

Lorton History - The 'First' Lorton

Yes, Virginia There Was (And Is) a Lorton

By Irma Clifton

Was there really a Lorton? If so, where was it? Does it still exist? Those are questions we "natives" hear all the time. Of course, regular users of the Amtrak Auto Train and the VRE know exactly where Lorton is, but is that all there is (or was) to it? To set the record straight here are some facts about the Lorton that I and some other "natives" remember.

The village of Lorton was centered in the area where Lorton and Gunston Cove Roads intersect but the rural route postal delivery area went far beyond those confines. The village proper consisted of more than twenty-five homes, a school, two stores, a post office, a telephone exchange, a blacksmith shop and train station among other things. The northern boundary of the village was about where the Auto Train Station is today and up a portion of Silverbrook Road and there were a number of homes in those areas. The southern boundary extended beyond the old wooden bridge that crosses the RF&P tracks. To the east of the railroad tracks were several homes and the boundary to the west went beyond where the American Legion is today.

Lorton Road, in earlier days, before the construction of Shirley Highway, went directly in front of the old Lorton School, now used as offices by Fairfax County Public Schools, where it then made an abrupt left in the area of the old post office near the railroad tracks. It then continued to the railroad underpass, which was in the same general area as today but was only one lane then. To continue on Lorton Road toward Route 1 you would have to make a sharp right turn and proceed under through the underpass.

In the days before Shirley Highway was built there were several homes and a store along Lorton Road between the school site and the railroad. Homes also lined Gunston Cove Road to the south and at the old wooden bridge a road went off to the west and culminated in the area that is today just north of the debris landfill. The construction of the highway in the late 1940s and early 1950s effectively cut the village of Lorton in half and took out most of the homes on the stretch of road between the school and railroad.

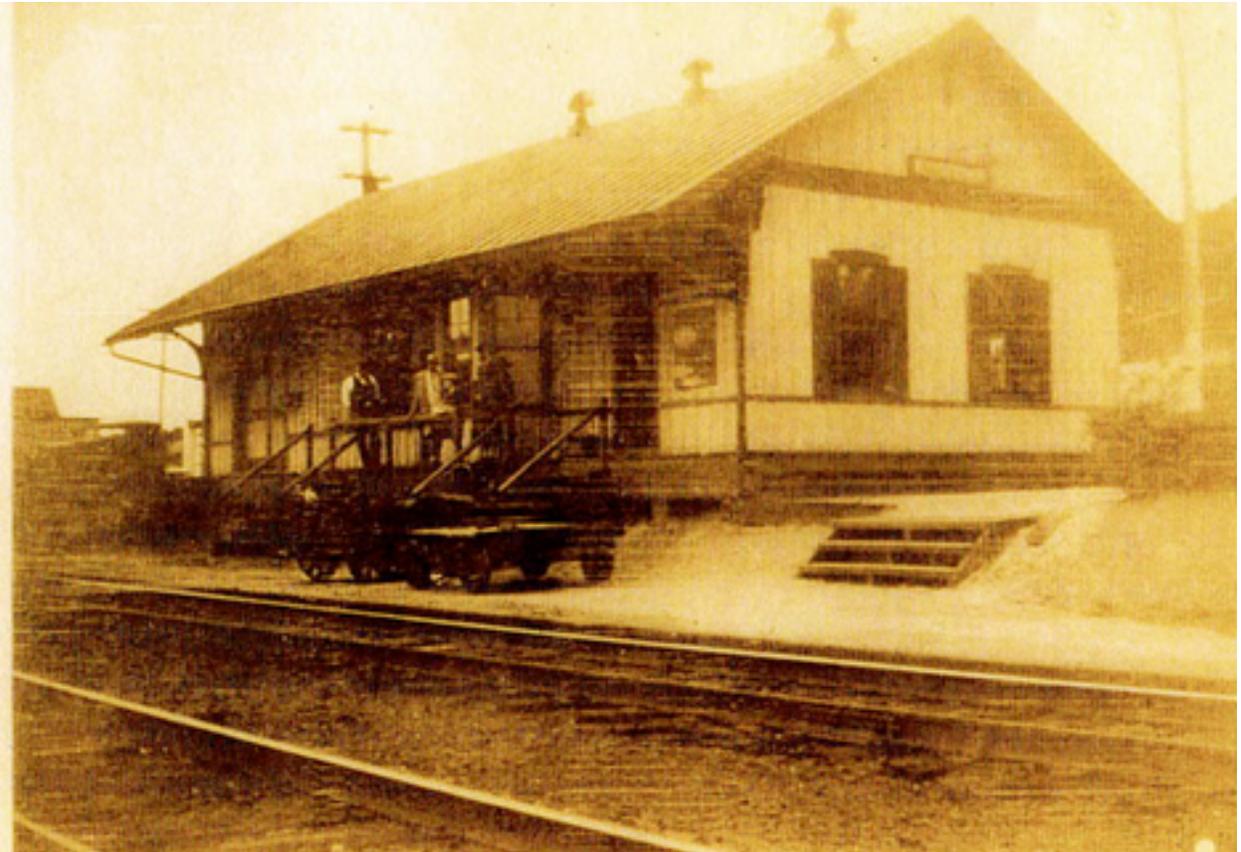
During highway construction Lorton Road was improved and the alignment was moved slightly to the north about where it is today. To accommodate foot traffic along the old road a tunnel was cut under the highway to allow passage between the now two sections of the village. Just this past summer, as part of the widening of I-95, the old tunnel was filled with concrete and closed forever.

With the construction of Shirley Highway came less dependence by Lorton residents on the railroad for daily commutes into Alexandria and Washington and heavier use of automobiles. Businesses such as Tillinghast's store which was located near the train station suffered while a gas station built on the new section of Lorton Road prospered. By the 1970s the train station had been abandoned and dismantled. The post office moved to a new location further down Lorton Road near Route 1 and only a few families remained.

The village of Lorton was no longer on the "beaten" path and had begun to deteriorate. As older families moved away or died the properties went into decline and were bought up for industrial use, especially those on the east side of Shirley Highway. A handful of structures on the west side remain but barely resemble how they appeared in earlier times. The telephone exchange that was located near the intersection of Lorton Road and Sanger Street has been gone since the 1950s.

Recently, the last structure in the former village of Lorton east of the highway was ordered demolished by the Fairfax County Office of Blight Abatement. Located directly behind the Shell gas station it was known as the Springman House. Constructed just after the turn of the last century, in its day it was known for its elaborate woodwork. "Pop" Springman who built and occupied the home for many years was at times station master, post master and store keeper in the village.

So the answer to the first question is yes, there really was a Lorton and it was a good-sized, close-knit village. The location of the village would be difficult to identify today. Does it still exist? Certainly it does in those of us who remember it as it was. But like most things Lorton has changed with the times and what's left is mainly just a zip code. When the prison closed the most readily identifiable landmark with the Lorton name in the region was gone. But Lorton is making a comeback and some communities and businesses are recognizing and honoring their Lorton roots by carrying on the name Lorton. At least there is still a highway sign off I-95 that identifies the exit as Lorton!



Lorton railroad station photo taken during the 1930s showing baggage and mail carts in the ground. Credit Lorton Historical Society



The Springman House in the village of Lorton, shown in this 1940s photo, was built just after the turn of the last century. It was demolished in 2010. Credit Lorton Historical Society