



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

From D.C. jail to Alexandria slave bazaar

Alexandria Times, January 26, 2017

Image: 1836 woodcut illustration taken from a broadside advertisement of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Library of Congress.

In 1826, Congress appropriated \$10,000 to construct a jail in the city and county of Alexandria, then a part of the District of Columbia on the western side of the Potomac River.

The jail was built soon after along North St. Asaph Street, part of which is still standing today. When first constructed, its purpose was to hold not only criminals deemed a threat to the community, but also people of color who had come to the region but could not provide papers affirming their freedom.

Several years earlier, in 1820, Congress had authorized the corporation of Washington, the administrative unit established to run the new nation's capital, to regulate the terms by which "free Negroes and mulattoes, male and female, may come to the city to reside."

By 1827, just as the Alexandria jail was completed, these regulations were codified and immediately enforced. Black individuals arriving in the city had to register with the mayor's office within 30 days, present their title to freedom, and upon penalty of \$500 provide a bond to guarantee their personal good behavior and that they would not require costs to the corporation over the coming year.

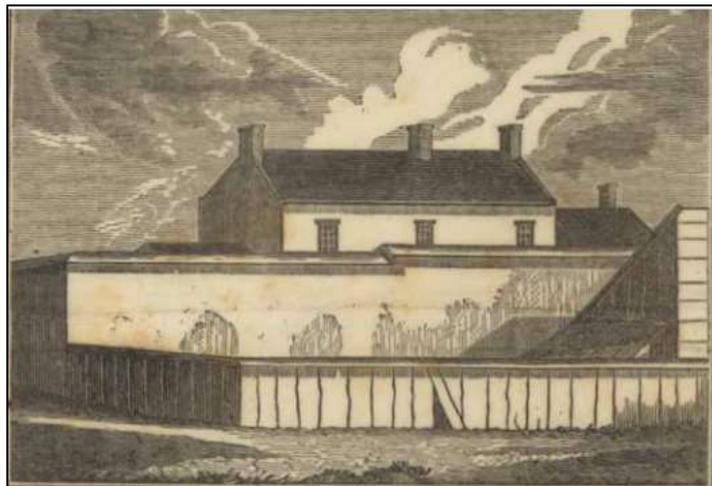
This bond was to be renewed annually for three years before permanent residency could be established. Those unable to meet these requirements were to be "committed to jail, as absconding slaves."

To make matters worse, those unable to prove their freedom or pay their ever-mounting daily jail fees were later sold to private owners and condemned to a life in bondage.

The American Anti-Slavery Society condemned this practice, and the accompanying woodcut etching, taken from their 1836 broadside advertisement, singled out the horrors awaiting people of color in Alexandria.

By that time, many Alexandrians supported the group's abolitionist goals, based not only on the inhumane conditions and punishments imposed on slaves, but also on how it affected the white population forced to witness this cruelty on a daily basis.

In an urban setting like Alexandria, those in bondage often worked indoors servicing white households, were dressed in finer clothes than their rural counterparts, and were referred to as servants rather than slaves. But by the 1820s, with the depleted agricultural practices and overpopulation of slaves





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

in Northern Virginia, the Port City became the major partner with New Orleans in the American slave trade.

What was once a sporadic and isolated practice in the sale of forced labor had emerged as a huge industry of Alexandria, with slaves tortuously held in open pens or chained and driven like cattle through local streets. Locals often referred to the suffering as “wretched creatures” and the discomfort it caused just viewing the spectacle.

In the early years of the expanding Alexandria slave trade, after passage of the African Slave Act of 1807, which forbade the import of additional slaves from Africa, traders were From D.C. jail to Alexandria slave bazaar few and far between and often advertised in local papers seeking to purchase excess slave from Virginia farms.

Lacking proper offices and facilities, these vendors in human trafficking were often to be contacted at local taverns, such as the notorious Indian Queen, located on the northwest corner of King and St. Asaph streets.

By the early 1820s, nearly a dozen such traders were doing business out of the lodging facility, and by 1825 the proprietor, Elias Legg, closed the hostelry and became a slave trader himself, witnessing firsthand the huge profits that could be made in the nefarious sale of human chattel.

“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.

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.