

Alexandria Women's History Bike Tour 2021: Women's Suffrage and City Facilities Named After Alexandria Women

Overview

- This tour explores Alexandria's role in the women's suffrage movement, as well as various parks, schools, and other city facilities named after notable Alexandrian women.
- Please note that this is just a sampling of women's history in Alexandria. There are many more women who helped shaped the City.
- The route is about 13.6 miles long, with 9 stops at sites associated with women's history.
- Go to <https://ridewithgps.com/routes/35176189> for cuesheets or turn-by-turn directions.

1. Jones Point Park, 125 Jones Point Drive

Starting point: in front of the ship rudder, next to the bathrooms.

The first person to hold a land grant on Piper's Island (now Jones Point Park) was a remarkable woman named **Margaret Brent**. She was the first American woman to seek the right to vote. Born in England in 1601, she and her sister moved to colonial Maryland to find religious freedom. She held a land grant from Cecil Calvert, proprietary Governor of Maryland, which gave her land in her own name. She and her sister developed their property well, working with indentured female and male servants. She became active in the Maryland colony's affairs, and sometimes lent money to other colonists.

Her business and her representation of the Calvert family matters made it necessary for her to appear in court -- inspiring, much later, the American Bar Association to dub her the nation's "first woman lawyer." A single woman, Brent was legally able to own her property and represent herself and others, but she could not vote in the Maryland Assembly, a right she needed to do her work. She asked for the right to vote and was turned down. She then left Maryland entirely and moved to Virginia, purchasing 11,000 acres, where she lived from 1651 to 1671. The property included a 700-acre tract that is now the heart of Old Town Alexandria. She lived on her plantation, called "Peace," in what is now Fairfax County until her death. Her heirs later sold the property.

Source: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/dchs/info/WomenTourWebsite.pdf>.

See also <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/002100/002177/html/brochure.html>.

*Start your ride by getting on the Mount Vernon Trail, heading west. Turn right under the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and continue onto S. Royal Street. Turn left onto Wilkes Street, cross Washington Street and Patrick Street, then turn left onto S. Fayette Street. Bike into the parking lot for the **Nannie J. Lee Recreation Center**, then turn left and bike to the playground.*

2. Nannie J. Lee Recreation Center and Ruthanne Lodato Memorial Playground

Stopping point: by the playground.

The recreation center is named after **Nannie J. Lee**, a community activist who was instrumental in the development of recreational activities for the children in the southwest area of Alexandria. A resident of South Payne Street, Nannie and her husband General supported athletic and recreational activities for children. They had four children of their own and Nannie was very concerned about the apparent lack of recreational facilities on the south side of town. She formed the Lee Southside Parents' Club and appealed to City Hall for support. She was given a box of playground supplies, like balls and jump ropes,

which she would hand out to children after school at the old Robert E. Lee school. Her husband organized athletic teams and raised money to support the teams through bake sales, cocktail parties and banquets. They also successfully campaigned to keep a City swimming pool in their community. The Nannie J. Lee Memorial Recreation Center was later named in her honor.

Source: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/info/default.aspx?id=120198>

The **Ruthanne Lodato Memorial Playground** celebrates the life of a music teacher who was shot and killed at her own front door in February 2014. Besides teaching music, Lodato actively supported Alexandria's special needs community. The playground features swings with music-related decorations and outdoor musical instruments. The \$100,000 needed for the playground came from the private donations. CVS donated \$25,000 and \$75,000 came from the Kelley Cares Foundation and the Miracle League of Alexandria. Said Kathy Karns, a friend of the Lodato family, "She will have a legacy without the playground. But the playground makes it all the more special. Ruthanne touched so many people in the Alexandria area."

In May 2017, a jury convicted Charles Severance for the murder of Lodato and two other prominent Alexandria residents. All three victims were fatally shot in their own homes over the course of a more than a decade. Prosecutors said Severance harbored a grudge against people who he perceived to be the city's elite after losing a custody battle over his son. He has a history of erratic behavior and also ran for mayor twice.

Sources: <https://wtop.com/alexandria/2015/06/playground-woman-killed-alexandria-unveiled-photos/>; <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/charles-severance-alexandria-murders-verdict-nancy-dunning-ron-kirby-ruthanne-lodato/1978910/>

Retrace your steps back toward S. Fayette Street. Turn left onto Jefferson Street, then right onto S. Payne Street. Turn left onto Roundhouse Lane, then turn right onto S. West Street. Cross Duke Street and continue on S. West Street. Turn right onto Queen Street. Turn right onto N. Fayette Street, and stop by the park at the corner of Queen and Fayette.

3. Helen Miller/Bernard Hunter Park

Stopping point: sidewalk alongside the park.

The park is named for community activists and long-time City residents **Helen Miller** and Bernard Hunter, the first African Americans to have a park named after them in Alexandria.

Miller was born in Alexandria and lived at 1301 Queen Street for over four decades. She worked for years to improve the Parker-Gray community and the very park that would later be named for her. She was a community activist who was involved in the civil rights movement, school and church programs, the police department's Community Action Team, and the Hopkins House Board. Miller, along with many others, marched and participated in sit-ins in order to open libraries, restaurants, banks, and ABC stores to blacks, as customers as well as employees. She marched to integrate the city's Fire, Health, and Police Departments. Whenever she saw suspicious activity in the park, she called police and complained to city officials. In spirit, the community and city leaders considered the park Helen Miller's park long before it was officially named in her honor in the early 1990s. Bernard Hunter was a member of the Police Department's Community Action Team and worked to ensure that the playground that now bears his name had proper and safe equipment.

Sources: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/info/default.aspx?id=120198>;
<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/recreation/parks/Hunter%20Miller%20Park%20-%20DRAFT%20FOR%20PUBLIC%20COMMENT.pdf>. See also oral history at
<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/history/OralHistoryMillerHelen.pdf>

Continue south on N. Fayette Street. Turn right onto Cameron Street. Turn right onto Commonwealth Avenue and continue under the railroad overpass. Turn left onto W. Oak Street. Cross Russell Road and stop in front of Matthew Maury Elementary School.

4. Matthew Maury Elementary School

Stopping point: open area in front of the school

In connection with the renaming of T.C. Williams High School, the School Board has also been looking at renaming Matthew Maury Elementary School. Matthew Maury was a commander of the Confederate Navy in addition to being a celebrated oceanographer and astronomer. In March 2021, the superintendent recommended that the elementary school be renamed **Naomi Brooks** Elementary School. The School Board will vote on the new name in April, with implementation expected in July 2021.

Naomi Lewis Brooks (1934-2020) was born in Alexandria, in what was then "Seminary Mudtown." She was raised attending segregated schools in the city, played four sports in high school, and finished second in her graduating class at the all-Black Parker-Gray High School. She was the first person in her family to attend college. She earned a degree in elementary education from Virginia State College and began her teaching career in 1955 in Alexandria—committed to educating all students. She was a beloved teacher at Charles Houston Elementary School and Cora Kelly Elementary School.

Sources: <https://www.acps.k12.va.us/Page/3413>; <https://alexandriapublic.ic-board.com/attachments/55f1aaa9-8e72-4ed3-bd7f-0c57fd1acb19.pdf>.

*Do a U-turn and head back east on W. Oak Street. Turn left onto Commonwealth Avenue. Just before Del Ray Avenue, turn right onto the sidewalk curbcut and bike into **Judy Lowe** Neighborhood Park.*

5. Judy Lowe Neighborhood Park

Stopping point: labyrinth area inside the park.

Judy Lowe was known as the “First Lady of Del Ray” because of her involvement in many civic activities. Her family moved to Alexandria after her childhood home in Washington, DC, was taken by the city using its eminent domain power and demolished. In the words of Del Ray resident Ruth Brannigan, “This act, in part, spurred Judy’s interest in preserving community, a sense of connection, and a nurturing place for a family.” Lowe lived in Del Ray for 53 years and was a longtime board member of the Del Ray Citizens Association. She nearly singlehandedly increased DRCA membership from just over 300 households to well over 500 in two years, just through friendly conversations on the street, punctuated at some point by a question: Are you a member of the DRCA?

She was named an honorary citizen of the city’s George Washington Birthday Parade, and she served as a grand marshal in the Centennial Parade for the Town of Potomac in 2008. She was the longtime

personal aide to City Councilman Lonnie Rich, a campaign aide to Congressman Jim Moran, a federal government employee for 37 years, and a mother of three children.

While alive, Judy appreciated the fact that it was a grassroots effort by neighborhood activists who convinced the city to buy the land for the pocket park. After her death, the DRCA collected \$7,500 for a memorial to Judy. In 2013, the DRCA and the city agreed to a public-private partnership to pay for further construction of the community-supported park design, and the park was dedicated in 2015.

Sources: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/recreation/info/default.aspx?id=87547>;
http://legistar.granicus.com/alexandria/meetings/2015/5/1315_A_City_Council_Public_Hearing_15-05-16_Docket.pdf.

Exit the park and continue north on Commonwealth Avenue. Turn right onto E. Reed Avenue, take the first right onto Wilson Avenue, then take the first left onto Lynhaven Drive. At the end of Lynhaven Drive, use the driveway on your right to get onto the sidewalk, turn left after the bushes onto the Route 1 sidewalk, then left again to enter the park.

6. Ruby Tucker Park

Stopping point: in the park.

Ruby Tucker was known as the “Queen of Lynhaven,” because of her decades of community activism in the Lynhaven neighborhood where she lived. Beginning in the 1970s, Tucker organized a small group of citizens to work with police to combat open-air drug trade and prostitution in the neighborhood. She confronted this issue and many others in Lynhaven throughout the years, all while caring for her two children as well as countless foster children.

Beyond Lynhaven, Tucker served Alexandria's Redevelopment and Housing Authority for 12 years, worked as director of ALIVE Child Development Center, and was the elections chief at Cora Kelly School for several decades. She was also a founding member of First Agape Baptist Church in Del Ray and served as PTA president at multiple Alexandria schools.

Mayor Bill Euille, who recalled meeting Tucker when he first joined the Alexandria School Board in 1974, said she was an example of how someone can leave a mark on a city without being an elected official. Tucker died in 2009, and the park was dedicated in her honor in 2011.

Sources: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/recreation/info/default.aspx?id=48542>;
<https://patch.com/virginia/delray/city-unveils-ruby-tucker-park>.

Retrace your steps back to Lynhaven Drive. Turn right onto Wilson Avenue, then left onto E. Reed Ave. At the intersection of Reed and Commonwealth, turn left onto the sidewalk next to the park, then bike into the park.

7. Shirley Tyler Unity Park and Cora Kelly School

Stopping point: by the benches in the park.

Shirley Tyler was a community leader in Alexandria for over 40 years. She and her family were the first black homeowners in their Arlandria neighborhood. She served on the Arlandria Civic Association, on

the Alexandria School Board, and as teacher and headmistress of Grace Episcopal School until her retirement in 1989.

She became involved in her neighborhood association because of the problems of flooding from Four Mile Run, rat infestation, and drug dealing. She worked tirelessly to bring about the Four Mile Run Flood Control Project and make sure FEMA support was available for flooded neighborhoods. Her efforts to resolve the rat problem led to city rules requiring trash to be placed in cans with lids. Her efforts at curtailing drug traffic led to the establishment of a satellite police facility in the neighborhood. She also fought against absentee landlords not keeping their property in good shape or illegally subdividing houses and apartments into multiple units.

The proposal for the Unity Park name was a reference to the 1970 murder of Robin Gibson at a 7-Eleven near the park. The murder sparked racial tension at the time. The proposal also suggested the word unity in recognition of the work that local residents put into the park construction. The site used to be an abandoned Dominion Power substation. Neighbors donated plants and cut down unhealthy trees to improve the park, and students from the school helped tend the gardens.

Cora Lee Webster Kelly (1869–1953) was the daughter of Alexandria police chief James Webster. Her salary when she first began teaching was \$250 per year. Kelly married but didn't have children, and she identified very strongly as a teacher. She believed in traditional teaching and encouraged her students to go to church and be good citizens. Her tombstone reads: "Beloved teacher who trained the hearts and minds of Alexandria youth through 53 years of dedicated service." When the new elementary school was built in 1955, it was named in her honor.

Sources: <https://thezebra.org/2020/01/24/which-name-do-you-like-best-for-the-commonwealth-avenue-park/>; <https://alexandrialegends.org/shirley-tyler/>; <http://www.arlandria.org/2018/01/a-plan-for-commonwealth-park.html>; <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/info/default.aspx?id=120198>.

Ride through the park and get back onto W. Reed Ave, heading east. Turn left onto Commonwealth Avenue. Turn left onto Four Mile Run Park Trail and follow the trail around until the intersection with Mt. Vernon Avenue. Cross Mt. Vernon Avenue and continue onto Four Mile Road. Turn left onto Old Dominion Boulevard, turn left onto W. Glebe Road, and then immediately turn right onto Old Dominion Boulevard. Take the first right onto Tennessee Avenue. Turn left onto Valley Drive. At the top of the hill, turn right onto Kenwood Avenue. At the intersection of Kenwood and King, turn left and hop onto the sidewalk on the south side of King Street. Stop in front of the main entrance to T.C. Williams High School.

8. T.C. Williams High School

Stopping point: in front of the school's main entrance.

ACPS is in the process of renaming T.C. Williams HS, which named after a segregationist school superintendent. In March 2021, the superintendent recommended that the school be renamed Alexandria High School. A number of notable women made it to the semifinal round. One semifinalist was Ruth Bader Ginsburg High School, after the Supreme Court justice. Another semifinalist was **Blois Hundley** High School.

Blois Hundley was a cafeteria cook at the Blacks-only Lyles-Crouch Elementary School in the 1950s. She was Black and had eight children who attended Alexandria schools. She joined a handful of other families in suing ACPS to integrate schools. Said her daughter: "She just wanted better for her kids, so

she raised her hand.” When T.C. Williams found out, he fired her almost immediately. Being fired was traumatic, and she rarely talked about the painful experience afterward.

The court eventually directed Alexandria to integrate schools, but Hundley and her family had left Alexandria by then. She later went on to work as the personal cook for philanthropist Philip Stern, who owned the local Northern Virginia Sun newspaper and who was outraged by Hundley’s firing.

Source: <https://alextimes.com/2021/02/black-cook-fired-by-t-c-williams-could-replace-him-as-high-school-namesake/>.

Merge back onto King Street and head southeast. After passing the train station, turn right onto Daingerfield Road, then left onto Prince Street. Turn right on Washington Street, then make the first right into the parking lot for the Lyceum.

9. Site of former federal courthouse

Stopping point: parking lot for the Lyceum, at the SW corner of Prince Street and Washington Street.

Across the street, at the southeast corner of Prince Street and Washington Street, stands the U.S. Bankruptcy Court. Before this building was constructed around 1930, there was another federal building on this site: the Alexandria Custom House and Post Office. That building was erected in 1858, constructed of granite with cast-iron doors, window frames, and stairways. The Post Office was on the first floor, the customs rooms on the second, and a courtroom on the third. The courtroom was the site of a court hearing for dozens of women fighting for the right to vote.

In 1917, suffragettes began picketing the White House demanding women’s voting rights. Many were arrested on false charges like “obstructing free passage of sidewalk” and taken to the Occoquan Workhouse in Lorton, Virginia. The conditions there were unsanitary, and the prisoners were harshly treated: hit by the guards, literally thrown into their cells, denied food and water, and threatened with gags and straitjackets if they tried to communicate with each other. Some went on hunger strikes and were force-fed.

On November 23, 1917, the women appeared for a court hearing in Alexandria. Onlookers gasped: the women were emaciated, some were too weak to sit up, some still had bruises from the guards’ rough treatment, and one woman collapsed soon after entering. Judge Waddill, a soft-spoken, older Southern gentleman, expressed great concern at the unchivalrous treatment of the women: “Here is a case concerning twenty-five or thirty ladies. The statement as to their treatment was bloodcurdling; it was shocking to man’s ideas of humanity if it is true.”

Judge Waddill later ruled that the women’s transfer to Occoquan was illegal, because they had been arrested for an offense committed in the District of Columbia but sent to a workhouse in Virginia. He ordered them sent to the D.C. Jail instead, where conditions were somewhat better.

Sources: William Francis Smith, *A Seaport Saga: Portrait of Old Alexandria, Virginia* (1989); <https://msmagazine.com/2019/11/23/feminist%e2%80%8b-history-november-23/>, <https://msmagazine.com/2019/11/24/feminist-history-november-24/>, <https://msmagazine.com/2019/11/25/feminist-history-november-25/>.

Make your way back to Prince Street, then continue east on Prince Street. Turn right onto S. Royal Street, which will take you back to Jones Point Park.