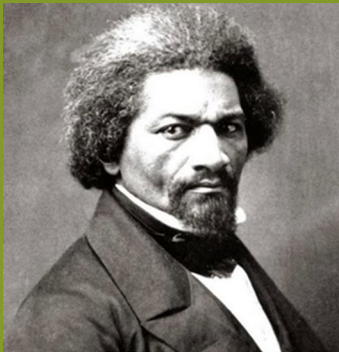


## BLACK HISTORY

Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery located at 1421 Wilkes Street in Alexandria, VA. It dates back to the early 1800s. Black residents of Alexandria named this burial ground after the great activist Frederick Douglass soon after he died in 1895. Well over 2000 African Americans are buried here with several hundred born into slavery and then freed. Two hundred are children, some who were stillborn and some who only lived very short lives. Records indicate that of 2000 buried here, approximately six to seven hundred headstones are present.



# FREDERICK DOUGLASS MEMORIAL CEMETERY NEWSLETTER

## Vol.1 Issue No. 5 JUNETEENTH SPECIAL

Welcome to the Friends of Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery newsletter. This quarterly newsletter will inform all stakeholders, descendants, and the public about the scope of work and ongoing progress at the cemetery.

Ed. Michael Johnson & Kerry James Reed

## Ongoing Remembrance: Exploring the lives of Descendants and Ancestors

This issue of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery Newsletter will feature the methods that Descendants and City of Alexandria Staff are utilizing to revitalize Douglass Cemetery in the historical record, and in living memory. It will also feature updates on the preservation status of Douglass Cemetery.



## Meet the Staff



**Photo Unavailable**

Kerry James Reed is an Oral History Associate with the Alexandria Oral History Center. He recently received his MA in History from George Mason University. He plans to apply for PhD programs in the fall. Currently, Kerry is working with Descendants to create Oral Histories related to the memories that Descendants may have of Douglass. Additionally, these Oral Histories also focus on the lives of Descendants, their personal triumphs and tragedies, and the historic specificity of their lives.

J Orisha is pursuing her doctoral degree in sociology at George Mason University, where she is in her third year of studies. Her research focuses on African American history, with a particular emphasis on utilizing oral history and documentaries.

## **Overcoming Historic Erasure Through Oral History**

By Kerry James Reed

Walking through Douglass is a harrowing experience for a historian. As you walk along the rows of dilapidated headstones and step on the dandelions that signify the scores of unmarked graves, you can't help but feel a sense of professional failure. The historical importance of Douglass, as one of (if not the) oldest Black cemetery in the City of Alexandria, has been overlooked until recently. Yet the history of the Cemetery and those interred there cannot be reclaimed through traditional institutional methods. Archival records regarding those buried at Douglass are scant, especially in a City that has too often been reluctant to acknowledge its role in the slave trade.

Oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. In the case of Douglass, oral history provides an opportunity for descendants to reclaim the historical narrative around their own lives, and those of their ancestors. The oral history component of the Douglass Initiative widens the scope of the work to include lived experiences. It provides descendants with a space to engage in their own spiritual and historical reclamation of Douglass and black history in the City of Alexandria more broadly. But perhaps most importantly, these oral histories are a way for descendants to connect with previous generations, to bind together temporally distant communities, and provide descendants a sense of stability and participation in their own historical past.

Though the narrators of the oral histories collected thus far have provided a wealth of different experiences and memories, some common threads are shared between them. To begin with, questions about family history typically see descendants recall the generations before them being somewhat reticent to discuss family history. In addition, many remember the area around Douglass being overgrown and ill-taken care of, but not to the extent it is today. Many also remember the boundaries of Douglass extending further North, on land that is now occupied by condominiums. Finally, when asked what they would like to see happen with the Douglass Cemetery project in the future, a majority of descendants hope for a sense of community to return. This desire for renewed communal importance around Douglass is unsurprising,

considering that many descendants have had careers in public service, ranging from youth outreach, firefighting, teaching dance, and state politics.

Recently, I was fortunate enough to be present while a descendant was sharing their story and memories. We have a closing question we like to ask narrators, “if you could hold on to one memory forever, what would it be?” When I asked this descendant what he would like to hold on to, he said he would always like to remember sitting there speaking with me. I initially laughed, this is not a usual response and I thought he was joking. But he was serious. He forgave my embarrassment from laughing and told me that sitting down with me was one of the few times he has had to sit down and reflect on the community he came from, the myriad of new relationships that he has built from the connections unearthed by the Douglass project, and the changes he has witnessed in his community over his lifetime. For him, our meeting functioned as a nexus from which an impression of a community, disparate in time and place but unified through resilience, could still be envisaged and acted upon.

When the archives fail, when the glaring silences prohibit other avenues of research, Oral History provides an opportunity to find historicity in descendants and enduring communities. Though their bodies have decayed, the ancestors buried at Douglass share in the agency of their descendants, who speak to me with the hope that their narrations will serve to foster a spiritual and historical reclamation of the narrative encompassing the historical importance of Douglass Cemetery, but more broadly, the historical importance of Black history in the City of Alexandria.

Oral Histories Completed as of May 20, 2024:

Fran Burton	James Lightfoot	Jeffery Johnson
Verdella Jennings	Stephanie Johnson	As of May 20, 2024, we have another 20 descendants who
Charlene Napper	Steve Johnson	are planning to provide the Douglass project with their
Donald Taylor	Steve Nelson	narrations
Eric Napper	Darnela Nelson	
Charles Nelson	Richard Williams	
Leroy Council	Myron Contee	
Harold Hughes	Beatrice McGuire	

## **The Work of J Orisha**

By J Orisha

The Office of Historic Alexandria, the Friends of Douglass Cemetery, and the Social Responsibility Group have embarked on an inspiring project to document the lives of those laid to rest at Douglass Cemetery. I delve into death certificates and historical records to craft succinct biographies, enriching them with vital information and family details as they are discovered.

As an intern, I carefully examine death certificates from the late 19th and 20th centuries. Some of the handwriting is difficult to decipher, so I've had to become familiar with various scripts from different periods. It's important to note the causes of death in the biographies I'm crafting, so I meticulously look up each one, striving to understand and honor the lives of those laid to rest.

Occasionally, I come across particular notes on a person's death certificate, and when I do, I make it my mission to find news articles or additional historical information that could shed more light on their story. I'm also dedicated to linking family members buried at the cemetery, piecing together connections that may have been lost to time.

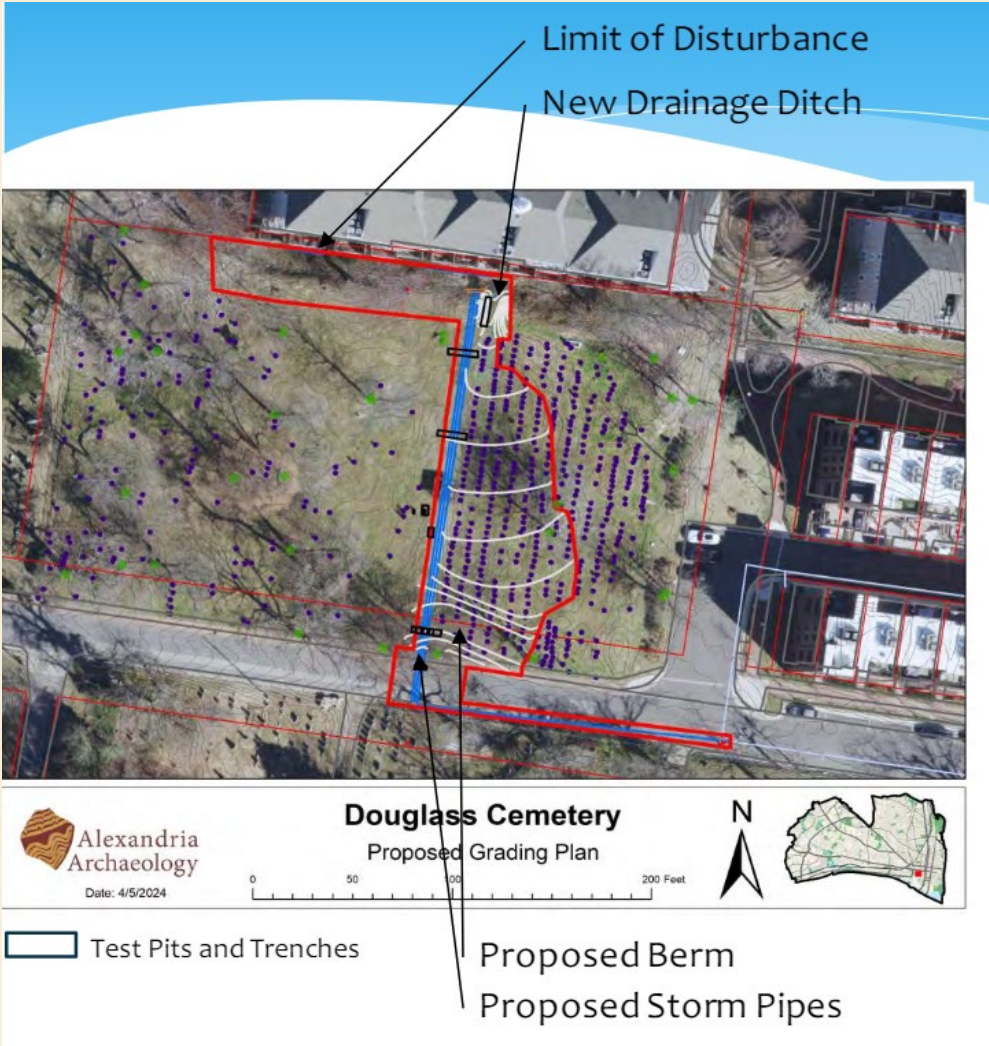
It's a challenging but rewarding process that demands a great deal of patience and investigative inquiry. Each discovery brings me closer to breathing life into the stories of those who came before us, and I'm honored to play a part in preserving their legacies. These biographies will flourish as we gather oral histories and additional historical information.

## **Evolving Scope of Work**

The scope of work for the Douglass Cemetery Initiative continues to be under development with the Descendant Advisory Group and the Office of Historic Alexandria. Listed below are some stated goals of the project, as well as their status:

- Collection and Preservation of Oral History
  - As of this issue, 17 descendants or community members closely affiliated with Douglass Cemetery have had their memories and experiences recorded. This number will likely be over 30 by the end of June 2024.
- Conservation of critically endangered gravestones at Douglass Cemetery
  - Gravestone conservation project to begin in the fall of 2024 by Wellman Conservation, LLC. The planning phase for a volunteer gravestone resetting project has begun
- The Office of Historic Alexandria will create a publicly accessible collection of material to be exhibited at the Black History Museum in Alexandria
- An internship program will be created that gives members of the community and students at local universities and high schools opportunities to work on a public history initiative and assist in the preservation of Douglass Cemetery
  - Several interns have been employed by the Office of Historic Alexandria and City of Alexandria Archaeology. Currently, they are researching persons buried at Douglass and creating biographies for them
- Permanently mark and preserve Douglass Cemetery as a key site of African American history in Alexandria.
- The Office of Historic Alexandria will produce several public history products, these include: filing a nomination with the National Register of Historic Places, City staff and DAG members presenting at conferences, creating a walking tour about the history of Douglass, creating a brochure about the history of Douglass, and managing volunteers to support the preservation of Douglass

# Status of the Restoration



The Plan for Douglass as of May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024:

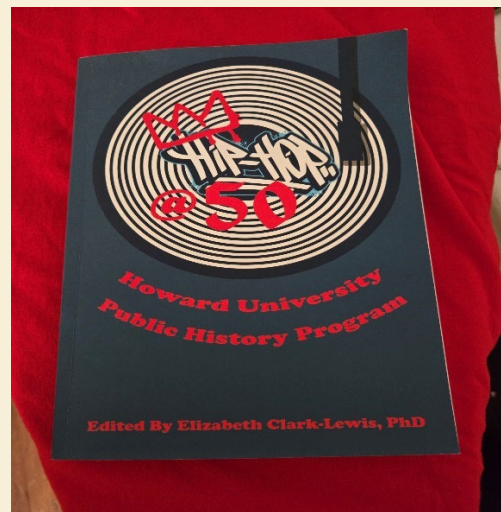
- Replace existing Stormwater pipe in Douglass Cemetery
- Raise grade in the Cemetery & create a berm to prevent water overflow from street into Douglass Cemetery
- Install new drainage ditch between the low spot and the northern drainage swale to promote water flow
- Regrade northern drainage swale to ensure water flows away from Douglass

All construction work will be monitored by City of Alexandria Archaeologists to ensure minimal disturbance to persons buried at Douglass

**Projected Timeline:**

	2023 Dec	2024 Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	2025 Late Spring
Archaeology	Burial Permit	Archaeological Testing									
Stormwater Design	Grading Plans				Permit Approval						
Bid Package							Bid Documents				
Bidding and Construction								Bidding and Procurement		Construction	
Cemetery Preservation											

## Hip Hop @ 50: A Howard University Public History Program



The Public History students at Howard University and Five Scholars from Alexandria Virginia along with Dr, Abena Lewis-Mhooon (Coppin State), and Michael Johnson (Coppin State) help to organize a two-day Hip-Hop conference that was held in October on the campus of Howard University. This observance uplifted and honored every aspect of Hip- Hop, culture during its 50 Anniversary. It was an epic celebration with activities all around Howard University campus.

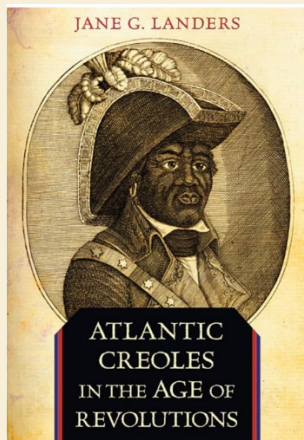


## Recommended Reading for Juneteenth:



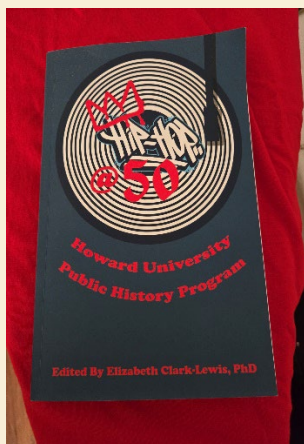
*Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* by Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr.

Black against Empire is the first comprehensive overview and analysis of the history and politics of the Black Panther Party. The authors analyze key political questions, such as why so many young Black people across the country risked their lives for the revolution, why the Party grew most rapidly during the height of repression, and why allies abandoned the Party at its peak of influence. Bold, engrossing, and richly detailed, this book cuts through the mythology and obfuscation, revealing the political dynamics that drove the explosive growth of this revolutionary movement and its disastrous unraveling.



*Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* by Jane G. Landers

Sailing a tide of a tumultuous era of Atlantic revolutions, a remarkable group of African-born and African-descended individuals transformed themselves from slaves into active agents of their lives and times. Big Prince Whitten, the black Seminole Abraham, and General Georges Biassou were “Atlantic creoles,” Africans who found their way to freedom by actively engaging in the most important political events of their day. These men and women of diverse ethnic backgrounds who were fluent in multiple languages and familiar with African, American, and European cultures, migrated across the new world’s imperial boundaries in search of freedom and a safe haven.



*Hip Hop @50: Howard University Conference and Celebration* ed Elizabeth Clark-Lewis PhD

Scholars, artists, and media icons of Hip Hop convened at Howard University in October of 2023 for a two-day conference to celebrate Hip Hop’s 50 years. The event was packed with sessions that examined the social and historical roots of Hip Hop. People who helped make Hip Hop a global force gave personal accounts of how the genre fueled their empire-building moves. Featuring many of the symposium’s essays, this book looks at Hip Hop’s impact from 1973, when it was born, to the present.

## REFERENCES

### **Alexandria African American Hall of Fame:**

<https://www.alexandriafricanamericanhalloffame.org/>

### **Alexandria Virginia Historic Sites:**

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic-sites/douglass-memorial-cemetery>

### **Douglass Memorial Cemetery**

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic-sites/douglass-memorial-cemetery>

### **The Fight to Preserve Douglass Cemetery**

<https://alextimes.com/2021/11/the-fight-to-preserve-douglass-cemetery/>

### **Social Responsibility Group:**

<https://www.socialresponsibilitygroup.org>

### **The Black Cemetery Network**

<https://blackcemeterynetwork.org/>

### **Concerns Growing Over Flooding at Historically Black Cemetery in Alexandria:**

<https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/local/virginia/flooding-at-historically-black-cemetery-in-old-town-remains-an-ongoing-issue-for-families-and-neighbors/65-02163cf6-5098-4fe4-9b01-f998bf91384b>

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