



There are many partners in the effort to search, study and share Alexandria's rich archaeological heritage. To find out more, please contact:

Alexandria Archaeology Museum

105 North Union Street, #327
 Alexandria, Virginia 22314
 (703) 838-4399
www.AlexandriaArchaeology.org
archaeology@alexandriava.gov

The Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery

902 Wythe Street
 Alexandria, Virginia 22314
www.FreedmensCemetery.org

Alexandria Black History Museum

902 Wythe Street
 Alexandria, VA 22314
 (703) 838-4356
www.alexblackhistory.org



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Archaeology at Alexandria Freedmen's Cemetery



A Memorial in Progress

Although it may be difficult to imagine, the area at the corner of S. Washington Street and Church Street is a burial ground of African Americans who lived in Alexandria during the Civil War. Over time, the memory of the cemetery was lost. The City of Alexandria is now in the process of reclaiming the cemetery, protecting the graves, and honoring the memories of those buried here.

Who were the Freedmen?

When Federal troops occupied Confederate states during the Civil War, slaves escaped their bondage and fled to safety behind Union lines. Thousands of these freedmen, or “contrabands,” sought freedom and a refuge from slavery in towns such as Alexandria. However, they also encountered horrible living conditions, sickness, disease, and death. With the arrival of the freedmen, the population of Alexandria almost doubled in less than three years. In January 1864, the federal government seized property near S. Washington and Church streets to establish a burying ground for the freedmen in Alexandria.



The cemetery is the final resting place of as many as 1,800 individuals.

Freedmen workers at Alexandria's Quartermaster Wharf (New York Public Library)

Since they were still considered property, the slaves who sought refuge in Union territory were called contrabands of war in order to prevent them from being returned to their masters.

After the war, many freedmen moved on. The government abandoned the cemetery in 1869, and the cemetery last appeared on a local map in 1939.

What are the goals of the Freedmen's Cemetery archaeology project?

The City archaeologists find grave locations so they remain undisturbed during the development of the Alexandria Freedmen's Memorial Park. The park will commemorate the lives of the freedmen and acknowledge the cemetery as sacred ground. Unfortunately, there are no longer grave markers indicating where the individuals were buried; the original wooden markers may have deteriorated or been removed over time. Once the graves are located, the park can be designed with the protection of the graves in mind.

Archaeologists excavate to learn more about our history; they usually search for artifacts and other cultural remains in order to explore how people lived in the past. However, at Freedmen's Cemetery, the City archaeologists are working to keep the cemetery intact out of respect for those who are buried here. They are digging to protect, rather than to study.



Archaeologists at work in the parking lot of the gas station, 2004. (Alexandria Archaeology Museum)

The Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865. Records of burials at Freedmen's Cemetery began in 1864 and ended in 1869.

What have archaeologists found?

Excavations have identified many graves. The burials are arranged in rows running north/south, with the head to the west, in keeping with Christian tradition. Some graves were found just inches underground, indicating that several feet of soil have been removed from the original ground surface since the burials occurred.

Archaeologists have also unearthed stone tools, evidence of Native American occupation.



A section of a grave shaft, or the hole into which the coffin is lowered, is revealed in an archaeologist's trench. The shaft soil is darker in color and different in texture from the surrounding natural soil. The shaft can be seen in the center of this photograph. (Alexandria Archaeology Museum)

1,800: Approximate number of burials at the cemetery
123: Number of graves located by archaeologists by 2004

Unfortunately, some of the burials were disturbed due to extensive development of the site. A service station, underground gas tanks, an office building, parking lots, a brick factory, and an interstate highway were all built here, disrupting what was once above and below the ground.



Freedmen's Cemetery may have once looked like Alexandria National Cemetery, pictured here in a Civil War-era photograph. (National Archives)

This gas station and office building were constructed on the cemetery site in the mid-20th century. (Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery)



"This spot of ground was then studded with shingles bearing the names of children, many but a few days old and others only as many hours." -Alexandria Gazette, 5 January 1894

What is the future of Freedmen's Cemetery?

The City archaeologists returned to the site in 2007 to continue grave location efforts. The gas station and office building have been demolished, leaving the site clear for the next step in the memorializing process. After the archaeologists complete their work, development and construction of the Memorial Park begin.

The final plan has not yet been determined, but the Alexandria Freedmen's Memorial Park will feature a design that honors all those buried here by name. Walkways, fences, benches, and interpretive signs will be placed so as not to disturb the burials. City officials, the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery, archaeologists, designers, and community members are working together to construct a meaningful memorial space while protecting the cemetery. Ultimately, the park will be a sacred space intended for remembrance, appreciation, and recognition. **The Freedmen of Alexandria will be remembered, honored, and never again forgotten.**