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Out of the Attic

Rev. Pauli Murray and her ties to Alexandria

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Attorney and writer Pauli Murray was a civil rights pioneer, gender equality advocate and influential legal strategist. In 1977, she became the first African American woman to be ordained as an Episcopal priest shortly after completing her religious studies at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria. In recent years, Murray, a member of the LGBTQ community, has received increased recognition for her significant contributions to the civil rights and feminist movements.

Born Anna Pauline Murray in 1910 in Baltimore, she was raised by an aunt in North Carolina after her mother died. She attended college in New York City where she was able to explore her gender expression, often wearing men's clothing and choosing to use the gender-neutral name, Pauli. Murray struggled with her sexual orientation and gender identity. Despite emotional difficulties, Murray committed herself to the pursuit of racial and later, gender equality.

In 1940, Murray and a friend sat in the whites-only section of a bus in Virginia and were arrested in Petersburg for violating segregation laws. They were later convicted of disorderly conduct. This experience and her work as a civil rights activist prompted Murray to enroll in law school at Howard University so she could develop the knowledge and foundation to challenge Jim Crow laws. She graduated first in her class, yet because of her gender, she was denied a post-graduate opportunity at Harvard. She later obtained advanced degrees from Berkeley and Yale.

While working as a civil rights attorney in 1950, Murray published "States' Laws on Race and Color," a comprehensive study of states' segregation laws that, along with a paper she had written at Howard, influenced the NAACP's approach in "Brown v. Board of Education."

In 1965, Murray co-authored "Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII," an article that used the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fourteenth Amendment to argue that discrimination against women on the basis of gender should be prohibited. More than 20 years before becoming a Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg included Murray as a co-author of the appellant's brief in "Reed v. Reed," the case in which the Supreme Court first ruled that the Equal Protection Clause prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex.

In addition to her legal work, Murray co-founded the National Organization for Women and worked in higher education, holding positions at the Ghana School of Law, Benedict College and then Brandeis University.



Pauli Murray outside the Village Court apartments, August 1975. Photo/Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Seeking to pursue spiritual studies, Murray enrolled at the General Theological Seminary in 1973 and then moved to Alexandria in 1975 to continue her studies at VTS. She lived in an apartment at 2702 Dartmouth Road, in what was then Village Court and today is Seminary Walk. After graduation and her historic ordination, Murray remained at Village Court for the next few years. But when plans to convert the complex into condos were announced, Murray could not afford to remain there and moved to Baltimore. She later moved to Pittsburgh and died there in 1985 of pancreatic cancer.

(Note: While many historians believe that Murray today would likely identify as a transgender man, not all agree on which pronouns to use. This article identifies Murray with female pronouns which Murray used to identify herself.)

Historic Alexandria is proud to present its Pride Month Lecture by Prof. Lisa Croombs-Robinson on Pauli Murray and James Baldwin on June 30, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Alexandria History Museum at the Lyceum.

"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.