The Friends of Freedmen’s Cemetery was founded by Lillie Finzel and Louise Massoud in 1997 for the purpose of preserving, commemorating and researching a Civil War-era African-American cemetery in Old Town Alexandria. Initial efforts concentrated on memorial ceremonies to honor and raise public awareness of Alexandria’s freedpeople. With the nearby construction of a new Interstate 95/495 bridge over the Potomac River, the Friends collaborated with the City of Alexandria and project consultants on the design of an appropriate memorial on a portion of the site. It is the dream and mission of the Friends to see the entire cemetery parcel ultimately returned to public ownership and restored as a memorial park.

The Friends of Freedmen’s Cemetery is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization run by a volunteer board of directors. All contributions are fully tax-deductible.
Laundry day at Volusia, a farm near Duke Street and Holmes Run, 1860s. About forty percent of the burials at Freedmen’s Cemetery were of children five years old and younger—those most vulnerable to disease and malnutrition. Photograph courtesy of Lewis and Rosalie Leigh.

At the urging of Rev. Albert Gladwin, the civilian “Superintendent of Contrabands,” Alexandria’s Military Governor, Brigadier General John P. Slough, pictured above, seized a parcel on South Washington Street and established a cemetery for former slaves. Library of Congress photograph.

Harriet Jacobs, a former slave and celebrated author, was one of the many agents of private freedmen’s aid societies that ministered to the needs of Alexandria’s freedpeople. The city’s formerly enslaved people received contributions and visits from such prominent figures as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. Photograph from a private collection.

Freedmen’s Cemetery today [2000]: the site of a gas station and office building.

The extraction of clay by the Alexandria Brick Company from the west and south edges of the cemetery exposed human remains in the 1890s. Alexandria Library Local History and Special Collections.

Left: Freedmen’s Cemetery state highway marker, dedicated in September 2000. Right: A detail of a site map created by URS Greiner Woodward Clyde, a cultural resources management firm. Their 1999-2000 test excavations in small portions of the site unearthed evidence of nearly sixty graves, even extending under Washington Street. An earlier ground-penetrating radar survey by another firm indicated the presence of many burials beneath the gas station parking lot.

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