

Retrocession

Alexandria, D.C.

In 1791, Alexandrians applauded their inclusion in the District of Columbia, believing that the town would benefit economically as part of the Federal district. These positive feelings toward inclusion in the District persisted while Alexandria's economy thrived. However, during the War of 1812, the British burned Washington on August 24th, 1814. Baltimore and New York City soon eclipsed Alexandria as a commercial port, and sentiments changed. There was also a growing concern among white Alexandrians that the U.S. Congress would act to curb one of Alexandria's major businesses and the core of the region's economy - the ownership and trade of enslaved people.



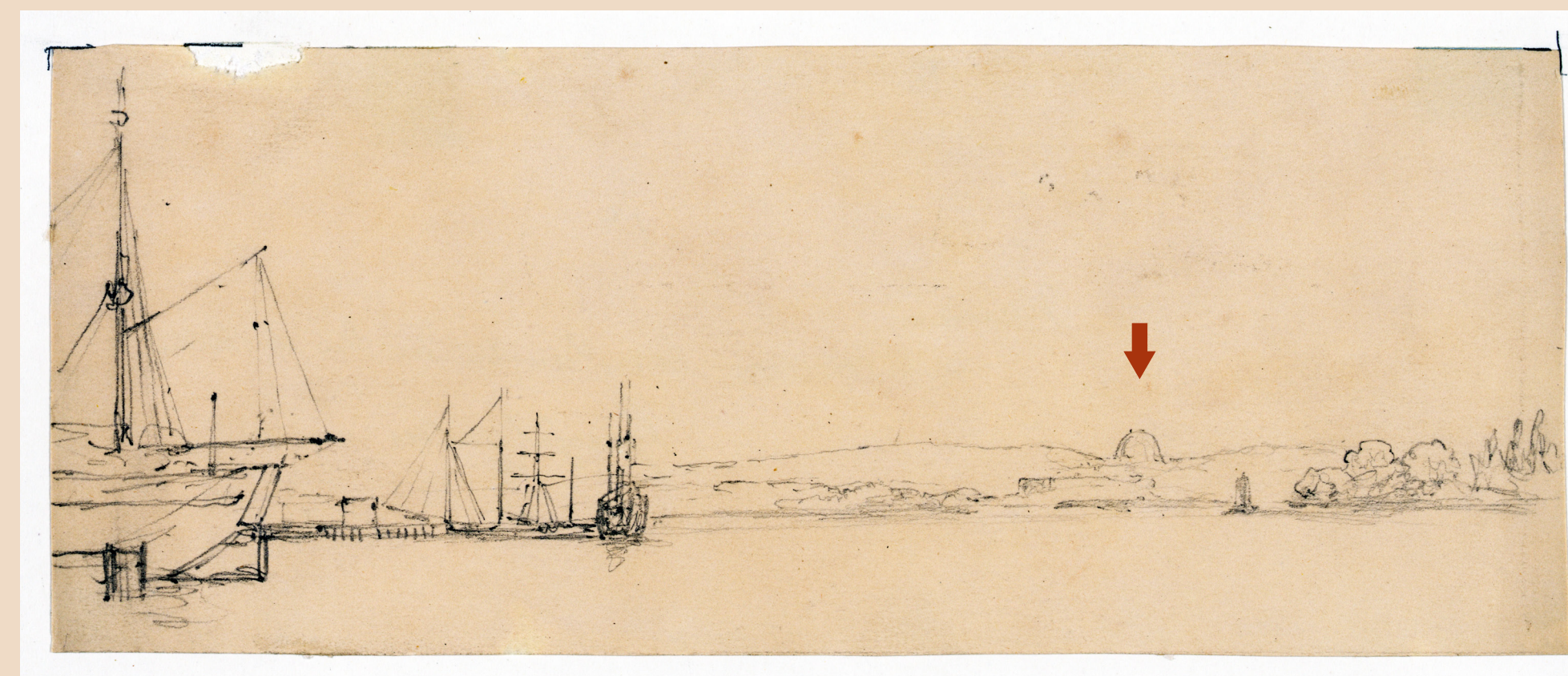
The District of Columbia - Washington City, Washington County, and Alexandria County and City - shown in the highlighted square in this geographical, statistical, and historical map of the District of Columbia, H. C. Carey & I. Lea, 1822.

Library of Congress



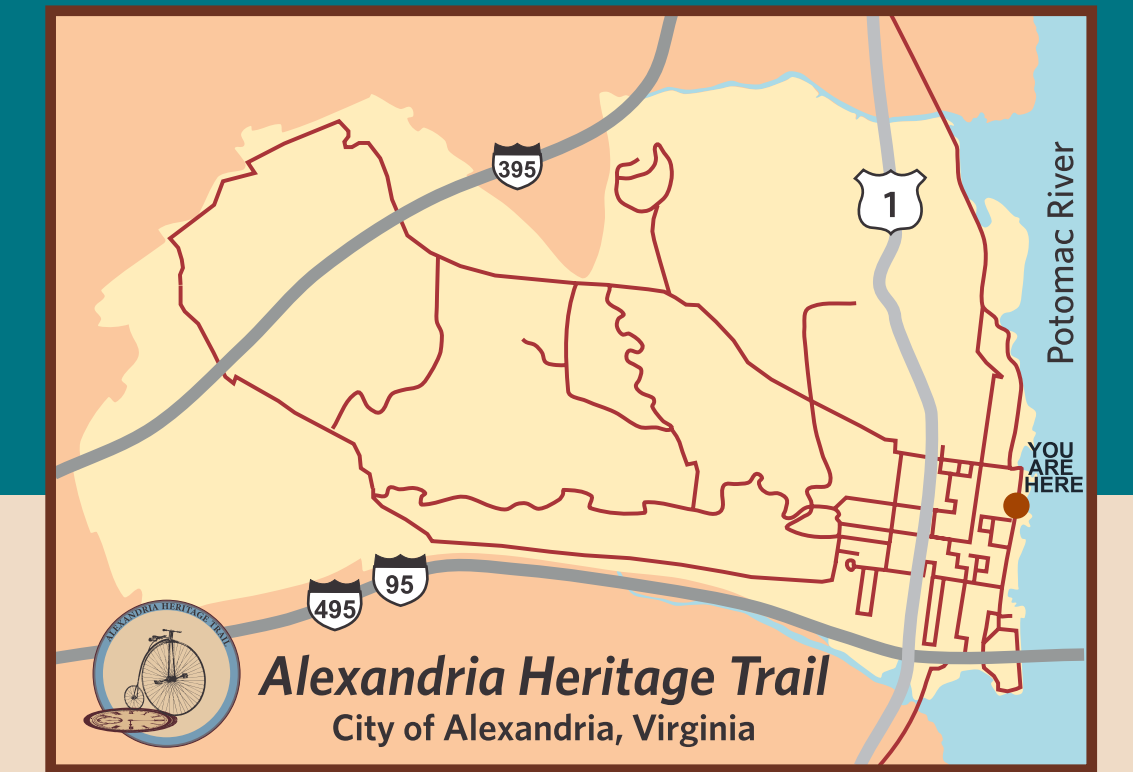
Beginning in the 1820s, Alexandria became a major port of the domestic slave trade with a series of slave trading companies operating from the slave pen at 1315 Duke Street. The identity of the woman in this Civil War Era photo is unknown. Alexandria, Virginia. Slave Pen. Exterior view, ca. 1861-1869.

Library of Congress



Sketch shows ships docked on the waterfront of Alexandria, Virginia, in the years after Retrocession. Washington, D.C.'s Capitol dome rises in the distance, marked by the red arrow. *Alexandria on the Potomac, Washington in the distance*, by George Wallis, [June 26, 1853].

Library of Congress



Slavery and Retrocession

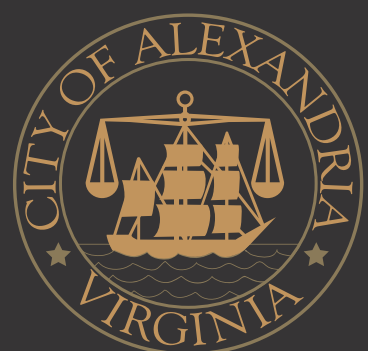
While Congress failed to support the District economically, it had the power to pass legislation concerning "the property of the people of the District." Many white Alexandrians, including several prosperous slave traders, were especially concerned about one type of "property" - enslaved people. Abolitionists had been vigorously lobbying Congress to end slavery and the slave trade in the District. In response, Alexandrians who benefited from slave holding wanted the town to return to Virginia's jurisdiction because they feared the abolitionists would be successful in the District. Black residents, however, feared that the privileges they had enjoyed as part of the District, such as attending school and freedom of assembly, would be lost once they were again under Virginia's laws.

By 1846, white leaders were actively promoting Alexandria's return to Virginia - to retrocede. As a result of Alexandria's lobbying, Congress passed a retrocession act, and President James K. Polk signed it into law in July 1846. In March 1847, Virginia accepted Alexandria back under its jurisdiction. Alexandria's African American community soon experienced the negative impacts of retrocession, including the closure of schools and other sites.

THE RETROCESSION ACT.

The President of the United States yesterday signed the bill, recently passed by Congress, retroceding the town and county of Alexandria to Virginia, and it now, therefore, only remains for the vote to be taken by the people, to consummate the important measure.

Source: *Alexandria Gazette*, July 10, 1846, page 3.



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749

Created by the Alexandria African American Heritage Trail Committee, Alexandria Archaeology, and the Alexandria Black History Museum.

