



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandria's Emancipation Day Celebrations

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Image: Prof. Magnus L. Robinson, Alexandria, Virginia. Courtesy Office of Historic Alexandria..

With the celebration of Juneteenth, which started as a commemoration of the emancipation of enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, we wanted to highlight the celebrations of those who were emancipated in Alexandria. Records of Emancipation Day in Alexandria can be found. For instance, Magnus Robinson provided an account of the Emancipation Day celebration that was held Jan. 1, 1891 in a letter he wrote to Senator S.M. Cullom of Illinois that day. The event took place at Lannon's Opera House, which sat at the southwest corner of Pitt and King Streets. Robinson claimed:

"Every orchestra chair was filled with the fair sex... the grand stage was well arranged; the scenery being grand and imposing."

Some of the speakers seated on the stage were the Hon. James M. Townsend of the U.S. Land Office, Mr. H.J. Europe of Alabama, Robinson himself and the pastors of Ebenezer, Shiloh and Zion Baptist churches. Townsend was the first African American appointed to the General Land Office by President Benjamin Harrison. Townsend's speech included his summary that:

"We assemble on this 28th Anniversary of the Emancipation of the American Negro, to thank God for our deliverance, to review the past, to tell of the present and to forecast the future...to enter our solemn protest against the conspiracy of silence on the one hand, and of outrage and high handed murderous assaults of our fellow countrymen on the other. In these gatherings we plead for justice, for fair play, for the equality of opportunity for every man in this broad land."

Robinson concluded his account of the celebration by calling it "one of the largest, enthusiastic and grandest meetings ever held in the city of Alexandria."

Robinson continued to organize Emancipation Day celebrations, although the date and location changed. For instance, it was announced on July 15, 1903 that the Emancipation Parade would take place on Sept. 22 that year. The April 21, 1908 edition of the Alexandria Gazette announced that the celebration would take place on July 4, when a cornerstone for a new Lincoln Memorial Hall would be laid.

Perhaps the reader can conclude that the time and place of the celebration of Emancipation was flexible in Alexandria, unlike Galveston. But what also comes through the accounts of the day was that emancipation was an event that deserved an annual celebration to Magnus Robinson and like-minded Alexandria residents.



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“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 staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.