



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The effects of emancipation in Alexandria

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Image: *Suny Binghampton.*

Blacks in Alexandria organized politically during that first summer of freedom in 1865 and aligned themselves with the Republican Party, to whom most white Southerners referred simply as “Radicals.”

Conservative whites in Alexandria and elsewhere in the South were Democrats. Many letters were published in local newspapers in the years immediately following the Civil War warning blacks against being led astray by smooth-talking Radicals from the North, as portrayed in this political cartoon of the period, who seemed to be promising them everything.

“The thinking colored men,” one article stated, “say that, whatever may be their power, politically, it would be impolitic to use it in a way to exasperate the white residents, whom they should rather strive to conciliate . . . seeing that they must live with them and be dependent in a great degree on them.” A letter to the *Charlottesville Chronicle* in 1867, re-printed in the *Alexandria Gazette*, observed that “the colored people, as if impelled by a malign destiny . . . are all moving towards an offensive political alliance with the most unscrupulous, violent and dangerous enemies of their Southern friends and employers.”

Among the provisions in the Reconstruction Act of March 2, 1867 — often referred to at the time as the “Force Bill” for the measures it forced Southern state governments to adopt to be re-admitted to the Union — was the requirement that states in the former Confederacy extend voting rights to black males. The act was passed by the Republican controlled Congress over President Andrew Johnson’s veto. Defending his veto, Johnson asserted that under the Constitution, it was up to the states to determine voting eligibility, not the federal government. “The negroes have not asked for the privilege of voting,” he declared, adding that “the vast majority of them have no idea what it means.”

This climate of official uncertainty thus gave local authorities all the wiggle room they needed; when votes were cast in Alexandria’s municipal election three days later, over 1,300 black votes were disregarded. Black Alexandrians continued to align themselves with the Republican Party during this period, still known as “the party of Lincoln,” and to actively support candidates in areas where black voters were most concentrated. A black Republican club in the city’s fourth ward organized a boycott of the Washington and Alexandria Railroad in 1867 to protest the company’s segregated seating policy.

Socially, Alexandria’s black and white populations were just beginning to adjust to this new life together as well. A thousand daily interactions before the war had always been negotiated relatively





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

easily by a black person's status as either free or enslaved, governed by social rules both codified and unwritten for over two centuries in Virginia. These interactions were now thrown into flux, as millions of former slaves began to enjoy the freedoms of movement, property ownership and work that most whites had always enjoyed.

In "A Word to the People of Color," re-printed in the Alexandria Gazette in 1867, a Washington resident described an incident on a streetcar in which black males refused to give up their seats to black women. One of the women was quoted as saying, "You paid your money, and you [have] got as good a right to your seat as anybody."

The observer cautioned that "civility is more appropriate to the colored race now than when slavery existed, for everybody will understand that it comes now from the heart, and is the expression of a good disposition, and not dictated by fear." The writer further warned that blacks "ought to remember that in one sense they are representative of their race, for thousands watch their behavior here to see what is the effect of emancipation upon the people of color."

"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.