

Way Down Yonder in the Graveyard Walk: A Biography of Randall Ward, Gravedigger

This is the story, or rather *a* story, of Randall Ward, the head gravedigger for Freedmen's Cemetery throughout the burying ground's active use, 1864 through 1868. It is the tale of one man's transition from slavery into a precarious freedom during the Reconstruction era. Ward's life was surely not bereft of all happiness, but the sparse records extant omit his image, nearly exclude his voice, and single out heartrending incidents that cannot portray a life in full.

Randall was born to the enslaved Judy and Pharaoh about 1820 or 1821 in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. One of thirteen children, his large family was broken up early, as he was apparently sold as a teenager to William Alexander Winston, a cousin of Dolley Madison.¹

On his "Raccoon Ford" farm in southern Culpeper County, William Winston held about 40 servants in bondage when, nearly a decade before his death, he gifted one slave to each of his sons "to be at their own disposal." Randall Ward, now barely twenty, went to the youngest son, Lucien Dade Winston. This suggests that Randall was a house servant, as a boy like Lucien would have little use for a field hand. A child probably had little use for a valet or groom either, and Randall was sold off in 1843—although another account indicates that the date was nearer to 1851.

By the early 1850s, Ward was enslaved to Henry Fitzhugh, a prominent farmer of Stafford County. Randall, described as "mulatto," was then a carriage driver, often conveying Fitzhugh from his "Sherwood Forest" home farm to his lands across the Rappahannock River in Culpeper County. As a character witness after the Civil War, Randall testified to his owner's cruelty at the outbreak of the conflict. "He whipped me because he said I had said I would rather kill a Southern man than kill a Yankee. Then he took and hand-cuffed me, and sent me to Fredericksburg and put me in jail. He whipped me with a cat o' nine-tails and I have got the scars on me now." Ward went on to describe Fitzhugh beating with a cobbing board an "old Baptist colored woman" whose offense had been to warn her daughter to refuse master's sexual advances.

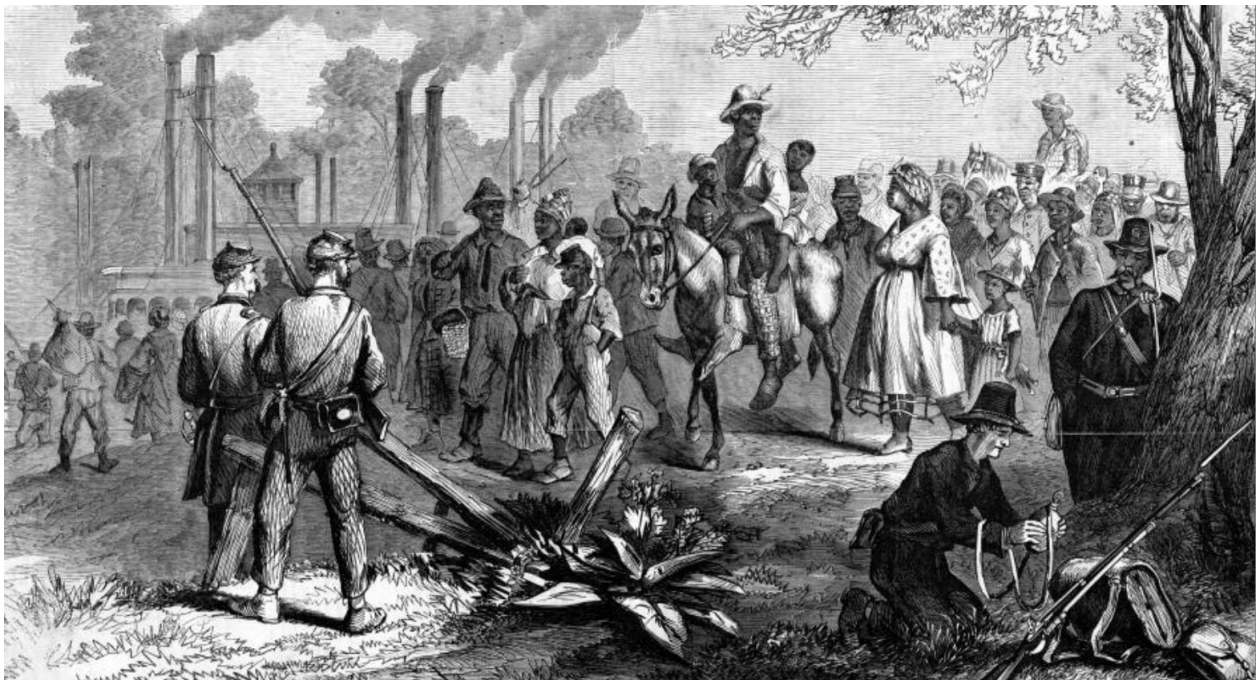
¹ Records relating to the enslaved are notoriously unreliable. Freedmen's Bureau records are the source of Randall Ward's birthplace, but the license for one of his marriages gives the site of his nativity as Culpeper County where, one way or another, he spent much of his youth. The discrepancy raises the possibility that Randall was born into William Winston's household in Culpeper, rather than being purchased by Winston.

In the same postwar depositions, both Fitzhugh's son and his overseer downplayed his harshness, and they tried to impeach Randall Ward's credibility. Overseer John Cox, who arrived on the farm in the spring of 1862, hardly knew Ward, as he had previously seen him only in passing, yet still offered that he "did not know much good of him." As a newcomer, Cox may have been truthful in stating his ignorance of Fitzhugh whipping anyone—although he had probably received some instructions as to discipline on the farm. On the other hand, Samuel Fitzhugh, the son, had known Randall "since I could recollect anything." "[H]e was one of my father's pet servants," Samuel deflected, protesting that Ward had been spoiled. "He didn't do nothing but just work around the house, hitch up the carriage, saddle the horses, and one thing and another." Still, Samuel admitted to one or two incidents of violence. Once, Henry Fitzhugh had seized Randall's carriage whip "and slapped him [with it] over the shoulder," over his coat, "for not cleaning the horses off right." The Southern Claims Commission, which took these depositions, seems to have been uncertain whether to credit Ward's story of the old Baptist lady, but his own scars spoke for themselves.



A man beating an enslaved woman with a cobbing board. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.

Randall's whippings would soon be a thing of the past. John Cox had been engaged to manage Sherwood Forest, because its owner sought refuge deeper within the Confederacy, and two of the Fitzhugh boys had joined the rebel army. Union troops arrived to occupy the plantation in spring 1862, and little more than a month later, the remaining Fitzhugh slaves escaped en masse. They joined thousands of "contrabands" who embarked on northbound transports at Aquia Landing that summer. Randall was likely accompanied; he had married a fellow mulatto slave named Betsey, and their eldest child, Elizabeth, was said to have been born in 1861. Recounted one of the Sherwood Forest field hands, "We all came up [the Potomac River] on the boat together from Aquia Creek, and stopped in Alexandria." Most continued to Washington, D.C., but Randall and Betsey would reside south of the Potomac for their whole lives.



Contrabands coming into a Union camp at a steamboat landing, specifically, Jefferson Davis's former slaves at Chickasaw Bayou, Mississippi, 1863, published in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper.

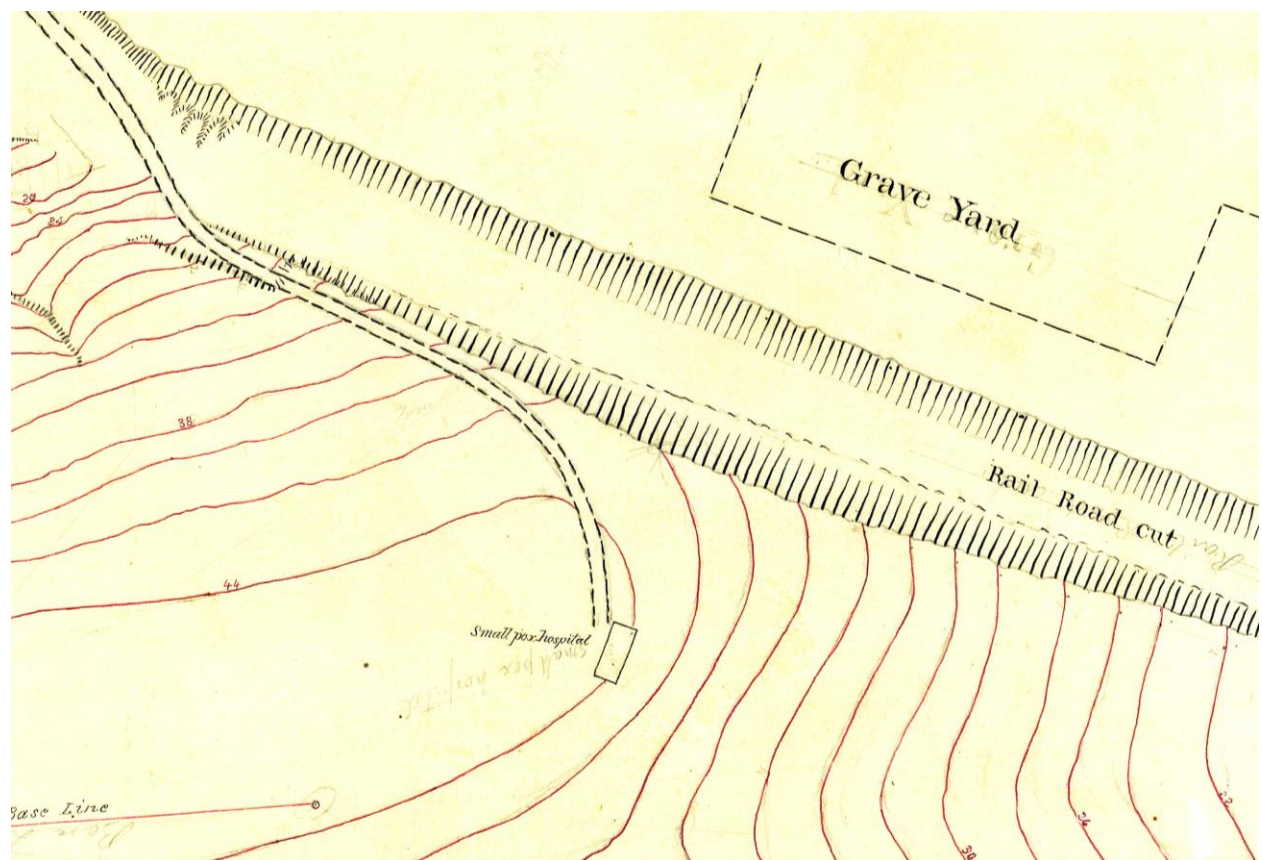
The strangers found a small city crowding with refugees like themselves, adding to a population of longtime residents, garrison troops, soldiers passing to the front, government employees, carpet-bagging merchants, and shady hangers-on. By the end of that summer, it was estimated that more than a thousand contrabands had settled in Alexandria, a town of fewer than 13,000 people before the war. The concentration of the newly arrived posed problems, including inflation of the costs of shelter, food and fuel. The ill-housed and ill-fed poor were particularly vulnerable to dangerous

communicable diseases such as smallpox and typhoid fever, illnesses that also threatened the troops, their logistical base, and the defenses of Washington.

In May 1862, the military erected a small “pest house” south of St. Mary’s Cemetery for the quarantine of smallpox patients. In October, Alexandria’s new military governor appointed a first commissary to the contrabands, to oversee employment and rations, and the first physician to treat and vaccinate them. Such measures could not prevent all deaths, of course, and the military assumed the responsibility of burying poor refugees, black and white. For more than 65 years, Alexandria had maintained a public cemetery, “Penny Hill,” and that became a burying ground for contrabands, but mostly for those who had been Alexandria residents. At the south end of town, another graveyard sprang up around the pest house, initially intended for the interment of smallpox victims. It was probably in this, Alexandria’s first true “contraband” burying ground, that Randall Ward landed his first, ostensibly paying job.

As President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation at the beginning of 1863, the formerly enslaved carriage driver was now a government gravedigger responsible for interring his fellow African Americans. We know this because he was one of 75 freedpeople who were stiffed by the government on anywhere from one week’s to seven months’ wages for labor performed at the end of 1862 and the beginning of 1863. The former slaves were desperate for income, and the army took advantage of their influx by putting them to work—not always with their full consent—on the construction of fortifications and railroads and barracks, the maintenance of streets and hospitals, the operation of bakeries and sawmills and, perhaps most important, the transport of supplies. Sidney Burdge, a former New York City drayman and a convalescent soldier, was detailed to Alexandria’s provost marshal’s office to serve as a commissary and superintendent of contrabands. Between October 1862 and August 1863, he was responsible for organizing work crews, but he neglected to report many of the employees to the Quartermaster Department on the proper payment invoices. This issue remained unresolved even after the war, when those still unpaid appealed to the new Freedmen’s Bureau. The Bureau’s investigation concluded that it had no authority to compensate the wartime labor, but that the claims were just. “Those persons were employed at a time when the Small Pox was raging in this city and had it not been for their services... the consequences would have been fearful...” But the Quartermaster General closed the books on the two-and-a-half-year-old claims, opining, in spite of the evidence, that the people must have agreed to work for their keep alone.

The smallpox epidemic had indeed kept the gravediggers busy, with deaths peaking in the winter of 1862-1863 at about 150 burials a month. Randall Ward was joined in his labors by fellow freedmen Sam Baltimore, Isaac Fontleroy, John Parker and William Thomas.



A detail of an 1863 Coast and Geodetic Survey map showing the smallpox hospital or “pest house” south of Saint Mary’s “grave yard” and the Manassas Gap Railroad cut leading from Jones Point. A new graveyard grew up around the hospital, probably to its southwest on the high, flat area at the lower left of the image.

At least in summer, the crew would dig graves in the cool of the morning. Funerals, which meant their filling, would take place about 2 p.m. At work backfilling a single grave just after that hour on June 9, 1863, the crew’s eardrums were concussed by a blast from Ballenger’s Hill, a mile and a half west across Hunting Creek. Before the men could grasp what had happened, they found Randall on the ground, bloodied by a piece of cast-iron shrapnel. Eight tons of gunpowder and hundreds of shells had blown up at Fort Lyon, taking the “bomb-proof” north powder magazine and 22 artillerymen with it. Windows shattered in town, and plaster was knocked off walls. But Ward’s injury was superficial, and he was soon back to work. A short time later, he presented the jagged chunk of shell to Julia Wilbur, a Northern freedmen’s-aid worker and a collector of souvenirs.

The war dragged on, and the number of smallpox cases diminished as the population developed immunities through exposure to vaccination and to the disease itself. Both the treatment and burial of smallpox victims was increasingly shifted to the new

Claremont smallpox hospital south of Hunting Creek in Fairfax County. But fatalities persisted from many other causes. The deaths of more than 1,250 African-American residents were recorded during the period April 1862 through February 1864. The graveyard at the pest house was soon full. And Penny Hill, already crowded at the beginning of the war, was overflowing.

Alexandria's military governor ordered his health officer and a new superintendent of contrabands to select a suitable location for another burying ground. At the south end of town, Washington Street dwindled to a dirt track serving little more than the Catholic graveyard and the pest house. Facing Saint Mary's Cemetery, the men found a meadow that was among the parcels that had been seized as abandoned by a fleeing pro-Confederate owner. Randall Ward may have helped clear the land, but a contractor enclosed the plot with a fence and erected a shed to secure the gravediggers' equipment and to shelter the men in inclement weather. Ward was appointed head gravedigger of this new Freedmen's Cemetery, now leading a crew of two, Thomas Johnson and Hezekiah Ages, the latter a former slave from Fairfax County. The Quartermaster Department provided coffins and headboards, and the superintendent of contrabands' staff kept the records and performed funerals, the first of which took place March 7, 1864.



Gravediggers at Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1862. Timothy O'Sullivan photo. Library of Congress.

The laborers prepared graves in advance, as the freedpeople were interred quickly, the day of or the day after the reports of their deaths. An ambulance or hearse would deliver the body in a pine coffin along with a whitewashed headboard marked with the name of the deceased. The hearse driver or orderly would hand a written burial order to Randall Ward, but as Ward was illiterate, the number of burials authorized was indicated by "X" marks scribed on the back of the paper. The grounds crew lowered the dead into an open grave, probably about four feet deep, typically after a funeral officiated by Rev. Leland Warring, Rev. Eliphalet Owen or Rev. Peter Washington, subordinates of the superintendent of contrabands. The crew set the wooden marker upright at the head of the coffin, then backfilled the graves. The dirt was mounded up because of the added volume of the coffins and in anticipation of settlement when the rotting coffins collapsed. There is no mention of efforts to level, sod or beautify the graves, but Ward was undoubtedly tasked with maintaining the grounds, including its wood fencing, which was always a target of fuel-seeking soldiers and scavengers.

Eleven months after the graveyard opened, Randall was caught in the middle of a controversy over the burial of African-American soldiers. The prejudices of the military establishment and their white comrades had excluded all but a few black troops before mid 1863. But the Union's pressing need for more men coincided with a decision to strike at the heart of the slavery-based economy of the South, and the federal government now sought recruits among the recently emancipated as well as the previously free blacks. The army remained racially segregated, however, right down to its hospitals and burying grounds. In November 1863, the military authorities in Alexandria commenced construction of hospital barracks for African-American soldiers and civilians alike, replacing a small facility set up in a residence the prior February. The new L'Ouverture Hospital opened February 15, 1864, but it was not until almost three months later that its first military patient perished.

Private John Cooley had been mustered into the 27th U.S. Colored Infantry that March. The 23-year-old farm laborer had apparently escaped slavery in Virginia, enlisting in Ross County, Ohio. Cooley succumbed to a remittent fever, and his death raised a problem for the authorities: was he and his comrades to be interred in the Soldiers' Cemetery—established in 1862 and later designated Alexandria National Cemetery—or in Freedmen's Cemetery?

Rev. Albert Gladwin, Alexandria's superintendent of contrabands, conferred with Dr. Edwin Bentley, surgeon commanding the Second and Third Division general hospitals, including L'Ouverture and the medical affairs of the freedpeople. According to Gladwin, "it was then and there agreed that they should be buried in the new [Freedmen's] Cemetery, with military honors; and I was requested to act as chaplain in

such cases, which I did until a chaplain was appointed.” Cooley was accompanied to his final resting place by a white escort. His and subsequent burials were placed in a portion of the grounds separate from the civilians, “and neat and appropriate Headboards have already been obtained and set at most of the graves.” By the end of December, about 120 men had been interred there.

This kind of separate but supposedly equal treatment upset both the Quartermaster Department, which was generally responsible for military burials, and the U.S. Colored Troops convalescing at L’Ouverture Hospital, who ultimately demanded in writing to be buried alongside their white comrades as the appropriate honor for their shared sacrifice. Gladwin had the support of the military governor, Brigadier General John P. Slough, but Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs overruled him. On January 5, 1865, the military governor apprised Gladwin of his approval of the depot quartermaster’s request to re-inter the Freedmen’s Cemetery burials at the Soldiers’ Cemetery. Exhumation began the next day. Randall Ward and his men had to assist the gravediggers from the national cemetery, cutting through the frozen earth to retrieve the coffins they had laid months earlier, only to re-inter them a mile away in virgin clay. The emptied graves were soon refilled. Even subtracting these 122 or so soldiers, Freedmen’s Cemetery held nearly 600 burials by the end of the war.



The African-American grounds crew at Arlington National Cemetery, June 1864. Captain Andrew J. Russell photograph, courtesy of the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, a purchase of the Horace W. Goldsmith Fund.

With the Confederate surrender and the demobilization of most of the Union army, Alexandria's freedpeople endured a severe contraction of the labor market. Many men were separated from their families as they sought work elsewhere, mostly on farms. Destitution was as bad as at any time during the hostilities, although a new Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands and several freedmen's-aid societies assisted with food, fuel, clothing, housing, employment, education, legal help, medical treatment, and burial. Randall Ward had the grim good fortune of keeping his job as superintendent of Freedmen's Cemetery.

The pay was good relative to that of farm laborers, which was commonly fifteen dollars a month. Randall initially earned 25 dollars monthly—half the pay of the Freedmen's Bureau's white assistant superintendent for Alexandria. For the moment, he still led a burial crew of two, Joseph Stuart and Joseph Thompson, at twenty dollars each monthly. But the Bureau's scope and mere existence were continually questioned by Congress, and it was perpetually pressured to reduce costs. Although the death rate of Alexandria's freedpeople during the six months following the war nearly equaled that during the conflict's final year, the Bureau was forced to cut wages. Entering his fourth year of gravedigging, Ward's pay was reduced to twenty dollars, and his crew was thinned to a single assistant, Thomas Johnson, at fifteen dollars a month.

In his capacity as cemetery superintendent, Ward drew rations from the Freedmen's Bureau. He was also quartered at a nominal rent, first in No. 3 and then No. 25 in the Construction Barracks, now tenements run by the Bureau, but formerly the base of the laborers who had built and maintained the U.S. Military Railroad facilities. From the end of 1865 through March 1867, he made his home there with his family, but in April 1867 the buildings were auctioned for salvage. At this date, of the nearly 7,700 African Americans in Alexandria city and county, exclusive of the population of Freedman's Village, at least 400 were counted as destitute freedpeople, that is, without any means of support, a step down from the poverty of most. The formerly enslaved were increasingly thrown back upon their own scant resources, as all barracks were being dismantled, and rations for even the poorest were cut off in August. A municipal soup kitchen, supported by contributions of beef from the Bureau over the winter of 1867-1868, was the last of the food assistance. As other forms of aid were curtailed, the need to pay rent to a private landlord constituted another effective pay cut for Randall Ward, and a substantial one.

In early 1866, Randall's family was counted as two females—wife Betsey and daughter Lizzie—and one other male. His sister, Susan, had just moved out of their home in the barracks, but later that year Betsey Ward gave birth to a second daughter, Julia, likely named in honor of family friend, freedmen's-aid worker Julia Wilbur. The household's

other male was probably Randall's nephew and namesake, ten-year-old Randall Jackson. Emancipation did not signify immediate freedom for many, and the Freedmen's Bureau frequently received pleas for help releasing loved ones from their former masters. Ward himself had retrieved his nephew from Culpeper County—possibly from the Winstons or Fitzhughs—in August 1865. But such was the demand for farm labor and the disregard for the rights of the freedpeople that the younger Randall was stolen from the family again about New Year's Day 1868 by persons unknown. According to Randall Ward's information, the boy was spirited away to "five miles below Fredericksburg," that is, Spotsylvania County, the place of his uncle's nativity. Despite this specificity, the Freedmen's Bureau subassistant commissioner for Alexandria reported that "nothing is known here about the circumstances of this abduction." Ward begged the Bureau—his employer—for help, but oddly not until months after the disappearance. The diligent searches of Bureau agents in the vicinity of Fredericksburg produced no "tidings" of Jackson.

But Randall Jackson was far from the only one lost. Gone forever were another 600 freedpeople laid in the soil of Freedmen's Cemetery in 1866, 1867 and 1868. The tragedy of so many dying so soon after attaining freedom is compounded by the fact that most of the dead were children. African-American minister Leland Warring performed more than his share of their funerals, often traveling many miles from Alexandria to serve the freedpeople. Eleven months after the war, he confessed to the *American Baptist* newspaper, "When I look back... and see the number of 1,019 dead bodies which I have stood by as they were buried, methinks my time is nigh...."

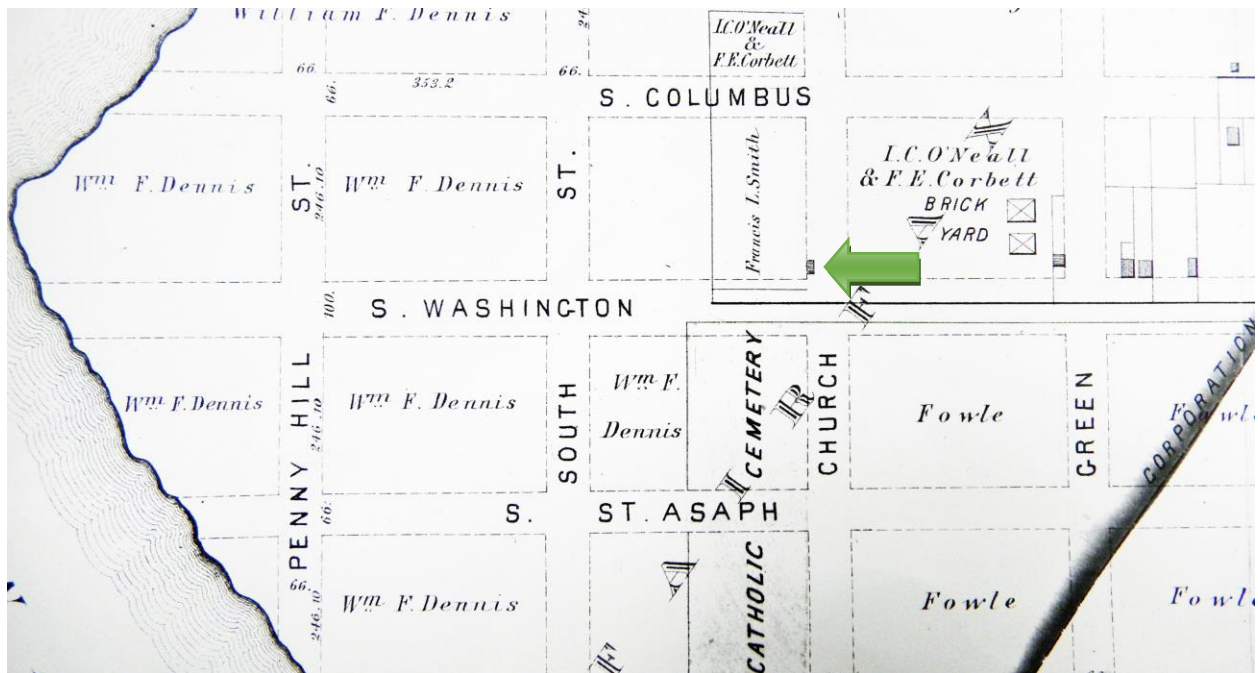
Still, the death rate was now dropping, and the Freedmen's Bureau was increasingly shifting interment duties to local authorities. At the end of August 1867, Randall Ward's assistant was let go and, on New Year's Eve 1868, Ward himself was fired. Congress had curtailed the mission of the Freedmen's Bureau, limiting its functions thereafter to the promotion of freedpeople's education. The cemetery lot was handed back to its former owner. Strangely, the Bureau recorded one last burial in Freedmen's Cemetery, on January 12, 1869, after it had officially closed. Millie Bailey, the 80-year-old mother of Amy Bailey and a neighbor of the former U.S. coal wharf, passed away and was laid to rest on South Washington Street. Especially as there were few formal burying grounds for African Americans in Alexandria until the 1880s, it is possible that others continued to be interred there. We do know that at least one headstone was later set in Freedmen's Cemetery, to replace a wooden marker that had rotted away. Landowner Francis Smith may have tacitly assented to continued use of the grounds, as a parcel already full of graves was of little economic use to him.

Because of his long experience as graveyard superintendent, it is a reasonable guess that Randall Ward dug Millie Bailey's grave. Randall was also a denizen of the neighborhood. When the Construction Barracks were razed in 1867 and his crew laid off, it is likely that his family (and their new dog) moved into the Freedmen Cemetery's tool house. Newspaper items of the 1870s and 1880s indicate that Randall lived along Washington Street "immediately opposite the entrance gate of the Catholic burying ground." Period maps depict few structures in that vicinity, and only one located between the two cemeteries. While owner Francis Smith again controlled the African-American graveyard, the 1877 Hopkins atlas suggests that its tool house stood not on Smith's land, but next to it, on an unopened section of Church Street. Randall would live and work in this area until the end of his days.

It was an out-of-the-way locale, near the southern extreme of town, where Washington Street narrowed to a lane and dead-ended. Formally it was an odd protuberance of Fairfax County, a remnant of the annexation of Alexandria to a new District of Columbia in the 1790s. When the lands south of the Potomac were retroceded to Virginia in the 1840s, the former District boundary still slashed across the lower end of the town's street grid. Because he resided outside the corporation limits, Ward does not appear in the city's property tax records or even directories. An obscure figure in an obscure corner, we learn little of his later life except through some quirky news items.

Ward's neighborhood was frequented mainly by employees of the adjacent brickyard and visitors to the Catholic cemetery. But like water finds its way into every cranny, trouble finds its way to every corner. In February 1870, a fellow freedman by the name of Davis Gibbs brought his dog by the Ward house and "set it upon" Randall's own pet. When Randall offered a few choice words of remonstrance, Gibbs threatened to whip him. Ward took the threat seriously enough to report the incident to the authorities. Meant literally or not, he would not submit to be whipped again in this life. Of course, the violence could go the other way, too. Toward the end of 1873, Randall got into a donnybrook with another man on Franklin Street, three blocks north of his home. It seems he received the worst of it, because this time he returned to his dwelling and quickly "reappeared armed with a gun which he threatened to use, but which was taken away from him before the threat was put into execution." No one was headed for the cemetery that day. That Randall stayed his hand suggests he ultimately meant no harm—or at least realized the potential cost of his rashness. Whether or not he had a clear conscience, he slept soundly. Several years later, a burglar carried off his stove and other household goods in the middle of the night. "The old man said to day," the *Alexandria Gazette* mimicked, "'When I riz this morning I actually didn't know I was in my own house, it was so cleared out.'"

Randall Ward's next job would be about two blocks away, at a familiar location across some fields and the Manassas Gap Railroad cut. An outbreak of smallpox in 1872 induced Alexandria's city council to re-establish a quarantine hospital, something that had been put off for years. Despite complaints from Washington Street residents, the city rented from William F. Dennis the war-era pest house south of St. Mary's Cemetery. Sometimes referred to as the Bromilaw Hospital, it was again in operation from the end of 1872 into 1874. It must have been a somber place, especially to its patients, as it was still surrounded by the slumping graves that Randall Ward had excavated and filled years earlier. But now the former gravedigger was engaged as the hospital's head nurse, at a wage of \$20 per month, laboring alongside his old co-worker Joseph Stuart when the caseload was heavy. Susan Scott cooked for the establishment, and Louis Dudley had at least occasional burial duties. Three white doctors attended patients at different times, but treatments were largely palliative. Smallpox vaccines had been introduced, but once a patient was afflicted, medicine offered no remedy and little help beyond possibly ameliorating the fevers and skin eruptions.



A detail of southeastern Alexandria from the 1877 G.M. Hopkins City Atlas of Alexandria, Va. Freedmen's Cemetery was located on the lot identified as belonging to Francis L. Smith. The only building shown in its vicinity is the tiny house in the unopened Church Street right-of-way, indicated by the green arrow. A brickyard lay on both the north and west sides of the African-American burying ground. The Alexandria/Fairfax County boundary runs across the lower right of the image. The mapmaker omitted a depiction of the former smallpox hospital, which stood on William Dennis's land south (left) of the "Catholic Cemetery." At least four of the five jobs Randall Ward held in Alexandria were located in the neighborhood shown, and he resided here as much as thirteen of his eighteen years in town.

Whites tended to associate smallpox with the poor, and particularly with blacks, and blamed them as its source. Of course, living in drafty, overcrowded housing, with limited access to basics like food, health care and heating and cooking fuel, the poor did prove more susceptible. On the other hand, wealthier whites generally had less exposure and could afford private care. The visibility of cases among the freedpeople encouraged in defenders of the old order the theory that smallpox was a natural consequence of emancipation, that the former slaves would die off without both hard work and care at the direction of their former masters.

In city council debates over the potential appointment of an official smallpox doctor, alderman J.B. Johnson, a physician who ultimately treated several victims of the disease himself, opined that “[t]he idea of hiring a man to go among small-pox patients and after getting his clothes, hair, whiskers, and even his breath, filled with contagion, to circulate at large among the healthy people of the city, and be a walking pestilence, was more than ridiculous, it was simply outrageous.” Thus, just as during the war, only African Americans appeared willing—and perhaps were the only ones permitted—to staff the smallpox hospitals. Each laborer had presumably been inoculated or had previously contracted the disease. But unlike the white doctors, Randall Ward and his colleagues were probably restricted in their movements, so as not to spread the virus. Still, Ward was again in a position of considerable responsibility—and grueling labor.

The quarantine hospital closed in 1874, to be re-opened for a similar crisis in the early 1880s before being abandoned. Randall had to hit the bricks again—and took employment with a brickyard that virtually wrapped around his house. First operated by Tucker and Lucas, the yard was purchased by O’Neill and Corbett in the early 1870s. Perhaps Randall molded bricks, but it is likely that he was again digging, this time collecting their raw ingredient. The lot immediately west of Freedmen’s Cemetery was one of the company’s borrow pits; in the 1890s, the extent of clay extraction and erosion would expose several of the 30-year-old coffins there.

Shortly after starting his job, Randall suffered a shattering personal tragedy. As night fell on October 8, 1874, he was presumably still at work while wife Betsey was home with their two girls. Betsey must have already lit a coal-oil lamp before she realized its font needed refilling. As it would have been dark indoors already, she did not extinguish the light while pouring from the oil can. The flame must have ignited the fumes, and the lamp exploded, engulfing her clothes in fire. Betsey had no neighbors to render aid, and young Lizzie and Julia, helpless to save their mother, witnessed a true horror. Two hysterical children met the returning Randall, and he discovered his beloved Betsey “lying on the floor with her clothing entirely consumed, and the flesh on her body, from her knees up to the crown of her head, burned to a crisp.” Dr. J.B.

Johnson tried to treat her or at least ease her suffering, but Betsey would have been better off dying instantly. Even twenty-first-century medicine may have offered no cure for such extensive third-degree burns, and she perished after nearly a full day of agony.

Randall still had two children to raise, one about thirteen years old and one eight, and that responsibility may have prompted his remarriage little more than ten months later. There is some confusion as to the identity of his wife. An August 1875 marriage license for “Randolph” Ward gives the name of his spouse-to-be as Matilda Wilson, the 40- to 42-year-old widow of Alexandria laborer William Wilson. Matilda was born in Fauquier County to Randolph and Agnes Wormley. She had two children of her own, but they were now in their early twenties. But there is another record that suggests that Randall’s second wife was named Caroline. This source is Caroline Ward’s death certificate, which identifies her husband as next of kin. It is possible that Matilda and Caroline are one and the same, as their stated ages were close. In any case, we know that Caroline, wife of Randall, passed away in the dead of winter, January 3, 1878, a victim of pneumonia, an affliction common enough among the poorly housed community of freedpeople. The Wards were again traumatized by the sudden loss of a wife and mother.

His middle age waning, Randall was now employed at farm labor, his final occupation, and the motherless Lizzie and Julia were forced by circumstances to become largely self-reliant. The girls probably received a rudimentary education at the public Hallowell School for African-American girls, fourteen block distant, before keeping house for their father and for white families.²

Their father’s decades of labor had been only one piece of a hard life. In late October 1880, an illness uncharacteristically kept him home from work. Maybe a fire had been left lit for cooking. Or perhaps, with his stove recently stolen, the ailing man had an open fire for warmth on a rainy, windy autumn day. Whatever their source, at about one o’clock on the afternoon of the 28th, flames spread to the walls, quickly consuming the dwelling. Rescuers dragged Randall out, but not before he was severely burned. The incident was hastily published in the evening newspaper, initially misreported as two vacant shanties destroyed by fire. Correcting the mistakes in subsequent issues, the papers noted that Ward’s wife had burned to death in the same house years before. Like Betsey, Randall lingered in critical condition and excruciating pain—not for one day, but three. On Halloween night, he passed to the other side.

² It is known that Lizzie and Julia were employed as domestics as adults, but maids commonly began their careers as teenagers.

A man who had witnessed so much death finally met his own. Despite the extensive documentation of burials in Alexandria, the spot where Randall Ward was laid to rest is a mystery. It would be nice to think that some African-American gravedigger helped sneak him into the defunct Freedmen's Cemetery, as Randall had likely done for Millie Bailey, and that he lays there still among his neighbors, his people, in the graveyard lane.

Tim Dennee, 2017

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