

# Docent Dispatch

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## Alexandria Civil War Ghosts and Graveyards

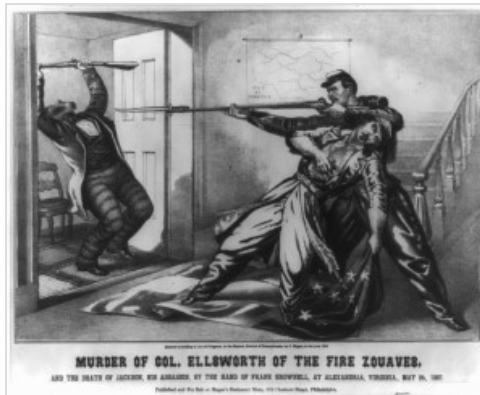
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In 1860 the population of Alexandria was 12,862. When the Civil War ended five years later, about half this number of Union soldiers, “contrabands” and Confederate prisoners remained behind in Alexandria’s cemeteries. It is not surprising, then, that a few restless souls remain behind as well.



Among these may be the first two combat casualties of the war, Elmer Ellsworth and James W. Jackson. Jackson was the proprietor of the Marshall House, a hotel located at the southeast corner of King and Pitt. A secessionist and ardent patriot, Jackson flew a large Confederate flag from the roof of his hotel, so large that Lincoln could see it from the White House. Lincoln requested his friend Ellsworth, a colonel of the New York regiment of Fire Zouaves, tear the flag down. He did so when Alexandria was occupied on May 24, 1861. Jackson took exception, fatally wounding Ellsworth in the left breast with a shotgun blast as he descended the stairway from the roof. A zouave named Brownell won the Medal of Honor avenging Ellsworth by shooting Jackson in the

face, then bayonetting him for good measure. The site of the Marshall House is today occupied by the Hotel Monaco, where a plaque commemorates Jackson’s defiance of Federal tyranny – *sic semper tyrannis*. Lore is that spirits persist on the sixth floor, in the location of the old staircase where the struggle over the flag occurred.

The Mansion House Hotel, gone now but once located in the front yard of the Carlyle House, was used as a hospital. The upcoming PBS series *Mercy Street* is set in this hospital. One or more of the wounded threw themselves out of the upper stories to end their suffering on the bricks below. Heads up on Fairfax Street – their ghosts are reportedly still falling.

Not long after the occupation, a local hero taking pot shots at the invaders was killed and dumped in a shallow grave at the side of Duke Street near the Metro Station. Judging the sniper did not merit a formal monument, the Yankees drove a stake through his chest to mark his unconsecrated grave. For all we know, he is still there, but the stake should hold his spirit at bay.

The Wilkes Street tunnel has earned some bad karma over the years. *The Alexandria Gazette* recalls in 1909: “Nearly forty-four years ago a young soldier was stabbed to death in the Wilkes Street tunnel. The murder was committed between five and six

### CARLYLE HOUSE

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o'clock on a bright summer evening. The party or parties who committed the crime were never identified. The victim wore new clothes, but there is every reason to suppose he had enlisted in order to procure several hundred dollars bounty. He had been lured into the tunnel, where he was murdered and robbed. A short time before this murder some fiends who had murdered a man placed his dead body upon the track at the western end of the tunnel. The head of the corpse had been placed on the rail and a passing train crushed it." The *Gazette* also reports that on August 25, 1862, a drunken soldier had his leg severed by a train at the eastern end of the tunnel. So, it turns out there is good reason for the "cold spots" in the tunnel.



On Seminary Ridge, Vacluse graced the spot where Alexandria Hospital now stands. In 1930 Marguerite Du Pont Lee told the story of the Vacluse ghost in her classic *Virginia Ghosts*. Vacluse did not survive the war, torn down for bricks to construct the powder magazines at nearby Fort Worth. By 1862, the estate had been devastated and a certain attractive young woman (probably Constance Cary) had fled south. But her beau, a young Confederate soldier, did not know this when he tried to slip through the lines to see her. The Confederates were nearby at Bailey's Crossroads, while the Federals were on an entrenched line between the newly-constructed Forts Ward and Worth, with sniping and occasional firefights in the intervening no-man's land. Our hero made it as far as the garden of Vacluse and was probably wondering

where the mansion had gone when Yankee pickets turned him into a ghost.

Lee says the boy was buried where he fell, next to the spring in the garden. In the 1930s, Lee regrets: "All that remains of that chapter in [Vacluse] history and of the once beautiful old garden are the hardy daffodils and narcissi, blooming here and there on the hillside in the spring sunshine; the thread of living waters surging over pebbles as of old, and the ghost of the unlucky lover, visible on moonlight nights, lying at full length among the ferns, violets and periwinkle beside the spring." Deprived of rainfall by the asphalt and concrete of Alexandria Hospital, the spring runs no more.

The nameless ghost is described as "a boy in his gray uniform, his breast stained a dark red, his youthful face turned upward towards the leafy roof of the interlacing poplars. Children of a later generation bend over him and gaze in breathless wonder as through the soft grey of his Confederate uniform they see the little violets blooming on the sod! Gradually he fades from their sight..."

The movie *Poltergeist* warns against building on old burial grounds. Yet there are many places in Alexandria where this may have happened. A wartime map shows a cemetery at the corner of Seminary and Quaker, where the rectory of Immanuel on the Hill now stands – this was likely associated with the Fairfax Seminary hospital. The hospital already had a dedicated cemetery about 100 yards northeast of Aspinwall Hall, so it is not clear whether this is a second "overflow" cemetery for soldiers or whether it was occupied by "contrabands." If soldiers, coffins were likely disinterred and moved to the Alexandria National

Cemetery; if not, it may still contain burials. And, as the Reverend Joseph Packard relates in his autobiography, not all of the roughly 500 burials in the main cemetery were moved: "Some boys playing in Dr. Walker's garden, as late as 1870, fell through a hole in the ground into a shallow grave, where a skull and bones were found." Now, of course, a house occupies the site of the main hospital graveyard.

At one time 39 Confederate prisoners of war who died in Alexandria were interred in the National Cemetery as well. All of the Confederate soldiers are now buried elsewhere, including 34 reinterred in a mass grave in Christ Church Cemetery by the Daughters of the Confederacy in 1879. Some of these Confederates may have been interned in the Odd Fellow's Hall on North Columbus. A particularly mean guard went missing one day and was never heard from again – unless he was the corpse found under the floorboards during renovations of the Hall about forty years ago.

Before the National Cemetery opened, soldiers were buried at the camps and forts where they died, or in Alexandria's potter's field, Penny Hill. Fort Worth had its own burial plot located on a knoll, "directly beneath" the guns of the fort, corresponding to the old garden of Colonel Herbert's Muckcross, now the cul-de-sac of Moss Place. Colonel J. Howard Kitching, camped at Fort Worth in December of 1861, described it to his wife: "You will remember that I wrote you about the little grave-yard where they laid the poor fellow who was shot two weeks ago, and where several of our pickets are lying, who have been shot at various times. We turned out our companies last week, and put a little rustic fence around it, and the place looks really pretty, only so *lonely*, and reminds one so strongly of the realities of war, lying, as it does, directly under the guns of our fort; their

black muzzles seeming to point directly upon the new-made graves." Records indicate at least some of these burials were moved to the National Cemetery. In the late '70s, across from Alexandria Hospital at the northwest corner of Seminary and Howard, bones were discovered as houses went up. Although Union eagle buttons were associated with these graves, they were almost certainly not soldiers. Most likely this was a burial ground for the freedmen who served the forts, hospitals and camps nearby.

Jane Stuart Woolsey, nursing superintendent at the Seminary hospital, writes sympathetically of the condition of these "contrabands." "The huts about us, first homes of the wandering, sorrowful race, were strange patchwork; bits of shelter-tents and blankets, ends of plank, barrel staves, logs and mud, but most of them were neatly whitewashed and with the likeness of a little fenced garden behind, and near many and many, by the roadside, was a rough grave with a red wood cross at its head." In her autobiography *Hospital Days*, she reflects that: "The huts and gardens are gone, and the forlorn graves were trodden long ago into the fine white dust of the Virginia highway."

These "forlorn graves" remain. The old roads widened now for modern traffic, crumbling bones shudder beneath our tires daily. Might we hope to assuage this indignity by not forgetting? Happy Halloween!

Sources: Joseph Packard, *Recollections of a long life*; J. Howard Kitching, *More than Conqueror*; *Alexandria Gazette*; Jane Stuart Woolsey, *Hospital Days*; Marguerite Du Pont Lee, *Virginia Ghosts*; Alexandria National Cemetery, [http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/national\\_cemeteries/virginia/Alexandria\\_National\\_Cemetery.html](http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/national_cemeteries/virginia/Alexandria_National_Cemetery.html)