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Out of the Attic

Recalling the final resting place for escaped slaves

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Image: "The Path of Thorns and Roses" by Mario Chiodo. Photo, City of Alexandria.

After the Union occupation of Alexandria in May 1861, the celebratory mood of secession quickly turned to despair and residents who supported the Confederacy fled southward.

But by 1862, Alexandria had become a beacon of hope for enslaved blacks seeking refuge and protection as contrabands behind the Union lines. In a now famous decision, Union Gen. Benjamin J. Butler declared that three escaped slaves who had presented themselves at Fort Monroe in 1861 — where he was stationed — would not be returned to their owners as required by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Butler shrewdly reasoned that the terms of that law did not apply to countries other than the United States, which the Confederacy claimed to be, and therefore slave owners in those states were ineligible to reclaim their human property.

Word of the decision spread, and thousands of slaves fled bondage, escaping to Union-held territories like Alexandria. By the fall of 1863, the population of the city had swelled to 18,000-plus, more than doubling in just over a year.

Once in Alexandria, military officials and reformers struggled to provide food, shelter, medical care and other basic services to the new refugees. The city's limited social and health systems were soon overwhelmed, and death and disease spread rapidly. By early 1864, local cemeteries were nearly full, and steps were taken to hastily acquire new land for burials.

In January 1864, a parcel of open land at the intersection of South Washington and Church streets — owned by Francis Smith, a secessionist who had fled to Richmond — was confiscated by Federal authorities. The site received its first burials of contraband and free blacks by March 7. Over the next several years, more than 1,800 blacks, mostly women and children, would be interred at the site. Even black soldiers who had fought on behalf of the Union Army were buried there, until what may be the nation's earliest civil rights protest resulted in the removal and reburial of those soldiers in the new Alexandria National Cemetery.

What was known as the Freedmen's Cemetery was forgotten after military rule ended in Alexandria. By the mid-20th century, a gas station and office building were constructed on the site. Those buildings eventually were torn down and are being replaced by a permanent memorial to be dedicated later this year. As seen in this photograph, the recently installed statue, "The Path of Thorns

and Roses" by Mario Chiodo, interprets the struggles and hopes of those escaping to freedom in Alexandria.

In honor of Black History Month — and to commemorate the upcoming 150th anniversary of the cemetery — former Alexandria archaeologist Steven Shephard will present a free illustrated lecture called the Discovery and Archaeology of the Freedmen's Cemetery. The lecture starts at 7:30 p.m. tonight at Lloyd House, 220 N. Washington St. All are invited to attend.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.