



PLACES | Freedom House Museum

From 1828 to 1837, the port city of Alexandria, Virginia, served as the eastern hub for the largest domestic slave-trading firm in the country. Native North Carolinian John Armfield partnered with Isaac Franklin of Tennessee to purchase enslaved workers from declining tobacco farms in Virginia and Maryland and sell them for enormous profits at the firm's slave markets in Natchez, Mississippi, and New Orleans.

Nearly ten thousand Black men, women, and children were torn from their families and transported to Alexandria—by ship, flatboat, and often on foot—to help meet the demand for workers on cotton and sugar plantations in the Deep South. When the firm closed in 1837, other businesses continued to traffic enslaved persons until May 24, 1861, when the Union Army marched into Alexandria and liberated the complex.

What remains of the former slave pen at 1315 Duke Street preserves the history and stories of the trade and its impact as the Freedom House Museum, which re-opened to the public in 2022.

The structure, part of the city's National Historic Landmark District, was built circa 1812 as a three-storey brick home, with an attached kitchen wing and basement, for Brigadier General Robert Young. When Franklin & Armfield purchased it, they converted it into a massive jail complex that encompassed half the block by adding a pair



CHRIS CRUZ COURTESY OF VISIT ALEXANDRIA

The museum's first-floor gallery examines the domestic slave trade and how it impacted the lives of enslaved African Americans. The 1830 census recorded 145 people held here at that time.

of yards enclosed by high brick walls on either side of the main block and fencing in the rest of the property.

The site passed through several owners and uses until the City of Alexandria purchased it from the Northern Virginia Urban League in 2020. City officials then commissioned a historical structures report to determine how best to restore the building to the period 1828 to 1861.

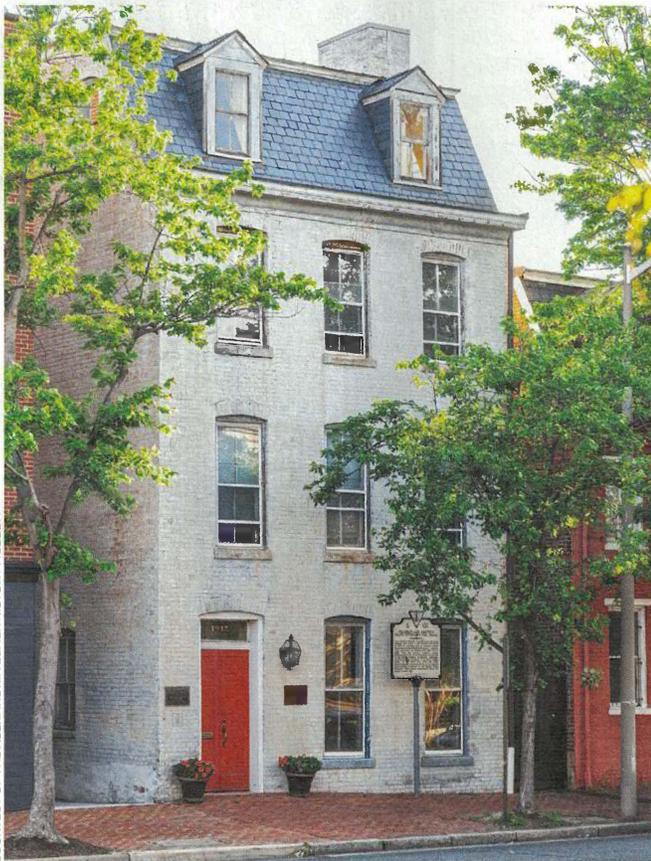
Museum officials continue to work with architects, exhibition designers, and community groups to develop a master plan for the site's future use, interpretation, and preservation. Participants were asked to consider how the trade operated at the site, the city and national capital's role in the domestic slave trade, the scale of the trade and its impact on enslaved persons' lives, what happened to the site after slavery was abolished, and the legacy and relevance of the site today.

"One of my goals for the museum is to make sure visitors who come here leave with a better understanding of Alexandria's role in the domestic slave trade," said Audrey P. Davis, director of the African American History division of the Office of Historic Alexandria, which oversees Freedom House, the Alexandria Black History Museum, and related historic sites.

"We hope that visitors think about the people—men, women, and children—who were trafficked through the site. We plan to share new research into what happened to them when they came through this location," Davis added.

Another goal, she noted, is to continue the museum's commitment to offering internships to students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) with a goal of bringing more people of color into the museum and

The remaining section of Alexandria's notorious slave pen, where thousands of enslaved persons were trafficked to cotton and sugar plantations in the Deep South, is now the Freedom House Museum.



COURTESY OF THE ALEXANDRIA BLACK HISTORY MUSEUM

preservation fields. "For African Americans visiting this museum and discovering this horrific history, many want to see people who look like them interpreting this history," she explained.

Currently, visitors can tour exhibits on the three main floors. The central exhibit on the first floor tells the stories of enslaved people who passed through the site, including Reverend Henry Louis Bailey, who returned to Alexandria after being freed in 1863 and founded several extant churches and schools in Virginia.

The second floor displays *Determined: The 400-Year Struggle for Black Equality*, a traveling exhibition from the Virginia Museum of History and Culture that traces the stories of individuals who struggled for equality and, in the process, shaped the nature of American society. A companion exhibition, *Determined in Alexandria*, focuses on Black Alexandrians who built the foundations of the community while fighting for equality.

Before the Spirits are Swept Away, on the third floor, is a companion to an exhibition at the Alexandria Black History Museum and explores paintings of African American sites by the late Sherry Z. Sanabria—often moody works of cavernous and shadowy construction sites, empty rooms, or abandoned buildings.

As the master plan comes to fruition, Davis said, "We will have to make hard but important decisions about the building and exhibitions. We plan to address many of the suggestions and actions that have been proposed in the community group discussions. This museum is an important part of our national story. What happened here also impacted the local community. All of this history needs to be told." ★

Freedom House Museum is open for tours Thursday through Monday year-round except on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

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