Erkiletian Companies (Erkiletian) retained JMA (John Milner Associates, Inc.) to conduct archeological investigations at the proposed site of The Asher condominium complex, 621 North Payne Street in Alexandria, Virginia. The proposed development site includes the entire Block 354, bounded by Payne, Wythe, Fayette, and Pendleton Streets. The city block is within the Uptown/Parker-Gray Historic District (Virginia Department of Historic Resources [VDHR] #100-133).

The Asher will be a two-building development with retail suites at street level and residential units above (Figure 1). A courtyard will be incorporated into the street-level plans. Parking will be below street level, under both buildings.

Until February 2011, a 1950s warehouse building occupied the entire block. At the start of fieldwork, the warehouse was demolished and the majority of the debris was removed.

The project area under investigation includes the footprint of this now-demolished warehouse building (2.0 acres), as well as the walkway along the west side of the block, between Wythe and Pendleton Streets.

Research Design
The design of the archeological investigation was based on the results of a documentary study conducted in 2009 by JMA (Jones et al. 2009) and recommendations made by the staff of Alexandria Archeology (Francine Bromberg pers. comm., 2011). This research found the city block had potential to contain archeological resources associated with the Union occupation of Alexandria during the Civil War, and later, the early to mid-twentieth-century occupation of African-American renters in a developing African-American neighborhood.

Figure 1. Block 354, showing proposed construction plan and locations of trenches and well (Erkiletian 2010).
Field investigations included the excavation of trenches at selected locations within the project area to determine the presence or absence of buried features or intact historic deposits. The task of monitoring included the removal of the warehouse basement floor and the removal of a segment of dual railroad tracks from the sidewalk adjacent to Fayette Street. Also, a well discovered during demolition was documented. The treatment, context, and construction of the resources were documented with digital photographs and field notes.

Figure 2. Bird’s Eye View of Alexandria showing approximate project area location (Magnus 1863). To the west of the project area is a camp labeled 5, the “Pa. Reserves.” The small building on Henry Street labeled 6 is the “Government Bakery.” Belle Aire, the residence of the Mason Estate on the corner of Henry and Oronoco Streets, was later called Colross.

Project Area History
The neighborhood in which the project area is located appears to have been one of the least developed sections of the city until the 1890s. The blocks that were delineated in the city’s 1798 survey, but remained vacant, were used in various ways in the early nineteenth century. Some held groves of trees, while others were outlying grounds of large estates. The block where the early nineteenth-century Mason Estate, Belle Aire (also called Colross), was built is located just southeast to the project area (Figure 2).

Belle Aire was home to a number of prominent Alexandria citizens, including merchant and diplomat Jonathan Swift, lawyer and judge Thomsen Mason (grandson to Gunston Hall’s George Mason), and merchant William Smoot. The land immediately north and west of the estate, including the vicinity of the project area, was open fields or lightly wooded.

During the Civil War, the project area and adjacent vacant blocks became occupied by Union Army encampments and military buildings. The Sickel Hospital, was established south and west of the project area, between Oronoco, Pendleton, North West and Fayette Streets. The location of the hospital may have overlapped the southern edge of the project area. Another military establishment, the Government Bakery, southeast of the project area, was built along the existing railroad lines to provide provisions for Union troops (Figure 2). Prior to the Battle of First Manassas on July 21, 1861, the 2nd New Jersey Infantry an encampment which covered an approximately two-block area, occupying over half of the project area, from North West Street to Fayette Street, between Pendleton and Wythe Streets (Figure 3). From April 1863 to February 1864, Sickel’s Pennsylvania Reserves, 22nd Corps, occupied land to the southwest of the project area (Figure 2).
After the Civil War, the northwest quadrant of Alexandria remained vacant, though land began to be acquired and a few buildings appear on neighboring blocks. The area’s close proximity to two railroad lines probably appealed to land speculators. By 1877, the project area is part of Ward Three of Alexandria and becomes the property of William N. Brown. Brown was one of the city’s “Principal Farmers,” (Chataigne 1888), but it is not clear how the property was used, if at all.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, several African-American neighborhoods developed in the northwest quadrant of Alexandria. The project area is located in what became the Colored Rosemont neighborhood (Figure 4) (Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association 2004).

Colored Rosemont developed as an outgrowth of Rosemont, a new Alexandria suburb that was developing in the 1890s, west of the city line and south of Braddock Road. Colored Rosemont may have been so-called because of jobs that African-Americans
living in the 600 and 700 blocks of North West Street and Payne Street had in households in Rosemont proper, such as cooks, laundresses, etc. The development of the African-American neighborhoods led to the establishment of the Parker-Gray Elementary school.

Located just three blocks northeast of the project area on Wythe Street, the school was the first city-certified school for African-American children in 1920. Twenty years later, the city established the Parker-Gray High School at the same location.

On Block 354, a small residence was built by at least 1921 (neither maps nor deeds have indicated that it was there before that date). The 1921 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map shows the dwelling surrounded by two other buildings: a modest-sized building, possibly a shed, and a frame one-story house to the south near the street corner (Figure 5).

By 1931, a greenhouse was constructed and the small shed-like building was gone. Then by 1941, only the ell-shaped dwelling occupied the block. City directories in 1924, 1932, and 1942 indicate the residents of this block were African-Americans. The names differ in each directory, so the residents were probably renters.

Sometime between 1941 and 1949, the dwelling was torn down. In 1951 the south half of a warehouse was built. A north addition was completed in 1958. The warehouse was demolished in February 2011.

**Archeological Investigations**

Investigations included monitoring the removal of the building’s interior concrete pad (the basement floor); monitoring the removal of a dual railroad track that was embedded in the sidewalk adjacent to Fayette Street; trench excavation; and documentation.

Removal of the building debris allowed JMA team members to see that the interior of the block had been graded well below street level to accommodate for basement space. The basement floor was 8 feet (ft.) to 13 ft. below street level. The elevations of the streets which surround the block are believed to be close to the historic grade. With the exposure of the interior basement walls of the warehouse, it was concluded that there was little potential for the
preservation of any significant historic deposits below the modern construction. Three trenches were excavated to demonstrate the absence of intact cultural resources.

The first two trenches (Trenches 1 and 2) were placed in the north half of the block (Figure 1). This is the portion of the block in which historic maps show the 1861 Civil War occupation of 2nd New Jersey infantry (Figure 3). Trench 3 was excavated in the southeast quadrant of the block, where research suggests the early twentieth-century dwelling was located (Figures 1 and 5). No historic surfaces were encountered during trench excavation. Trenches 1 and 2 exhibited fill deposits and remnants of modern construction over subsoil. The date range of artifacts from the fill suggests the north half of the block was graded and filled prior to the construction of the warehouse. Warehouse construction then disturbed those layers of fill. Similar fill deposits were absent in the south half of the block. Stratigraphy in Trench 3 shows that the southeast quadrant of the block was graded into subsoil for the construction of the warehouse basement.

**Documentation of the Well**

During demolition of the warehouse building, a buried brick-lined well was discovered (Figure 6). The well was filled with soil and brick from the destroyed portion of the well. The well wall is only one-brick thick and built up against subsoil. The interior diameter of the well is approximately 3.5 ft. Brick dimensions were generally 0.68-by-0.33-by-0.19 ft. and many of them were imperfect, showing cracks or spalls that occurred before or during firing. The well wall also contained brick fragments as part of its construction. The brick pattern was dominated by stretchers, with irregularly placed headers. Since the base of the well was not exposed, the depth and base construction is not known.

![Figure 6. South profile of the well. A concrete pipe, shown at left, was laid over the truncated feature.](image)

Over the east half of the well, a 0.68-ft.-diameter (8-inch-diameter) concrete pipe was installed. Above the top brick course and the concrete pipe is 2.1 ft. of fill capped with the concrete of the warehouse basement floor. No yard surface was seen in the soil profile. Block 354 is in a historically poorer part of the city and the city water and sewer systems may not have been extended to this neighborhood until later. The sewer pipe was probably installed, thus truncating the well, around 1951 when the south half of the warehouse was built. Though the age of the well is not certain, it was probably built during the years that the early twentieth-century dwelling stood on the block. A 1949 aerial photograph shows that the African-American residence was torn
down. The well was probably filled and covered around this time.

According to Erkiletian construction plans, the well is located within the footprint of a proposed landscaped courtyard (Figure 1). After the location and elevation of the well were recorded, it was filled and covered with gravel.

**Documentation of the Railroad Tracks**

Dual narrow gauge railroad tracks were incorporated into the sidewalk between the project area and Fayette Street (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The dual railway along the east side of the warehouse in 2009, facing south.

The tracks consisted of two sets of iron “T” rails (a total of four) with flange bases; one set in between the other set (Figure 8). The tracks were laid on 6-by-8-ft. treated wood ties (sleepers) set on gravel and slag ballast. Steel tie plates, fastened to sleepers with railroad spikes held the tracks to the sleepers. Both the, left and right rails shared the same tie plate, suggesting that the different gauged tracks were laid simultaneously.

Figure 8. Cross section of the west half of the dual railroad, facing south. The rail on the right is interior.

Sometime after the 1958 warehouse addition was built, a narrow-gauge railroad spur was installed next to the warehouse (Sanborn 1958). It is not known when the tracks ceased being used; perhaps around 1963 when the property changed hands (Alexandria Deed Book 583/415).

**Summary and Recommendations**

Investigations revealed that the construction techniques used in building the warehouse destroyed any historic yard surface that resided in the upper levels of the soil. The results of trench excavation confirmed the absence of buried surfaces; trench profiles showed fill deposits directly over subsoil. No buried historic yard surfaces are present in the project area. The top of the discovered well is at least 4.2 ft. below proposed construction grade and will not be impacted. However, for future ground-disturbing activities in this area, avoidance of the well is recommended. The preservation of other cultural resources is not likely. No additional archeological investigation is warranted.