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Contrabands and Freedmen Memorial marks 10th anniversary

In a 2020 essay on Richmond's East End Cemetery, Kiki Petrosino posed an important question. The poet and University of Virginia professor asked: "How does a community lose its memory?" The answer offered by Petrosino could be applied to many cemeteries, including the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery.

"Decades of segregation, discrimination, and institutional racism have worked their way like creeping vines, prising basic infrastructure and financial resources from local areas. Throughout the twentieth century, as families departed the South for opportunities in the industrialized North and Midwest, untold numbers of ancestral cemeteries fell into obscurity," Petrosino wrote.

Before the years of work by concerned citizens like Lillie

Finklea and Louise Massoud, the former cemetery languished under a gas station and small office building. Today, it is a space of reflection in memory of and tribute to those who sought freedom from slavery in Union occupied Alexandria, known as contrabands of war.

Historian Chandra Manning described the contraband camps sites as "created opportunities for Union soldiers to converse with black men and women as fellow human beings, and not as abstractions."

Audrey Davis, the director of African American History for the city, zeroed in on the despair of the contraband camps, where orphaned children were conscripted to care for those suffering from smallpox: "They literally didn't have blankets." Many of these contrabands of war perished and were bur-

ied on land along what is now South Washington Street.

In 1917, the archdiocese of Richmond, then in charge of the cemetery, sold it with the promise that the area would never be devoted to the sale of alcohol or a gas station. Unfortunately, that agreement would be broken.

After years lost to development and later years of recovery, the site was formally dedicated as the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery and Memorial in 2014.

At the center of the site is the commanding sculpture: The Path of Thorns and Roses by Mario Chiodo. Davis has said the statue is "about the burden and the power of grief, but the ability to heal and find hope eventually."

This weekend this healing process continues with ac-



PHOTO/HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

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

tivities set to mark a decade since the site has been rededicated. For more information on the scheduled anniversary events, visit: alexandriava.gov/FreedmenMemorial

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