

Archaeology at the Bruin Slave Jail

1707 Duke Street

Alexandria, Virginia

The Bruin Slave Jail is a standing brick building at 1707 Duke Street in the historic West End of Alexandria, Virginia. This imposing structure was built in about 1820, and in the years leading up to the Civil War it housed the most successful and well-known slave trading operation in Alexandria. Between 1844 and 1861 the property belonged to Joseph Bruin. Bruin lived on an adjacent lot and used 1707 Duke Street as the headquarters of his slave trading business. Bruin purchased hundreds of slaves in Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia and shipped them to New Orleans to be sold. Although the Constitution banned the slave trade from Africa, slave trading remained legal within the United States, and thousands of enslaved African Americans were sold by their owners in the east to the newly developing lands in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Bruin became notorious through his purchase of several slaves after they had attempted to escape to freedom aboard the schooner *Pearl* in 1848, and he inspired some of the characters and incidents in the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In 1861 Bruin's property was seized by the Federal government, and the Slave Jail served from 1863 to 1864 as the Fairfax County Courthouse. The house itself will be preserved, but a new commercial building is being constructed on the lot behind it. On behalf of Columbia Equity Trust, Inc., archaeologists from The Louis Berger Group, Inc. (Berger) investigated the lot in 2007 to 2008, and they found many artifacts and features dating to the slave jail period.



The Bruin Slave Jail

Excavating the Lot

When the excavations started, some of the lot was covered by modern buildings, and the rest was a gravel parking lot. No trace of the historic yard was visible. However, test pits showed that the historic ground surface was still present across much of the lot, buried beneath the gravel and one to three feet of fill. Once the modern buildings had been demolished, the first step was to remove the modern fill using a backhoe. This exposed a very dark gray layer that archaeologists recognized as the topsoil of the yard of the old slave pen. The archaeologists then dug two dozen test units in the historic topsoil to get a sample of the artifacts from the yard. More than 2,000 artifacts were found in these units. They included nails from buildings



Archaeologists Excavating in the Historic Ground Surface

that had once stood in the yard, pieces of pottery and glass, and even one prehistoric stone tool. After the sample units had been dug, the backhoe was brought back to strip off the old topsoil and foundations, trash pits, and other features buried beneath it. These features were then mapped and excavated by hand.

The Slave Barracks

Directly behind the standing house the archaeologists found a confusing collection of post holes, piles of brick rubble, and shallow pits full of oyster shell, animal bone, and artifacts dating to the 1850s. This material was probably the remains of a barracks and kitchen for people who were imprisoned on the property. The brick house itself was not large enough for the number of people Bruin sometimes held enslaved on the property, as many as fifty, so a separate building was needed.

In a large, shallow pit behind the slave barracks, the archaeologists found hundreds of pieces of animal bone. These bones are probably the remains of meals fed to the inmates of the slave jail. Most of them were head and feet bones from cattle and sheep. The West End of Alexandria was the site of numerous stock yards and butcher shops, and the slaves were fed from the scraps of these local shops. The bones were not burned, so they had probably been used to make stew, a traditional way of eating animal feet and heads.



Mary and Emily Edmonson

The Edmonson Sisters and the Cistern

When the modern building that used to be adjacent to the brick house was torn down, a brick cistern was exposed. The cistern had lost the dome that once covered the top but was otherwise nearly intact. It was probably built in the 1820s and used until the 1930s, when it was filled with coal ash and other trash. This cistern was attached to a laundry, which is shown on an insurance sketch of the property from 1853. Among the people captured after the failed escape on the *Pearl* in 1848 were two sisters named Emily and Mary Edmonson. The Edmonsons worked in Bruin's laundry while they were in the jail, so they would have drawn water from this very cistern. The Edmonsons had free relatives in the north who worked with abolitionists to

purchase their freedom. Joseph Bruin threatened to sell the sisters into prostitution in New Orleans, and saving these Christian girls from that fate inspired a frenzy of sermonizing and fund-raising in the north. Eventually the money was raised and the girls' were bought and set free. They became active themselves in the abolitionist cause. One of the abolitionists who worked to free the

Edmonsons was Harriet Beecher Stowe, and she later said that Joseph Bruin was one of the models for the wicked slave owners she put in her famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Hoodoo

The accounts of slaves imprisoned in Bruin's jail tell us that hymn singing and Christian prayer were regular parts of life. Archaeology tells us that some of the African-Americans who passed through also practiced a different style of faith. Two pits excavated on the site contained what seem to be the remains of hoodoo rituals. Hoodoo was a system of magic based on African religions practiced by some African Americans, especially those held in slavery. Many practitioners were Christians and saw no contradiction in using their traditional magical and herbal methods. One form of hoodoo involved burying objects or collections of selected for their symbolic significance.



Objects from a Hoodoo Cache at the Bruin Slave Jail

At the Bruin Slave Jail, one excavated pit contained a striking collection of nearly complete ceramic vessels, scratched glass, and iron nails. These objects were strikingly different from the rest of the artifacts found around the slave barracks. Another pit contained nothing but chicken bones. When these bones were counted, they proved to be a whole hen, minus the head.



Chicken Bones from a Pit at the Bruin Slave Jail

These hoodoo caches take us back to the time when the elegant house at 1707 Duke Street was a place of horror for enslaved African Americans. The poor people brought here were facing sale away from their friends and families to unknown owners in a strange land five hundred miles from home. In their distress, they reached out for every means of help they knew including the spirits of their ancestors' African home.