

AFRICAN AMERICAN WATERFRONT HERITAGE TRAIL



Illuminating the History of the African American Community

Even before the founding of the City of Alexandria in 1749, Africans and their descendants, enslaved and free, have lived and worked along the waterfront, making significant contributions to the local economy and culture. In the 1820s and 1830s, Alexandria became home to the largest domestic slave trading firm, which profited from the sale and trafficking of enslaved African Americans from the Chesapeake to the Deep South. The Civil War revolutionized social and economic relations, and newly freed African Americans found new job opportunities as a result of the waterfront's industrialization. The Potomac River played an important role in leisure activities too, including picnicking, boating, and fishing, much as it does for Alexandrians and visitors today.



Experience the Trail

Alexandria's African American history is told through online StoryMaps and can be experienced in-home on your computer, or on your smartphone as you walk the trail along the Potomac River.

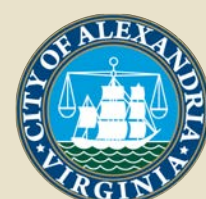


North Trail StoryMap



South Trail StoryMap

Learn more at www.alexandriava.gov/go/4273.



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Navigate the Trail

The African American Heritage Trail along the waterfront consists of two interconnecting routes. Both begin at Waterfront Park. Together, these trails illuminate the history of the African American community in Alexandria over a span of several centuries.

Follow along on your phone as you walk the trail, or on your computer at home.

NORTH ROUTE: Beginning at Waterfront Park and ending at Montgomery and N Fairfax Streets.

Land-making Efforts

The area around lower King Street east of Lee Street (formerly called Water Street) sits on the land made by early Alexandrians. Residents used the earth, held in place by wharves, piers, and derelict ship hulls, to create useable land and reach the deeper channel of the river.

Torpedo Factory

The Alexandria Torpedo Station was a workplace for African American workers during and after World War II.

Carlyle's Wharf

Ships carrying both goods and enslaved people arrived in Alexandria in the late colonial period at places such as Carlyle's Wharf, which was likely constructed in 1759.

Retrocession

Alexandria was part of the District of Columbia beginning in 1801. The return of Alexandria back to pro-slavery Virginia in 1847 impacted the lives of Black residents.

Fishtown

In the 19th century, Fishtown existed at a time when the Potomac River was described as "full of fish and business." Seasonally, free and enslaved laborers worked in Fishtown, cleaning and preparing fish for market.

Industry

After the Civil War, the waterfront experienced a period of industrialization. Many of these factories, plants, and yards provided a source of jobs for African American men.

West's Point

Between 1735 and 1738, Hugh West acquired this point of land and operated a tobacco inspection warehouse here. West owned several enslaved African Americans including Harry, Tom, and Bob, who probably did the hard work of his tobacco operation.

African American Neighborhoods

Three African American neighborhoods straddled Oronoco Bay, just off the river's edge - what became known as The Berg and Fishtown to the south and west, and Cross Canal, to the north.

The Canal and Laboring at the Coal Wharf

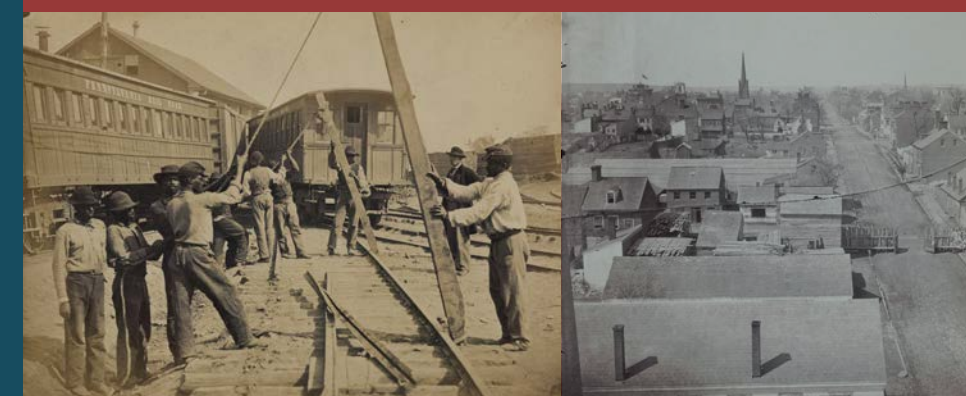
During the Civil War, African American men who had escaped from slavery or were already free worked on the Alexandria Canal at the northeast tip of the city. African American residents may have moved to Cross Canal in search of affordable housing or to be close to jobs at the wharves.

Old Dominion Glass Corporation

Among the workforce at this glass factory were white and African American children as young as ten years of age.

Cross Canal

The Cross Canal neighborhood was a quiet rural area during the Civil War, named for its position just across the Alexandria Canal at the northeast tip of the city. African American residents may have moved to Cross Canal in search of affordable housing or to be close to jobs at the wharves.



SOUTH ROUTE: Beginning at Waterfront Park and ending at Jones Point Park.

Enslaved on the Waterfront

At the southeast corner of King and South Union Street stands a building once used as a merchant warehouse for storing goods. Enslaved people owned by merchant John Fitzgerald likely labored here in the 18th century.

The Domestic Slave Trade in Alexandria

Alexandria was once one of the country's largest centers of the internal or domestic slave trade. Thousands and thousands of people were trafficked by ship from the wharves here on the Potomac to the slave markets of the Deep South.

George Henry, Enslaved Ship Captain

An enslaved ship captain sailed the waters of the Chesapeake, including those of Alexandria, before he sought his own freedom in the 1840s.

The River Queen

This steamship, once the transport of President Lincoln and his generals, tells the story of the river as a place of leisure for African Americans in the 20th century.

Shipbuilding in Early America

The experience of Charles, an enslaved ship carpenter's apprentice, illuminates maritime Alexandria.

Quakerism and the Anti-Slavery Movement

In the decades before the Revolutionary War, Quaker teachings ultimately led to a condemnation of slavery. Merchant and Quaker William Hartshorne owned a store at this location. Through the experience of an enslaved man named Ben, we see the deep conflict between Hartshorne's religious convictions and his economic interests.

Evidence of Banking Out

Remnants of the efforts to bank out or expand waterfront properties in the 18th century are visible at this location. Enslaved people performed some of this arduous and dangerous labor.

Everyday Life of Free African Americans

Some of Alexandria's free Black families lived in an alley off The Strand in the early 19th century.

The Railroad during the Civil War

Many free and formerly enslaved African American people found employment as laborers for the U.S. military on the City's several railroads, which transported supplies and soldiers to the waterfront.

Hayti, An African American Neighborhood

Free African American residents formed a neighborhood called Hayti. Historical research and archaeological excavations help document this important place in history.

African American Neighborhoods in the Civil War

Thousands of formerly enslaved individuals came to Union-controlled Alexandria to seek refuge and freedom. As a result, new neighborhoods appeared, including four in this vicinity.

Zion Baptist Church

A small group of African American residents established Zion Baptist Church in 1864 at an earlier location closer to the river. At the end of the Civil War, Zion Baptist was one of five African American churches in Alexandria. In 1882, the congregation dedicated the new Zion Baptist Church where it still stands today.

"Mr. Philip Alexander's Quarters"

Tobacco was the central commodity of the early Virginia economy. A map from 1724 shows the location of quarters for enslaved people who labored on Philip Alexander's tobacco plantation.

USCT at Battery Rodgers

The Civil War generated the construction of 68 major fortifications circling Washington, D.C., including Battery Rodgers. A unit of African American soldiers, designated USCT or U.S. Colored Troops, was stationed here to help maintain the fort.

CCC Camp at Battery Cove

In 1935, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) created a camp at Battery Cove, which housed about 200 African American men assigned to convert the area into a park. The camp was renowned for their glee club.

The Virginia Shipbuilding Company Workers

The First World War generated a significant increase in Alexandria's business environment, notably its ship-building industry. More jobs meant greater opportunities for African American workers.

Freedmen's Cemetery

Citizen activists played a major role in reclaiming the burial site as a memorial to the 1,711 Black men, women, and children buried there who sought freedom behind Union lines in Alexandria during the Civil War.

Jones Point Ropewalk

Free Black men worked at this site of a former ropewalk, a 1,300-foot-long building built for the purpose of making rope to support Alexandria's maritime trade.

Jones Point and Benjamin Banneker

Benjamin Banneker set the first cornerstone for the future District of Columbia, the capital of the new nation, here in 1791.