

## A walk through Black history

**Saturday ceremony to officially launch updated African American Heritage Trail**  
BY WAFIR SALIH

On Saturday, the African American Heritage Trail Committee will gather at Founders Park for the unveiling of 11 new signs and two orientation panels installed along the waterfront. These signs are a showcase of various historical facts and paint a complex history of what African Americans faced in Alexandria since, and even prior to, the city's founding.

Jeanene Harris, the communications specialist for the Office of Historic Alexandria, extended an invitation to the public to attend the ceremony.

"We encourage the public to join in this ribbon-cutting ceremony and discover history as we confront the city's past, make progress together and inspire future generations," Harris said in an email to the Times.

Audrey Davis, director of the city's African American History Division, underscored the importance of exploring

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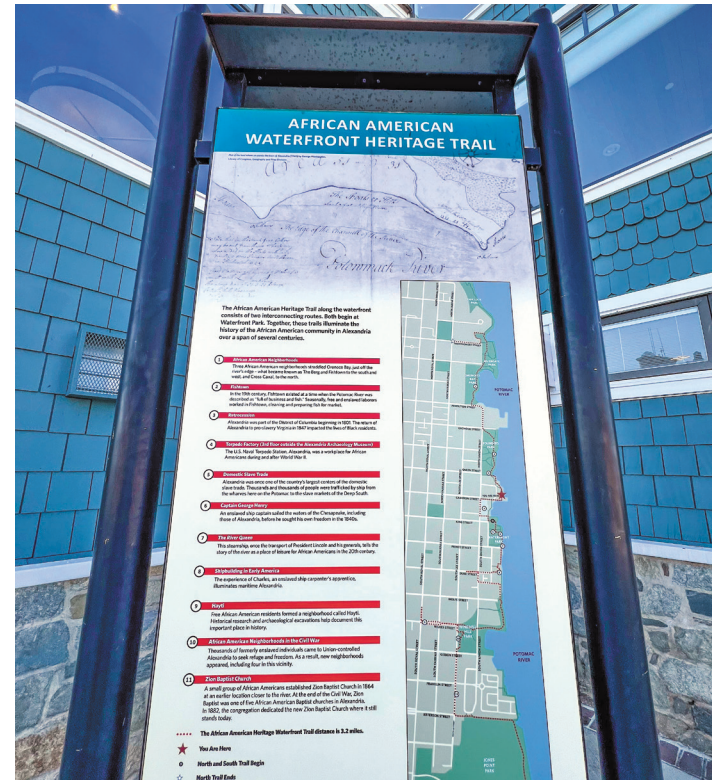
PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

The February 10 ribbon-cutting ceremony will take place by the new "Fishtown" sign.



PHOTO/CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

Trailgoers pause to explore one of the new informative signs.



PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

One of the new orientation panels made to guide trailgoers.

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and recognizing the wide spectrum of Black history.

“We are more than just being bound in bondage,” Davis said. “There is more about Black life that people don’t realize or don’t think about in the 19th century or even in the 18th century.”

In the 1820s, Alexandria was the site of the largest domestic slave trading firm, a grim chapter in the city’s past.

“People don’t realize that places like Duke Street were the hub for the domestic slave

trade in Alexandria,” Davis said. “When you talk about the domestic slave trade, you talk about the enslaved who have now been here in America for generations, and the fact that the people who are owning them can no longer afford to keep them – so they sell them to dealers like Franklin and Armfield.”

City Archaeologist Eleanor Breen said there was a lengthy research process during development of these signs.

“We used everything that we had at our disposal,” Breen said. “That means pri-

mary sources like historic documents, archaeological information that we’ve uncovered along the waterfront, even oral history that tells us about people’s experiences in the recent past. We also use a lot of maps that show how Alexandria has changed over time.”

Gwen Day-Fuller, a member of the Trail Committee and daughter of legendary Alexandrian Ferdinand Day, spoke about why she joined the committee.

“There’s so many treasures of Black history in Alexandria that still need to be uncov-

ered. All of those signs really give some input into what was going on in Alexandria that we really didn’t have any idea of growing up,” Day-Fuller said. “The idea that any of that history would ever be covered up, lost or not talked about just really upsets me.”

Davis and Day-Fuller both urged those planning on walking the trail to check out the official website regarding the heritage trail to get a sense of what’s in store and plan ahead.

**Journey through time**

The first sign on the trail, titled “African American Neighborhoods” introduces The Berg, a neighborhood in Alexandria where many freed slaves fled to during the Civil War. The sign provides context to the naming of the city and includes a 1902 map of the neighborhood and the Potomac River.

Jumping ahead to the 20th century, the sign includes a brief snippet about Earl Lloyd, the first African American basketball player to join the National Basketball Association, and how he grew up in The



**AUDREY DAVIS**

Berg and attended Parker-Gray High School in 1940.

“I feel lucky enough to have known him when he was alive,” Davis said. “Earl Lloyd was known for his talent even as a young man, but then when he achieved real legendary status through his history in the NBA, it’s something that every person in Alexandria, Black or white, can look to with fond memories.”

Further along, the “Fish-town” sign is placed in Founders Park. It highlights how not only fish was a dietary staple for Alexandrians, but it was also a major part of the economy and how African Americans were deeply involved in

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the process. It notes how enslaved Africans, and free Africans – who were employed – would gut, clean and salt fish. An image accompanying the sign shows a group of African American women diligently preparing fish by the wharf.

As the path unfolds, the sign marked “Retrosession” comes into view and offers a glimpse into a controversial moment in Alexandria’s history. The sign notes the city’s transition back to Virginia after it had joined with Washington, D.C. Black Alexandrians were fearful of the city retreating as they would lose access to privileges like freedom of assembly and being able to attend school – a privilege those residents gained when Alexandria had become a part of the District of Columbia.

In 1846, President James K. Polk signed the Retrosession Act, which marked Alexandria’s return to Virginia the following year.

“It’s really interesting for



**GWEN DAY-FULLER**

people to learn about retrosession and how [when] boundaries change, people’s lives change. When Alexandria retreated back to Virginia, it sort of enabled us to be a greater part of the of the slave trade,” Davis said.

Toward the end of the trail we reach the “George Henry” sign. Henry’s situation is unusual in the sense that while he was enslaved, he was also a ship captain of the HMS Llewellyn. Because of his captain status, he had a degree of flexibility and freedom that many who shared his fate as a slave did not.

The sign notes an instance in which Henry met with Sally Griffith, the owner of the

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Llewellyn, and was disrespected by her, which prompted him to leave his life in Alexandria behind and escape to Philadelphia.

“When she disrespects him for just forgetting to take off his hat, he’s done,” Davis said.

“It’s just like, ‘I’ve had enough, I’m walking away and I’m not taking anything from you. I’m just taking what is exactly my property and I’m taking that risk to go for freedom.’”

The sign at the end of the trail is titled “Zion Baptist Church,” and highlights how Black churches played a key role as a meeting place and safe haven.

“[Black] churches were the only truly safe spaces that you had when you were Af-

rican American,” Davis said. “I think about the lynchings that occurred here in Alexandria in 1897 and 1899 and the churches providing a safe harbor for people who were scared.”

Day-Fuller also said the church was integral – and continues to be – to the African American community in Alexandria.

“My family had real close ties to Zion Church. I’m Catholic, but that church being there in that community and remaining there is still so important,” Day-Fuller said. “A lot of political things from what I can understand happened in that church.”

### The steps ahead

As the city prepares to cel-

ebate these new historical markers, the African American Heritage Trail Committee is planning to continue working together on future projects and possible ways to expand the trail.

“There’s so much more to know about Alexandria’s history,” Breen said. “We intend as the committee to stick together and to continue to explore and uncover and highlight African American history on the waterfront, but also throughout the city.”

The committee plans for its next project to be in collaboration with the Toni Morrison society and their “Bench by The Road” initiative, in which a memorial bench will be installed by the waterfront.

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PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

Founders Park is an early stop on the African American Heritage Trail.