Through sheer strength of will, determination, fortitude, guts, and against all odds, our ancestors fashioned a life here at Fort Ward, an abandoned Union fort. Then, out of necessity, they developed an entire viable, self-sustaining community that is still very much in existence today. It’s undergone many changes, but we’re still here.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the City moved the residents out of Fort Ward to establish the Park and Museum, which disrupted their tranquility. In 1962, the City displaced our community once again to build T.C. Williams High School. But, we’re still here.

Famous (Johnson) Colbert Terrill, great-great-granddaughter of Seminary community founder, Wallace and Virginia Ray Wales/c/o

The African American Descendants of The Fort and Seminary communities have only one dutiful and determined goal, the restoration and preservation of our sacred heritage. Where others view deeds, cannons, and picnic pavilions, we see people buried on this hallowed ground whose blood runs through our veins and four generations of our families’ veins.

Countless unmarked graves of our ancestors are buried under the very soil that joggers, dog walkers and Civil War buffs unknowingly tread today. Where others are “open space,” we see familiar faces, family memories and challenges on land that our ancestors—from slavery to freedom to Jim Crow to urban renewal—toiled, bought and successively seeded to grow a sustainable community through self-sufficiency; small farms, churches, schools and community values that have contributed to the prosperity of this city and nation for 150 years.

What does Fort Ward mean to us? It means blood, land and life. It models faith and morality. It conveys endurance and excellence. It speaks of our struggle but trumpets our survival.

Adrienne Terrill Washington, great-great-great-granddaughter of “The Fort” founders, Harriett Stuart McGinnis Sherr and Robert Adams conveyed a quarter-acre to the Falls Church School District of Fairfax County in 1898 for the purpose of educating African American children. The one-room “Colored School Building at Seminary” was the first public schoolhouse for African Americans living in this community. The school closed in 1925, yet School House Lane can still be discerned in the park’s landscape. The building became an African American Episcopal chapel, St. Cyriaxis, with students from the Virginia Theological Seminary leading services and teaching children. Its members joined Meade Memorial Episcopal Church when the chapel closed. Renovated for residential use, the St. Thomas Lee Young family lived here from 1947 until the City of Alexandria’s purchase and demolition of the building in the 1960s. Sgt. Young remembers that his bedroom was located in the chapel’s pulpit, and the kitchen was in the “Amen Corner.”

Photo left: Robert Adams. Courtesy Joyce Casey Sanches, great-niece.

An Enduring African American Community

Visit those City of Alexandria Museums for more about African American & Civil War Heritage.

Fort Ward Museum & Historic Site
alexandriava.gov/FortWard

Alexandria Black History Museum
alexandriava.gov/BlackHistory

The Lyceum, Alexandria’s History Museum
alexandriava.gov/Lyceum

The City of Alexandria thanks the Fort Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society, the Fort Ward History Work Group, the Fort Ward Park & Museum Area Stakeholders Advisory Group, Alexandria Archaeology volunteers, and Howard University Department of History for contributing directions, knowledge, research, and images for this project. Descendants, Joyce Casey Sanches, Frances (Johnson) Colbert Terrill, and Adrienne Terrill Washington, led the project with support from researchers: Dave Cavanaugh, Glenn Eugster, and Tom Fulton, as well as graduate students, Neil Var.

The many people who shared their memories with Alexandria Legacies, the Historic Alexandria Oral History Program, deserve special recognition, as does Patricia I. Knock for beginning the interviews in the early 1990s. Oral histories may be read at alexandriava.gov/legacies.

The Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School are successors to the School for African American students, founded 1858, that once stood at The Fort and its successor, the Seminary School. The school was located where T.C. Williams High School now stands.

Upon the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the City of Alexandria honors The Fort’s enduring African American legacy.
African Americans established “The Fort,” a community that continued here for nearly a century after the Civil War (1861-1865) into the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s. The place received its name from The Fort’s location on and around the remnants of Fort Ward, one of the fortifications that were built as part of the Defenses of Washington. In the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, families living at The Fort and in the larger “Seminary” community—located around the Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School on Braddock, Howard, King and Quaker streets—were connected through shared kinship, marriage, church, and work, particularly at the two Episcopal educational institutions. Four generations of families (including the Adams, Ashby, Craven, Casey, Henry, Hall, Jackson, Javins, Johnson, Lewis, McKnight, Miller, Craven, Casey, Henry, Hall, Johnson, WWII Veteran

In the Civil War, enslaved African Americans worked as domestics and laborers at the Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School. Change occurred in June 1861 when Union troops occupied the closed schools and established a military hospital. The Fairfax Seminary Hospital provided employment and support for some freed people. After the war, African Americans settled in the areas surrounding the Episcopal temples, where they worked as carpenters, cooks, waiters, drivers, and maintenance staff. By the end of the 19th century, more of these families had bought land and established their homes in “The Fort” and “Seminary” community. Some families retained their connection to these educational institutions for nearly a century.

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In 1939, the Oakland Baptist Church acquired a lot from Samuel Javins after the death of his wife, Florence McKnight Javins. She inherited the property from her mother, Harriett Stuart McKnight Shorts, one of the founders of the church. Family ownership of the land started in 1879, when Burr Shorts, Harriett’s husband, began purchasing 10 acres. The Shorts-McKnight family was one of the principal founding families of “The Fort” and continued living here until the 1960s. Three McKnight family graves are the earliest known in the cemetery and pre-date church ownership of the land: James W. Terrell and Maria McKnight (1925), and Burney McKnight Terrell, wife of James and sister of Maria (1930).