



## Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Design Competition 2008

### HISTORICAL NEWS FLASH FREEDMEN AND CONTRABAND BURIAL GROUND IDENTIFIED IN ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

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For many years it has been known that a Negro burial ground existed at 1001 South Washington Street. Newspaper accounts, personal reminiscences and land plats substantiate this fact. For instance in the November 1987 issue of the Fireside Sentinel I published the following account of this cemetery:

Formerly located directly across the street from St. Mary's Catholic cemetery, this graveyard probably dated from the Civil War period. A Washington, D.C. newspaper reported circa 1893 that "the graveyard containing the bones of defunct colored people was being washed away by the rains and those not washed into the Potomac were ground into fertilizer." The Alexandria Gazette of January 1, 1894, rebutted these charges with the following commentary:

SENSATIONAL STORY The sensational story published in a Washington paper today to the effect that a graveyard containing the bones of defunct colored people is being washed away by the rains and the remains--that those not washed into the Potomac--ground into fertilizers, is without foundation in fact. The paper asserts that the cemetery in question is situated at Broomielaw, on the banks of Hunting Creek, while the truth is the graveyard is at the southern end of Washington street, half a mile from Broomielaw Point, and directly opposite the Catholic cemetery. Besides there never were four thousand persons in the reservation, as the paper states, nor one thousand either, a few hundred being the maximum. The deep cut dug for the "independent" line of the old Manassas Gap Railroad is on the south of the graveyard and the property of the Alexandria Brick Works on the west. Most of the bodies buried there were colored children, generally infants, a fact which will be attested by all whose recollections go back to war times. This spot of ground was then studded with shingles bearing the names of children, many but a few days old and others only as many hours. During the years which have elapsed occasionally some bones may have been brought to the surface by the encroachments of the brickyard, but no such state of things exists as portrayed in the Washington paper.

This cemetery remained "in situ" until a gasoline filling station was constructed upon it.

Were the bodies ever exhumed?

An additional description and plat of the Negro cemetery is contained in Fairfax County Deedbook: H4: 531-533 [10 February 1868]. In addition the Alexandria Land Use Maps and Real Property Survey of 1939 [page 126] also shows the existence of a Negro cemetery at 1001 South Washington Street. [See enclosure]

Recently the Alexandria Library, Lloyd House has purchased copies of the Diary of Julia Wilbur, a Quaker teacher from New York. Excerpts from this document were published in the November 1990 issue of the Fireside Sentinel. Among these were the following:

On April 12, 1864 Miss Wilbur talks about visiting the new contraband burying ground, "65 graves there already, as good a place as they could get." ...On May 5th she further noted: "...funeral of a colored soldier, the first who has died here. Had a white escort and was buried in the new Freedmen's Burial ground." [Diary of Julia Wilbur, Lloyd House microfilm: 00562]

When this news journal was published I did not know the location of the Freedmans or contraband burying ground. Recently I stumbled across a citation in the March 4th 1864 Alexandria Gazette which provides circumstantial evidence that 1001 South Washington Street is indeed the site of the old contraband cemetery. The citation asserts:

A grave yard for the burial of "contrabands," who may die in this place has been laid off near the Catholic Cemetery."

This announcement appeared just one month before Julia Wilbur talked about visiting the new "contraband burying ground."

When 1939 Alexandria Land Use Map is examined, the proximity of the Negro cemetery at 1001 South Washington to the Catholic graveyard is all too apparent. Thus, it is highly probable that 1001 South Washington Street is the site of the contraband graveyard and the location where many black Union soldiers were interred during the Civil War.

Perhaps, many of their graves lie undisturbed beneath the asphalt of the gas station parking lot and the adjoining real estate. There is no doubt however, that "1001 South Washington Street" is an important black historic site in Alexandria and should be marked.