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Out of the Attic

From Grantville to Petersburg to The Berg

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As one of Alexandria's "forgotten" African American neighborhoods, Grantville had a brief but important appearance in Alexandria's history. One of three neighborhoods that straddled Oronoco Bay, Grantville joined Fishtown to the west and Cross Canal to the north.

The names of the neighborhoods reflected the locations where enslaved people had fled to come to the Union-occupied Alexandria. They also honored those that the residents saw as allies in their quest for freedom. The changing names of newly formed African American neighborhoods in Alexandria reflected both the influx of new residents with their variety of original locations and the politics of changing city leadership. The rough geographic location of "Grantville" was also known as "Petersburg."

We can attribute the name Grantville to two people: General Ulysses S. Grant, who led Union forces during the last few years of the war, and Peter Grant, a shoemaker said to have built the first house in the neighborhood for a cost of \$39. According to the "History of Schools for the Colored Population," published in 1871, naming the neighborhood Grantville after both Grants, "kill[ed] two birds with one stone." In 1863, Julia Wilbur wrote in a letter that "Grantville numbers about 100 houses now, & they are building a school house too."

The name Petersburg, shortened to "The Berg," refers to the city in southern Virginia that many of the neighborhood's residents had fled, especially during the siege that started in June 1864. In a 1982 oral history interview, longtime "Berg" resident Henry Johnson corroborated the assertion that the neighborhood's name connected to the city in Southside Virginia.

After the Civil War, the name Grantville disappeared from the written historical record, replaced by The Berg. Although no documentation explains the name change, one speculates that the city's white elites, who returned to Alexandria after the war, did not support having any neighborhoods named after a self-emancipated African American or a Union general. Another possible theory is that African American residents decided to change the name to better reflect their shared experience.

The Book of Records, primarily kept by Superintendent of Contrabands Rev. Albert Gladwin, shows the shift in the neighborhood's name. Gladwin, in addition to recording names, dates of death and ages also recorded the residence or place of death. After September 1865, Gladwin stopped using the name Grantville and began to use Petersburg regularly after December 1865.

Earl Lloyd, the first African American to break the color barrier by playing in the National Basketball Association on Oct. 31, 1950, was a 20th-century resident of the Berg. Born in 1928 and raised in The Berg, Lloyd graduated from Parker-Gray High School, which today is the location of Charles Houston Recreation Center on Wythe Street across from the Alexandria Black History Museum. Lloyd received a scholarship to play in college before entering the NBA. He was also the first African American to become an assistant coach in the NBA.

"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



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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.