

Sanctuary

A place of refuge, safety, protection

The creation of sanctuaries is deeply rooted in African American history. A sanctuary includes places of refuge from slavery, violence, racism, and discrimination where people can be proud of the color of their skin without fear of disrespect or punishment. They are safe spaces where one can speak and be heard, learn, collaborate, and plan.

Places of sanctuary take on many forms from homes to churches to schools to civic associations to neighborhoods. Free Black neighborhoods in Alexandria provided refuge as early as the late 18th century. Among the earliest known was The Bottoms which was roughly bound by Duke, Franklin, Patrick, and Washington streets. Black neighborhoods provided a familiar and relatively safe setting largely outside of the gaze of white authority figures, allowing people to live and express themselves more freely.



"Coloured school at Alexandria Va. 1864 taught [established] by Harriet Jacobs & daughter, agents of New York Friends." The X in the image indicates Harriet Jacobs. (Robert Langmuir African American Photograph Collection, Emory University)

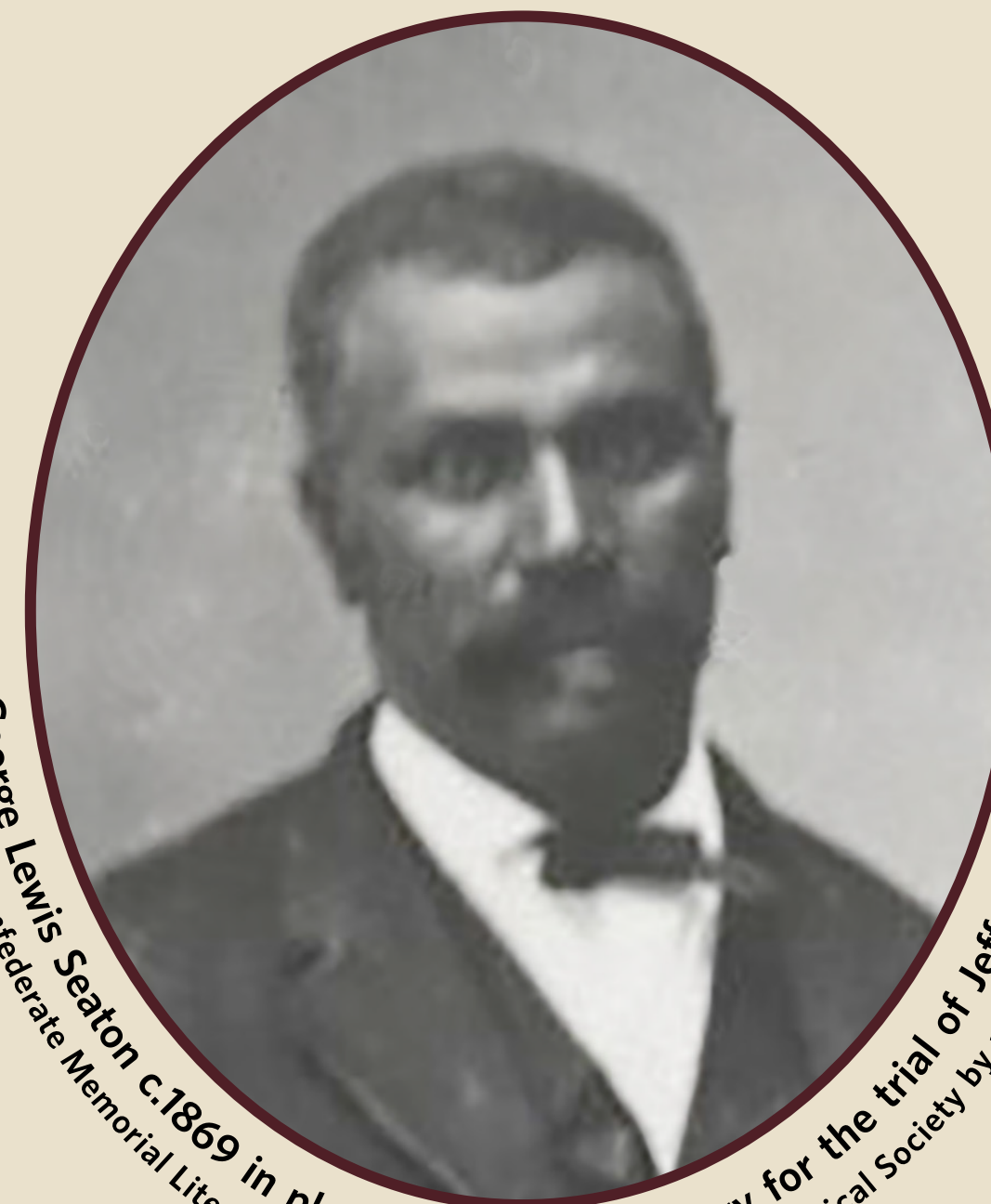
Harriet Jacobs and The Jacobs School

Harriet Ann Jacobs—writer, abolitionist, and reformer—was born into slavery in North Carolina and achieved freedom for herself and her children in 1852. During the Civil War, she and her daughter, Louisa, returned to the South and devoted themselves to helping Black refugees. Both Harriet and Louisa focused their efforts on education and building schools that served Black Americans.

Schools for free Black students had operated sporadically in Alexandria in the early 19th century when the city was part of the District of Columbia. Soon after federal occupation of Alexandria during the Civil War, there were attempts at reinstating education for Black students. However, it was under Harriet Jacobs, in January 1864, that a schoolhouse opened at the corner of N. Royal and Oronoco streets. This was called the Jacobs School and was the first school in the city to be built, owned, and operated by freedmen and freedwomen. With the help of Harriet Jacobs and her school, Black Alexandrians were able to take charge of their lives and futures.



"Harriet Jacobs in 1894" (Gilbert Studios)



George Lewis Seaton c.1869 in photo of the "Grand Jury for the trial of Jefferson Davis" (Collections of the Confederate Memorial Literary Society managed by Virginia Historical Society by agreement of January 1, 2014)

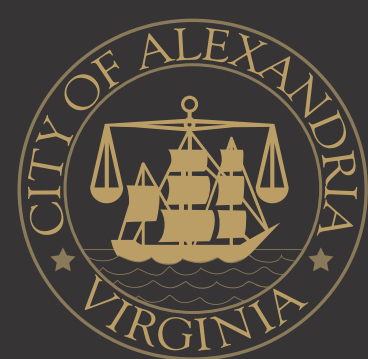


George Lewis Seaton

Following the Civil War, George Lewis Seaton used his talents as a master carpenter, builder, real estate developer, politician, and community leader to build sanctuaries for Black residents of Alexandria. A Freedmen's Bureau agent described him as "very much interested in the welfare of the colored people here."

In addition to building homes in the city's Black neighborhoods, he established the Free School Society of Alexandria in 1867 and was commissioned to build two schools. These were the Seaton School for Boys (later known as the Snowden School for Boys) in The Hill neighborhood and the Hallowell School for Girls in Uptown.

He also built several civic buildings for the community. As a leader, he was a founder of the Colored Odd Fellows in 1869 and built a large expansion on their building in The Bottoms. Multiple organizations—including Rising Star, the Lincoln Lodge, the Good Samaritans, the Daughters of Zion, and Galilean orders such as the Eastern Star and the Golden Star—used this building as a meeting place.



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749



Courtesy of AlexRenew and
The Office of Historic Alexandria