



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Alexandria's descent into the slave trade

*Alexandria Times, February 28, 2013*

*Image: The Edmonson sisters. Photo, Library of Congress.*

Although Alexandria's economy in the 18th and early 19th centuries was largely centered on the prosperity of Virginia's agricultural abundance, by the 1820s things had started to change.

Lands overused growing wheat and tobacco for a century became unproductive, and a growing population placed a major burden on the region's sustainability. Seeking new opportunities, the children of Virginia planters began to move west and south, and the Old Dominion's landowners found themselves with more slave labor than needed at their declining operations. Thus, a new chapter began in America's dark period of slavery, one that involved the transfer of thousands of enslaved blacks from Virginia to the Deep South.

In the decades before the Civil War, Alexandria and New Orleans became the most prominent cities in the United States engaging in the slave trade. Several properties along Duke Street were associated with this inhumane practice, including ones at 1315 and 1707 Duke St. that still stand.

Joseph Bruin, who by 1847 was the largest slave trader in the city, purchased the [Bruin Slave Jail](#) at 1707 Duke St. in 1844. Bruin gained notoriety for his association with 76 runaway slaves who attempted to escape the District of Columbia for points north in April 1848 on the ship, *The Pearl*. After their capture near the mouth of the Potomac, the slaves were sold to Bruin, including two sisters aged 14 and 16, Emily and Mary Edmonson, seen in this photograph.

The sisters were transported to New Orleans to be sold as "fancy girls," but their father attracted the attention of northern abolitionists to their plight. With the help of the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, \$2,250 was raised to pay Bruin for their freedom. His daughter, Harriett Beecher Stowe, used their story in research for her book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

During the Civil War, Bruin was imprisoned and his property confiscated by federal authorities. A statue adjacent to the former jail building commemorates the Edmonson sisters.



*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*



**Office of Historic Alexandria  
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

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*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*