THE FORMATION OF FREE BLACK COMMUNITIES IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ALEXANDRIA, VIRGNIA

by

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Foreword

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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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Pamela J. Cressey, Ph.D.
City Archaeologist
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Alexandria, incorporated as part of the District of Columbia from 1791 until 1846, experienced a rapid growth in her free black population during the early nineteenth century. Whereas in 1800, 20 percent of blacks were free, by 1840 over 64 percent of the black population had free status (Brown 1972:11). That constraints were placed on free blacks, as a group sharing the urban environment of Alexandria, are undeniable, and an atmosphere of racial discrimination and oppression was the norm.

Yet, socioeconomic variation within the free black population as a whole indicates that approximately 14 percent of Alexandria's free blacks attained a socioeconomic status comparable to that of middle class whites. Certain free blacks transcended the limitations imposed on their group and over time increasingly used their means to facilitate the growth of the free black community.

As two groups sharing the urban environment, whites and free blacks adapted to varying extents through competition and accommodation, and these interactions have material correlates in residential patterns (c.f. Burgess 1925a, 1925b; Sjoberg 1960, Hawley 1971; Cressey and Stephens 1982). One obvious result of the competition for

the urban Alexandria environment is the notion that spatial distance reinforces race and class distinctions (Cressey 1985, Shephard 1985). Free blacks often responded to this competition through residential choices based on conflict avoidance (c.f Jochim 1981:62).

This idea was tested using a methodology which consisted of a one hundred percent survey of free blacks in the tax and census records for Alexandria in twenty year intervals from 1790 to 1850. The development of Alexandria's free black residential areas was studied through the analysis of information collected for 632 free black household heads on twenty-nine spatial, social, and economic variables gathered from the tax and census documents. Previous documentation of tax assessor routes made possible the plotting of household heads by streetface and alley and neighborhood boundaries determined for blacks by the City Survey were refined (c.f. Cressey et al. 1984; Cressey 1985). In this study, contiguous clusters of free black occupation were defined as residential areas, some of which developed into enduring neighborhoods. The maps generated were compared with locations of extant nineteenth century structures on streetfaces and provide a foundation for preservation planning efforts and more intensive archaeological study.

When data were available, each household head was also assigned a socioeconomic rank in order to study intravariation within the population. Socioeconomic rank is a three-tiered rank scale measure dividing the population into low, middle and high or 'elite' categories based on a cumulative rank total of three factors: occupational opportunity, the property value of a house owned or rented, and property tenure.

The occupation of seven residential areas evolved over the course of the antebellum period and these patterns were plotted and studied further in regard to variations in the socioeconomic rank of household heads.

(slide) The very earliest occupation by free blacks (ca. 1790) is on blocks that remained continuously occupied over time, eventually becoming the nuclei of more stable free black residential areas. (slide) Areas 1, 2, 3, and 4 are occupied beginning in 1810 through 1850. (slide) Area 5 emerges as a residential cluster by 1830. (slide) Areas 6 and 7 are small residential areas defined by 1850. In general, a movement away from the central business district and a decline in the free black population within the wards nearest the waterfront from 1830 to 1850 indicate a movement toward the more peripheral areas of the city. Although this movement conforms to the core periphery model outlined by Cressey and Stephens (1982), the consistent presence of occupation along the King Street corridor,

indicates that for some free blacks, residential choice may have been guided by proximity to their workplaces.

Some of the free black residential areas experienced more expansionary movement than others. (slide) In 1830, Area 1 is in virtually the same location but moves to the south by 1850. Area 2 remains stable with a slight movement to the southwest. Area 4 and 5 expand to the south during this time period.

The longevity and density of Areas 1 and 4, known as "Haiti" and "The Bottoms", respectively, correlate with increasing property investments and social links. As Areas 1 and 4 grew they extended further toward the city's periphery. Lower property values in Area 4 correlates with higher property ownership suggesting that unoccupied or undesirable land in these areas was made available for sale by whites.

In fact, more free blacks living in Areas 1 and 4 owned properties. Places of free black worship, such as the Alfred Street Baptist Church in "The Bottoms" and the Trinity Methodist Church in "Haiti", were located on blocks with the densest occupation within these areas. Three black men purchased the lot for the establishment of the Alfred Street Baptist Church in 1816, however the land adjacent to the church site was purchased by William Gordon in 1798 and became the first property privately owned by a free black in Alexandria. Initial settlement by free

blacks and accessible places of worship attracted free blacks able to buy land to these areas. The security found in sheer numbers undoubtedly attracted free black immigrants and blacks with the most limited opportunities to these areas, although enforcement of Alexandria's ordinances on free black registration were deferentially enforced over time. The increased heterogeneity of Areas 1 and 4 may have been the impetus to their growth into the only true antebellum free black "neighborhoods" of Alexandria (c.f. Pack 1984).

Areas 2 and 3 were areas inhabited by free blacks in small clusters, possibly for reasons related to their proximity to the central business district. Undoubtedly, the predominance of white residences and white owned businesses restricted the opportunity for increasing the free black population in these areas and therefore afforded less stability and security. The adaptive strategies employed by these free black residents may have emphasized occupational opportunities, proximity to place of work, or temporary residence in the boarding houses of these areas.

Area 5 corresponds to the neighborhood previously defined as "Uptown" in The City Survey. The occupation of "satellite" areas surrounding Area 4 by predominantly low and middle ranked individuals in the free black community may have been the result of migrations or the need for more inexpensive housing away from the central business

district. In Area 6, an elite free black, Henry Darnell, was renting houses he owned to other free blacks as well as living there himself. This strategy of buying properties that were subsequently rented to free blacks is one that may indicate how residential areas initially formed in the outlying parts of the city.

Area 7 had an eclectic mix of household heads, with a high percentage of "elite" free blacks. The proximity of this area to the property upon which Roberts Memorial Church was built suggests that the majority of individuals living in Area 7 composed a social and financial network in support of the church.

The location of the majority of the free black population in Area 4, "The Bottoms", regardless of time period, was not accidental. On a very general level, spatial distance reflects a physical response by whites and free blacks to inequalities in social status or power. One subgroup of the free black population, mulattoes, were perceived as separate from blacks in documentary references by whites, despite no significant differences in their overall socioeconomic rank within the free black community. However, mulattoes lived more frequently in larger, two-story houses and had higher literacy rates. Although data only exist for 1850, mulattoes are more frequently found in the city wards that had greater numbers of whites than free blacks. In contrast, a greater

percentage of blacks were located in Area 4, "The Bottoms" and Ward 4 had the lowest white population in 1850.

The social dynamics of group boundaries are also evident in the spatial placement of black churches. The movement of a free black Methodist church, now known as Roberts Memorial, began in 1830 when it branched off from the predominantly white congregation of Trinity Methodist Church located in Area 1. The new church, initially located on North Columbus Street just outside of Area 5, was moved when an opposition force of whites led by Edmund J. Lee, Robert E. Lee's uncle, objected to its location after the foundation had been laid. The church's third move was then to Area 7 where building began in 1834. As a result, the spatial patterning of free black residential areas had been altered because of constraints imposed by whites.

In general, the segment of the free black population interested in property ownership and the development of social networks and institutions, such as churches, found easier access to the more peripheral locations within Alexandria. The development of independent churches within clusters of free black residential areas signalled to their own community and the city at large that strength in the face of conflict could be garnered from organization based on faith.

Yet, figures for Alexandria's white population by ward indicate that total racial segregation was far from being the norm. The various levels of integration of whites and blacks may be reflective of changes in the power balance between groups over time. When several kinds of social differences are closely related, such as race, unskilled occupation and low income, and poor housing, their effects reinforce one another; they consolidate differences in social positions and group boundaries and they inhibit intergroup relations (Blau 1977:14). Segregation or intragroup clustering may increase when group identity is emphasized and conflict heightens between groups.

For example, there is no significant change in the density of free blacks on residential blocks between 1810 and 1830, but density on free black occupied blocks increases sharply between 1830 and 1850, even though the free black population growth is not as rapid as it was in the earlier period. By 1850, although the Alexandria economy had improved, increasing competition between poor whites and free blacks, Alexandria's retrocession back to Virginia, and heightened tensions surrounding the question of slave emancipation and black insurrection probably initiated responses to avoid conflict through increased clustering and segregation.

In Alexandria elite free blacks responded differently to group pressures at different points in time than lower ranked free blacks. An analysis of high ranked residential locations revealed that the majority of "elite" free blacks lived outside the boundaries of free black residential areas in 1810. However, they were generally living near or adjacent to the borders of these areas. Two trends occur over time. Free black residential areas either expanded into these adjacent blocks where the free black elites were residing, incorporating the majority of the elite within them by 1830 and 1850, or new dense residential clusters form in the area of initial elite occupation. New residential areas may be begun by elites purchasing property and attracting other free blacks to live on recently "secured" land, as is the case in Areas 5, 6, and 7.

To begin forming a "neighborhood" is a strategy for coping with the larger social hierarchy and power structure, and this coping was facilitated by free black "elites" in Alexandria who functioned as brokers for the group as they "colonized" new areas. Although negative sanctions against blacks were not systematically enforced - increasing slave trade, abolitionist and colonists movements, black political uprisings, and retrocession to Virginia created an environment of volatility and fear. Over time, more free black elites lived within the

boundaries of free black residential areas. As free blacks began to perceive the existence of their community they increasingly used locally based resources to establish churches in areas that provoked the least conflict with whites.

Increased clustering into residential areas, regardless of socioeconomic status differences and the development of some of these areas into neighborhoods, reinforced free black group identity and security in an uncertain antebellum environment. To the present day, Area 4, known as "The Bottoms", begun with a land purchase in 1798 and the building of the Alfred Street Baptist Church, remains a long-standing symbol of the strength gained from neighborhood formation and the power of community.

Strategies, motivated by restricted opportunity and conflict avoidance, were first initiated in the formation of free black neighborhoods during the antebellum period and continue today. Neighborhoods still remain the primary focus of black community identification and solidarity. In this domain, historians and archaeologists have much to offer.

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