

Was FAA HQ the Site of a Notorious Slave Pen?

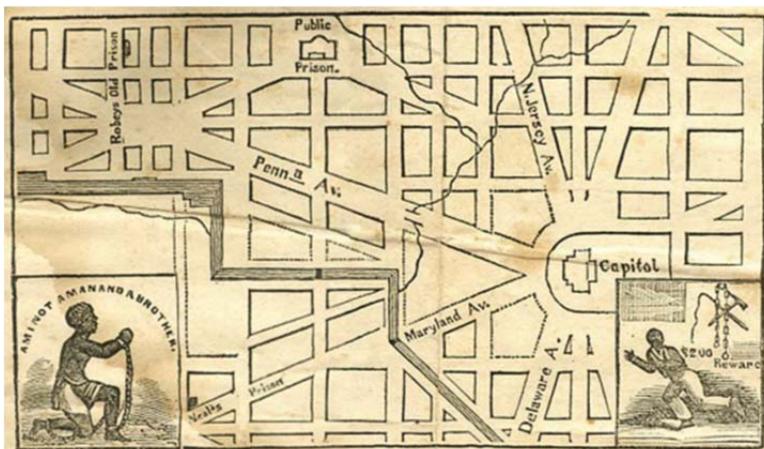
Theresa L. Kraus, FAA Historian

The movie, “Twelve Years A Slave,” has sparked renewed interest in Washington, DC’s, role in the slave trade. The movie, based on the book of the same name, by Solomon Northrup, chronicles the story of a free black man who is abducted and sold into slavery. Northrup, imprisoned in a slave pen in DC prior to being sold, wrote that the pen where his captor held him was “within the very shadow of the Capitol.” It is generally believed he was held at the Yellow House, a private prison.

Pinpointing the exact location of the Yellow House, owned by William Williams, is problematic. Depending on who is describing the buildings, the locations of the Yellow House, and another notorious slave pen, located on the property of Washington Robey’s Tavern, and operated by Joseph W. Neal and Company, are often confused. Foreign traveler’s accounts from the 1830s and 1840s often describe the Robey and Williams slave pens as being along the Mall.

Journalists, historians, and other writers disagree on the location of the two slave pens. Some place William’s slave pen at the site of the FAA Headquarters (FOB10A), at 8th and B Streets (now Independence Ave), SW, and Robey’s Tavern at 7th and Maryland. Others believe the Yellow House sat where FOB10B is and Robey’s across the street on the grassy area in front of Capital Gallery. According to historian Kenneth J. Winkle in *Lincoln’s Citadel*, William Williams’ Yellow House sat south of the Smithsonian Institution along the National Mall. Robey’s Tavern, according to Winkle, sat directly across the street from the Yellow House.

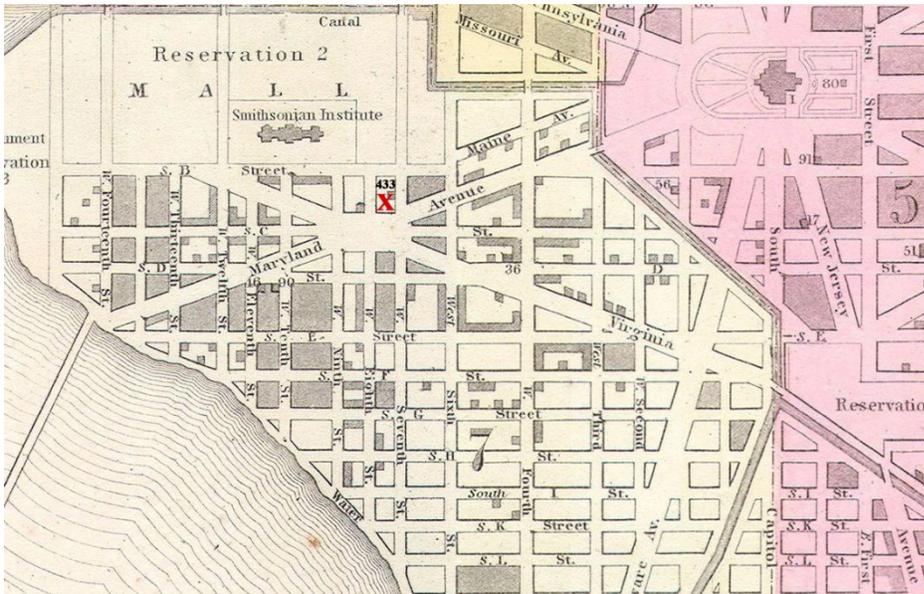
Jesse Holland, who wrote *Black Men Built the Capitol: Discovering African-American History In and Round Washington, D.C.*, believes the slave markets were located between what are now the Department of Education and the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. According to Holland, “directly in between where the Department of Education sits today and where the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum is now used to be a slave market called Robey’s Tavern.” He says the Yellow House sat just a block or so toward the Tidal Basin.



1836 Anti-slavery Broadside, “Slave Market of America,” showing the location of Robey’s and Neal’s prisons

According to the 2008 “Phase II Archaeological Investigation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Final Report,” the two best-known slave jails in Washington were Robey’s and Williams’ pens. The report, however, could not provide exact locations for the two pens. The reports authors cited Walter

Clephane’s 1900 essay, “The Local Aspect of Slavery in the District of Columbia,” which located the two pens at the southeast corner of 8th and B streets, SW, and at the southeast corner of 7th and B streets, SW. The report, however, also cited a 1836 American Anti-Slavery Society account that placed Robey’s Prison along 9th Street, NW, between D and E Streets, and another prison at the corner of 7th Street, SE, and Maryland Avenue, which the Society referred to as Neal’s Prison, however, the latter location corresponds to the location described as Williams’ pen.



1850 grid map of Washington, DC,
433 block marked with an X

In *Solomon Northrup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years A Slave*, Historians David Fiske, Clifford Brown Jr., write that according to tax records and other accounts, the Yellow House “was located in the 433 block of the city’s grid (which is faced by South B Street, now Independence Avenue, on its north; Seventh

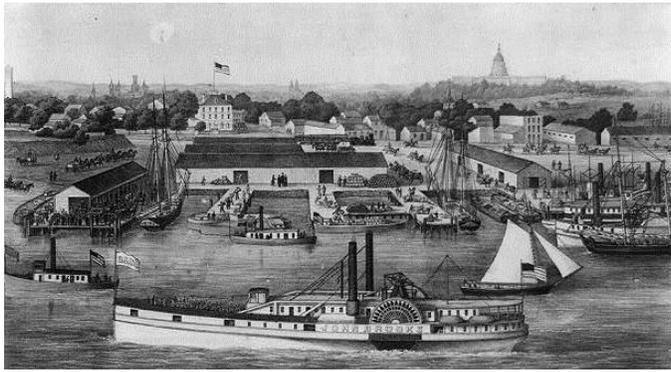
and Eighth Streets on its East and West; and Maryland Avenue on its South.” They place Robey’s Tavern a block east of Williams’s, situated on the east side of Seventh between B and C south. Three other slave pens were on the same street.



Long Bridge, circa 1865

Fiske and Brown admit the “precise location of the pen [Yellow House] on the block is difficult to pin down, although there is excellent evidence that the front entrance faced Seventh Street.” In researching old newspapers ads, they found an advertisement by Williams asking “sellers to stop by his ‘jail, on Seventh Street, between Center Market (where the National Archives now stands) and Long Bridge (originally a foot bridge connecting Maryland Avenue and 14th Street SW, with Alexandria), at the rough cast house that stands in the large garden surrounded by trees, on the west side of Seventh

Street.” Another ad “describes the establishment as ‘a yellow rough-cast house, the first on the right hand going from the market house to the steamboat wharf.’” A 1827 Washington, DC, directory lists Roby’s tavern on the east side of 9th Street West between D and E Streets.

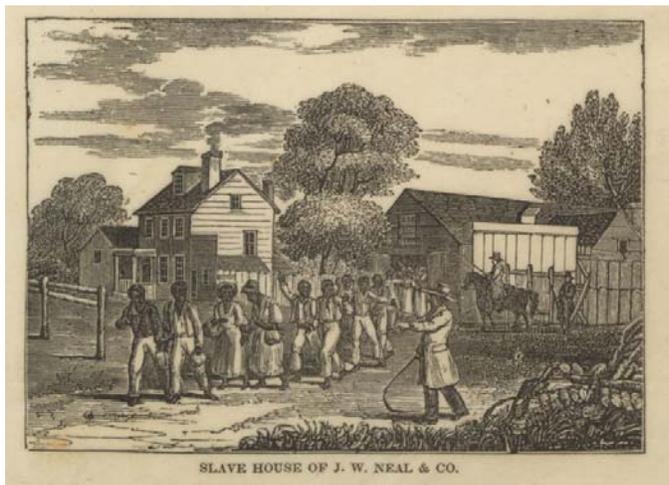


1863 painting of the steamboat wharf

One of the difficulties in identifying exact locations of the slave pens is that the city was young with a fairly small population and an evolving landscape of buildings and streets. Southwest Washington, at the time,

for example, was lightly populated. As E.S. Abdy described Robey’s slave pen in 1833:

One day I went to see the "slaves' pen" – a wretched hovel, "right against" the Capitol, from which it is distant about half a mile, with no house intervening. The outside alone is accessible to the eye of a visitor; what passes within being reserved for the exclusive observation of its owner, (a man of the name of Robey,) and his unfortunate victims. It is surrounded by a wooden paling fourteen or fifteen feet in height, with the posts outside to prevent escape and separated from the building by a space too narrow to admit of a free circulation of air.



Slave coffle in Washington, DC, circa 1862

Regardless of where they were located, the presence of slave pens in the nation's capital captured the attention of abolitionists. Since the founding of the District of Columbia (the capital was moved from Philadelphia to DC on December 1, 1800), enslaved people had lived and worked in Washington. Because of its location between Maryland and Virginia, both slave states, the city became important in the domestic slave trade. In DC, slave dealers kept slaves in crowded pens and prisons prior to sale. Long lines

of shackled slaves, or slave coffles, became a common site in Washington, as the slave traders moved their captives from one place to another.

