PROJECT SUMMARY

The City of Alexandria began Stage 1 archaeological investigation of Fort Ward Historical Park in 2010 through the consulting firm The Ottery Group. The Stage 1 investigation focused on four parcels within the park. The fieldwork was completed in early 2011. The 36.5-acre park is operated by the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities. The City launched the Stage 1 archaeological investigation so as to provide information for park planners by identifying cultural resources, finding unmarked graves, and telling the story of “The Fort,” the post-Civil War African-American neighborhood that once occupied the park property from the 1870s until the 1960s when the City acquired the land in order to create the park.

The archaeological findings reported herein are one part of the first stage of work (formally known as Task 1-3) which also includes intensive historical research for the entire park (Task 1-1), and the completion of a detailed inventory of the historical resources on the park property (Task 1-2). The archaeological testing for this Stage 1 of fieldwork took place on four small tracts of land inside the park. The four parcels include: a 1.5 acre area used until recently as a maintenance yard that contained a church/school and several human graves within its bounds; a 0.90 acre lot once occupied by the Burr and Harriet Shorts family and their descendants; a 0.10 acre burial plot known as the “Old Graveyard” located adjacent to the Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery; and a 0.25 acre area situated on the western glacis of Fort Ward and referred to as the “Jackson Cemetery.”

The archaeological investigation was guided by four primary goals: 1) field-check the veracity of a ground penetrating radar survey that identified the possible locations of unmarked graves; 2) delineate the boundaries of the Old Graveyard, Jackson Cemetery, and the graves in the maintenance yard; 3) map and record all graves into the City GIS system; 4) evaluate sites of an African American schoolhouse, church, and other structures that were present in the maintenance yard, evaluate the archaeological remains in the Shorts Home Lot, and test for other cultural resources (such as Civil War and American Indian site areas) through standard shovel testing, metal detection, and mechanical trenching.

A summary of the findings for each of the four goals and a review of the recommendations for future stages of archaeological investigation are provided below.

Goal 1: Field check ground penetrating radar findings.

Fourteen of the 36 GPR anomalies (n=39 percent) positively identified graves. Among the 22 false positive GPR anomalies, 12 of them were triggered by subsurface irregularities such as tree roots or dislodged soil. Ten of the investigated GPR anomalies signaled intact sterile soil (i.e. a location with no visible soil intrusion). The fact that the GPR did not “find” the marked grave of W.E. Javins is especially troubling.

Soil type and soil conditions, as well as vegetation have a significant impact on the accuracy of the GPR findings. For example, the success rate of the GPR in the Jackson Cemetery—an area with few trees and a relatively thin layer of sandy soil overlying subsoil—produced markedly better results (4 out of 7 accurate anomalies) than
The outcome of the use of GPR for this project demonstrates that this type of testing as conducted by a trained professional is a valuable tool for detecting human graves, but it must be used in conjunction with intensive archaeological testing and other field methods. GPR testing alone is not enough. The only way to positively identify an unmarked human grave is to remove the upper layers of soil down to the level of subsoil so as to reveal the soil discolorations of grave shafts. By focusing the GPR testing in specific locations where graves are predicted by documentary or oral history data, this limits the extent of the field investigations to areas that are feasible for follow-up archaeological testing. In these cases, it is important to recognize that graves may be present anywhere that has not been verified by archaeological investigation, unless the area has been previously disturbed to such an extent that no graves could be extant.

**Recommendations:**

Full examination of the maintenance yard, the Old Graveyard, and the Jackson Cemetery—either by systematically stripping off the topsoil or comprehensive hand testing—will need to be accomplished in future stages of archaeological study at Fort Ward Park. The locations of graves are suspected to exist in several additional places on park property. GPR testing could be employed usefully in these locations where background research and/or oral testimony indicate a high possibility for graves.

**Goal 2: Delineate the boundaries of cemeteries.**

The full boundaries of the Old Graveyard and Jackson Cemetery remain unknown, although the western extent of the Old Graveyard appears to be established as indicated by the absence of graves within a 30 ft. wide expanse to the west of Burial 11. Additional graves may be present to the east and south in the Old Graveyard, and perhaps even to the north near the boundary with the Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery. More graves also may be located in the Jackson Cemetery, particularly between the three clustered graves and the outlying one 50 ft. to the north. Furthermore, graves could be present in all the areas in the maintenance yard that were not archaeological examined during this project, especially in the northern half of the maintenance yard.

**Recommendations:**

Further archaeological testing is needed for the entire Jackson Cemetery so as to ensure that all graves are identified within its bounds. Further archaeological testing also will be necessary in the Old Graveyard, in particular to the north, south, and east from the existing 16 burials in order to confirm the full boundaries of this cemetery. As addressed under Goal 1, more graves are likely to be present in the northern half of the maintenance yard, and archaeological testing will be needed in order to identify them.

**Goal 3: Map all identified graves into City GIS.**

All identified graves and archaeological have been integrated into the City GIS system as a layer. Based on the dates on the surviving grave markers, both adults and children were interred in the Old Graveyard over the course of several decades from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. All 16 of the graves identified in the Old Graveyard are oriented on the same axis, approximately 45 to 55 degrees west of
north, a strong clue that this distinctive grave placement practice was considered the norm at this particular location. The grave orientation plainly differs from the east-to-west orientation of graves in the Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery located immediately to the north. Not only are the grave orientations different between the two cemeteries, but the dateable stones in each cemetery do not overlap in time. Virginia Fitzhugh was the last known internment in the Old Graveyard in 1918 and the first dated headstone in the Oakland Cemetery dates to the mid-1920s, a gap of at least five years. These two factors alone strongly suggest that the cemeteries were not in operation at the same time, nor were they interrelated in any way.

In the Jackson Cemetery all four identified graves probably were adults. The graves here are oriented on an east-to-west axis, as was common in a Western burial tradition. The question to resolve is why there is a 50 ft. separation between Burial 15 and the others. Is Burial 15 just an outlier, or are there more graves in the gap between? Perhaps the outlying burial is that of William Carpenter, a man who purchased a burial plot in the Jackson Cemetery in the mid-1920s.

A question remains regarding graves in the maintenance yard on Amanda Clark’s land. The graves of Clara and Robert Adams are confirmed, but former resident Lee Thomas Young recalls the presence of perhaps a dozen headstones to the north of the Adams’ graves, headstones not part of the Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery. GPR and subsequent testing failed to identify any graves in the north maintenance yard, which leaves the question of their whereabouts an open issue.

Recommendations:

As additional graves are identified at the Fort Ward Park, they must be added into the City GIS system.

Goal 4: Investigate the African American schoolhouse, church, and other structures that were present in the maintenance yard and test for other cultural resources through standard shovel testing, metal detection, and mechanical trenching.

In addition to the graves, archaeologists identified other potentially significant cultural resources during the course of the archaeological investigation. The most noteworthy findings are the 22 ft. by 22 ft. foundations for the main dwelling on the Shorts House Lot, as well as evidence of additions to the main structure. A portion of the School/Chapel/Young residence was uncovered in the maintenance yard area, probably an addition built prior to Lee Thomas Young’s acquisition of the property in the late 1940s. A privy pit likely associated with the Casey family and located near the south boundary of the maintenance yard was partially excavated. A small, widely scattered assemblage of artifacts dating to the Civil War was found while metal detecting the Old Graveyard and to the south of the Shorts House Lot, but no concentrations were found to indicate long-term or intensive activity. No American Indian archaeological resources were identified during this investigation.

Recommendations:

The western half of the Shorts House Lot has high archaeological potential, as well as the lot containing the School/Chapel/Young residence. Further archaeological testing is warranted in both locations, guided by specific research questions. The lot once
owned and occupied by the Casey family in the southwest corner of the maintenance yard (including the partially excavated privy) retains moderate archaeological potential. Additional archaeological investigation in this area should focus on research questions pertaining to the Casey family and later occupants the Belk family.

**Management Recommendations**

As a management tool, six levels of archaeological potential have been created and specific areas within each parcel:

1. *Sacred Areas*: those areas that contain human graves. Three Sacred Areas have been identified: the entire Old Graveyard, the Jackson Cemetery, and the graves of Clara and Robert Adams located on a lot once owned by Amanda Clark in what later became a City maintenance yard. These areas must receive the highest level of preservation. Further investigation is needed in the Old Graveyard and the Jackson Cemetery to pinpoint the boundaries.

2. *Unconfirmed Grave Areas*: The north half of the maintenance yard is deemed as such. This area must remain preserved until further archaeological investigation can be employed to confirm the presence of graves, which would then elevate it to a Sacred Area.

3. *High Archaeological Potential*: The western two-thirds of the Shorts House Lot as well as the immediate area around the School/Chapel/Young residence have elevated archaeological potential. These areas should be preserved and further investigated in the future.

4. *Moderate Archaeological Potential*: A small area in the southwest corner of the maintenance yard is demarcated as having due to the presence of archaeological remains related to the use of the lot by the Casey family, and later the Belk family. Archaeologically controlled mechanical stripping is necessary in this area if ground disturbance is planned for this area.

5. *Low Archaeological Potential*: The eastern one-third of the Shorts House Lot and the southeast quadrant of the maintenance yard have low archaeological potential and any ground disturbance must be archaeologically monitored.

6. *Cleared*: Small zones within each parcel have been cleared, and therefore nothing of archaeological significant is present in these particular locations.