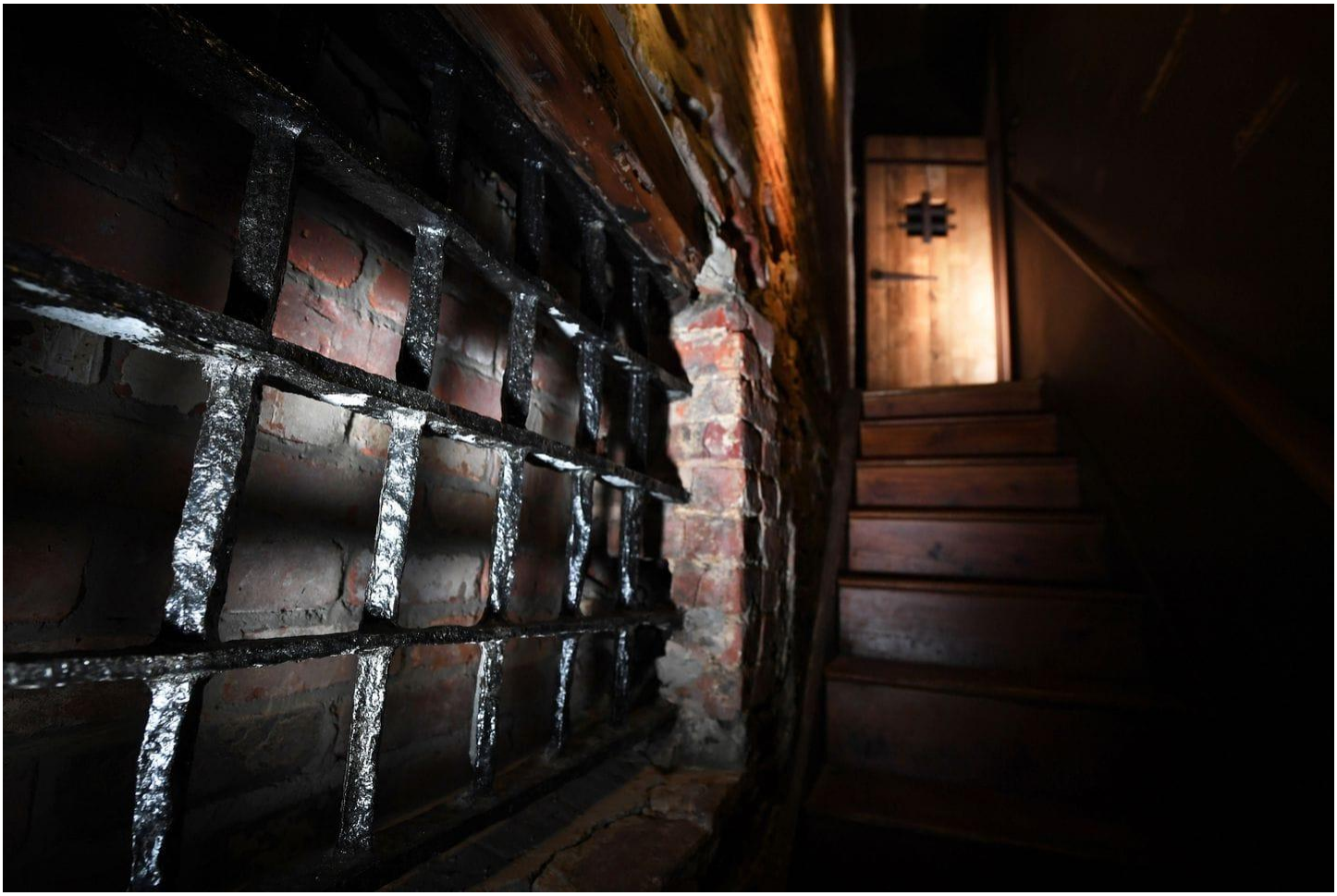
The Washington Post | News Service & Syndicate

They were once America's cruelest, richest slave traders. Why does no one know their names?

Isaac Franklin and John Armfield committed atrocities they appeared to relish



A window in the basement of Isaac Franklin and John Armfield's slaveholding "pen" in Alexandria, Va. The two men, largely forgotten today, were the most successful — and cruelest — domestic slave traders in American history. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

By **Hannah Natanson** - September 14, 2019

The two most ruthless domestic slave traders in America had a secret language for their business.

Slave trading was a "game." The men, Isaac Franklin and John Armfield, were daring "pirates" or "one-eyed men," a euphemism for their penises. The women they bought and sold were "fancy maids," a term signifying youth, beauty and potential for sexual exploitation — by buyers or the traders themselves.

Rapes happened often.

“To my certain knowledge she has been used & that smartly by a one eyed man about my size and age, excuse my foolishness,” Isaac Franklin’s nephew James — an employee and his uncle’s protege — wrote in typical business correspondence, referring to Caroline Brown, an enslaved woman who suffered repeated rape and abuse at James’s hands for five months. She was 18 at the time and just over five feet tall.

Franklin and Armfield, who headquartered their slave trading business in a townhouse that still stands in Alexandria, Va., sold more enslaved people, separated more families and made more money from the trade than almost anyone else in America. Between the 1820s and 1830s, the two men reigned as the “undisputed tycoons” of the domestic slave trade, as Smithsonian Magazine put it.

As the country marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Jamestown, Americans are being forced to confront the brutality of slavery and of the people who profited from it. Few profited more than the two Virginia slave traders.

Their success was immense: The duo amassed a fortune worth several billions in today’s dollars and retired as two of the nation’s wealthiest men, according to Joshua Rothman, a professor of history at the University of Alabama who is writing a book on Franklin and Armfield. Several factors set the pair apart, Rothman explained: For one thing, their timing was impeccable. They got into the domestic slave trade just as the cotton economy — and American demand for enslaved labor — exploded, and quit right before the United States sank into the financial panic of 1837.

Their location was also prime, perched so they could collect enslaved people from plantations across Virginia and Maryland and sending them on forced marches — in groups of several hundred known as “coffles” — or on tightly packed ships along the Atlantic Coast to the Deep South. While their business strategy was not especially innovative, it was conducted on a scale “bigger and better than anyone else,” Rothman said. Franklin and Armfield transported an estimated 10,000 enslaved people over the course of their careers, according to Rothman.

“They’re the ones who turned the business of selling humans from one part of the U.S. to another … into a very modern, organized business — no longer just one trader who might move a few people from one plantation to another,” said Maurie D. McInnis, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin who studies the cultural history of slavery. “They created a modern machinery to support the business of human trafficking.”

That was possible largely because of the traders’ willingness to be unusually cruel and heartless — even for a business built around the sale of human beings — as they committed atrocities they appeared to relish.

“In surviving correspondence, they actually brag about raping enslaved people who they’ve been processing through the firm,” said Calvin Schermerhorn, a professor of history at Arizona State University. “This seemed to be as much a part of Franklin and Armfield’s culture of business as, say, going to the bar after a successful court case might be the culture of a successful law firm’s business.”

Yet today, almost no one knows their names.

When Franklin and Armfield retired, they passed easily into elite white society, achieving respectable dotage without a murmur. History, too, has largely “let them off scot-free,” Schermerhorn said. Few, if any, American high school or college students ever learn about the duo.

“I think America continues to be uncomfortable talking about the original sin of slavery,” McInnis said. “And this is one of its most horrific chapters.”

‘The whole thing was so evil’

The slave trade was all Isaac Franklin ever knew.

He was born in 1789 to a wealthy planter family in Tennessee that owned “a significant number” of enslaved people, according to Rothman. In his late teens, right around the time the United States passed a law barring the transatlantic slave trade, Franklin and his older brothers grew interested in the domestic version: They began transporting small numbers of enslaved people between Virginia and the Deep South.

Franklin developed a taste for the business and, after taking a brief break to fight in the War of 1812, dedicated himself to slave trading full-time. It was all he did for the rest of his professional life, right up until he retired.

“His brothers never got back into the slave trade, but Isaac really decides this is going to be his game: He’s good at it, he likes it, he can make money at it, he sticks with it,” Rothman said.

The exterior of the Franklin and Armfield Slave Office, today the Freedom House Museum, in Alexandria. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

Franklin worked with a few partners over the years but connected with his longest-lasting collaborator — the man who became his closest friend, confidant and nephew by marriage — in the early 1820s. At the time, John Armfield was lacking in purpose: Shiftless and footloose, he had recently been chased away from a county in North Carolina for fathering a child out of wedlock, Rothman said.

His path to the slave trade was less clear-cut than Franklin's. Born in 1797 to lapsed Quakers who farmed several hundred acres in North Carolina and owned a small number of enslaved people, Armfield spent his early adulthood pursuing a variety of unsuccessful ventures, including a small mercantile shop — which he was forced to abandon after his affair.

Though unsure what he wanted to do, Armfield was clear on what he didn't: He loathed farming. So, "floundering about" in the wake of the sex scandal, Armfield decided he would "just dabble in the slave trade," according to Rothman.

Franklin and Armfield met a few years after that in the course of business and immediately developed a rapport, Rothman said — an intimacy that continued for decades and fueled their profitability. In 1834, the two men became family when Armfield married Franklin's niece.

"They are each other's closest friends and that's rooted in their working relationship," Rothman said. "Part of the reason they're successful is they work well together: Each understands the other's strengths, they trust and respect each other."

The two men launched the slave trading firm Franklin & Armfield and moved into the Alexandria townhouse — today a museum — in 1828. From the beginning, they divvied the work according to each man's strength: Armfield, based in Virginia, managed the "buying side of things" and arranged transportation, Rothman said. Franklin, meanwhile, stayed mostly in Natchez, Miss., and was responsible for selling their human cargo to plantations in the Deep South.

It worked like this: Relying on a network of headhunters spread across Virginia, Maryland and the District, Armfield would round up enslaved people, holding them in an open-air pen behind the house in Alexandria — or sometimes in its crowded, filthy basement — until he'd amassed a sufficient number: usually between 100 and 200. Then, he'd send the group on an arduous 1,000-mile march to slave markets in Natchez or New Orleans — or he'd stuff them into one of the company's three massive ships to make the same journey by water.

At the peak of their business, the two men were moving roughly 1,000 people a year, historians said.

They placed ads in local newspapers seeking enslaved people almost every single day they remained in business. They developed cruel stratagems to boost their bottom line: For example, they "designated less space per person [on their ships] than the trans-Atlantic slave trade vessels did," Schermerhorn said.

While enslaved people waited in Franklin and Armfield's "holding pen" in Alexandria, the two men most likely adopted classic techniques employed by slave traders to enhance enslaved people's salability, McInnis said. That meant feeding their captives large amounts of corn pone and pork to "fatten them up," dying gray hair black "so they looked younger," and — if an enslaved person's skin was scarred with whip marks — smearing wax into the wounds "so they looked healthier," according to McInnis.

“The whole thing was so evil,” McInnis said.

Through it all, both regularly raped the women they bought and sold and joked about it in letters, a shared habit that deepened their friendship. Franklin and Armfield each fathered at least one child with an enslaved woman, Rothman said. He suspects the abuse, which had no financial purpose, stemmed from a desire for raw power: “They did it because they could, and they felt like it.”

An exhibit of business items belonging to Franklin and Armfield at the Freedom House Museum in 2017. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

When Franklin wed a rich socialite in 1839, he had been “raping the same enslaved woman” for about five years and had fathered a child with her, Rothman said. Franklin sold the enslaved woman and her baby right after his wedding.

Her fate is unknown.

‘No indication … they felt guilty’

One of the most persistent misconceptions about slavery in the United States is that the white upper class refused to associate with slave traders on principle, Rothman said — a myth the case of Franklin and Armfield disproves.

Even while actively trading slaves, the two men enjoyed an excellent reputation and moved in top-tier social circles, according to Rothman. Franklin went to the theater with other rich whites and threw dinner parties, earning a reputation as a “gregarious” host with “the best liquors,” Rothman said.

Armfield may have been less extroverted, but he, too, drew accolades for his social graces. When visitors came to the Alexandria townhouse, he always opened the door for them, made elegant small talk and offered them something “nice” to drink, McInnis said.

Now a museum, this townhouse was used to house enslaved people before they were transported to the South. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

He was so smooth he managed to impress even a New England abolitionist who visited Alexandria in the 1830s. The abolitionist, knowing full well Armfield’s profession, nonetheless wrote: He is “a man of fine personal appearance, and of engaging and graceful manners.”

Their good reputations persisted after retirement. Franklin and Armfield quit the business around 1837. Franklin, who was approaching his 50s, “was tired and didn’t want to do it anymore,” Rothman said. Armfield had no wish to continue without his longtime partner.

Franklin divided his retirement between a large mansion he built in Tennessee and several Louisiana plantations he acquired over the course of his career. He whiled away his final years managing his estates and spending time with his three children and wife, Adelicia Hayes, whom records indicate he adored. Franklin died in 1846 of intestinal issues.

Armfield, meanwhile, purchased an old hotel in the Tennessee mountains and converted it to a luxury summer getaway for the wealthy. He ran it with great success in his final years, earning visits from "very prominent people," including archbishops and the mayor of Nashville, according to Rothman. (Armfield's hotel, which still stands, is used to host events including Methodist retreats.) He died of old age in 1871.

Armfield's marriage never yielded any children, and Franklin's children with Hayes all died without producing offspring, according to Rothman, so the two men have no direct white descendants living today. Armfield has at least one direct black descendant, Rodney Williams, who wrote about his heritage — which he said he discovered through DNA testing — in an essay included in "Slavery's Descendants," published in May.

A group of Franklin's indirect white descendants learned of their relationship to the slave trader a few years ago and, in 2018, donated money and relics to the Alexandria museum located where their ancestor's business once stood.

Neither Franklin nor Armfield earned recrimination from their peers during their lifetimes — and neither man felt the slightest remorse, according to their papers.

"It never occurs to them to think slavery might be bad: Slavery is what made their society work, it made them rich, it was a given that that was what black people were for," Rothman said. "There's no indication anywhere in the record that they felt guilty over what they did."

Rothman is one of a small handful now fighting to remember the two men who arguably served as the founding fathers of America's domestic slave trade. He became interested in Franklin and Armfield after perceiving a relative paucity of books or articles about the duo — what he called "a gaping hole in all of the literature on the slave trade."

It's been six years since Rothman began his research, crisscrossing the country to scour old documents such as property transactions in Louisiana, court cases in Mississippi, ship manifests in Alexandria.

Sometimes, he finds it difficult to keep going. He is loath to spend yet another day probing the dark activities and darker minds of Franklin and Armfield.

Then he remembers why he wanted to write the book.

"People are still talking about how the slave trade was marginal, slave traders were these ostracized dirtbags, and slaveholders only bought and sold people when they had to," Rothman said. "Those kinds of stubborn myths — they need demolition."

Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/09/14/they-were-once-americas-cruelest-richest-slave-traders-why-does-no-one-know-their-names/