

"The Fort" and "Seminary" Community Civil War to Civil Rights

African Americans established "The Fort," a community that continued here after the Civil War (1861-1865) for nearly a century into the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s. The place received its name from The Fort's location on and around the remnants of Fort Ward, one of the fortifications that were built as part of the Defenses of Washington. In the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, families living at The Fort and in the larger "Seminary" community—located around the Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School on Braddock, Howard, King, and Quaker streets—were connected through shared kinship, marriage, church, and work, particularly at the two Episcopal educational institutions. Four generations sustained The Fort through these associations, faith, adherence to a strict moral code, and emphasis on education.

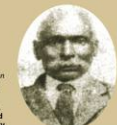
"The Fort" community began in large part from the results of the Civil War—freedom, rights, and opportunities for enslaved African Americans. Ironically, The Fort ended almost a century later as civil rights expanded. The City of Alexandria dedicated this park and museum for the Civil War Centennial in 1964. People were displaced, buildings demolished, and graves lost before the African American presence faded from view. Yet The Fort endures. The remains of its homes and school/chapel, fragments of household items, and numerous graves survive underground. The Fort's descendants retain memories, images, and traditions. New generations of those who founded The Fort and Seminary community still live nearby. The Oakland Baptist Church stands on King Street as a landmark to the community's founders and members. Its cemetery is bordered by Fort Ward Park. The Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School are witnesses to African American craftsmanship, care, and service of those who once worked there. Upon the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the City of Alexandria honors this enduring African American legacy.



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749



Courtesy Crozet Wood Johnson
William Wood escaped slavery and served in the US Colored Troops. Son, Douglass, donated land for public Seminary School in 1926, and great-granddaughter, Crozet, served during World War II.



Courtesy Adrienne Terrell Washington
J.M. Peters

1863
James M. Peters escapes slavery and joins the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Son, John Peters, established home here by 1910.

1867
African American men, who later are documented as living in the community, such as Wallace Wanzer (Wanzer) and Daniel Simms, register to vote in a referendum to rewrite state constitution outlawing slavery, which led to Virginia's readmission to the Union.



Courtesy Adrienne Terrell Washington
James W. Terrell, an early owner at The Fort, and wife, Burney McKnight Terrell

1870
Burr and Harriet McKnight Shorts family is first documented African American household here.

1884
First African American at "The Fort", Burr Shorts, buys 10 acres. Children of wife, Harriet McKnight Shorts, including Burney McKnight Terrell with husband James W., buy nearby land.



Courtesy Dorothy Hall Smith
Beatrice (left) and James (2nd from left) Jackson

1890
Starting in this decade, more families continue to buy land. The Fort reaches its maximum size before sales to land speculators begin in 1926. Some family members stay in this close-knit community until the 1960s. Long-time families include: Adams, Ashby, Casey, Craven, Hall, Henry, Jackson, Javins, Johnson, Lewis, McKnight, Miller, Peters, Randall, Roy, Shorts, Simms, Terrell, Wansler, Wood, and Young.



Courtesy Charles McKnight
Clara Shorts Adams

1898
Clara Shorts Adams and Robert Adams convey 1/4 acre to Fairfax County for "Colored School Building at Seminary." School operates until 1925.



Seminary School
Courtesy Fish University, Franklin Library, Special Collections

1926
Speculators begin to buy western and northern portions of The Fort. When Eagle Crest subdivision is created in 1938, it contains nearly 1/2 of the original land in The Fort. Roads are cut, but no houses built.

1927
Fairfax County opens Seminary School for African Americans on King Street, due to Douglass Wood's land donation and community contributions to match the Rosewald Fund grant.

1932
St. Cyprian's merges with Meade Episcopal Church. Chapel at The Fort closes.

1955
City of Alexandria begins to purchase land for Fort Ward Park, starting with Eagle Crest development parcel, and continues acquiring land for more than a decade. The result is displacement of The Fort community.



Courtesy Joyce Casey Sanchez
Maydell Casey Belk

1959
Maydell Casey Belk (granddaughter of Oakland Baptist Church founder, John Wesley Casey) and Julia Bradley (a descendant of the Adams and Roy families and mentor to community children) are two plaintiffs in Jones v. School Board of City of Alexandria, resulting in school integration.

1964
Beatrice Terrell becomes the first African American in Alexandria to work at the election polls. Fort Ward Park and Museum open to commemorate the Centennial of the Civil War.

1965
City of Alexandria opens T.C. Williams, an integrated high school, on site of segregated Seminary School.

Last members of The Fort leave after four generations living here. Some of Seminary community continues on Quaker Road, Woods Avenue, and Woods Place. Oakland Baptist Church still stands on King Street.

1861
U.S. Civil War begins.

1863
Emancipation Proclamation frees slaves in areas of rebellion and opens military service to African Americans.

1865
Civil War ends.

13th Amendment
abolishes slavery.

1868
14th Amendment to Constitution broadens citizenship; prohibits state and local governments from depriving people of life, liberty and property; and requires equal protection.

1870
15th Amendment to Constitution prohibits denying right to vote due to race, color, and previous condition of servitude.

"Growing up in my beloved Seminary was like living in one great big house. Everyone was family, and if they were not, you thought they were. There were gardens at every home; some people had chickens, a few pigs, horses, and many dogs and cats. The families provided for themselves with these gardens and livestock, so eating fresh foods was a natural for us. As children, we grew up happy and care free despite of the happening of the times."

Gerald Wanzer

Julia Adams Bradley

1896
Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson upholds "separate but equal" doctrine for facilities.



Courtesy Gloria Jean Randall and Adrienne Terrell Washington
World War II veterans, the Randall brothers (Aaron-cockpit, George-wing, and David-right front), with Charlie Kulp (left front), known as The Flying Farmer, and honored for training African American pilots

1910
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) established.



Courtesy Joyce Casey Sanchez
Albert S. Lewis, Jr., gave his life for his country.

1941
The United States enters World War II.



Courtesy Adrienne Terrell Washington
Arthur Peters, grandson of James M. Peters

1954
Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, overturns "separate but equal" doctrine leading to dismantling of segregated schools.

1963
Martin Luther King, Jr., gives his "I Have a Dream" speech advocating racial equality at the March on Washington.

1964
24th Amendment to the Constitution abolishes poll tax. Congress passes Civil Rights Act that outlaws discrimination, including racial segregation.

1964
Congress passes Civil Rights Act that outlaws discrimination, including racial segregation.



Courtesy CBC & Frances Johnson-Colbert Terrell
Oakland Baptist Church at Bill Reeves Photography

"It [March on Washington] was an awesome experience: thousands and thousands of people from all across the country, black and white, arms locked, standing together for freedom."

Frances (Johnson) Colbert Terrell

NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION®

FORD FOUNDATION

The City of Alexandria thanks the Fort Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society and the Fort Ward History Work Group for contributing knowledge, research, and images.

www.alexandria.gov/FortWard

