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The man behind James Bland Housing

BY LAUREL SPEAR

Born in 1854 in Flushing, New York, James “Jimmy” Bland was a free African American musician and songwriter. Best known for composing more than 700 songs, Bland wrote “Carry Me Back to Old Virginy” which was named the official state song of Virginia from 1940-1997. Bland was inducted into the Songwriter Hall of Fame because of his revolutionary songwriting and for helping to break down racial barriers in the music industry.

At the age of 12, Bland discovered his love of music in Philadelphia, and built his own banjo. After moving to Washington D.C., 15-year-old Bland began composing short pieces of original music and earning money playing on the street. His father was one of the first African Americans to graduate from college in the U.S., and Bland followed in his footsteps by attending Howard University.

After graduating at age 19, Bland began looking for work with minstrel groups, but they turned him down because groups preferred to hire white

men in blackface. In 1875, he found employment with Billy Kersands’ “All Negro Minstrel Group” and toured with them for the next few years.

In 1881, Bland traveled to Europe where he spent 20 years singing with Callender-Haverly’s Minstrels and later touring as a solo artist. While in Europe, Bland found financial success, and even performed for Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales. Although he prospered while in Europe, in 1902 he returned to D.C. penniless. After he died from tuberculosis in 1911, he was buried in an unmarked grave.

In 1940, The Lions Club petitioned for “Take Me Back to Old Virginy” to be named the official state song of Virginia, and six years later, the club found Bland’s grave and erected a marker in his honor. Because the song contained stereotypical lyrics and was written from the perspective of a former slave reminiscing about being enslaved, in 1997 it was removed as the state song.

Because of his prominence in the music industry and the popularity of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginy,” the Alexan-

dria Redevelopment and Housing Authority constructed the James Bland Complex in 1954 to 1959. Located on the Northwest end of Alexandria’s Historic District, this complex housed low-income African American residents.

Before the housing was constructed, a World-War-II-era trailer camp occupied the site. When ARHA finished building the James Bland Housing, many of the trailer park residents moved into the newly constructed housing.

In 2008, the Alexandria City Council approved a redevelopment of the complex that would replace the existing James Bland Housing with a mix of affordable and market-rate housing. This redevelopment included the creation of 218 new mixed-income townhomes and multi-family dwellings as well as open spaces and additional parking.

Although many Alexandrians do not know the story behind the James Bland Housing, as former Bland resident James E. Henson Sr. explained in an interview with Oral History by the Office of Historic Alexandria:



PHOTO/ENCYCLOPEDIA VIRGINIA
 An 1879 image of Jimmy Bland.

“When I lived in Bland, the people that I knew were very happy to be there. There was a lot of camaraderie. We thought the accommodations were great. People watched out for people’s houses. There were times when we didn’t lock the door. It was a very folksy neighborhood.”

Out of the Attic is provided by The Office of Historic Alexandria.