1323 Duke Street – From Slavery to Freedom and Service

This house, built by Emmanuel Jones by 1888, stands at the corner of a block that witnessed the extremes of 19th century African American experience. From a slave trading company to significant expressions of freedom – military service, medical care, religious services and Alexandria’s first, collective civil rights action.

The block was purchased by slave dealers in 1835 and continued to be used by a succession of such businesses until the Civil War (1861-1865). Union troops took control of the block and built L’Ouverture Hospital in 1864 to care for soldiers serving in the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT). Hundreds protested inequality in death and petitioned for burial in the military burial ground now known as Alexandria National Cemetery. The hospital’s Mess Hall was the early meeting place for the congregation that became Shiloh Baptist Church.

“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.”

Frederick Douglass

The 47th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment fought in several engagements including the Battle of the Crater. Three men of the regiment died at L’Ouverture Hospital: Pvt. William Mathews, Pvt. John Henry Nicholson and Pvt. William Plato. All were from Maryland and suffered from illnesses, such as typhoid, in the hospital.

“Enlistment of African Americans in the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) began in 1863 and resulted in the service of about 179,000 men. In the first known civil rights action in Alexandria, 423 soldiers in L’Ouverture Hospital protested their comrades’ burials in the freedmen’s graveyard and signed a petition asking for a resting place “in ground designated for the burial of brave defenders.” Their success resulted in the burial of approximately 280 USCT in Alexandria National Cemetery. The grave markers can still be seen today and are a solemn statement of the equality the soldiers sought through their military service -- burial as soldiers, not as civilians.

As American citizens, we have a right to fight for the protection of her flag, that right is granted, and we are now sharing equally the dangers and hardships in this mighty contest, and should [sic] the same privileges and rights of burial in every way with our fellow soldiers, who only differ from us in color ... We ask that our bodies may find a resting place in the ground designated for the burial of the brave defenders, of our country [sic] flag ...”

From petition in letter from Alexandria Quartermaster Captain JGC Lee to the Quartermaster General, December 28, 1864.

Shiloh Baptist Church has a long history on the block. Fifty freed people gathered in the L’Ouverture Hospital mess hall as the Old Shiloh Society led by Reverend Leland Waring, Charles Rodgers and E. Owens. The congregation moved across West Street after the Civil War. The clock of the church, James Ballard, and his wife, Mary, bought 1323 Duke Street in 1920. Shiloh Baptist Church, under the pastorate of Reverend Moses W. Beasley, purchased it from widow Mary Ballard in 1957. Under the pastorate of Reverend Doctor Lee A. Earl, the church leased it to Heritage Community and Economic Development Corporation, Inc. The building was dedicated for senior housing as Beasley Square in 2010.

Shiloh Baptist Church