

African Americans and the Civil War— Fleeing, Fighting and Working for Freedom

The Civil War (1861-1865) opened the door for opportunity and civil rights for African American Virginians, about 90 percent of whom were enslaved in 1860. The upheaval from battles and the federal presence in Alexandria and eastern Fairfax County offered the chance and destination for thousands to escape slavery, seek refuge and jobs behind Union lines, and create new lives. At the end of the War in May 1865, African Americans in Alexandria and environs numbered 10,000, nearly half of whom were under 12 years of age.

These “contrabands” and freed people aided the Union cause by working as hospital attendants, gravediggers, stevedores, teamsters, cooks, laundresses, and in labor gangs to build roads, construct fortifications and trenches, and maintain rail lines. More than 200,000 men enlisted in the United States Colored Troops (USCT), and a quarter of those lost their lives fighting for freedom. Many USCT soldiers escaped slavery before enlistment, such as the fathers of two long-time residents here at “The Fort” and the larger “Seminary” community.



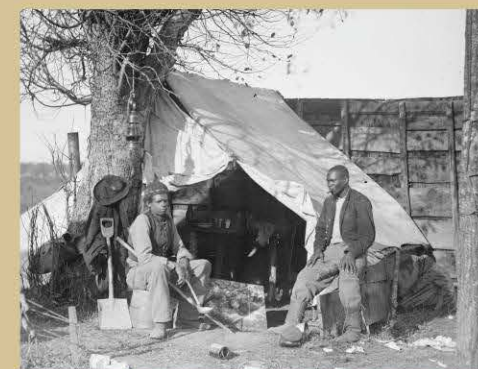
National Archives

Barracks of the First Battalion, Companies C, E, and L, 1st Connecticut Heavy Artillery at Fort Ward, circa 1863.

Military installations like Fort Ward and other forts in the Defenses of Washington served as a line of safety for African Americans escaping slavery. This view of Fort Ward dates to 1863 and shows Braddock Road in the foreground with barracks and the fort's gate.

“Capt, I have the honor to report that the 'colony of negroes' mentioned in the communication of Surg. Allen - Fairfax Sem. Hosptl are, so far as I can learn from white people - other than those at the Hosptl - an industrious community and almost all the males are at work, one place or another, for the Govt. Some of them have little garden spots with vegetables ... They seem clean, orderly and well disposed...Surg. Allen says he offered them work which they refused, probably because they could get better wages at Fort Ward and the block houses on the rail road....”*

*Refers to work being done on the rifle pits and roads between Fort Ward and Fort Reynolds, and the block house on Leesburg Turnpike. 1st Lt. and Asst. Provost Marshal Geo. R. Alvord, Nov. 1, 1864. National Archives



A freedmen's tent in Culpeper, Virginia. Library of Congress

“The huts about us, first homes of the wandering, sorrowful race, were strange patchwork; bits of shelter tents and blankets, ends of plank, barrel staves, logs and mud, but most of them were neatly whitewashed and with the likeness of a little, fenced garden behind, and near many and many, by the roadside, was a rough grave with a red-wood cross at its head. The huts and the gardens are gone, and the forlorn graves were trodden long ago into the fine, white dust of the Virginia highway.”

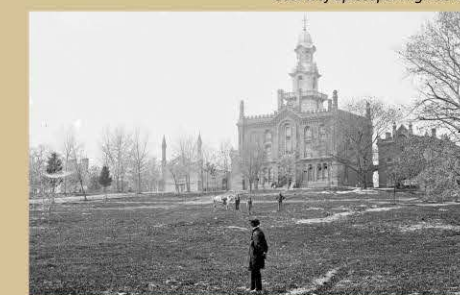
Jane Stuart Woolsey, a nurse at the Fairfax Seminary Hospital, describing the living situation of African Americans near here in her 1868 memoir, Hospital Days: Reminiscence of a Civil War Nurse. Edinborough Press, 1996

The Chaplain was called on frequently to visit and bury the 'contrabands' whose poor little huts hung upon the edges of the camp and were scattered over the fields all the way to the City. After the Second Bull Run battle large numbers of blacks gathered about the Hospital and were kindly treated, the men being employed in policing and the women as laundresses, all receiving Government rations.

Jane Stuart Woolsey, her 1868 memoir, Hospital Days: Reminiscence of a Civil War Nurse. Edinborough Press, 1996

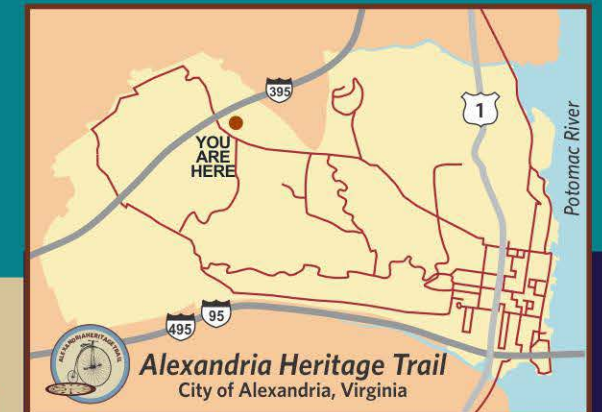


Episcopal High School, Haxton House, 1900. Courtesy Episcopal High School



Fairfax Seminary Hospital, Aspinwall Hall, at Virginia Theological Seminary, Civil War-era. Library of Congress

The Episcopal High School and Virginia Theological Seminary, both located across Braddock Road from Fort Ward, were used by federal forces during the Civil War for camps, a large hospital facility, and a cemetery. After the war, the Episcopal institutions provided employment for decades to “The Fort” and “Seminary” African Americans.

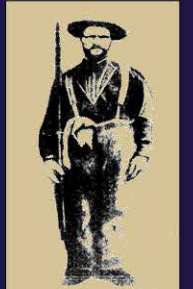


Civil War Veterans—Ancestors of “The Fort” and “Seminary” Families

The sons of two veterans who served in the United States Colored Troops (USCT) moved into “The Fort” and “Seminary” after the Civil War. By buying land and raising families, they helped establish an enduring African American community, a right for which their fathers fought. The Seminary continues as a neighborhood today.



Courtesy Adrienne Terrell Washington, great-great-granddaughter



Courtesy Crozet Wood Johnson, granddaughter

James M. Peters

James M. Peters escaped slavery from a plantation in Prince William County and joined the Union Army at Mason's (now Roosevelt) Island in 1863. Assigned to Company E, 1st U.S. Colored Infantry, Peters served in the Siege of Petersburg in which the smoke he endured led to partial blindness. He was also wounded in another battle, yet remained enlisted until the end of the War. Returning to Prince William County with his wife, Josephine, he farmed and raised 10 children. By 1910, his son John Peters, and wife, Ella Ashby, moved to “The Fort” where the family resided for 50 years.

William Wood

William Wood was enslaved in Fauquier County, but escaped early in the Civil War. Fleeing to Alexandria and Arlington Heights, Wood worked as a laborer and teamster to aid the Union war effort. He enlisted in the Union Army as a paid substitute soldier in July 1864 and served in the 39th U.S. Colored Infantry at Petersburg. Falling sick, he was brought to L'Ouverture Hospital in Alexandria and died about four months later. Wood's grave is in the USCT section of Alexandria National Cemetery. His son, Douglass, was born enslaved and was only 8 years old when the Civil War began. Later, Douglass Wood moved to the “Seminary” community with wife, Matilda, and mother, Susan. He donated the land on which the Seminary School for African American students opened in 1927. The land today is occupied by T.C. Williams High School.



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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.alexandriava.gov/FortWard

