Alexandria Black History Bike Tour 2024

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 thirteen sites.
- Go to https://ridewithgps.com/routes/47056402 for cuesheets or turn-by-turn directions.

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1. Waterfront Park, 1 Prince Street
Starting point: by the art installation.

Waterfront Park is the starting point for both of the Alexandria African-American Heritage Trails, which illuminate the history of the African-American community over a span of several centuries. The African American Heritage Trail Committee created these walking tours through history, with the support of the Office of Historic Alexandria.

The northern walk is about a mile long and goes to the corner of North Fairfax and Montgomery Streets. The southern walk, which just opened in 2023, is about two miles long and goes to Jones Point Park. The next three stops on this bike tour are part of the southern walk, but it's worth checking out the entire walk when you have time.

Source: https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic-sites/african-american-heritage-trails.

Start your ride by heading south on Strand Street. Turn right on Duke Street, climb up the small hill, then continue on Duke Street. Turn left on South Royal Street, then pull over after crossing Wolfe Street.

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2. Site of Hannah Jackson's former home, 406-408 S. Royal Street
Gathering spot: across the street

Around the time of the Haitian Revolution in 1804, free African American residents formed a neighborhood that came to be called Hayti (pronounced Hay-tie), generally located from South Fairfax to South Pitt Streets and Prince to Gibbon Streets. Research by Alexandria Archaeology revealed that between 1815 and 1861, free Black households occupied most of the residences on the 400 block of South Royal Street.

Hannah Jackson, a free Black laundress, owned the lots that became modern-day 406 and 408 South Royal Street. She purchased a house from a white Quaker in 1820, which made her one of the earliest Black residents and Black women in Alexandria to own property. Jackson was a remarkable woman who was also able to purchase and emancipate members of her family. Court records indicate that Hannah Jackson was able to purchase her granddaughter Ann for about $300, her sister Esther and Esther's four children for about $1,000, and various other members of her family.

Source: https://media.alexandriava.gov/docs-archives/historic/info/archaeology/arpublication33hannah-jackson406408sroyal.pdf.

Continue south on S. Royal Street for one block, then turn left on S. Franklin Street. Turn right on S. Lee Street and stop across from Zion Baptist Church.

3. Zion Baptist Church, 714 S. Lee Street
Gathering spot: on the sidewalk in front of the church.

Zion Baptist Church was established in 1864 on the corner of Wolfe and South Union Streets. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, the church was also used as a community meeting place. Alexandria's First Ward Radical Republicans regularly met at Zion, including to nominate Black men to political office. One of the men nominated here, George L. Seaton, went on to serve in the Virginia House of Delegates.

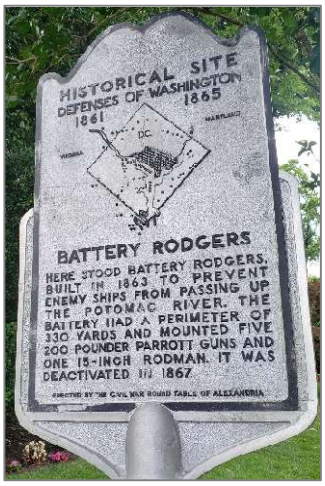
In 1880, the Zion Baptist Church moved to this location on South Lee Street. The reasons for the relocation are unknown, but the original site was prone to flooding. The church opened to the public in June 1882, using funds raised by its congregants.

Civil rights leader Samuel Wilbert Tucker grew up in this neighborhood and attended Zion Baptist Church. His father, Samuel Tucker Sr., directed the Sunday School and the church choir; Samuel Tucker played the church piano. Today the church serves the community by extending its facility to host various meetings, services, and other events.

Source:
https://alexgis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=b411599b2ed74af79d1d04243f0df811.

Continue heading south on S. Lee Street. At the intersection of S. Lee and Green Streets, look to your left for the historical marker for Battery Rodgers.

4. Battery Rodgers
Gathering spot: by the historical marker.



Battery Rodgers was one of 68 fortifications built to protect Washington, D.C. from Confederate attack during the Civil War. A unit of U.S. Colored Troops was stationed at Battery Rodgers and helped to maintain the fort.

On Christmas Day 1865, more than eight months after the surrender of the Confederate Army at Appomattox, racial violence broke out across Alexandria. Groups of White Alexandrians, many of whom were returning Confederate veterans, attacked African Americans as they celebrated the first Christmas following the Civil War. At least one person, a Black man named John Anderson, was killed, and several soldiers stationed at Battery Rodgers were injured.

The military arrested the perpetrators and sent them to the military prison. A U.S. military commission heard charges against 17 White men for their roles in the riots. Five of the men were found guilty of assault and battery with intent to kill, and one was additionally charged with murder. Two of the men were sentenced to hard labor for fifteen years and five years, respectively, and the three others were sentenced to six months. The President later mitigated the sentences of the two ringleaders to five and two years.

However, less than two months into their sentences, the men were released from prison on the grounds that the military commission was not a civilian court and did not have the jurisdiction to try them. No charges were filed in civilian court following their release, despite the evidence that had already been presented against the men.

Source:
https://alexgis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=b411599b2ed74af79d1d04243f0df811.

Turn right onto Green Street, then turn left onto S. Royal Street. Go under the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, then turn right onto the Mount Vernon Trail and climb up the hill. Cross S. Washington Street at the traffic light, then turn right onto the sidewalk. Stop at the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial.

5. 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.

Memories of the cemetery faded, and a gas station and office building were eventually 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 heading north on the westside sidewalk of S. Washington Street. At the intersection of S. Washington Street and Church Street, cross at the traffic light and then turn left onto Church Street. Take the first right onto S. Columbus Street. Look to your right as you cross Jefferson Street, and you'll see ***Abyssinia Mart and Coffee House****, one of the Black-owned businesses along this route. Continue heading north on S. Columbus Street. Turn left on Wilkes Street. Cross Route 1 at the traffic light and keep going on Wilkes Street. Turn left on S. Fayette Street, then turn right on Jefferson Street. Turn right on S. Payne Street. Stop at the entrance to Penny Hill Cemetery.*

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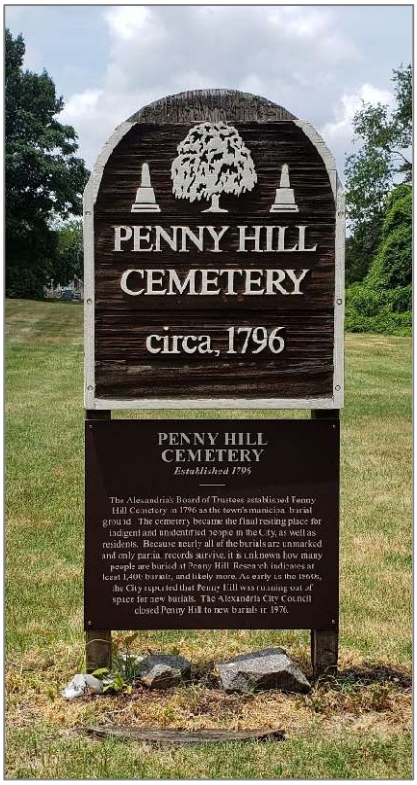
6. Penny Hill Cemetery.
Stopping point: in front of the entrance to the cemetery.

One hundred Virginians were lynched between 1882 and 1968, including two in Alexandria – Joseph McCoy in 1897, and Benjamin Thomas in 1899. The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is a city-wide initiative aimed at helping Alexandria understand its history of racial terror hate crimes and work toward creating a welcoming community bound by equity and inclusion. The ACRP is dedicated to telling the story of those two men, both of whom were buried in paupers' graves in Penny Hill Cemetery.



Joseph McCoy's family had deep roots in Alexandria: his grandmother was born a free woman of color in Alexandria well before the Civil War. He grew up on South Alfred Street among his extended family of parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. He began working for the Lacy family while still a young boy, likely as a farmhand. But when McCoy was 19, his employer, Richard Lacy, alleged that McCoy had sexually assaulted his daughter.

McCoy was arrested without a warrant and held at the police station, present-day City Hall. After multiple attacks on the station, the white mob broke through, dragged McCoy one block, shot him, bludgeoned him with an ax, and hanged him. Newspaper accounts of the time suggest that he may have been dismembered or castrated as well, indignities often inflicted on Black males who were lynched for perceived indignities to White females.

The Virginia governor later blamed the mayor for failing to respond to the repeated attacks. But no officials were ever held accountable, and no members of the white mob were ever arrested.

Sources:
https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/blackhistory/ACRPRemembranceNewsletter2021April.pdf;
https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/blackhistory/McCoyLynchingNarrative04162020.pdf.

Around midnight on August 8, 1899, 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas was lynched by a White mob at the corner of Fairfax and King Streets. The mob attacked the city jail, dragged him half a mile while shooting, stabbing, and throwing things at him, and hanged him from a lamppost.

Thomas had been arrested for allegedly assaulting the 8-year-old white girl who lived next door. Despite the girl's inconsistent testimony, Thomas was ordered held at the Alexandria jail until his trial. A mob of 500-2000 people ignored the mayor's pleas to go home, overwhelmed the officers at the jail, and seized Thomas. The Times later reported that 200 shots were fired into Thomas' body.

Despite their promises, local and state authorities never investigated the events of the lynching. There were no arrests or prosecutions of the perpetrators who killed Benjamin Thomas.

Sources:
https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/blackhistory/BenjaminThomasHistoricalNarrative.pdf;
https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/blackhistory/McCoyLynchingNarrative04162020.pdf.

Continue north on S. Payne Street. Turn left onto Roundhouse Lane, then stop in the park at the intersection of Roundhouse Lane and S. West Street.

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7. Duke Street Train Depot
Stopping point: in the park at the intersection of Roundhouse Lane and South West Street.

Roundhouse Lane owes its name to the fact that there used to be a large roundhouse for trains when this site was the Duke Street Train Depot. The train depot played a role in the Poor People's Campaign of 1968, an initiative launched by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., shortly before his assassination.

The Mule Train was one of eight caravans that was supposed to convene in Washington, D.C. for a "Solidarity Day" rally on June 19, 1968. The Mule Train left Mark, Mississippi, on May 13, traveling throughout Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia before arriving in Atlanta on June 15. The marchers then put 13 disassembled wagons, 27 mules, and 4 horses onto a train bound for Alexandria.

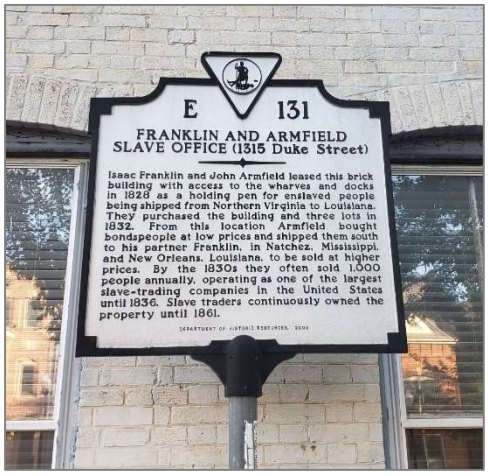
Upon arrival in Alexandria, a local veterinarian found that five mules and all of the horses were unfit for further travel. Those animals were sent to a farm to recuperate. The marchers reassembled their wagons and hitched up their remaining animals, and started for DC. However, a broken cartwheel and a road rage incident slowed down the already slow pace of the Mule Train. It took three hours for the caravan to reach the Virginia side of the Arlington Memorial Bridge. The rally's leaders decided the Mule Train's arrival would cause confusion and disruption, and the exhausted marchers did not reach DC until after the rally was over.

The difficulties experienced by the Mule Train were emblematic of the larger problems that beset the Poor People's Campaign. The loss of Dr. King, the logistical difficulties in organizing eight caravans, and the lack of cooperation by both federal and local governments limited the campaign's visibility and impact.

Source: https://www.alexandriava.gov/sites/default/files/2024-02/poor-peoples-campaign-attic-2-8-2024.pdf.

Continue north on S. West Street. Cross Duke Street at the traffic light, then turn right onto the northside sidewalk of Duke Street. Continue on the sidewalk, then stop in front of the Freedom House Museum.

8. 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 Northern Virginia Urban League used to operate a small museum in the building's basement. The City of Alexandria purchased the site in 2020, and the museum reopened in 2022 after significant renovations. The site is now the Freedom House Museum, dedicated to honoring the lives and experiences of the enslaved and free Black people who lived in and were trafficked through Alexandria.

Sources:
https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/blackhistory/BlackHistoryLessonPlanSlaveTrading.pdf; https://www.alexandriava.gov/news_display.aspx?id=114402.

Continue east on the Duke Street sidewalk. Make the first left onto S. Payne Street. Cross King Street, then turn left on Cameron Street. Continue east on Cameron Street, then stop at the Oswald Durant Center.

9. Oswald Durant Center, 1605 Cameron Street
Stopping point: in front of the recreation center.

The recreation center is named after Dr. Oswald Durant, who was born in 1895 outside of Sumter, South Carolina. He attended Morris College in Sumter before being drafted to serve in the First World War and assigned to the 371st Infantry. Durant had been promoted to sergeant by the time his unit sailed for Europe in April 1918. During their service with the French 157th Division, these brave African-American

draftees earned the respect of the French military, which honored them with the Croix de Guerre. They returned home in early 1919.

After the war, Durant earned his medical degree in 1926 at Meharry Medical College in Nashville and set up practice in Alexandria. He practiced for more than 25 years in Alexandria, during which he was one of only two or three Black doctors. Dr. Durant was an active community leader and devoted significant time to public health campaigns. Dr. Durant passed away in 1953 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Fifty years after his death, the community center was named in his honor. The building had originally been constructed during World War II as a USO center that was only open to White servicemembers.

Next door to the Durant Center is the temporary home of "Wrought, Knit, Labors, Legacies," created by artist Olalekan Jeyifous. This artwork opened in Waterfront Park in March 2020 and is composed of four metal profiles with iconography related to the four major industrial enterprises in Alexandria: flour, tobacco, railways, and armory. The City of Alexandria recently announced plans to move the artwork to a permanent location by the Braddock Road metro station and to commission the artist to create a vertical version of the ground mural that was part of the Waterfront Park installation.

Sources: https://www.alexandriava.gov/recreation-centers/oswald-durant-center; https://findingauntdelia.blogspot.com/2010/11/veterans-day-remembering-oswald-durant.html; https://www.alxnow.com/2024/06/27/former-waterfront-park-artwork-being-moved-to-permanent-home-at-braddock-road-metro-station/.

Continue west on Cameron Street. At the intersection of Cameron Street and Commonwealth Avenue, turn right and go under the train tracks. Take the first left onto W. Cedar Street. Turn right onto Russell Road, then take the first left onto W. Rosemont Avenue. Turn right onto King Street and climb the hill. Turn left onto Janneys Lane, cross Quaker Lane, and continue onto Seminary Road. Turn right onto Deanery Drive, then stop in front of the visitor center for Virginia Theological Seminary.

10. Virginia Theological Seminary, 3737 Seminary Road.
Stopping point: area in front of the visitor center and chapel.

Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) was founded in 1823 by several slaveholding men — including Francis Scott Key, who wrote the national anthem and who so opposed emancipation that he criminally prosecuted abolitionist journalists as U.S. attorney in the District of Columbia.

Enslaved people owned by a construction contractor built Aspinwall Hall in 1841, which now houses the seminary's administrative offices. Mount Vernon, George Washington's estate, rented enslaved people to work at the seminary in the 1850s, and early professors also owned enslaved people. Even after slavery ended, VTS remained segregated. Black students were not admitted until 1951.

In September 2019, VTS designated $1.7 million as a reparations endowment fund. The seminary's dean and president said at the time, "Part of our past is explicit racism. We were a Seminary where enslaved persons worked. We participated fully in segregation. So we apologize; so we commit to a different future; but we need to do more. This fund is our seed — the first step." Though other institutions have created atonement programs, such as scholarships and housing vouchers, VTS's program may be the first to provide cash.

As of September 2021, the Reparations Initiative had issued 17 payments to members of seven different families, awarded its first reparations grant to a historically Black Episcopal church, and uncovered hundreds of records that shed light on the Seminary's history and connections to the larger institution of slavery.

Sources: https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/09/10/virginia-theological-seminary-reparations-slavery/; https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/31/us/reparations-virginia-theological-seminary.html; https://vts.edu/deans-commentary/reparations-initiative-update-090821/.

Retrace your path back to Seminary Road. Turn right and continue west on Seminary Road. At the traffic light, turn right onto N. Howard Street. Turn right onto W. Braddock Road, then get into the left turn lane so that you can turn left into Fort Ward Park. There are public bathrooms available in Fort Ward Park if you need them.

11. 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 in the 1950s and 1960s, the City moved the residents out of the area to establish the Fort Ward Park and Museum. The City of Alexandria is working on an Interpretive Plan for Fort Ward Park to expand interpretation to include the full range of its history, especially including the African-American experience and the post-Civil War Fort community. The Office of Historic Alexandria is also working on two memorial projects to preserve key burial areas in the park.

Morris Leroy and Lonnie Richard Johnson, aged 9 and 11, are buried in the cemetery here next to their father, Morris. In the early 1950s, 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-sites/the-fort-a-post-civil-war-african-american-community.

Make a u-turn and retrace your way back to W. Braddock Road. Turn left onto W. Braddock Road and go down the hill. After passing N. Quaker Lane, turn right onto King Street. Continue on King Street, then turn right into the entrance for Alexandria City High School.

12. Alexandria City High School, 3330 King Street
Stopping point: on the sidewalk by the bikeshare station.

Alexandria City High School used to be called T.C. Williams High School, after the segregationist who was Alexandria's superintendent of schools from the mid-1930s into the 1960s. When Alexandria was undergoing the process of renaming the school, one of the candidates 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 said her participation in the lawsuit was "like a slap in the face" and fired her 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.

Sources: https://alextimes.com/2021/02/black-cook-fired-by-t-c-williams-could-replace-him-as-high-school-namesake/; https://alextimes.com/2018/03/civilrightsstand/.

Head back out toward King Street, then turn right onto King Street. Take King Street back to the King Street metro station. Go under the train tracks, then turn right onto Daingerfield Road. Turn left onto Prince Street. After crossing S. West Street, look to your right for the historical marker for L'Ouverture Hospital.

13. Historical marker for L'Ouverture Hospital, at Prince St. and S. Payne Street
Stopping point: next to the historical marker

During the Civil War, this entire block was a hospital for Black troops and contraband civilians. The hospital, which was named for Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture, opened in February 1864. About 1400 patients were admitted during 1864 and 1865. Buildings included barracks, a cookhouse and mess room, linen room, office, sutler's store, deadhouse, and dispensary. Some patients were housed in long canvas tents.

In December 1864, a hearse carrying Private Shadrick Murphy was diverted from the nearby military cemetery to the Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery. In response, L'Ouverture patients wrote and circulated a petition. Part of their petition stated, "we are now sharing equally the dangers and hardships in this mighty contest, and should shair [sic] the same privileges and rights of burial in every way with our fellow soldiers who only differ from us in color." As a result, Black soldiers began to be buried in Alexandria National Cemetery, and those who had been buried at Freedmen's Cemetery were disinterred and re-buried with their military brothers.

Most of the wartime construction was dismantled in 1867, but the existing residence used as the hospital's HQ still stands. There's a marker around the corner by the front door of 219 S. Payne Street.

Source: https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/civilwar/default.aspx?id=73499.

*Consider stopping at **Goodie's**, a Black-owned business a half-block north of here, for delicious frozen treats. Other Black-owned businesses in the vicinity include **PIES Fitness Yoga Studio** and **Harambee Books and Artworks**. When you're ready to resume your ride, continue west on Prince Street. Turn right on N. Fairfax Street, then turn left onto Duke Street. Turn left onto S. Union Street and end your ride at **Café du Soleil**, another Black-owned business.*