

Alexandria Times

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Women’s Civil War history in Alexandria

BY CHLOE MAZARIEGOS

On April 22, 1861, the Alexandria Gazette published an article about an upcoming meeting of women from the city, who wanted to participate in the ongoing Civil War efforts. Alexandria, at the time, was a very critical location for the Union forces, as its proximity to the capital, Washington, D.C., made defending its borders of the essence. Many forts were constructed here for this very purpose, among them, Fort Ward, which now houses the Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site. For several years, the Fort Ward Museum held a special program to commemorate the important and not often discussed contributions of women during the Civil War. It highlighted women who launched

aid and relief efforts to aid the fighting armies during the war. Although men were the primary landowners of the places where the Union erected its forts within Virginia, women often oversaw the property rights of the land. One example was Battery Garesche, erected on widow Margaret B. Dangerfield’s farm near Alexandria. The contribution of these women also extended to supplying life at the Forts themselves, with many women, particularly freed African American women, working in locations such as superintendent offices, cook houses, wash and laundry rooms. In Maryland, Nancy McDowell started her own bakery business when her husband, Charles, was detailed to construct at Fort Foote, and she sold her desserts to enlisted soldiers. Unfortunately, women’s

involvement in the war efforts sometimes came to their detriment. While there is a lot said about popular female figures from the Civil War era like Katherine “Kate” Jane Chase Sprague, who was a famous socialite almost as influential as First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln herself, there is rarely any discussion of other women, whose sacrifices – many times involuntary – played an enormous role in the Union forces’ victories. For instance, part of the land where Fort Stevens was built was home to a community of free African Americans. Elizabeth Proctor Thomas was one of the owners of this land, and the fort’s construction included demolishing her house. She spent a long time filing for damages against the federal government after this, to which, according to the Na-

tional Park Service, she might have possibly received compensation shortly before her passing in 1916. Since 1998, the City of Alexandria has celebrated March as Women’s History Month. The City of Alexandria offers its annual “Women’s History Walk” on Saturday, March 15, to educate the public about women’s contributions to Alexandria’s history. *Historic Alexandria is proud to celebrate Women’s History Month in March. Find out more on Women’s History Month events in Alexandria at alexandriava.gov/news-citywide/2025-03-03/this-march-celebrate-womens-history-month-with-the-city-of-alexandria* Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.