



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The racial divide of local Civil War medicine

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Images: Location of L'Ouverture Hospital; Wyeth pharmaceutical bottle unearthed on the site in 2016. Office of Historic Alexandria.

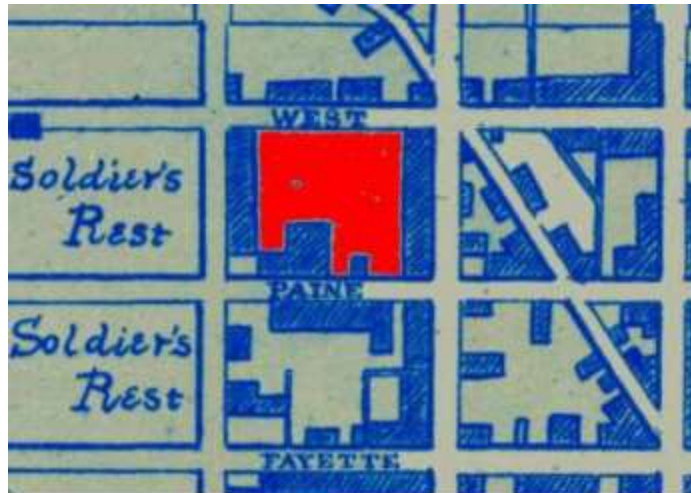
With the finale of season 2 of the Civil War medical drama “Mercy Street” coming up this weekend, thoughts go to the overwhelming health care crisis that overcame Alexandria as the war progressed.

In addition to treating sick and wounded soldiers, epidemics of diseases and illness due to poor sanitary conditions, inadequate housing and general exhaustion were commonplace among the civilian population.

And none suffered more than the thousands of African American Contrabands who escaped slavery deeper in the South and made their way to Alexandria, only to have their quest for freedom cut short by an untimely death. This situation was further compounded by the racial issues of the day, which segregated care even for the desperately ill.

To address this issue, construction began in 1863 on a large hospital near the Shiloh Baptist Church, seen here in red on an 1864 Union Army map, to care for African American soldiers and Contraband civilians. The site already contained an existing house, formerly used as a slave jail along Duke Street, a corridor that contained America’s second largest center for the sale of human chattel.

The property was in the same block as the notorious Birch slave pen at 1315 Duke St. and was bounded by Prince, Duke, South Payne and South West streets. When completed in 1864, the facility included hospital buildings and ventilated tents, a soldier barracks, a cook house and mess room, wash shed, a sutler’s store,





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

privies, a surgeon's dispensary, ward tents, Contrabands barracks and school room. A so-called "dead house" used to store corpses before burial was also located on the site.

The hospital was named after Toussaint L'Ouverture, the heroic leader of a successful slave revolt in Haiti that occurred nearly 70 years earlier. Despite the honor of naming the institution for a slave revolutionary, racial issues continued to play a part in the care and treatment of its patients, even after death.

Soldiers of the U.S. Colored Troops who died at the hospital were initially buried at the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery on South Washington Street, despite the opening of the Soldiers (now Alexandria National) Cemetery a year earlier.

Events came to head in late December of 1864, when the hearse carrying Pvt. Shadrick Murphy was diverted from the military cemetery by Rev. Albert Gladwin, supervisor of Contrabands.

In response, L'Ouverture patients wrote and circulated a petition on Christmas Eve that was presented to the surgeon in charge and made its way to the quartermaster for Alexandria, and eventually to Montgomery Meigs, the quartermaster general of the U.S. Army.

As a result, from then on African American soldiers were buried in the National Cemetery, and those who had been buried at Freedmen's were disinterred and reburied with their military brothers. A recent plaque installed on Prince Street near the intersection with South Payne Street identifies the site of the former L'Ouverture compound. After the war, the hospital buildings were sold for scrap or moved elsewhere, and the area was eventually redeveloped for residential housing.

In 2016, Fire Chief Robert Dube, who now lives on the site, unearthed a Civil War era medicine bottle in his backyard. That bottle, seen here and labeled "Wyeth" for the pharmaceutical manufacturer that sold supplies to the Union Army during the Civil War, is now in the possession of the Alexandria Archaeology Museum.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.