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A Tale of Two Communities, And of How the Tale Gets Told

With its rolling lawns and secluded glens, Fort Ward looks like a lovely place to take a walk. Turns out, it's far more than a park in Alexandria — it's one history sacrificed to make way for another, a Civil War military installation that has become a contemporary battleground over whose story gets told.

Officially, Fort Ward is, as the city of Alexandria puts it, "the best preserved of the system of Union forts and batteries built to protect Washington, D.C., during the American Civil War." That's fascinating enough: a Union fort in Confederate Virginia.

But Fort Ward is also Adrienne

Washington's ancestral home. Her great-grandmother lies buried there, the headstone standing crooked and forlorn in the middle of a scruffy city maintenance yard along one edge of the park — a painful symbol of a community of black families that was forced off the hillside in the early 1960s when the city bought the land to stop a housing development.

Fort Ward is also Tom Fulton's back yard, literally. Fulton, a retired Interior Department deputy assistant secretary who has delved into the history that lies behind his house, and his next-door neighbor, a National Park Service retiree named Glenn Eugster, are part of a group of residents trying to do what the city



COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

An undated photo of Clara Adams, looking to the left, at Fort Ward in Alexandria. Her great-granddaughter is helping lead the fight to recognize the area's black history.

never did — learn about those who lost out when Alexandria took these 44 acres across Braddock Road from Episcopal High School, reconstructed the old fort and made a park out of someone else's

neighborhood.

Now the city of Alexandria is trying to figure out Fort Ward's future: Should the

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Two Histories in Need of a Combined Voice

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park be used more intensively — already, it's a site for big corporate picnics — or protected as a site for reflection? And which story should the park and its museum tell — that of the Civil War fort, or the black community that called this home?

The debate has brought together two sets of residents who previously barely knew each other existed: The immediate neighbors, who want to curb the loud parties that have been held in the park since alcoholic drinks were allowed in its picnic groves, and the families who want to recover their relatives' buried stories of life "on the fort." The two groups have united in support of a park that tells a different history — quietly.

"It's just a shame when you have to go through two locked gates to see one of the graves of your ancestors," then find them surrounded by trucks, tools and piles of mulch, says Washington, a columnist at the Washington Times who is researching the history of the Fort Ward settlement where her family lived through much of the 19th and 20th centuries.

For a long time, the city operated a trash transfer station right where Washington's great-grandmother, Clara Adams (1865-1952), was laid to rest. Her headstone — and, historians say, the unmarked grave of her husband — now sit smack in the center of the maintenance yard, an offense to history that the city could solve easily, Washington says.

Neighbors who want the park to tell the full story of Alexandria's past have been gearing up for a fight. "Our park services have always had a discomfort with the tension between African American history and Civil War history," Eugster says. "But what started for us as a literally not-in-my-backyard battle because the city had put dumpsters behind our houses led us to explore what really is one story of both the Civil War and the black community that was here afterwards."

During the Civil War, you could stand atop Fort Ward and see Confederate soldiers at Baileys Crossroads three miles away, and those black flecks in your spyglass certainly looked like cannon (though you'd later learn that they were really tree trunks painted black to fool Union spies into thinking that the enemy was armed and dangerous).



COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

An undated photo shows a house at Fort Ward in Alexandria, one of the many demolished when the city bought the land in the 1960s.

After the war, freed slaves settled on abandoned land around the fort. Those workers who built and maintained the Virginia Theological Seminary (of Seminary Road fame) are the people whose graves are now believed to be scattered throughout Fort Ward Park. Just last week, says Lance Mallamo, director of the Office of Historic Alexandria, city historians used old maps to discover an area where still-visible depressions in the ground indicate some of the old residents are buried.

Thanks to pressure from people such as Eugster, Fulton and Washington, the city says it is looking at Fort Ward much as the neighbors do. After a community meeting Wednesday, the city will move to stop the issuing of alcohol permits, reduce the size of picnic groups and number of picnic areas, and look for ways to tell the black community's

history, says Kirk Kincannon, Alexandria's recreation and parks director.

The broken headstones are a reminder that the city rebuilt Fort Ward when "there was probably not much thought about more contemporary history," Mallamo says. But since the '60s, "the history of ordinary people has become as important as the history of the heroic."

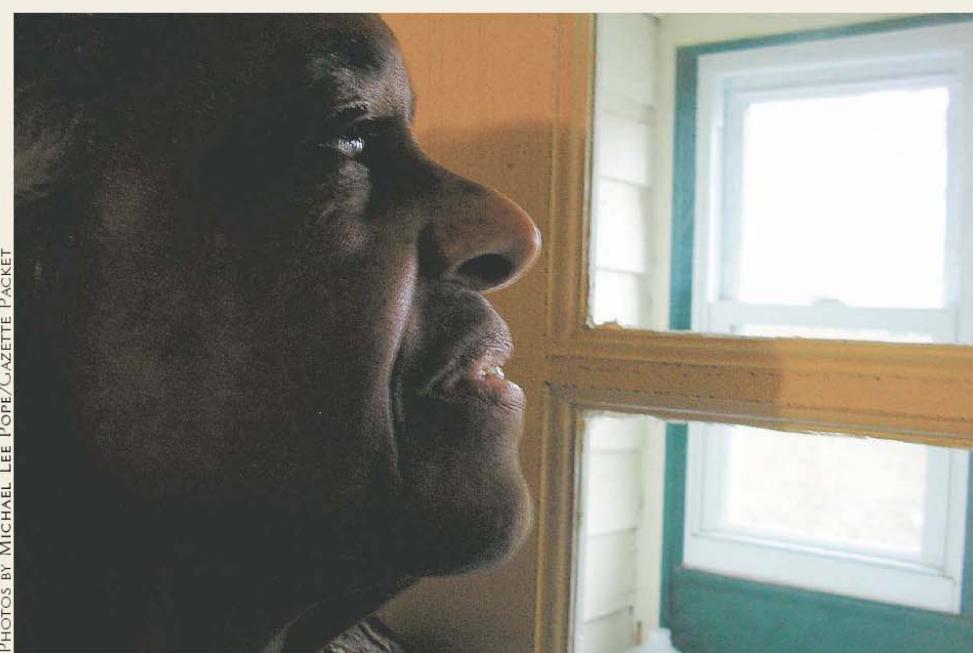
No one expects to find the money anytime soon to conduct the archaeological digs needed to flesh out Fort Ward's full story. But it should be possible to protect the graves and the row of cedar trees that once led to the long-gone houses, and to use the park's tours and museum to tell a history of the fort that you can still see and the community that you can't.

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PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LEE POPE/GAZETTE PACKET

Elizabeth Douglas looks out a window in the kitchen of the house where she grew up, where she still lives across the street from T.C. Williams High School.

History Behind the Gate

Long-neglected cemetery obscured by a city-owned maintenance yard.

BY MICHAEL LEE POPE
GAZETTE PACKET

Long before City Hall began purchasing plots of land that were later assembled to become Fort Ward Park, Elizabeth Douglas at-

tended a one-room schoolhouse that was located on what is now the eastern edge of the park. She has fond memories of visiting the family burial yard outside the school where members of a community that old-timers still refer to as "the fort." There, outside of

the schoolhouse, Douglas says, 10 to 15 bodies are buried in red mud under homemade concrete markers. In the 1950s, a woman she called "Aunt Clara" was buried there — a beloved matron of the community whose grave she visited often.

But the next few years would bring rapid change that would distance her and Aunt Clara.

First the City of Alexandria moved its boundaries westward, then the city began buying plots of land in an effort to create a new park at the old Civil War fort where a Connecticut artillery brigade guarded against Confederate attack from a road then known as the Alexandria turnpike. So city officials bought land from Eagle Crest Development in the late 1950s to head off a proposed subdivision on the western end of the park. Although some of the African-American properties on the eastern edge of the land had clouded titles in the early 1960s, the city eventually got everything it wanted after



A padlock bars entry into the family burial yard where the city now operates a maintenance yard.

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PHOTO BY MICHAEL LEE POPE/GAZETTE PACKET

This fence prevents access to the grave of Clara Adams and others buried on the eastern edge of Fort Ward Park.

City Yard Obscures Cemetery

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condemning some of the properties and paying fair-market value to the families who had lived there since Reconstruction.

"Who would want someone to uproot you and buy your place out?" asked Douglas, 87, who still lives in the house she grew up in across from T.C. Williams High School. "That's what they did."

THE STORY of how a city-owned maintenance yard ended up over a family burial yard is a story that dates back to a time when Robert E. Lee's cousin owned a slave plantation nearby known as Menokin. When the Civil War erupted, the Union army seized land adjacent to that owned by the Hooff family and began building an earthen fort to serve as a supply base south of the Potomac River. After the war was over, the Union Army deserted the prop-

erty and recently freed slaves began squatting on the land. By the time the city was trying to assemble lands to create Fort Ward Park in the 1960s, determining the titleholders to houses with no plumbing or

sewer service created a problem.

"There may have been people who didn't want to sell but realized that their community was changing," said Wally Owen, curator at Fort Ward Park. "What's frustrating about this is that we don't have the full record of what went on back then."

The family burial yard where Clara Adams was buried in 1953 next to other family members eventually became a maintenance yard where city officials store horticultural equipment and park vehicles. On the occasions that Douglas has returned to an area she still calls

"the fort," she has become outraged that access to the cemetery is blocked by a gate to prevent people from entering the maintenance yard. Douglas said that seeing the padlocked gate is a painful reminder of how city officials treated black families when they were trying to create Fort Ward Park in the 1960s.

"I just think they were racial," she said one recent afternoon while sitting at her dinner table. "Those people were prejudiced, and that's all there is to it."

LATE LAST YEAR, the city's park planning staff issued a facility study at Fort Ward that concluded the facility was suffering from too much use. As a result, neighbors who live near the park began attending a series of community meetings to solicit ideas for recommendations to the Parks and Recreation Commission. During one of these community meetings, a discussion about the long-neglected family burial yard prompted concern among several neighbors.

"Our main goal is to improve operation and management of the park," said Dave Cavanaugh, a neighbor who has constructed a timeline of events at Fort Ward Park. "We'd like to see a more diverse interpretation of African-American history during and after the Civil War."

The community meetings led to an effort of several city officials to interview several individuals who remember what the area was like before the city started acquiring properties in the late 1950s. The interviews have led to a realization by modern-day city officials that more bodies had been buried near the Clara Adams grave than were previously known. Now that the archeology at the Freedman's Cemetery on South Washington Street has been completed, a similar undertaking is beginning to determine how city officials should proceed with the Adams family burial ground in the Fort Ward maintenance yard. This week, the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities scheduled another public meeting to gather ideas about what should happen at the park.

"I think if everybody puts their heads together we'll all be able to come up with a good process," said City Archeologist Pam Cressey. "But we'll need to have plenty of discussion about this before we make a decision."

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— Elizabeth Douglas