

PHASE I ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF THE JAMES BLAND DEVELOPMENT PROPERTY IN ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA:

INTRODUCTION

Documentary research and archeological investigations were conducted of the James Bland Development property; comprising two entire city blocks and three partial city blocks bounded by First, N. Patrick, Madison, N. Alfred, Wythe and N. Columbus Streets in Alexandria, Virginia.



The project area is included within the Parker-Gray Historic District which has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

PROPERTY HISTORY

Documentary research indicated that the James Bland Development property was owned by members of the Alexander family from the late 17th century until the late 18th century. During the colonial period, the Alexander's enslaved laborers or tenants may have also resided on or worked the lands within the project area. Various prominent citizens of the city, including Richard Conway, John Gadsby, Orlando Fairfax, and Thomas Veitch owned portions of the study property between the late 18th and mid 19th century. Use of the land by tenants or enslaved laborers remains a possibility during this period, as most of these individuals were documented slave owners and tenants are known to have lived in the vicinity. Several buildings appear near or within the project area on Civil War era maps.

During the Civil War, Union troops occupying the city established various facilities to the south and east of the project area; these included the Washington Street Corral, barracks and other structures. No archival evidence for Civil War era activity within the project area was found, however, it is possible that refugee slaves may have settled in temporary shanty towns in the project area vicinity during this time period.



*North Side of the 800 Block of Madison Street,
View to Northwest; 1940s*

By the third quarter of 19th century, residential development in the project area was increasing. As the project area is located within the historic African American neighborhood known as the Hump, based on trends in later property history, it is likely that most residents of the project area during

this period were African Americans, although the city directories only indicate six residents.

By the turn of the 20th century, however, the number of residents has substantially increased; at this time, 50% of the neighborhood was African American but 70% of the project area.

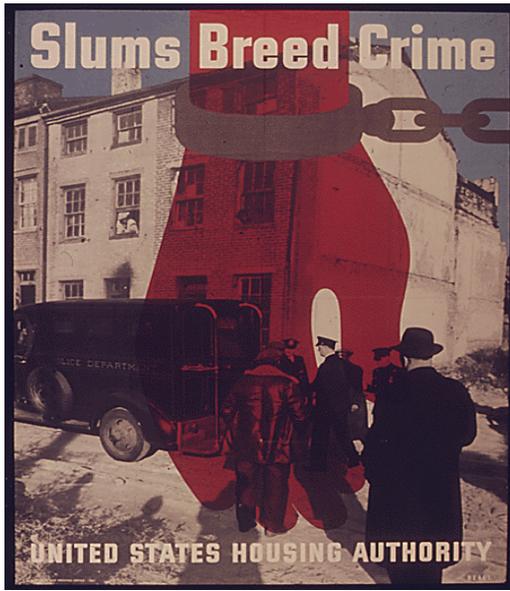


*East Side of the 800 Block of N. Alfred Street, View
to Northeast: 1940s*

Residential development in the area was rapid after 1902 until circa 1921, when much of the area had been completely developed. From the property research that has been completed, it is clear that, by 1900, the African American character of this portion of the Hump and Uptown

neighborhoods were well established. The neighborhood within the project area appears to have remained racially integrated from the mid 19th century into the early 20th century; however, not to the degree found in other portions of the Uptown neighborhood. The working class character of the neighborhood within the project area, as illustrated by the occupations noted in city directories and voter rolls, is clear. The neighborhood including the project area and its immediate surroundings appears to have been organized primarily along lines of class and secondarily by race.

The census record also shows ethnic diversity in this working class neighborhood. Portner's brewery appeared to be a major employer for local residents in the late 19th century; other occupations listed were brick burner, railroad brakeman, servant, and laborer. According to the census forms, many of the African American residents of the neighborhood owned their homes, although many were mortgaged; most of the Euro American residents rented.



By the 1930s, most American cities included slum areas or neighborhoods characterized by substandard housing of various types, occupied by the very poor, often ethnic or racial minorities. Many believed that slums were breeding grounds for crime and a major public health problem. However, the methods to eliminate the slums or, even if they should be eliminated at all, were the subject of some controversy. Traditional reformers believed that slum clearance served to eliminate blighted and overcrowded neighborhoods while the building of new low-income housing on former slum sites allowed the poor to continue to live near their places of

employment. Others believed that slum clearance was a waste of time and money that primarily benefited the real estate industry.

Regardless, by the early 1940s, slum clearance in Alexandria had begun. In 1941, the government condemned two acres for temporary public housing for African American defense workers and the James Bland Homes project was preceded on the site by a wartime FHPA trailer camp.



"Trailer Camp near Alexandria, Virginia; March 1941"

Some residents of the neighborhood occupied the trailers following the condemnation of their homes and the construction of the first buildings at James Bland in 1954. By 1945, it appears that the trailer camp was disbanded and the individual trailers were hauled away.

However, life within the area was not grim. The *Silas Green from New Orleans*, a successful traveling African American variety show was held in vacant lots within the project area in the 1940s and perhaps earlier.



Photograph with Silas Green Show Poster; November 1935; Location Unknown.

As stated, in the early 20th century, the vicinity of the study area was the site of continued residential and industrial development in Alexandria; the project area, specifically, remained an integrated neighborhood, including a population of approximately 70% African American and 30% Euro-American, largely recent European immigrants. The neighborhood became almost entirely African American only after the completion of the James Bland Homes public housing project in the mid 1950s.

By the mid 20th century, the currently standing buildings had been constructed. In 1954, the three-block area from Wythe Street to First Street between Alfred and Columbus Streets and the adjoining blocks between Madison, Montgomery, Alfred, and Patrick Streets became the site of the first phase of James Bland Homes. According to City of Alexandria building permits, Victor R. Beauchamp, Inc. received the contracts and constructed the buildings. The project design was by local architecture firm Joseph Saunders and Associates. In 1959, the block bounded by Montgomery, First, Patrick, and Alfred Streets became the final phase of construction for the James Bland Homes project. Again, the design work was done by Joseph Saunders and Associates and Victor R. Beauchamp, Inc. constructed the

new buildings. Both phases of the building became known as the James Bland Homes.

Although named in his honor, no evidence was found that James Bland ever resided within or even visited the buildings. James Alan Bland (also known as Jimmy Bland) (October 12, 1854–May 6, 1911) was an African American musician and song writer born to a free family in Flushing, New York. Bland's father was one of the first African American college graduates in the United States and was appointed examiner in the U.S. Patent Office after the Civil War. James Bland was educated in Washington, D.C. and graduated from Howard University in 1873. He composed over 700 songs, including "In the Evening by the Moonlight," "O Dem Golden Slippers," and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny", the official State Song of Virginia from 1940 until 1997. Along with Stephen Foster, Bland defines an era in popular music and is remembered for breaking racial barriers in the music industry.

ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

The Phase I archeological investigation was conducted in anticipation of the planned development of the property; the goals of the investigation were to determine the degree and locations of disturbance on the property and to identify archeological sites that may be present and to provide a preliminary assessment of their potential significance in terms of eligibility for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

The Phase I consisted of the excavation of shovel test pits at predetermined locations throughout the property. The shovel testing program determined that significant disturbance and deep modern or late historic fills were present in most of the area. The fills may have resulted from attempts to bring low lying portions of some of the blocks to grade at the time of development in the mid to late 1950s.

Although most of the blocks exhibited disturbance and modern filling, two historic archeological sites, 44AX0211 and 44AX0212, were identified.

Site 44AX0211

Site 44AX0211 appears to be a subsurface scatter of historic refuse contained within the matrix of a truncated historic plow zone (Apb horizon) buried beneath modern or late historic urban fills. The artifacts from the site date from the later 18th/early 19th century through the late 19th/20th century. No clearly modern materials were recovered from the Apb horizon within the site, indicating that the soil level, or at least the extant portion of the Apb horizon was sealed and no longer receiving refuse prior to the modern era.

Two probable cultural features were identified in shovel test pits within the site; however neither feature could be dated or was fully investigated. The features, Feature 3-1 and 3-2 were present underlying the disturbed fill soils and cut through the historic plowed horizon (Apb) into subsoil. As Feature 3-1 was located in a

shovel test pit that produced a relatively large assemblage of historic artifacts, it may represent a refuse pit of some type. Feature 3-2 may be related to utilities in the area.

Site 44AX0211 appears to contain material culture associated with the residents of this portion of the project area from the late 18th or early 19th century into the early 20th century. Additionally, there are indications that intact historic features are present in the site. Sites of this type have not been well studied in the City of Alexandria; particularly within the Parker-Gray Historic District. Site 44AX0211 was felt to be potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). A Phase II archeological evaluation to determine the NRHP eligibility of the site was recommended.

Site 44AX0212

This site was identified solely on the basis of a single historic feature. This feature appears to be an area of preserved brickwork. It was determined that the feature contained at least three vertical courses of brick; however, the horizontal extent of the feature could not be determined. The individual bricks that make up the feature did not appear to be fully modern and likely date from the early 20th century or earlier. No artifacts were recovered in association with the feature and it can not be dated at the present time. It may be associated with a building shown on the 1921 Sanborn located just to the south.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the documentary research and the Phase I work, it must be considered possible that significant cultural features may have been preserved beneath the urban fills that cover the study property. Due to the presence of extant buildings, impervious surfaces and impervious subsurface fills, the program of shovel testing was not adequate to identify all possibly significant archeological resources that may be present within the project area.

In addition to the previously described additional investigations, we recommend that all ground-disturbing activities within the project area, which will include the removal of asphalt parking areas, concrete alleys and sidewalks, and underground utilities; the demolition of the extant buildings on the property and the removal of subsurface architectural elements of said buildings and all other excavations necessary to prepare the site for planned redevelopment and new construction, be monitored by an archeologist. The goal of the archeological monitoring will be to identify any significant archaeological resources that were not or could not be identified during the archeological site evaluation (Phase I investigation). Additional archeological work may be necessary if significant archeological resources are found during monitoring.

Finally, as the re-development of the James Bland Housing will occur over a long period of time, work beyond the Phase I level will be accomplished in stages in accordance with the development schedule.