

DOCUMENTARY STUDY AND ARCHEOLOGICAL RESOURCE  
ASSESSMENT FOR THE JAMES BLAND HOMES,  
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA



## **INTRODUCTION**

A Documentary Study of the James Bland Development property was prepared by Thunderbird Archeology, a division of Wetland Studies and Solutions Inc. (WSSI) of Gainesville, Virginia. The James Bland property is comprised of two entire city blocks and three partial city blocks bounded by First, N. Patrick, Madison, N. Alfred, Wythe and N. Columbus Streets in Alexandria, Virginia. The study area is located within the Parker-Gray Historic District which is on the National Register of Historic Places. This study was prepared with contributions from and in consultation with History Matters, LC of Washington, D.C.

The research was conducted in anticipation of the planned development of the property. It was designed to provide a full contextual study of the prehistory and history of the property, focusing on cultural themes associated with the historic James Bland public housing project and the historic African American neighborhood in which it is located. The study also evaluated the potential for locating intact archeological sites on the property.

The documentary study and recommendations were required by the City of Alexandria Archaeological Protection Code, as well as Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended. The research followed a Scope of Work provided by Alexandria Archaeology and approved by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

The focus of the study is currently the site of the James Bland Homes, a public housing project built by ARHA in two phases, with a four-block area constructed in 1954 and a final block (known as the James Bland Addition) constructed in 1959. The first Federal Public Housing action within the project area; however, may be traced to 1943, when as a component of a continuation of the previously discussed slum clearance project commenced in 1941, the government condemned two acres for temporary public housing for African American defense workers. The James Bland Homes project was preceded on the site by a wartime FHPA trailer camp.

## **HISTORY OF PROPERTY**

The research has shown that the property was owned by members of the Alexander family from the late 17th century; it was part of an estate bequeathed by Robert Alexander' to his daughter Sarah Alexander before 1736. Sarah Alexander was the wife of Baldwin Dade. Although the property had been subdivided by the late 18th century, portions of the property remained in Alexander hands into the 19th century. During the colonial period, the lands may have been utilized for the cultivation of tobacco or other crops or as pasture; however, little detailed information about the specific usage was contained within the documents.

Although the property history is somewhat unclear, various prominent citizens of the city, including Charles Alexander Jr., John Gadsby, Richard Conway, Orlando Fairfax, Burke and Herbert and Thomas Veitch owned portions of the property between the late 18<sup>th</sup>

century and mid 19th century. During this period, several properties in the vicinity of the project area were used as farms, pasture and household or market gardens by the various landowners or lessees. Documentary evidence has also been found indicating that at least one of the project area owners, Veitch, engaged free African Americans as tenants on his lands to the west of the project area during the second quarter of the 19th century. Several dwellings appear near or within the project area on Civil War era maps.



*1862 Mc Dowell Map of Northeast Virginia and Vicinity of Washington, D.C. Showing Project Area*

During the Civil War, Union troops established various facilities to the south and east of the project area; these included the Washington Street Corral and associated barracks and support structures. However, no direct evidence for Civil War era activity was found.



*Undated Lithograph Showing 71<sup>st</sup> New York Regiment in the Vicinity of James Bland property. The view is to the northwest from Washington Street and the Cotton Mill at Pendleton and Washington is in the background.*

By the third quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century, residential development in the project area had clearly begun; with about 20 dwellings present in the project area by 1877. As the project area is located within the historic African American neighborhood known as the Hump, and based on trends in later property history, it is likely that many residents of the project area during this period were African Americans.

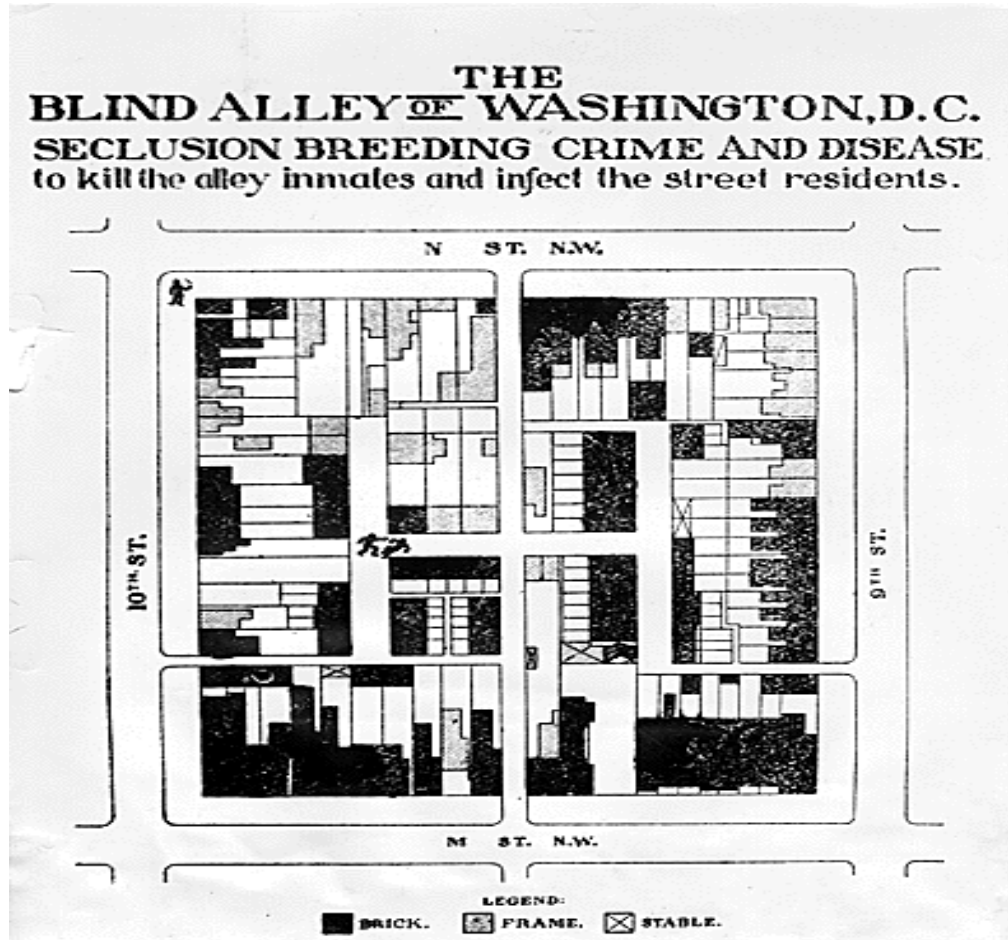
In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the vicinity of the study area was the site of continued residential and industrial development in Alexandria; the project area, specifically, remained an integrated neighborhood, including a population of approximately 70% African American and 30% Euro-American, largely recent European immigrants. Although preliminary, an examination of the ethnic affiliation of the individual residences indicated that some segregation by street face was noted at the turn of and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, although integration by street face appears to increase through time.



*North Side of the 800 Block of Madison Street, View to Northwest: 1940s*

The *Silas Green* from New Orleans, a successful travelling African American variety show was held in vacant lots within the project area in the 1940s and perhaps earlier.

In the 1930s, a greater awareness of substandard housing (often called slums) was evident in American life. Many individuals felt that the slums contributed to high crime rates and posed a problem to public health. However, the methods by which to correct these issues differed. By the 1940s, a slum clearance program was undertaken within the City of Alexandria and, in 1941; houses within two acres of the James Bland property were condemned. These were followed by a war time trailer camp that provided temporary housing for African American defense workers and residents displaced by slum clearance in the city.



*Propaganda for Slum Clearance in Washington, D.C.*

After World War II, the rapid growth of the population and the concentration of the population in urban areas led to new problems in housing. Under the Housing Act of 1949 and beginning in the 1950s, a number of large public housing projects were constructed in the United States. Established in 1939, the Alexandria Housing Authority (later named the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority or ARHA) was commissioned to provide safe, sanitary housing for city residents. In the latter part of the 1930s and 1940s, a greater public awareness of the need for public housing had arisen and a number of public housing projects were built in Alexandria. These projects were

generally segregated; some of them include the "whites" only John Roberts Homes as well as the George Parker Homes and the Samuel Madden Homes for African Americans.

In 1954 and 1959, the James Bland homes were constructed. The development was designed by Joseph Henry Saunders, Jr., a noted local architect and was named after James Alan Bland, an African American musician and songwriter born to a free family in Flushing, New York. Bland composed over 700 songs, including "In the Evening by the Moonlight," "O Dem Golden Slippers," and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny", the official State Song of Virginia from 1940 until 1997. Although the namesake for the development, there is no indication that James Bland had a direct connection with the James Bland Development property.

Although formally integrated, the James Bland neighborhood became almost entirely African American after the completion of the James Bland Homes public housing project in the mid 1950s.



*Example of Building within James Bland Homes, Alfred Street*



*Example of Concrete Courtyards and Back Alley of James Bland Homes*

## **ARCHEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In addition to providing information about the history of the James Bland Homes and preceding property occupants, the documentary study was also conducted to determine if the property had the potential to contain archeological sites from either the prehistoric or historic periods.

Based on a visual reconnaissance, the property appears to have been little altered since 1959 when the final phase of construction in the James Bland public housing project was completed. Although a topographic map prepared in anticipation of the 1959 buildings indicated that the ground surface was relatively level and near its historic elevation, the 1959 soil tests indicated that approximately 2-3 feet of fill was present.

## **POTENTIAL FOR THE PRESENCE OF ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES**

The probability for locating prehistoric sites generally depends on the variables of topography, proximity to water, and internal drainage. Sites are more likely on well-drained landforms of low relief in close proximity to water. An 1894 topographic map indicates that the study area vicinity was on level terrain approximately 50 feet a.s.l., less than one half mile west of the Potomac River. This would indicate at least a moderate probability for the presence of prehistoric sites. The most likely site types expected in the project area were felt to be small temporary resource exploitation camps dating to the

Archaic and/or Woodland periods. However, it was anticipated that at least portions of the property would have been disturbed by 19th and 20th century construction and demolition activities and plowing of the land prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century may have disturbed any prehistoric archeological resources present. Because of these factors, it was anticipated that any prehistoric sites found would have been disturbed by the historic plowing and construction and demolition activities.

The study area was also determined to have a high probability of yielding cultural materials from the historic period. Multiple buildings were present within the project area by 1877. A wide range of features including foundation remnants, refuse middens; and deep features such as privies, cellars, and wells might be expected in association with sites of this type.

In addition, during the Civil War, Union troops were certainly present in the project area vicinity and some Union soldiers may have set up encampments nearby or within the project area. Features associated with short term military camps would likely be shallow and ephemeral.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Because the project area was felt to have at least a moderate probability for both prehistoric and historic archeological sites and as demolition of the existing structures and planned development will impact the entirety of the project area to a depth that would disturb any potential archeological deposits or features that may be present, a Phase I archeological survey of the property was recommended.