

**Editor's Note:** Each year, the Arlington Historical Society, in partnership with the Cherrydale-Columbia Masonic Lodge 42, sponsors an essay contest for Arlington students in grades 8–12. This year essay contestants were asked the following question: *The Arlington House estate has played a prominent role in both Arlington and national history. From its early connections to the Custis family and George Washington, its inhabitation by Robert E. Lee, its enslaved population who became some of the first families of Arlington, its role as the site of a Freedmen's Village, and its role as the site of a National Cemetery, the estate has been interwoven with the events of the past three centuries. One hundred years from now, what do you think will be the most enduring significance of the Arlington House estate? Explain in detail and include why you believe it will be significant.*

# Freedman's Village

## A Continued Legacy of Freedom and Community in Arlington

*by Malia Humphries*

Since its inception in 1803, the Arlington House estate stands as a stark reminder of America's complicated history (Fig. 1). Originally dedicated as a memorial to George Washington, Arlington House was built between 1802 and 1818 on what was once a 16-acre plantation.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, it has served as a home to George Washington Custis, the adopted grandson of George Washington; Robert E. Lee, the Confederate General during the American Civil

*Fig. 1: Union soldiers stand outside Arlington House, ca. 1864.*



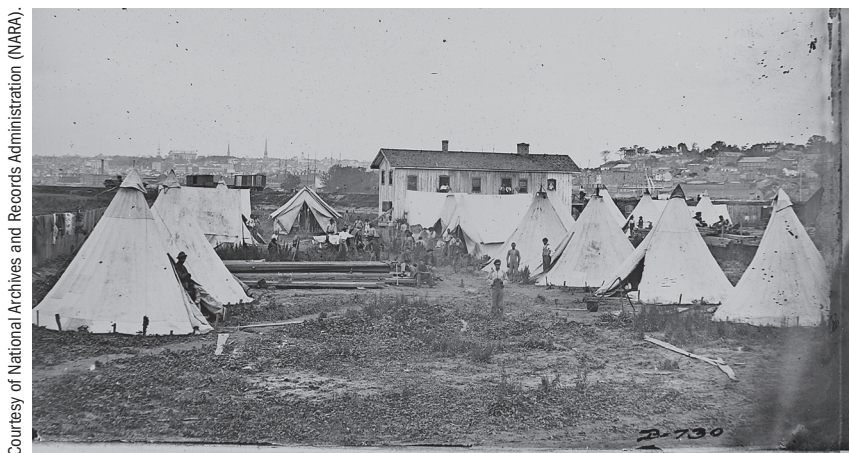
Courtesy of Library of Congress.

War; Selina Gray, one of the hundreds of enslaved that lived and toiled on the estate; and Maria Syphax, one of many emancipated individuals who settled in Freedman's Village.<sup>2</sup> It is currently on the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery, with over 400,000 veterans and many prominent figures buried on the estate.<sup>3</sup>

Arlington House estate should not be remembered only as the nation's first memorial to the first US president. Nor should it be solely a reminder of Robert E. Lee's complex, harmful legacy, or as an institution that oppressed and marginalized hundreds of Black Americans. While it has played many integral parts throughout history, its role as Freedman's Village stands out as both a poignant embodiment of Black history in Arlington and a powerful testament to what a community can achieve. Freedman's Village was arguably the most consequential in improving individual and societal life in Arlington. The Village provided a sense of progress, empowerment, and freedom for the formerly enslaved and left a lasting impact on Arlington's community.

As the Civil War raged on, contrabands escaping from bondage in Virginia and Maryland fled to DC for protection and refuge. By the end of the war, over 40,000 fugitive slaves had escaped to DC.<sup>4</sup> They often resettled in contraband camps, which provided them with food and shelter. However, the sheer number of refugees agitated the city's

*Fig. 2: Inhabitants stand outside a Contraband Camp in Richmond, Virginia, ca. 1865.*

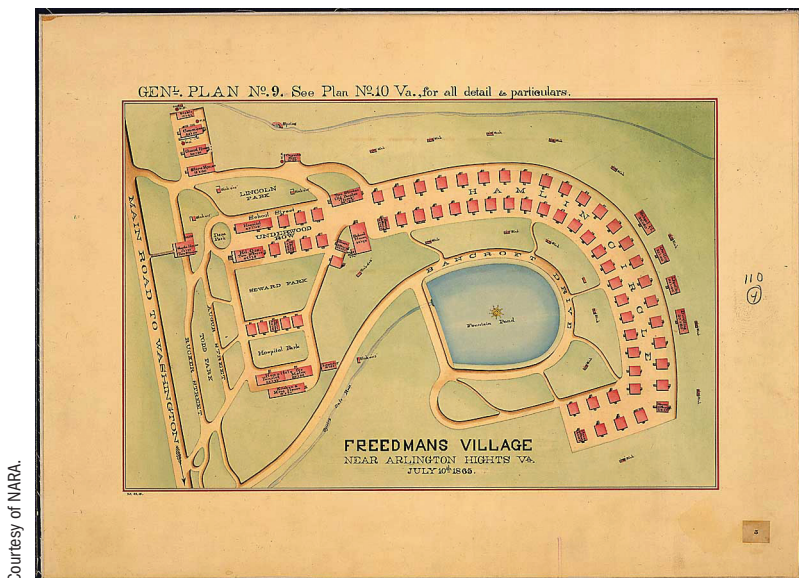


Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

already limited resources, and the camps quickly became overcrowded and diseased (Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> In response to these concerns, the War Department looked to Arlington to expand and created Freedman's Village. Before the village, most contraband camps were an afterthought and functioned more as "holding grounds" or "adjuncts to the plantation."<sup>6</sup> Former slaves were subjected to menial, strenuous labor, and death rates were staggeringly high. Despite hopes that the camps would foster self-sufficiency, they provided the freedmen with limited opportunities for growth and instead "treat[ed] the former slaves as children."<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Freedman's Village was a meticulously planned community, envisioned to teach its inhabitants practical skills and provide them with long-term resources for success, support, and self-sufficiency. The War Department established institutions that taught the freedmen valuable skills such as carpentry and blacksmithing.<sup>9</sup> While many former slaves struggled to find work in the South, inhabitants of the village had plentiful, stable employment opportunities, and they even received comparable pay to their White counterparts.<sup>10</sup> By offering the contrabands a living wage, it established a strong support network for generations of Black families.

*Fig. 3: Planned layout of Freedman's Village, 1865.*



Courtesy of NARA.

The layout of the village itself was intended to foster harmony and order, encompassing around fifty homes, a hospital, a chapel, and a school (Fig. 3). *Harper's Weekly* described it as a "neat and extensive collection of frame houses" that "presents a neat and prosperous appearance at all times."<sup>11</sup> As such, Freedman's Village rapidly transformed from a camp into an enduring, tightly-knit Black community, primarily due to the newly established churches, schools, hospitals, and strong support networks (Fig. 4). Significantly, in 1866, Freedman's Village gained its first two churches: Old Bell Baptist Church and Little Zion Methodist Church.<sup>12</sup> Church leaders such as Robert S. Laws, the Reverend of Old Bell Baptist Church, played prominent roles in the community. For instance, Laws was not only a reverend but also an employment agent and supervisor of the village school.<sup>13</sup> The churches not only served the spiritual needs of the community but also provided crucial support and guidance. As time went on, Freedman's Village and its religious centers experienced rapid growth. Within a decade of its founding, Old Bell Baptist Church grew so large that it had to split into two distinct churches, Mt. Zion Baptist Church and Mt. Olive Baptist Church. This expansion underscored the community's devotion to not only their faith but also engagement in village activities and commitment to the village's long-term success.

*Fig. 4: Residents stand outside Freedman's School reading books, ca. 1862-65.*



Courtesy of Library of Congress.

In addition to churches, Freedman's Village residents also formed aid societies, such as the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows.<sup>14</sup> These societies played a crucial role in shaping the social and political fabric of the young Black community. The Odd Fellows organized group functions and provided various charitable services, ensuring that Freedman's Village remained lively and vibrant. The organizations not only provided opportunities for social engagement but also facilitated empowerment and leadership among the youth. The development of these community networks exemplified the enduring support and commitment that Freedman's Village provided for its inhabitants.

The story of William A. Rowe is one of many that highlights the transformative impact the village had on its residents and the residents had on the village. Rowe was one of the first inhabitants of Freedman's Village. From the start, he was an active participant in the community, and upon moving to the village, he started a new career as a blacksmith. Along with his wife, Ellen, he also helped organize the Lomax A.M.E. Zion Church. Rowe became an influential community leader: he was the first Black policeman in Arlington County, the first Black person elected to the Board of Supervisors, and a supervisor of the Jefferson District and Arlington District Board Chairman.<sup>15</sup> Rowe was integral to the development of the Green Valley neighborhood and instilled the importance of activism in his family and community. For generations, his descendants continued his legacy of advocacy and public service. His great-grandson, Milton Rowe Sr., served in the Coast Guard during World War II and on the Trustee Board at Lomax A.M.E. Zion, the very church William Rowe was once a constituent.<sup>16</sup> He was also a member of the Arlington Housing Committee, the NAACP, the American Legion, and the Green Valley Civic Association.<sup>17</sup>

Freedman's Village not only drastically improved the lives of former slaves within its community but also had a transformative effect on Arlington County as a whole. Because of the village's many resources and opportunities, it served as a catalyst for attracting other newly-freed African Americans. Prior to the village's development, African Americans accounted for only one-third of the total population.<sup>18</sup> After its creation, the county's Black population grew to represent over half of the total population—a testament to the settlement's profound influence.<sup>19</sup>



Inhabitants were an active and engaged part of the local Arlington government. Many residents held council seats in Alexandria or county offices, including treasurer and sheriff.<sup>20</sup> John B. Syphax, one of the most prominent politicians from Freedman's Village, served as a county supervisor and later became the first Black delegate to the general assembly.<sup>21</sup> He, along with many other inhabitants of the village, was instrumental in shaping community development and effectively representing Arlington's Black population. Furthermore, Freedman's Village brought about significant economic growth to Arlington. Inhabitants were heavily invested in the village's success and spent as much as three times their initial investments on additions and land beautification to their homes (Fig. 5).<sup>22</sup> In addition, as previously mentioned, residents dedicated themselves to support networks within the village and were active in the community. With such measures, Freedman's Village greatly fostered active community participation, diverse political representation, and economic growth in Arlington.

The success of Freedman's Village also served a symbolic purpose: as the former home of Robert E. Lee, up to that point, it had been a reminder of the brutality of slavery. However, when Lee and his family fled south to Richmond, the government seized the property, presenting a fitting opportunity to repurpose a house constructed through the toil of enslaved laborers as a sanctuary for those same people. The village garnered national and local attention, representing a grand experiment in fostering a self-sufficient Black community. The enthusiastic participation of many prominent military and civil authorities in village activities and festivities emphasizes its larger significance.

*Fig. 5: A panoramic rendering of Freedman's Village, 1864.*



Courtesy of Library of Congress.

Their support not only acknowledged the village's great success but also underscored that freedom and equality for African Americans were not only possible but necessary. Freedman's Village served as a "physical representation of federal goals of moral uplift for the formerly enslaved population."<sup>23</sup> It empowered not only the Black population within the village but those nationwide to seek freedom.

Despite these many gains, the inhabitants of Freedman's Village encountered significant barriers and faced pushback from the government. From the start of the village, there existed an ongoing conflict between residents and camp authorities. The villagers were subjected to the burden of paying \$5 in monthly rent, which amounted to half of their hard-earned salaries.<sup>24</sup> Residents were forced to eat rations, and the death rate, while significantly lower than other camps, was still two per day.<sup>25</sup> These rents, along with other punitive actions imposed by the authorities, were seen as contradictory to the fundamental notion of freedom that Freedman's Village aimed to cultivate. Although these measures inflicted damage upon the community, the village still managed to thrive and expand. Far more substantial conflicts for Freedman's Village would arise later on.

As national public support for Reconstruction-era programs declined, Freedman's Village became vulnerable to closure, and in 1868, the federal government first attempted to close the village. White residents in Arlington accused the villagers of being "squatters" and painted them as "paupers [...] who infest the Arlington estate in the county."<sup>26</sup> In reality, those opposing the village sought to limit Black political power and extend their own reach. For some time, the inhabitants of the village controlled the Alexandria County government and constituted the largest Black voting bloc in the county.<sup>27</sup> Freedman's Village also faced mounting pressure from land developers in Arlington as the county's wealth and land valuations dramatically increased.<sup>28</sup> The culmination of these challenges came in 1887, when eviction notices were finally sent out, ordering the residents to vacate within 90 days without any remuneration for their land. Community leaders rallied against the government's actions and ultimately secured compensation for the residents. This underscored the strength of the community: even in times of trial, inhabitants banded together and advocated for the common good. However, by 1900, all

of Freedman's Village's residents had been relocated and the camp shut down permanently.

Despite its closure, the village's legacy lived on and its former inhabitants stayed closely connected. They remained an integral part of the Arlington community, and many settled in other Black neighborhoods, such as Hall's Hill or Green Valley.<sup>29</sup> The village left a lasting impact on Arlington's Black diaspora, shaping the experiences and aspirations of generations to come. For many residents, Freedman's Village was their first experience of freedom and agency over their own lives. They could, at least partially, "determine their own destinies."<sup>30</sup> The village serves as a reminder of the strong Black community in Arlington and continues to inspire generations of Americans on the importance of freedom.

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## Endnotes

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10. Joseph P. Reidy.
11. Roberta Schildt, 12.



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23. Ibid., 55.
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28. Ibid., 49.
29. Ibid., 131.
30. National Park Service, "Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial," June 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/arho/index.htm>.