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Archaeology of the Bruin Slave Jail in Alexandria, Virginia

By Lisa Kraus, John Bedell and Charles LeeDecker

The authors are preparing a report entitled *Archaeology of the Bruin Slave Jail (44AX0172)*, prepared for Columbia Equity Trust, Inc., Washington, D.C., by the Louis Berger Group, Inc., Washington, D.C. (2009). The Bruin Slave Jail is a standing brick house at 1707 Duke Street in the West End of Alexandria, Virginia. The house 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. The site's primary period of historical significance is 1844 to 1861, when the Slave Jail was owned and operated by Joseph Bruin. Bruin purchased thousands of slaves in Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia and shipped them to the southwest, mainly to New Orleans, to be sold. Bruin became notorious through his purchase of several slaves who 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. Archaeology carried out by the Louis Berger Group, Inc. (Berger), in 2007 to 2008, on behalf of the Columbia Equity Trust.

The initial testing in 2007 revealed a distinctive historic landscape surface beneath modern fill and pavement at the site. The buried landscape contained deposits from entire nineteenth century, including the Bruin period and it to be intact in several locations across the entire lot. The site was determined to be significant, and data recovery excavations were completed in spring of 2008, following demolition of modern structures on the site. Numerous features were identified, including postholes from fences and other structures, three small pits, perhaps used for storage of food and personal items, and a brick-lined cistern. Analysis of the collection of features and artifacts suggested that the area around the Slave Jail contained several other buildings, fences and other structures that were inhabited and used by the slaves Bruin kept in his prison.

A comprehensive study of archival materials, primary accounts and other sources was carried out in addition to the fieldwork. The combined fieldwork and historical research provide a detailed story of the lives of the enslaved people who passed through Alexandria on their way to the deep south. In several cases, archaeological data speaks directly to the conditions faced by Emily and Mary Edmondson, two sisters and fugitives on the *Pearl* whom Bruin bought after their escape was thwarted. The story of their captivity and eventual rescue by their parents and the abolitionist community were recorded in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriett Beecher Stowe.