

St. Asaph Racetrack

The Alexandria Gentleman's Driving Club laid out a track just north of here that was operating by 1894, colloquially known as "the St. Asaph Track." In 1897, however, Virginia banned horse race betting, so the track was shut down. Betting on the races at this track was never as profitable as betting on races run elsewhere from the privacy of the track's poolroom. In early 1904, Commonwealth's Attorney Crandall Mackey alleged that the poolroom was making \$150,000 profit per year (a huge sum at the time), even after paying \$14,000 a year for telegraph service and \$12,000 a year in graft to local officials.



This impressive grandstand and the judges' tower were long abandoned at the time of this photo in 1914, when homeless African Americans were living there. Built in 1894, but used only until 1897, the facility included stables that lined both sides of Mt. Vernon Avenue. The grandstand stood until it burned in 1916. This large area was used by the Army as a mobilization camp in 1898 and again in 1917-18.

Arlington County Historical Society



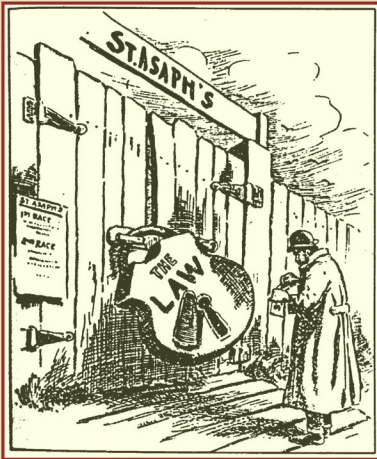
The southern edge of the track would have been about 200 feet directly in front of you, lying between Mt. Ida Avenue, the W&OD railroad right-of-way, and Mt. Vernon Avenue, on the McKericher and Hill properties. It essentially split the town in two until it was developed for housing as the Abingdon Development in 1922.

Virginia Title map, 1900, Special Collections, Alexandria Library

Wire-tapping Suspected.
The poolroom at St. Asaph's was put out of business Saturday just after the first race at Saratoga had been run, and the management suspects there was an unsuccessful attempt at wire-tapping. The poolroom was isolated, except for some unsatisfactory messages by telephone from the stand the wire gave out until the fourth race on the card at Saratoga. Effective communication then was established by telephone with the Western Union office in this city and the reports of other races were received in this way. As an incident of the episode, a mistake cost the poolroom management some thing like \$1,000. When the wire first room operator could be sent to the Western Union office here, there was an attempt to supply the news by telephone, and in some way word reached the poolroom that Delhi had been scratched from the Great Republic. All bets that had been placed on Delhi were refunded, and it was subsequently discovered that Delhi was quoted at 8 to 1 in the betting and to the clamorous demands of patrons the spite the fact that all bets on Delhi had been refunded. The wire used between Washington and St. Asaph was a private one, owned by the poolroom management and if it was tapped an investigation will be made.

A poolroom, in the gambling parlance of the time, was a facility for placing bets on races run elsewhere, the results being brought in by telegraph. Betting on races was illegal in Virginia, so two companies were set up to help gamblers skirt the law at the St. Asaph poolroom. The West Virginia Athletic Association was established in Harpers Ferry, where such activity was legal, and the Old Dominion Telegraph Company was chartered to conduct wire transfers of money. Poolroom operators thus claimed that the bets were actually made in West Virginia, even though poker, keno, jaro and other games of chance were also played on the premises. The Hiawatha Pleasure and Social Club was similarly established to get around state laws on liquor sales.

Article from Alexandria Gazette, August 8, 1904.



The Alexandria County Commonwealth's Attorney repeatedly brought charges against the operators of the St. Asaph poolroom, only to have the city police refuse to enforce them or the city court throw the charges out. In May 1904, he authorized a posse that visited the St. Asaph track and two other poolrooms in the county with sledgehammers and crowbars. They smashed gambling equipment and threw slot machines in the river, but the poolrooms were quickly back in business. In January 1905, the Commonwealth's Attorney got his first conviction, and subsequent plea agreements shut the facility down for good.

Cartoon from The Washington Times, January 13, 1905

Alexandria County residents opposed the illegal gambling and related activities at the racetrack and elected crusading Commonwealth's Attorney Mackey on a "clean government" platform to shut it down. The track and poolroom, however, fell within the police jurisdiction of the City of Alexandria, whose officials adamantly refused to move against it. The facility was finally shuttered in 1905. Three years later, the property fell under the jurisdiction of the new Town of Potomac, founded to give residents direct control over their own affairs, municipal services, and such troublesome properties as the St. Asaph track and poolroom.



1908

TOWN OF POTOMAC

1929

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