



**September 2024**

**Planning the Future of Alexandria's  
Freedom House Museum at 1315 Duke Street**

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Alexandria's Freedom House Museum at 1315 Duke Street has now been under City of Alexandria operation for over two years. Thousands of people from around the United States and the world have visited this powerful site. The building that houses the museum represents what remains of a large complex through which thousands of Black men, women, and children were trafficked between 1828 and 1861 (Skolnik 2021; SmithGroup 2021). In the decades before the Civil War, Alexandria was a major port in the domestic trade of enslaved people and a variety of firms operated within the city, forcibly transporting people from the Chesapeake region to the Deep South. At its height, the massive complex spanned nearly half a city block, enclosed by high brick walls and fencing. The museum seeks to reframe white supremacist history that erased and diminished the contributions of African Americans to the national narrative. This museum honors the lives and experiences of the enslaved and free Black people who lived in and were trafficked through Alexandria (Figure 1).

Since the museum's opening with temporary exhibitions, the Office of Historic Alexandria has also initiated a comprehensive planning process to determine the future use, interpretation, and preservation of this important site. This process requires the expert assistance of several project partners who consult on everything from the structural soundness of the building to exhibit design and interpretation strategies. Perhaps even more critically it requires the input of the community and other stakeholders. Over 400 people responded to a survey about the museum, sharing their vision for the museum's future. Between March and June 2023, the City of Alexandria conducted a series of meetings to begin a conversation about the site's mission, a new potential name, the interpretive focus, and the museum's role in the community. Participants included community representatives, educators, and students. The group pondered a

number of questions including what stories have been buried, what is unique or special about this site, whose voice should narrate the story, and what activities they would like to see in this museum. They were also polled on their experiences within the existing museum space, what features helped them learn or evoked strong emotions, and what other African American heritage sites should be connected to the interpretation of this museum. Full summaries of these meetings can be found online (SmithGroup 2023a, b, c).

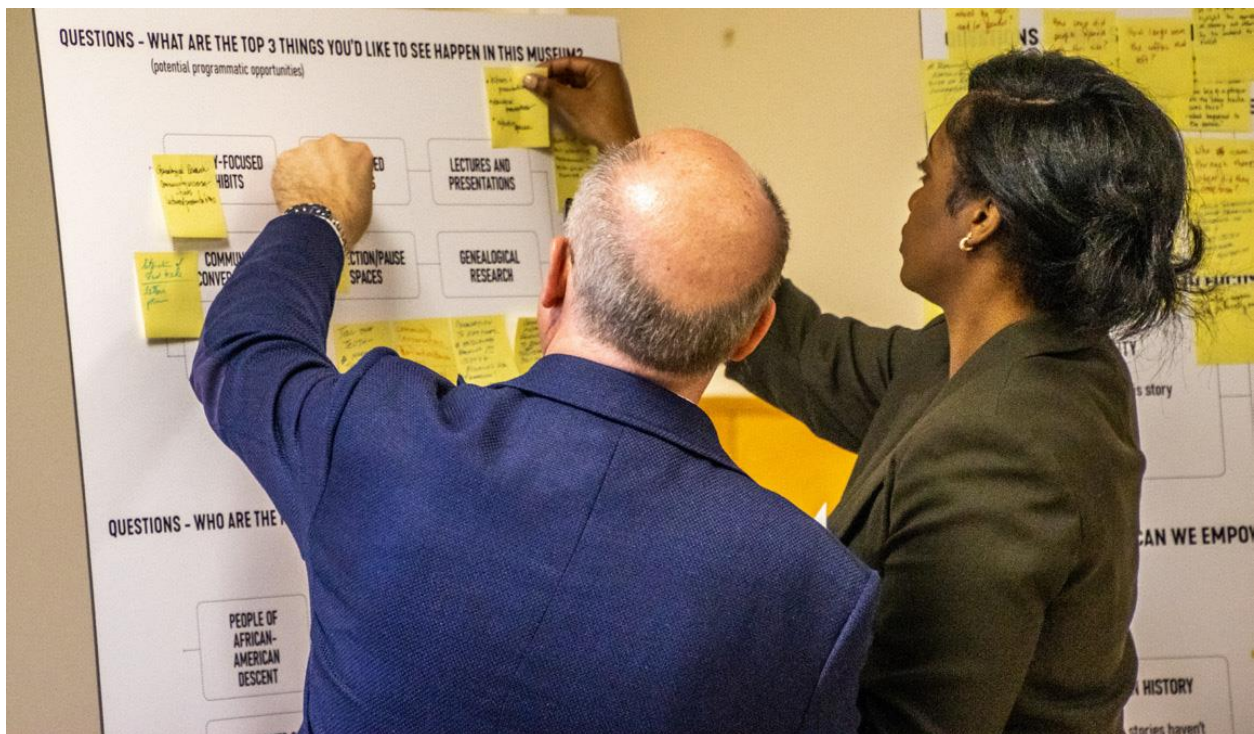


**Figure 1. Current Freedom House Museum exhibit space.  
Image courtesy of Chris Cruz and Visit Alexandria.**

In April 2024, the City of Alexandria released a Comprehensive Plan for 1315 Duke Street (SmithGroup 2024). Informed by experts, City resources and needs, and stakeholder input, this plan provides several key recommendations for the site (Figures 2, 3). The ultimate goal is to rehabilitate the building to be used as a museum that will include exhibits, ancillary support spaces like storage and offices, and a community gathering space. The Comprehensive Plan recommends the following mission statement:

- *Seeks to give voice to and honor the humanity of the enslaved trafficked through the site and elevate their stories within Alexandria and our nation’s historical narrative.*
- *Recognize the Power of Place through the preservation of this site, a direct link to the trauma of the domestic slave trade.*
- *Confront the legacies of slavery and use this site as a catalyst to create a more perfect union.*
- *Acknowledge that Black Lives Matter, in the past, the present, and into the future.*

The workshop discussions did not lead to a consensus about what to call the museum in the future, reflecting the complex nature of the site and the history it seeks to interpret. The current recommendation, based on stakeholder input and Office of Historic Alexandria feedback suggests perhaps “The Alexandria Slave Pen Museum.”



**Figure 2. Participants in a stakeholder meeting engage in a brainstorming activity. Photograph courtesy of SmithGroup 2024.**





**Figure 4. Rendering of South Facade after rehabilitation. Image courtesy of SmithGroup 2024.**

remains of the Bruin Slave jail site located a few blocks west of 1315 Duke Street (44AX172, Kraus, Bedell, and LeeDecker 2010), and another slave jail site on the 1500/1600 Block of King Street (44AX202, Mullen et al. 2009). Each of these sites has the potential to tell us more about the lives of those imprisoned in these places, awaiting sale and transport south. These projects have already contributed to the interpretation of the Freedom House Museum, but a reanalysis of the material is in order. Alexandria Archaeology has embarked on a project to enter these three sites into the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS). This will allow these sites to be compared to others, places them into a broader context of enslavement in the Americas and allows scholars and public access to the data (Figure 5).

Alexandria Archaeology and the Office of Historic Alexandria are excited to begin the next phase of work at the Freedom House Museum at 1315 Duke Street. Big changes are around the corner for both the interior and exterior of the building itself. New exhibits will incorporate stakeholder feedback in telling the history of the domestic slave trade and community spaces will provide room for reflection and action. A reanalysis of the three archaeological sites associated with the domestic slave trade in Alexandria will additionally help provide new insight into this traumatic history and help inform future interpretive plans.

**Figure 5. Context Data Entry into DAACS.**

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