



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Two homes key in Alexandria's Contraband history

*Alexandria Times, March 23, 2017*

*Images, Contrabands Hospital, 321-23 South Washington Street, during the Civil War and today. Office of Historic Alexandria.*

Two matching residences located at 321 and 323 S. Washington St., and now used for commercial purposes, played an important role in Civil War Alexandria and in the emergence of racial tolerance in what, before the war, was one of America's largest slave trading ports.

Although the homes were built as mirror images of one another, as compared in the black and white and colors images taken about 1864 and 2015, respectively, they appeared as one large dwelling with symmetrical fenestration and architectural details.

When the war broke out, they housed two Quaker brothers of the Miller family — Elisha, who left Alexandria when Union troops arrived, and Robert, who remained in the city but refused to swear the required oath of allegiance to the United States.

Due to the large size of the structure, its strategic location on Washington Street, and the questionable loyalties of the brothers, Union authorities confiscated the homes to house relief workers and to store goods and supplies for nearby hospitals, including the Lyceum and Downtown Baptist Church Hospital.

Two women who lived at the site included Julia Wilbur, a social reformer from Rochester, N.Y., and Harriett Jacobs, a former slave who became an influential nurse and writer.

In 1863, military Gov. John Slough ordered that one of the two houses be



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

---

converted into a hospital to care for African American soldiers serving with the Union Army. But the single residence allotted was much too small to serve that purpose, and ultimately the L'Ouverture Hospital complex was built along nearby Prince Street.

Instead, the buildings at Washington and Wolfe streets cared for ailing Contraband refugees, slaves who had escaped bondage in the Deep South, seeking protection behind Union lines in Alexandria. It came to be known interchangeably as the Contrabands Hospital or Bigelow's Hospital, named for the surgeon in charge.

Despite having the authority to resource the hospital with the best available supplies, equipment and staff, there appears to have been a conscious decision by Dr. Bigelow to ignore Slough's intent, without repercussions.

He directed that supplies housed in the building be used elsewhere or remain in storage rather than be used for their intended patients. The hospital was so ill-equipped and understaffed that Wilbur complained repeatedly in her diary about the so-called medical care facility, calling it "a loathsome place. Those poor women are dying from neglect. I can hardly be civil to Dr. B."

But as the plight of the desperate Contrabands grew worse, and Alexandria's health crisis deepened over the ensuing months, even Bigelow's apparent racial bias seems to have waned in favor of compassion. By the fall of 1863, Wilbur wrote, "The house is now filled with those for whom it was intended, a competent matron and nurses are employed, and I thank God for the blessed change." Alexandria's long journey to racial tolerance had begun.

*"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.*