

Alexandria African-American History Bike Tour 2019

Overview

- This tour explores some of the sites associated with Alexandria's extraordinary Black history.
- Please note that this is just a sampling of the many Black history sites in Alexandria. There are many more sites to learn about and many more stories that deserve to be told.
- The route is about 11.2 miles long, with stops at eleven sites.
- Go to <https://ridewithgps.com/routes/29533827> 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.

Jones Point Park houses the DC's southern cornerstone. The location of this cornerstone was determined in 1791 by Benjamin Banneker, a free Black mathematician and astronomer. According to legend, he worked out of a field tent in the winter of 1791 and spent nights lying on his back plotting stars, so that he could make the necessary astronomical observations.

When architect Pierre L'Enfant was dismissed in 1792 from the project to design the city of DC, he took the plans with him. Banneker, who had been working with L'Enfant, recreated the plans in just two days.

Even more remarkable: Banneker had little formal education and was largely self-taught. He computed the lifecycle of seventeen-year cicadas, built a clock entirely out of wood while still a young man, published six annual farmer's almanacs, and corresponded with Thomas Jefferson.

Benjamin Banneker Park in DC is on a direct axis with the Smithsonian Castle, and Benjamin Banneker Park in Arlington has one of the original boundary stones.

Source: https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2017/02/15/americas-first-known-african-american-scientist-mathematician/#.XNWk_fKh9M.

Start your ride by heading west on the Mount Vernon Trail. Go up the slope, then cross S. Washington Street/GW Parkway at the traffic light. Turn right and use the westside sidewalk of S. Washington Street to ride to the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery.

2. Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery, 1001 S. Washington Street

Stopping point: by the sculpture.

During the Civil War, contrabands (escaped slaves) sought refuge in Alexandria, which was occupied by Union forces. Many were destitute and in poor health; mortality rates were high. The Superintendent of Contrabands confiscated property from a pro-confederate owner for use as a cemetery. Approximately 1,800 people were buried here between 1864 and 1869. Over 40% were children.



The cemetery was eventually forgotten, and a gas station and office building were built on top. The cemetery was rediscovered through historical research in the 1980s. The community mobilized to honor the deceased and preserve the site as a memorial.

Mitigation funds from the construction of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge helped pay for archaeological work and construction of the memorial, which opened in 2014.

The statue, “Path of Thorns and Roses,” is by Mario Choda. It is a figurative representation of Oppression, Struggle, Sacrifice, Loss, and Compassion, with Hope at the top holding the unbloomed “rose of freedom” and standing on his tiptoes to avoid the thorns of oppression beneath him.

Sources: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/FreedmenMemorial>;
<http://www.freedmenscemetery.org/history/history.shtml>;
<http://freedommarchofart.com/thepathofthornsandroses.html>.

Continue north along the westside sidewalk of S. Washington Street. Turn left onto Church Street, then right onto S. Alfred Street. Stop just before you get to Duke Street, and the Alfred Street Baptist Church will be on your left.

3. Alfred Street Baptist Church, 301 S. Alfred Street

Stopping point: parking spots across the street from the church.

The Alfred Street Baptist Church traces its origins back to 1803, when the Alexandria Baptist Society was formed and Susan Black, an enslaved woman, was baptized as the Society’s first Black member.



The church purchased this site in September 1842. The building now known as the “old church” was built between 1881 and 1884, probably by Black craftsmen. The adjacent “new” church was built in 1981 and expanded in 1994.

Notable historical events in the church’s history include the following: creation of a library in the 1920s to serve the city’s African-American population; Pastor Adkins helping to found Parker-Gray, the first high school for African-Americans in Alexandria; among the first churches to ordain women as deacons (1979); first in Virginia to ordain an African American woman minister (1980); Presidents Clinton and Obama attending services here, in 2000 and 2015.

The church made national news in 2019 when over 4,000 members collectively donated \$150,000 to Howard University and Bennett College, a historically black women’s college in North Carolina. At Howard, the gift was used to eliminate student debt for 34 seniors.

Sources: <http://www.alfredstreet.org/our-church/church-history/>;
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/a-huge-weight-off-of-my-shoulders-virginia-church-pays-howard-students-debt/2019/02/10/71424f42-2ae6-11e9-b011-d8500644dc98_story.html?utm_term=.3a52e27fad07.

Turn right onto Duke Street, then take the first right onto S. Columbus Street. After you pass Wolfe Street, stop at the Odd Fellows Hall on your right.

4. Odd Fellows Hall, 411 S. Columbus Street

Stopping point: parking spots along S. Columbus Street

Odd Fellows Hall was built in 1864 and enlarged in 1870 by George Seaton, a prominent Black builder. It is located in “the Bottoms,” Alexandria’s oldest African-American neighborhood.

This is one of the only surviving structures associated with African-American communal organizations. Fraternal and benevolent societies have existed in Black communities since the mid-seventeenth century, providing services to alleviate the harshness of segregated life. In addition to providing support to those in need, these groups provided African Americans with an opportunity to develop leadership skills and a professional network.

The Odd Fellows was an established benevolent society founded in the late eighteenth century in England and brought to the United States. White members of the Odd Fellows in America refused to admit Black members, so the Alexandria Odd Fellows received their charter from the English order and established their own lodge in 1846.

The Odd Fellows Hall hosted community and social events for more than a century. It was the meeting hall for many secret organizations, benevolent groups, and others established by and for African Americans. It was also the site of many festivals and other social events because it was one of the few non-religious buildings in the city that could hold large groups of people that were not restricted according to race. The building was converted to condos in the 1980s.

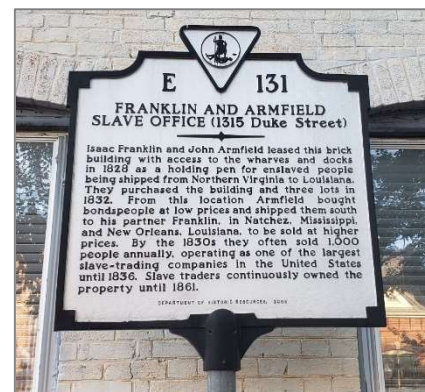
Source: <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/100-5015-0005/>.

Take the next right onto the Wilkes Street bikeway. Cross S. Patrick Street and continue on Wilkes Street. Turn right onto S. Payne Street, left onto Roundhouse Lane, then right onto S. West Street. Cross Duke Street at the traffic light, then turn right onto the sidewalk at the northeast corner of the intersection. Ride on the northside sidewalk of Duke Street for a half block, then stop at 1315 Duke Street.

5. Freedom House Museum, 1315 Duke Street

Stopping point: in front of the museum, by the historical marker.

The Franklin and Armfield Slave Office at 1315 Duke Street was one of the largest slave trading companies in the country. John Armfield worked out of this office in Alexandria, buying enslaved people and readying them for transportation, either by overland trek or by ship. Isaac Franklin oversaw the Natchez and New Orleans offices, where the enslaved people were sold to owners of cotton and sugar plantations. “Amenities” at the slave pen included a kitchen, a tailor shop to make the enslaved people more attractive “commodities,” a hospital/infirmary, and outdoor courtyards to exercise and dine in.



Franklin and Armfield were responsible for at least one-third of the enslaved people sold South during the 1820s and 30s. During their heyday, they annually exported between a thousand and twelve hundred enslaved persons, and they owned three ships to transport the enslaved people by sea. Other slave trading firms later operated on this site until the Civil War.

The building is now owned by the Northern Virginia Urban League and has a small but powerful museum in the basement.

Sources: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/FreedomHouse>;
<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/blackhistory/BlackHistoryLessonPlanSlaveTrading.pdf>.

Make a u-turn and retrace your way back to S. West Street. Cross Duke Street again and continue south on S. West Street. At the intersection of S. West Street and Jamieson Avenue, turn right onto the curbcut at the southwest corner and use the sidewalk/trail that runs along the south side of Jamieson Avenue. Stop outside the Alexandria National Cemetery.

6. Alexandria National Cemetery, 1450 Wilkes Street

Stopping point: outside the northern wall of the cemetery.

The Alexandria National Cemetery is one of the original 14 national cemeteries established in 1862. It holds more than 3,500 graves.

More than 200 Black soldiers from the Civil War are buried here. Many are buried in the south-central section, with headstones that say U.S.C.T. for U.S. Colored Troops. The U.S.C.T. constituted more than 10% of the Union forces.

Black soldiers who died in Alexandria were originally buried at Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery. But Black soldiers recuperating at L'Ouverture Hospital signed a petition demanding that the national cemetery be opened to Black soldiers. The petition was granted, and those already buried at Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery were reinterred (but segregated in a separate area from Whites).



Source: <https://www.cem.va.gov/cems/nchp/alexandriava.asp>;
<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/attic/2008/Attic20081030SoldiersCemetery.pdf>.

Hop onto the street and continue heading west on Jamieson Avenue. Turn right onto Holland Lane, then left onto Duke Street. At the next traffic light, turn right and use the curbcut at the northeast corner to

hop onto the eastside sidewalk of Reinekers Lane. Turn right behind the brick building and enter the courtyard that houses the Edmonson Sisters statue.

7. Edmonson Sisters statue, 1701 Duke Street

Stopping point: by the statue

Mary and Emily Edmonson were just 15 and 13 years old when they participated in what was then the largest slave escape attempt ever. Seventy-seven enslaved people tried to escape on the schooner Pearl. The plan was to sail down the Potomac River and north to New Jersey. But their ship was caught and towed back to DC.

Slave dealer Joseph Bruin purchased many of the people who participated in the escape attempt, including both sisters. He sent them to New Orleans to be sold as prostitutes, but they were sent back to due to outbreak of yellow fever. Their father was able to purchase their freedom with help from abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*).

Both sisters became active in the abolitionist movement and attended Oberlin College. Mary died of tuberculosis at 20, but Emily married, later moved to Anacostia, and continued to work for African-American rights.



The statue was erected in 2010 where Bruin's slave pens once stood. The statue, by sculptor Erik Blome, depicts them escaping from the shadow of a rock that represents the darkness of slavery.

Sources: <https://blogs.weta.org/boundarystones/2016/12/15/edmonson-sisters-alexandria-legends-fight-against-slavery>; <https://alextimes.com/2010/05/slavery-and-freedom-embodied/>.

Make a u-turn and retrace your way back to Reinekers Lane. Continue north on Reinekers Lane. Turn right onto Prince Street, then make the first left onto Daingerfield Road. Go under the train tracks and continue onto Commonwealth Avenue. Turn left onto W. Rosemont Avenue, then turn right onto King Street. Turn right onto Kenwood Avenue, then turn left onto W. Braddock Road. Go through the King-Quaker-Braddock intersection and continue on W. Braddock Road. Turn right into Fort Ward Park, and stop in the parking lot. There are public bathrooms available in Fort Ward Park if you need them.

8. Fort Ward Park, 4301 W. Braddock Road

Stopping point: pull into the grassy area near the museum.

Contrabands helped build the fort during the Civil War, then bought small plots of land nearby, built houses, and started churches and schools. Four generations of families were part of "The Fort" community, connected through kinship, marriage, church, and work, especially at Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School.

But people were displaced, buildings demolished, and graves lost when the City dedicated the park and museum for the Civil War Centennial in 1964. Nonetheless, their legacy endures. The Fort's descendants retain memories, images and traditions. New generations of those who founded The Fort and larger "Seminary" community still live nearby.

Morris Leroy and Lonnie Richard Johnson, aged 9 and 11, are buried in the cemetery here next to their father, Morris. Their deaths precipitated change in the City of Alexandria a decade before the civil rights movement. Prior to this time, the municipal pool was open to White residents only. African Americans had two ways to swim: take a weekly bus to a Washington, D.C., pool or go to the Potomac River and Hunting Creek. The Johnson brothers, on a hot summer's day, made a "boat" out of a cardboard box and launched it into the river, resulting in their drowning. After the tragic accident, the City opened the Johnson Memorial Pool.

Source: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/archaeology/default.aspx?id=54262>.

Make a u-turn and retrace your way back to W. Braddock Road. Turn left onto W. Braddock Road and go back down hill. After passing N. Quaker Lane, turn right onto King Street. The Oakland Baptist Church will be on your right. Hop onto the sidewalk after passing the church and bus stop.

9. Oakland Baptist Church, 3408 King Street.

Stopping point: sidewalk on the southside of King Street, between the church and the high school.

Several residents of "The Fort" were founders of Oakland Baptist Church. They started worshipping in an arbor, then a small school house. The church moved to this location in 1893. This building was constructed in 1931 after a fire.

Despite hardships associated with Fort Ward's development as a historic park, the church is still active and has grown from a purely African-American church to one that is racially and culturally diverse. It is a testament to the self-sufficiency, integrity, and longevity of this distinctive African-American community.

Sources: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/archaeology/default.aspx?id=54262>;
<http://obcalexandriava.org/about>.

10. T.C. Williams High School, 3330 King Street

Stopping point: same as stop # 8.

Douglass Wood, son of a USCT soldier who is buried in Alexandria National Cemetery, was a member of the Seminary community. In 1927, he donated the land for what was then the Seminary School for African-American students. The community raised \$1,000 to build the school. That land is now occupied by T.C. Williams HS.

T.C. Williams HS opened in 1965 as an integrated school, but there were two rival high schools (Frances C. Hammond and George Washington), and racial violence often spilled out at football games. The school superintendent decided to merge the two other schools into T.C. Williams as part of the school desegregation plan. Having a bigger student body led to a better football team, whose championship season was fictionalized in *Remember the Titans*.

As of the 2017-18 school year, the school was about 22% White and 78% minority, leading some to call for a change in the school's name. T.C. Williams was Alexandria's superintendent of schools from mid-1930s into 1960s, and he opposed school integration.

Sources: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/archaeology/default.aspx?id=54262>;
<https://thezebra.org/2019/02/10/athletics-as-a-problem-and-a-solution-in-integrating-alexandria-public-schools/>; <https://alextimes.com/2018/03/ourviewtcwilliams/>.

Hop back out onto street and continue heading southwest on King Street. Watch out for potholes at the bottom of the King Street hill. Go under the train tracks, then turn right onto Daingerfield Road. Take the first left onto Prince Street. Turn left onto S. West Street, then turn right onto Queen Street. At the intersection with N. Columbus Street, turn left and use the curbcut at the northeast corner of the intersection to enter the courtyard for the Kate Waller Barrett Library.

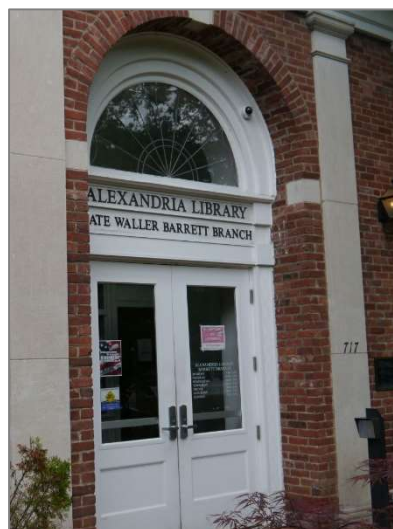
11. Barrett Branch Library, 717 Queen Street

Gathering spot: by the bike racks outside the library.

This library was the site of one of America's first sit-ins, in 1939. The library was financed by all City taxpayers but only available to Whites. Local attorney Samuel Tucker selected 5 young Black men (including his brother) who politely entered the library, asked for a library card, picked up a book, and began to read.

Police officers arrested the men and escorted them out of the library – into a crowd that included newspaper reporters and photographers, as arranged by Tucker. The City eventually agreed to build a separate library for Black Alexandrians – with half the construction budget of the White library.

Tucker continued to oppose the separate and unequal facility. He went on to work for the NAACP and argued civil rights cases across Virginia.



The Alexandria library system finally integrated to Black adults in 1959 and to Black children in 1962.

Sources: <https://alexlibraryva.org/1939-sit-in>;
<https://blogs.weta.org/boundarystones/2016/11/29/alexandria-library-sit-1939>.

Make a u-turn and retrace your way back to the intersection of N. Columbus and Queen Streets. Turn left to continue east on Queen Street. Cross Washington Street and continue on Queen Street. Turn right on N. Royal Street. Cross King Street and continue on S. Royal Street. Follow S. Royal Street back to Jones Point Park.