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Alexandria Community Media

City preserves Douglass Memorial Cemetery

The Douglass Cemetery Association established Douglass Memorial Cemetery in 1895 as a segregated, nondenominational African American cemetery named in memory of Frederick Douglass. Douglass Memorial Cemetery was one of the last of 13 cemeteries established in the Wilkes Street Cemetery complex.

Careful and systematic research of historical records suggests that over 2,200 people were buried in Douglass Memorial Cemetery, making it Alexandria's largest African American cemetery. The cemetery's final interment occurred in 1975.

In October 1895, the Alexandria Gazette reported: "A force of workmen is employed in opening the walks, grading the ground and grading an entrance at the new Douglass Memorial cemetery for colored people, on the western outskirts of the city. The owners of the property [are] preparing to erect a monument in the center of the cemetery to the memory of Fred. Douglass."

By early 1896, newspaper reports listed five African American cemetery trustees who intended "to make the cemetery a very handsome one," along with plans to erect a life-sized statue in memorial of Frederick Douglass, who had died the year prior. Evident in this news report is the sense of pride in the establishment of this sacred space for Alexandria's Black community.

Like many Black cemeteries in Virginia and across the country, Douglass Memorial Cemetery has faced several preservation issues that threaten its integrity as a significant sacred and historic site. One of the most severe and visible of these poor conditions are the gravestones – many of which are broken, cracked, sunken or toppled.

With partial funding from the Virginia Historical African American Cemetery and Graves Fund, the Office of Historic Alexandria has worked closely in partnership with Friends of Douglass Cemetery and the Social Responsibility Group to improve the conditions of the historic gravestones and the grounds.

To date, over 230 gravestones have been straightened and reset, and 73 gravestones have received treatment from a professional gravestone conservator. The treated gravestones range in age from 1901 to 1974 and were made from granite, marble and concrete. Each marker reflects an individual life and member of the community buried there in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

PHOTO/ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

The city and community members are working to improve the conditions of the Douglass Memorial Cemetery.

Anyone interested in the cemetery's preservation can learn more about the history of Douglass Cemetery and about how historic cemeteries are preserved from community experts and city staff. As part of the celebration of Virginia Archaeology Month, the Office of Historic Alexandria, descendants of Douglass Cemetery and the Alexandria Historical Society are offering a Preserving Douglass Cemetery event from 10 a.m. to noon on Saturday at 1421 Wilkes St.

A community's involvement and advocacy ensure a site's stewardship for generations to come.

Find out more about Virginia Archaeology Month events in Alexandria at alexandriava.gov/archaeology/celebrate-virginia-archaeology-month-2026.

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