

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: OCTOBER 5, 2009

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER *J*

SUBJECT: ALLOCATION OF FUNDS FROM THE FY 2010 CONTINGENT RESERVES TO THE OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT FORT WARD PARK

ISSUE: Council consideration of allocation of funds to the Office of Historic Alexandria for archaeological research at Fort Ward Park.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council authorize the allocation of \$50,000 in previously designated funds from the FY 2010 General Fund Contingent Reserves to the Office of Historic Alexandria for archaeological research at Fort Ward Park as outlined below.

BACKGROUND: The parcels of land comprising what is now Fort Ward Park were acquired by the City of Alexandria in the early 1960's for public park purposes, and to preserve and restore one of the City's major historic features associated with the American Civil War. Fort Ward, the fifth largest of 164 forts and batteries that ringed the nation's capital as part of the "Defenses of Washington," was named for Commander James Harmon Ward, the first Union naval officer to be killed in the war. Soon after the Civil War concluded, the property surrounding the fort became the site of an African American community that included several homes, a church, school and cemetery. Except for the Oakland Baptist Church cemetery, which is surrounded by Fort Ward Park on three sides, and burial sites that remain within the parkland, most of the features associated with the post war African American settlement were removed from the property soon after City acquisition. At that time, the interpretive focus was restoration of the historic fort's Northwest Bastion in time for the Civil War centennial commemoration.

DISCUSSION: The City of Alexandria has owned and operated Fort Ward Park for nearly half a century, with the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities responsible for park maintenance and recreation programs, and the Office of Historic Alexandria responsible for the operation of the museum and preservation of the historic

site. Over the years limited research on park history not associated with the Civil War has been undertaken. Two notable exceptions are a 1980's archaeological investigation in a central area of the park that confirmed the pre-historic occupation of the site by Native Americans, and oral histories performed in the 1990's that described the African American community that existed from about 1870 to the mid 20th century. During the past year, largely through the efforts of community residents actively researching the park's history, a growing awareness of the significance of this long neglected aspect of the park's heritage has emerged. Of particular concern are determining the location of unmarked gravesites and family burial plots which tentatively have identified in several possible areas of the park, as well as Native American sites, and underground features remaining from the period of the African American community.

Earlier this year Alexandria Archaeology staff began an investigation of the post Civil War African American community, known as "The Fort," in an attempt to identify the long forgotten homes, farms, school, church and burial sites once associated with the settlement. The investigation intensified in June when graduate level interns were brought in to assist with tracing early records, historic and aerial photographs, maps and oral histories, documenting the people, buildings and landscape features that once occupied the site for nearly a century. Through this effort a clear description of this unusual settlement has emerged and specific areas of archaeological sensitivity have been identified for further investigation.

Based on the work of this past summer, Alexandria Archaeology staff has completed a Scope of Work for the first phase of archaeological investigation at Fort Ward Park, and have reviewed the plan with the City Manager's Office, the Directors of the Office of Historic Alexandria and Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities, as well as the Historic Alexandria Resources Commission. The first phase of the archaeological investigation in 2009 will focus on completing the historic record of the property, eliminating several major gaps that exist within the historical documentation, and experimenting with a new ground penetrating radar (GPR) software program that may target areas to be dug. The experimental use of this technology will be attempted in October 2009 to identify grave shafts by recording the "signature" of known graves both in the park and within Oakland Baptist Cemetery. Once this image is established, equipment operators will be searching for similar signatures elsewhere in the yard. If an image is matched, the area will then be "ground truthed" by City archaeologists, to confirm the existence of a burial site.

Although there are concerns about soil conditions in the area that may preclude GPR accuracy, if successful, this software technology could reduce the overall cost of the archaeological investigation and minimize ground disturbance. However, if this technology is not successful in identifying grave shafts in the clay soil conditions at Fort Ward, more traditional archaeological survey methods will have to be used. Regardless of which approach is deemed more appropriate, it is expected that the subterranean investigation will be a multi-year project, with major archaeological survey work beginning early in 2010.

FISCAL IMPACT: The cost of the initial phase of the described research activities is \$50,000, which is proposed to be funded by FY 2010 Contingent Reserves previously designated for the Office of Historic Alexandria for archaeological research at Fort Ward Park. Subsequent phases could cost in total upwards of between \$250,000 to \$300,000. The Office of Historic Alexandria will seek additional funding for the Fort Ward initiative from available private and public funding sources including the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Institute for Museum and Library Services, and Virginia Dept. of Historic Resources.

STAFF:

Mark Jinks, Deputy City Manager

Lance Mallamo, Director, Office of Historic Alexandria

Pamela Cressey, Director, Alexandria Archaeology Museum

Susan Cumbey, Director, Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site