

# “The Fort” and “Seminary” Community Civil War to Civil Rights

African Americans established “The Fort,” a community that continued here after the Civil War (1861-1865) for nearly a century into the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s. The place received its name from The Fort’s location on and around the remnants of Fort Ward, one of the fortifications that were built as part of the Defenses of Washington. In the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, families living at The Fort and in the larger “Seminary” community— located around the Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School on Braddock, Howard, King, and Quaker streets—were connected through shared kinship, marriage, church, and work, particularly at the two Episcopal educational institutions. Four generations sustained The Fort through these associations, faith, adherence to a strict moral code, and emphasis on education.

“The Fort” community began in large part from the results of the Civil War—freedom, rights, and opportunities for enslaved African Americans. Ironically, The Fort ended almost a century later as civil rights expanded. The City of Alexandria dedicated this park and museum for the Civil War Centennial in 1964. People were displaced, buildings demolished, and graves lost before the African American presence faded from view. Yet The Fort endures. The remains of its homes and school/chapel, fragments of household items, and numerous graves survive underground. The Fort’s descendants retain memories, images, and traditions. New generations of those who founded The Fort and Seminary community still live nearby. The Oakland Baptist Church stands on King Street as a landmark to the community’s founders and members. Its cemetery is bordered by Fort Ward Park. The Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School are witnesses to African American craftsmanship, care, and service of those who once worked there. Upon the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the City of Alexandria honors this enduring African American legacy.



Courtesy Great Wood Johnson  
William Wood escaped slavery and served in the US Colored Troops. Son, Douglas, donated land for public Seminary School in 1926, and great-granddaughter, Crozet, served during World War II



Courtesy Adrienne Terrell Washington  
James M. Peters

**1863**  
James M. Peters escapes slavery and joins the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Son, John Peters, established home here by 1916.

**1861**  
U.S. Civil War begins.

**1863**  
Emancipation Proclamation frees slaves in areas of rebellion and opens military service to African Americans.

**1865**  
Civil War ends.

**13<sup>th</sup> Amendment**  
to Constitution abolishes slavery.

**1868**  
14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to Constitution broadens citizenship; prohibits state and local governments from depriving people of life, liberty and property; and requires equal protection.

*“I remember that we always had a nice neighborhood and the people were always kind and nice and they looked out for one another...We all lived like one family.”*

Julia Adams Bradley



Courtesy Adrienne Terrell Washington  
James W. Terrell, an early owner at The Fort, and wife, Burney McKnight Terrell

**1870**  
Burr and Harriet McKnight Shortts family is first documented African American household here.

**1870**  
Civil War ends.

**15<sup>th</sup> Amendment**  
to Constitution prohibits denying right to vote due to race, color, and previous condition of servitude.

*“Growing up in my beloved Seminary was like living in one great big house. Everyone was family, and if they were not, you thought they were. There were gardens at every home; some people had chickens, a few pigs, horses, and many dogs and cats. The families provided for themselves with these gardens and livestock, so eating fresh foods was a natural for us. As children, we grew up happy and care free despite of the happening of the times.”*

Gerald Wanzer



Courtesy Dorothy Hall Smith  
Beatrice (left) and James (right) from left) Jackson

**1890**  
Starting in this decade, more families continue to buy land. The Fort reaches its maximum size before sales to land speculators begin in 1926. Some family members stay in this close-knit community until the 1960s. Long-time families include: Adams, Ashby, Casey, Craven, Hall, Henry, Jackson, Javins, Johnson, Lewis, McKnight, Miller, Peters, Randall, Roy, Shortts, Simms, Terrell, Wansizer, Wood, and Young.

**1891**  
Community members establish Oakland Baptist Church, which moves to current location in 1893.

**1896**  
Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson upholds “separate but equal” doctrine for facilities.



Courtesy Gloria Jean Randall and Adrienne Terrell Washington  
World War II veterans, the Randall brothers (Aaron-cockpit, George-wing, and David-right front), with Charlie Kulp (left front), known as The Flying Farmer, and honored for training African American pilots



Courtesy Charles McKnight  
Clara Shortts Adams

**1898**  
Clara Shortts Adams and Robert Adams convey 1/4 acre to Fairfax County for “Colored School Building at Seminary.” School operates until 1925.

**1910**  
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) established.



Courtesy Fish University, Franklin Library Special Collections  
Seminary School

**1926**  
Speculators begin to buy western and northern portions of The Fort. When Eagle Crest subdivision is created in 1926, it contains nearly 1/2 of the original land in The Fort. Roads are cut, but no houses built.

**1927**  
Fairfax County opens Seminary School for African Americans on King Street, due to Douglas Wood’s land donation and community contributions to match the Rosewell Fund grant.

**1941**  
The United States enters into World War II.

Among the many who served in Armed Forces:



Courtesy Joyce Casey Sanchez  
Gerald Wanzer



Courtesy Arthur Peters  
Albert S. Lewis, Jr., gave his life for his country.



Courtesy Adrienne Terrell Washington  
Arthur Peters, grandson of James M. Peters

**1932**  
St. Cyprian’s merges with Meade Episcopal Church. Chapel at The Fort closes.

**1955**  
City of Alexandria begins to purchase land for Fort Ward Park, starting with Eagle Crest development parcel, and continues acquiring land for more than a decade. The result is displacement of The Fort community.

**1954**  
Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, overturns “separate but equal” doctrine leading to dismantling of segregated schools.



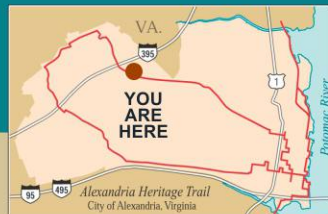
Courtesy Joyce Casey Sanchez  
Maydell Casey Belk

**1959**  
Maydell Casey Belk (granddaughter of Oakland Baptist Church founder, John Wesley Casey) and Julia Brodby (a descendant of the Adams and Roy families and mentor to community children) are two plaintiffs in Jones v. School Board of City of Alexandria, resulting in school integration.

**1963**  
Martin Luther King, Jr., gives his “I Have a Dream” Speech advocating racial equality at the March on Washington.

*“It [March on Washington] was an awesome experience: thousands and thousands of people from all across the country, black and white, arms locked, standing together for freedom.”*

Frances (Johnson) Colbert Terrell



**1965**  
City of Alexandria opens T.C. Williams, an integrated high school, on site of segregated Seminary School.

Last members of The Fort leave after four generations living here. Some of Seminary community continues on Quaker Road, Woods Avenue, and Woods Place. Oakland Baptist Church still stands on King Street.



Courtesy CBC & Frances Johnson-Colbert Terrell  
Oakland Baptist Church at Bill Reeves Photography



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749



The City of Alexandria thanks the Fort Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society and the Fort Ward History Work Group for contributing knowledge, research, and images.

www.alexandriava.gov/FortWard

