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A Hidden History: Alexandria's Slave Pen and the Domestic Slave Trade

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Abstract

Historical objects often have dark and horrible stories hidden just beneath their unassuming and innocent visage. The picture above is one such example of this type of object. At first glance the photo seems to depict a simple brick building; however, this building is anything but simple. It was used as a slave pen in the 19th century. Slave pens were buildings in which slaves were imprisoned and prepared for sale. The one pictured above was located in Alexandria, Virginia, the site of a major slave-trading center. While this photo's association with the slave trade makes the photo a deeply disturbing one, the story that this picture tells is not completely devoid of hope or human agency. Indeed, the photo speaks to numerous stories of strength, as well as despair, in addition to the power of material objects and structures to enlighten both past and present Americans for the better. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Edmonson Sisters, Franklin & Armfield, slave pen

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Hidden History: Alexandria's Slave Pen and the Domestic Slave Trade

By Savannah Labbe '19



Franklin & Armfield slave pen in Alexandria, VA. (via Library of Congress)

Historical objects often have dark and horrible stories hidden just beneath their unassuming and innocent visage. The picture above is one such example of this type of object. At first glance the photo seems to depict a simple brick building; however, this building is anything but simple. It was used as a slave pen in the 19th century. Slave pens were buildings in which slaves were imprisoned and prepared for sale. The one pictured above was located in Alexandria, Virginia, the site of a major slave-trading center. While this photo's association with the slave trade makes the photo a deeply disturbing one, the story that this picture tells is not completely devoid of hope or human agency. Indeed, the photo speaks to numerous stories of strength, as well as

despair, in addition to the power of material objects and structures to enlighten both past and present Americans for the better.

The story hidden in the picture begins with the company Franklin & Armfield. It was established in 1828 in Alexandria and named after its progenitors, Isaac Franklin and his nephew by marriage, John Armfield. Although both part of one company, the two men operated out of two different cities. Armfield established his base of operations in Alexandria and Franklin established himself in New Orleans. These two outposts helped make Franklin and Armfield tycoons in the domestic slave trade industry. In the deep South, slaves from states such as Maryland and Virginia were highly prized because they were believed to be compliant, gentle, and not broken by overwork like people thought slaves from the deep South were. This stereotype of slaves from the middle states helped Franklin & Armfield put more slaves on the market than anyone else. Armfield even had agents going door to door in Virginia, Maryland, and Washington D.C., asking people if they wanted to sell their slaves. Franklin & Armfield was an innovative company; they developed mass-marketing strategies, such as advertising in newspapers that they were looking to buy slaves, and offered their Louisiana clients a money back guarantee. Their innovation allowed them to become one of the largest business operations in the South by the 1830s, only mere years after they established the company.

An important part of Franklin & Armfield's business was the transportation of slaves to the deep South. The domestic slave trade has been described by some scholars as a new kind of middle passage, though less attention is paid to this middle passage than the more infamous middle passage across the Atlantic Ocean. Today, most of the physical reminders of the middle passage of the slave trade on America's landscape have either been erased from the landscape, or they are completely ignored or reduced to simple waysides. A lack of awareness of these sites only serves to hide a cruel history. Slaves were usually transported in what was termed a "coffle." A coffle is a line of animals or slaves that are fastened and driven along together. The term coffle puts slaves on the same level as animals and indeed they were often viewed as animals, as less than human. Slaves were not to be treated with any humanity and Franklin & Armfield ensured their slaves knew their position among the animals. Armfield would have the slaves chained together while he sat on his horse, armed with a gun and a whip to keep the line moving and dissuade anyone from trying to escape. He would also bring along armed white men to help guard the slaves. If necessary, Armfield would sell off slaves to help pay for his journey. The coffle would move at a pace of three mph and would progress twenty miles each day. When Armfield got halfway to New Orleans, he would hand over the group to Franklin, who would take the slaves the rest of the way, using the same tactics as Armfield to keep them in check.

The beginning of the slave journey described above started at the slave pen in the photo. After Armfield and his agents bought the slaves, they would house them in slave pens either in preparation for an auction or, more likely, until they could be shipped further south. Sometimes the slave pen would be used as a place for Virginians to buy the slaves outright at auctions but usually it was just used as a holding place, as Armfield could

make a much larger profit by selling them in the South. Until they could be moved south, this slave pen was used for keeping slaves penned up like animals. It is not described as a house or even a jail, but a pen, something used to ensure animals do not escape. The use of the word pen was just another way slave traders and holders took away the humanity of the people they enslaved. When the pen was not being used by Armfield to display his chattel, he would rent out the space to slaveholders to use as a prison for misbehaving slaves. From the simplest and most innocent “crimes” to the most serious crime of trying to escape, slaves were punished by being treated like animals and penned up in a cage.

Auctions would also take place in this slave pen. Every slave dreaded sale; they dreaded that their lives would be uprooted and they would be separated from their loved ones to live a harsher existence in the Deep South. Slaveowners liked to encourage familial relations between slaves to help ensure the growth of the slave population but would rip these families apart as soon as it suited them and they could turn a profit out of it. Sometimes slaves would try to influence the sale by making themselves look less valuable. For example, slave purchasers tended to want a well-behaved slave, so sometimes slaves would make it seem as if they were disobedient and, therefore, less valuable. If slaves made themselves less valuable, then it would be less likely that they would be bought and separated from their family. However, due to companies like Franklin & Armfield, thousands of slave families were wrenched apart and often were unable to ever find each other again. Nearly 450,000 slaves were uprooted and sent to the deep South between 1810 and 1860 and Franklin & Armfield was responsible for a large portion of this movement. This slave pen in Alexandria was the site of the destruction of many families.

The end of the journey was no better for slaves. The Deep South was the worst place for a slave to be. Slaveowners in the South were often harsher and worked their slaves hard, treating them cruelly and feeding them little. Slaves would also usually be picking cotton, a much harder task than harvesting tobacco, which was what slaves from the middle states tended to do. The journey for Franklin and Armfield’s slaves usually ended in New Orleans, which was particularly known for its “fancy girls.” Fancy girls were slaves used as prostitutes. For many female slaves, the end of the overland middle passage resulted in their bodily violation, over and over again, to benefit their owner. However, with two of these would-be fancy girls, one sees a glimmer of hope in the story of the Alexandria slave pen. Two girls named Emily and Mary Edmonson were held in this slave pen in 1848. The Edmonson sisters, along with 75 other slaves, attempted to escape slavery. The group of escaped slaves boarded a boat called the *Pearl* but were unfortunately soon captured and returned to slavery. However, Emily and Mary managed to avoid being sold to a brothel owner to become fancy girls. Their story attracted much attention, especially among abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe and her brother. Stowe and her brother raised money and purchased the girls’ freedom. Afterwards, Stowe used the sisters’ story as part of her research for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Therefore, through an unlikely and ironic twist of fate, this slave pen, with all of its horrors, became inextricably linked with a literary piece of material culture whose

power in fueling the call for abolition in the North (and thus, also in fanning the flames of war throughout the South) played a key role in the path to American abolition.



***Statue of the Edmonson sisters in Alexandria, VA.
(via Wikimedia Commons)***

The Edmonson sisters were eventually able to achieve their freedom and they became relatively famous figures that abolitionists used to support their case. However, after the abolition of slavery, many soon forgot the horrors of the domestic slave trade. The

Edmonson sisters' story, as well as the story of this slave pen, is one that reminds people of this history. A company named Carr Properties bought the slave pen building and surrounding property, turning it into an office building and retail space in 2007. In addition, they also erected a statue of the Edmonson sisters so that their story would never be forgotten. No longer is the story of the slave trade relegated to the background of Alexandria's landscape, but it is out in the open to remind everyone of the darker side of Alexandria's history, to which this photo attests. The building in the photo has many different meanings to many different people. To the Edmonson sisters it was a place of despair, but also a place where they used their agency to try to escape. To Franklin and Armfield, the pen and the slaves held within it was nothing more than a source of profit—a profit that supported the social and political backbone of the southern states. The building not only means different things to people, but it also connects to several other material objects with immense symbolic significance and socio-political importance, such as Stowe's book and the modern-day statue. Most importantly, it connects to many different people: Slaves, slaveowners, slave buyers and sellers, the American public who read and were influenced by the descriptions of the pen in Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, as well as contemporary passers-by all have experienced this building in disparate ways—a testament to the multi-valenced stories of humanity, and inhumanity, to which the building continues to speak.

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