THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FREE BLACKS IN ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

by

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Foreword

The Alexandria Archaeology Publications series is composed of papers on various aspects of research conducted under the auspices of Alexandia Archaeology, a division of the Office of Historic Alexandia, City of Alexandria, Virginia. The authors include professional staff members, university students and Alexandia Archaeology volunteers. Editing of the papers has been kept to a minimum. It should be understood that the papers vary in tone and level of technicality, since they were originally directed toward many different audiences.

We are pleased to offer the papers within this series and in so doing are opening our "manuscripts on file" - including professional conference papers, background documentary studies, student course papers, and volunteer research papers - to professionals and public alike.

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The study of Afro-American life in 19th Century Alexandria is a perfect topic ffor archaeological inquiry. The number of black Alexandrians fluctuated between 25 and 39 percent of the city's population, yet few written records detail their daily lives, friends and families, and contributions to the community. Archaeological study is conducted at such a fine scale that we have been able to go beyond the broad generalizations about Alexandria's history (which often exclude blacks) to a microscopic view of of selected streets and households. It is in this manner that historic black life can be closely viewed. In turn, its study can shed new light on community relations and urban growth in Alexandria.

Afro-American research conducted by Alexandria Archaeology since 1979 has centered upon a neighborhood approach. Using primary records such as tax assessment rolls, census schedules, deeds, and city directories, geographical areas where blacks lived were delineated in twenty year increments. Where it is not possible to accurately identify other ethnic groups from such records (names may only "sound" Irish, for example), the census takers did late 20th Century researchers a great service by refering to a black person with an asterisk or the term "colored." By following the tax assessor and census recorder from block to block throughout the historic city (see attached map for city limits), we have been able to reconstruct black neighborhoods. This information has then been cross-checked with senior citizens living today to determine the accuracy of the

neighborhood boundaries, the area's name, and the general character of the different parts of town.

The first map outlines the black neighborhoods which existed in Alexandria between 1870 and 1910. You will not that the neighborhoods are associated with the periphery of the city, or in other words, they are on the outskirts of town. The second map helps in seeing the degrree to which these neighborhoods are an expansion from the antebellum beginnings. In the 1810-1850 period the niehgborhoods were forming, especially in the southern part of town.

This formation process follows a time when the proportion of free blacks in Alexandria increased dramatically. Between 1790 and 1800, the number rose from only 52 to 369. By 1820 there were 1,168 free blacks. Forty-five percent of the blacks living in Alexandria by that year were free, rather than slave, compared to only nine percent in 1790.

Alexandria Archaeology has excavated in two of these early neighborhoods -- The Bottoms and Hayti.

1. The Bottoms. It formed around the Alfred Street Baptist Church, the first known black congregation. It is one of the earliest areas where free blacks lived near one another. The area is often called "The Dip" today and is the location of the building which once housed the Odd Fellows Joint Stock Company -- perhaps the earliest black club -- established in 1869.

2. Hayti. A small area along Royal Street, Hayti was the location of many black homes and a few black businesses, such as grocery stores. The name "Hayti" may have been used as a symbol of freedom by newly freed blacks inhabiting the area as early as the 1820s. Hayti is the historic spelling of Haiti, the setting of the first successful slave revolt in the world, ca. 1791-1803. The area gradually became less residential with the construction of the railroad along Wilkes Streets

(and through the tunnel to the Potomac), a brass and iron factory (where the Safeway store is), and a tannery. Hayti was also the neighborhood in which George Seaton, the first Alexandria black in the Virginia General Assembly and a master carpenter, lived.

After excavating ten sites in thesee two neighborhoods, we have learned some interesting aspects about black life. The artifacts found in thesee sites are extremely similar to those found in sites once inhabited by white merchants and craftsmen. The dishes which once were in the kitchen or on the table were made either at one of the Alexandria potteries or in Britain. A few plain white dishes were made in the United States in the last half of the century. Bottles marked with Alexandria apothecary names also indicate that blacks were using products that many other Alexandrians were, as well. Even toy marbles and dolls reflect the similarity of children's games. Only the food remains indicate that black laborers ate more pork than other Alexandria households -- particularly pigs' feet.

Is that all there is to archaeological study? Not quite. It is valuable to look not merely at what is on a site, but also to ask the questions: "What's missing?", "What patterns are formed in how the artifacts are discarded across a backyard?", "What do the artifacts, the architecture, and the oral history together say about historic life?"

It is interesting to note that few brick-lined wells have been discovered on black sites. This is quite unlike what is seen throughout the middle class white sites, which often have several such wells. Many of these structures were turned into privies, and contain some of the best samples of artifacts.

Since the black sites do not have such wells (or, if wells do occur, they are used as wells into the 20th Century, and are empty of artifacts), the artifacts are found throughout the backyards. They are often small and difficult to piece into larger objects. Yet, the lack of wells on black sites points to an important difference between Alexandrians in the 19th century. People living along King Street (merchants and slaves) often had a handy and personal source of water either through wells, or in the 1850s, piped water. Free blacks in the outlying neighborhoods continued to walk several blocks to procure their water in buckets.

Also missing from the black sites is the variety of ceramic patterns and forms. While merchants along King Street set their tables with matched sets of two-color, elaborately decorated dishes with many serving pieces, black working class families on Royal Street predominantly used plain white, unmatched plates and bowls.

The great quantities of artifacts discarded in black back-yards in the 1870-1910 pereiod (estimated to be more then 25,000 from our sample) point to another variation in Alexandrians' lifestyles. The black back-yards continued to be places of work and animal raising, while many other Alexandrians joined the Victorian trend toward lovely gardens. As evidence of this fact, excavations in wealthier Alexandrians' back-yards yield fewer artifacts dating to this period. The Royal Street black sites, in contrast, have animal bones of an age and type that lead us to speculate that chickens and rabbits may have been raised. Arti-

facts double in amount, rather than decrease. The numerous small cylinders of decomposed wood discovered through the backyards are associated with high frequencies of shirt and underwear buttons. These are clues that the black women -- such as Barbara Newman and Marsha Johnson -- living on these sites were washing clothes and hanging them on laundry lines held up by wooden poles. Some confirmation for this interpretation comes from the census that records these women's occupation as "washerwoman" -- even though Mrs. Newman was 70 years old.

The study of Afro-American life through archaeology in Alexandria has gone beyond stereotypes of slaves and slave-trading. The examination of neighborhoods, the broken and discarded bits of daily life, and the personal sagas of many individuals have created a picture in our minds, when few photographs exist. The black neighborhoods show a steady growth and vitality through the establishment of churches, clubs, businesses and family relationships in the 19th Century. It is through our archaeological studies that I have come to an intimate experience which draws me closer to individuals who contributed their labor, timee, funds, and dreams and created the spirit of black neighborhoods and community.

The documentary research which I discussed in this paper has been conducted by Ted McCord. I have listed his book in the brief bibliography for further reading. The Alexandria Society for the Preservation of Black Heritage, located at 638 North Alfred Street, and the Lloyd House library on Queen and Washing-

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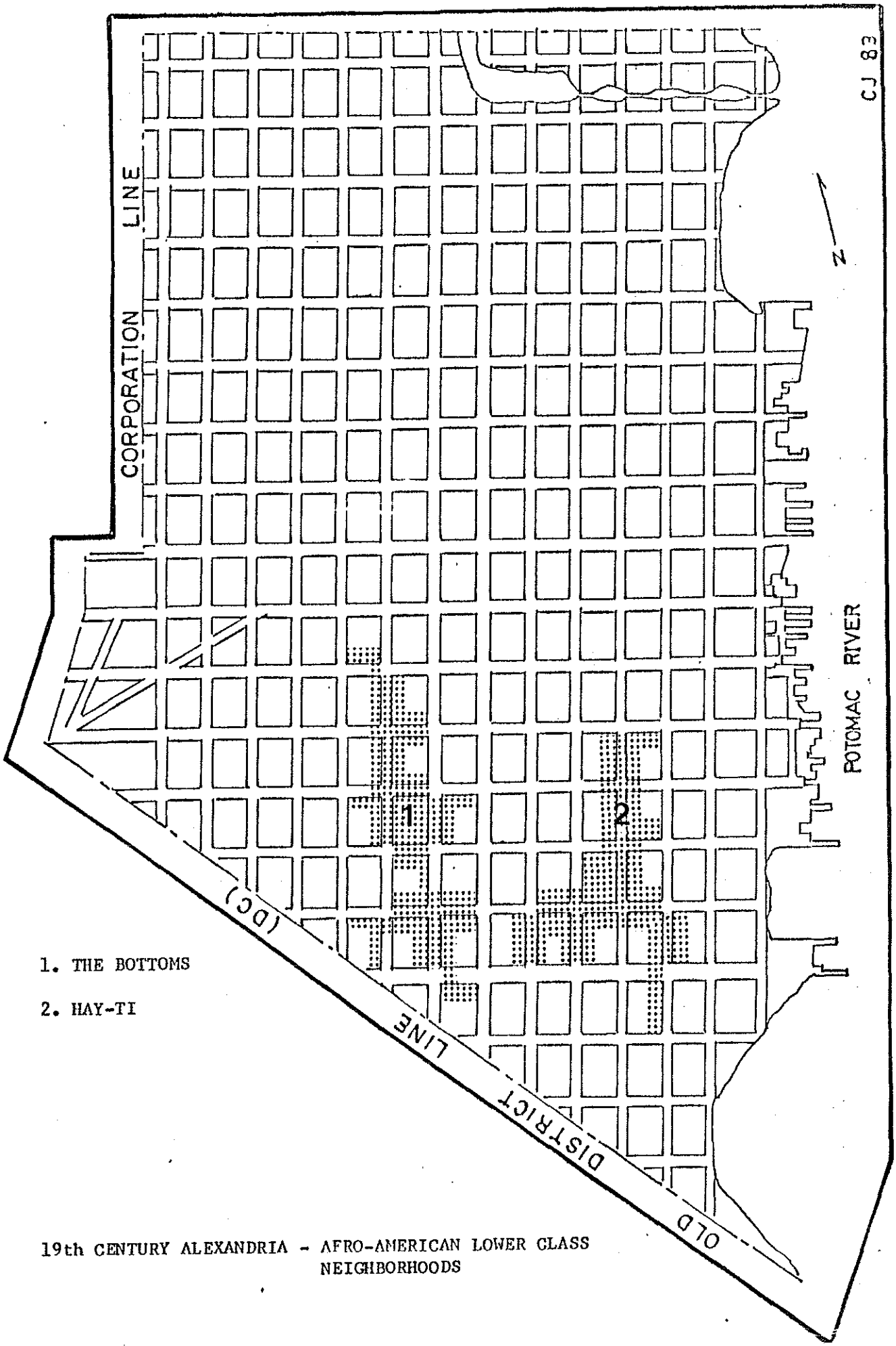
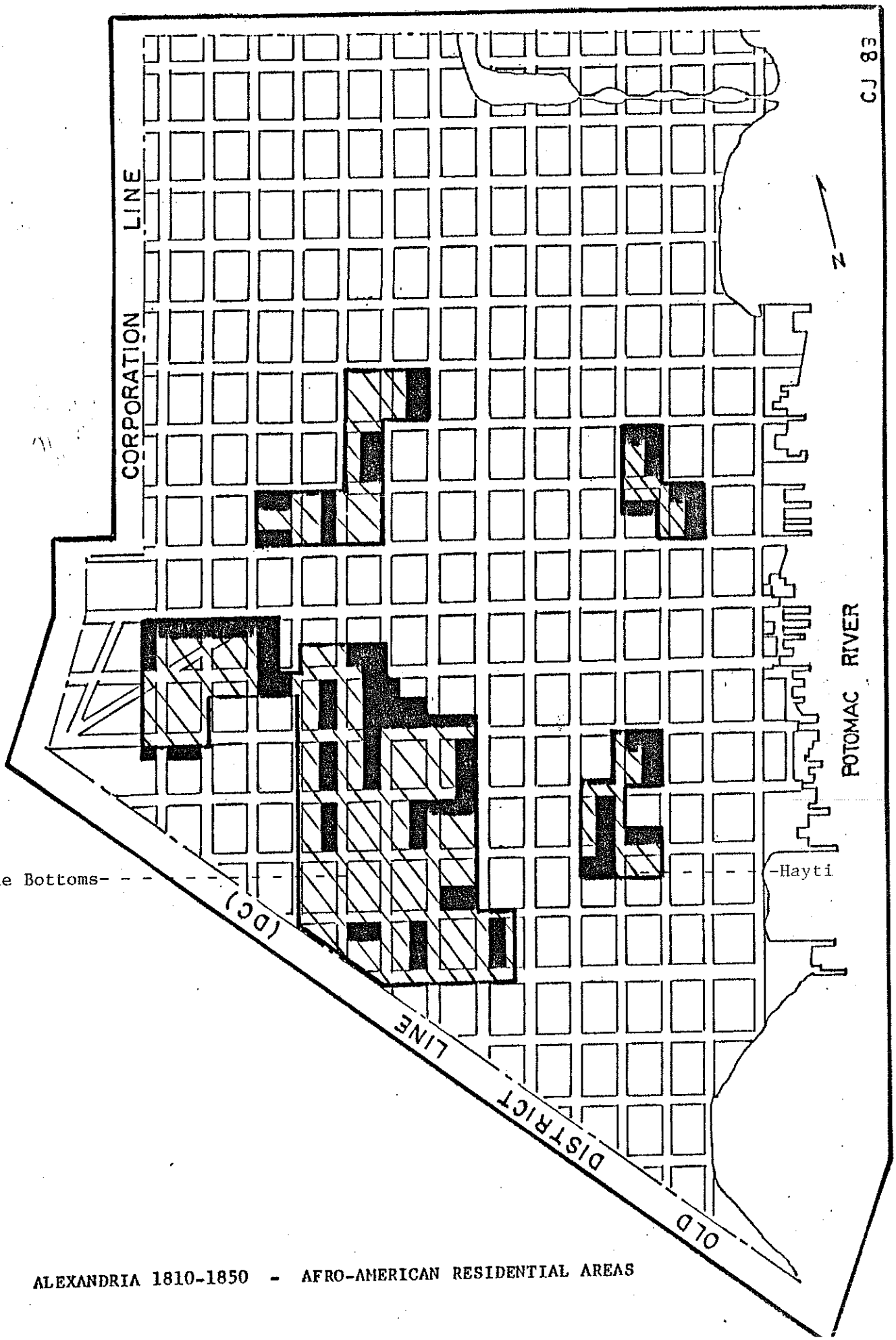


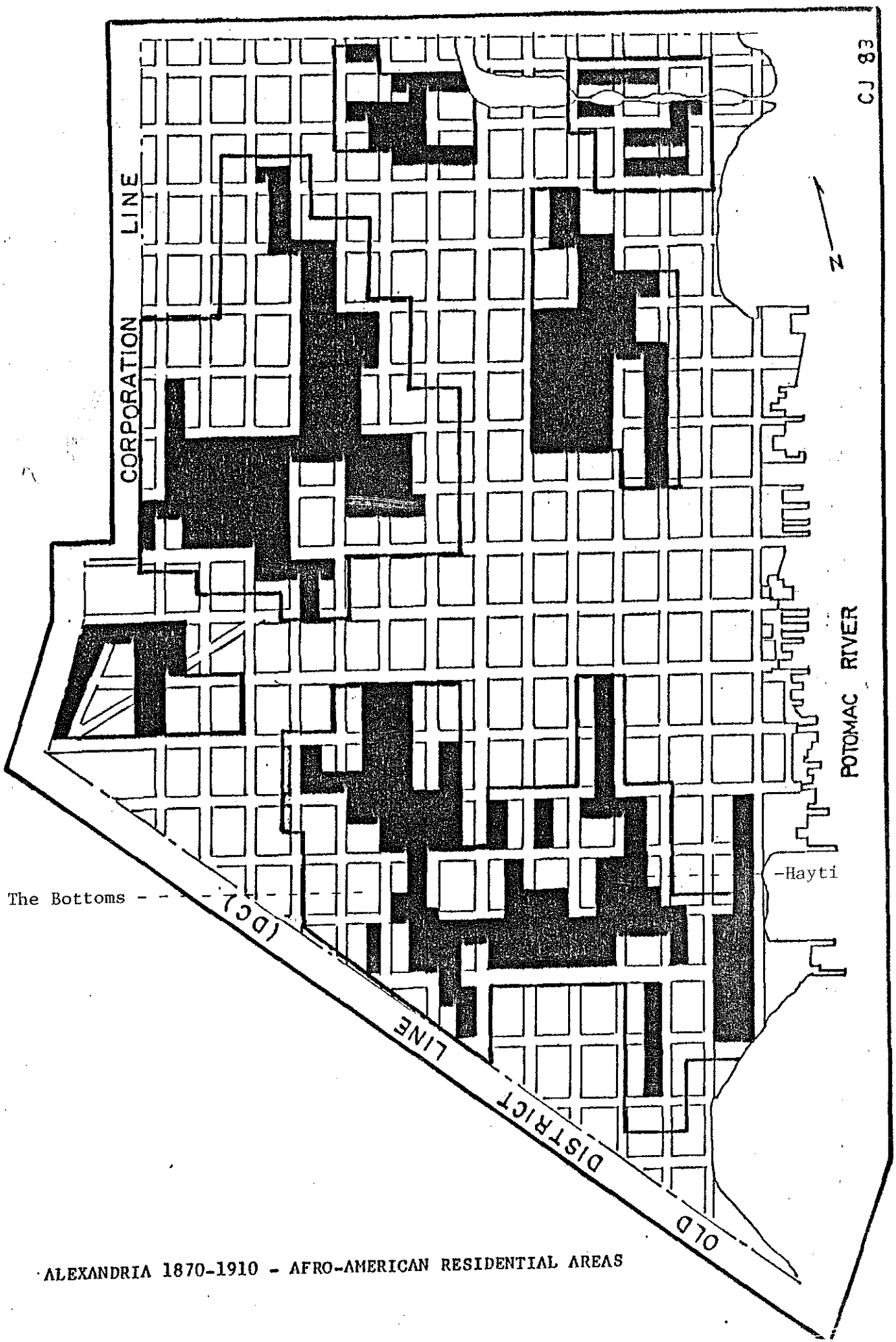
1. THE BOTTOMS

2. HAY-TI

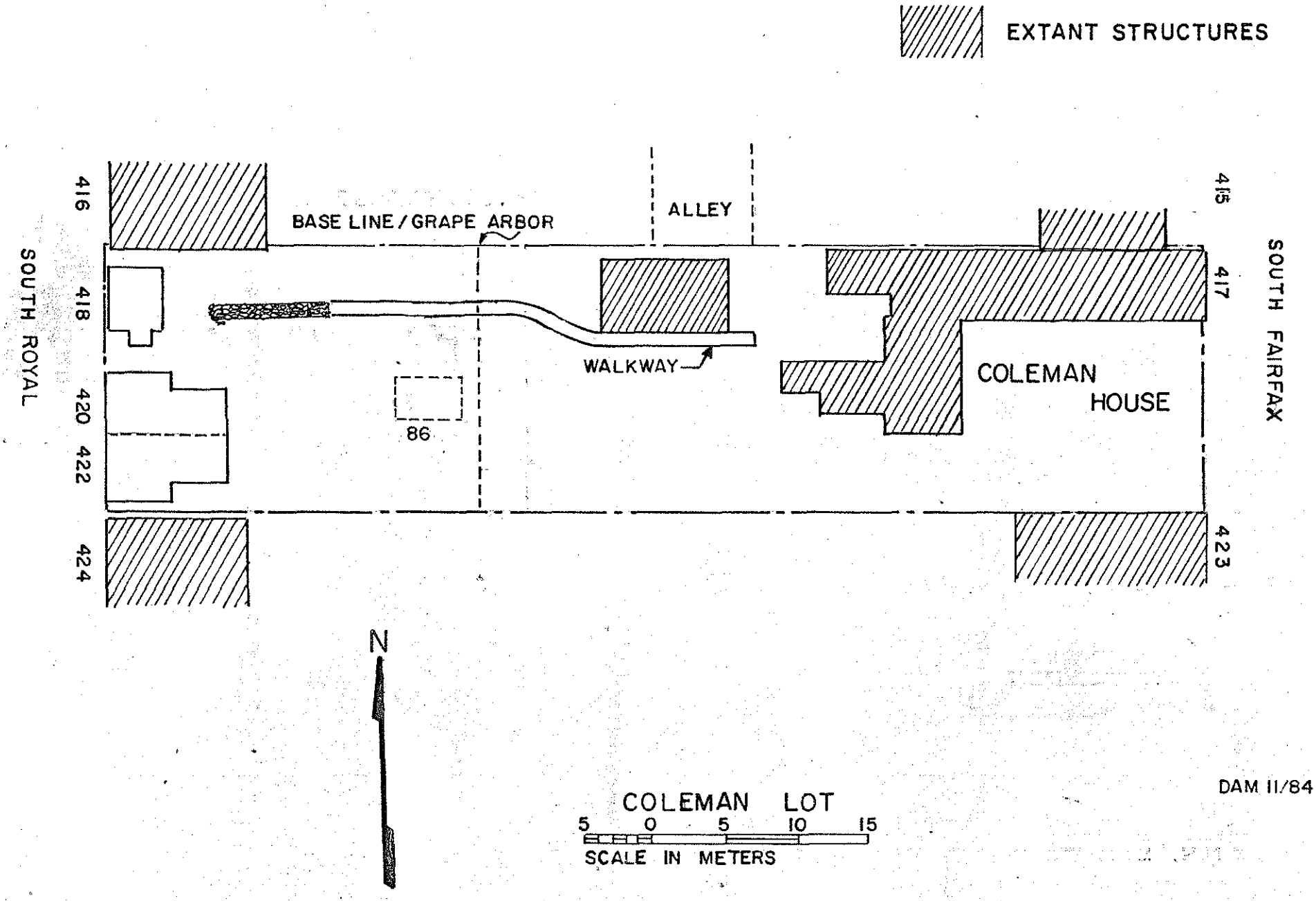
19th CENTURY ALEXANDRIA - AFRO-AMERICAN LOWER CLASS NEIGHBORHOODS



ALEXANDRIA 1810-1850 - AFRO-AMERICAN RESIDENTIAL AREAS



ALEXANDRIA 1870-1910 - AFRO-AMERICAN RESIDENTIAL AREAS


EXTANT STRUCTURES
416
418
420
422
424
SOUTH ROYAL
BASE LINE / GRAPE ARBOR
ALLEY
415
417
423
SOUTH FAIRFAX
WALKWAY
COLEMAN
HOUSE
86
N
COLEMAN LOT
5 0 5 10 15
SCALE IN METERS
DAM 11/84