

The first of its kind

Alexandria Archaeological Commission turns 50, looks ahead

BY SYDNEY KODAMA

With half a century under its belt, the Alexandria Archaeological Commission is continuing to prove that there is history, both buried and on display, in the city.

The Commission, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in late February, was the first city archaeological commission in the United States. It continues to play an important role in historic Alex-

andria as it works with and advises our local government.

"[It] is really unique in the country to have archaeology as part of local government and to have a commission that's the first of its kind in the country," City Archaeologist Eleanor Breen, Ph.D., said.

Breen is the staff liaison to the Commission which, she said, acts as "the sounding board" of the city's Archaeology Department.

"They give us great advice and we communicate what we're doing with them and get feedback and have a good di-

alogue about archaeology in the city," Breen said.

Commission Chair Ivy Whitlatch, who said she is an Alexandria "history buff," joined the Commission about 10 years ago and was elected chair three years ago. She said the local community can be easily engaged in archaeological projects because Alexandrians are both well-educated and interested in our city's history.

"It's a very strong sense of pride that city residents and city management have and what we have done for archeology, so it's not really hard to

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PHOTO/ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

Members of the Alexandria Archaeological Commission at their annual walkabout meeting, Wilkes Street Cemetery complex.



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Members of the Alexandria Archaeological Commission receive a proclamation from the mayor and City Council in commemoration of the Commission's 50th anniversary in February.



PHOTO/ANNA FRAME

Archaeologists moving ship hull planking timbers from the site of the Hotel Indigo.

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get people enthused about it," Whitlatch said.

African American history

In an attempt to remember parts of Alexandria's history that may have been previously ignored, the Commission in recent years has prioritized bringing African American history to the forefront.

The City of Alexandria established the African American History Division under the Office of Historic Alexandria – where the Archaeology Department also sits – in 2023.

The new division ensures "the continued inclusion of Black History in city museums and public programming," according to the city's website.

Alexandria has long had "a vibrant Black population," according to the city's website, including 52 free African Americans recorded in 1790 from the first federal census.

One of the Commission's priorities has been the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery, which was established in 1864 by the federal government and was one of the earliest cemeteries for emancipated African Americans.

In 1865, about 118 U.S. Colored Troops were disinterred from the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery and reburied in Alexandria National Cemetery as a result of a petition by more than 400 of its troops, according to the National Park Service website. The petition makes the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery the site of one of the oldest civil rights demonstrations in the United States.

The Commission nominated the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery to become part of the African American Civil Rights Network, and it was officially designated as part of the network in June 2021.

The African American Civil Rights Network was a listing kept by the National Park Service of different sites and programs throughout the country that together told the history of the civil rights movement, according to the National Park Service website. Congress has not yet reauthorized the Network, and it expired on Jan. 8 of this year. A list of network sites, including the cemetery, can still be found on the National Park Service website.

Breen said her office supported the Commission's application for the cemetery to

be recognized nationally.

"It's one of the earliest places of a civil rights action in Alexandria," she said. "It ended up being the first site that was nominated in Virginia."

The Commission has also helped preserve Douglass Memorial Cemetery on Wilkes Street. The cemetery was "established in 1895 as a segregated, nondenominational African American cemetery," according to the city's website, and is named after abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

"[It is] really falling into disrepair. Alexandria Archaeology has been able to get some funding to kind of help support the cemetery and the structural infrastructure of it," Paula Whitacre, Planning District III

Representative on the Commission, said.

The Commission and Archaeology Department have also helped to put together the African American Heritage Trails, which tell the story of African American history in Alexandria over the span of centuries, according to the city's website.

"We kind of have a motto to study and preserve all areas of the city, all time periods, all people, and to share with all. And that was something that was set in the very beginning days of the Commission," Whitlatch said. "And in those days, a lot of African American History was never discussed. It broadened us to be all inclusive, and I think we've done a

really great job of keeping that mandate for years."

Road to the Port City

As they look for more ways to preserve the history of Alexandria, members of the Commission are interested in finding a way to both continue preserving and displaying the timbers of four 18th-century merchant ships that were discovered in 2015 and 2018 at the Hotel Indigo and Robinson Landing sites by the waterfront.

Three out of the four sets of ship hull remnants are being preserved at Ben Brenman Park. The ships were not part of a shipwreck, Breen said. Instead, they were used in the

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PHOTO/ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

Excavations of the fourth lock and third basin of the Alexandria Canal.

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landfill process to claim part of the Potomac River for development and make Alexandria a successful port city.

“They really symbolize Alexandria’s goal to become a successful and prosperous port city,” Breen said. “And one way to do that was to change the land, was to make new land,

bring the shore closer to the deeper channel of the Potomac River and just make an easier, more accessible port, and [the ship hull remnants] are kind of the tangible evidence of that.”

Whitacre said the Commission is advocating for a way to preserve and display the first set of the four sets of ship timbers when it comes back from Texas A&M University where it is currently being conserved.

“One of the things we’ve been advocating for is, okay, what will the city do when they come back?” Whitacre said. “I mean, they could be kind of the centerpiece of a museum or exhibit. I mean, they’re huge. We’re talking about this massive thing.”

Whitlatch also emphasized the Commission’s priority of ensuring that the first completed ship hull has a place to be preserved and displayed when it comes back to Alexandria in a year.

“We need to get storage secured, or they’re going to languish. And then we really need to get the concept of exhibition,” she said. “We’ve had a long time, and we haven’t gotten very far on it, and we really are advocating strongly for the ship hull and a world-class, innovative way to present Al-

exandria’s history through the waterfront.”

Continued impact

The Commission and the city’s Archaeology Department are responsible for enforcing the Archaeological Protection Code when approving development projects, ensuring they are not covering any artifacts that need excavating.

“In Alexandria, archeology is part of development, so we review new development that comes forward, and sometimes make a determination that archeology happens before construction,” Breen said.

The Commission and the Department have initiatives in place to engage the community in archaeological projects and Alexandria’s history.

“We offer free lessons about the science of archeology for Alexandria City Public School students [and] other students in the area,” Breen said. “We are also curators of Alexandria’s history. We have three million artifacts from over 250 sites, and it’s our responsibility to take care of those and also to share them with people and educate people about Alexandria’s history through these tangible remains.”

Whitacre said she wants people to know that archeol-

ogy is about more than just “digging in the ground.”

“It’s not just finding interesting artifacts... but really trying to extrapolate what were people’s lives like, who used this, and really kind of thinking of the significance and the power of history which now we really have to deal with in a very real way,” she said.

Breen wants the Alexandria community to know that the city’s Archaeology Department has opportunities for them to get involved and learn more.

The Alexandria Archaeology Museum, located in the Torpedo Factory, is open to people of all ages. The Commission and the city’s Archaeology Department have also hosted events for the public to learn more about their local history, including the Jan. 19 public viewing event of the canal lock and basin found in Old Town North.

“There’s always more to learn, even in a city where there’s been so much focus on history, we keep finding new components of the past and learning more through the study of archeology,” Breen said. “Even in a city that’s always changing, there’s always something buried beneath your feet.”

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PHOTO/ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

Ship hull remnant excavated from the site of the Hotel Indigo.