African Americans and the Civil War—Fleeing, Fighting and Working for Freedom

The Civil War (1861-1865) opened the door for opportunity and civil rights for African American Virginians, about 90 percent of whom were enslaved in 1860. The upheaval from battles and the federal presence in Alexandria and eastern Fairfax County offered the chance and destination for thousands to escape slavery, seek refuge and jobs behind Union lines, and create new lives. At the end of the War in May 1865, African Americans in Alexandria and environs numbered 10,000, nearly half of whom were under 12 years of age.

These “contrabands” and freed people aided the Union cause by working as hospital attendants, gravediggers, stevedores, teamsters, cooks, laundresses, and in labor gangs to build roads, construct fortifications and trenches, and maintain rail lines. More than 200,000 men enlisted in the United States Colored Troops (USCT), and a quarter of those lost their lives fighting for freedom. Many USCT soldiers escaped slavery before enlistment, such as the fathers of two long-time residents here at “The Fort” and the larger “Seminary” community.

The Chaplain was called on frequently to visit and bury the “contrabands,” whose poor little huts hung upon the edges of the camp and were scattered over the fields all the way to the City. After the Second Bull Run battle, large numbers of blacks gathered about the Hospital and were kindly treated, the men being employed in policing and the women as laundresses, all receiving Government rations.

Barracks of the First Battalion, Companies C, E, and L, 1st Connecticut Heavy Artillery at Fort Ward, circa 1863.

Military installations like Fort Ward and other forts in the Defenses of Washington served as a line of safety for African Americans escaping slavery. This view of Fort Ward dates to 1863 and shows Braddock Road in the foreground with barracks and the fort’s gate.

"Capt., I have the honor to report that the ‘colony of negroes’ mentioned in the communication of Surg. Allen – Fairfax Sem. Hospital are, so far as I can learn from white people – other than those at the Hospital – an industrious community and almost all the males are at work, one place or another, for the Govt. Some of them have little garden spots with vegetables... They seem clean, orderly and well disposed... Surg. Allen says he offered them work which they refused, probably because they could get better wages at Fort Ward and the block houses on the road..."

"The huts about us, first homes of the wandering, sorrowful race, were strange patchwork;bits of shelter tents and blankets, ends of plank, barrel staves, logs and mud, but most of them were neatly whitewashed and with the kininess of a little, fenced garden behind, and near many and many, by the roadside, was a rough grave with a red-wood cross at its head. The huts and the gardens are gone, and the forlorn graves were trodden long ago into the fine, white dust of the Virginia highway."

The Episcopalian Church and Seminary Theological Seminary, both located across Braddock Road from Fort Ward, were used by federal forces during the Civil War for camps, a large hospital facility, and a cemetery. After the war, the Episcopalian institutions provided employment for decades to “The Fort” and “Seminary” African Americans.

Civil War Veterans—Ancestors of “The Fort” and “Seminary” Families

The sons of two veterans who served in the United States Colored Troops (USCT) moved into “The Fort” and “Seminary” after the Civil War. By buying land and raising families, they helped establish an enduring African American community, a right for which their fathers fought. The Seminary continues as a neighborhood today.

The City of Alexandria founded the Fort Ward/Episcopal Theological Seminary Society in 1993 to preserve and continue the historic woodland campus of knowledge, research, and images.

www.alexandriava.gov/FortWard

The City of Alexandria has the Fort Ward and Episcopal Theological Seminary listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Historic Preservation and Cultural Resources marker is located at the entrance to Fort Ward.

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