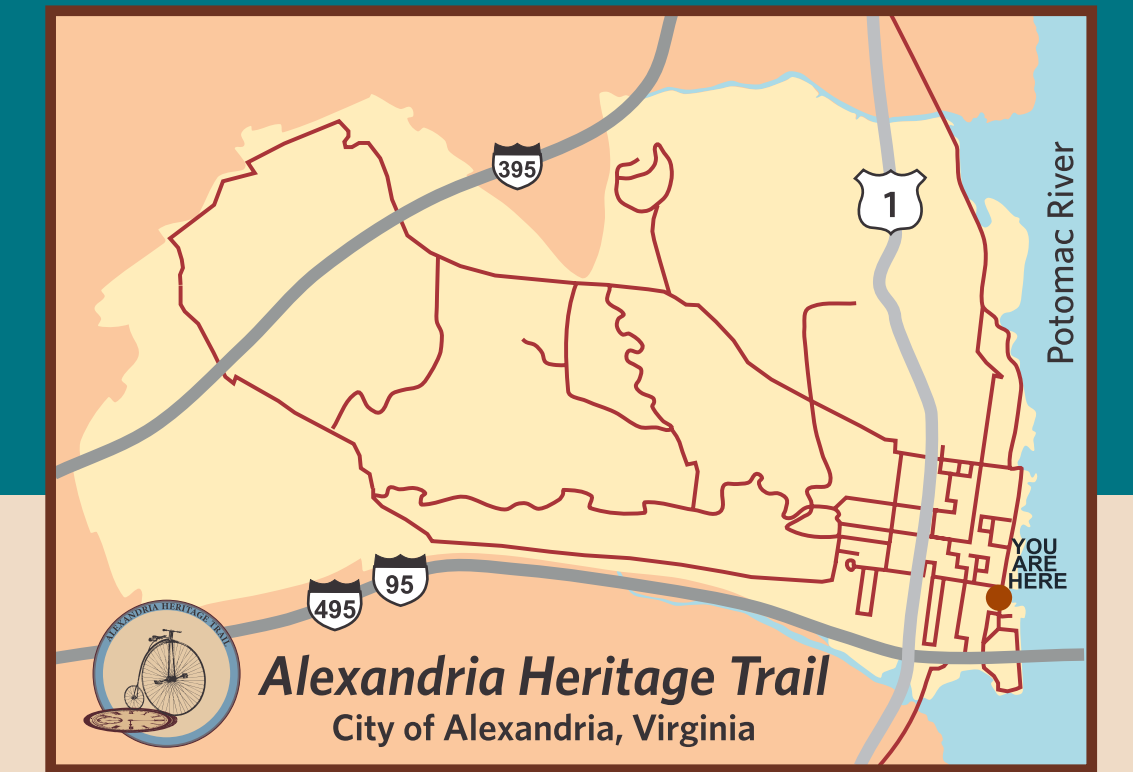


# African American Neighborhoods in the Civil War



Alexandria in 1865.  
Prepared for the Office of Historic Alexandria by Howard+Revis Design.

During the Civil War, thousands of formerly enslaved individuals came to Union-controlled Alexandria to seek refuge and freedom. As a result, several new African American neighborhoods developed during and after the Civil War, including four in this vicinity. Three of them, Vinegar Hill, Union Town, and one only identified as “near Wilkes Street Tunnel,” appeared in the records kept by Reverend Albert Gladwin, a member of the Baptist Free Missionary Society of New York and Superintendent of Contrabands in Alexandria from 1862 through 1865. His “Book of Records” documented information on those African American individuals buried in the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery on South Washington Street. Gladwin, in addition to recording names, dates of death, and ages, also noted the residence or place of death, giving historians a sense of the African American landscape at the time. The fourth community, Zion Bottom, coalesced slightly later with the establishment of a nearby church and is the closest neighborhood to this sign.

Community names in greater Alexandria reflected the areas that enslaved people fled from during the Civil War (Petersburg), characteristics of their new settlements (Newtown), or recognition of those who supported the cause of freedom (Grantville). These names, however, and the boundaries of the neighborhoods were also in flux and reflected the flows of African American refugees in and out of the city along with Alexandria’s racial politics.



Andrew J. Russell’s “Track near the Potomac River, in Alexandria,” ca. 1863-5. Taken near the foot of Franklin Street and looking northwest back toward the Wilkes Street Tunnel, this Civil War-era photograph of a military construction yard also captures part of what would become the Zion Bottom neighborhood. The entrance to the Wilkes Street Tunnel is behind the house to the right of the train engine.  
Library of Congress

Union Town (or Uniontown) and Vinegar Hill appear the earliest in Gladwin’s “Book of Records” in 1864. The area near the Wilkes Street Tunnel seems to have also been an African American enclave by 1865. Uniontown is only mentioned three times, and very little is known about the residents, but it may have been associated with the Uniontown School located at the corner of Wolfe and South Union Streets (see map, Alexandria 1865) and established in May 1863. The Uniontown School, under the instruction of a Black teacher named Nancy Williams, reportedly had 80 students in 1865. It is possible that records of free people passing away near the Wilkes Street Tunnel may also have been a general reference to the Black enclave near the Uniontown School or the Uniontown neighborhood. Vinegar Hill, also known as “The Hill” and “Out on the Hill,” appears to have been located further south along the waterfront. Jennie Gray, who passed away in 1866, had come from Vinegar Hill (Gladwin even noted that she lived near Washington, Jefferson, and Columbus Streets). Other records associated Vinegar Hill with Washington and Franklin Streets.

Though the name is not listed in the “Book of Records,” the neighborhood known as Zion Bottom must have had some overlap with the three nearby communities mentioned above. By the early 1870s, residents renamed the low-lying area near the Wilkes Street Tunnel “Zion Bottom,” most likely after Zion Baptist Church, which was initially located here. The neighborhood appeared periodically in the *Alexandria Gazette* from 1872 through the early twentieth century. For instance, tragedy hit in September 1872, when one of the first cases of a smallpox epidemic occurred in the neighborhood. The medical community initially did not take the situation seriously, and several African American residents became sick and died. Zion Bottom faced another crisis in the summer of 1873 when the Washington City, Virginia Midland and Great Southern Railroad Company demanded that residents accused of squatting on the company’s land had to move so that it could build a distributing depot. Many took their homes—literally piece-by-piece—and rebuilt them on land north of Battery Rodgers. Others settled elsewhere in the city.

