

# *Archer Alexander: The Face of Freedom*

## *Re-Visiting a Rockbridge Icon*

*This article is written by Eric Wilson, Executive Director of the Rockbridge Historical Society, part of its digital series on [Local Black Histories](#), available on the RHS Website. An [abbreviated version](#) was written for the [Lexington News-Gazette](#), July 22, 2020.*

*New, original research comes from historian Dorris Keeven-Franke, who visited RHS & Rockbridge 2019 with Keith Winstead, Archer Alexander's 3<sup>rd</sup>-great grandson. For more details, see her extensive [ArcherAlexander.blog](#)*

### **“UP FROM SLAVERY”**

His name is Archer.

Archer Alexander.

You won't find either name on his statue in the nation's capital. Even its plaque.

But now his name echoes resonantly, again, in Rockbridge County.

He was born here in 1806, enslaved.

In August 1829, he was taken west in an 800-mile, five-family caravan, moving from the nation's largest slave state, Virginia ... to its newest, Missouri.

In February 1863, he made the decision to free himself.

Acted.

Ran away to Union lines, foiling a plot by Confederate sympathizers to sabotage a railroad bridge.

Saved scores of lives.

After the Civil War, he would “*Rise Up*”...

### ***Monumentally***



‘Emancipation Memorial’ (variously called ‘Freedmen’s Monument,’ and ‘Freedom’s Memorial’) sculpted by Thomas Ball and erected in Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C, 1876. Formerly-enslaved Archer Alexander was selected to model “his likeness in face and figure.” The just-broken chains echo how Alexander freed himself during the Civil War, after foiling a plot against Confederate sympathizers. Abraham Lincoln stands in the background (J. Scott Applewhite).

Archer Alexander became the national face, quite literally, for **EMANCIPATION**, as inscribed on the memorial that was installed in Lincoln Park, Washington, DC: the anonymous, self-emancipated hero who was chosen to accompany President Lincoln in lasting, heroic, and contested bronze.

The commemorative couple was dedicated in 1876, with a speech by Frederick Douglass, and funded entirely by the contributions of former slaves, and veterans of the United States Colored Troops. Recently, the original statue (as well as a formal replica of the 'Emancipation Group,' standing near the Boston Common) has been challenged for its representation of the figure kneeling beneath Lincoln, its design ambivalent as to who is responsible for his just-broken chains.

But neither statue recognizes Archer Alexander's own distinctive history. Nor his own agency in freeing himself, to aid American war efforts to save others.

### DESCENDANTS

Archer Alexander died in St. Louis in 1880. His first wife, Louisa, was also born in Rockbridge ca. 1808. Property of the McCluer family, and nurse to their newborn daughter, Louisa was taken on that same westward journey that would attract many migrants from this County, looking for new land and economic opportunity. Also on the journey, Archer and Louisa's own newborn son, Wesley.

The couple was separated by an estate executor in the 1840s. But after fleeing to St. Louis during the Civil War, and hiding in Illinois, Archer paid \$25 to a German friend to smuggle Louisa to join him. Archer noted that in their 30 years of marriage, they had 10 children together.

Their many descendants would include, most famously, Muhammad Ali.



Archer Alexander (b. Rockbridge Co. 1806-1880) and Muhammad Ali (b. Louisville, 1942-2016). Alexander is the third-great grandfather of both Ali, and of Keith Winstead, below (Missouri History Museum).

After following his fists to become boxing's heavyweight champion of the world at age 22, Ali then famously claimed his own name, when converting to Islam. Over the next 50 years he would establish a lasting legacy as a global icon and a Civil Rights pioneer, with the [Muhammad Ali Center and Museum](#) now standing on the banks of the Ohio River, to pay it forward.

But it would be Keith Winstead (like Ali, a third-great-grandson of Archer, and a Louisville native) who would bring their common ancestor's story home to Rockbridge, with profound and timely cultural impact.

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***Last Summer:*** Winstead visited the Rockbridge Historical Society Museum and Washington & Lee Special Collections Library, traveling with Dorris Keeven-Franke, a St. Louis based historian, genealogist and author. Together, they'd returned to Virginia to further research Archer's ancestry and historical contexts. From Lexington, she would drive back to St. Louis, blogging along the very route of the trek that was remarkably chronicled in the 1829 journal kept by William Campbell (its script now archived with [RHS Collections at W&L](#), but not broadly known until now).



Keith Winstead, Archer Alexander's third-great grandson, visits [RHS Museum](#), 2019 (Dorris Keeven-Franke)

These records are now more tightly stitched to the extensive DNA-based research that Winstead and other relatives have undertaken. Together they weave a remarkably rich tapestry that stands as a model for community and family based research.

When I met with them in Lexington last summer, and in communications since, I've been struck by the range and depth of their research, and the variety of resources and partners they've drawn on. In meaningful ways, they are jointly 'quilting history.'

Their genealogical research interweaves DNA tests with documentary texts, threaded through local and national archives. The unique histories and newly visible figure of Archer Alexander – both here in Rockbridge and nationally – illuminate other colors and patterns in a complex fabric of history.

***One. Year. Later:*** the multi-media narratives they've patiently shaped and shared bring fresh context to newly current conversations about history and legacy.

Not least for the contested debates regarding the pair of statues that still presently stand in D.C. and Boston (though an exact physical replica, the statue in Boston differs significantly in its sponsorship and funding, era of installation, public location, and communities most directly engaged).





Protestors for and against removal of the 'Emancipation Memorial' featuring Archer Alexander and President Abraham Lincoln (rear), Washington, D.C., June 26, 2020 (Tasos Katopodis, [Smithsonian.com](https://www.smithsonian.com))

As with the function of any monument in public space, the particularities of local circumstance bring specific considerations, and questions. But more broadly, the *Freedom Memorial*, anchored by Archer, also prompts useful questions not just about **Who** we memorialize, but **How**. And **Why**.

To quote the closing line of [HAMILTON](#), the monumental musical history of our moment:

### [‘Who Tells your Story?’](#)

Are documentaries or websites now the new forms of publicly accessible monuments? History Plays? Are DNA-results memorials in their own right, now trusted key archives?

This personal ‘return’ to a native place reminds me how much we have to learn from family descendants, in complementing traditional sources. They’re jointly and especially crucial to the work and legacy of local history.

### [FROM VIRGINIA TO MISSOURI](#)

When Archer was 16, his father Aleck was sold south from Rockbridge by John Alexander. As characterized in Archer’s first biography, [The Story of Archer Alexander: from Slavery to Freedom](#), published in 1885: Aleck was seen as “too uppity, [he] had somehow the skill of being able to read, and talked about being free.” The threat of literacy is a conventional trope in literary slave narratives, but it was also a crime in Virginia, highlighting the different means of power and vulnerability that could instantly sever family ties of the enslaved. Threat, trope or true: Archer never saw his father again.

When John Alexander died in 1828, his son James Henry Alexander would inherit his enslaved property, Archer included. The Alexanders were one of one of the earliest and most prominent families to settle what would become Rockbridge County. Most famous among them was Archibald Alexander, noted theologian born in Timber Ridge, who would become 4<sup>th</sup> President of Hampden-Sydney College, and head north to found Princeton Theological Seminary. Many Alexanders still live in Rockbridge today, as well as Campbells and Wilsons, McClures, and McCluers. Some of their forebears would try to stake west together, in 1829.

The daily journal kept by William Campbell chronicles the 50-person, 4-wagon caravan, including the 25 enslaved men, women, and children itemized among them. The first two sentences of his journal candidly state his own, singular priorities:

*“I started on a journey from Lexington, Va. to the state of Missouri. My own object in going to that remote section of the Union was to seek a place where I might obtain an honest livelihood by the practice of law.”*

Perhaps new Rockbridge archives, and family papers, will add more contexts to the enterprise: its varied experiences, its risks and rewards. Archer, after all, was but one of 50 in the great gamble.

Over the next three decades in Missouri, Archer Alexander served several prominent families, establishing connections that Keeven-Franke notes as crucial in ensuring his freedom, after his escape. His own courage and agency would earn respect among educational and political leaders in St. Louis, and would set the stage for his rise to national prominence, before his death in 1880.

### **FREEING HIMSELF**

Most famous among those efforts was a daring venture during the Civil War, when Missouri was a fiercely divided battleground between Confederate and Union troops, and civilian groups torn between those seeking to preserve Missouri’s slaveholding status since the 1820 Compromise, and others looking to free western lands (including a notable population of German immigrants).

As dramatically narrated in Keeven-Franke’s [ArcherAlexander.blog](#), Archer risked his life to foil a plot against local Union troops:

*“On a cold night in February 1863, Archer Alexander would overhear the men in his neighborhood [Southern sympathizers] bragging to each other on their latest achievement. They had surreptitiously managed to saw the timbers on the wooden railroad bridge that would collapse under the weight of the next train to pass over. Plus, they also had guns stored in James Campbell’s ice house. Knowing what this would mean, Archer took off after dark and made his way five miles to the north, in order to alert the Union troops known as “Krekel’s Dutch” as to what was about to happen. When the plans did not succeed, however, suspicion of who had alerted them fell quickly upon Archer.*

*Knowing that he could not stay in St. Charles, and fearing the lynch mob that was forming, he fled towards St. Louis. There were landmarks and those that he could trust to help him make his way. He had not gone far, and had fallen in with two others, when the slave patrol caught him near the river. They would celebrate their achievement, by stashing the slaves in a second floor bedroom over an inn, with a well-trained dog stationed below the window. Fortunately, as he climbed from the open window, the hound was awakened to the chase by a raccoon in the distance, and the dog disappeared in the trees. The slave patrol followed the animal, thinking it was chasing Archer, while Archer would disappear in the opposite direction. After several days of making his way at night, and sleeping during the day, he was able to make it to St. Louis.”*



Railroad bridge at Peruque Creek (Missouri) with blockhouse erected by “Krekel’s Deutsch” (Germans), the Union Home Guards pictured here with identifying white headbands. In 1863, Alexander ran to warn the troops the bridge had been sabotaged by Southern sympathizers who’d sawn through its timbers in order to destroy the next train. (St. Charles County Historical Society Archives, Missouri).

Through his own initiative and ingenuity – cued by a sort of ‘underground railroad’ – Archer would reach a still-tentative freedom. In St. Louis, with the 1850 Fugitive Slave law still in effect, he connected with the man who would protect him from arrest, help him legally secure his freedom under Missouri’s wartime law, and eventually memorialize him through both sculpture, and biography.

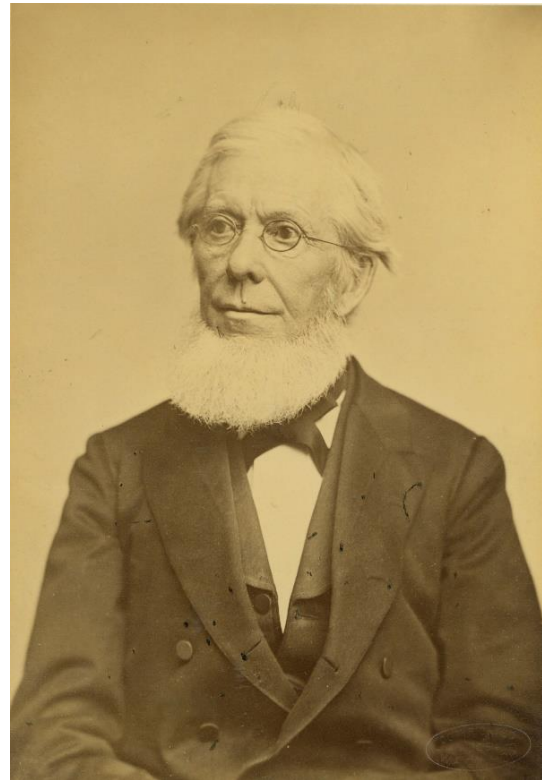
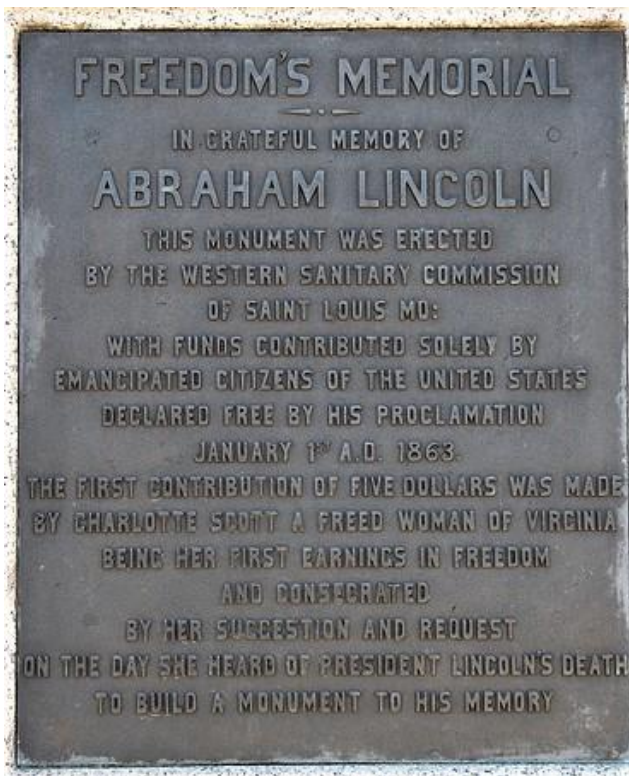
A celebrated Unitarian minister, William Greenleaf Eliot was the future founder of Washington University, and creator of Missouri’s public school system. He organized charitable homes that supported women and the blind, as well as “colored orphanages” and “soldiers’ orphanages,” alike. A political ally of President Lincoln, Eliot was a founding head of the [Western Sanitary Commission](#): a private relief agency, hospital system, and support network that served fugitives and wartime refugees. It maintained an expansive reach of service for two decades after the war, anticipating and collaborating with the Freedmen’s Bureau, among others.

Across its range of service: How many people might that Commission have served: from that 50-person Rockbridge caravan, and their families grown, in that half-century since?

Eliot’s deep, personal admiration for Archer’s integrity, courage, and self-determination led him to publish his posthumous biography, [The Story of Archer Alexander, from Slavery to Freedom](#). But his leadership of the Sanitary Commission, which had been tasked with the creation of a national Emancipation Memorial, would enable him to personally recommend that Archer stand as its model, providing “his likeness in face and figure.”

Its first funds had been contributed by [Charlotte Scott](#), a formerly enslaved woman from Virginia. As inscribed on the plaque, her own first \$5.00 “first earnings in freedom” came with the “request, on the day she heard of President Lincoln’s death, for a monument for a statue to Lincoln, on the day of his assassination, to build a monument to his memory.” In due course, freedpeople – including many African-American veterans who’d fought with the U.S. Army to abolish slavery and restore the Union – would invest their valued money to fully, authentically fund her *Freedmen’s Monument*.





Plaque on *The Emancipation Memorial*, or *Freedom's Memorial*, dedicated on the 11<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of President Lincoln's assassination. The plaque notes the famous contribution of Charlotte Scott, formerly enslaved in Virginia, who directed her first \$5 earned with a request to build a monument to President Lincoln. Dedicated in 1876 with an [Oration by Frederick Douglass](#), '*The Freedmen's Memorial*' was funded entirely by freedpeople, and U.S. Colored Troops.

The memorial's development was managed by the Western Sanitary Commission, co-founded during the Civil War by St. Louis' William Greenleaf Eliot (right). Alexander's legal advocate, biographer and friend, Eliot recommended him to sculptor Thomas Ball as the model for the "face and figure" that has broken his chains, poised in front of Lincoln.

### **'RISE UP' ... FREEDOM'S 'LIKENESS IN FACE AND FIGURE'**

Winstead and Keeven-Franke had traveled to Rockbridge to deepen their research, to more personally explore family roots, and to re-position Archer's story within widening media attention. The contexts of Archer's ties to the memorial had not been broadly known to many in the United States. But confirmation of the DNA ties to Ali had newly begun to spool out through *National Public Radio*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, and other national outlets.

This summer – torqued by COVID-19, and fueled by nationwide protests for racial justice – the *Emancipation Memorial* that Archer Alexander represents is playing out on an international and highly publicized stage. Added attention and energies from the Black Lives Matters movement has brought many to re-think the figurative relation between Alexander and Lincoln. Some have criticized the [unidentified kneeling figure's posture as too submissive](#), or Lincoln as too patronizing, too patriarchal. Others, while crediting the role of [new black citizens in raising funds for the original monument](#) in Washington, D.C., [note that its designers expressed the visions of white artists](#) and administrators.

[At the 1876 Unveiling of \*The Freedmen's Monument\*](#), the dedicatory address was given by Frederick Douglass: internationally renowned orator and political activist; journalist, publisher, and serial autobiographer; father to sons who fought in the U.S. Colored Troops; and self-freed from slavery, himself.

Douglass headlined the ceremonies for a crowd of 25,000 Americans – white and black, some birthright citizens, some now into their second decade of freedom – who'd gathered on the eleventh anniversary of Lincoln's assassination, April 14, 1876. Notably, given the bold, bronzed and capitalized title, EMANCIPATION: the chosen ceremonial date aligned neither with the wartime measure of the Emancipation Proclamation, 'July 1st A.D., 1863,' blazoned on the plaque itself. Nor, that of the ratification of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment: formally, finally abolishing American slavery on December 6, 1865.

Douglass' remarks centered on Lincoln, the politician, rather than the statue itself. And he was characteristically unsparing.

[Archer Alexander's name was never mentioned by Douglass, nor was he in attendance, when his own image was unveiled]

The most celebrated African-American leader of his time, and the most photographed man in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (shrewdly using that newest memorial medium), Douglass spoke only a few blocks east of the United States Capitol, and just over a mile from Ford's Theater. President Ulysses S. Grant, members of the U.S. Senate, House, Supreme Court, and the Dean of Howard University's Law School, John Langston Mercer, were among the nation's highest dignitaries, in witness.

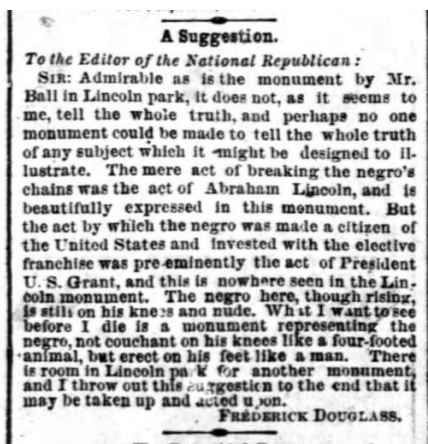
[The Text of Douglass' Oration](#) offers a host of praise for Lincoln, salted with a candid litany of his political failures and personal flaws, before ultimately noting that the President had re-keeled himself – and the nation in turn – as a newly transcendent 'Great Emancipator.' That turn and that commitment, Douglass would insist, opened lasting opportunities for black Americans for which all Americans should be truly grateful: advancing the nation towards its idealized yet still unrealized goals (not least in the light of evidently collapsing Reconstruction policies in 1876, a mere decade after the Civil War's end).

Douglass begins the occasion on a high note, his broad national narrative leaning to the hopeful gymnastics of the 'future perfect tense' (*what will have happened, when we later look back*): "We stand today at the national centre to perform something like a national act – an act which is to go into history; and we are here, where every pulsation of the national heart can be heard, felt, and reciprocated."

For all this monumental reach, Douglass carefully qualifies some of the distinct terms through which Lincoln's legacy differentially applies and appears to white and black citizens, metaphorically figuring them as Abraham's "children," and "step-children," respectively. In the celebratory moment, however, he offers little but praise to the occasioning artwork, newly sculpted behind him. President Grant, in his quieter second act, pulled off the curtain to reveal freedom's new figures.

With pride in the accomplishment, Douglass would further seek to extend and empower the meaning of Emancipation: imagining some new figure into the mix, while inviting keen and conscious critique to view these national histories in context. [A newly-discovered Letter](#), written by Douglass just days after the unveiling, reveals his own suggestion that another statue of an independent "negro citizen" stand next to the pair, in free-standing integrity. Having praised the "admirable monument" from the start, he's thoughtful enough to identify both ethical strengths, as well as diminishing flaws in this new national icon. Looking to the future, however, Douglass argues not for removal, nor iconoclasm, but for additional contexts, interpretive emphasis, and a broader representation of black lives that matter:

*"The negro here, though rising, is still on his knees and nude. What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man. There is room in Lincoln Park for another monument, and I throw out this suggestion to the end that it may be taken up and acted upon."*



[Letter written by Frederick Douglass](#) to *The National Republican*, shortly after he gave the [Dedicatory Oration](#) for 'The Freedmen's Monument,' in Lincoln Park, 1876, and suggesting additional complements to its figures, and re-presentation. Nearly 100 years later, in 1974, the memorial on the right was added across the Park, honoring educational pioneer [Mary McLeod Bethune](#), the first statue to honor an African-American woman on public land in Washington, D.C.



The very names that history has variously given these bronze-cast figures bring their own interpretive cast:

*“The Emancipation Memorial”?* Memorializing Archer’s own personal act? Or the political Proclamation by a presiding President??

*“The Freedmen’s Monument”?* Because the artifact was created with the funds entirely raised by freedwomen and freedmen? Or because it is to some degree representative of freedpeople??

Regardless: neither names Archer Alexander, specifically.

So here, and broadly, stands an opportunity once again to ‘Say His Name.’ Whether or not a new, upstanding version of him arrives to more visibly signal his agency (or another person, or symbol). Or some other new image to help us freshly imagine our evolving cultural terms and standards for freedom, and empowerment.

No monumental changes would come before Douglass’ death, twenty years later, in 1895. But his vision for other figures of citizenship and strength to complement the *Freedmen’s Monument* would be advanced, a century later. And not “like a man,” but through a woman of substance.

In 1974, a second [Memorial Featuring Mary McLeod Bethune](#), pioneering educator and activist, was installed across Lincoln Park. Paid with funds raised by the National Council of Negro Women (which she’d founded in 1935), the statue would be the first to honor an African-American woman on public land in the nation’s capital. Interestingly, in some sense of synchrony, the Lincoln-Alexander statue was even turned eastward to face her, and the children she dynamically leads.

We’re all variously and collectively shaped by our present knowledge, perspectives, and values. And none of us know what next may happen with these particular statues, with the park’s collective commemorative landscape, with American and international debates about monuments at large. But in their own important ways, complex community conversations, cultural protests, museums and media are presently building foundations of their own: helping to determine not only **WHAT** is worth remembering, but **HOW**, and **WHY**.

David Blight, Douglass’ prizewinning biographer and renowned authority on post-Civil War memory and memorialization, notes that the monument’s sculptor, Thomas Ball, “believed he had depicted Alexander as “an agent of his own resistance.” Qualifying that as “an assumption roundly debated to this day,” [Blight offers a contemporary, commemorative, community-based suggestion of his own](#):

*“Rather than take down this monument to Lincoln and emancipation, create an arts commission that will engage new artists to represent the story of black freedom from one generation to the next. Let today’s imaginations take flight. Perhaps commission a statue of Douglass himself delivering this magnificent speech. So much new learning can take place by the presence of both past and present.”*

In our digital age, photographs now stand as virtual and often viral memorials of their own. To my thinking, this particular image, as framed and focused here, most fully re-presents Archer, imagines him in distinct power, poise, and portrait. From a grounded, strategic angle, Lincoln remains engaged, but oblique. To others – informed by figural traditions of Art History, or felt through the spine of more personal experience – Archer may understandably appear subordinated, more subject than agent.



How we tell the Stories that Matter, and the contexts we choose to bring to the fore, inevitably and usefully places historical figures, events, and values in illuminated ‘relief’ (adopting a sculptor’s term that fittingly captures the highlights and subtleties that artists use to reveal both contrasts and connections).

But when we **do** know Archer’s particular history – when we are fully conscious that he’d been chosen precisely *because* he **did** free himself – it’s hard not to lock in on his determined gaze, cast in a more distinctly empowering light. His muscles already flexed, others at the ready:

### ***Archer has already broken his own chains.***

Different individuals, no less than different audiences, bring varied perspectives to historical artifacts, texts, and events that command broad attention. To the point: *Freedom’s Memorial*, originally installed in the nation’s capital during Reconstruction, a decade after the Civil War, has come to be seen and debated in different lights than its double. The latter, which has come to be known as ‘The Emancipation Group,’ was installed three years later near the Boston Common’s revolutionary terrain; significantly though, this full-size replica of Ball’s model was not funded by freedpeople, but by the Knights of Columbus.

More locally, Virginia memorials have been variously praised and pulled down on Richmond’s Monument Avenue: frequent points of comparison for the local memorials and institutional structures that have been variously created, commemorated and critiqued in Lexington & Rockbridge, from 1870-2020.

Whatever the monumental limits, or monumental lustre: Archer Alexander is rising again to join the memorial conversation: on new footing, in new national contexts; whether near Lincoln, or anchored more independently, elsewhere.

As so often, and in fitting coda, Douglass strikes a chord that is both resonant, pithy, and prescient:

***“No one monument could be made to tell the whole truth of any subject it was designed to illustrate.”***

### **A FINAL RETURN, TO FAIRFIELD**

Most historical research is deliberate. But some of its best moments come in surprise.

While in Rockbridge, Winstead and Keeven-Franke traveled to see some of the local sites and homes where these ancestral families lived. Among them was Fairfield’s Cherry Grove, right off the highway.



Cherry Grove, Fairfield, VA, US Route 11. This 18th-century Rockbridge estate was birthplace in 1796 to future VA Governor James McDowell (1843-46), as well as his granddaughter Jessie Benton Fremont (b.1824). Like her husband John C. Fremont, she would play her own prominent role in Missouri politics, and would help the story of fellow Rockbridge native, Archer Alexander (b.1806). Cherry Grove would be bought by members of the Alexander family in the early 1900s.

Historically owned by branches of the McDowell and Alexander families, it was the birthplace of future Virginia Governor James McDowell (b.1796). Also growing up there was his granddaughter Jessie [McDowell] Benton Fremont (b.1824): daughter to Thomas Hart Benton, Missouri's five-term U.S. Senator, who married John C. Fremont in 1841.

*[sidebar, if apt for Archer's narrative: Beyond his renown as pioneering 'Pathfinder to the West,' first U.S. Senator from California, and the Republican Party's first Presidential Candidate in 1856, Gen. Fremont was appointed by Lincoln to be the Union Army's Commander of The Department of the West. Based in St. Louis, he would be sacked early in the war, after declaring martial law and preemptively and summarily emancipating Missouri's slaves in August 1861, a year ahead of Lincoln's own careful, provisional Proclamation. Jessie Benton would famously if unsuccessfully lobby on her husband's behalf, even earning President Lincoln's admiration for her persistence when she found her way to him, personally]*

Jessie became a prominent Missouri activist in her own right, noted anti-slavery campaigner, and active leader in the relief efforts of Eliot's Western Sanitary Commission, and an influential journalist and author. Indeed, Keeven-Franke contends that the Rockbridge chapter of Archer's biography, as published by Eliot, is written in a distinct style that reflects her own hand, and influence of her own local ties.



*Writing Archer Alexander, from Virginia to St. Louis, and back.*

Noted American journalist and author Jessie Benton Fremont, an influential leader in 19<sup>th</sup> century St. Louis, appears at her writing desk in Los Angeles, ca. 1890s. At right, author and historian Dorris Keeven-Franke, pictured here at the Rockbridge County Courthouse, traveled from St. Louis in 2019 to research the lives of Archer Alexander, and other families who played a role in his life, during and beyond his first 23 years in Rockbridge, before being taken to Missouri. Based on Fremont's social connections (and the distinct style of writing in the Rockbridge chapter of Archer's 1885 biography, published by her friend William Greenleaf Eliot), Keeven-Franke suggests she may well have written that section, given local familiarities.

***In all their forms, Histories are written – or sculpted, or electronically webbed –  
through many Hands...***

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This historic Rockbridge site now operates as a dairy farm owned Tom Alexander, descended from John Alexander. The two Alexander descendants met there, ancestral footprints stretching back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, hands newly re-connected across the ‘color line,’ even as W.E.B. duBois enduring phrase still echoes. For all different limits, and opportunities, and historical turns, this photograph provides its own memorable and meaningful portrait in history, colored by the complex ties that both bind and bridge between past and present.



Fairfield’s Tom Alexander (descendant of John Alexander, left) meets Keith Winstead (middle, descendant of Archer Alexander) at Cherry Grove, historic Rockbridge estate, where Alexander now operates a dairy farm. They met during Winstead’s 2019 visit to research his Alexander family ancestry. At right (ca.1870s), Archer Alexander, in his later years in St. Louis, when his heroic service to the country, determined flight to freedom, would find him chosen as the model for the Emancipation Memorial that stands on Capitol Hill, in Washington, D.C., today (photos from Dorris Keeven-Franke’s website: [ArcherAlexander.blog](http://ArcherAlexander.blog))

Archer Alexander’s story will continue to grow, to spread, to stand on new grounds.

Already, new inquiries and ideas are fueling back to RHS, and to Rockbridge: where Archer began his life, his marriage and family, and his self-determined rise to freedom.

Wherever these new journeys lead, toward whatever heights, Rockbridge County offers inviting grounds to recover, reconnect, and remember his social networks, from the lived and worked ground of that first third of his life.

Rockbridge histories can help to flesh out the life of Archibald Alexander.

... And Archibald Alexander can help us to see Rockbridge, anew.

**~Eric Wilson, Executive Director**  
**ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
Director for History, Governing Council, Virginia Association of Museums