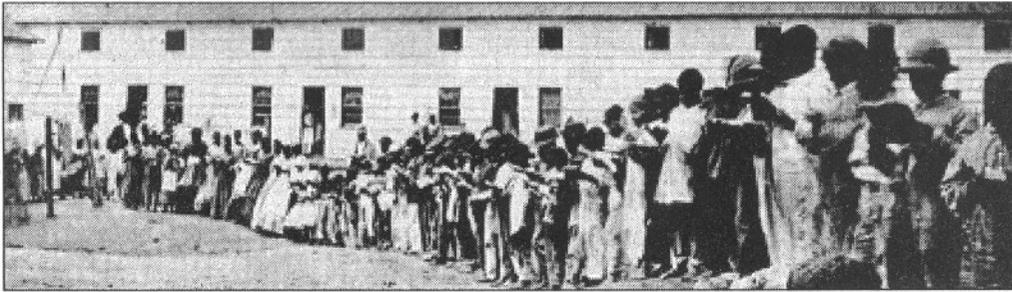


The Washington Post

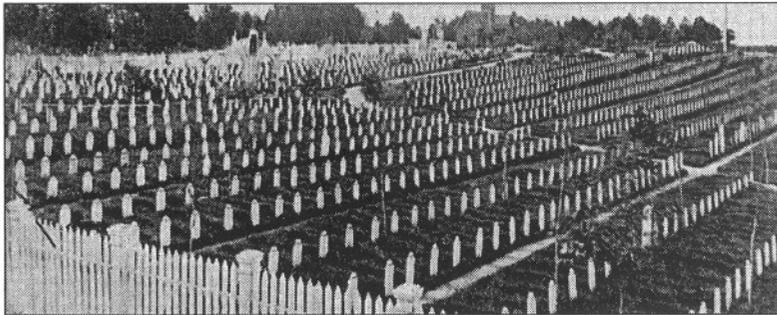
May 13, 2007



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A historical scene of freedmen reading at Contraband Barracks in Alexandria.

A Matthew Brady photograph of Alexandria National Cemetery circa 1876.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES



WOODROW WILSON BRIDGE PROJECT

In the 1950s, a gas station was built on top of the abandoned Freedmen's Cemetery at Washington and Church streets in Alexandria. The gas station and an adjacent office building were demolished as part of the city's effort to rededicate the cemetery.

ALEXANDRIA

Residents Gather to Rededicate Freedmen's Cemetery

By **CHRISTY GOODMAN**
Washington Post Staff Writer

The corner of Washington and Church streets in Alexandria glowed. It came from the 1,800 luminaries, representing the souls buried below. It came from the faces of those who have worked for more than 10 years to have those people recognized. It emanated from the community that reclaimed the 1.5 acres that had been so long forgotten.

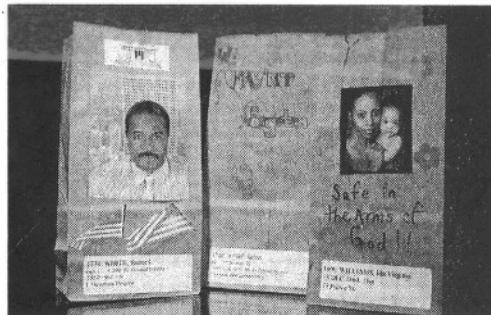
The Freedmen's Cemetery is once again hallowed ground.

For nearly 50 years, the cemetery, which holds the graves of freed slaves and their children, was buried beneath a gas station and a two-story office building, both now demolished. Last night, neighbors and city officials took back the land and rededicated the site in a twilight ceremony.

The approximately 300-person crowd was welcomed by a rhythmic groove from the African Heritage Drummers. Brian Sales, a community educator, poured a ceremonial libation on the ground, drawing from an African tradition. As part of the ritual, he called on ancestors to help pay proper respect to people who had long been ignored.

"It feels like a victory, for once again we were able to give the due justice and return [the cemetery] to the sacred ground for our ancestors who came here and struggled and helped give us the life we enjoy today," said Louis Hicks, director of the Alexandria Black History Museum.

Alexandria City Council members, local faith leaders and community historians lit 20 luminaries like the hundreds lit on the slight hill behind them. The 20, chosen because of their May dates of death, included Betsey Jackson's 1-day-old baby from the New-



BY AMY BERTSCH

Alexandria Black History Museum hosted sessions for residents and volunteers to decorate luminaries for yesterday's rededication ceremony.

town area and Manual Warner, who lived to be 100.

Lillie Finklea and Louise Massoud, both 68, co-founded Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery, the group that fought to reclaim the site. They met in 1997 when they were opposing the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project.

"We lost that battle," Massoud said.

"But we didn't lose this one," Finklea added.

They said they were looking forward to the day when a park sits on the site. "It was a picture of injustice . . . and it will be a beautiful gateway into the city," Massoud said.

The cemetery was built on land the U.S. military seized from Francis L. Smith, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's attorney, and it operated from 1864 to 1869. During that time, several thousand freed men and women flocked to Alexandria, Hicks said. Malnourishment and disease contributed to the numbers

buried there, he said.

After the Civil War, the Smith family reclaimed its land. In 1917, it became the property of the Archdiocese of Richmond, which later sold it to a private owner, requesting that no automobile service station or place that sells alcohol be constructed on it. The property was rezoned in 1946, and by 1955 a gas station was built after the acting bishop revoked the earlier restrictions.

The historical nature of the site had fallen off area maps by 1940, and it wasn't until 1987 when the city's historian, T. Michael Miller, found references to the cemetery in *The Washington Post* and the *Alexandria Gazette* that the grounds were rediscovered.

"We begin the future of this memorial tonight," said Alexandria City Manager James K. Hartmann, who said the demolition of the gas station and office building was the quickest the city has ever seen.

This week, city archaeologist Pam Cressey and her team, which will include George Washington University students, will begin to remove the remaining asphalt and concrete in their search to identify graves on the site, which sits near the Capital Beltway. No graves will be disturbed, she said.

"We don't think all 1,800 people survived because of the gas tanks going in, the beltway, the brickyard digging for clay. . . . There has been a lot of damage to the site," Cressey said.

A public design contest for the memorial will be held in 2008. The city plans to open Alexandria Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Park by 2010.

"In a community like this, my greatest satisfaction is keeping archaeology and the history underground and turning that place into a landmark and a commemorative area that the public can enjoy today," Cressey said.