



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Ferdinand T. Day: A remarkable Alexandrian

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We continue our Black History Month series this week by featuring Ferdinand T. Day. Born in 1918, Day lived in Alexandria until his passing in 2015. His tenure on the Alexandria School Board in the 1960s and '70s is the most visible aspect of his service to his hometown.

Day impacted the rest of the world with his instruction of Foreign Service officers for the U.S. Department of State until his retirement in 1978. Day caught the attention of former City Manager Vola Lawson in the 1960s due to his support and leadership in fighting segregation of everyday services in Alexandria such as retail, transportation and local government. He made a lasting impression on those who fought for civil rights in Alexandria and beyond by emphasizing that the attention should remain on the issue rather than the protesters.

Day went to elementary school at the segregated Parker-Gray School. When he graduated from seventh grade, there weren't any public-school options available for African Americans to continue their education in Alexandria. He commuted every day into Washington, D.C., and graduated from Armstrong Technical High School in 1935. He later graduated from Minors Teacher's College with majors in geography and history. Rather than teach in Virginia, Day embarked on his career at the State Department. Upon his retirement, Day was a Foreign Service Reserve Officer.

Alexandria expanded its School Board from six to nine members in 1964, at least in part in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision 10 years earlier. Day was selected to serve as the first and the only African American member at the time. He was reelected in 1969 and became the first African American chair of a public School Board in Virginia in 1971, serving until 1972. The crowning achievement of his time on the board was the unification of Alexandria's high schools with the opening of T.C. Williams High School, now Alexandria City High School.

Day's public service didn't end there though. In 1985, he was chosen by the Virginia Secretary of Education to advise on the next steps in desegregating higher education in the Commonwealth. In 2007, it surprised almost no one that Alexandrians chose Day for the inaugural class of Alexandria Living Legends.

Although he died in 2015, Day's legacy in Alexandria continues. Today, students of all backgrounds receive a public education in Alexandria that wasn't available to him as a student. In 2018, Alexandria named its newest public elementary school after its own civil rights pioneer. Day's daughter Gwendolyn Day-Fuller is very much a pillar in the Alexandria community today. O

Historic Alexandria celebrates Black History Month throughout the month of February. For a listing of virtual events and celebrations, please visit alexandriava.gov/historic.

"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



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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.