



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Dedication of Memorial Marks End of Long Journey for Cemetery

*Alexandria Times, September 4, 2014*

*Image: 1927 aerial photograph of the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery (left) and St. Mary's Cemetery (right). Photo, City of Alexandria.*

The formal dedication of the [Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial](#) at 10 a.m. Saturday commemorates the 150th anniversary of the hastily prepared burial site for more than 1,700 black contrabands and freedmen that died in Alexandria during the Civil War. However, the location of the cemetery at the heavily trafficked intersection of South Washington and Church streets often prompts questions about its selection as a burial ground and why the construction of a gas station and office building on the Freedmen's cemetery site — in 1955 and 1962 respectively — was permitted.



When Alexandria was first settled the downtown area was centered on Cameron and Fairfax streets. The town gradually expanded outward over the next century as the Potomac riverfront was filled in and the long-planned street grid was built to the north, south and west. The southern extremities of early Alexandria lay along a large bay at the mouth of Great Hunting Creek, an active shipping waterway that reached the old village of Cameron near today's Telegraph Road, which lost out to Alexandria as the first designated port in Northern Virginia in 1749.

It was not until 1809 that Great Hunting Creek was bridged by a causeway linking the Port City to Richmond (today's U.S. Route 1). Eighty-three years later an electric railway to Mount Vernon was built, crossing the creek just to the west of Broomilaw Point. Until 1932, when the George Washington Memorial Parkway was built across the creek, South Washington Street was a one lane dead-end roadway in a section of the city where adjacent streets had not yet been built.

This aerial photograph of the area, dating from 1927, documents the unpaved end of South Washington Street, separating the open field of Freedmen's Cemetery to the left from St. Mary's R.C. Cemetery, marked by large gravestones across the street.

Since the founding of Alexandria, the southern end of the city always was a foul place filled with noxious smells, where small tenant farms crowded up against small brickyards and spontaneous dump sites that held the ever-increasing waste it produced. By the time of the Civil War, the site selected by Union authorities for the Freedmen's Cemetery was one of several land tracts owned by Francis L. Smith, who lived at 511 Wolfe St.

A lawyer by trade, Smith was Robert E. Lee's personal attorney. He moved to Richmond at the start of the war. Although Smith's parcel was confiscated by the federal government, no steps were taken



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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to legally take title to the property or protect it in perpetuity. Several years after the cemetery was abandoned in 1869, the wooden fencing and small crosses used to mark the site had deteriorated and disappeared, and the cemetery became largely forgotten.

By the mid-20th century, the tract at Freedmen's was owned by the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, which sold it with a covenant restricting the sale of alcohol or gasoline on the site. Soon after, a motel was proposed for the parcel of land, but that plan fell by the wayside as routes for construction of the Jones Point (now Woodrow Wilson) Bridge through the area were being evaluated. Ultimately, the bridge was built and permits were issued for a gas station and office building on the site, with no discussion in the local press about the historic significance of the site or enforcement of the legal covenant.

Although construction of the Capital Beltway and two buildings caused damage to burial areas, the huge expanse of asphalt paving fortunately protected the graves underneath. The restoration of the cemetery and construction of the memorial using the building slabs restores the dignity of the site as sacred ground, and provides a host of interpretive panels and markers that trace its history. During the past week the final installation of white bricks in the surrounding sidewalk mark graves of those buried closest to the original pathway of Washington Street, long-since widened to a four-lane roadway.

*"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.*