

Alexandria Times

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Lillie Finklea: modern Alexandria preservationist

Today, Alexandria residents and visitors experience the lasting impact of Lillie Finklea's work when they visit Alexandria's Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial. Through the perseverance of Finklea for 20 years, this powerful Memorial honoring the more than 1,700 Contrabands – self-emancipated men, women and children – who are buried there became a reality.

Finklea's endeavor to bring this important era of Black History to public awareness exemplifies how citizens can become change agents in their communities. Her goal was simple: to give the people buried in the cemetery the same dignity in rest as those buried at St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery across the street.

Finklea was educated in the Alexandria school system; she attended Lyles-Crouch Elementary and Parker-Gray High School. After working for 30 years with the Federal Government, she continued to work and volunteer in Alexandria.

Through her volunteer work with Alexandria Archaeology, Finklea learned about the history of Contrabands in Alexandria and their desecrated burial ground at the corner of South Washington and Church Streets. Finklea



PHOTO/HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

Lillie Finklea (in white hat) and Louise Massoud at the 2007 rededication of the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial.

and her friend Louise Massoud established Friends of the Freedmen's Cemetery in 1997.

Meeting in the Alexandria Black History Museum, they created a website, organized annual remembrances at the cemetery site – then covered by a gas station and office building – when there weren't any visible headstones, curated an exhibition at the ABHM, and worked with city leaders to fight for the preservation of the site and the creation of a memorial.

Finklea was always fascinated by the Civil War history of those who escaped slavery to find independence with the Union forces in Alexandria. She was especially moved by the lives of those who risked

everything for freedom but did not get to live long in it.

Finklea was particularly outraged by the proposal by the federal government to buy the property that contained the cemetery, use it as a temporary roadway during construction on the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, and then resell it. Finklea and the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery convinced the City of Alexandria to purchase the land and rededicate it as a cemetery.

On Sept. 6, 2014, when the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial was officially dedicated and open to the public, Finklea and Massoud were the first citizens to enter the Memorial. In July 2021, the National Park Ser-

vice entered the Memorial into its African American Civil Rights Network – an honor that has its foundation in Finklea's fight to preserve African American history in our city.

Lillie Finklea passed away on Dec. 22, 2022. She is missed by many in Alexandria who had the pleasure of working with her and becoming her friend. Former City Archaeologist Pam Cressey paid tribute to Finklea in February's Alexandria Historical Society Newsletter, writing:

"I was often moved by Lillie's profound faith in what was right. She stood as a citizen with no technical expertise initially, speaking to panels of experts. Yet she spoke with conviction and carried on even when others saw no importance in her message."

Alexandria's preservation of its history owes an incalculable debt to Lillie Finklea.

In honor of Women's History Month, we invite you to read our series on women's history in Alexandria throughout the month of March. For more on Women's History in Alexandria, please visit <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic-alexandria/womens-history-in-alexandria>.

Out of the Attic is provided by The Office of Historic Alexandria.