

## ALEXANDRIA'S HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOODS

*In remembrance of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas, soil was collected from several historic African American neighborhoods in Alexandria.*

### 12. THE BOTTOMS

Established in 1790, The Bottoms was the first African American neighborhood in Alexandria. It was settled by Free Blacks who were allowed to hold long term rental agreements with property owners. It is called the Bottoms because surrounding streets are at a higher elevation. Joseph McCoy's home and Odd Fellows Hall are in The Bottoms community.

### 13. HAYTI

A second African American neighborhood was developed in the early 1800s with the help of Quakers Mordecai Miller and his son Robert. Mordecai emancipated several slaves and testified to the free status of many of Alexandria's free Blacks who often had to prove their status to avoid being enslaved. Mordecai built nine houses on the 400 block of S. Royal Street and rented them to free Blacks. When Robert became president of First National Bank of Alexandria, he then sold the homes to their Black renters. The neighborhood grew to include the 300 block of S. Fairfax Street. It is thought that residents named the area Hayti in recognition of the Haitian Revolution in the 1790s.

### 14. THE BERG

During the Civil War, African Americans escaping slavery arrived in Union occupied Alexandria in large numbers. The bulk of these refugees established a neighborhood north of King Street called The Berg, named after Petersburg, Va. from where many had escaped. In the 1870s, the neighborhood was a hot bed of radical republicanism. African Americans from this community held leadership posts in the local and state republican party. On the night of Benjamin Thomas' arrest, many of the men from this neighborhood were involved in trying to protect the youth from a threatened lynching.

### 15. FISHTOWN

Just to the East of The Berg was Fishtown, a seasonal village of enslaved and free African Americans that originated in the 1700s along the waterfront. Each fishing season (March to May), small wooden shacks and stalls would spring up at the foot of Oronoco Street where up to 600 Black's counted, beheaded, gutted, cleaned, and

salted thousands of fish for sale. By the mid-1800s, Fishtown included land from Princess to Oronoco and from Union Street to the Potomac River.

By 1920, Fishtown was gone. Today, Founder's Park stands in its place. Soil from this location was collected in recognition of the Black men and women who lived and labored in the fisheries.

### 16. UPTOWN

The streets that make up the neighborhood were laid out as early as 1796, but the area was mainly developed after the Civil War. By 1899, rowhouses were packed tightly together merging The Hump and Colored Rosemont into Uptown. The majority of residents were Black, however, white people also lived in this district.

As the talons of Jim Crow gripped Alexandria during the 20th century, the 1100 Block of Queen Street became a hub for Black-owned businesses.

The Thomas family lived in Uptown.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE SITES

*Soil was gathered from sites of significance that recognized Alexandria's African Americans role in the struggle for equal rights and combined with soil representing the lives of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas.*

### 17. ALEXANDRIA LIBRARY ON QUEEN STREET



Two decades before the Civil Rights movement spread through the south, Black attorney and activist Samuel Tucker led a sit-in at the Alexandria Public Library. In 1937, the Alexandria Free Library opened, but African Americans were not allowed to use it. After failing

to convince officials to provide library services to both white and Black Alexandrians, Tucker organized a protest.

On August 21, 1939, five African Americans, Otto Tucker, Edward Gaddis, Morris Murray, William Evans and Clarence Strange, went into the reading room, pulled books from the shelves and when

asked, they refused to leave. They were respectful, well dressed, and nonviolent, just as Tucker had instructed them to behave. The five men were arrested and charged, but then they were released without a judge's ruling. Tucker had been counting on representing the men in court, but when the charges were dropped his plan was thwarted.

As a result of the protest, the City built the small Robert H. Robinson Library for African Americans which opened in 1940. Tucker and other Blacks felt this was an inferior option and continued to advocate for library privileges at the Queen Street building.

**18. ALEXANDRIA BLACK HISTORY MUSEUM**



As a result of the 1939 sit-in, the Robert H. Robinson Library was constructed at 902 Wythe Street and opened in

1940. Once a segregated reading room, the building is now the Alexandria Black History Museum. The museum collects and interprets Black Alexandrian's contributions to local and national history and culture.

**19. THE DEPARTMENTAL PROGRESSIVE CLUB**



In 1927, seven African American's who worked for the federal government, established the Departmental Progressive Club to provide a setting for Alexandria's Black community to meet and hold social events before, during, and after segregation. Known as the Secret Seven, these men worked to integrate Alexandria City Public Schools and fought tirelessly for social and civil rights in this city. Members continue this legacy today.

**20. PARKER-GRAY HIGH SCHOOL**

Due to segregation in education, the Parker-Gray High School opened in 1920 to teach Black students in grades 1 thru 8 at 901 Wythe Street. The name comes from the former principals of boys' and girls' schools set up by the Freedman's Bureau after the Civil War.



At its opening, the Parker-Gray School employed nine teachers and was led by Principal Henry White. Because the City was meager in its support, members of the community banded together to provide the furniture, equipment and supplies needed to teach the children.

In the 1930s high school grades were added and in 1936, the first students graduated. In 1950, a new Parker-Gray High School was built on Madison Street and the school on Wythe again became an elementary school. It was named after Charles Houston, the NAACP lawyer and civil rights leader.

Parker-Gray produced doctors, lawyers, judges, a brigadier general, the first African American NBA player, numerous college and high school coaches and Federal workers, scientists, musicians, and businessmen of note. Today, the site of the old school is the Charles Houston Recreation Center that houses the Alexandria African American Hall of Fame to recognize the many impressive graduates.

**21. ALEXANDRIA AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE PARK**



Established on the site of the oldest known independent African American burial ground, the Black Baptist Cemetery, the park with its bronzed memorial, Truths that Rise from the Roots - Remembered by Jerome Meadows, honors the contributions of African Americans to the growth and success of Alexandria.

The cemetery was chartered in 1885 by the Silver Leaf Colored Society of Alexandria.