



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

The Fort: Out of the Civil War and back again

Alexandria Times, May 6, 2021

Located at Braddock, Howard, King and Quaker streets, The Fort community sprang out of the remnants of Fort Ward. Not the Fort Ward that you can visit today in the middle of a city park, but the original, built and used by the Union Army during the Civil War.

The community was built by African American families, most of whom had a connection to the Fairfax Seminary, which is now Episcopal High School, and Virginia Theological Seminary. The Fort community wasn't unique in its use of Civil War fort remnants to build a new African American community in this area. Fort Reno in Washington, D.C. is another example of a new community built out of the physical materials of an abandoned Union fort.

The community's location relative to the Fairfax Seminary meant that many of its residents worked at the school, and the neighborhood belonged to a larger Seminary community.

While both white and Black residents lived in the Seminary community, The Fort maintained its vibrancy mainly through the efforts of four generations of African American families. These included the Adams, Ashby, Craven, Casey, Hall, Henry, Jackson, Javins, Johnson, Lewis, McKnight, Miller, Peters, Randolph, Roy, Shorts, Simms, Terrell, Wans(z)er, Wood and Young families.

Some of these families founded the Oakland Baptist Church in 1891 and moved it to its current location at 3408 King St. in 1893. In 1898, Clara Shorts Adams and Robert Adams founded the "Colored School Building at Seminary," the first public school for African American children in the area. The school closed in 1925, but you can still see where Schoolhouse Lane stood in today's Fort Ward Park.

In a sad twist of fate, the community's physical demise came as a sacrifice to the memory of the Civil War, the war that freed many of the community's first residents and provided the original building materials for many of the residences.

In the 1950s and 60s, after annexing the land from Fairfax County, the City of Alexandria expropriated the land of the residents of The Fort community to create the Fort Ward Museum and Park, which was dedicated in 1964 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of the Civil War.

Particularly bitter to some residents and descendants was the erasure of burials that they remember being on what used to be residential property. The same community was moved again in 1962, as the city built T.C. Williams High School.

Despite these physical hurdles, The Fort continues as a community, as those who grew up in the neighborhood maintain memories and traditions as they continue to stay in contact. The survival of the Oakland Baptist Church building is a reminder of the community that the residents built, against so many odds.

To learn more about The Fort community, please visit <https://www.alexandriava.gov/54262>.

In honor of Historic Preservation Month, Historic Alexandria is running a series on historically African American neighborhoods in Alexandria. The columns will feature both pre and post-Civil War neighborhoods.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

“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 and invited guests.