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With sincere appreciation of the clients and customers who wisely and graciously choose to do your holiday shopping at Belle View, we are delighted to offer a holiday story. Unfortunately, the only stories the author knows have to do with the history of the neighborhoods in which he grew up, so this is the story of the origins of Belle View, Belle Haven, and New Alexandria, all of which can be traced in the surprisingly rare map that appears below.

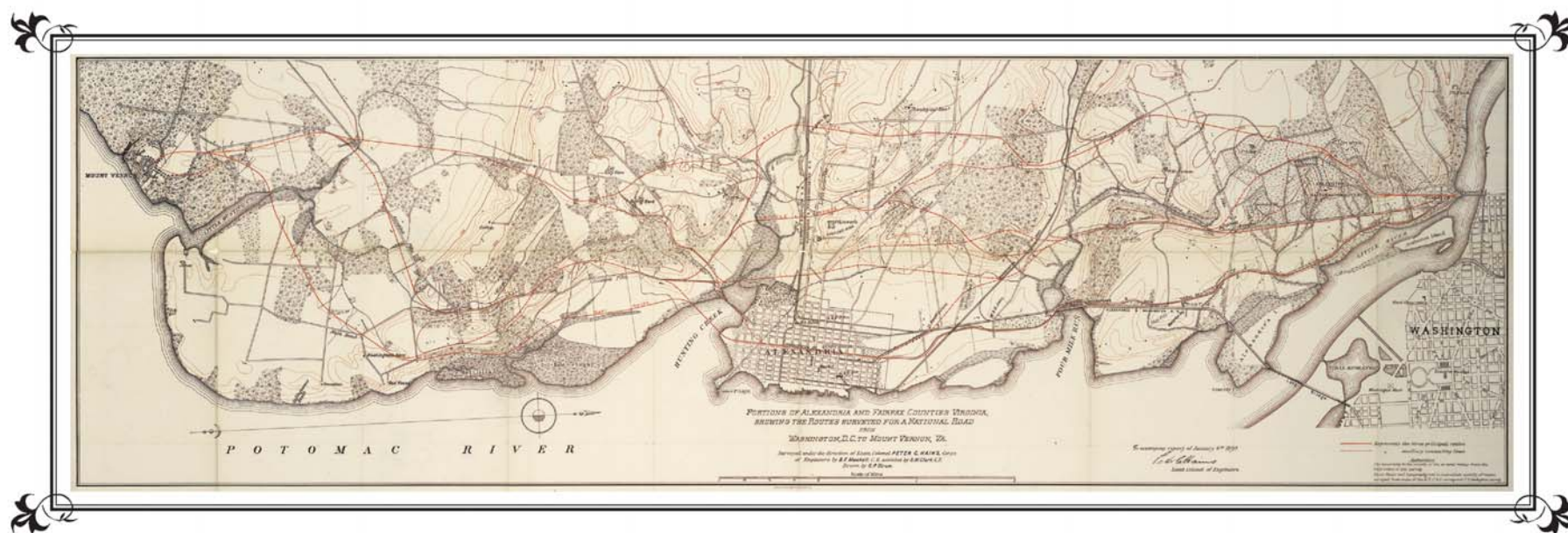
Dated 1890 and signed in the original engraved plate by its surveyor, U.S. Army Engineer Peter Hains, for whom Hains Point would not much later be named, the long map that you see here was originally four feet in length and folded into a fat little book. The book offered a proposal for the first “National Road from Washington, D.C., to Mount Vernon.”

The proposal suggested three potential routes (with several inter-connections) for a scenic parkway extending from Georgetown’s canal-carrying Aqueduct Bridge, now replaced by Key Bridge, due south to Mount Vernon. Shown in red, the proposed roadways included an East Route that closely followed the Potomac River, a Middle Route that crossed the highlands above Shuter’s Hill (site of today’s George Washington Masonic Temple), and a West Route that roughly paralleled today’s Quaker Lane. Topographic lines in 20-foot intervals clearly reflect the lay of the land. Perhaps most striking from a modern point of view is the fact that much of the

From the Virginia end of the bridge, the streetcar line entered Alexandria along the median of Commonwealth Avenue, turned east on King Street, then south again on South Royal Street, and crossed the wide mouth of Great Hunting Creek on a 1,500-foot-long wooden trestle roughly where today’s George Washington Parkway covers the same distance, although mostly on filled land. The streetcar line continued along the Potomac as far south as Collingwood Road, where it turned southwest to make a beeline for Mount Vernon. The great circle at Mount Vernon’s North Gate today was originally circumnavigated by streetcars beginning the return trip to Alexandria and Washington.

The length of the streetcar line required a power station near its halfway point, and that station was located where Belle Haven Road and Potomac Avenue intersect today, an area still bare on this map. The presence of electricity gave rise to new proposals for an industrial suburb south of Hunting Creek, to be known as New Alexandria. For reasons unknown, the industry never materialized, but New Alexandria became one of the nation’s first “streetcar suburbs.”

The streetcars ran from 1892 to the mid-1920s, when the call for a scenic parkway to Mount Vernon was revived. The first of its kind in the nation, the parkway was completed in time for the 1932 bicentennial celebration of George Washington’s birth, more or less along the streetcar-line’s route.



countryside below the city of Alexandria was cleared of trees for dairy-farm pasturage, affording long views of the Potomac River from the heights to the west—views now obscured in and by our verdant suburban neighborhoods.

The irony behind the map lies in the fact that the road that it proposed would never be built, at least not as proposed here, and not for another 40 years. Instead, the decision was reached to build an electric-streetcar line—one of the nation’s first—along a roughly similar route, but one departing from Pennsylvania Avenue and 12th Street, N.W. In Washington and crossing the Potomac on what was still called the Long Bridge at 14th Street, N.W.

With the arrival of motorcar-commuting, suburban living became even more attractive and the hills above New Alexandria were shortly developed as Belle Haven, still one of Washington’s loveliest residential neighborhoods. Belle Haven’s developers knew shopping would be essential and spent the next 15 years persuading the National Park Service to allow the construction of an exit at Belle View Boulevard explicitly for the Shops at Belle View, completed in 1953. The rest, as they say, is holiday- shopping history!

Copies of the original map shown here are available at The Virginia Florist in Belle View.

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