



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Notorious local slave dealer had hand in Solomon Northup's kidnapping

*Alexandria Times, November 7, 2013*

*Image: Price Birch and Co. at 1315 Duke Street, Civil War era. City of Alexandria.*

The new movie “12 Years a Slave” documents the tragic tale of Solomon Northup, a black man from Saratoga Springs, N.Y., who was kidnapped in 1841 and sold into slavery by a notorious human trafficker from Washington, D.C.

In his writings, Northup records the name of his kidnapper as “Burch,” but it was actually James H. Birch, who would later preside over Alexandria’s largest [slave pen](#) at 1315 Duke St.

In 18th-century Alexandria, slave auctions often were held spontaneously on sidewalks or street corners. But by the early 19th century, with the importation of slaves outlawed and the tobacco crop dissipating in Northern Virginia because of soil exhaustion, shipping slaves from the commonwealth to the emerging cotton fields of the Deep South became extremely lucrative.

It is during this time that permanent slave facilities were established along Duke Street. Alexandria became the second-largest slave center in the country, just behind New Orleans. Originally built as the private home of Brig. Gen. Robert Young in 1812, the Duke Street dwelling was leased by the firm of Franklin and Armfield in 1828 and converted into a large slave jail and pen. The strategic location of the site — between the bustling city to the east and vast farmlands to the west — allowed the firm to efficiently contain and then ship off hundreds of slaves at any one time.

In 1858, partners Charles M. Price and John Cook acquired the Franklin and Armfield property. Cook left the partnership soon after and was replaced by Birch. Soon the front facade was emblazoned with the name “Price, Birch & Co. Dealers in Slaves.”

When Union troops entered Alexandria on May 24, 1861, they found the building hastily abandoned, with one slave still chained to the basement floor. This photograph of the facility, taken about 1862, shows the main building after it was turned into a prison by federal authorities.

Although Solomon Northup was never actually associated with this site, the inhumane conditions maintained by his nemesis — Birch — in Alexandria were quite similar to those he experienced. The building has been vastly changed from its original appearance, but it still stands as the local headquarters of the Northern Virginia Urban League and the Freedom House Museum, which records the barbarism of slavery in this region.



*“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**

---

*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.*