

Origins of “The Berg”

Alexandria’s Freedmen



Freedmen working at Quartermaster’s Wharf on Montgomery Street, Alexandria, Virginia, ca. 1863.

Library of Congress

During the Civil War, an influx of self-emancipated slaves (often referred to as “contrabands”) arrived in Alexandria. For several decades thereafter, this population, along with other free Black migrants, changed the racial character of both the city and its neighborhoods.

As recently as 160 years ago, the landscape surrounding North Pitt, North Royal, and North Fairfax Streets was very different from that of today.

Two blocks east, the Washington and Ohio Railroad’s yards blocked one’s view of the Potomac River. To the northeast, the stream known as “Ralph’s Gut” had been dammed to create an ice pond, with a wooden ice house nearby. Wealthy white investors like William Yeaton and Lewis McKenzie owned many of the large, nearly vacant, lots in this area before the Civil War.

During the war, recently liberated slaves came to Alexandria seeking protection from the Union Army, which employed them on the wharves or railroads, or to construct other facilities needed during the period of Union occupation. Some moved into “hastily built shanties” or barracks around North Pitt and Royal Streets. The newcomers called their community “The Berg,” because many of its residents had come from the city of Petersburg.

Over the next several decades, “The Berg” gradually expanded into a larger residential area generally bounded by Fairfax, Saint Asaph, Princess, and Madison Streets.

