

Mount Vernon Avenue

Proposals for a modern road connecting the nation's capital with the Mount Vernon Estate were raised in 1888 and proceeded in fits and starts for the next forty-two years. By 1900, a patchwork of new roads and renamed existing roads had created Mount Vernon Boulevard from Rosslyn to Alexandria. With the construction of an electric rail line running a similar route all the way to Mount Vernon however, the impetus for such a road died out. The rise of the automobile renewed interest in the road proposals and resulted in a rebuilt Mount Vernon Avenue in 1915. Eventually, the George Washington Memorial Parkway used an all-new route north of Alexandria in 1930 and claimed the electric railway's right-of-way for the portion south of the city.



The few hard-surface roads in the US by 1900 were mostly of macadam construction, using several layers of rock and gravel. With the advent of the automobile, a new technique came to the fore called tarmacadam ("tarmac" for short), that involved pouring tar or asphalt over the gravel so that it would seep in a few inches and form a hard, dust-free surface. The most miserable job on a road-building crew was that of the "oiler," whose function was to pour the hot molten liquid on the gravel surface. Here an oiler, wearing his leather protective outfit, is working on Mount Vernon Avenue near Ullier Avenue in 1915. About half of the experimental road was done using this technique, while the other half received the pioneering (now standard) method called "hot-mix asphalt," in which the asphalt or tar and gravel are mixed together before spreading.

National Archives

Since 1894, Mount Vernon Boulevard had been the widest road in Del Ray and St. Elmo. In recognition of its role as the main street, the Town of Potomac had Mount Vernon Boulevard surfaced with tarmacadam in 1911, while the rest of the streets in the town remained clay and gravel. The surface failed early, due to poor specifications. Here a steam roller heads north on Mount Vernon, pulling a device to scarify, or rip up, the old tarmac surface at the intersection with Windsor Avenue in 1915.

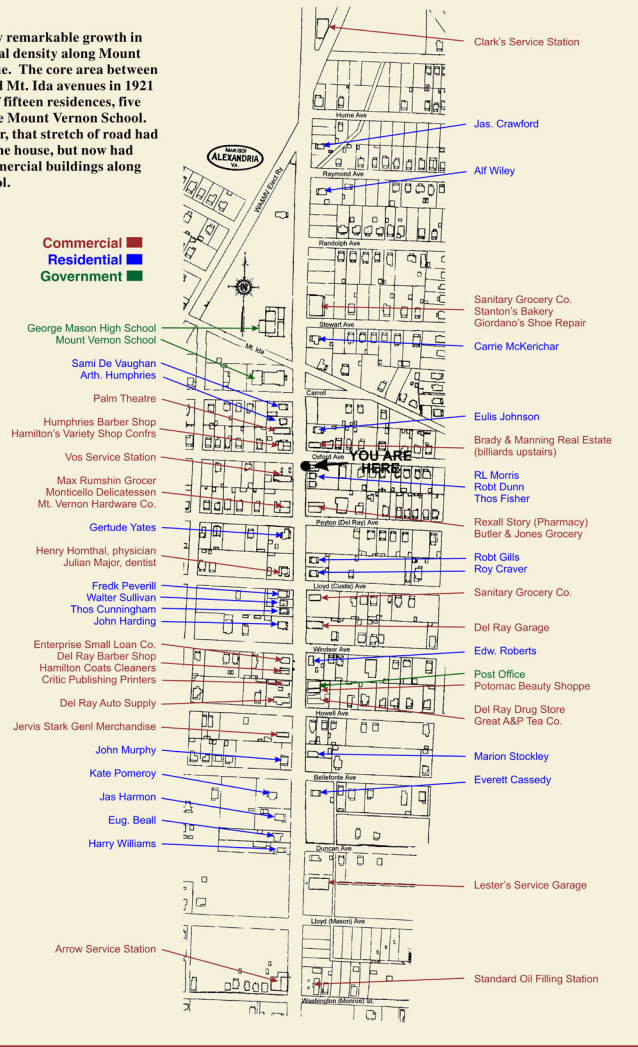


By 1929, Mount Vernon Avenue (below) in the Town of Potomac was starting to lose its rural and largely residential character in favor of a more commercial main street. This view looks north from near Windsor Avenue. The building on the near right is a Sanitary Grocery Company store, a Washington, D.C.-based chain that was bought by Safeway in 1928, but kept its own name into the late 1930s. The curbs and gutters were just a year old at the time of this photo.

Special Collections, Alexandria Library



The 1920s saw remarkable growth in the commercial density along Mount Vernon Avenue. The core area between Bellefonte and Mt. Ida avenues in 1921 was the site of fifteen residences, five stores, and the Mount Vernon School. Ten years later, that stretch of road had gained only one house, but now had eighteen commercial buildings along with the school.



The appearance of mass-produced automobiles changed American life in many dramatic ways, including the need for high-quality paved roads. In 1914, the federal government began subsidizing "experimental roads" to test various materials and construction techniques. An early form of transportation largesse, these projects were eagerly sought after. One of the first to be launched was the "Mount Vernon Avenue Experimental, Road", which ran from the foot of the Highway Bridge at 14th Street down what is now Arlington Ridge Road, along Mount Vernon Avenue and into Alexandria.



1908 **TOWN OF POTOMAC** 1929

Produced for the Town of Potomac Centennial in 2008 by the City of Alexandria, Research and text by Lenise Neese

