

A SURVEY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA, 1940-1965

by

Ann Deines

At the eve of World War II, Arlington County, Virginia, was a small community adjacent to the nation's capital that functioned as a town exclusive from the city. In 1940 the county experienced a large population growth and influx of federal government operations that would rank the county as the fastest growing in the nation for the next decade. In dealing with this rapid growth, Arlington County transformed its small town image and adjusted to the many alterations. Zoning ordinances were modified to include many apartment areas; roads were upgraded; and schools reorganized to accommodate the rapidly growing student population. Instead of being thought of as an isolated community, Arlington County was now considered a "bedroom community" of Washington, D.C.

Following World War II, Arlington County continued its search for new ways to provide public services as the population continued to increase. In the 1960s, Arlington County focused on recruiting businesses to the area to increase the county's tax base, for since World War II the county had been almost exclusively dependent upon the federal government for revenue. In the years between 1940 and 1965, Arlington County developed from a small community located near Washington to a fully developed county that interacted with the federal government as well as supporting its own businesses.

As a result of the federal government's expansion during World War II, many federal buildings were built in Arlington County. By 1959 the federal government used 2,912 acres or almost eighteen percent of Arlington County.¹ This acreage included sites existing in Arlington prior to World War II such as Ft. Myer; sites under construction, most notably Washington National Airport located along the Potomac River at Gravelly Point; and sites obtained during and after the war. The largest acquisition during World War II in Arlington County was by the War Department in the fall of 1941 for an office building. The resulting structure, the Pentagon, was the largest office building in the United States at the time of its construction and a major stimulus in increasing the population of Arlington. The Navy Annex and Arlington Hall also were used for military services. By 1960 the private sector developed 800,000 square feet of office and commercial space while the federal government built over 8,000,000

square feet.² The majority of the population that moved to Arlington either worked at the sites located in the county or worked in Washington for the federal government making Arlington a “bedroom community.”

The rapid growth precipitated by World War II was most apparent in the population statistics. Doubling in four years, the population grew from 57,000 people in 1940 to 120,000 people in 1944.³ This influx affected every aspect of the community. First and foremost was the availability of housing. On March 30, 1940, the County Board instructed the County Manager, Frank C. Hanrahan, to “investigate the character and quantity ratio of large scale housing projects in the county or contemplated and their effect on other kinds of home development and property values in Arlington.” The preliminary report, submitted in September, found that Colonial Village had 974 apartments; Arlington Village, 655; Buckingham, 1,014; and Westover, 152. While this was an adequate number of apartments for a population of 57,000, by 1941, at the beginning of the population explosion, severe housing shortages were experienced.⁴ A 1942 survey of housing resources identified 3,700 rooms available in which 3,100 applicants had been placed, but over 4,300 families applied for 650 housing units. This shortage worsened as the war progressed and the population increased. In response, in 1942, Frank C. Hanrahan, now the County Defense Director, created a war housing advisory committee to assist in securing houses for war workers, especially single women employed at Arlington Hall.⁵

The federal government provided some relief in alleviating the housing shortage. The Federal Housing Administration assisted in constructing the Arna Valley garden apartments located in south Arlington in 1941. The U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency of the Public Housing Administration built additional projects in 1943.⁶ The largest project undertaken by the federal government was Fairlington Village. Reported in the *Northern Virginia Sun* on December 12, 1941, as “cheap federal housing projects which will total 4,200 family units,” the acquisition of the Fairlington property was officially announced on February 5, 1942. Originally referred to as Seminary Heights, Fairlington was located in both Arlington and Fairfax counties. By May 15, 1943, the first three hundred families moved into Fairlington. Architect Kenneth Franzheim designed the units to avoid the vapidness of parallel rows by grouping the townhouses along courts or in clusters.⁷ All of these government financed projects were multi-family housing projects due to the severe shortage of housing. The multiple units provided more housing space as well as taking less time to construct.

In addition to federally supported projects, many privately constructed buildings were erected during the war years. The amount of construction reached

record levels almost every year of the decade. Due to the priority restrictions placed on building materials by the War Production Board and also the general lack of availability of materials, the increase in construction throughout Arlington was even more noteworthy than the figures indicated in the table.

Total Building in Arlington County	
Year	\$ Amount
1932	1,065,118
1933	704,258
1934	1,154,451
1935	6,121,228
1936	5,052,981
1937	6,752,345
1938	10,077,882
1939	12,004,150
1940	12,839,105
1941	15,944,763
1942	16,742,787
1943	12,393,441
1944	4,158,041
1945	*
1946	*
1947	23,622,000
1948	20,745,000
1949	26,802,312
1950	28,583,350 **
* Figures not available	
** Estimated	

At the close of 1940, building construction figures were setting records for the erection of homes, apartments, and businesses, totalling \$12,839,105. The first eleven months of the year included 1,585 permits issued for the construction of houses and 58 for business buildings. Three-fourths of the total construction in 1942, which was five percent greater than 1941, consisted of apartments. Four hundred seventy-nine buildings with 3,488 units were authorized, mostly located in Fairlington. The construction of the apartments caused the increase in total construction figures, for the permits issued for the construction of businesses and homes decreased in 1942.⁸

At a board meeting in October 1942, County Board member F. Freeland Chew motioned to deny a zoning alteration by Elmer C. and Bessie C. Howell to construct apartments. Chew thought Arlington County had reached a saturation point in the development of large apartment complexes. This opinion did not prevail throughout the county, and apartments continued to be a large

portion of the total construction costs throughout the decade.⁹

During 1940 commercial development began to rapidly expand in Arlington. J.C. Penney built the first large department store in the area in May 1940 at Wilson Avenue and North Highland Street in Clarendon. Sears followed with a store in Clarendon in September 1942, G.C. Murphy's also built a store in Clarendon in September 1949, Kann's Clarendon store opened in 1951, and Hecht's opened a store and the Parkington shopping center at Ballston in 1951. As the pattern of construction revealed, Clarendon was the commercial center of the county. Each community provided local shopping areas, but Clarendon was where people went for a day of shopping. Ballston (Parkington) and Virginia Square were also large commercial areas. As the development of the department stores in the area illustrated, this area functioned as the center of the economy into the 1950s. In 1958 thirteen percent of the county's major department stores, twenty-three percent of the furniture stores, and thirty-one percent of the clothing stores were located in Clarendon.¹⁰

A 1952 economic survey of the land uses of Arlington County indicated that Arlington could become the principal shopping center for Northern Virginia. This predication held true until the late 1960s when shoppers began to travel to suburban shopping malls instead of local shopping areas. With inadequate parking facilities, traffic congestion, and a population shift to the outer suburbs of Fairfax and Montgomery counties, the Clarendon area no longer was a favorite place to shop.¹¹

Directly related to the increasing population was the increasing effectiveness of transportation facilities. Some major roads were built or designated prior to World War II which assisted in moving people around the area. The George Washington Memorial Parkway, initially called Mount Vernon Memorial Boulevard, opened in November 1932; Memorial Bridge, the second span connecting Arlington and Washington, was completed in February 1932; the need for a high capacity east-west road linking Fairfax and Arlington counties with Washington was recognized in 1938; and in April 1940, the Arlington County Board signed an agreement with the National Capital Parks and Planning Commission for the construction of unit two of the George Washington Memorial Parkway which measured for about a mile along the Potomac River from the Key Bridge. As the population grew these roads were used in large volumes. U.S. Route 50's use increased from 11,800 vehicles per day in 1945 to 34,200 vehicles per day in 1958, or 190%. Similarly the traffic volumes using the bridges over the Potomac increased 93% between 1945 and 1958.¹²

The Arlington County Planning Commission began transportation planning, in 1941, when it adopted the Thoroughfare Plan, which provided the method for Arlington's present highway system. George Mason Drive, Walter

Reed Drive, Williamsburg Boulevard, Patrick Henry Drive, and John Marshall Drive were all developed as part of the plan. The Henry G. Shirley Memorial Highway, named March 20, 1942, and Fairfax Drive were also mapped out in the plan.¹³ The roads developed in the 1940s continued to be used throughout the county without many alterations.

A trolley system and the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad also provided transportation from the county into Washington. The railroad ran one passenger car to Rosslyn Circle where passengers could transfer to a trolley headed for Washington. The last passenger car operated by the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad ran on May 31, 1951. Another means for citizens to move throughout the county was the two bus companies also operating throughout the county.¹⁴

One of the major problems confronting Arlington County during the 1940s and 1950s was providing an education for the school aged children. In April 1943 Arlington County was waiting for the War Production Board to grant priorities for the construction of two new schools which would assist in decreasing the overcrowded conditions in schools. One of the schools, an elementary school in Fairlington, accommodated 1,000 students by having students attend school in double shifts. This pattern continued throughout the Arlington school system into the 1950s.¹⁵

In 1946 Arlington residents formed the Citizens Committee for School Improvement in order to change and improve the school system. Working with the County Council of PTAs, the Citizens Committee for School Improvement succeeded in establishing public kindergartens, providing full day sessions for first and second graders, and expanding school facilities.¹⁶

Zoning ordinances reflected major changes in the county: the population explosion, transportation improvements, and federal development. Arlington adopted a Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance on May 16, 1942. The *Northern Virginia Sun* reported that, "the main change in the new ordinance is its creation and preservation of population density districts in apartment zones to low density districts in high residential areas." In consideration of the single family home owners, the County Board cut the proposed "blanket" apartment zoning from Park Lane, Ballston, and Lyon Park except where it previously existed. In a statement against the blanket designation, County Board member F. Freeland Chew announced that the area proposed for the designation comprised one-fourth of the county's area and eventually probably one-third of the county's population. This stance reflected Arlington residents' concern that the increasing population might overrun existing communities. Each potential apartment building would be considered on its own merits, not automatically approved through the blanket designation.¹⁷

The changes and development in Arlington County did not stop at the conclusion of World War II. The population continued to increase, reaching 135,449 people in 1950 and 163,401 people in 1960. As illustrated earlier, apartment development proliferated, schools continued stretching to accommodate larger student populations, and transportation systems continued improving. There was, however, more time to plan actions and greater resources than during wartime. The Arlington County Board appointed a Post-War Planning Board to survey the more pressing public works needs and the financial problems involved. In addition, the Arlington Chamber of Commerce initiated a thirteen-point program in 1944. The program included considering the increased industrial zoned areas of the counties, the construction of an adequate system of storm sewers, and immediate acquisitions of parks and playgrounds. The County Board initiated another survey of Arlington's needs on March 11, 1950. The survey studied the county's needs for the next six years and estimated a cost of \$45,627,320 to fulfill all recommendations. It would instigate a program of capital improvement to increase the services of public service facilities. The County Manager, A. T. Lundberg, stated that the growth in the population stretched the limits of the public service programs, but due to the high costs the deficiencies could only be corrected with a "maximum effort over a relatively long period of time." These county government actions illustrated the continued desire to oversee the development and maintain the standard of living in the county.¹⁸

The County Board adopted a revised Zoning Ordinance in July 1950 which went into effect on August 10, 1950. Under discussion for over two years, the zoning ordinance reflected changes in specifications of certain zones and included a greater concentration of zoning areas, but overall the ordinances did not vary greatly.¹⁹

Two of the major changes in the county's transportation structure were discussed throughout the late 1950s and 1960s but were not completed until much later. A 1938 study conducted by Arlington County determined an east-west access route between Washington, DC, and Fairfax and Arlington counties necessary. The county incorporated what became known as Interstate Route 66 into the interstate highway system in June 1959. After many controversies the Virginia Department of Highways and Transportation submitted plans to the Federal Highway Administration for approval in 1976. Interstate Route 66 finally opened to traffic on December 22, 1982.²⁰

Metro, the subway system serving the Washington metropolitan area, like Interstate Route 66, was conceived of long before it became a reality. In July 1960 Congress created the National Capital Transportation Agency and directed it "to submit to the President for transmittal to Con-

gress... recommendations for organization and financial arrangements for transportation in the National Capital region." The plan that grew out of this study was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in October 1965. The Arlington County Master Plan of 1961 showed the effects of the Metro stations on Arlington communities. The declining commercial communities of the 1950s experienced a revitalization. A *Northern Virginia Sun* article noted that "planners [foresaw] a scalloped skyline with peaks at the transit stations where the highest density would naturally accrue. Ballston and Clarendon, now strips of medium-density, mostly commercial use, [would] probably lose their small town look in the not-so-far-away future."²¹

In the 1960s Arlington County began focusing on attracting commercial businesses to the area to decrease the county's reliance on the federal government. A study of commercial activities, zoning, and land use conducted in 1957 and 1958 noted the advantages of commercial facilities which accounted for a substantial portion of county revenues. The report also concluded that,

older business areas already are or gradually are becoming obsolete because they are caught in the squeeze between heavy traffic in the front and densely built up residence areas in the rear with not much space left for parking, and competing business areas located in the outlying tracts. The remedy for this calls for concerted action and cooperation by business interests in the preparation of certain phases of the County Plan.

On August 12, 1961 a general land use plan was adopted which reflected the desired commercial expansion. The only major alteration in the land use plan from the earlier zoning ordinances was the designation of Rosslyn and the Jefferson Davis corridor as commercial areas. The initial commercial developments during the 1960s added an estimated \$200,000,000 to the county's real estate tax base within the first five years of their development.²²

Rosslyn was the first area to undergo a change. Formerly an area characterized by open storage of building materials and auto parts, substandard buildings, and vacant lots, Rosslyn, in 1962, began to undergo redevelopment. The County Board adopted the *Rosslyn Plan* which envisioned Rosslyn as a high density area of offices, apartments, and hotels. Illustrative of the success of the redevelopment, during the 1960s construction companies completed 270,000 square feet of gross floor area annually. In other terms, nineteen high rise buildings were constructed between 1962 and 1967.²³

The other major development of the 1960s was located in the Jefferson Davis Corridor. The land developed was either formerly vacant, devoted to low-intensity industrial use, or commercial users in wholesale and warehouse storage.

Unlike Rosslyn, most of the development until the mid-1970s was completed by one development company, the Charles E. Smith firm. During the 1960s 2,850,000 square feet of construction was completed in the corridor.²⁴

World War II caused changes in Arlington County that transformed the county into an urban center directly tied to Washington. Prior to the war, the county was a rural community that remained isolated from its adjacent city. The growth brought on by World War II forced the citizens of Arlington to confront major changes. Through planning, the county accommodated a rapid population growth and the economic expansion associated with the influx of people. Although it took until the early 1960s for the county to adjust and compensate for the changes, the planning provided an organized and efficient response which prepared the county for further growth and expansion. The transportation network planned in the 1940s is still in use today, the schools were upgraded to meet the increasing number of students, and zoning prepared the county for further construction. It was in the 1960s with the increase in commercial areas that Arlington County began to function as its own urban center. Without the planning of the previous decades this change would not have been possible.

Notes and References

A former resident of Arlington, Ann Deines wrote this article as part of a graduate school project at George Washington University. She is currently the historian at Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park in Dayton, Ohio.

-
- ¹ Arlington County School Board, *The Arlington Story, 1968* (Arlington: Arlington County Public Schools, 1968), p. 13.
 - ² *Trends, Office and Commercial Development for the Years 1960 through 1982* (Arlington: Department of Community Affairs, July 1982), p. 3.
 - ³ C.B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County, Virginia, A History* (Arlington: Arlington Historical Society, 1976), p. 206.
 - ⁴ "Preliminary Report Given on Housing Project Survey," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 20 September 1940.
 - ⁵ Rose, *Arlington County*, p. 206 and "Hanrahan Appoints Housing Committee," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 23 December 1942.
 - ⁶ Rose, *Arlington County*, p. 206.
 - ⁷ "The Defense Homes Corporation was originally...", National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), Record Group (hereafter RG) 234, Entry 176, Box 16, Folder: Fairlington Misc.; "Fairlington 10th Anniversary, May 1943-1953," Arlington County Archives, RG 25, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Folder 1; Nan Netherton and Ross Netherton, *Arlington County in Virginia: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1987), p. 164; and Seminary Hill Residents to Blandford, NARA, RG 234, Entry 176, Box 1, Folder: Fairlington, VA, Part 1.
 - ⁸ "1940 Building Nears 13 Million Point," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 23 December 1940; "Building Construction Hits All-Time High During 1941," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 9 January 1941; "Apartments Swell Building in County to New High in '42," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 30 December 1942; "'44 Construction Drops to 4 Million," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 5 January 1945; "Arlington Reflects on Year of Growth

- and Looks Forward to an Active 1950," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 30 December 1949; "Apartment Units Top Homes in '49 Construction Here," *Northern Virginia Sun*; and "Construction Sets New High in Active Year for Arlington," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 29 December 1950.
- ⁹ "Apartments Swell Building in County to New High in '42," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 30 December 1942.
- ¹⁰ Arlington County Department of Community Affairs, *Clarendon Sector Plan*, (n.p., March 1984).
- ¹¹ *Clarendon Sector Plan*, p. 16 and *Arlington County Virginia Annual Report 1952-1953*, pp. 24-25.
- ¹² Wilbur Smith and Associates, *Review of Interstate Route 66 Through Arlington County, Virginia* (New Haven: Wilbur Smith and Associates, October 1958), p. 1.
- ¹³ Frank L. Dieter, "Early Planning Progress in Arlington County, Virginia to 1945," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 3, October 1967, p. 34.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Paul Barkley, 8 April 1992 and Netherton, *Arlington County*, p. 168.
- ¹⁵ "Priorities Awaited for Two New Schools," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 16 April 1943, p. 1 and Interview with Barkley.
- ¹⁶ Rose, *Arlington County*, pp. 209-210.
- ¹⁷ "Master Zone Plan and Ordinance are Adopted by Board," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 22 May 1942.
- ¹⁸ "Arlington Creates Post-War Board to Map Needs Here," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 8 October 1943; "C. of C. Maps Work Program for 1944," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 18 February 1944; "Cooperative Efforts Result in Recommended 6-Year Improvement Program for Arlington," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 12 October 1952; "Regular Meeting of the County Board - March 11, 1950," Arlington County Archives, RG 20, Subgroup 3, Series 3, Folder 3; and "Initial Figures on Six-Year-Plan for Arlington Reach \$45,627,000," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 7 July 1950.
- ¹⁹ "Board to Receive Written Views on Zone Ordinance," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 21 April 1950 and "Zoning Ordinance Adopted; Sets Two Hearings Per Year," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 21 July 1950.
- ²⁰ E.D. Arnold, Jr. and K.E. Lantz, Jr., *Phase I Report: An Evaluation of I-66 and the Improvements to I-395 between the Capital Beltway and the District of Columbia* (Virginia Highway and Transportation Research Council, November 1985).
- ²¹ Dieter, Ronald H., *The Story of Metro: Transportation and Politics in the Nation's Capital* (Glendale, CA: Interurban Press, 1985), pp. 25-27 and Carolyn Jackson, "Northern Virginia...Ending a Decade with a New Face," *Northern Virginia Sun*, 30 October 1969.
- ²² C. Brian Kelly, "The New Cities of Arlington County," *Commonweal*, October 1967, pp. 26-30 and Arlington County Office of Planning, *Summary Report of Commercial Studies, Arlington County, Virginia* (n.p., June 1960), p. 1.
- ²³ *Trends, Office and Commercial Development for the Years 1960 through 1982*, p. 8 and Daniel Poole, "Rosslyn Provides a New Gateway," *Washington Star*, 28 July 1967.
- ²⁴ *Trends, Office and Commercial Development for the Years 1960 through 1982*, p. 11 and "Multi Million Dollar Corridor Grows in Virginia," *Washington Post*, 29 November 1969.