



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Collingwood Beach: An early African American resort

*Alexandria Times, August 8, 2018*

*Image: Frederick Douglass, a journalist, civil rights activist, author and government official for whom Collingwood Beach was renamed in 1895. National Archives and Records Administration*

**B**efore the end of segregation in Virginia, places of leisure marketed to African Americans opened throughout the state, including here in Alexandria. As author Patsy Mose Fletcher notes, African Americans living in Washington, D.C., often working as maids, seamstresses, chauffeurs or porters, saved money to enjoy leisure activities outside of the crowded capital city.

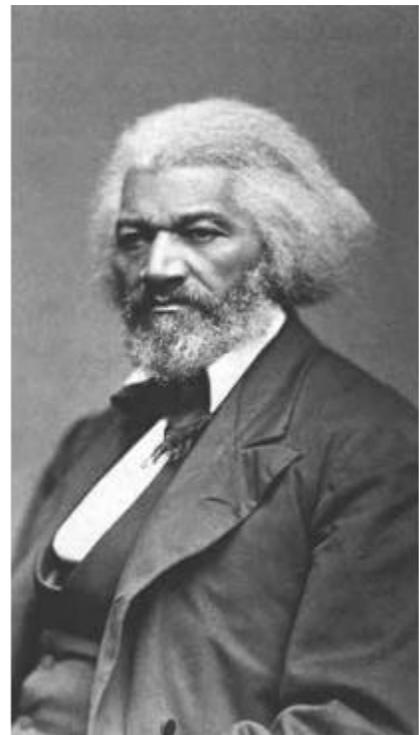
Often sponsored by churches and fraternal orders, popular and affordable day-long excursions included picnics, local steamboat trips, pleasure gardens and camp meetings. Collingwood Beach, located along what is now the George Washington Memorial Parkway near Fort Hunt, was a favorite among the locals, in addition to Notley Hall and Glymont.

The late 1880s saw a rise in riverboat owners expanding their businesses by offering city dwellers river cruises that promised fresh air and excursions along the shores. As these became more popular, captains purchased shorefront property as destinations for their cruise. As most cruises excluded people of color, in 1888, steamboat captain L.J. Woolen, a white man, recognized the potential of the African American market and leased and developed Collingwood Beach as an exclusively African American resort. Woolen invested in an early version of a roller coaster, a pavilion, a merry-go-round, swings and a bathhouse.

Business practices, which intentionally oversold outings and ignored gambling, led to occasional fights that the press played up as proof for stereotypes and segregation. One such “riot” led to the nickname “Razor Beach,” which became a derogatory term for all African American beaches in the area. Despite the reputation, this and many of the other beaches thrived as respectable getaways.

In 1895, Collingwood Beach was taken over by J.W. Patterson, an African American lawyer, minister, businessman and real estate investor. Determined to operate a black-owned excursion company, he raised funds to lease Collingwood Beach and hire a steamboat after the failure of his first excursion business. Patterson renamed the destination Douglass Beach after Frederick Douglass, who had just passed away.

A month into his operation, the steamboat captain refused to land the passengers at Douglass Beach, claiming that it was unsafe to dock. Despite Patterson’s pleas to take the paying customers down





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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the river and back, the captain refused, noting that the boat still belonged to the previous owner as Patterson had only paid a down payment. The matter was settled out of court, and Patterson left the excursion business for real estate. The Aug. 23, 1908 Post magazine notes in an article on other African American beaches in the area that Collingwood was abandoned.

The demand for African American leisure sites continued until the end of segregation in the 1960s; however, Alexandria and other Virginia towns were overshadowed by competitors in Maryland, especially Cobb Island and Highland Beach, which was founded by descendants of Frederick Douglass and maintains its identity to this day.

*“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 staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*