

SOME BLACK HISTORY IN ARLINGTON COUNTY: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

From the Files of the Historical Research Committee

Residence of blacks in Arlington County, until fairly recent times, was confined to certain well-established communities, each with its own origin and development. A sketch of these stories takes on perspective in the context of Arlington's over-all development.

Arlington View and Adjacent Areas

What is now called Arlington View was known for many years as Johnson's Hill since it was once part of the farm of John R. Johnston, a white. (The "t" dropped out somewhere along the way.) He was living there in 1866 when he was elected to the County Court, the governing body of the County. At his death in 1882, he left part of his land to his son Walter C. Johnston, part to his wife Maria L. Johnston, and part to his son Richard W. Johnston. This last bequest was in addition to the part which he had given Richard earlier. This son, like his father, took quite an active part in civic affairs: he was Chairman of the Board of Supervisors 1885-87, and twice served as Commonwealth's Attorney. J.R. Johnston also left a life interest to what his will describes as his "former faithful servant" Ann Johnston in the land "on which she now lives."

At the edge of the Johnston property was Fort Albany, one of the forts built for the defense of Washington during the Civil War. No trace of this fort remains since the construction of the Shirley Highway and the Pentagon road network. But it was still in existence in 1882 for part of the property left to Richard Johnston was described as "the ground occupied by Fort Albany extending out and around as far as the Rifle pits."

Nearby, across Columbia Turnpike and on part of what is now the Arlington National Cemetery, was Freedman's Village where freed Negroes were settled by the Freedmen's Bureau after the Civil War. This was close to the 17 acres given to Maria Syphax by George Washington Parkes Custis, grandson of Martha Washington and founder of the Arlington Estate. His deed to Mrs. Syphax, given apparently on the occasion of her marriage in 1826 to Charles Syphax, was confirmed by Act of Congress in 1866.

Quite a community was developed in Freedmen's Village, with a church, meeting hall, and stores. The Union League Hall, purchased by the School Board of Arlington Magisterial District, was the site of one of the first public schools in Arlington County. It was operated from 1871 until 1889. During the 1880's the population of the Village gradually had resettled so that a school was no longer needed in this vicinity. Living conditions in the Village had never been very satisfactory, and as soon as they were able to, the resi-

dents bought land elsewhere in the County. When the installation was closed as the Federal Government decided to expand the Cemetery, the remaining residents were forced out. Some went to Johnson's Hill where the land was now being subdivided and sold in small parcels, some to new communities like Queen City, South Washington, and East Arlington.

Queen City and East Arlington, the latter built on the land of Walter C. Johnston, disappeared when the Pentagon was built. It was condemned by the U.S. Government in 1946 in connection with the construction and improvement of the Pentagon road network. South Washington, which lay along Route #1, gradually disappeared as industries moved in and took over the land where people had been living. Many of its residents had been employed in the nearby brickyards, which also were being phased out. East Arlington at one time had its own volunteer fire company. When the community was moved, the equipment from this company was turned over to the Hall's Hill company.

The early history of Queen City reveals that the first black church in this area was founded by the Rev. Robert S. Laws. This was the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, built on land bought from John R. Johnston. A second church, Mt. Olive, was established by the Rev. Charles H. Veney who also owned and operated a general store.

Near Queen City and East Arlington before the construction of the Pentagon lagoon, had been a small collection of houses and a hotel known as Jackson "City." This had been the site of Fort Jackson (really only a bridgehead post) during the Civil War. It was here that a race track and gambling hall were operated at the close of the last Century. Later, the area was used for Washington's first airport (Hoover Airport) which operated until the National Airport was opened during World War II. All of these places offered employment for the residents of the nearby communities.

The name of Hatfield, once applied to an entrance gate (now closed) to Fort Myer from Washington Blvd. around 2nd St., South, was also borne by a community founded in 1882 by William H. Butler and H.L. Holmes. Known also as the "Butler-Holmes" subdivision, it is now called Central Arlington.

High View Park

This area of North Arlington used to be known as Hall's Hill since it had once been the property of Basil Hall who came to the County from the District of Columbia in 1850. He bought part of the Van Ness property which in turn had been part of the original Glebe Tract of Christ Church in Alexandria. Here he established his home and farmed his land.

Shortly after the Civil War, Hall decided to make the property available to the destitute Negroes in the area. The homes which they constructed on the property have been described as above average in comfort. Although blacks from elsewhere in the County held positions of high responsibility, there is no

record of any from this area having done so in the past. This is reputedly due to the "benevolence" of Mr. Hall who, although tolerating no violence to be perpetrated against Negro landholders, would not allow them to "forget their places." One of the early black churches in the County was Calloway Methodist on Lee Highway which celebrated its centennial not long ago.

The residents of this community have taken the lead in the County's "Neighborhood Conservation" program and through cooperative efforts have been able to bring about long-needed improvements to streets and sidewalks. The Hall's Hill Volunteer Fire Company was always one of the most active in the County. This station is now the County's #8 Fire House.

Nauck and Green Valley

The area known as Nauck derives its name from John D. Nauck, Jr., originally a resident of Washington, D.C. and a white who eventually moved to the County. His occupation was that of upholsterer but at different times he served as Special Police (1878-9) and Justice of the Peace (1890-91) in Arlington Magisterial District. He is best known for his activities as a real estate developer. These began in 1874 when he was still living in the District. In that year he purchased 46 acres from Rudolph and Emma Buckley. This tract originally had been part of the land granted to Robert Howson in 1669 and sold by him to John Alexander in the same year.

During the Civil War a large Union hospital known as Convalescent Camp had been located partly on this land. Thus it was for many years that the area continued to be called Convalescent Camp and what is now partly Army Navy Dr. and partly 24th Road, South, was known as Convalescent Camp Road. The camp had provided employment for many residents of the area. When Nauck sold his land in small parcels, he sold mostly to blacks. Development was still going on in 1910 when the advertisements for development of West Nauck read, in part: "Be Independent. Pay Rent to Yourself. ... A few good lots have nice running water on them. Weekly 35 cents to 75 cents." The "nice running water" was a euphemism for a stream which often flooded.

The community of Green Valley adjacent to Nauck drew its name from that of the Sickles estate. Part of the land which had belonged to the Alexanders was first rented (in the early 1800's) and then sold to Anthony Fraser whose home was established on Long Branch near what is now Shirley Park. His daughter who had married a Mr. J.E. Sickles, inherited the property. The story goes that a member of the Fraser-Sickles family who did not believe in slavery had freed his slaves and given them land and money with which to build a home in what is now known as Green Valley although originally that name had applied to the whole Fraser estate. Thus it was that some free Negroes owned land in the area even before the Civil War.

One of these was Mr. Levi Jones. When he died in 1886, his will provided that his wife, Sarah Ann Jones, should inherit "the house in which I now live" and 17 acres of land "bordering on the road leading to the Seminary," and

the horses, cows, and other animals and equipment on his farm. His will mentions his sons Levi and Isaac, and daughters Mary, Martha, and Louisa. His age at the time of his death was given as 86 (which would have made his birth date 1800) but as 45 in 1858 and as 62 in 1874. Probably, as was usual in those days, there was no actual record of his date of birth. He and his wife were leaders in the community. The Paul Dunbar Homes were built on this tract during World War II.

The Nauck-Green Valley area grew with the subdivision of land by John D. Nauck, Jr. and the movement of people away from Freedmen's Village. With this development, churches and schools began to be built. The Wesley Zion Church, first established in Freedmen's Village, began to hold prayer meetings in the home of Mrs. Levi Jones. Eventually, through her generosity, a small frame building was built on her property, the first church building in the community. The first building for the Lomax Church, formerly called the Little Zion A.M.E. Zion Church, was one which had been taken down in Freedmen's Village and re-erected at the new site. It had only one room where the congregation worshipped on Sunday, held its prayer and business meetings at night, and in which public school was held during the day. A second chapel was completed in 1889, and a new brick building in 1922.

The school in the Lomax Chapel was opened in 1875. By 1883, it was being referred to as the Kemper School. In 1883, the Arlington Magisterial District School Board bought three-fourths of an acre from Nauck and had a frame, one-story building, 24' x 36' constructed there in 1885. In 1892, a brick structure was built at a new site. The present school, known as Drew for the blood transfusion pioneer doctor, Charles Drew, later replaced Kemper. It has been enlarged and houses a model school program drawing pupils from throughout the County.

A factor encouraging the development of Nauck was the availability of good public transportation. The Cowden Station (later Nauck Station) of what was first the Southern Railway and then the Washington & Old Dominion, was located near where present Shirlington Road intersects with South Four Mile Run Dr. An electric railway running into Washington also served the area. The Washington, Arlington, and Fairfax had a station at the present junction of S. Lowell and S. Kenmore Sts., and its terminus near Shirlington Rd. and 24th Road, S. The Penrose Station of this line was in Arlington Heights near the Butler-Holmes subdivision.

Some Leaders in the Black Community

Negroes, even free Negroes, took no part in public life any place in Virginia before the Civil War. In this area the black population was relatively small. Interestingly, each decennial census beginning with 1840 reported more "free colored" than slave for the County and the City of Alexandria combined. Separate data for the County were not reported until 1870. In 1860, there were 1,415 "free colored" and 1,386 slaves in the City and County combined,

and 9,851 whites. In 1870, for the County alone, the figures given were: white - 1,175; colored - 2,010. The increase in the number of blacks in this area reflected the movement of freed slaves northward during and after the Civil War, and the permanent settlement here of those who had found employment with the Union forces during the war.

We know something about the free Negroes in this area before the Civil War from a record in the archives of the Virginia State Library. This "Register of Free Negroes in Alexandria [Arlington] County, 1858" contains names which are still well known in the County today. Ten Syphaxes are listed (although for some the name is spelled "Cyphas"), five Hysons, four Lomaxes, four Joneses, and three Halls, among others.

It is interesting, however, that with a few exceptions, notably in the case of the Syphax family, those blacks who were officeholders in the County after the Civil War were not native Arlingtonians and often not even Virginians. This conclusion emerges from the register of qualified voters kept separately for whites and blacks for each of the Magisterial Districts into which the County was divided in 1870. The register gives name, age, occupation, place of residence, and shows how long the voter had lived in the County and the State. Unfortunately, the book for the Jefferson Magisterial District which included Johnson's Hill and part of the Arlington Tract, is missing. The register for Arlington Magisterial District (year uncertain; possibly 1874) includes, among others:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Residence</i>	<i>Years in County</i>	<i>Years in State</i>
W.H. Butler	44	farmer	Arlington Tract	6	6
Dennis Boswell	25	laborer	McCable Tract	4	25
Randel (sic) Bates	29	laborer	Freedmen's Village	6	29
John Contee	52	laborer	Near Ft. Whipple	7	7
Thornton Grey	45	laborer	Arlington Tract	45	45
Thornton Hyson	47	laborer	near Mrs. Febrey's	3	47
John Hyson	35	blacksmith	Ball's Cross Roads	10	35
Abraham Holmes	98	laborer	Freedmen's Village	5	98
Burnett Holmes	30	laborer	Arlington	2	30
Ruffin Holmes	22	laborer	Freedmen's Village	6	22
Levi Jones	62	farmer	Convalescent Camp	35	62
Henry Lomax	41	laborer	Freedmen's Village	6	41
Jesse Pollard	21	laborer	Arlington	13	21
Robert Ruffin	32	attorney	Arlington	1	1
Austin Syphax	38	farmer	near Freedmen's Village	38	38
Shorter or Slater Syphax	34	farmer	near Freedmen's Village	34	34
Cornelius Syphax	40		near Ft. Whipple	15	15
John B. Syphax	32		near Freedmen's Village	1	1

Ennis Syphax	30		near Freedmen's Village	1	1
Henson Thompson	36	carpenter	Arlington Heights	6	6
Nelson Wormley	43		Freedmen's Village	7	43

Of this list probably the most prominent person was John B. Syphax. He was elected a member of the Board of Supervisors from Arlington Magisterial District on May 23, 1872.¹ He resigned in December of that year after he had been elected County Clerk, an office he assumed in January 1873. He served in that post only a short time and in 1874 was the member of the House of Delegates representing this area in the General Assembly. As Delegate in 1875 he introduced a bill which would have led to the building of a free bridge over the Potomac from Washington to the County. All the bridges at that time were toll bridges. In 1875, Mr. Syphax was elected County Treasurer but did not qualify as he could not give the necessary bond. In 1879 he was a Justice of the Peace in Arlington Magisterial District. His brother Austin had held this post in 1875. Both were active in what was known as the Radical Republican Party.

Probably the black who held office longest was Henry Louis Holmes. He was elected Commissioner of the Revenue for the County in May, 1875 but failed to qualify because he was not yet 21. The next year he was again elected and served continuously until December 31, 1903. He died in 1905 at the age of 49. It was he together with W.H. Butler who developed the Butler-Holmes subdivision. Mr. Butler was elected Commissioner of Roads for the County in 1879 and served as Surveyor of Roads in Arlington Magisterial District throughout the 1880's. In those days that job meant that he was in charge of maintaining the roads and for hiring men and teams of horses for road work and for buying the gravel and other materials necessary for road maintenance.

William A. Rowe (also sometimes spelled Wroe or Roe) was a free Negro living in Arlington before the Civil War. In 1869, he was appointed a Special Police for the County, and there is a record that he served as Clerk of Elections the following year. He was first elected a member of the Board of Supervisors representing Jefferson Magisterial District in 1871. On July 1, 1872, he became Chairman of the Board and served in that capacity until June 30, 1874. He continued as a member of the Board until he moved from near Johnson's Hill to Nauck in April, 1879. He was promptly chosen to represent his new Magisterial District (Arlington) and served as Chairman until June 30, 1883. He was immediately appointed Superintendent of the Poor for the County and served until June 30, 1886.

¹The length of residence in the County and State of only one year given for Mr. Syphax in the above list must have been in error or the imputed year of 1874 for the register is wrong, since, to have been eligible for election in May of 1872 he must have lived in the County for three months and the State for a year previously.

Another black who served as Superintendent of the Poor was Henson Thompson. Mr. Thompson first was Overseer of the Poor (an elective office) for Arlington Magisterial District in 1874, and the same year became Superintendent of the Poor for the County. Others who served as Overseers of the Poor were John Willis Wormley (Jefferson District), Isaac Green (Jefferson District), Benjamin Pollard (first in Arlington District - 1870; then in Jefferson District - 1876), and W.H. Lomax (Arlington District). Mr. Lomax succeeded Mr. Rowe as Superintendent of the Poor for the County in 1887. He had been elected Sheriff in 1883 but failed to qualify.

An interesting episode is the case of R.D. Ruffin who was elected Sheriff of the County in 1873 and took office on January 2, 1874. A newspaper account of this event notes that he had been studying law at Howard University and was the first Negro to take the oath as Sheriff in Virginia. A charge was brought against him that he had not been a resident of the County the proper length of time² at the time of his election and that therefore he was ineligible. He was indicted by the Grand Jury and apparently the charge was proved because on March 2, 1874, his resignation was accepted by the Judge of the County Court who wrote him: "Your resignation has just been handed to me and is accepted. Since your term of office commenced you have discharged your duties faithfully and to my entire satisfaction." Later that year he qualified as an attorney before the Court, and subsequently apparently removed from the County as he was a Delegate to the General Assembly from Dinwiddie County.

Mr. Tibbett Allen who owned land near the Little Zion Church in Nauck and worked as a farmer on the Frank Corbett farm was elected a Constable in Jefferson District in 1877 and a member of the Board of Supervisors from that District in 1887. He resigned in the Fall of 1888. Randall Bates served as a Special Police from 1874 until that body was abolished by the County Court in 1879. Travis Pinn also was a member of the Board of Supervisors, succeeding Mr. Rowe as the Supervisor from Jefferson District in 1879. He resigned in 1881.

Another group of black leaders in the community, of course, were the teachers. They have been named in the article on the public schools of Arlington District of Arlington County, 1870-1905 which appeared in the *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 1, in October 1965.

²One of the reasons for imputing the date of 1874 to the register cited above.