

THE HISTORY OF GUM SPRINGS

Formally established in 1833, Gum Springs is the oldest African American Community in Fairfax County. West Ford, a former enslaved person at the Mount Vernon Estate, founded the community after he was freed by Hannah Bushrod Washington in 1805. When her son, Bushrod Washington passed away in 1829, his will awarded 160 acres of land adjacent to the Mount Vernon estate to Ford. In 1833, he sold the original 160 acres and purchased 214 acres adjacent to it. This new purchase would become the community of Gum Springs.

Prior to the Civil War, many of Virginia's communities were a place where Black Americans sought only to survive. However, Gum Springs wasn't just for "surviving," but for African Americans to be free, seek refuge, and ultimately build a thriving community.

West Ford's purchase of land soon became a safe-haven for freed slaves and runaways to build a life of their own free from the bondage of forced labor and enslavement. Over the years, refugee, run a way slaves made their way to Gum Springs, freed people of bondage migrated to the community by way of the nearby port of Alexandria, developing and constructing an independent community.

With the assistance of Quakers from Woodlawn Estate the residents of Gum Springs used the skills they brought from their country of origin and trades taught as enslaved workers to establish independence. This community soon became a place for newly emancipated enslaved people to settle and be reunited with separated families and for African Americans to grow.

During the Civil War, Gum Springs was a stop on the Underground Railroad for those seeking freedom in northern states. In 1890, the Joint Stock Club was created. The first minister of Bethlehem Baptist Church and his Deacons pooled their money to buy and sell land at cost to other African Americans for \$30 per acre. This allowed even more Blacks to be able to afford purchasing their own land and building homes, which resulted in a growing community. The first institution of Gum Springs, the Bethlehem Baptist Church and Schoolhouse, was established by runaway slave Samuel Taylor. Assisted by Quakers, the first school was established in Gum Springs.

With the establishment of new organizations, the community expanded and thrived. The triumph of this community, however, was not without adversity. The freedom of Black Americans from slavery is far from the end of the struggle.

In the 1950s and 60s, the residents of Gum Springs banded together to fight civil rights injustices that negatively affected their community such as the segregation of Fairfax County Public Schools and the lack of storm water drainage that negatively impacted housing standards. Residents worked on nationwide issues such as voting rights legislation. In the face of these challenges, the story of Gum Springs remains full of triumph, perseverance, self-sustenance, and growth.

Today, the community continues to thrive with over 2,500 residents with up to 500 direct descendants of the original Gum Springs families. The community houses a Black History Museum and Historical Society to disseminate the history of Gum Springs, a national treasure.

*Written by Ronald L. Chase, President of The Gum Springs Historical Society
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