

# CONTRABANDS AND FREEDMEN Cemetery Memorial



*“We must always remember  
the sacrifices of those laid to rest here.”*

– Lillie Finklea, Friends of Freedmen’s Cemetery

## THE MEMORIAL

The Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial is a sacred site dedicated to honoring more than 1,700 individuals of African descent who died in Alexandria during and immediately following the Civil War. By reclaiming this nearly forgotten burial ground and preserving the hundreds of graves that have survived, we remember and pay tribute to the dignity, perseverance, and courage of Alexandria’s freed Black men, women, and children.



*The Path of  
Thorns and Roses,  
by Mario Chiodo.*

# CONTRABANDS AND FREEDMEN Cemetery Memorial

In 2014, the City of Alexandria dedicated the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial, which restored honor and dignity to the final resting place of a forgotten people. Through the efforts of the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery, descendants, archaeologists, historians, and the City of Alexandria, this cemetery is now a place of remembrance and reflection.

## 1 SCULPTURE

The bronze statue serves as a focal point that beckons visitors into the memorial. *The Path of Thorns and Roses*, designed by Mario Chiodo, portrays a spiraling journey through Oppression, Struggle, Sacrifice, Loss, and Compassion. It culminates in Hope, as depicted by the sculpture's highest figure holding a rose that has yet to bloom.

## 2 PLACE OF REMEMBRANCE

Stone walls enclose a plaza for reflection and display bronze tablets inscribed with the names of those buried in the cemetery as written in the original record book. Icons are installed as descendants are identified, making this a living memorial. Interpretive panels provide insight into the lives and contributions of the Contrabands and Freedmen who made their way to Alexandria.

## 3 MEMORIAL FENCE

The metal fence around the memorial echoes the design of the original white wooden picket enclosure thought to have surrounded Soldiers' Cemetery (today known as Alexandria National Cemetery) during the Civil War. The arched entrance to the memorial reminds visitors of the arches depicted in photographs of Union soldiers' encampments in Alexandria during the war.

## 4 CENTRAL PATH

Archaeological investigations at the site discovered evidence of a path that was likely used by carts carrying the dead. Appropriately, it became the pathway into the Memorial.

## 5 GRAVESTONES

Rows of stones flush with the ground mark the locations of graves discovered by archaeologists. Of the 1,711 burials known to be present on the site from historical records, archaeological investigations identified 631. Additional burials are likely present in areas not tested archaeologically. Each is marked to ensure future preservation. On the south side of the path, five hexagonal shapes reminiscent of the outlines of the underlying coffins delineate two adults and three children. The smaller outlines underscore the vulnerability of infants and children under the age of 16, who comprise more than fifty percent of the burials.

## 6 NATIVE AMERICAN SITE MARKER

Archaeological investigations discovered thousands of stone artifacts in the cemetery, including a possible Clovis spear point, made as early as 13,000-years ago. These finds reveal that Native Americans camped and made tools for millennia on this bluff overlooking Hunting Creek.

## 7 U.S. COLORED TROOPS MARKER

As a result of a December 1864 protest and petition by USCT soldiers, African American troops buried in this section of the cemetery were moved to the military burial ground now known as Alexandria National Cemetery in 1865. This event is recognized as one of the earliest civil rights actions in Alexandria. The cemetery is included in the national African American Civil Rights Network.

"	"	ELLA STANTON
"	-12	CHARLES GIBSON
"	-15	Stillborn infant of Jane Madden
"	2-1	Stillborn infant of Polly Ann Parker
"	"	Stillborn infant of Emma Harrington
"	"	SARAH FRANCES HOLL
"	29	Stillborn child of Mary Willis
May	-1	HENRIETTE DOUGLAS
"	2	HENRY MOORE
"	"	BETTY SANDERS
"	"	WILLIAM SMITH
"	7	THORNTON HOLMES

Officials recorded the names of those buried in the cemetery. These entries are inscribed in bronze. Genealogical research has identified the people with living descendants.

## 8 SIDEWALK MARKERS

Historically, South Washington Street was a narrow path. The cemetery extended farther east into what is now the road. Archaeological excavations discovered numerous graves under the sidewalk and into the street. Known grave locations are marked with a stone brick in the sidewalk.

## 9 HISTORIC INTERPRETATION SIGN

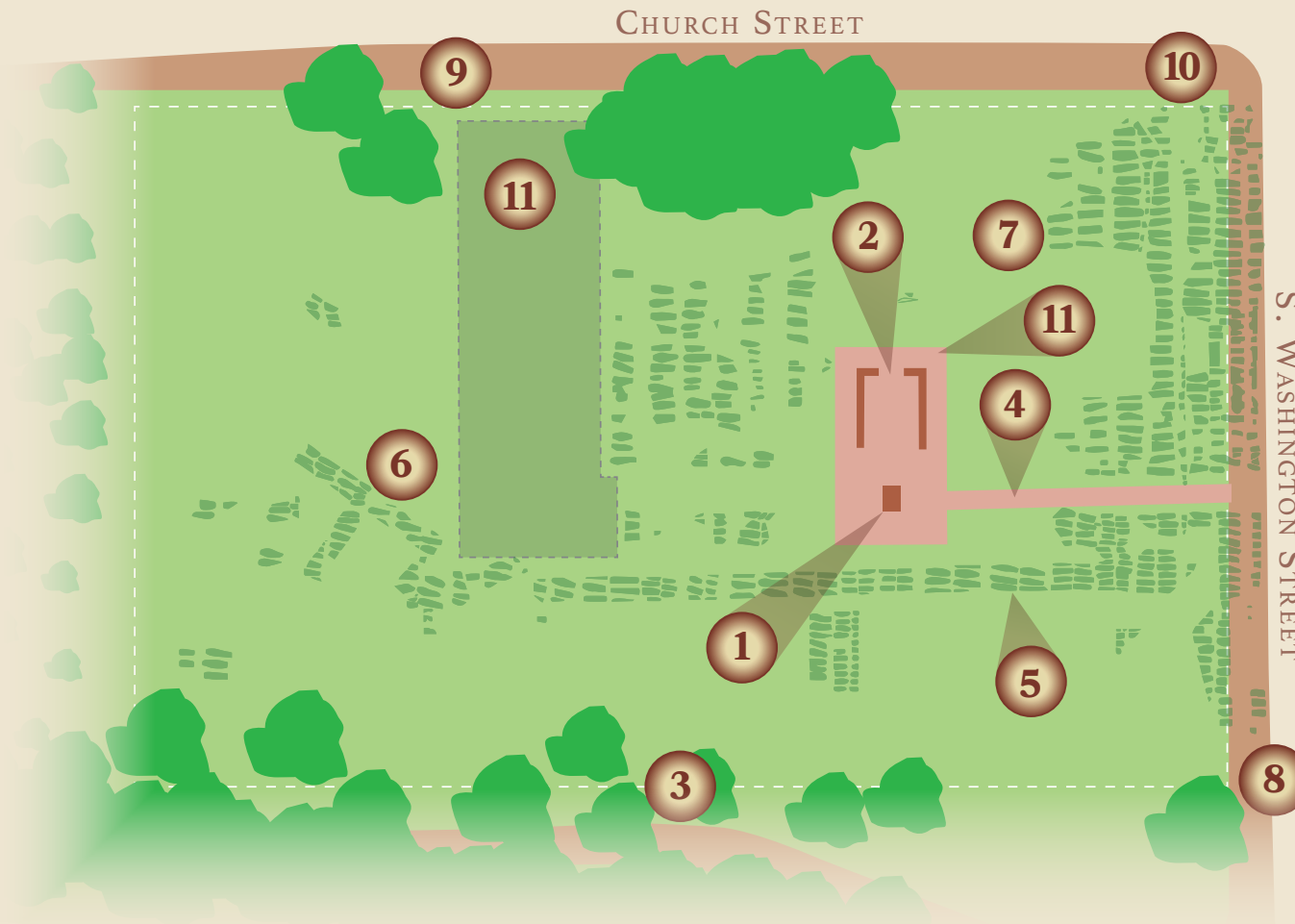
Learn more about the cemetery's history and preservation on this interpretive panel.

## 10 STATE HIGHWAY MARKER

Founded in 1997, the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery formed to preserve, commemorate, and study what was, at the time, a little-known Civil War era African American burying ground. Part of their efforts to bring recognition to the site included the installation of the state historical highway marker in 2000.

## 11 REMNANTS OF DISTURBANCE AND DESECRATION

The remains of a former gas station and office building chronicle the losses and mistreatment of the cemetery. The foundations of these buildings remain in place to protect the graves presumed to be below. The Place of Remembrance stands on the foundations of the gas station, the gas tanks of which destroyed many graves. The historic boundaries of the cemetery remain uncertain due to additional desecrations that occurred over time.



# THE HISTORY

The story of the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial begins with the self-emancipation of enslaved people. The Civil War ravaged the fabric of established communities in the South. Thousands of African Americans escaping slavery sought refuge behind Union lines in Alexandria, Virginia.

The influx of freedom-seekers overwhelmed the town. Rampant disease and deprivation took their toll on the many who had survived slavery, but did not live long in their freedom. In 1864, the military government created this cemetery, managing it until 1869. It became the final resting place for these African Americans. Government officials recorded their names in a book preserved in the Library of Virginia in Richmond.

The cemetery began to fall victim to neglect and desecration by the end of the 19th century. The story of the cemetery—and of those laid to rest there—was all but lost. Chance discoveries by historians launched a decades-long campaign by local activists to reclaim the sacred ground. Their vision became reality as a result of the reconstruction of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. This federal project necessitated evaluation and mitigation of the effects of the construction on the significant historical and archaeological site.

Today, the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial honors African American people's contributions to Alexandria and the legacy of freedom personified by their descendants.



Learning to read at an Alexandria freedmen's school

A bas-relief inside the Place of Remembrance, by artist Joanna Blake, depicts the importance of education to the freedom-seekers.

# VISITING THE MEMORIAL

The Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial is a solemn and reverent place, offering opportunities for reflection, commemoration, education, and the search for cultural identity. Memorialization of the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery was made possible by the City of Alexandria, Federal Highway Administration, Virginia Department of Transportation, and the National Park Service.

**HOURS:** Open dawn to dusk



## CONTRABANDS AND FREEDMEN CEMETERY MEMORIAL

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[alexandriava.gov/FreedmenMemorial](http://alexandriava.gov/FreedmenMemorial)



Office of Historic Alexandria  
Photography by Anna Frame