

Biography of Isaac Franklin

Office of Historic Alexandria Freedom House Research Project, November 2020

Isaac Franklin was the elder partner in Franklin and Armfield, the company based at 1315 Duke Street, the building we now call Freedom House. Franklin was born on May 26, 1789, to a farming family in Station Camp Creek, Tennessee. He was the son of Revolutionary War veteran James Franklin and the sixth of nine children. At the age of 18, he began working for his older brothers James and John as their shipping agent, transporting goods on the Mississippi River from Gallatin, Tennessee, to New Orleans, Louisiana. During the War of 1812, he served briefly as a Second Lieutenant in the Second Mounted Gunmen of the West Tennessee Volunteers.

Business

After his wartime service, little is known about Franklin's activities until May 19, 1821, when a Washington, DC, *Daily National Intelligencer* ad announced, "Negroes Wanted – I wish to purchase 18 or 20 likely young negro boys and girls, for which I will pay a liberal price in cash. For further information enquire at the bar of Joshua Tennison's Hotel. Isaac Franklin."¹ An ad placed the following April in the same newspaper sought the return of two enslaved people who had escaped from the Rockville County Jail. This suggests that not only was Franklin engaged in the slave trading business, but that he was trading in the greater Washington, DC, area at least part time.² While the United States Census of 1820 shows that Franklin's father James Sr. and brother James Jr. owned enslaved people in Sumner County Tennessee, Isaac was likely influenced to deal in the sale of enslaved people through his trips to New Orleans, where the practice was common.

In 1825 Franklin was still living at least part time on his family's property in Tennessee.³ An ad placed in the *Richmond Enquirer* on August 13, 1825, notes that Jailor Charles Hulet of Frederick County, Maryland, has in his possession a girl named Jane who says she is owned by an Isaac Franklin of Tennessee, and that the girl's owner should come and make a claim for her.⁴

Though some traders operated as independent agents, Franklin opted to work in a partnership to split the duties involved. John Armfield, a former Quaker from North Carolina, proved to be that partner. Isabel Howell posits that Franklin first met Armfield in 1824 while Armfield was a stagecoach driver in Virginia.⁵ Both Franklin and Armfield appear jointly on a sale in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1827 – the first documented sale involving both partners.⁶

¹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 19, 1821, 1.

² *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 11, 1822, 4.

³ Sumner County Tennessee Tax List, 1824.

⁴ *Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), August 19, 1825, 3.

⁵ Isabel Howell, *John Armfield of Beersheba Springs* (Beersheba Springs Historical Society, 2011), 10–12.

⁶ Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *Isaac Franklin: Slave Trader and Planter of the Old South* (LSU Press, 1938), 56.

In 1828, Franklin and Armfield formalized their partnership; leased the three-story brick building in Alexandria, Virginia, at 1315 Duke Street; and advertised their business in the *Alexandria Gazette* and the *Phenix Gazette*.⁷ Armfield was based in Alexandria, while Franklin was based mainly out of New Orleans and Natchez, Mississippi. Armfield purchased enslaved men, women, and children from around the Chesapeake region for sale in the Deep South. These enslaved people were kept at the Duke Street property, then transported to Franklin for sale, either by walking an overland route or via ship, an arduous journey that could take a minimum of three weeks.

Franklin and Armfield bought and sold thousands of enslaved people over the eight years the business was active. By 1836, Franklin was anxious to get out of the business, and began to extricate himself and settle the firm's accounts. Armfield partnered for several years with Richmond trader Rice Ballard before also quitting the business.

Personal Life

Franklin retired to his Fairview estate outside of Nashville, Tennessee, and in 1839 married Adelia Hayes, a minister's daughter 28 years his junior. The Franklins had four children during their marriage – Victoria, Emma, Adelia, and Julius Caesar (none survived childhood). In addition to the Fairview estate, Franklin owned several large plantations in Louisiana, and the family split their time between the two locations.

On April 27, 1846, Isaac Franklin died after a brief stomach illness in Louisiana. His will, executed at Bellevue Plantation on May 24, 1841, and probated on May 7, 1846, laid out his intentions for distributing his estate. He wished first to provide for his widow and children, and then create a seminary or school. The will notes additional provisions for the children of his siblings in varying amounts and for the erection of a family burial vault at Fairview.

Adelia and his daughter Emma (the other children did not survive to inherit) were given the use of his Tennessee estate, Fairview, and the revenue and profits from his Louisiana plantations and bank stock. If Adelia should remarry before Emma came of age, then the estate would revert to his executors, and she could either receive annual payments or a lump sum payment after a year. Adelia would go on to remarry twice, first to Joseph Acklen in 1849 and then to William Archer Cheatham in 1867.

The most widely written about part of the will pertains to the creation of a seminary or school on his Fairview property, to be funded by the revenues not allotted to his children. It was to include the building and furnishing, as well as payment of male and female teachers and professors, and allowed for the education, board, and clothing of his siblings' children, their descendants, his own children, and their descendants, with a focus on a good English education. If revenues allowed, the poor children of the county could also attend, if of

⁷ *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), May 15, 1828, 1.

exceptional character. He appointed his father-in-law O.B. Hayes, his brothers James and William, and John Armfield to oversee the bequest. The Isaac Franklin Institute was incorporated on December 1, 1847, and organized on March 15, 1850. However, two court decisions regarding the will nullified the Institute from being realized.^{8,9} While the courts generally found that the Institute had the right to exist, the bequest to his wife Adelia and daughter Emma took precedence in the proceeds of the estate, leaving little monies left with which to build and fund such a school. As a result, the Supreme Court of Tennessee dissolved the Franklin Institute on March 8, 1867.¹⁰

Franklin is buried at Mount Olivet Cemetery in Nashville, Tennessee, in the Acklen Family Mausoleum. After his death, his body was first brought to Fairview and interred on May 29, 1846.¹¹ Then at Adelia's death in 1884, her will instructed that the Acklen mausoleum be constructed and Isaac's body, along with that of her four children, be reinterred from their former resting place at Fairview.

⁸ Succession of Franklin-Adelia Acklen and her minor child Emma v. J.W. Franklin et al. Trustees. etc. (Supreme Court of Louisiana, 1852).

⁹ Wm. Franklin et al. v. John Armfield et al. (Supreme Court of Tennessee, 1854).

¹⁰ Adelia Acklen Cheatham et al. v. F.L. Paschal et al. (Supreme Court of the State of Texas, 1877).

¹¹ Acklen Family Bible, Tennessee State Library and Archives.