



Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Design Competition 2008

A Time for Remembrance -- The Contraband Cemetery

by T. Michael Miller
Research Historian
OHA

Occupied by the Union Army during the Civil War, Alexandria became a haven for Contraband, former slaves who escaped into Federal army lines. Many of these African Americans worked for the U.S. Government as stevedores on the waterfront, in hospitals or as laborers at the U.S. Military Railroad complex, S.W. corner of Duke and Henry Streets. Soon, dozens of settlements were constructed throughout the City to accommodate the thousands of new arrivals. A reporter from the Washington Chronicle who visited Alexandria in August 1863 wrote that "These houses, huddled together, with no conveniences for drainage, swarm with a mass of men, women and children. We have no means of knowing what are their numbers. We have "Petersburg," and "Richmond," "Contraband Valley," and "Pump Town," and twenty other towns in our midst. It is said that the inhabitants of these new and strange villages are generally orderly and give no occasion for the interference of the civil or military police. ...Those of our citizens who lived here before the war, would hardly know the place, if they could return here, so overgrown by the Negro shanties have been the commons and vacant lots." [Alexandria Gazette: 8/25/1864, p. 2.]

Unfortunately, the large influx of African Americans and poor sanitary conditions sparked several severe outbreaks of smallpox and typhoid resulting in the death of Blacks. One hundred and eighty-five Contraband had been buried in Alexandria by November 26, 1862. To combat these epidemics, the U.S. Army established at least four hospitals to treat the Contraband. A large facility known as L'Overture Hospital was situated at the S.W. corner of Prince and Payne Streets and included soldiers barracks, a school, cook house, sutlers store, etc. L'Overture was one of the last hospitals to close and treated patients following the end of the war.

In December 1862, the U.S. Government also erected a new hospital to facilitate the treatment of Contraband victims with smallpox. Located on the south side of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad complex, this structure which appears on military maps was known as Kalorama Hospital. The Alexandria Gazette of December 1, reported that "the deaths from the disease among the Negroes are quite numerous and great precaution should be taken to prevent its spread."

On January 8, 1864, U.S. Military Governor Slough requested that "all citizens to have themselves vaccinated at once and the poor of the city who cannot afford to pay will be vaccinated free of expense by calling at the Contraband Hospital on Washington Street between Duke and Wolfe Street." Evidence suggests this

hospital may have been located at 321 and 323 S. Washington Street in a building formerly erected by Robert H. Miller around 1853. Yet, another infirmary may well have been situated at the Beulah Baptist Church at 320 S. Washington Street.

Recently, new data has surfaced which documents that the Alexandria Academy, erected in 1785 and endowed by George Washington, was also utilized as a Contraband Hospital during the Civil War.

In January, 1864, General Slough (b. 1829; d. 1867) ordered the appropriation of Francis L. Smith's property at 1001 South Washington Street for the subsequent interment of sick and destitute African Americans and United States Colored troops.¹ On March 4, it was announced that "a grave yard for the burial of "contrabands," who may die in this place has been laid off near the Catholic Cemetery." Miss Julia Wilbur who worked with the Freedmen's Bureau wrote in her diary on May 5, 1864 that she visited the new contraband burying ground where she observed the "funeral of a colored soldier, the first who has died here. Had a white escort in the new Freedmen's burial Ground."

After the death of Francis Smith, Sr. in May 1877, his son, Francis, Jr. attempted to receive a monetary payment for the Freedmen Cemetery. His letter to the War Department dated October 18, 1877 states:

During the late war a parcel of land adjoining this city, the property of my deceased father, Francis Smith, Esq. was appropriated as a place of burial for colored federal soldiers. Afterwards I believe it was used by the Freedman's Bureau for similar purposes.

According to a burial book kept by the Reverend Albert Gladdin, Superintendent of Contrabands in Alexandria, there may be as many as 1,800 contraband interred in this abandoned cemetery.

Subsequently, the Contraband cemetery reverted back to the Smith family. In 1917, Margaret, Smith's daughter, sold the one acre parcel to the Reverend Dennis O'Connell, Bishop of Richmond. Later in 1946, Bishop Ireton conveyed the property to George C. Landrith in 1946 with the proviso that no gasoline filling station be constructed thereon and that no liquor be sold on the property. On June 25, 1946, over the opposition of the Alexandria Planning Department, the Alexandria City Council rezoned the Contraband Cemetery parcel for commercial use.

By March 1951, George Landrith had sold the Contraband

¹ Francis L. Smith, the owner of the real estate at 1001 S. Washington Street, was a respected attorney and renown citizen of Alexandria.

Cemetery lot to Mildred Koplin and James Juliano. Dwight H. Chase submitted an application from the Tidewater Associated Oil Company to construct a gasoline service station atop the cemetery on July 13, 1955. Two weeks later Mildred Koplin conveyed the property to Tidewater Oil Company and on August 9, 1955, Bishop Ireton revoked the restrictions he had formerly placed on the parcel. By 1958 the Contraband Cemetery was further desecrated when "Harper's Flying A" gasoline station opened for business. Unfortunately, the graves of these Alexandrians are not marked and have been neglected.

Therefore, we meet here today to right these injustices and to honor the unique travails and contributions of the thousands of Americans whose remains rest in the Freedmen's Cemetery. We encourage additional steps to protect and preserve this vital part of Alexandria's historical legacy.