



June 2023 Newsletter

Interpreting the Domestic Slave Trade: Exhibits and Research at Alexandria's Freedom House Museum at 1315 Duke Street

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In May 2022, the Freedom House Museum reopened in Alexandria. The much-anticipated reopening made regional and national news and marks a new chapter in the history of the site (Armus 2022; Scott 2022). Two of the three powerful new exhibits showcase archaeological artifacts associated with the lives of free and enslaved Black individuals who lived and passed through Alexandria.

The Freedom House Museum located at 1315 Duke Street is the remains of a large complex through which thousands of Black men, women, and children were trafficked between 1828 and 1861 (Skolnik 2021; SmithGroup 2021). In the decades before the Civil War, Alexandria was a major port in the domestic trade of enslaved people and a variety of firms operated within the city, forcibly transporting people from the Chesapeake region to the Deep South. At its height, the massive complex spanned nearly half a city block, enclosed by high brick walls and fencing.

The Freedom House Museum seeks to reframe white supremacist history. Slavery, race-based laws, and racial terror erased and diminished African American history and contributions from the national narrative. This museum honors the lives and experiences of the enslaved and free Black people who lived in and were trafficked through Alexandria. Archaeological investigations and artifacts have contributed to the reframing of this narrative.

In 1984 and 1985, the owners of 1315 and 1317 Duke Street (44AX75) worked with contract archaeologists from Engineering Science Inc., Alexandria Archaeology, and the Alexandria Society for the Preservation of Black Heritage to document the history of these lots prior to redevelopment (Artemel, Crowell, and Parker 1987). They focused their efforts on three areas: the basement of the main building at 1315 Duke Street, the east women's yard also at

1315, and the west men's yard at 1317 Duke Street. Archaeologists uncovered artifacts and features, such as evidence of foundations and posts, which tell us more about the lives of those imprisoned here, awaiting sale and transport south.



1315 Duke Street

Two of the new exhibits at the Freedom House Museum include archaeological artifacts that speak to the lives of free and enslaved Black individuals. The first-floor exhibit discusses the history of the building and Alexandria's role in the domestic slave trade in a way that centers the lives of those trafficked and not their enslavers. One case contains objects excavated at the site and highlights the important role archaeology plays in helping tell the often-hidden history of those enslaved and forcibly moved through this space. The exhibit contains small personal objects like coins, a jack, and a cameo that may have belonged to those trafficked through the building and larger items like a crock and an enamel pan that may have been used to store food and feed those enslaved at this site. Eyewitness accounts from the 1830s suggest that enslaved individuals were fed inside the yard areas, using tin enamel plates and bowls (Artemel, Crowell, and Parker 1987: 84).



Archaeological excavations in western yard and basement overlaid on Civil War Quartermaster Map of the Slave Pen.

The second-floor exhibit geographically and temporally expands the focus beyond the slave trading complex at 1315 Duke Street to Alexandria and Virginia more generally. Using the Virginia Museum of History and Culture’s traveling exhibit *Determined: The 400 Year Struggle for Black Equality* as a starting point, the second floor explores these themes in Alexandria. *Determined in Alexandria* is a companion exhibition about Black Alexandrians who built the foundations of the city’s community while fighting for equality. Several cases contain archaeological artifacts that help speak to the varied experiences of free and enslaved Black Alexandrians over the centuries. One case discusses the role of urban enslaved labor in the sugar refining process. Sugar mold and syrup jar sherds and coral from two sites (44AX96 and 44AX113) illustrate the hot and sometimes dangerous process in which enslaved men and boys

boiled muscovado with lime water made from coral and shell to remove impurities from the mixture. Another case uses household artifacts like a pitcher, an inkwell, and a wine bottle excavated on the 500 block of King Street (44AX1, Feature V) in the 1970s to tell the remarkable story of Harriet Williams and her struggle to create a comfortable home despite challenges. Before the Civil War, Williams, who was enslaved, rented a house from Confederate sympathizers. When the house was seized by the Union Army during the war, she used the opportunity to purchase the property for herself and her family. The exhibit explores her subsequent struggles to keep this home amidst racism and injustice.



Transfer printed whiteware pitcher possibly associated with Harriet Williams (44AX1, Feature V) (Photo credit Anna Frame)



Cameo found in the basement of 1315 Duke Street (44AX75, Feature 1, Level E) (Photo credit Anna Frame)

Though the Freedom House Museum has reopened, work and research are not complete. The Office of Historic Alexandria is currently engaging with the community and other stakeholders to create the Master Plan for the museum. The Master Plan will provide a road map for the future use, interpretation, and preservation of the site. Through a series of public meetings and survey, feedback will be solicited about the site's mission, name, interpretive focus, and role in the community (<https://www.alexandriava.gov/museums/master-plan-freedom-house-museum>). The first series of stakeholder meetings began in March 2023. The City of Alexandria

is also committed to interpreting the history of the domestic slave trade beyond the walls of the museum. Alexandria Archaeology recently developed and installed a new sign in the heart of Waterfront Park that links 1315 Duke Street to the wharves along the Potomac River where enslaved people forcibly boarded ships bound for New Orleans.



Iron jack found in the basement of 1315 Duke Street (44AX75, Unit XVI, Level C) (Photo credit Anna Frame)

Additionally, while developing the archaeological artifact cases and interpretation for the new exhibits it became apparent that there is a need for further research and reanalysis of these sites. The collections are ripe for answering new anthropologically informed questions about the domestic slave trade and the lives of free and enslaved Black Alexandrians. A recent reanalysis of material from 44AX1 (Feature 4) has demonstrated the potential of these older collections to tell new stories (Niculescu 2022). The collection from Feature V, possibly associated with Harriet Williams, likely also holds clues to the past and can help us better understand how people created a sense of home despite daunting circumstances. Because Alexandria was a major node in the domestic trade of enslaved people, there are also other slave jail sites that have been archaeologically excavated in the city. The material from 1315 Duke Street would benefit from a full reanalysis and comparison with that excavated only a few blocks west at 1707 Duke Street (44AX172) (Kraus, Bedell and LeeDecker 2010). This work would build on recent and ongoing

extensive historic map and image research that has helped us better understand the history of the building at 1315 Duke Street and the complex around it (Skolnik 2021). We encourage anyone interested in either of these two projects to reach out to our department. These older archaeological collections have great potential to help us reframe white supremacist history and work towards a more equitable future.

References

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Return to June 2023 Newsletter:

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