

Alexandria Gazette Packet

May 17, 2007

Resurrecting a Cemetery

Former gas station site rededicated as Freedmen's Cemetery.

By MIKE DiCICCO
GAZETTE PACKET

“We must never forget the struggles of these people, whose names, in some cases, we may never know,” the Rev. Adam Hansford of Zion Baptist Church told a crowd of about 600 gathered at the southern end of South Washington Street last Saturday evening. He was referring to the more than 1,900 black freedmen buried near that street corner between 1864 and 1869, some 90 years before a gas station was built on top of the old cemetery.

Hansford noted that most of the people buried there had struggled to reach Alexandria, where they had lived in shantytowns, enduring hardship and disease.

“For those who gave so much,” he said, “we give in return.”

The gas station has now been torn down, and it was replaced, for the Saturday's rededication, with 1,906 paper-bag luminaria, each made by an Alexandria child to commemorate someone known to have been buried there.

Within the next few years, the city plans to have a permanent memorial park constructed on the site.

SEE FREEDMAN'S. PAGE 4



PHOTOS BY LOUISE KRAFT/GAZETTE PACKET

City Manager Jim Hartmann presents Lillie Finklea with a flame to light the next luminary in the closing ceremony at the rededication.

“It just goes to show what two determined old women can do when they set their minds on a mission.”

— Lillie Finklea, co-founder of Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery

The 1906 luminaries, right, are lit and flicker gently as the ceremony proceeds into the twilight of Saturday evening.





A volunteer group, Top Ladies of Distinction — Julia Checkley, Pauline Hunter, Lucretia McClenney, Lorena Granados, Shariya Scott and Shannon Scott — take a moment after setting up 1906 luminaries.



PHOTO BY LOUISE KRAFT/GAZETTE PACKET

Pam Cressey and history interpreter Donise Stevens, portraying Mrs. Thomas.

Freedman's Cemetery Recalls the Struggle

FROM PAGE 1

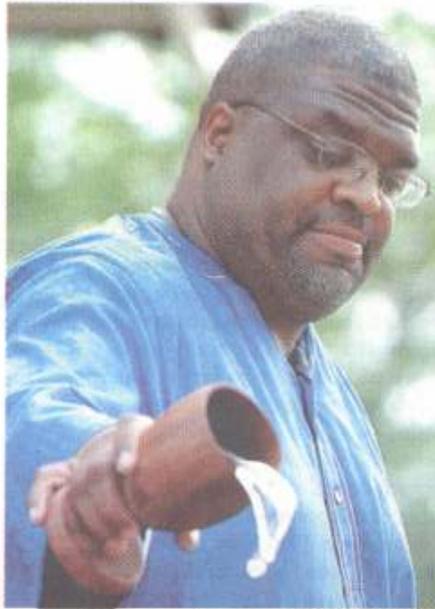
Mayor William Euille recounted how some 8,000 to 12,000 free blacks poured into Alexandria after it was occupied by the federal government during the Civil war, doubling the city's population. The cemetery was first used as a burial ground for blacks who had died fighting for the Union Army, although those bodies were later exhumed and moved to Arlington National Cemetery. Between 1864 and 1869, the graveyard was operated by the Freedman's Bureau, and it was then that some 1,900 people were buried there.

"The place stayed marginal, on the edge of town," said Euille. That is, until the construction of the George Washington Parkway, following which, the site began to be paved over with streets and sidewalks. "Many of the graves are now very shallow and close to the asphalt," he said.

What Euille did not mention that day was that the land, having been donated to the Catholic Church, was rezoned as commercial property by the City Council in 1946 and sold months later by Bishop Peter Ireton. The bishop stipulated that it could not be used for an "automobile service station," but two months after Tidewater Associated Oil Co. submitted an application for the construction of a gas station on the property, Ireton removed the restriction.

"Some folks call me Aunt Betty," said Donise Stevens, playing the part of "Mrs. Thomas," a free black from Civil War-era Alexandria. She recounted the tribulations of Mrs. Thomas' people.

"In my day, if you had white blood on your mother's side, you were free — but not here, across the river in Virginia." Of her people's free status, she said, "However they achieved it, let me tell you it was not free." Some, she said, still worked as hard as they had as slaves. Others were caught and reenslaved, unable to prove they had been freed. "We're gathered here today to acknowledge their pain, their struggles and sacrifice," she said.



Brian Sales performs a libation ceremony to honor the deceased.

Euille introduced Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery co-founder Lillie Finklea as "the one person who has the most passion" about the memorial park. "And she's not bashful about shedding tears while she's talking to you in order to win you over," he said.

She briefly recounted her crusade to have the cemetery recognized. She had been part of a group that was fighting the construction of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge when she learned of the cemetery buried beneath the Mobil station. The site was being considered for a staging area for equipment during the bridge's construction. Historian Wesley Pippinger discovered the cemetery's record book in 1994 and published the names of everyone known to have been buried there. So Finklea and the Friends' other co-founder, Louise Massoud, took the list to churches and charities looking for descendants of those named on it and gathering support. Saturday's event, she said, "just goes to show what two determined old women can do when they set their minds

on a mission."

As for the park's design, Finklea said, "from the beginning, we envisioned a wall of names." Displaying the names of the deceased, she said, would allow visitors to see

if they had any relatives buried there.

City Manager James Hartmann said the process of converting the site was rolling along; the city hopes to have the memorial park built by 2010.