

Andrew Russell photograph of the Prince Street Contraband Barracks, 1864. Library of Congress.

Just out of slavery, most freedpeople were destitute by any standard. Among an undernourished, ill-housed population with inadequate health care, death was no stranger. Disease and high infant mortality were endemic. After more than 1,000 freedpeople had perished in the Alexandria area, the town desperately needed a new burying ground for them. In January 1864, the Military Governor ordered that an undeveloped parcel on South Washington Street be seized from its pro-Confederate owner as abandoned. At the beginning of March it opened as a burying ground for “Contrabands.” At first, African-American soldiers who died in Alexandria were also buried at Freedmen’s Cemetery. The black troops in the town’s hospitals finally demanded to be interred in the “Soldiers’ Cemetery” on Wilkes Street, as were their white comrades. About 75 deceased black veterans were removed from Freedmen’s Cemetery to the Alexandria National Cemetery in January 1865.

As Federal troops extended their occupation of the seceded states, African-American refugees flooded into Union-controlled areas. Safely behind Union lines, the cities of Alexandria and Washington offered not only comparative freedom, but employment. As Alexandria was transformed into a major supply depot and a center for transport and hospitals, the freedpeople or “Contrabands” took positions with the army as construction workers, nurses and hospital stewards, longshoremen, painters, wood cutters, drivers, laundresses, cooks, grave-diggers and personal servants—and ultimately as soldiers and sailors.

When the Civil War broke out, enslaved African Americans had a better sense of where the conflict would lead than did the combatants themselves. Many predicted, as the inevitable outcome of an armed conflict between North and South, the “jubilee,” the end of slavery, when families would be reunited in freedom.

At war’s end, responsibility for Freedmen’s Cemetery was transferred to the new Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands. When Congress curtailed nearly all Freedmen’s Bureau functions at the end of 1868, the cemetery, with its more than 1,700 burials, was closed. The parcel’s former owner, attorney Francis Smith, reclaimed it. For eight decades, it remained largely undisturbed, but the wood grave markers quickly rotted away. In 1917, the Smith family conveyed the property to the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, which maintained its own cemetery across the street. In 1946, the parcel was rezoned for commercial use and sold. A gas station was erected in 1955, followed by an office building. In spite of these, and the construction of Interstate Route 95 to the south, hundreds of graves remained.

Alexandria’s freedpeople were mostly northern Virginians, but African Americans migrated here from most of Virginia and eastern Maryland. By 1868 there were arrivals from Kentucky, North Carolina, Alabama, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. Alexandria County’s black population temporarily grew to more than 8,700, or about half the total number of residents. This sudden influx stressed the local economy and transformed social relations. The people reshaped the landscape, occupying vacant buildings and army barracks, erecting shantytowns, and creating long-lasting rural communities. After ratification of the 15th Amendment, the freedpeople provided the support necessary to put the first black Alexandrians in City Council and the Virginia legislature.

The Friends of Freedmen’s Cemetery was founded by Lillie Finklea 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.



“Friends” and Alexandria City Council members at a Memorial Day commemoration.

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This 1865 Andrew Russell photograph of Alexandria National Cemetery suggests how Freedmen’s Cemetery appeared—rows of whitewashed wood markers enclosed by a picket fence.

www.freedmenscemetery.org  
email: freedmen@juno.com  
mail: 638 N. Alfred Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314

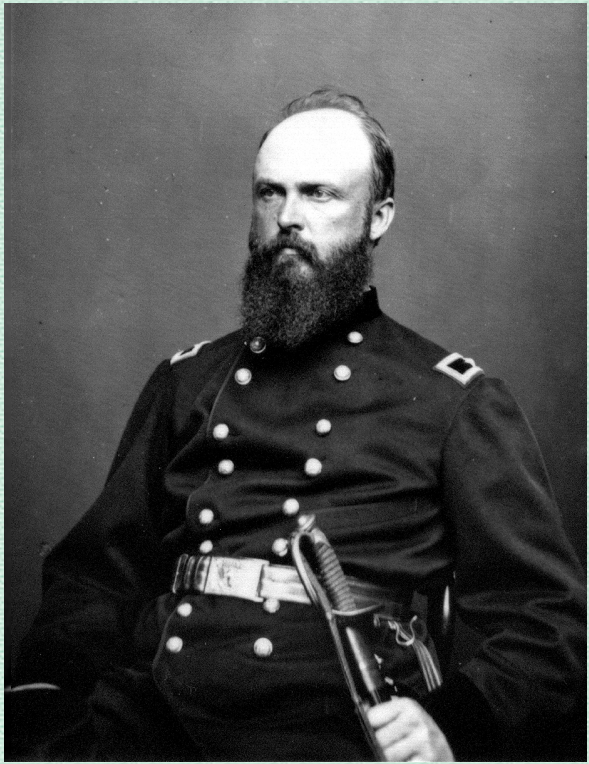
1001 South Washington Street

Alexandria  
Virginia





*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.*



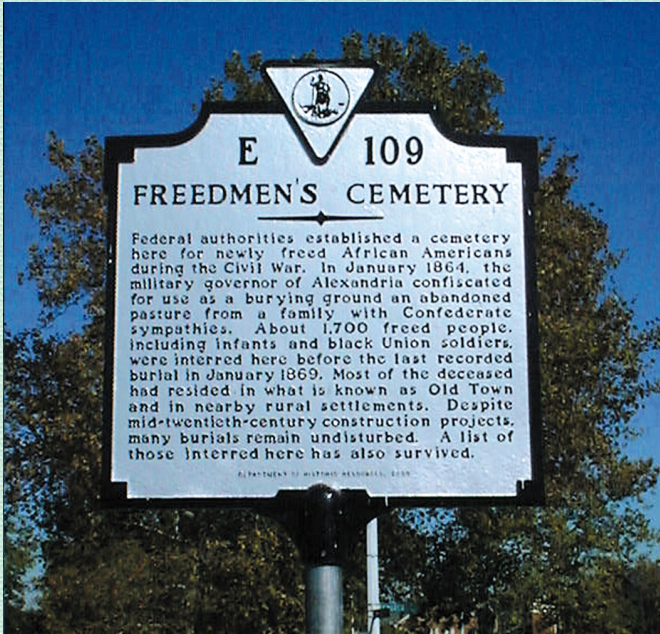
*Harriet Jacobs, a former slave and celebrated author, was one of the many agents of private freedmen's aid societies that ministered to the needs of Alexandria's freedpeople. The city's formerly enslaved people received contributions and visits from such prominent figures as Frederick Douglass and Harriet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



*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.*



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



*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.*

