



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Admiring the determination of black refugees in Civil War-era Alexandria

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Image: Quartermaster's Coal Wharf. Library of Congress.

During the summer of 1862, thousands of southern slaves fled to Northern Virginia seeking protection as [contrabands](#) behind Union lines. At the time, although their legal status was still undetermined, many refugees flooded into Alexandria, joining free blacks already settled here and working in service to the Union Army. Living conditions were almost intolerable, as the new residents sought refuge in areas surrounding the established downtown blocks, setting up tents or building small shelters and shanties in open spaces, interior courtyards or the small plots between buildings. As the black population in these developing neighborhoods grew, new names began to take hold,



identifying such areas as The Bottoms, Hayti, Uptown, The Berg, The Hill, The Hump and Cross Canal.

These unofficial names often were derived from the spontaneous expression of their new residents, relating to their past origins or local geographical features that they had to overcome. As Alexandria was then under military rule, the U.S. government, with the aid of northern social reformers, responded to the huge influx of refugees by building housing barracks at the western end of Prince Street and creating schools, hospitals and employment opportunities. Northern soldiers, many of whom had never seen a black person, were often surprised by their determination, writing home about their work ethic and personal industry, especially when encouraged by discussions of freedom.

By September 1864, the contraband population in Alexandria had swelled to more than 7,000, yet only 25 of those were reported on the charitable ration list of the U.S. Commissary Department. Interestingly, white refugees numbering in the hundreds had a corresponding number on the same charitable list.

It was noted that the enterprising blacks not only built and paid for their homes, they were often whitewashed and fenced, with a small garden and pens maintained for raising crops and small farm animals. One cavalryman commented that they were an inspiration to other soldiers to continue fighting for a Union victory.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Many black refugees obtained employment at area hospitals, bakeries or as laborers with the Army, assisting with the storage and transport of supplies and equipment in support of the Union cause. This photograph of fatigued laborers in front of the Quartermaster's Coal Wharf at the foot of Montgomery Street records the strength and determination of those workers who braved the overwhelming odds of their situation. In particular, note the central figure who silently speaks for all the men, bent on one knee with arms flexed and determined, poised for a freedom that's almost certain to come.

"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.