

Biography of John Armfield

Office of Historic Alexandria Freedom House Research Project, November 2020

John Armfield was the younger partner in Franklin and Armfield, the company based at 1315 Duke Street, the building we now call Freedom House. Armfield was born in 1797 to a Quaker family in North Carolina. Tax records show that his father owned at least one enslaved person, which would have put him at odds with the Quaker Church at the time. Family tradition held that Armfield ran away from home while a teenager, vowing not to return until he was wealthier than his father.

Business

According to historian Isabel Howell, Armfield seems to have met Isaac Franklin while working as a stagecoach driver in 1824.¹ The two maintained contact, and Armfield is first recorded as selling an enslaved person with Franklin in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1827.

Franklin and Armfield initially moved enslaved people by land, like other firms,² and they were well acquainted with the Natchez Trace forest trail and Andrew Jackson's military road. At one point, they had problems in New Orleans due to smallpox infections that killed many of the people that they intended to sell.

As the junior partner, Armfield was responsible for buying enslaved people in the Chesapeake region, while Franklin took care of selling them in the Deep South. Franklin also arranged lines of credit that allowed the firm to dominate their competitors in the early 1830s. The acquisition of their own ships changed the domestic slave trade; the firm seems to have owned seven vessels over its life (not all owned or operated at the same time). Armfield still took the coffles (lines of enslaved people) overland at least once a year, and more than one contemporary noted his poor health as they encountered him on the route. At some point in this period, he met Leonidas Polk, who later was to become an Episcopalian bishop and play a large role in Armfield's life.

Armfield used the building at 1315 Duke Street as both a place of business and a residence during the firm's operation from 1828 to 1836. When Franklin gave up the business in 1836, Armfield at first tried to operate the firm by himself. Then the building was sold to George Kephart in 1836, who continued to use it as a slave jail, and Armfield started a new firm with Rice Ballard, a former agent and partner of Franklin and Armfield. The new firm dissolved in 1839.

¹ Isabel Howell, *John Armfield of Beersheba Springs* (Beersheba Springs Historical Society, 2011), 10–12.

² Howell, *John Armfield of Beersheba Springs*, 14–15.

Personal Life

Armfield married Franklin's niece Martha in 1834; he was 34, she was 19. Armfield by this time had converted to the Episcopal Church, and Martha converted as well after the wedding. The couple became devout attendees of St. Paul's Episcopalian Church in Alexandria, but lived at 1315 Duke Street for only two years. They had no surviving children and instead raised her brother's three children after his wife died, even after he remarried.

Isaac Franklin married in 1839, and the Armfield and Franklin families remained close. In fact, they were all living together in New Orleans when Franklin died in 1846. Armfield took responsibility for the transportation of Franklin's corpse to Tennessee.³ Franklin's sudden death resulted in a long-term lawsuit between Franklin's heirs, Armfield, and Armfield's partner Ballard that lasted from 1850 to 1854.

In 1849, the Armfields, two nephews, and one niece moved to Sumner County, Tennessee. In 1850, John Armfield was listed as owning 300 acres of land, 15 enslaved people, 12 horses, and 6 cows. In 1854, he bought 1,000 acres of land at Beersheba Springs, Tennessee, with the intent to develop a resort and sell plots. His speculation paid off, and he received a second windfall of income.

Despite their official residence in Tennessee, it seems clear that the family stayed months at a time in New Orleans during the 1850s. They occasionally attended Trinity Church, rectorship of Armfield's acquaintance Bishop Leonidas Polk, then Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana, who began to talk of his grand plans for a University of the South. In 1857, Armfield wrote a letter to the Bishop of Tennessee, suggesting Beersheba Springs as the site for the new university. The university board chose Sewanee instead, but Armfield remained attached to the founding of the school, pledging in 1859 to donate \$25,000 a year for the remainder of his life. Thus, Armfield donated much of his fortune, gained through selling people, to the University of the South in Sewanee.

Despite losing much of his wealth during the Civil War, Armfield remained a relatively wealthy man. However, he was not healthy at the end of his life. His nephew Edward Noel Franklin noted that "Uncle Armfield" died September 20, 1871,⁴ after suffering from years of rheumatoid arthritis.

³ Howell, *John Armfield of Beersheba Springs*, 30–31.

⁴ Terry L. Martin, ed., "September 21, 1871," in *"Love's Young Dream": The Letters of Dr. Edward Noel Franklin to Miss Nannie Hillman* (Silver Goblet Press, 2018).