

Alexandria Times

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African American heritage along the waterfront

In 1800, Alexandria resident and former mayor Robert Townsend Hooe signed an Indenture of Apprenticeship with John Hughes, a ship builder and sea captain in Alexandria. Hooe, a prosperous merchant and owner of a warehouse on Point Lumley at the foot of Duke Street, agreed to indenture an enslaved boy named Charles to “be taught and instructed by Hughes in the Art[,] Mystery and Business of a Ship Carpenter and no other Business for a period of 12 years.” After 12 years, Charles would be emancipated and able to enter the business as a free man with a full suit of clothes and the tools necessary to start his own business.

This moment of Charles’ life, captured in a historic document, provides a glimpse into maritime Alexandria and the people involved in the “art and mystery” of ship building more than 200 years ago. This history, along with some of the artifacts excavated from waterfront archaeological sites, is featured in the new southern route of the African American Waterfront Heritage Trail. Charles’ story is highlighted alongside the events, places and people, like Benjamin

Banneker, George Henry and George Lewis Seaton, that contributed to the history of Alexandria’s waterfront.

Even before the founding of Alexandria in 1749, Africans and their descendants, enslaved and free, have lived and worked along the waterfront, making significant contributions to the local economy and culture. In the 1820s and 1830s, Alexandria became home to the country’s largest domestic slave trading firm, which profited from the trafficking of enslaved African Americans from the Chesapeake to the Deep South.

The Civil War revolutionized social and economic relations, and freed African Americans found new job opportunities because of the waterfront’s industrialization. The Potomac River played an important role in leisure activities too, much as it does today. The history shared on the trails strives to highlight African American experiences while recognizing that their voices are often not directly preserved in the historical record.

The African American Heritage Trail Committee has developed two trails, both beginning at Waterfront Park,



PHOTO/MCARTHUR MYERS

Visitors learn more about Alexandria’s African American history in Waterfront Park. **Left to right:** Marvin Sanders, Tamika Sanders, Ebony Wilkes, Monte Cole Kincaid and Dana Kincaid.

that together span more than three miles from Old Town North to Jones Point Park. The trail is available as a web page and a self-guided, online StoryMap that allows residents and visitors to walk the trails and experience 30 stops covering two centuries-plus of Alexandria’s history. Ultimately some of these stops will include interpretive signage, like the history of Charles and the trade of ship carpentry at Point Lumley Park.

The new southern route of the African American Waterfront Heritage Trail will launch on Saturday. Visit <https://www.alexandriava.gov/Historic> for more information on the trails

and all the events celebrating Black History Month in Alexandria. This community history project was developed by members of the African American Heritage Trail Committee past and present: Councilor John Chapman, Susan Cohen, Gwen Day-Fuller, Elizabeth “Indy” McCall, Maddy McCoy, committee chair Krystyn Moon, McArthur Myers and Ted Pulliam. Support from the Office of Historic Alexandria is provided by the Alexandria Archaeology Museum and the Alexandria Black History Museum.

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