



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Making archaeology accessible

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Alexandria Archaeology, a division of the Office of Historic Alexandria, holds nearly three million artifacts from 250 registered archaeological sites in the public trust for present and future research, education and exhibition. We are the stewards, not the gatekeepers, of this material. Our job is to ensure that these items are cared for in perpetuity so that your children and the generations that follow will get to experience the same wonder you had, and get to ask and answer new questions about the past and what it means to be human.

Grassroots community concerns about the potential loss of buried history in the 1960s and 1970s led to the creation of Alexandria Archaeology. Under the guidance of our first city archaeologist, Pam Cressey, archaeologists and volunteers carefully excavated the 500 Block of King Street. This work led to a richer record and understanding of the lives of people who lived there. It is because of this work that we know more about the life of Harriet Williams, an enslaved woman who lived on the 100 block of S. St. Asaph Street, and her struggles for freedom, autonomy and her home.

It is because of proper archaeological investigations, the kind that take notes, record context and properly curate artifacts, that we understand the material ways in which Williams and many other enslaved people created a home and a sense of family under the excruciating circumstances of slavery and white supremacy.

Sites that are properly documented and studied help us ponder bigger questions about the world. What does it mean to be free? What does it mean to be an American? Professionally excavated sites like this provide the material remains for sparking imaginations about the past. Artifacts associated with Williams are now on display at both the Alexandria Black History Museum and the Freedom House Museum, where new generations can engage with history.



Transfer print whiteware pitcher that may have been used by Harriet Williams. Now on display at the Freedom House Museum as part of the Determined Exhibit. (Photo/Anna Frame)



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Each privy and well, like the one associated with Williams, contains the untold stories of the people who have lived here. Archaeologists piece the past together by analyzing the smallest seeds and fish bones, fragments of glass and ceramic, as well as whole artifacts. Wells, privies and all the artifact fragments they contain – not just whole bottles – are non-renewable resources offering a snapshot into the lives of Alexandrians from the 18th through 20th century. Without archaeological excavation and curation methods, these small pieces of the past have less meaning for understanding Alexandria's history.

You can partner with Alexandria Archaeologists as stewards of the area's unique and long history. If you suspect you have a sinkhole on your property, or are approached by a non-city archaeologist asking to dig your well or privy, we encourage you and other residents to contact us first at 703-746-4399, email archaeology@alexandriava.gov or put in a 311 request. City archaeologists are standing by ready to answer your questions and help preserve the past for everyone.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.