

FREEDMAN'S VILLAGE: ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA, 1863-1900

By

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On April 16th, 1862, President Lincoln signed a bill which emancipated the slaves in the District of Columbia.¹ Large numbers of slaves, many from Maryland and Virginia, came to the city for protection.² When conditions in the camps where the contrabands were housed became overcrowded, and a high rate of death due to disease resulted, it was decided to relocate some of the contrabands outside of the city. Freedman's Village was set up by the federal government across the Potomac River from Washington, D. C. on Arlington Heights, Virginia on the Arlington Estate. The village was formed in June of 1863 as a temporary camp for contrabands; however it became much more than a temporary stopover point for freed slaves and it existed for more than thirty years. The village provided education, training in skills for employment, employment when possible, medical care, clothing, shelter and food for the former slaves.

Washington, D. C. became a haven for fugitive slaves and contrabands in 1863. Men, women and children came to the District of Columbia when they were freed by the advancing Union Army.³ Others came to the city with those armies as laborers and servants. Later many regiments of the United States Colored Troops discharged their men at the camps in the area. The District had more people than employment for them.⁴ According to a delegation of northerners there was probably a larger number of freed people gathered in the Washington area than anywhere else.⁵

Some of the fugitive slaves who arrived were housed in the Old Capitol Prison. When James S. Wadsworth became the Military Governor, he tried to improve living conditions by moving the contrabands to Duff Green's Row. Conditions there deteriorated due to overcrowding and a smallpox epidemic. Those not affected by the epidemic were moved to a camp on Twelfth Street. The camp there was overcrowded which made it necessary for tents to be set up to accommodate the new arrivals. Other contraband camps were set up in the area. The Boundary Street camp held only about 1000 of the District's 10,000 contrabands while about 3000 were located in Alexandria.⁶

Plans were made to relocate some of the freedmen outside of the District of Columbia. In an effort to provide additional housing, more employment and to lessen the congestion and lower the high death rate, the Quartermaster in charge of Washington, Colonel E. M. Green, suggested that some of the freedmen farm the nearby lands.⁷ Green chose the area south of the Potomac River where he felt the "pure country air" would have a positive effect on the freedmen.⁸ On May 5, 1863, Dr. Nichols, the Superintendent of the contrabands in Washington, selected the village site.⁹

Within a month, by June of 1863, 100 people formed the original colony.¹⁰ A formal religious dedication opened the village later on December 4, 1863.¹¹ At

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Harper's Weekly
May 7, 1864

This article accompanies this sketch of the Freedman's Village, Arlington, Virginia. The sketch was drawn by A. R. Waud, a well-known artist who was hired by the U. S. Government to help document the Civil War. He also worked for Harper's Weekly. The wording of the article follows.

"FREEDMAN'S VILLAGE, ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

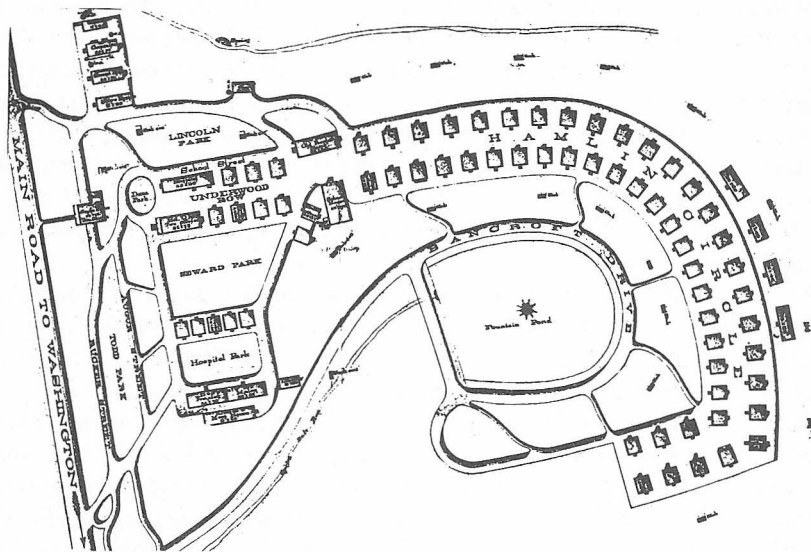
We give a view of the Freedman's Village, established on Arlington Heights, Virginia, by the Government. The village is a neat and extensive collection of frame houses, erected especially for the use of such contraband as, failing to provide for themselves, become a burden to the Government. The village is surrounded by farmland, which the negroes cultivate for their support. To Colonel Elias M. Greene is due the principal credit of thus assisting the negroes to help themselves.

All the smartest and strongest among the released slaves find employment as servants of different kinds - barbers, teamsters, etc. But there is still a number who fail to get employment and them Colonel Greene has tried to make self-supporting on the Government lands, and so far with considerable success.

The village is quite lively, having a large number of children in it. For these there is a school house; there is, besides, a "home" for the aged, a hospital, church, tailor and other work-shops, with other public buildings. The principal street is over a quarter of a mile long, and the place presents a clean and prosperous appearance at all times."



A view of Freedman's Village, Arlington Virginia
From Harper's Weekly May 7, 1864
By A. R. Waud - Sketch Artist



Government Plans for the layout of Freedman's Village
 Library of Congress Cartographic Division - General Plan #9, July 10th 1865



Contraband School At Freedman's Village, Arlington, Virginia
 Library of Congress Photographic Division - From the Brady Collection

the opening, members of Congress, the Cabinet and officers from the Army made speeches.¹² By November of 1864, the population had increased to nearly 3000 persons.¹³ Another source contends that at its height the population was 1500.¹⁴ In addition to the residents there were many visitors to the village. Passes were granted to a fact-finding group from the New England Friends to visit Freedman's Village and other camps in the area. They felt that the responsibility of their agents was to see that the charities of the government were rightly directed.¹⁵ Some visitors to Freedman's Village, such as Sojourner Truth, served as counselors at the village. She stayed for over a year.

Sojourner Truth was appointed to serve at Freedman's Village by the National Freedman's Relief Association. While she was there she counseled the villagers, instructed the women in domestic chores, preached, helped find work for the unemployed, and taught the villagers how to stand up for their rights.

One case of Sojourner Truth helping the villagers stand up for their rights occurred after some of the young men of the village were captured by their former masters from Maryland. The mothers of the young men who were kidnapped were upset and made a commotion. The women were put into the guardhouse at Freedman's Village because of the disturbance. When Sojourner Truth heard about the incident she arranged for the release of the women and also encouraged them to use the law to get their sons back. The women swore out warrants and in time their children were returned. The Marylanders later came to Freedman's Village to let Sojourner Truth know that they would have her thrown in the guardhouse if she meddled in their business again. She told them that if they tried that she would "make the United States rock like a cradle". While she worked at the village she found both employment and homes for many villagers in the northern states. She encouraged Congress to give public lands as a way for the people to begin to support themselves.¹⁶

The village was initially run by military commanders and special agents of the Treasury Department. After the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands was set up on March 3, 1865, Freedman's Village came under its jurisdiction.¹⁷ While in the village the former slaves were taught to be tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, and wheelwrights although the majority of the villagers were farmers.

Within a year of its opening Colonel Green viewed the village as successful because of the bountiful crops raised and the money earned by farming. There were over 1,100 acres of the estate alone and large amounts of vegetables and grains were raised there by the freedmen. They produced large quantities of buckwheat, corn fodder, potatoes and other vegetables. The freedman raised 191 tons of corn fodder in one year. The corn was sold for \$12.00 per ton and the buckwheat and potatoes were used to help supply the people in the local hospitals for freedmen.¹⁸ Some of the crops were sold at the markets in Washington. The villagers, however, lived on Army rations. When some Quakers visited the village in 1864, some of the villagers were hungry and begging for money to buy a few "taters" (potatoes). Some felt the rations were the cause of the high death rate.¹⁹

The average number of deaths was fewer in the village than it was in the camps in the District of Columbia. The average number of deaths was two per day in

Freedman's Village while it was three to five per day in a camp in Washington, D. C. There were outbreaks of scarlet fever, measles, and whooping cough, especially among the children.²⁰ The most serious of the illnesses were treated in the local hospitals. Some felt that no proper provision had been made for the villagers and that many suffered from inadequate care because they were housed in such temporary camps. Others, such as historian Letitia Woods Brown, felt that compared to some camps in the District of Columbia, Freedman's Village provided more adequate shelter and care.

There were three major hospitals in the area; Washington, Alexandria, and Abbott Hospital in Freedman's Village. Alexandria had 100 beds and Washington had a 200 bed facility while the hospital in the village had fifty beds. The Abbott Hospital had fourteen medical officers working there in November, 1866. Rations were provided for both the patients and staff. For one month a total of 6079 rations were issued to the patients and staff at the hospital.²¹ By February of 1868 there was a need to expand the staff.²²

A variety of cases were brought to Abbott Hospital in Freedman's Village. An application was made from the hospital for an artificial leg to be made for Jerry Savage, a government worker who lost his leg due to mortification which resulted from frostbite.²³ In March of 1868, a request was made to transfer sick women and their children from Freedman's Hospital in the District to Abbott Hospital because of crowded conditions in the women's ward. The people who were listed as in need of transfers included; Margaret Jackson and Georgeanna Jackson (aged six weeks), Celia Cooper and Jane and Marriah Cooper (aged five weeks), Caroline Spriggs and Mary Spriggs (aged two years) and Thomas Spriggs (aged three weeks), Eliza A. Johnson and Elizabeth Johnson (aged two years) and Eliza (aged three weeks) and Anna Robinson and John E. Robinson (aged three months) and Polly Myers. Later by the 1870's after the hospital in the village closed, many of the patients from Abbott Hospital were moved to Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D. C.²⁴ In the 1870's more than one-third of the permanent residents at Freedman's Hospital in the District were either former slaves from the Arlington Estate or former residents of Freedman's Village.²⁵

In addition to the hospital, a "Home" for the aged, infirm and permanently disabled was located in the village. In 1866 the average population in the "Home" was ninety people.²⁶ The Home was a two-story structure which measured thirty feet by ninety-four feet. There were fourteen rooms below and four above.²⁷

Some of the women who lived in the home and were able, were employed at the Industrial School. The men who were able tended the vegetable gardens.²⁸ A formal request was necessary for admission to the home. One such request was made for C. Camay who was sixty-five years old and who had no family or friends and was unable to care for himself. He was admitted to the village.²⁹

One of the surgeons made recommendations on how to improve the living conditions at the "Home". In February, 1867, G. A. Wheeler, the surgeon in charge of Abbott Hospital, suggested changes in the Home which he considered necessary to ensure the comfort and health of the inmates. He suggested that wards be set up rather than having the people in private rooms to allow for more adequate heat in the winter months and better ventilation in the summer. He also felt that

having a ward system, with each bed numbered, would decrease the likelihood of patients getting the wrong medicine.³⁰

In addition to the "Home" there were also churches in the village. The American Tract Society erected a chapel by December of 1863. It was one of the most conspicuous buildings in the village.³¹ Later there were at least two churches: Mt. Olive Baptist Church and the "Old Bell Church" which was a predecessor to Mount Zion Baptist Church.³²

In addition to founding a chapel in the village the American Tract Society also ran a school in Freedman's Village. This organization, which was headquartered in Boston, founded the school in the village just a few days after the formal religious dedication. The school had an attendance count of 150 students on the first day of classes on December 7, 1863.³³ The American Tract Society provided the slates and writing books, while the Boston School Board provided the furniture.³⁴ Early staff members included H. Simmons from Providence, Rhode Island who was the principal, and four teachers. The teachers were Miss Anna Carpenter also from Providence, Miss E. A. Barcroft of Westfield, Massachusetts, Miss E. G. Stanwood of Winsted, Connecticut and Miss A. Hall of Springfield, Vermont.³⁵

When a group of Quakers visited the schools in the area in 1864, they found that there was something wrong in the way the school was run in Freedman's Village. In most other places the children readily went to school; however in the village, force was needed to make the children attend. In the spring of 1864 almost 900 students attended school while the following fall only 300 enrolled. Some moved to other areas, many died and some were apprenticed. Some of the young men and boys were sent to Analostan Island (now Roosevelt Island) for punishment.³⁶ Yet there were still many children in the village who did not enroll in school.

There were both primary and higher schools in the village.³⁷ During one week in June, 1865, an average of ninety-nine students attended primary school and 143 students attended the higher school.³⁸ Some of the subjects students were taught included reading, composition and geography.³⁹ The scholars sat in double desks which were made by the freedmen in the carpenter's shop in the village.⁴⁰ There was also an Industrial School in Freedman's Village run at one point by Miss Heacock.⁴¹

The Industrial School helped furnish training for freedmen. The training was meant to provide the contrabands with skills to use when they went out on their own. Clothing was made, repaired and distributed at this school. The women made clothing for the aged, including hats, clothes and 200 yard of strawbraided patchwork.⁴² Workshops were organized for those who were able to work where some of the villagers became skilled blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, tailors and shoemakers.⁴³

In November of 1866 requests were made to change the school building to better serve the smaller enrollment. Well over half of the scholars remaining were from the old Custis slave families who seemed to be permanent residents as they owned their own homes and cultivated their land. The children were considered promising by their teacher. Permission was granted to carry out some modifications to the building as long as the work was done cheaply.⁴⁴

Along with an education, clothing was provided to the villagers when necessary. Some of the material which George McKay had in his tailor shop were red flannel and sheeting.⁴⁵ Brown denims were also received by McKay.⁴⁶ Shoes were available for those who needed them.⁴⁷ When A. Laurence raised the question of whether a suit of clothing should be given to villagers when they left the village, he was told that clothing should only be issued when actually necessary.⁴⁸

When the freedmen left the camp they were provided transportation to rejoin their families or to go to a new location for employment. General Order #138 from the War Department which was passed in 1865 stated that transportation would be provided for refugees and freedmen who were unable to provide for their own transportation.⁴⁹ Those individuals who were employed would be expected to pay their own transportation costs.⁵⁰ Two young men who had been separated from their families during the war ended up in Freedman's Village. The young men, Louis Primis aged fourteen and Aaron Lawney aged sixteen were supplied with rail transportation home to southern Virginia.⁵¹

For those who were staying in the village housing was needed. The tenements were wooden and two to four families lived in each. Rent was paid by the villagers. Originally the camp included fifty or sixty buildings including a commissary, two hospitals, a dispensary, and a missionary hall. These early buildings were later removed.⁵² In May of 1864, Sibley tents were requisitioned to provide shelter for the new arrivals until the buildings were finished.⁵³

Much of the work in and around the village was performed by the laborers from Freedman's Village. It was simple to arrange for part of the annual rent paid for their places to be taken out of their earnings.⁵⁴ In addition to the villagers, other civilians, officers and enlisted men worked at Freedman's Village.

In June 1866, a request was made to increase the number of enlisted men in the village. It was felt that more men were needed to secure the crops planted and cultivated by the freedmen on the Arlington Farm. The request was denied along with a suggestion that severe punishment be used as a deterrent.⁵⁵

In July 1866, the officers at the village included 1st Lieutenant Levi B. Downs, who was with the 107th Regiment, United States Colored Troops and 2nd Lieutenant P. O. Bergevin who was the Assistant Superintendent. The positions held by civilians employed there at the time included clerk, overseer, carpenter and Matron of the Home. William Fithian was paid eighty dollars per month as a clerk. Charles Wilkins was paid seventy-five dollars to perform the dual responsibility of overseer and carpenter. Fifteen dollars per month was paid to the Matron of the Home.⁵⁶ In June of 1866 the enlisted men who were stationed at the village included two sergeants, four corporals, and twenty-nine privates detailed from various companies of the 107th Regiment, United States Colored Troops.⁵⁷

Because the village was under military rule some people were not content. Some villagers felt that life in the village was little better than slavery because they were entirely under military discipline. When asked about the question of how much freedom the villager had, one woman who lived in Freedman's Village and appeared to be more comfortable than the others replied, ". . . don't feel as if I was free, (ap)pears like there's nobody free here . . ."⁵⁸

In 1866 there was an effort to reduce the expenses of the village by releasing

some of the employees and using some of those villagers who were dependent on the government for support to fill the vacancies. The Assistant Commissioner felt that the laborer at the "Home", the whitewashers, street cleaners, stable keeper carpenter, superintendent and one overseer could be discharged and be replaced with villagers. That same year the government announced that in order to remain living in the tenements in Freedman's Village, the residents had to either work for the government or have some source of support. This order was poorly carried out according to a government study. Some of the people who were forced to leave held down jobs with the government. Some people were forced out of the village with little or no notice of what the qualifications were to remain. Some evictions were carried out improperly.⁵⁹

A request was made in November 1866 to allow Thomas Owens, who was employed at the cemetery, to remain in the village. His wife was also employed by the government as a cook at the mess. It was decided that the freed people who were employed in or near the village would be allowed to remain in the tenements.⁶⁰

In another attempt to reduce the expenses of the village the government limited rations. It was decided that rations would only be issued to those who were ill or who were too young to work. The government also put pressure on the residents to accept work contracts to farm and do other kinds of work in outlying areas. Some of the freedmen felt that the work contract was like signing yourself back into slavery again and refused to accept the work contracts.⁶¹

The villagers had other problems and complaints. After an investigation it was determined that the "Home" was not heated properly. Almost all of the stoves were broken and only drums were used to supply the heat. In addition there was not enough attention paid to cleanliness there.⁶² Both villagers and people in neighboring areas had problems and complaints.

Mr. J. W. Reynolds who lived near Fort Jackson called for an investigation of an incident at his home. He was threatened without provocation by four men who had fixed bayonets. He thought one of the men lived in Freedman's Village.⁶³ In another case, Dr. Henry Armstrong reported cows and other property stolen from his home near Ball's Cross Roads. He thought that some of the stolen items might be found in the village.⁶⁴ A neighbor of Dr. Armstrong, John Kimball, felt that anyone who dared steal from the doctor, who was an old army officer, must care little for his life.⁶⁵ Difficulties with both individuals and groups over the years influenced the decision which forced the closing of Freedman's Village.

Freedman's Village continued to exist until around the turn of the century. George Washington Custis Lee's attempt to regain the Arlington Estate or to reach a settlement through the courts focused attention on the residents of the village. He considered the residents squatters on his family estate. When a settlement was reached between him and the government in the 1880's and the government paid Lee for the land, they turned it into a Military Reservation. According to army regulations, civilians were not allowed to live on government lands so they were asked to leave. Some Alexandria residents complained that there were high crime rates in the village and that the villagers were a financial burden to the community. In addition, Commerford, the Superintendent of Arlington National Cemetery,

called for the removal of the residents of Freedman's Village.

Commerford felt there were grounds for their removal because in the past years trees had been taken in the night from the cemetery. He presumed the people of Freedman's Village were the culprits because they were in need of firewood.⁶⁶ Some felt that the complaints of the trees being taken from the Cemetery was a trumped-up charge when in fact the government had other plans for the land. Some of the plans which were being considered by the government at that time included creating a large park, building a highway to Mount Vernon, building a Memorial Bridge, and expanding Fort Myer or expanding the cemetery.

The officers at Fort Myer did not favor the idea of closing the village down as many of the villagers worked or had worked previously on the fort.⁶⁷ Commerford's request was approved by Quartermaster General Holabird and by the Secretary of War. When the orders were given to Major Carpenter, the commanding officer at Fort Myer, he called for a full investigation including a survey, census and valuation of property.

On December 7, 1887, the villagers were notified that they would be forced to move within ninety days. The villagers reacted by holding a mass meeting to discuss what response they should take to the order. The villagers selected a committee of five to visit the Secretary of War to discuss the decision. Many of the villagers moved to other areas at that time while others stayed on.⁶⁸ After the investigation was completed and after further study, in April of 1887, a recommendation was made to grant \$15,000 to pay the villagers for their homes, improvements and moving expenses. Another problem developed around the issue of schools.

Because the estate was part of a military reservation, the county of Alexandria refused to admit the children to its public schools. The villagers requested that the Quartermaster's Office make repairs, pay a teacher and furnish fuel and furniture for a school. On October 18, 1890, the Quartermaster General recommended that those residents of Freedman's Village who still remained be forced to move.⁶⁹

In 1900 on March 23rd, the House of Representatives and the Senate appropriated \$75,000 to settle the debt owed the villagers from the money the freedmen had paid as a "contraband" tax. Upon getting the money the villagers gradually left the village and resettled in other communities in Arlington.⁷⁰

Set up by the government in 1863, Freedman's Village provided newly freed slaves with the basic necessities of life. It became much more than a temporary stopover for freed slaves on their way to a new life. It existed as a community for over thirty years until the government forced its closing. After the village closed the former residents moved to small communities such as Hall's Hill, Nauck and Queen City.⁷¹ Most of the land which made up the village and the outlying areas is now contained in the lands comprising Arlington National Cemetery. What remains of Freedman's Village are over 3200 unmarked contraband gravestones and the memories of the sons and daughters of those who lived in Freedman's Village.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Sara Collins whose leads brought sketches and books which made my research easier. Special thanks to Seymour B. Stiss whose encouragement, support and editorial help from initial research to final rewrite was invaluable. And finally for my husband who survived our den's becoming Freedman's Village Memorial Room - I thank you.

FOOTNOTES

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- ²³ Letter from G. A. Wheeler to C. H. Howard, February 28, 1867. Records of the Assistant Commissioner of the District of Columbia. B.R.F.A.L. R.G. 105.
- ²⁴ Letter from P. Glennan to Colonel Rayburn, March 7, 1868. B.R.F.A.L. R.G. 105.
- ²⁵ Thomas Holt, Cassandra Smith-Parker, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "A Special Mission: the Story of Freedman's Hospital, 1862-1962." Academic Affairs Division, Howard University, Washington D.C.
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- ³⁰ Letter from G. A. Wheeler to A. A. Laurence, February 14, 1867. B.R.F.A.L. R.G. 105.
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- ⁴⁴ Letter from Edward Smith to General Howard, November 22, 1866. B.R.F.A.L. R.G. 105.
- ⁴⁵ Letter from George B. Carse to George McKay, April 30, 1865.
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- ⁴⁸ Letter from A. Laurence to General C. H. Howard, November 9, 1866.
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