

The Freedpeople of Section 27



ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY
HISTORY EDUCATION SERIES



Section 27 of Arlington National Cemetery. (ANC Education/Emily Rheault, 2019)

Many recognize Arlington National Cemetery as a military cemetery, where burial space is reserved for members of the United States military and their family. If you visit the northeastern sections of the cemetery, however, you will find a number of headstones marked “citizen” or “civilian.” These graves date to the early days of the cemetery and are the final resting place of thousands of African American “freedpeople” who died in and around Washington, D.C. from 1863 to 1867.

To understand who these people were and why they were buried in Arlington National Cemetery, we need to look back at the federal government’s role in assisting former slaves after the Civil War.



*A headstone in Arlington National Cemetery marked “citizen.”
(Arlington National Cemetery/2013)*



CONTRABANDS AND FREEDMEN

During the Civil War, the U.S. Congress passed laws declaring that the U.S. Army could confiscate Confederate property, which included slaves. These laws also forbade the return of slaves to Confederate slaveowners. Enslaved people who escaped to U.S. Army lines were classified as “contraband of war,” and “contraband camps” sprang up around Army forts and encampments.

Beginning with the sheltering and employment of so-called “contrabands,” the United States Army and federal government accepted a degree of responsibility for supporting former slaves after the Civil War. In 1865, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, also known as the Freedmen’s Bureau, within the United States Department of War. The Bureau took on a number of tasks to assist refugees and freedpeople, including building hospitals, supporting education efforts, helping families reunite after the war and providing legal assistance. They also provided burial assistance, which could include simply providing a coffin and headstone, assisting with transporting remains to a private burial ground or authorizing burial in a national cemetery.

In any war, “contraband” is the term for confiscated enemy property. During the Civil War, the United States also used the term “contraband” to refer to escaped slaves who fled across U.S. Army lines seeking freedom. This term dehumanized freedpeople, however, as it was the same language used for any other confiscated Confederate property, including livestock, machinery and buildings.



1863 photo of an African American family coming into U.S. Army lines. (LOC/David B. Woodbury)



BURIAL IN A NATIONAL CEMETERY

National cemeteries, including Arlington National Cemetery, were created during the Civil War to accommodate the thousands of U.S. service members who died in battle or in military hospitals. At that time, most families preferred to bury their loved ones in a private cemetery close to home, and national cemeteries were mostly used when the family of a soldier was too poor to afford a private burial.

Burials at Arlington National Cemetery began in May 1864 along the cemetery's northern edge, in an area known today as Section 27. The first burials were of white Union soldiers, but soon white government employees and dependents were included, and then Black Union soldiers. By July 1864, Black civilians who applied for burial assistance from the Army (and later the Freedmen's Bureau) were also allowed to be buried in this section.

In August 1864, Union Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs ordered that Union soldiers and officers should be buried closer to Arlington House, and at that point, the military stopped burying white Union soldiers in Section 27. Burials of African American soldiers and civilians continued, however, and the section came to be known as the "Contraband Cemetery." From 1864 to 1867, more than 3,000 African American civilians were buried in Section 27, significantly outnumbering the number of soldiers (both white and Black) buried there.

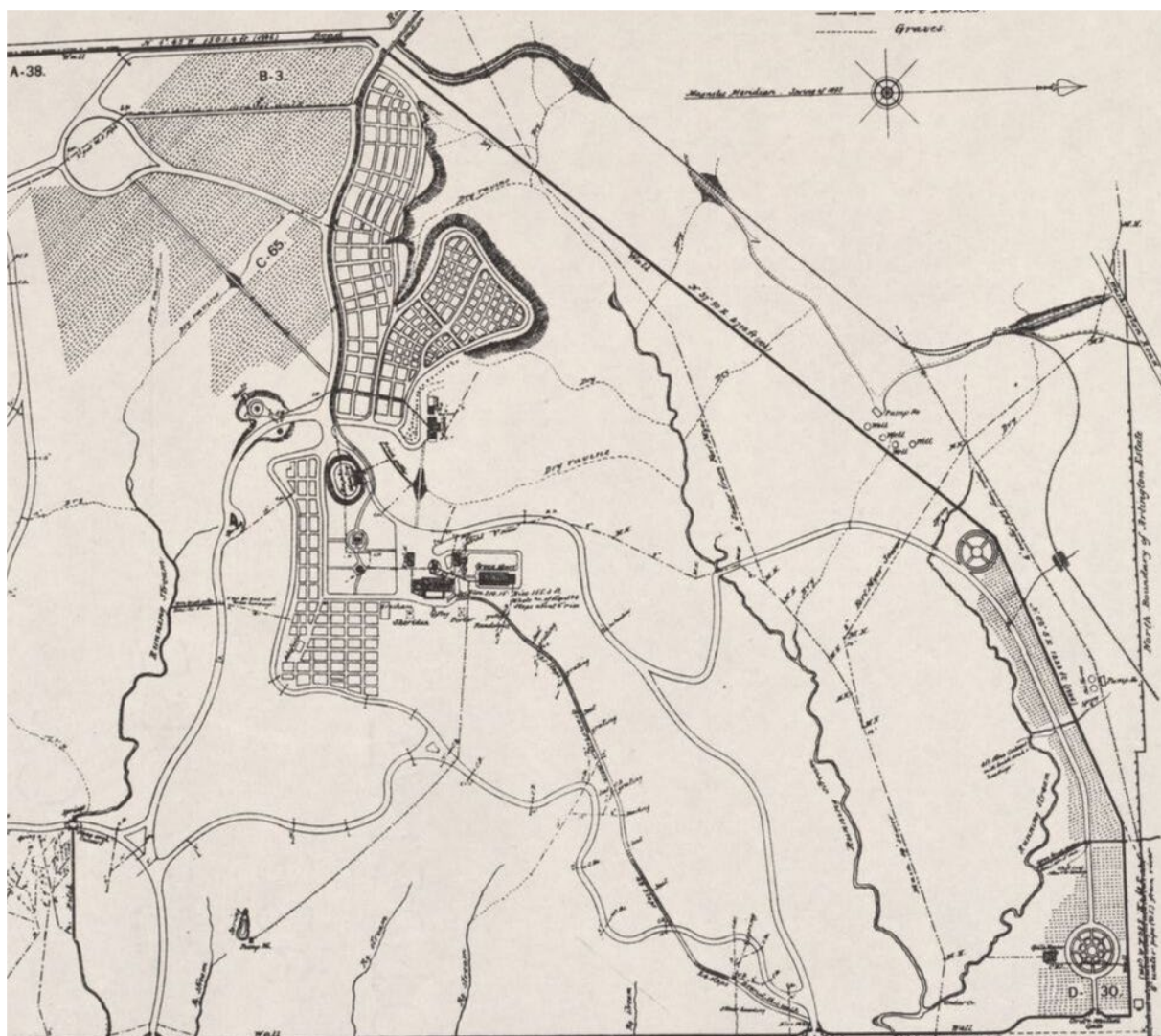


*Photo taken June 29, 1864 of the first graves in Arlington National Cemetery.
(Chrysler Museum of Art/Andrew Joseph Russell)*



WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM BURIAL RECORDS?

Little is known about the individual lives of the freedpeople buried in Section 27, but available burial records can give some insight. It should be noted that the records are incomplete and may have errors, as remains were sometimes moved and grave markers replaced multiple times, and cemetery administrators did not prioritize records management for poor civilians. In general, however, the records reflect where African Americans were allowed to live in and around Washington, D.C. and the poor conditions they lived in.



*Portion of a 1901 map of Arlington National Cemetery.
Section 27 is in the bottom right-hand corner. (LOC)*



GOVERNMENT HOUSING

Between 1860 and 1870, the African American population in Washington, D.C. tripled as thousands of freedpeople sought the opportunity to start new lives, and to be protected by the Army and the federal government. To accommodate this sudden rise in population, the Freedmen's Bureau converted Army barracks around the city into tenements and operated government farms where families could live and work. The Freedmen's Bureau attempted to limit rental of the tenement housing to only those who were working for very low wages and would therefore be unable to afford other housing available in the city. Residents were also expected to follow requirements for cleanliness and morality, and the tenements were subject to regular inspection. Burial records show that a number of individuals buried in Section 27 lived in this type of housing.

In 1863, the Freedmen's Bureau built a government farm and a "Freedman's Village" on land that was later incorporated into Arlington National Cemetery. Ironically, the residents of Freedman's Village were buried at other cemeteries and are not the freedpeople in Section 27.



Civil War-era photo of a group of freedpeople standing in front of their barracks in Alexandria, Virginia. Records do not indicate that residents of these particular barracks were buried in Arlington National Cemetery, though many of the barracks around Washington, D.C. looked similar to the pictured buildings. (LOC)



LOCATION OF ADDRESSES

Burial records indicate where the bodies to be buried in Section 27 were picked up for burial. Depending on the circumstances surrounding an individual's death, this may have been a place of residence, a nearby street, a hospital, or in the case of reinterment (relocation of a body to a new burial site), the location of the first burial.

The following locations appear multiple times in the records and provide a glimpse into the details of life and death in the 1860s:

Claremont Cemetery

The burial ground for the Claremont Eruptive Fever General Hospital, located near Alexandria, Virginia. From 1862 to 1865, this hospital served soldiers and civilians suffering from smallpox and similar diseases. Remains were moved to Arlington National Cemetery in 1867.

Colored Orphans Home

Officially titled The Asylum for Aged and Destitute Colored Refugees and Colored Orphans, the home was located in Georgetown from 1863 to 1866. In December 1866, the home was forced to move to a location near present-day Howard University.

East Capitol Street Barracks

Former Army barracks located on East Capitol Street between 6th and 7th Streets, which were converted into tenement housing for freedpeople from 1866 to 1868.

Freedmen's Hospital

Prior to 1865, a "Freedmen's Hospital" was located in barracks near Thomas Circle. In 1865, this hospital moved to the former U.S. Army Campbell Hospital, located north of Florida Avenue and east of George Avenue, NW. In 1868, Freedmen's Hospital became a teaching hospital for Howard University Medical School.

Giesboro Cemetery

A burial ground located near Camp Stoneman (1863-1866) on Giesboro (or Giesborough) Point, which is now part of Joint Base Bolling-Anacostia. The cemetery was used for the burial of Quartermaster Department laborers until December 1864; remains of African Americans buried there were moved to Arlington National Cemetery in 1866.

Harmony Cemetery

Operated by the Columbian Harmony Society, a mutual aid society founded by free African Americans, Harmony was the main cemetery for civilian freedpeople from 1863 to 1864. From 1857 to 1960, the cemetery was located near the present-day Rhode Island Ave-Brentwood Metro station. During the Civil War, a number of Black and white soldiers and employees of the Army Quartermaster Department were buried there, but most were reinterred at Arlington National Cemetery after the war.

**Kendall Green Barracks**

Former Army barracks located near present-day Gallaudet University and converted into tenement housing for freedpeople from 1866 to 1868. These tenements were considered the least desirable of all the housing available from the Freedmen's Bureau, due to their small rooms and location on the outskirts of the city.

Quartermaster Hospital

A hospital for employees of the Army Quartermaster Department, which in 1863 began operating out of St. Aloysius General Hospital, near St. Aloysius Catholic Church.

Wisewell Barracks

Former Army barracks located in the square bounded by 6th, 7th, O and P Streets, NW, converted into tenement housing for freedpeople from 1866 to 1868.



Washington, D.C., looking southeast from the Capitol building, 1863. (LOC)



CAUSES OF DEATH

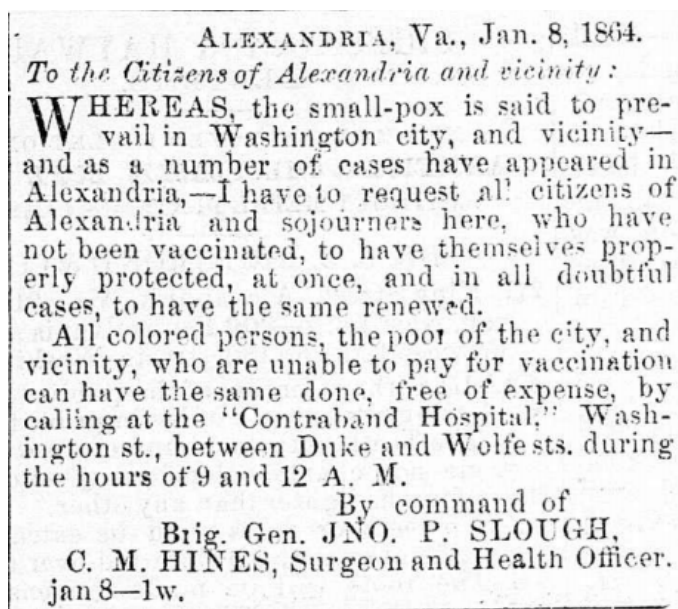
A number of entries in the Section 27 burial records list a complaint or a cause of death, which can provide some insight into how those individuals lived.

Some of the diseases listed in the Section 27 burial records, such as consumption (tuberculosis), bronchitis and pneumonia, are spread through the air and thrive in crowded urban environments.

Germes that cause diarrhea, cholera, dysentery and typhoid fever are spread through contaminated food and water. The prevalence of these diseases in the Section 27 burial record reflects the common lack of awareness about proper sanitation and the importance of access to fresh water.

Both the Union and Confederate armies required soldiers to receive the smallpox vaccine (developed in 1797) and also promoted vaccination among the civilian population. There were still smallpox outbreaks, however, and once an individual contracted the disease, very little could be done to treat it. Smallpox patients were often quarantined in smallpox or “eruptive fever” hospitals like the Claremont Eruptive Fever General Hospital, where they were cared for until they either recovered on their own or died.

The numerous infant deaths attributed to “teething,” and one adult’s death attributed to having “taken sick 4th July from drinking ice water,” simply reflect the lack of medical knowledge in the 1860s. Germ theory was only in its infancy, so neither doctors nor the general public practiced what we would now consider proper hygiene or sanitation; antibiotics and most vaccines had yet not been discovered; and without modern medical testing, doctors could only diagnose and treat symptoms of a disease, instead of eradicating the disease itself. Many of the causes of death in the Section 27 burial records are easily prevented and treated today.



Notification to the residents of Alexandria, VA about smallpox vaccination, published in The Alexandria Gazette. (LOC)



WHO WERE THEY?

There are more than 3,000 freedpeople buried in Section 27 of Arlington National Cemetery. For many of them, the information contained in burial records is all that is known about their lives.

While we know little about these individuals specifically, based on the history of the Freedmen's Bureau and Arlington National Cemetery, we know that they were former slaves who were trying to make new lives for themselves in and around Washington, D.C. Their families were too poor to afford a burial in a private cemetery, so they relied on assistance from the government and they were laid to rest alongside many Union soldiers who had fought to free them.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

- More information on the history of Section 27 and a compiled burial record of the freedpeople buried in Arlington National Cemetery:
<https://38thdcstudiesconference.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/arlington-section27.pdf>
- Primary source documents and interpretive essays that tell the story of emancipation and Reconstruction from the African American perspective:
<http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/index.html>
- Search for your Civil War-era ancestors and help transcribe Freedmen's Bureau documents:
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/freedmens-bureau-records>



1864 photo of African American students and teachers outside their schoolhouse in Alexandria, VA. This school had been founded by Harriet Jacobs, a woman who escaped from slavery and published a book about her experiences in 1861. In the photo, she is marked with an X. (Emory University Library)



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IMAGES

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