

River Ferries



Potomac River ferry companies date back to as early as 1740, when Hugh West received permission to operate a ferry from the Hunting Creek warehouse in Prince William over the Potomac River to Fraziers Point in Maryland...“the price for a man 1 shilling and for a horse the same.” The ferry system predated the first bridge over the Potomac, which was not constructed until 1797.

The early Hunting Creek ferry docked near Point West (lower Oronoco Street). Later proprietors of the ferry line across the Potomac included: Thomas Sanders, 1756; James Rhodes, 1768; and John Lomax, 1770. More famous owners of the line included George Washington and George Mason, although Washington successfully petitioned to discontinue the ferry on his land in 1790. From 1785 to 1800, the ferry industry was in a state of flux. Despite Washington’s assertion that ferries had become unprofitable, multiple would-be proprietors petitioned the Virginia General Assembly for permission to establish a ferry.

Following the War of 1812, ferries that travelled between Washington and Alexandria were primarily horse-powered. One observer noted, “The paddle wheels were turned by a team of horses that made a circuit in the middle of the vessel and conveyed the power by means of cranks to wheels which turned on each side of the vessel.” In 1816, the first steam ship was used for ferrying purposes across the Potomac. In direct competition to the stately Union ferry, which began operating in 1815, the 70-foot long steamboat christened the Camden, plied a route from Georgetown to Alexandria.

The Alexandria Steam Ferry Co. organized in 1839 and commissioned Robert Hunter to build a steam ferry boat at his shipyard on Wilkes Street for use to and from Maryland. Other steamboat companies were established between 1854 and 1866. The last ferry to operate solely between Alexandria and Washington appears to have been the steamer “Alexandria.” It made its last voyage from the foot of King Street at 5:20 p.m. on July 27, 1912. Other steamers still served this route, among others, but did so at longer intervals.



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↕ Dining 🍴

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→ Torpedo Factory Art Center

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↑ King Street 
18 BLOCKS

