

The Cameron Valley

Early Industrial Development in Western Alexandria

The area west of the Mill Race complex once was a sloping meadow through which ran the meandering tail race of the Cameron Mills. The mill site itself was located beneath what is now the parking garage of the Hoffman Center complex. Built in the 1790s, the twin mills at Cameron produced flour, meal, and feed both for local consumption and for export. From the mid-19th century until 1919, the firm of Roberts and Hunt operated the mills, farmed the surrounding property, and maintained a feed and grain store on Alexandria's waterfront. The western mill building was destroyed by fire in 1928.

In 1851, the newly founded Alexandria Water Company converted the eastern mill into a pumping station, installing new iron wheel and a pump inside the building. The pump drew water from the 60-year-old millrace and pumped it into a reservoir at the top of nearby Shuter's Hill. From there, it was distributed through a gravity-fed system to households and businesses throughout Alexandria. The Cameron Pumping Station continued to supply water to the city through the mid-20th century.



The Cameron Mills as they appeared in the late 19th century. On the left is the gristmill, by then partially steam-powered. The building on the right is the Alexandria Water Company's pumping station.
Special Collections, Alexandria Library.



The 1803 map of the lower Cameron Valley showed early roads, the "Head of Navigation" of Cameron Run and Hunting Creek, and the twin Cameron Mills.
Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

Water from Cameron Run was channeled through a long millrace whose stone and earthen embankments (right) maintained the force of the water and channeled it to the top of the mill wheel. The weight of the water, caught in the buckets on the wheel, caused it to turn. Excess water flowed back into Cameron Run through a meandering tailrace (left).
Both photos, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.



The Cameron Valley, through which Eisenhower Avenue runs, has served as an industrial and commercial center for Northern Virginia for over 250 years. At one time, Cameron Run and its estuary, Great Hunting Creek, provided direct access to the Potomac River, while surface routes funneled Northern Virginia's products to the stream's head of navigation. The "Road to Richmond" (today's Telegraph Road) and the Little River Turnpike (now Duke Street)—were the major land routes into this area. In the mid 19th century, two railroads also acquired rights-of-way through the valley. These networks allowed Northern Virginians to ship their products to Alexandria's wharves, and from there, to markets around the world.

Water from Cameron Run also stimulated commercial and industrial development. A dam on the upper reaches of the stream diverted water through a mile-long millrace; this water supply turned the wheels of several gristmills in the valley, and later even provided water for the city. Today's office and condominium complexes, the Beltway, Metro, and Eisenhower Avenue itself represent the latest chapter in the economic development of the Cameron Valley

