

Docket Item #14  
CITY CHARTER, SEC 9.06; CASE #2003-0003  
FREEDMEN'S CEMETERY MEMORIAL PARK

Planning Commission Meeting  
November 6, 2003

**ISSUE:** Consideration of a proposal by the City of Alexandria to acquire property for use as a park commemorating the Alexandria Freedmen's Cemetery, pursuant to the provisions of Section 9.06 of the City Charter.

**APPLICANT:** City of Alexandria

**LOCATION:** 1001 South Washington Street and 714 Church Street

**ZONE:** CL/Commercial Low

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[GRAPHIC]

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends **approval** under Section 9.06 of the City Charter.

## DISCUSSION

The City proposes to purchase the property at 1001 South Washington Street and at 714 Church Street for use as a park commemorating the Alexandria Freedmen's Cemetery. Funds for the purchase will come from the mitigation package established by the Woodrow Wilson Bridge settlement, and a group of staff agencies has already begun working with interested citizens and groups on a process by which the ultimate memorial park is designed and constructed. This collaborative effort will mark an important phase of the City's history, will create a new park for the public on South Washington Street and will provide a tangible benefit for the City from the construction of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge.

### Section 9.06 of the City Charter

Section 9.06 of the City Charter requires that the Planning Commission review and approve any acquisition or sale of public land and any change in streets, squares, parks, public buildings or spaces in order to ensure that any such acquisition, sale or change is consistent with the City's Master Plan.

### Description of Property and Proposed Use

The subject property is an entire block of land in the southern part of Old Town bounded by Church Street, South Washington Street, the Capital Beltway and the Beltway exit ramp to Church Street. It is comprised of two tax parcels: the land known as 1001 South Washington Street includes 18,750 square feet and contains a one-story Mobil automotive service station, related structures and extensive asphalt paving; the adjacent lot at 714 Church Street includes 25,412 square feet, and contains a three-story brick office building and surface parking for approximately 20 vehicles, with an alley extending along the south boundary of the service station property to South Washington Street.

To the north across Church Street is the Gunston Hall Apartments complex. To the east across South Washington Street is the Saint Mary's Catholic Cemetery. On the south and west, the property is bounded by the Capital Beltway right of way. The general area has a mix of light commercial uses and apartments along South Washington Street, with townhouses predominating a block away from Washington Street.

### Zoning and Master Plan History

Both the master plan and the zoning designate this property as Commercial Low, recognizing the existing low density commercial uses and providing a buffer between the residential uses to the north and the Capital Beltway. Prior to 1992, the property was zoned C-2 and C-2-B, again consistent with the long time commercial uses of the site. As part of the Southwest Quadrant Small Area Plan chapter of the City's master plan, the land use discussion of the area in the 1992 plan focuses on the need to maintain a low scale of development at this site, in order to support the low density residential areas nearby and to recognize the importance of Washington Street and the low rise buildings in the vicinity.

The Historic Preservation chapter of the Master Plan refers to the potential for a 19<sup>th</sup> century African American cemetery under the Washington Street service station, but notes that it is not visible. It also lists the “Church Street African American Cemetery” in the 700-800 blocks of South Church Street as a documented historic resource within the South West Quadrant small area plan.

The proposed acquisition and creation of a memorial park at Freedman’s Cemetery does not technically require an amendment to the master plan and zoning of the property, but it may be desirable to make a change in the future in order to recognize the site’s unique position as a land use in the city.

#### History and Significance of the Property

The proposed Freedmen’s Cemetery Memorial Park will be a passive recreation facility featuring a memorial to the freed African Americans who were buried there during and shortly after the Civil War. With the advent of the Civil War in 1861, Alexandria was occupied by federal troops. The town was transformed into a place of liberation for thousands of African Americans. People enslaved on plantations in Confederate Virginia south and west of Alexandria streamed into town to escape bondage. Until the Union soldiers occupied Alexandria, the town had been home to some of the largest slave dealing companies in the South; about half of its black residents lived in slavery. Yet, virtually over night, with the federal occupation, Alexandria became a mecca for people fleeing slavery. Over the next four years, about 7,000 to 8,000 African Americans made their way through Confederate-held land to cross into occupied Alexandria. These freedom seekers were first referred to as “Contraband,” and later as “Freedmen.”

While the Freedmen who entered Alexandria did succeed in leaving captivity behind, they faced great hardships. Arriving on foot and in old wagons pulled by mules, they carried only meager clothing and supplies. As the thousands of refugees came to Alexandria, they encountered insufficient housing, food and jobs in a town with a pre-war population of about 12,000. Over time, many found jobs with the military, working as construction workers, hospital stewards, painters, teamsters, laundresses, cooks, grave diggers and personal servants. The military authority erected some barrack-style housing, but the refugees usually had to create their own makeshift shelters. Shanties sprung up on vacant land, and the new shanty towns became neighborhoods, such as “Cross Canal,” “Petersburg,” “Somnerville,” and “Grantville.”

Living in destitute conditions, thousands of Freedmen died during and after the Civil War. It appears that, in the early war years, Freedmen were buried in the town’s pauper cemetery at Penny Hill. Although there is no estimate of the number who died, by February 1864, the high death rate prompted the military to seize private land near South Washington and Church streets and lay out a cemetery for Freedmen. The Superintendent of Contraband, Rev. Albert Gladwin, and others recorded the names and ages of those who died in a ledger book from May 1864 until January 1869. It is these individuals who were buried in the one and a half acres now referred to as Alexandria Freedmen’s Cemetery. More than half of those who died were children, including many newborns.

After 1869, the abandoned cemetery was reclaimed by Francis Smith, the former owner. In 1917, the Smith family conveyed the property to the Catholic Diocese of Richmond. Washington Street did not exist as far south as the cemetery site until the construction of the George Washington Memorial Parkway in 1932. In 1946, the property was sold and subsequently zoned for commercial uses. In 1955, the Mobil service station was constructed on the parcel now identified as 1001 South Washington Street. In 1959, construction of the Capital Beltway began on the right of way abutting the office building parcel and included about one-half acre of the original parcel on which the cemetery was created. In 1960, the three-story office building at 714 Church Street was built. From 1869 to 1955, when the first construction occurred, the cemetery remained undisturbed and essentially forgotten.

Since the 1980's, there has been renewed awareness of the plight of the freed slaves and the significance of Alexandria's historic role in events surrounding the end of slavery. First, historical research by T. Michael Miller, research historian in the Office of Historic Alexandria, and Wesley Pippinger, respectively, discovered that the cemetery was located on South Washington Street and that the burial ledger survived in Richmond. Then, in 1992, Freedmen's Cemetery was included in a state register of abandoned cemeteries and in the Historic Preservation chapter of Alexandria Master Plan. In 1997, the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery was organized by Lillie Finklea and Louise Massoud to preserve, research and commemorate the burial ground. Over the last six years, the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery has worked with the City Council to heighten community awareness of the cemetery and the Freedmen who sought freedom in Alexandria. An annual Week of Remembrance was established by City Council, and a wreath laying ceremony is held each year. In 2000, the Friends secured a Virginia Highway Marker to mark the site.

#### Proposed Acquisition of the Property to Create a Memorial Park

Preliminary archaeological investigations for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project have confirmed the presence of graves on the VDOT right of way and in the City's South Washington Street right of way and have produced compelling evidence of grave shafts under the pavement on the 1001 South Washington Street parcel. In 2002, the City negotiated an amendment to the Settlement Agreement with the Federal Highway Administration, approved by the City Council, that provides funds for acquisition of this property, demolition of the existing buildings and the creation of a memorial park. The improvement program includes a non-destructive archaeological survey after removal of buildings and pavement. This survey will identify the areas with undisturbed graves and provide information necessary for a suitable design and the protection of resources during construction.

The funds for the Freedman's Cemetery Memorial Park are part of a package of payments to the City in settlement of the City's claim against the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration challenging the selection process for the alignment and location of the new Woodrow Wilson Bridge, on the grounds that the impacts on the social fabric and the cultural resources of Alexandria were inadequately weighed. Of the total \$35.4 million coming to the city for mitigation measures, \$5.5 million is budgeted for Freedmen's Cemetery enhancements, to be made available to the City for its use in acquiring the property, demolishing the existing buildings,

conducting archaeological investigations, and designing and constructing the proposed park. The funds come to the City from the Federal Highway Trust Fund and the Virginia Department of Transportation acts as the agent of the Federal Highway Administration for the management of funds disbursed to the city.

The original Freedmen's Cemetery parcel is reported to have been one and one half acres in extent. The two privately held parcels have a total area of 1.014 acres. The balance includes limited losses to right of way for Church Street and South Washington Street, and the right of way acquired for the original Beltway construction in 1958. During the original Beltway construction, excavation encroached on the cemetery and has been shown to have disturbed several graves. No one knows the exact location of the southern boundary of the cemetery or how many graves were in the area south of the limits of the 1950's construction. The proposed park will extend to the retaining wall that will define the limit of the Beltway when current construction is completed. The City will assume responsibility for maintaining the entire park. VDOT has not yet determined the disposition of right of way within the original cemetery that is not required for the current Beltway and for maintenance of the retaining wall, but it is understood that the remainder right of way will be either ceded to or placed under a perpetual easement to the City.

The City plans to acquire fee simple title to the two privately held parcels on the Freedmen's Cemetery site. Following acquisition, the properties will be leased back to the present tenants until it is necessary to start demolition. The schedule for demolition and subsequent milestones, including archaeological investigations, conceptual design, engineering design, and construction, is dependent on access to the site for construction after completion of the retaining wall adjacent to the Beltway. The City's intent is to complete the park construction at the earliest feasible date that is consistent with the constraint against interfering with the Beltway and Urban Deck construction. The relevant construction contract, known as the Route 1 Interchange Tie-In Contract, is scheduled for completion in November 2007. Work that would be impacted by Freedmen's Cemetery construction should be completed by early Fall of 2007. The park construction will include enhancement of the surviving area of the original Freedmen's Cemetery excepting the right of way required for the current Beltway construction and the rights of way of Church and South Washington Street.

#### Plan for Creating the New Freedman's Memorial Park

Although at a very early point in the process, the city hopes to ultimately create a passive, memorial park that preserves the known grave sites and the cemetery, that commemorates the freed people of Alexandria, and that creates a place for historic understanding and personal reflection. The work to create a design for the park will proceed as the bridge work, discussed above, allows. Archeological work is tentatively scheduled to begin in earnest in 2005, with the process of selecting a design consultant to start when the archeological work is underway. Under this time schedule, construction of the park could be completed in 2008.

The process by which consultants are selected and preliminary design work is completed will include representatives of citizen, historic, parks and other relevant groups, and will be steered by an interagency staff group, already organized to create a process by which each step of the work proceeds. The park will require land use approvals and will be scrutinized by appropriate city boards and commissions, as well as the public as a whole, before final designs are approved.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission approve the 9.06 case to purchase the Freedman's Cemetery property as consistent with the Master Plan.

STAFF: Eileen Fogarty, Director, Department of Planning and Zoning;  
Jean Federico, Director, Office of Historic Alexandria;  
Pamela Cressey, City Archeologist, Office of Historic Alexandria;  
Reed Winslow, Transportation and Environmental Services.