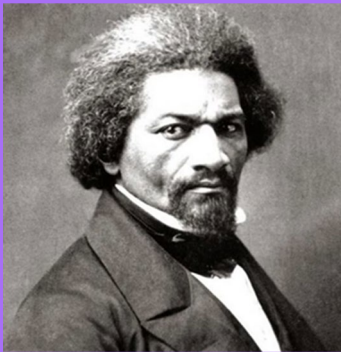


## BLACK HISTORY

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.2 Issue No. 1  
The First 2025 Issue

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, and Evelyn Kennedy

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

This issue of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery Newsletter will feature a biography of Lavinia Johnson, an ancestor interred at Douglass. Included also is an article outlining the importance of community focused Oral History Initiatives. It will also feature updates on the preservation status of Douglass Cemetery with a focus on Gravestone restoration.



## Biography of Lavinia Johnson

By Sadiya Quetti-Goodson

*The Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery Initiative seeks to preserve and showcase the history of Douglass Cemetery. One aspect of the Initiative is to publish short biographies about individuals buried at the cemetery. The biography below is one of many that are being written to tell the history of Douglass Cemetery.*

Lavinia Johnson, maiden name Cousin, was born on December 17, 1878 in Clarksville, Virginia. She was married to James L. Johnson, resided at 510 N. Patrick Street in Alexandria, and made a great impact on her community as a midwife.

In an interview with her granddaughter, Virginia Turner, Virginia shared much about her “grama’s” character and memory. When asked to describe her grandmother, Virginia Turner chuckled, “She was a nice, little fat lady,” explaining that she was always happy and very funny, saying things that made you laugh, joking around often, and being there to cheer you up. Lavinia grew tomatoes, lettuce, kale, and squash in their garden. She had chickens running around in their barn, and would often send the kids to collect the eggs. Because Lavinia was so busy as a midwife, constantly being called to deliver babies, she would usually cook pot dishes with potatoes and stews. She would make a big pot of soup, chicken, rice, or anything that did not require close attention. However, on the weekends, particularly Sundays, she would cook a nice dinner that was either roast beef, baked chicken, fried chicken, or boiled spareribs. She would often visit Warrenton and Franconia, Virginia, and was the oldest member of the Alfred Street Baptist Church.

Everyone knew everyone in the close-knit community of Patrick Street where she moved in 1926, and everyone knew her as, “Granny.” As a midwife, she served all members of her community, both black and white, delivered babies since 1917, and she even was one of the midwives for her granddaughter, Virginia Turner. She delivered countless numbers of babies. When people couldn’t afford hospitalization for childbirth, they would go to her. She would say, “If somebody couldn’t pay, they would give her some kale, potatoes, or anything just to show their appreciation to her as she brought their children into the world for them.” So, when people couldn’t afford to go to the hospital because they had no money, they would call her, and she delivered their babies in-house. If no one was home to watch her granddaughter, Virginia Turner, Lavinia would take her with her, and she would be told to sit in another room in the corner by

herself quietly. Virginia recalls one of these times, witnessing a cat having kittens, and when her grandmother Lavinia found out, she was very upset because you're not supposed to see that at that age. This was a funny memory for Virginia, because she was just following instructions, and couldn't leave while Lavinia was delivering a baby.

Lavinia's daughter's name is Ulysses Jackson, and they lived joyously together, often cracking jokes at the other's expense. Her mother's name is Ellen Coggine, and father's information is unknown. Lavinia passed away on March 4, 1950, at 72 years of age, and was buried in Douglass cemetery on March 8, 1950. Her tombstone inscription reads LAVINIA / JOHNSON / 1877-1950. Lavinia Johnson's contributions to her community as a midwife, mother, and friend cannot be understated, and there is so much we can learn from her legacy.





## Community Engaged Oral Public History

The adage, “history is written by the victors,” typically rings true. History, while ostensibly based on fact, often is influenced by the perspective and agenda of the dominant voice, and may result in a convoluted or distorted version of the truth. We can challenge these dominant narratives by engaging in community driven public history projects. One way to work towards an honest history is by engaging with people who have experienced these events, know people who have, or have heard oral renditions of these events. Oral history, an African diasporic tradition, is a form of community engaged public history, as all people are welcome to share their knowledge and help shape the narrative that will go on to inform the historical record.

The Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery Community History Initiative is using community engaged oral history to preserve the memories and stories of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery, a historic African American cemetery, established in 1895 in Alexandria, VA. This initiative aims to memorize the lives of those buried at Douglass and reconstitute the descendants' connection to them.

It is critical that this work is done correctly. One method the Initiative uses to foster community participation is assuring narrators they have control where their story goes, whether it be the archive, personal records or public records, and allowing this to be changed at any time with written contracts. This is different from the “shared authority,” traditional oral history theory whose understanding is that both the narrator and interviewer have rights over the story. This is done because Douglass Initiative staff want to work with community members and reinforce that people are more than sources and are their own true historians who can draw their power in the past to shape the future and are therefore grounded in centering the narrators and communities interests. Participating in oral history is important because it can mobilize communities, is accessible, and embraces historical narratives as told by participants. Several interviewees reflected on their experience with the Douglass Initiative in a positive light, viewing it as a step in the right direction to honor and repair the lives of both the people buried at Douglass and the black community in Alexandria.

Currently, the Alexandria Oral History Center has a StoryPortal where people can record and submit stories about their neighborhoods, as well as a StoryKit Program, which is a free oral

history training program for those interested in conducting their own histories and projects. First, participants will complete training that will teach them practices in methodologies of oral history, and once completed, they will be provided with recording equipment to complete their all history. Both of these resources can be found on the Alexandria Oral History Center webpage.

We hope to continue recording your stories, and giving you the tools to record your own. Whether for this Douglass initiative, or personal projects, your stories not only deserve, but need to be heard. We as a community can take the narrative into our own hands and inform the historical record, and in many cases can contribute to restorative justice in communities.

## Gravestone Preservation

This past fall, efforts to repair and conserve the gravestones at Douglass Cemetery began. Gravestone conservators Howard Wellman and Devlin McDonald treated 18 gravestones on the west side of the cemetery. This is the part of the cemetery that will not be affected by the upcoming stormwater drainage project. The stones that were treated during this round of work were high priority and had fallen or were broken. The dates on the stones ranged from 1898 to 1973. The determination about which stones need conservation was made as part of the 2022 Douglass Memorial Cemetery Preservation Plan. Many of the gravestones that were conserved were the die-on-base type, where the top stone had fallen from the base stone. Wellman produced a treatment report that describes the gravestone's type and method of construction, condition, and the treatment that was undertaken. Before, during, and after treatment photographs were taken. Another round of gravestone conservation will occur in fall 2025. This work is funded by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources' African American Cemetery and Graves Fund.



Left: Before treatment. This is an example of a die-on-base type gravestone. The gravestone of Willie T. Mangum had toppled off its base.



Right: After treatment. The gravestone was reset on the base using a gantry and the foundation of the gravestone was fixed.



Before treatment. The gravestone of Jannie Ross had broken into three pieces.



During treatment. The three pieces had to be re-assembled using pins and epoxy and then set in back in place by hand.



After treatment. Born in 1886, Jannie Ross' gravestone reads, "At rest."



Also in October, members of the Douglass Cemetery Descendant Advisory Group and staff from the Office of Historic Alexandria received hands-on training in gravestone preservation – activities like gentle cleaning and resetting – that will be helpful in organizing future efforts to improve the condition of this sacred site. Wellman provided participants with a series of handouts including Generally Accepted Practices in Conservation of Historic Cemeteries and Conservation Treatments for Historic Cemeteries.



Above: Descendants and Historic Alexandria staff learn about the ongoing gravestone conservation efforts and other hands-on preservation practices.



Howard Wellman explains the process of conserving Jannie Ross' gravestone.



Descendants and staff learn about the best and most gentle ways to clean grave markers, with a soft brush and water.





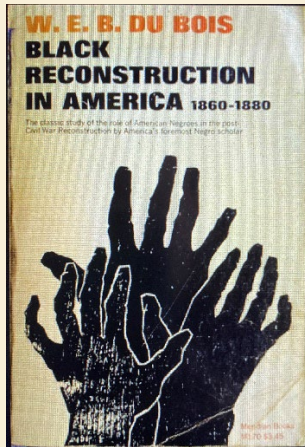
Participants also learned about basic gravestone resetting. The gravestone of Henry A. Norton was tilting forward. Wellman removed a small clod of dirt from behind the stone, reset it, and placed the dirt in the gap at the front of the stone to secure it in place.



Jan Norton Hailes then gently cleans the gravestone of her grandfather.

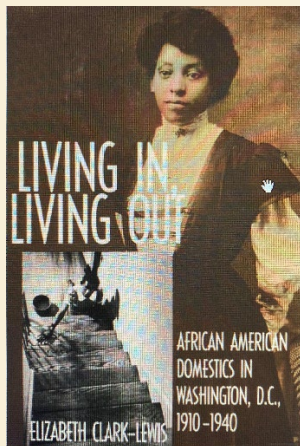


## Recommended Reading for the Beginning of 2025:



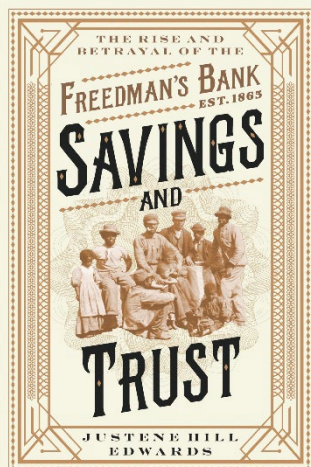
### *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* by W.E.B Du Bois

Upon publication in 1935, W. E. B. Du Bois's now classic *Black Reconstruction in America* offered a revelatory new assessment of Reconstruction — and of U.S. democracy itself. One of the towering African American thinkers and activists of the twentieth century, Du Bois brought all his intellectual powers to bear on the nation's post-Civil War era of political reorganization, a time when African American progress was met with a white supremacist backlash and ultimately yielded to the consolidation of the unjust social order of Jim Crow. *Black Reconstruction* is a pioneering work of revisionist scholarship that, in the wake of the censorship of Du Bois's characterization of Reconstruction by the Encyclopedia Britannica, was written to debunk influential historians whose racist ideas and emphases had disfigured the historical record.



### *Living in, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington D.C., 1910-1940* by Elizabeth Clark Lewis

This oral history portrays the lives of African American women who migrated from the rural South to work as domestic servants in Washington, DC in the early decades of the twentieth century. In *Living In, Living Out* Elizabeth Clark-Lewis narrates the personal experiences of eighty-one women who worked for wealthy white families. These women describe how they encountered—but never accepted—the master-servant relationship, and recount their struggles to change their status from “live in” servants to daily paid workers who “lived out.” With candor and passion, the women interviewed tell of leaving their families and adjusting to city life “up North,” of being placed as live-in servants, and of the frustrations and indignities they endured as domestics.



### *Savings and Trust: The Rise and Betrayal of the Freedman's Bank*

by Justene Hill Edwards (Author)

A leading historian exposes how the rise and tragic failure of the Freedman's Bank has shaped economic inequality in America.

In the years immediately after the Civil War, tens of thousands of former slaves deposited millions of dollars into the Freedman's Bank. African Americans envisioned this new bank as a launching pad for economic growth and self-determination. But only nine years after it opened, their trust was betrayed and the Freedman's Bank collapsed.

## REFERENCES

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<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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***Help Preserve Historic Frederick Douglass Memorial  
Cemetery***

*Donations can be made to the City of Alexandria C/O Frederick  
Douglass restoration project.*

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