

The Town of Potomac

When the Washington, Alexandria & Mount Vernon Railway announced plans in 1892 that included tracks between Washington, D.C. and Alexandria, the flat, open land north of Alexandria became a logical site for a new community. The development firm of Wood-Harmon bought two large plots of land in 1894 --- a larger one called "Del Ray," from the estate of John Lloyd, and a smaller one called "St. Elmo" --- separated from each other by a racetrack. The Town of Potomac, Virginia, was chartered in March 1908, bounded on the east by the Washington & Alexandria Turnpike (now U.S. Route 1), on the north by Old Georgetown (now Glebe) Road and Braddock Avenue (now Ashby Street), on the west by the electric rail line (now Commonwealth Avenue), and on the south by Bellefonte Avenue.



The Bank of Del Ray opened in July 1923, in temporary quarters in the Mt. Vernon Drugstore. The bank later constructed a new building, which still stands, at 2018 Mount Vernon Avenue, as does the house of its first president, John R. Harding, at 2100 Mount Vernon Ave. The bank withstood a dramatic robbery by a gang of six armed men in May 1929, but later fell victim to an attack from within, when it was found that cashier Clay Brittle had embezzled more than half the bank's assets. The bank closed its doors on January 21 1930, and thereafter paid out about 43 cents on the dollar to depositors pending sale of the land.

Special Collections, Alexandria Library



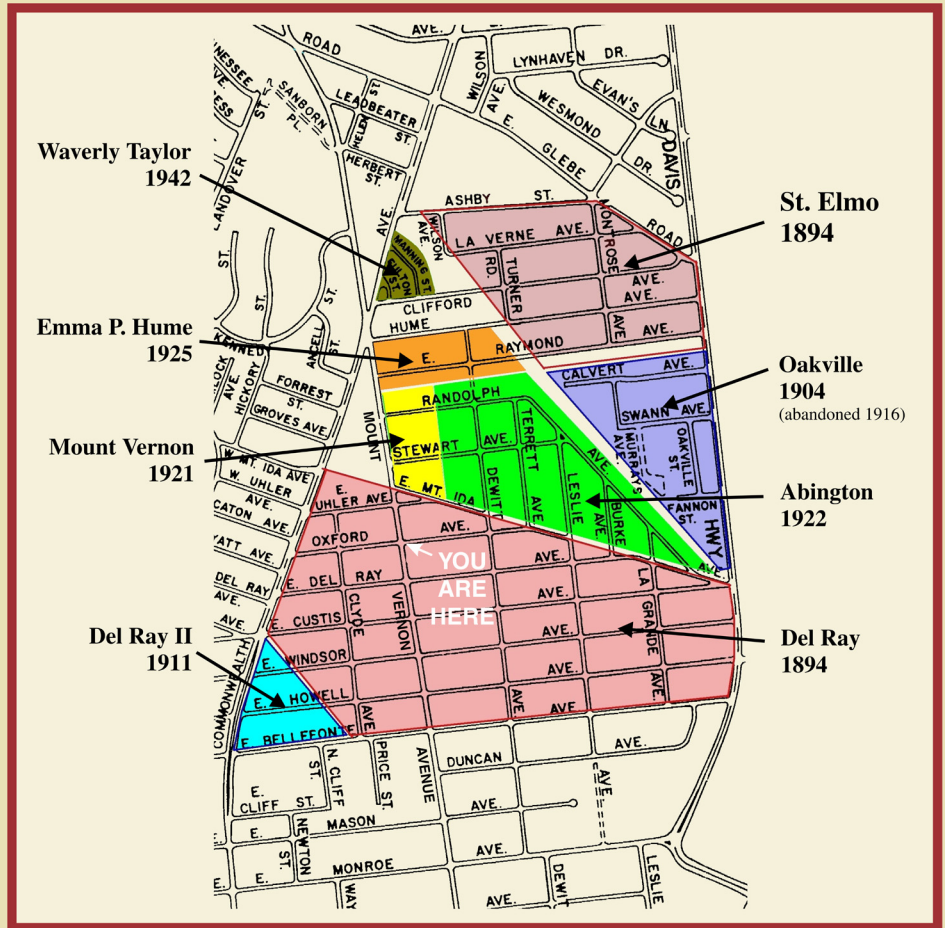
On the eve of annexation in 1929, many of the streets had been paved and lighted, and additional house construction had created a trace town feel to Potomac. Street lighting had been installed in 1910 in the form of forty-five 40-candlepower incandescent lamps. The hard paving of streets began with Mount Vernon Avenue in 1911 and gradually expanded to other streets, although this process was still not complete in 1930. This view shows Hume Avenue from the top of a small ridge, looking east towards Potomac Yard.

Special Collections, Alexandria Library



A massive railroad classification yard (for switching and sorting trains) was built in 1904 to the east of Del Ray and St. Elmo, named Potomac Yard. This brought employment to the area, and spurred housing and retail growth. It also brought life to what had been the poorly maintained Washington & Alexandria Turnpike, along the eastern boundary of the Town of Potomac. Here that road is seen about 1930, improved as the Jefferson Davis Highway, with Potomac Yard on the right and the eastern edge of the town on the left.

The National Archives



The Town of Potomac was formed around two subdivisions, Del Ray and St. Elmo. Other subdivisions followed through the 1920's, but only one (Del Ray Section 2 by David N. Rust, Jr.) was sold with houses. All the rest were sold simply as lots and the owners built their own houses, often considerably later than the land purchase. The result is a wide range of architecture that reflects the dynamic evolution of styles between 1894 and 1930, including Folk Victorian, Colonial Revival, Arts and Crafts, Four-square and even row houses of various types. The presence of so many well-preserved styles within such a small area helped it receive designation as a state and national historic district.

City of Alexandria and Leland Ness



Alexandria County (which became renamed Arlington County the next year) established a Health Department in 1919 and constructed one of its clinics in Potomac in 1923 at 2704 Mount Vernon Avenue. The clinic was open one or two days a week, concentrating on pregnancy and infant care, functions later taken over by City agencies after town annexation. Seen here are most of the professional employees of the Arlington Health Department in December 1929: Director Peyton Chickester, MD, second from left; Sanitary Inspector Norbert Melnick, second from right; and Norma Davies, RN, a nurse shared with the school system, far right. Missing is infant nurse Minnie Rudasill, RN. On the far left is Henry Latane, MD, who gave tuberculosis tests as needed, and in the center is Sue Brown, RN, who organized the "Health Crusaders" in Mount Vernon School on a volunteer basis to teach the virtues of cleanliness and a healthy lifestyle to local children. The building was also used sometimes by the one-person County Welfare Department, which concentrated mostly on child abandonment and truancy cases, and by the county school system's full-time dentist.

Virginia Room, Arlington County Library

Del Ray and St. Elmo are early examples of commuter suburbs, since one of the first inter urban electric railways in the country provided a rapid means of travel for workers going between Washington and Alexandria. The Town of Potomac was also one of the first recipients of federal highway funds in 1915 when modernization of Mount Vernon Avenue met the needs of an emerging automobile culture. Ease of transit between Potomac and Alexandria was no doubt a factor in the decision of the City to annex the town. The first annexation effort in 1915 failed, but a second one launched in 1927 succeeded. At the stroke of midnight on New Year's Day, 1930, the Town of Potomac ceased to exist and became the Del Ray neighborhood of Alexandria.



1908 **TOWN OF POTOMAC** 1929

Produced for the Town of Potomac Centennial in 2008 by the City of Alexandria. Research and text by Lee Ness

