



Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Design Competition 2008

Historic Design and Character of Alexandria Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery Archaeological Findings to Date September 5, 2007 Updated January 4, 2008

The information presented here is based upon three archaeological investigations, the discovery of more than 525 graves and extensive historical research. Additional findings may result from continuing documentary research.

What did the cemetery look like during the Civil War?

The cemetery was enclosed with a fence—possibly similar to the one built around Alexandria National Cemetery. A March 1864 order directed the construction to be done “as cheaply & expeditiously as possible.” Thus, the fence may not have been as ornate as the one around the military cemetery. The fence and a tool-house cost \$51.75.

It is not known whether the cemetery had trees or other landscaping. The cemetery was situated at the outer edge of town on a high bluff overlooking Hunting Creek, so extant trees may have been seen around the perimeter or within the cemetery.

There was at least one gate and probably several paths. The gate was probably on South Washington Street approximately across the street from the southern gate of St. Mary's Cemetery today. A path led at least halfway into the cemetery from this entrance.

Were people buried in individual graves? How were the graves marked?

Individual graves were dug for each burial. In one or perhaps two instances, two small coffins were placed into the same grave. However, in some cases more than one child may have been buried in a coffin. Possibly, children who died at birth or soon after were buried in the same coffin as their mothers who died from complications of childbirth. The record of deaths does note once that two men were buried in one grave.

Graves were marked with wooden head boards. If Freedmen's Cemetery head boards were similar to ones at Alexandria National Cemetery, they were whitewashed and had black numbers on the back (facing west). Civilian names were probably written in black on the front (east facing) side of the head board. The soldiers' names were probably also written in black on the front of the head boards.

What did the cemetery look like after the Civil War?

Wooden head boards deteriorated within a decade, so by 1875-1880 there would have been few reminders of individual graves. Burial plots may have sunk, giving the cemetery a rutted appearance. It is not known whether the fence was maintained; but without any federal ownership, it is thought that the cemetery was neglected. Randall Ward—the freedmen who supervised grave digging during the Civil War—continued to live in the area and may have provided some care. The Washington Post reported in the 1890s that a nearby brick yard quarried clay from the site, which caused human remains to be visible on the surface and coffins to protrude from the sides of the cemetery. The Post also reported one stone grave marker. If this marker did exist, it was probably placed by a relative after the Civil War ended.

Was there a design to the cemetery or a pattern to the orientation of graves?

Individuals were buried in an east-west (parallel to Church St.) orientation with heads placed at the west. The cemetery would have appeared to have rows of graves with a very small space between each grave.

The cemetery had at least 50 rows of graves parallel to South Washington Street, and a line of 46 graves has also been discovered parallel to Church Street. Historical records say that the government seized one and half acres from Francis L. Smith for the cemetery, and over 1200 people had been buried by January 1, 1866. More than 1800 appear to have been buried by the end of the cemetery's formal use in January 1869. There may have been informal use by people as late as the 1890s as reported by the Washington Post.

Given that head boards and burial rows were similar to Alexandria National Cemetery, Freedmen's Cemetery probably looked much like the military cemetery. However, there are some known differences. Freedmen's Cemetery does not have paths between every two rows of graves, nor has there been any evidence of the use of gravel or other paving materials. The military cemetery also had roads, a circular rotary with a flag pole and other "adornments and improvements."

Were the graves of United States Colored Troops (USCT) placed in chronological order of death throughout the cemetery or in a separate area?

Rev. Gladwin, Superintendent of Contrabands, wrote in an 1864 letter that the USCT soldiers were buried in a military section of Freedmen's Cemetery. He argued that it was more appropriate for them to lie in a visible place at Freedmen's then move them just to isolate them in a separate section at the soldiers cemetery (now Alexandria National Cemetery). Gladwin argued that the USCT section at Freedmen's Cemetery "could, if thought necessary, be enclosed so as to be a distinct Military Cemetery." He said: "It is the most accessible of any in the city, and every way a good location, and has been approved by visitors from various parts of the country, and may be beautified in any manner in which friends of patriots may desire." After the soldiers petition of December 27, 1864, the decision was made to disinter the more than 120 USCT at Freedmen's Cemetery and rebury them at Alexandria National Cemetery. This process started January 6, 1865. These men and more than 100 additional African American and Native American Civil War soldiers are buried in the USCT section of Alexandria National Cemetery.

Reverend Gladwin or another chaplain officiated at the soldiers' funerals, which were held with military honors.

Will the archaeological investigations discover all the graves?

No. The cemetery extended beyond the current fenced area. Graves exist under the sidewalk and South Washington Street, but archaeological work will not extend into these places unless disturbance is planned. Some of the graves have been lost to a series of intrusions: grading, construction, tank placement, the Beltway. Some areas containing contaminated soils or buried underneath building slabs cannot be explored. While more than 500 graves were identified in the archaeological investigations, it is probable that at least 1000 total graves remain in the cemetery.

What is known about the methods of burial at the cemetery?

The burial permit issued by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources does not allow excavation of the graves. The City archaeologists identified the grave shafts (the hole excavated for the coffin) as soon as possible after the asphalt was removed. This has been a challenge, since many feet of fill have been placed on the cemetery after grading its historical surface, so the grave shaft is difficult to discern. In other cases, most of the surface of the cemetery was graded, and only the bottom of the shaft with a coffin shape was detected. Some of these coffin shapes are shouldered, an older style of coffin, rather than a rectangular box. Excavation stopped as soon as a shaft was delineated, and no coffins were ever investigated.

Archival information does state that wooden coffins were kept in standard lengths of 2.5, 4, 5 and 6 feet lengths for use by "destitute contrabands". At least by 1866, the coffins were made at Freedmen's Village in Arlington and transported to Alexandria. After the military authority was notified of a death, the individual's information was registered in the Record Book of Deaths and Burials. Fees were collected if the person had any relatives or friends. Individuals paid \$2, \$2.50, \$3, \$4, and \$5 for the different sized coffins. If a person was in great need, the fee could be cancelled or paid over time. A head board was then prepared. Given the variety in coffins and the presence of hardware, such as hinges, some families provided their own coffins for the deceased.

If before 1 p.m., a driver with hearse came to the office, picked up an order for a specific size coffin, the head board and address of the deceased. The driver went to L'Ouverture Hospital to pick up the coffin, preceded to location of deceased, and then continued with the body to the cemetery. The funeral "is attended to by the men in charge of the place." After 1 p.m., the funeral was held the following day. No burials occurred on Sundays. In some cases, a particular minister is noted as officiating at the funeral.

Were there any buildings at the cemetery?

There was one "small house for keeping tools and bier, also for shelter to grave diggers in inclement weather". From January 1864 until January 1866, three men were employed to excavate graves, which were "always kept prepared". From January 1, 1866, two men continued as grave diggers: Randall Ward, the supervisor, and Thomas Johnson. Both appear to be freedmen. Mr. Ward received the order for burials, with "as many crosses (X) as there are bodies to be buried."

Is there evidence of other activities and time periods at Freedmen's Cemetery?

Yes. Thousands of Native American artifacts dating back 13,000 years have been discovered on the site. The artifacts show that people were making tools on this high bluff for millennia before John Smith sailed up the Potomac River. The 13,000-year old spear point is the oldest artifact discovered to date in Alexandria.

Vestiges of the two 20th century structures survive on the site as well. Two concrete slabs from the gas station and office building are visible and remain on site to protect graves which are probably underneath. The retaining wall and steps to the office building on Church Street are poignant reminders of how the cemetery was treated in the mid-20th century.