Ports on our rivers became important centers. Alexandria and Georgetown became ports on the Potomac River and were the central points of interest in this area. It was natural that an early overland trail would be developed between these two ports or towns. The Old Georgetown Road is noted in many early deeds. It was in the Arlington Ridge Road area north of Shirley Highway, and along Army Navy Drive and South Nash Street, south of Shirley Highway.

Apparently many of the roads followed trails that had previously existed and did not have legally established rights of way. Georgetown Road demonstrated this. It had been in existence many years before the right of way was condemned in 1809 through the Custis property (Arlington Estate). On a map of 1743 it was labeled "back road Long Branch" and referred to as "the road to the ferry"—a ferry which ran from present-day Rosslyn to the mouth of Rock Creek in the District of Columbia.

People travelled over trails that in many cases were established by Indians. We know that many Indians travelled to the Little Falls on the Potomac to fish, and what is now the site of the Chain Bridge was an early crossing point. No doubt the roads in this area were along routes followed by the Indians. What is now known as Little Falls Road was one such, developed as a "rolling road" over which tobacco traveled to Thomas Lee's warehouse at the mouth of Pimmit Run.

The existence of many of the "unofficial" roads is demonstrated on the Civil War maps. Map makers apparently were interested in showing any roadway suitable for military use. These continued to be used until subdivisions were created that caused them to be closed.

Some of the early efforts to construct highways were in the form of creating turn-pikes or toll-roads. Two of these that date back to the early 1800's are the Washington-Alexandria Turnpike (U.S. Route 1) for which deeds for right of way were obtained in 1808, and the Columbian Turnpike, chartered in 1808.

Of historic interest is the Georgetown-Alexandria Canal. This canal crossed the Potomac River at Georgetown on the Aqueduct Bridge to Rosslyn and was close to the river southward to the Pentagon. It paralleled

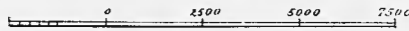
*Based on a speech given before the Arlington Historical Society, January 10, 1969.

MAP showing proximity of CARLIN SPRINGS to

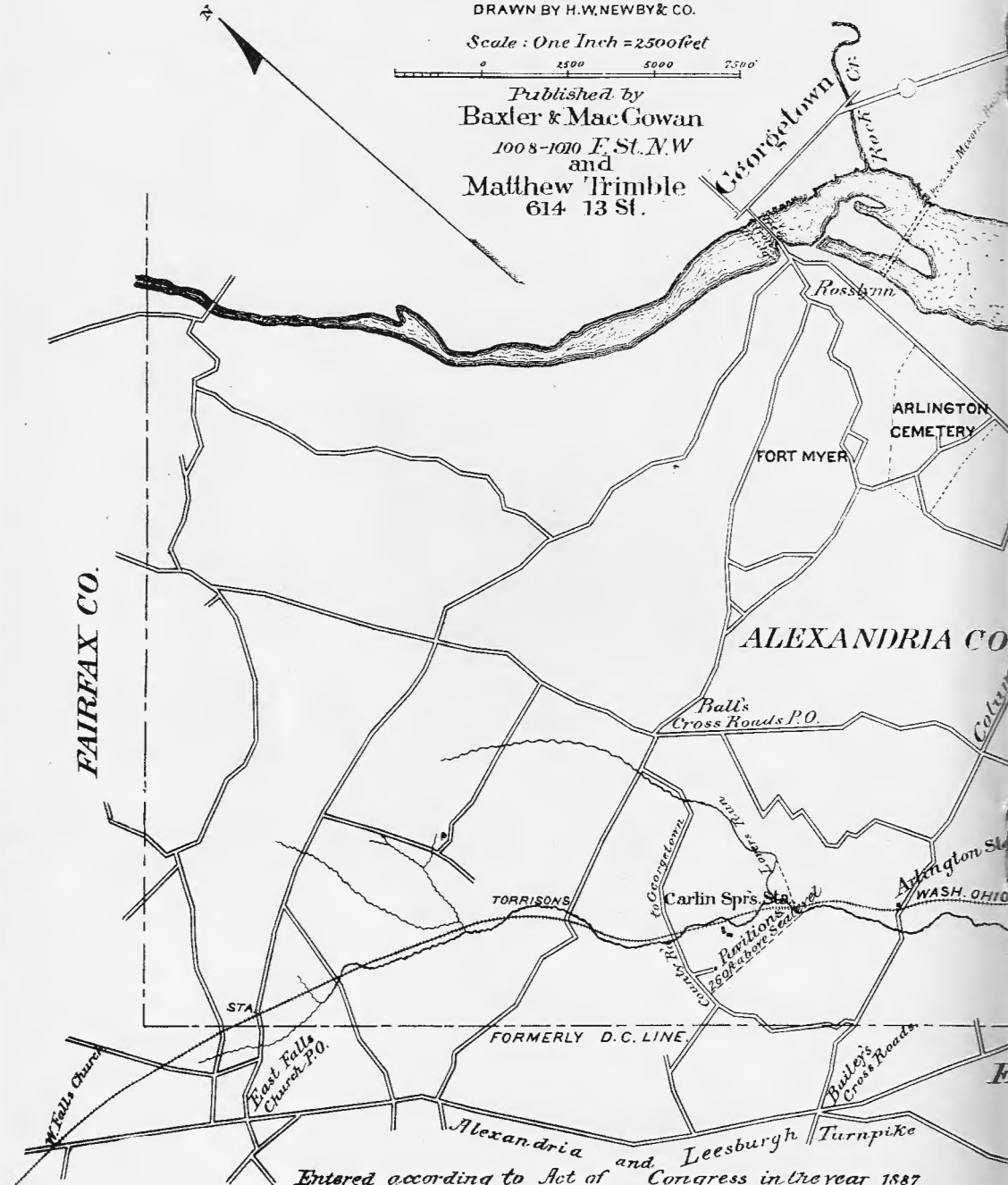
Washington and Alexandria

DRAWN BY H.W. NEWBY & CO.

Scale: One Inch = 2500 feet



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Washington

Potomac River

Alexandria

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the present South Eads Street from the Pentagon to Four Mile Run and thence southward into Alexandria.¹

It has been said that the coming of the electric railroads, or trolleys as they were called, was of great importance in the early development of Arlington County. The earliest of these were from Rosslyn through Fort Myer and along South Walter Reed Drive into Nauck; a second ran from Rosslyn through Clarendon and Ballston to East Falls Church. A third line from Rosslyn was along North Arlington Ridge Road to the south end of Arlington Cemetery and thence across Columbia Pike to Arlington Junction near 11th Street, South and South Eads Street where it joined a line from Washington to Alexandria. This third line from Rosslyn did not last long and a new line was constructed west of the Cemetery through Fort Myer to Clarendon where it joined the one from Rosslyn. Soon thereafter, another line was constructed from Rosslyn through Cherrydale to Great Falls with a connection across the Aqueduct Bridge to Georgetown. These trolleys were constructed in the 1890's and early 1900's. With the advent of these lines, people could go back and forth to the District of Columbia for employment. Consequently, most of our older homes are found near where the old trolley lines were. Subdivisions were made along the trolley lines and between 1890 and 1930, such areas such as Clarendon, Ballston, Fort Myer Heights, Lyon Park, Fostoria, Cherrydale, Livingston Heights, and others were completely subdivided. Other areas not accessible to the trolleys were largely unchanged. By 1935, the trolley could not compete with the automobile and busses which offered far more freedom of movement. These rail lines disappeared and most of the rights of way became highways. Old Dominion Drive, Fairfax Drive, North Lynn Street, South Eads Street, and parts of Walter Reed Drive and Washington Boulevard are examples.

In the 1870's, the County organized into road maintenance districts. Apparently the pedestrian's lot was an unpleasant one at that time. Concern was expressed because there were no suitable means of crossing streams as most roadways crossed streams at fords.

Oyster shells, cinders, crushed stone, gravel in fact, almost any materials that would reduce the muddy condition of the roads were used to help travel. Looking at the roads of Arlington today it is hard for those new to the area to realize that as late as 1930, only thirty-four miles of the County road system were paved. From 1930 to 1935, approximately ninety miles received new pavements for the first time.

¹ cf. Maxine Goff Morgan: "A Chronological History of the Alexandria Canal," in *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 and 2 (1965 and 1966).



Aerial photo of National Airport area looking west. Mt. Vernon Boulevard crosses laterally in foreground, Jefferson Davis Highway in center. Old road from Abingdon estate farm crosses vertically. A small section of present Glebe Road shows left of center rear. [About 1937.]

In 1935, the County maps show that the western part of the County, the area west of Four Mile Run from Falls Church to Alexandria, had just one subdivision—Glencarlyn—and little of the northern part of the County was touched by development. As the automobile came into more general use, as roads improved and with the growth of the sewer-water system, the population grew more rapidly, resulting in the development of the entire County. It also resulted in higher density with the construction of garden apartments. Colonial Village was started in 1934. It was the first garden apartment project in the County as well as being one of the first of its kind in the Nation.

Some of our roads and streets have changed their names and old trails have become busy streets. Wilson Boulevard had several names, such as Road to Balls Cross Roads and Georgetown-Falls Church Road. Sixteenth Street, North and North Lexington Street were the Mt. Olivet Road; Jefferson Davis Highway (U.S. 1) was the Washington-Alexandria Turnpike or the River Road, and Pershing Drive was Cathcart Road. Incidentally, many errors can be found in the old maps. Names were badly misspelled and a large part of Carlin Springs Road was shown in Fairfax and the County line was not in its proper relationship in one area.

When the early subdivisions were developed there was little or no county control over these. True to the spirit of individualism, each subdivision

named its own streets. There were many Lee, Oak, Washington, Arlington and other similar names. Imagine the confusion to outsiders, the delivery services, and even the emergency services.

In the early 1930's, a committee was appointed to examine the problem of street names and to determine a proper system of names. This committee worked out what was basically the grid system. Streets which ran north and south were to be alphabetical, while the east-west streets were to be numbered. Lee Boulevard, now Arlington Boulevard, was designated as the dividing line between north and south. Some main arteries and streets that did not fit the system were given names not in the grid system. These were given designations such as boulevards, drives, highways, etc.²

At this time, Arlington Boulevard (known as Lee Boulevard) had been constructed from Falls Church to Fillmore Street at a point known as Station 107. It was delayed over route location east of that point. Its connection to the District of Columbia was not completed until 1937. It is unusual that a boulevard planned in the 1920's would have a right of way of 200 feet. This far-sighted goal was a most unique situation.

In 1938, Arlington began a more formal planning of its thoroughfares, and in 1941 the first *Thoroughfare Plan* was adopted by the Planning Commission. This plan showed many of our major thoroughfares for the first time, including Shirley Highway to Route 1 at Woodbridge. Many roads coming into being now, date from the 1941 plan.

Arlington County is now faced with many problems in relation to the proposed major transit lines. Arlington opposed the initial plan for a transit line in Route 66 from Rosslyn to Glebe Road area as it would not pass through our proposed high density areas. Later, the County was successful in having this line planned in the Wilson Boulevard Corridor. It is planned to enter the median of Route 66 west of Glebe Road, near Stonewall Jackson School. This meets with the County's planning objectives. New major highways and rapid transit lines provide an opportunity to create new high density developments to serve the community.

² cf. C. L. Kinnier: "The Renaming of Arlington Streets," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1959).