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# Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery

Early historic preservation efforts focused on old buildings, such as the Gadsby's Tavern buildings, the Lyceum and the Carlyle House. Later efforts directed their attention to preserving cemeteries. The Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery on the corner of South Washington Street and Church Street is the most prominent example of the preservation and restoration of a cemetery in the city.

First used in 1864, the Cemetery initially served as a final resting place for formerly enslaved persons who had sought the protection of the Union Army in Alexandria. It was also used briefly for the burial of soldiers who had served in the United States Colored Troops, but a petition signed by 443 African American servicemen convinced the Quartermaster General to bury the remains of African American soldiers in the Alexandria National Cemetery.

In January 1865, 118 African Americans who had died serving the United States had to be disinterred from the Freedmen Cemetery and reburied at Alexandria National Cemetery. The majority of civilians buried in the Cemetery were either elderly or children who succumbed to disease in unsanitary housing situations

in Alexandria.

The Union Army's lack of preparation to house large numbers of civilians made the encampment of formerly enslaved people a humanitarian crisis. The last burial in the Cemetery was in 1869.

Over time, the Cemetery received less and less care, and the property was sold to the Catholic Diocese of Richmond in 1917. In 1946, the City of Alexandria rezoned the property for commercial use, and that same year, the Diocese sold the parcel with the stipulation that it not be used as an automobile service station. In 1955, the new owners built a service station on the very same property.

Residents did not forget the Cemetery, but officially, the City government did. 1948 was the last year the Cemetery was listed on a city map for almost 60 years. In 1987, City historian T. Michael Miller rediscovered the Cemetery's location in an 1894 Alexandria Gazette article.

That discovery and the 1995 publication of the Gladwin Record – a list of burials in the Cemetery – spurred Alexandrians to demand that the City repurchase and restore the Cemetery. The Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery, led by Lillie Finklea and Louise Masoud, formed in 1997 to keep the Cemetery in public con-



PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

The Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial.

sciousness. They successfully petitioned for a Virginia Highway Marker to be erected in 2000.

Even before the City of Alexandria repurchased the property in 2007, Alexandria Archaeology, led at the time by Pamela Cressey, did extensive work first to confirm the presence of burials, and later to identify the burial locations.

With the help of federal funds, the City of Alexandria rededicated the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery in 2007. In 2014, it dedicated the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial, composed of artist Mario Chiodo's sculpture "The Path of Thorns and Roses," an allegorical depiction of the struggle for freedom, and local sculptor Joanna

Blake's bas-reliefs depicting the flight to freedom.

In 2015, National Park Service added the Cemetery to its National Underground Network to Freedom, and in 2021, the Park Service also included it in the African American Civil Rights Network.

May is National Preservation Month. Find out more about what Historic Alexandria is doing to celebrate at alexandriava.gov/news-oha/2023-05-01/preservation-month-in-historic-alexandria. Learn more about the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery at alexandriava.gov/FreedmenMemorial#CeremoniesattheMemorial.

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