

Alexandria Times

Denise Dunbar
 Publisher & Executive Editor
 ddunbar@alextimes.com

Margaret Stevens
 Sales Director
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Caitlyn Meisner
 Editor
 cmeisner@alextimes.com

Hanna Leka
 Photo Intern

Hannah Marr
 Intern

ADVERTISING

Margaret Stevens
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Marty DeVine
 mdevine@alextimes.com

Patrice V. Culligan
 pculligan@alextimes.com

Tina Franco
 Office Administrator
 tfranco@alextimes.com

DIRECTOR OF ART & DESIGN

Jessica Kim
 graphics@alextimes.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Kim Davis
 Mark Eaton
 Mark Edelman
 Thompson Eskew
 Kim Gilliam
 Ryan Hopper
 Lexie Jordan
 Audrey Keefe
 Louise Krafft
 Brianne McConnell
 Jim McGrath
 Erin Shackelford
 Dr. Vivek Sinha
 Sandra Smith
 Kathryn Ziemer

ALEXTIMES LLC

Denise Dunbar
 Managing Partner
 The Ariail family
 Suzanne Brock
 William Dunbar

Fishtown: an Alexandria institution

BY RACHEL BAYLER

Where Founders Park stands today was once the site of a bustling African American neighborhood known as Fishtown. A crucial location of seasonal work for free and enslaved African Americans, Fishtown played a key role in the history of African American life, labor and independence in 19th century Alexandria and beyond.

Fishtown's location developed out of local legislation, commercialism and opportunity.

The abundance of shad and herring in the Potomac River drew the attention of fishermen and businessmen alike. However, the City of Alexandria sought to control the fishing industry by restricting its operation to one location.

In 1813, the city passed a law designating the wharf at the end of Oronoco Street as the official landing site of all fishing vessels arriving in Alexandria. Thus, the foundations of Fishtown were laid. By 1850, Fishtown extended westward from the waterfront toward Union Street between Princess and Oronoco Streets.

From March to May each year, hundreds of African Americans rented lots, built temporary housing and set about doing the dirty, difficult, yet advantageous work



PHOTO/W.M. SMITH COLLECTION AT THE ALEXANDRIA SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY

Women cleaning fish in Alexandria.

that accompanied the fishing season. Both men and women caught, hauled, cleaned and prepared hundreds of thousands of fish each season. The majority of African American laborers at Fishtown were free or self-emancipated, but a small portion were enslaved workers.

For the African Americans who called Fishtown home each spring, the fishing industry was a means of physical and financial support. In addition to supplying fish to eat, work within the fishing industry enabled African Americans to earn valuable income in the face of limited work options.

This was especially true for African American women, who often worked as fish cleaners. In 1861, the going rate for one

hour of cleaning shad or herring was anywhere from 37 to 50 cents; that is equivalent to almost \$13 to \$17 dollars an hour today. Far from lucrative, this work still presented an avenue toward income and maintaining independence.

African American laborers continued to rebuild Fishtown every spring until the Union occupation of Alexandria in May 1861, during which the Union Army commandeered Fishtown's buildings for storage or fuel. After the fishing season, the Union Army shut down the wharves for the remainder of the war.

After the Civil War, Fishtown continued as a commercial and residential hub until the early 20th century. Decreased fish populations and

lack of local or state support for wildlife protections contributed to the decline and eventual end of the local fishing industry by 1920. Some African Americans stayed in Fishtown and set up permanent housing, while others moved to nearby African American neighborhoods like The Berg.

For more than 100 years, Fishtown was a crucial site for free and enslaved African Americans in Alexandria who sought work, personal independence and financial security. Today, its historic location is marked along the north Waterfront route of the African American Heritage Trails as a reminder of the presence, labor and contributions of African Americans throughout Alexandria's history.

Historic Alexandria encourages readers to check out the many Black History Month events in Alexandria this month. For more information, please visit: alexandriava.gov/news-oha/2024-01-28/celebrate-black-history-month-with-historic-alexandria.

Readers can learn more about the Alexandria African American Heritage Trails by visiting alexandriava.gov/historic-sites/african-american-heritage-trails.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.