

Alfred Noland and the Oysterman Song



*A Fishtown scene, early twentieth century.
Alexandria Library Local History Special Collections.*

On every archaeological site in historic Old Town Alexandria, Virginia a multitude of oyster shells is unearthed. It is no wonder, as the bivalve was a dietary staple for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century residents of the port; seafood was more common than beef. Not only did demand for the shellfish spawn the venerable, seasonal, and odiferous, Second-Ward, waterfront settlement of stalls, shacks and cleaning sheds called Fishtown, but also a number of shanty-restaurants known as oyster houses sprinkled through the city, especially during the Civil War's economic boomlet.¹

Who was responsible for putting the oysters on Alexandria's dining tables? Certainly included were the black and white pungy crews and oyster tongers who harvested the entire Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, market-boat middlemen and wholesale fish dealers, market-stall keepers and even peddlers. In the slavery-based society of the antebellum South, African-American labor was crucial to all trades; both free and enslaved laborers and watermen played essential roles in the seafood industry at all levels. *The Alexandria Gazette* provides us with a colorful glimpse of one of these individuals, a real town character familiar for his boisterous sales pitch in the furtherance of his one-man, door-to-door, retail operation.

Alfred Noland (frequently written Nolan, Nowlan or Nowland, and occasionally even Nollin or Nallin) was born into slavery about 1815, probably in next-door Fairfax County. Whether or not he originally belonged to the Henderson family, by 1850 he was the eldest of ten slaves of Willis Henderson. Henderson was a farmer in the Hybla Valley section of Fairfax, not far from Mount

Vernon, and which included Gum Springs, a hamlet of former Washington family slaves. Unlike the nine African Americans on Henderson's property, Noland was no field slave or house servant. As an adult, he lived apart from the farm and its master, about four miles north, in fact, within the city of Alexandria. It is conceivable that the trust that made this possible had its roots in a blood relationship; while Henderson's other slaves were described as "black," Noland was identified as "mulatto."²



A building at 1126 Prince Street, said to have been an oyster house in the nineteenth century.

In a substantial city such as Alexandria, it was not unheard of for enslaved persons to live apart from their masters, although the distance was not typically a matter of miles. For example, from as early as 1839 and until after Emancipation, Harriet Williams, a slave of Samuel Lindsay, resided three doors from her owner in a story-and-a-half frame dwelling belonging to Mrs. Turner Dixon.³ Particularly in urban areas, many of the enslaved of the Upper South were hired to others. Some were allowed to hire themselves out, permitting some freedom to select their occupation and boss, as long as they delivered agreed payments to their masters. This provided an opportunity for some marginal profit between wages received and those offered up. Such an arrangement may have left Alfred Noland responsible for finding his own lodging—another opportunity, perhaps, to save a few nickels. This may help explain why his abode shifted several times in later years.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, Alexandria had its own substantial free-black community, largely as a consequence of a more liberal attitude toward manumissions in the post-Revolution

era. Marriages between free and enslaved African Americans became common enough, although owners preferred such marriages to include an enslaved wife as, by law, her offspring would be born into slavery. In November 1837, the 22-year-old Alfred Noland wedded 19-year-old Julia Bennett, a woman born free in Alexandria.⁴ For nearly five years they resided in a one-story, frame house near Prince and Fayette Streets belonging to the estate of the late Margaret Wilson, and then in a similar dwelling on a lot owned by Alfred's master on Patrick Street between Duke and Wolfe. For a time they kept a cow, to provide sustenance to a growing family.⁵ The couple had at least seven or eight children between 1837 and 1850.⁶ The aptly named Nolands moved frequently in the years prior to the war, but almost always within Ward 4, well away from Fishtown and the wharves.⁷

Alfred Noland may have been a common laborer as a youth, but he could have embarked on his career as oyster hawker by the end of his teen years. As the writer of the following newspaper item points out the nearly 50-year-old Noland's status as the eldest former practitioner of the trade, it was evidently a young man's game. As these hucksters typically wound through the town's dusty streets on autumn and winter evenings, singing to cajole potential customers, they surely held other jobs during the day and out of season.

The bitterness of the Civil War gave white Alexandrians cause for nostalgia for even a few years prior, and certainly decades earlier, when one might have heard the cries of perambulating African-American oyster mongers. That their ditties were already a thing of the past suggests that Noland and his peers had entered other lines of work long before the article ran in 1865. Their careers may have ended with efforts to tax the previously unregulated oyster hawkers in 1857.⁸ In 1864, Noland was arrested for violating the military government's general prohibition of alcoholic beverages in Alexandria, now vending a product more sought-after and lucrative than even the exorbitantly priced oysters trickling into town.⁹ Only months after his arrest, he disappears from the historical record.¹⁰

Although the tune of Alfred Noland's oyster sales pitch is lost to posterity, a bit of the song is cribbed from an old Scottish ballad, *Roseberry Lane*. It may include other snatches of popular tunes, but most of the lyrics, reproduced in full below, were surely of Noland's invention, extolling the virtues of his products of the York River, one of Virginia's more saline tributaries to the Chesapeake.

Despite drawing from Euro-American popular culture, Noland's oyster song must be regarded as an unusual specimen among the small corpus of work songs of the enslaved that have passed down to us. It is also a unique manifestation of the rich culture of the waterways of the Chesapeake region.



A stereoview image of a Virginia oyster shucker before a mountain of shells, circa 1895. Library of Congress.

The Alexandria Gazette, February 1, 1865, page 4.

An Alexandria Reminiscence

MR. EDITOR—A number of works have been written in regard to the various “Cries” of the larger cities of the world. For instance, “The Cries of London,” written many years ago, and doubtless quite familiar to many of your readers; also a later work, by Mr. Mayhew, entitled, “London Labor and the London Poor,” in which all the various peculiarities of the itinerant trading among the poorer classes of the population are given in very interesting detail.

These peculiarities, however, do not belong entirely to the large cities. There are *some* incident to this place, *now* alas! quite obsolete, but which are yet familiar to the recollection of not very old inhabitants and which, I think, ought to be rescued from oblivion. Any one of your readers whose memory can run down the vista of the past for the last twenty five or thirty years, can well remember the old familiar song of the Oysterman, and in imagination see him trudging lazily along the street at night, with his shining tin bucket filled with the choicest “bivalves,” and rattling at intervals between the verses of this song, the tin cups with which he served his customers, with “the finest Yorkey oysters you ever did see.” I have endeavored to get a correct version of this old song, and give it below. The familiarity with which it will doubtless greet the

memory of many of your old readers, will take them back, with a moment of joy only, to the recollection of the good old days of yore, when peace and plenty reigned over us, and happiness and contentment seemed to pervade the bosom of every inhabitant of the town, and the remembrance that those happy days are gone, perhaps never to return again, and the reality of the sad times into which we have now fallen, being continually forced upon the mind, will leave in the heart a pang of regret, and a sorrow, that no more can be had, and “right at your door,” the largest and finest oysters at “only ten cents a pint.” PERCY.

THE SONG OF THE OYSTERMAN.

Here's my nice city O! Here's my nice Yorkey Oysters.
Here's my nice city O! High relished Oysters.
Here's my Oysters as nice as can be;
Pray will you buy any? Pray can you buy any?
Here are Oysters as nice as you ever did see,
Pray will you buy any from me?

Here are my Oysters as nice as can be,
And they are all for the use of the city,
They are nice, and fresh and just from the shell;
I can't tell the reason my Oysters wont sell.
My Oysters are sweet they are round and complete,
For Oysters at ten cents a pint.

Oh, my father he dwelt in Roseberry Lane,
He opened nice oysters and I do the same;
For every oyster is round as a clam,
And every oyster is fat as a lamb;
Most beautiful oysters! high relished oysters,
The prettiest oysters you ever did see.

Oh, ladies and gentlemen take great delight,
In having nice oysters for supper at night.
My oysters are white and my kettles are bright,
And if you won't buy my oysters I'll bid you good night.
Good night ladies, good night gentlemen,
Good night ladies and gentlemen all.

NOTE—It may be as well to mention in connection with the foregoing remarks, that the oystermen alluded to, were invariably very respectable colored men. The writer of this, hunted up one of the oldest now living, in fact the very oldest, Alfred Noland, from whom he obtained the words of the above song.

Alexandria, January 31, 1865.

¹ In the early days of the Civil War, the city suffered from its abandonment by between one third and one half of its white population, who went South to support the Confederacy actively or passively. “The wharves look dilapidated and uncared for—piles of oyster shells are heaped around—dirt abounds—the alleys are filled with rubbish—a few eating shops are opened in the former marts of trade and commerce, and general decay and desolation prevail.” But newcomers—soldiers, civilian government employees, merchants, “contrabands,” and hangers-on—soon more than filled the void. *The Alexandria Gazette*, September 12, 1862, September 20, 1862, March 19, 1863, September 24, 1863 and February 14, 1865.

² United States Census, 1850, Virginia Slave Schedules; *The Alexandria Gazette*, April 6, 1875; United States Census, 1850, Virginia Population Schedules. Henderson was only ten to fifteen years older than Noland, so a direct relationship is probably out of the question. Of course, it is also dangerous to trust contemporary observations and characterizations of racial traits.

³ The latter few years, of course, Ms. Williams was free, first liberated by circumstances and then by law. She eventually purchased the property at auction for a pittance, as it had been confiscated because Mrs. Dixon’s husband served in the Confederate army. But she never gained permanent title. Registered Letters Received by the Alexandria Office, July 1866-December 1868, Entry 3851 in Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives and Records Administration; Alexandria Archaeology Website, 2008, <http://oha.alexandriava.gov/archaeology/ar-exhibits-witness-1.html>.

⁴ T. Michael Miller, *Alexandria & Alexandria (Arlington) County, Virginia Minister Returns & Marriage Bonds, 1801-1802*, (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1987), p. 131; Dorothy S. Provine, *Alexandria County, Virginia Free Negro Registers, 1797-1861*, (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1990), pp. 158, 261. Julia, said to have been born June 20, 1818, was one of the children of Milly Bennett, born in 1787 and freed by John C. Herbert between 1805 and 1826. Although Milly’s manumission paper stated she was not to be freed until the latter year, the fact that her children were born free in the late 1810s and early 1820s suggests that she may have been released sooner than promised in 1805. Alexandria Deedbook K, p. 333.

⁵ Alexandria Real and Personal Property Tax Assessments.

⁶ The children included John (born about 1837), James W. (1838), Amelia E. (1839), Alfred (1841 or 1842), Elizabeth (1843 or 1844), Harriet (1845), and Stephen and Ella (possibly twins, about 1848-1849; although Stephen appears only in the 1850 census, and Ella does not appear there). In 1860, second and third sons Alfred and James were said to be brickmakers. Provine, p. 263; United States Census for 1850, Virginia Population Schedules; United States Census for 1860, Virginia Population Schedules.

⁷ Alexandria Real and Personal Property Tax Assessments.

⁸ H.K. Bradshaw to the Board of Aldermen and the Common Council, April 22, 1857, Petitions to City Council, Papers of the City of Alexandria, University of Virginia Library.

⁹ Register of Prisoners Confined and Released from the Slave Pen, December 1863-June 1865, Entry 1529 in Records of the United States Army, Continental Commands, Record Group 393, Part IV, National Archives and Records Administration. Alexandria was officially under naval blockade until autumn 1863, but it remained difficult to bring in goods because of security and anti-smuggling measures and owners’ and underwriters’ fears of putting boats into “enemy” waters. Through 1863 at least, the few oysters landed came from Maryland. Rebels seized oyster boats in Virginia’s York River in December of that year. Quality was poor and prices high. Residents snapped up oysters at \$1.50 a bushel in 1864, about triple the pre-war price, but most were forced to seek gustatory satisfaction elsewhere; “Cakes and pies have taken the place of oysters.” As early as the winter of 1861-1862, oyster boats were shorting their customers with smaller-than-standard measures. The “bushel” effectively shrank during the war, as suppliers tried to maintain profits. “To such an extent has the extortion in the way of measuring OYSTERS to buyers, at the wharves, been carried, and the high prices asked there, that the trade is likely to be broken up entirely. From some vessels, the restaurant keepers will not buy at all, and other dealers are preparing to get their supplies from Washington and Baltimore. The grievance is particularly hard upon private families who wish to buy a bushel or two of oysters at a time. There are some honorable exceptions in the craftsmen who bring up oysters—but in many cases the *gouging* is beyond any thing ever seen elsewhere....” *The Alexandria Gazette*, May 29, 1863, September 21, 1863, September 24, 1863, October 5, 1863, October 12, 1863, December 29, 1863 and January 21, 1864; *The Local News*, January 17, 1862.

¹⁰ The Nolandts do not appear in postwar tax records and city directories for Alexandria.