Alexandria's electric railway

PHOTO/HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

A streetcar runs through Old Town in the 1920s.

Alexandria's electric streetcar system, the Washington, Alexandria & Mount Vernon Railway, was established in 1892 and ran between Alexandria and Mount Vernon. In 1896, the line extended into Washington, D.C., crossing the Long Bridge where the 14th Street Bridge is today.

The line traveled from Mount Vernon Estate into Alexandria, up South Royal Street, South Fairfax Street, to King Street, then west to Commonwealth Avenue and north across Four Mile Run, into Arlington and then Washington. The tracks on King Street once reached across Union Street to the waterfront, but in 1910, they were changed to end at Fairfax Street.
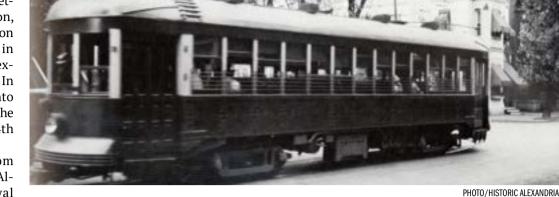
Between Columbus and Payne Streets, streetcars ran one way with tracks going the other way on Cameron Street. This photograph, probably taken in the 1920s, shows a car on North Columbus Street near Cameron Street.

The stops in Alexandria, and beyond in Del Ray – then called the Town of Potomac – allowed connections to railroads operated by Southern and Washington & Old Dominion. They also encouraged the growth of Del Ray, St. Elmo and Rosemont as streetcar suburbs, served by several stops along Commonwealth Avenue.

Trains ran regular schedules, traveling from Alexandria to the District about twice an hour between 6 a.m. and 11 p.m., Monday through Saturday, with less frequent service on Sunday. In 1906, 30 daily trains between Mount Vernon and the District carried 1.7 million passengers, a number likely boosted by the opening of an amusement park along Four Mile Run with a dedicated station.

By 1930, as automobiles gained popularity and roads were improved to accommodate them, service to Mount Vernon was abandoned south of Alexandria to make way for the George Washington Memorial Parkway. The Federal Triangle development's construction in the District resulted in that railway station's condemnation, leaving streetcars from Virginia without a Washington station. On April 9, 1932, the electric railway service ended.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.