

Harriet Williams, Independent Enslaved Woman (112-114 South St. Asaph St.)

Figure 1 shows a picture taken around 1870. The relief Fire Company ladder truck sits in front of an old frame house in the center background (112-114 S. St. Asaph) and the Columbia Steam Fire Engine Company (116-118 S. St Asaph) to the right.

In 1850, the frame house seen in the picture only had one story and was occupied by an African American slave named Harriet Williams. According to historical records, Williams was enslaved to [Samuel Lindsay](#), an insurance agent who lived just a few steps down the street and rented the house for her (Terrie 1979).



Fig. 1: The frame house at 112-114 S St Asaph Street around 1870, center background (Alexandria Library, William F. Smith Collection)

Harriet Williams was listed as the head of household in the City Census until at least 1855, a rare occurrence for an enslaved person in Alexandria. Records are not straightforward, but it is likely that she was living there with a Julia Williams, possibly her daughter, and Julia's four children. Julia Williams, aged 31 years, and her children, aged 4 to 14, were listed in the census schedule as a free "mulatto" family living on S. St. Asaph Street. The difference between "mulatto" and "black" was rather arbitrary and often inconsistent, but in any case it seems likely that Harriet and Julia were related and living together (Terrie 1979).

Williams was not the first African American to live at this address. Starting in the 1830's, the house had been rented and occupied by African Americans, beginning with Eli Thompson in 1836 and followed by Maria McDella (sometimes spelled "McDelley") from 1839 to 1846. Not much is known about Thompson but records indicate that McDella, a woman under 37 years of age, was the head of a household including six free African Americans as well as four slaves. Unfortunately, census records do not provide information as to the relationship between occupants, but it was not uncommon for related free blacks and slaves to occupy the same dwelling in southern ante-bellum cities. The last African American occupant of the house was a laborer by the name of Robert Duvall who rented the house from 1862-1864 (Terrie 1979).



Fig. 2: 114 S. St Asaph St (parking) and 116 (white house) in 1967 before demolition (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION).



Fig. 3: 106-114 S. St Asaph Street in 1967 before demolition (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION).

The frame house was razed around the turn of the century and the land was eventually purchased by the City of Alexandria and made into a parking lot in the late 1950's (Figs. 2 and 3).

After the parking lot was demolished during the [urban renewal project](#), archaeologists uncovered the remains of a well in the area that was once the backyard of the frame house at 112-114 S. St. Asaph Street ([See Site Map](#)) brick lined shaft measured approximately 5 ft in diameter and was excavated to a depth of about 4' 2" (Fig.4). The top of the feature had been badly disturbed so that the original well was probably much deeper than what was found. The well did not contain any fecal material, indicating that it was never converted into a [privy](#), as many others were on this block. Artifacts were numerous and preliminary analyses showed that they were deposited in the well between 1850 and 1860.



Fig. 4: Feature VV, 114 S. St Asaph St., ca. 4ft below top (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

This was a very important and exciting find. Indeed, it is rare for urban archaeologists to find contexts that relate exclusively to African Americans, since slaves or domestics usually lived in the same house as their owners. This feature thus became the first African American site to be excavated in Alexandria and provided archaeologists with the opportunity to study and learn more about their lifestyle in the 19th century.



Fig. 5: Whiteware ceramic artifacts, AX 1 Ft. VV (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

The research also showed a predominance of undecorated white ware, a hard and durable white earthenware more commonly used for table ware and much less expensive than other ceramic types. Indeed, the 484 sherds of plain white ware found in the feature amounted to 21 vessels out of a total of 81 vessels for the entire feature.

Although one might expect a household of slaves and free blacks to lack the more valuable types of ceramics, the finds in this well remind us of the risks of correlating material possessions with economic status too easily if historical records were lacking. Indeed, the well contained

a good number of porcelain vessels, the most valued ceramic ware at the time. In fact, this well contained a higher percentage of porcelain than two other wells excavated on the same lot and associated with middle and upper class families. This does not mean that the occupants of the house were able to afford such luxuries; in this case they were probably “hand-me-downs” from their white owners or employers (Scholz 1983).

Many of the artifacts found in the well were rather old by the time they were thrown out, some as old as 80 years. Another interesting finding was that the decorated wares were generally unmatched, unlike the assemblages found amidst the refuse of middle and upper class families on the block. The story that emerges from these finds is that of a very modest and different lifestyle. One can imagine Harriet Williams and her housemates making maximal use of their belongings, whether they were bought for a modest price, or handed down to them by their owners, friends, or family.



Fig. 6: Porcelain Fruit Basket, AX 1 Ft.VV (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 7: Repairing the basket in the lab (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

Among the finds was a blue and white porcelain fruit basket dating from 1790-1810 but discarded in the mid-nineteenth century (Magid 1982: 63; Fig. 6). It was decorated on the inside with a blue “Canton” pattern, a typical motif featuring a scene of pagodas on a lakeside. The handles were never found among the shattered pieces, leaving open the possibility that this valuable piece may have been handed down because it had been partially broken.

When it was found, the basket was broken in 145 pieces. It is only through the incredible patience of a few volunteers that the basket was restored almost entirely to its original form (Fig.7).



Fig. 8: Porcelain pitcher, AX 1 Ft. VV (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

Another fine example of porcelain is the neo-classical pitcher featured in Fig.8. This piece was deposited in the well sometime between 1840 and 1865 and could have therefore been used either by members of McDella's or Williams' households. In the middle portion, the raised white motifs feature a chariot, a lion, and winged cherubs or "erotes" (gods of love). A grapevine surrounds the neck, and the spout is in the form of a bearded and horned man representing the Roman god Pan. Classical themes were extremely popular in the 19th century. This particular piece was most likely inspired by the Portland Vase, an early Roman piece that was copied and popularized by Josiah Wedgwood in the late 18th century (Scholz 1983).



Fig. 9: Franklin's maxims on a pearlware mug, AX 1 Ft.VV (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

Another interesting find was a "Franklin's Maxims" children's mug (Figs. 9 and 10). This black transfer-printed pearlware mug depicts two scenes, each circumscribed by two maxims. The first scene features a shipwreck and two men on shore inspecting a rudder. The maxims read "Many a little makes a mickle. Beware of little expense" and "A small leak will sink a great ship." The second scene depicts people performing chores in a coastal village. The maxims are "Industry needs not wish and he that lives upon hope will die fasting" and "There are no gains without pins [pains] then help hands for I have no lands."

These maxims were taken from the last edition of "Poor Richard's Almanack" (1758), a book filled with maxims and proverbs collected by Benjamin Franklin. Fitting nicely within the larger trend of Victorian values that governed the times, they were extremely popular during the 19th century and were widely used for didactic purposes on mugs such as these and also on plates (MacMahon 1983).

(Written by Amanda Iacobelli, 2006)



Fig. 10: Reverse side of the same mug, also decorated with Franklin's maxims, AX 1 Ft. VV (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

References

Unless otherwise indicated, all artifact identifications were made by Barbara H. Magid, Alexandria Archaeology. Historical information was extracted from the Alexandria Archaeology Files (AAF), mostly compiled by Ruth Sinberg Baker, Vivienne Mitchell, and Nancy Sennewald.

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