



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### An early civil rights petition

*Alexandria Times, November 3, 2022*

**A**wreath-laying ceremony will be held on Nov. 6 at Alexandria National Cemetery, located at 1450 Wilkes St. from 1 to 3 p.m. in honor of the troops who answered their country's call to fight for freedom and paid the ultimate price.

Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863. Many people don't realize that the Emancipation Proclamation also allowed African American men to enlist in the United States Army, and thousands took that opportunity. African American men who enlisted often faced discrimination, inferior supplies and officers who doubted their combat capabilities. In 1864, 443 soldiers signed a petition here in Alexandria, insisting they should be buried with their white counterparts in Alexandria National Cemetery.

At the time of the petition, African American soldiers who died in Alexandria were buried in the Contrabands or Freedmen's Cemetery at the insistence of the Superintendent of Contrabands, Minister Albert Gladwin. The first soldier Gladwin buried at Freedmen's was John Cooley on May 5, 1864. The majority of African American military combat casualties came in the July 30,

1864 Battle of the Crater, and many of the injured were brought from Petersburg to Alexandria. The 23rd U.S. Colored Infantry of Indiana, the only regiment recruited in Indiana, lost 33 soldiers in Alexandria, more than any other regiment of USCT. Gladwin continued to insist on burying African American soldiers at Freedmen's until Dec. 27, 1864. The petitioners felt that the new Soldier's Cemetery, now Alexandria National Cemetery, where white soldiers were buried, was the proper place for their burial as well. The petition and insistence of African American soldiers in L'Ouverture hospital gained the support of JCG Lee, a white Union captain. Captain Lee wrote in a letter:

Mr. Gladwin, Superintendent of Freedmen at this place has caused the interment of colored soldiers be made at the contraband burying-ground. This ground is not owned by the U.S., is not fenced, ...nor is it taken care of. Yesterday ... while the hearse and the escort were proceeding to the military cemetery, Mr. Gladwin and a party of soldiers arrested my driver, took him from my hearse and drove it where they pleased.

The diary of Julia Wilbur, a nurse who volunteered in Alexandria for the majority of the war, is perhaps the most complete picture of life in our city during the Civil War. She corroborates Lee's account and records multiple confrontations between Superintendent Gladwin and other military authorities over



*In 1864, 443 Black soldiers signed a petition insisting to be buried with their white counterparts in Alexandria National Cemetery. Photo/National Archives.*



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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the burial of African American soldiers in Freedmen's Cemetery, even after the signing of the petition on Dec. 27, 1864.

The signing of the petition meant that 118 African American soldiers had to be disinterred from Freedmen's Cemetery and re-interred in Alexandria National Cemetery between Jan. 6 and 17, 1865 to rest alongside their comrades in arms. Of the 443 signatories to the L'Ouverture Petition, 23 are buried in Alexandria National Cemetery. Thanks to their standing up for their rights, more than 250 USCT are interred in the cemetery today.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.*