

INTRODUCTION

The Slave Depot of Washington, D.C.

AT 2219 LINCOLN ROAD NORTHEAST IN WASHINGTON, D.C., lies the entrance to Glenwood Cemetery. On lot 119, adjacent to Central Avenue and near the chapel, stands an impressive headstone, well in excess of eight feet tall, carved of Italian marble. The marker is not so much massive as it is distinctive, bearing the shape of a shield on the front and crowned by an ornate bell. This is the grave of William H. Williams, slave trader and proprietor of a notorious Washington, D.C. slave pen.¹

From Williams' place of burial, it is approximately three miles to the site of his slave jail, dubbed the Yellow House, which once stood on the block now occupied by the Federal Aviation Administration's Orville Wright Federal Building. In January 2017, the US government unveiled a pair of historical signs at 800 Independence Avenue Southwest, across the street from the Smithsonian's Hirschhorn Museum, to indicate the location of Williams' slave pen. The charcoal- and yellow-orange-colored panels supply curious passersby a cursory history lesson in Washington, D.C.'s slaveholding past.²

At the Democratic National Convention in July 2016, when First Lady Michelle Obama observed, "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves," she elicited gasps of indignation from some listeners offended by her statement, however factually correct it was. Slaves *were* involved in the construction of not only the White House but also the Capitol and practically all public buildings that went up in Washington, D.C. before the Civil War. That was how it was: enslaved people were crucial to the literal and figurative building of the United States. Though long overdue,

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Americans are at last beginning to reckon with the centrality of slaves to the nation's history.³

The United States terminated its lawful participation in the transatlantic slave trade effective January 1, 1808, but Congress did nothing to restrict the buying and selling of slaves within the young nation. Once the introduction of bondpeople from abroad was banned and external sources of labor cut off, the domestic slave trade accelerated, to redistribute enslaved workers to locations where they were most needed. Masters in the Upper South states of Virginia and Maryland sold surplus slaves, rendered unnecessary for labor locally by generations of Chesapeake bondpeople's self-reproduction as well as by regional economic transformations, to traders who carried the excess bondpeople farther south and west, where the demand for labor outstripped supply. At first, the preponderance of the domestic traffic conveyed slaves from the Chesapeake to the South Atlantic states of South Carolina and Georgia. After about 1820, the trade turned more westward, to the recently added states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Fresh cotton lands and cane swamps beckoned.⁴

Slave traders drove bondpeople to the Deep South in overland coffles, chained together single-file or in pairs, but as the domestic slave trade professionalized in the 1820s to accommodate the insatiable labor demands of the burgeoning cotton and sugar economies, they increasingly transported slaves via water. The US government, explained US Minister to Great Britain and future president Martin Van Buren in 1832, "most sedulously and rigorously guards against the further introduction of slaves" from overseas, with Congress in 1820 declaring participation in the international slave trade a form of piracy punishable by death. Yet simultaneously, Van Buren added, the law "*permits* [slaves'] transfer coastwise from one of the States to another." The same March 1807 statute that outlawed the foreign slave trade authorized, protected, and regulated the saltwater domestic slave trade in vessels "over 40 tons burthen" sailing from one US port to another.⁵

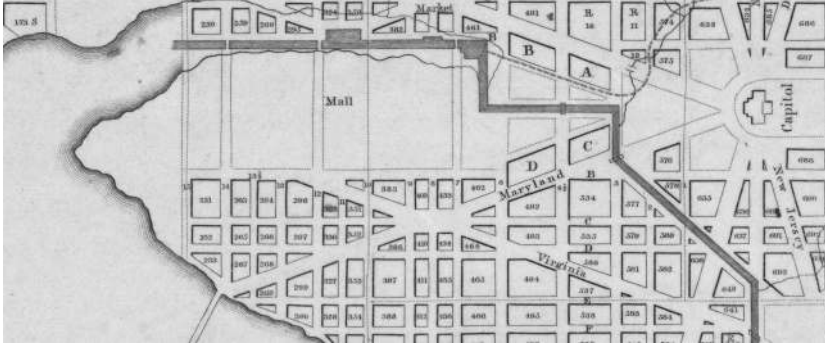
Among the new generation of professional slave traders arising in the 1820s, Austin Woolfolk pioneered the coastwise domestic slave trade

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from his base at the port of Baltimore. His family-run operation, which shipped virtually all of its slaves by water, dominated the slave market until the emergence of Isaac Franklin and John Armfield in the late 1820s. Headquartered in Alexandria, then a part of the District of Columbia, Franklin & Armfield upped the ante by purchasing their own slaving ships. In addition to the self-named *Isaac Franklin*, they operated the brigs *Tribune* by 1831 and *Uncas* by 1833. The coastwise slave trade had matured into a regular system by the time William H. Williams began to participate extensively in the saltwater traffic. Starting in the mid-1830s, he established himself as one of the foremost slave traders in Washington, D.C.⁶

Congress carved the District of Columbia in 1790 from lands donated by Virginia and Maryland. Consisting of a square ten miles on each side and bisected irregularly by the Potomac into two unequal parts, the District originally encompassed precisely one hundred square miles, much of it swampland in need of reclamation. It would take another decade of planning and backbreaking labor before the city of Washington was readied as the site of the new US capital. Sandwiched between Virginia, the single largest exporter of slaves, and the slaveholding state of Maryland, the District of Columbia emerged logically in the 1820s as a major hub of a bustling domestic slave trade on the East Coast, one that rivaled Baltimore in its traffic. About 6,400 resident slaves lived in the District in 1820, almost one-fifth of its total population. They lived on small holdings and most commonly labored as domestic servants. But it was the bondpeople who merely passed through the District, from the surrounding countryside en route to destinations farther south, who supplied slave traders their livelihood. Washington City and Alexandria were not known for the quantity of sales transacted there; rather, both served as leading depots for the gathering, warehousing, and shipment of slaves. “[T]his District is the principal mart of the slave trade of the Union,” proclaimed one congressman in 1835. It teemed with slave traders. One edition of the *National Intelligencer* in March 1836 included simultaneous advertisements from slave dealers Franklin & Armfield, James H. Birch, and J. W. Neal & Co., in addition to William H. Williams. Collectively, the traders desired more than 1,200 slaves for

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2 Map of “the Island,” Washington, D.C., 1840

Source: F. C. De Krafft, Mrs. W. I. Stone, and William M. Morrison, *Map of the City of Washington* ([Washington, D.C.]: Wm. M. Morrison, 1840), American Memory, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Washington, D.C., www.loc.gov/item/88694055/ (accessed November 26, 2018).

export. A September 1840 issue of the same newspaper listed not only Williams but also Jilson Dove on Pennsylvania Avenue, James H. Birch at the Steamboat Hotel, Robert W. Fenwick at Levi Pumphrey’s Tavern at C Street and Sixth, plus George Kephart, across the Potomac in Alexandria, at Franklin & Armfield’s former location on Duke Street. The slave trade, though certainly competitive, produced plenty of business to go around.⁷

William H. Williams established his slave pen and place of business on the Island, the name for that portion of Washington south of the City Canal, an artificial waterway connecting the Eastern Branch to Tiber Creek. (See Figure 2.) Opened in 1815, the Washington City Canal stretched northwards from the Eastern Branch, jogged northwest to skirt Capitol Hill, turned sharply west, north, and then west again as it joined a scooped-out and straightened Tiber Creek, which naturally flowed westward north of the Mall and emptied into the Potomac immediately to the south of the President’s House. A Washington City ordinance mandated that, starting August 1, 1831, anyone wishing “to trade or traffic in slaves” obtain a license from the mayor for \$400 annually, although enforcement of the provision proved lax to non-existent. According to one congressman in 1838, “for seven years, it has never been carried into effect.” William H. Williams and his fellow

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Washington slave traders may never have paid a dime for the privilege of peddling enslaved black bodies.⁸

This was how it worked. Sometimes, to the great convenience of the trader, sellers visited the slave pens with human merchandise to vend. Slave traders and their agents also roamed the surrounding Chesapeake countryside for slaves to buy. Paying for their purchases in cash, they escorted them to slave jails in the capital. “Private cells and prisons,” such as William H. Williams’ Yellow House, “have been erected by the slave traders in the District,” observed a congressman in 1835. Bondpeople “are brought into this city, sometimes marching in double files, connected by chains passing through hand-cuffs or collars, and sometimes crowded into large wagons, like sheep for the slaughter” or, to use another analogy, “like droves of cattle.” The slaves are then “driven through the streets of this city,” past the US Capitol, and “deposited in the ‘private jails’ prepared for their reception.”⁹

There the slaves awaited re-sale. Sometimes, but especially in the 1820s and early 1830s, dealers auctioned them off publicly within the District. “The District of Columbia is the great mart for the sale of men,” complained one antislavery activist in 1834. It is home to “a vast and diabolical slave trade[. T]he red ensign of the auctioneer,” customarily hung out to advertise the site of an impending sale, “is stuck up under the flag which waves from the towers of the Capitol.” By the end of the 1830s, however, local sales in public spaces outside the pens had fallen into disrepute and diminished, replaced by private sales negotiated within the walls and behind closed doors. Still, the vastly greater number of enslaved captives occupying Washington’s slave pens would not be sold to nearby masters at all but to strangers in distant lands, hundreds upon hundreds of miles away. In the Washington slave jails, explained one informant, “the negro is incarcerated until a cargo of slaves, of ‘human chattels,’ can be completed.”¹⁰

Once traders accumulated a sufficient stock of bondpeople to constitute a shipment, they prepared them for departure. As one representative in Congress explained, they “gather together gangs of slaves, and then fasten them by a long chain, running between the pairs, and to this they are hand-cuffed, right and left, and so driven off, ten, twenty, and thirty in a drove.” Thus bound, they exited the pen, navigated the streets

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of the capital, and crossed the Long Bridge over the Potomac, at the southwestern end of Maryland Avenue. “The number passing the bridge, in a year, was said to have amounted to hundreds,” wrote one observer in 1825, and the scale of the slave trade only increased as the nation experienced the flush times of the 1830s. Whereas some slave coffles kept marching hundreds of miles, across state lines, to their final destination, William H. Williams guided his captives through Alexandria to the riverfront. “Scarcely a week passes without some of these wretched creatures being driven through our streets,” grumbled one contemporary soured on the sight of slave coffles forcibly paraded down Alexandria’s thoroughfares. “After having been confined, and sometimes manacled, in a loathsome prison, they are turned out in a public view, to take their departure for the South. The children, and some of the women, are generally crowded into a cart or wagon, while the others follow on foot, not infrequently handcuffed and chained together.”¹¹

Williams and other D.C. traders then loaded their human cargoes on to vessels participating in the coastwise trade. After pulling out of port in Alexandria, they sailed down the Potomac, into the Chesapeake, and out into the Atlantic. By the time Williams achieved preeminence as a trader, his coastwise slavers set out occasionally for the port of Mobile, Alabama, but more commonly for New Orleans. Traders such as Williams undertook these voyages seasonally. Slaving vessels usually plied the coastal waters from October to May, avoiding the hottest months of summer, the malarial season, and the frequent outbreaks of yellow fever that besieged the Crescent City almost annually. The coastwise slaving calendar reduced mortality and increased the odds of maintaining the health of human cargoes. Voyages to New Orleans aboard the “floating jails” took about four weeks. Once in port, the slaves would be placed in a pen, fattened, and prepped for sale at auction. Traders maintained ownership of the bondpeople conveyed to the South until the moment they finalized their sales.¹²

New Orleans ranked as the largest slave market in the Old South and in all of North America. From the 1790s to the 1860s, the domestic slave trade dislocated one million bondpeople from home and loved ones, more than two-thirds of that figure between 1820 and 1860 alone. About 100,000, or 10 percent of the total, passed through New Orleans. The

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twin demands of cotton and sugar cultivation sucked slaves involuntarily into the city's pool of laborers for sale. The number of Louisiana sugar plantations increased more than threefold from 1824 to 1830, leading to a dramatic increase in the numbers of slaves toiling in the legendary hell of the cane swamps. Through no coincidence, the value of the cane crop more than tripled between 1820 and 1829. At the same time, cotton became the leading US export in the 1820s, and the expanding cotton frontier dispatched eager buyers to New Orleans on a quest for an idealized labor force necessary to clear the land and make a crop. Cotton prices "reached fifteen-year highs by 1835," spurring the acquisition of ever more slaves. Professional slave traders accordingly increased the scale of their operations to keep pace with demand. One of every twelve slaves crossed state lines in the 1820s, and one of every seven in the 1830s. Thirty percent of all bondpeople living in the Virginia Tidewater that decade were yanked out of the commonwealth. From 1833 to 1836 alone, 150,000 slaves were part of a sweeping, compulsory migration to the newer states of the Old Southwest. Large numbers passed through the Crescent City, either with their masters and onward to their new plantation homes upriver or as chattel for sale. Between 1820 and 1860, the New Orleans slave markets disposed of 6,000–8,000 bondpeople each year to new owners, or about \$11 million worth of enslaved bodies annually. Many of these slaves produced the cotton that transformed New Orleans into a commercial powerhouse thoroughly enmeshed in an Atlantic capitalist economy. By 1850, the bustling port was not only the largest city in the South but also the third-largest in the United States. Measured by the value of its exports, it outranked New York City as of 1834 and became the fourth-largest port globally in the 1840s. Slave trading not only was big business: it made big business.¹³

This book chronicles the misadventures of slave trader and slave pen operator William H. Williams, who trafficked in commodified human beings during a career that spanned from the late 1820s to 1850. During that time, he sold untold thousands of slaves in Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and other slave markets. His slave-trading activities took an extraordinary turn in September 1840 when one of his agents

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purchased a parcel of twenty-seven enslaved convicts – twenty-one men and six women – out of the Virginia State Penitentiary in Richmond. They had been convicted of a range of felonies and sentenced to death, but the commonwealth's governor exercised his legal right to reprieve them to sale and transportation outside the United States as an alternative to execution. He sold them to Williams' agent with the understanding that the enslaved criminals would, in accordance with Virginia law, be transported out of the country. Williams furnished the required \$1,000 bond per slave as insurance that he would remove them beyond the limits of the United States, but six weeks later, he appeared in New Orleans with his human cargo in tow. His violation of an 1817 Louisiana statute against the importation of enslaved convicts set off a protracted legal battle in the state court system. Altogether, Williams was party to more than a dozen lawsuits, providing ample fodder for a book that weaves together strands of slave criminality, the coastwise domestic slave trade, and southern jurisprudence.¹⁴

Few scholars have ever mentioned William H. Williams or his fateful journey of 1840. Whereas some slave traders have had articles or entire volumes written about them, Williams has garnered only cursory examination, never earning more than a sentence or two and sometimes only a footnote.¹⁵ And despite the explosion of research on the domestic slave trade over the past two decades, as well as the publication of landmark works in the new history of capitalism that situate the forced migration of slaves to the Old Southwest within the context of an expansive and rapidly evolving economic system, the legal history of the domestic slave trade remains little explored. With the notable exception of breach of warranty suits, in which slave purchasers sued traders after finding their newly acquired human property “unsound” in either mind or body, scholars have overlooked a host of legal issues resulting from the internal traffic in enslaved laborers. Williams spent the bulk of his adult life mired in litigation related to his profession. In 1840, his cargo of convicted slaves that arrived in New Orleans generated a sensation nationwide as it not only shed light on Williams' own sordid business dealings as human trafficker but also exposed multiple points of contention within the construction of Louisiana slave law. The tangle of legal issues raised

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by Williams' case would not be fully unraveled until after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery itself.¹⁶

Slave ships and their cargoes have inspired no shortage of studies. Unlike Williams' imbroglio in New Orleans, the vast majority of these contain an international dimension, examining the transatlantic slave traffic, outlawed beginning in 1808, and the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas.¹⁷ The fully lawful coastwise domestic slave trade produced its own share of memorable incidents, including shipwrecks and captives' shipboard uprisings. The Williams' gang slaves neither wrecked nor rebelled during their voyage, and their story does not share the same notoriety as other contemporaneous incidents, aboard such vessels as the *Creole* or the *Amistad*. It is nevertheless significant in that it offers the first detailed look at a shipment of enslaved criminals ordered sold and transported out of the United States. That the captives never made it outside the country reveals much about the functioning of the coastwise domestic slave trade in law and in practice. Williams' exploits with his enslaved transports attracted national attention by exposing the legal machinery that governed the realm of human trafficking.¹⁸

No simple biography, *Williams' Gang* is a roughly chronological story of not only a trader but also his enslaved cargo. Every act of sale told of one person's profit as it related a brief tale of another's heartbreak, tragedy, and misery. We learn about the convict slaves from Virginia transported by William H. Williams to New Orleans from a vast array of sources that collectively help identify the members of the Williams' gang captives by name, age, sex, and market value, and supply knowledge of the dates, locations, and natures of the crimes for which they were convicted. Surviving records permit the reconstruction of tumultuous and difficult moments for the accused bondpeople and offer a fleeting glimpse of their emotionally complex lives, filled with anxiety, suffering, deprivation, and loss. We also step inside the Louisiana State Penitentiary, where ten of the Williams' gang slaves spent years as property of the state, toiling at hard labor.

Before transfer to and imprisonment in Louisiana, Williams' gang was held in the notorious Yellow House slave pen, recreated in this book by drawing generously upon the accounts of visitors to the jail as well as

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Solomon Northup's narrative *Twelve Years a Slave*. The Yellow House's most famous prisoner, Northup was held captive there only months after the Williams' gang slaves departed. We learn as well about Williams' early slave-trading career and the larger dynamics that sustained it. Slave manifests, mandated by the act of 1807 that outlawed the transatlantic slave trade as a bureaucratic means to deter illegal importations, listed such vital information as the names of the shippers or owners, the names and tonnage of the slaving vessels transporting the slaves coastwise, and the names, sex, age, height, and color of each enslaved captive on board, along with the ports of origin and arrival and the person or entity to which the shipment was consigned. Virginia governors' executive papers uncover the process of selling convict slaves, based on a system of competitive bidding. A Williams agent won the enslaved criminals, who were transported to Washington, D.C., briefly incarcerated in the Yellow House, and then shipped out of Alexandria.

After an aborted attempted landing in Mobile, Alabama, William H. Williams conveyed his cargo of enslaved transports to Louisiana. Newspapers and New Orleans notarial records supply the best evidence for what transpired. Notaries public documented the sales of slaves in New Orleans in heavy, massive volumes available for viewing by researchers today in the Orleans Parish Clerk of Civil District Court Office. But Williams did not sell his enslaved transports in New Orleans. New Orleans police records show that the convicts were confiscated from him, after which Williams gathered testimony from eyewitnesses and put their accounts on file with a notary public, thus preserving detailed information no longer found among the surviving court records of his case.¹⁹

Accessing court records is still essential to understanding slave dealers. Although some traders, such as Franklin & Armfield of Alexandria, Virginia, landed in court less frequently than others (most notably Theophilus Freeman, a defendant in some thirty lawsuits across three states), the nature of their business meant that they all ended up there eventually. Quite simply, slaves were valuable property, so their sales sometimes prompted litigation. Slave traders sued, for instance, to recover debts owed them by clients with unpaid balances on their slave purchases. Compared with that, William H. Williams' many brushes with