

# Marie Grace and Cécile: Arlington in the 1850s



In 1853, Arlington was called Alexandria County and included the Town of Alexandria. What is now Arlington County was the “country part of the county,” and it remained very rural throughout the 19th century, while the Town of Alexandria was the “city part of the county” and was the social center. If Cécile or Marie-Grace lived in the “country” portion they most likely would have lived on a small farm.



In the journal kept by Robert E. Lee’s daughter Agnes, she writes about a book, *Angel Over the Right Shoulder*, that she received from her grandmother on Christmas of 1852. Among her gifts, this book is particularly notable because of the conflict it discusses between a woman’s need to fulfill her domestic role and her need to develop as an individual. At a time when the role of women was very restricted and they had few rights, it was an interesting gift, especially from her grandmother.



Sadly we have no record of what she thought of the book or what influence it might have had on her, but it’s very likely that both Marie-Grace and Cécile, as rather adventurous and independent young girls, would have found it to be of great interest.

## Epidemics

Like New Orleans, the “town” of Alexandria also suffered from epidemics of yellow fever, a particularly bad one in 1803. Popularly called "Yellow Jack" because it was a common cause for quarantining ships, and ships in quarantine fly a yellow flag or jack, the disease was greatly feared.

As a low-lying seaport community it was particularly susceptible to plagues, epidemics and other serious diseases including typhoid and dysentery. Due to these continuing epidemics it was decided in 1850 that the town should construct a public waterworks, which was completed in 1852. While this no doubt helped with disease control it would not have helped in the case of yellow fever which was found to be spread through mosquito bites.



## “Free Colored” and Slaves

Beginning in 1840 every federal census (taken every 10 years) reported more “free colored” than slaves for the County and City of Alexandria combined. In 1860, there were 1,415 “free colored,” 1,386 slaves, and 9,851 whites in the city and county combined. These “free colored” (which would have included Cécile if she had lived in Alexandria County) were primarily laborers, domestics and laundresses.

Overall, slavery was gradually declining in antebellum Alexandria because of an immigration of whites and the stagnation of local agriculture. By the 1870’s prominent persons of color such as John B. Syphax (1838-1916) who was born free on the Arlington estate and became a property owner in Arlington, held several offices included being elected to the County’s Board of Supervisors, in the 1870s.

By 1863, Arlington was the site of Freedman’s Village. This settlement, on the site of the Arlington estate, was established by the Federal Government as a refuge for escaped and emancipated slaves.

