



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The struggle begins for post-Civil War freedoms

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Image: A Richmond family after the Civil War. Photo, Library of Congress.

White Alexandrians were making preparations for governing their post-Civil War community months before the fighting ended. President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect on January 1, 1863, was a clear signal that life in the South would be changed forever following a Union victory in the war.

Millions of blacks, such as this family photographed in Richmond just after the war ended, would be welcomed into American society as free people, and would eventually be granted all of the rights and privileges of white Americans. As the war moved to its conclusion early in 1865, however, both white Alexandrians and the Restored Government of Virginia — which had replaced the seceded government in Richmond — acted to keep blacks out of active roles in the city and state political process.



In January 1865, Alexandria's charter was amended to include provisions that only white males could vote or hold office in city government. This was in keeping with new "black codes" at the state level, which replaced earlier legislation to restrict the rights of slaves and free blacks in Virginia. Black Virginians could now testify in court, for example, but only in cases that involved another black person and not those involving white people alone.

Recognizing the impact of the massive influx of contrabands moving into and within the state during the final years of the war, vagrancy laws also were tightened at the local and state levels, with punishments including forced unpaid labor on farms that would essentially return people to a slave-like status.

Wary of these actions and anxious to safeguard their new freedom, blacks in Alexandria organized and "went straight to the top;" they arranged a meeting with President Andrew Johnson in May 1865. Johnson received a set of resolutions from the group seeking protection from "certain state laws in relation to the colored population, which the [Virginia] legislature had not repealed." The President



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

referred their request to the U.S. Department of War, which oversaw law enforcement in the former Confederate states.

At the local level, military Provost Judge Paul R. Hambrick was tasked with following up on such legal disputes, as he did in October 1865, when a gun was seized from a black man named Arrenton while he was out hunting.

Though blacks had been banned from possessing firearms before the war, the judge now made it clear to Alexandria authorities that “the colored people will be protected by me, in any infringement upon any right guaranteed to white citizens,” adding that “the colored man must be regarded, as far as the right of property and freedom of person is concerned, precisely on the same footing with white citizens — no more, no less.”

A month later, city council enacted a revised ordinance governing the night watch, stipulating that any policies “relating to the night watch which discriminate between white and colored persons are hereby repealed and colored persons shall be punished and otherwise dealt with in the same manner as if they were white persons in all cases.”

Judge Hambrick’s opinion thus anticipated by nearly two years what would become the law of the land when the 14th Amendment was ratified in 1868.

“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.