

PRELIMINARY HISTORY OF THE LUMPKIN'S JAIL PROPERTY

Slave dealer Robert Lumpkin first became associated with the property on the narrow lane variously known as Wall Street, Birch Alley, and Lumpkin's Alley when he purchased Lots 62, 63, and 64 in "Mayo's Addition," an "in-fill" subdivision in Shockoe Bottom, on November 27, 1844 (City of Richmond Hustings Deed Book 53: 155). Each of the lots measured 30 feet wide, fronted on Wall Street, and extended east to Shockoe Creek (Figure 1). It does not appear that Lumpkin took possession of the property until three or four years later, however; he was not listed as the owner in the city land books until 1848, at which time buildings valued at \$6,000 were assessed on the lots.¹

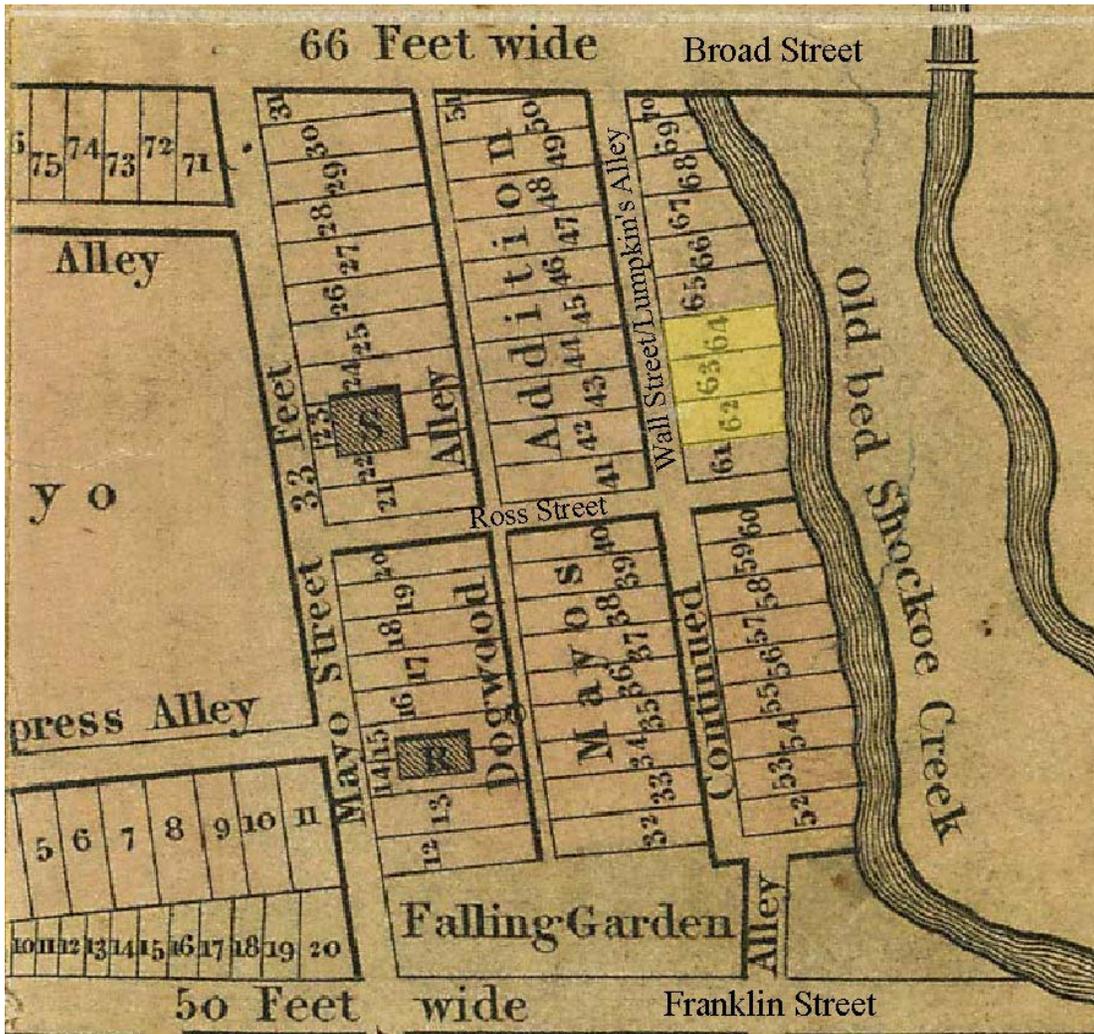


Figure 1. Location of Lots 62, 63, and 64.

Detail, *Plan of the City of Richmond Drawn From Actual Survey* (Micajah Bates 1835).

¹ Unfortunately, the land books consistently grouped Lots 62, 63, and 64 a single unit, never breaking down building values on the individual parcels. As such, it is not possible to determine the exact location of Lumpkin's jail on the property from this source.

The infamous building used to confine slaves prior to their sale has become widely known as “Lumpkin’s Jail,” yet the documentary evidence suggests that Lumpkin did not actually build it. In fact, he was the third slave dealer to own the property. The first person to develop these lots to any significant extent was Bacon Tait, a slave trader who operated a private jail in Richmond in the 1830s (Gudmestad 1993: 110, 131, 167, 194). Tait purchased Lots 63 and 64 in May 1830, and Lot 62 the following month (Deed Book 29: 14; 32: 134). When he first acquired the property, structures worth only \$400 were located on the property. By 1833, he had built a two-story brick dwelling house valued at \$1,500 fronting on Wall Street, and insured it with the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia (MAS policies, vol. 109, #12767). This was the same house that would later be occupied by Robert Lumpkin, and subsequently by the Colver Institute (later Richmond Theological Seminary).² It is not known what additional buildings Tait may have erected on the lots, but any other structures would have been fairly insubstantial, as the total assessed value of buildings during his ownership never exceeded \$2,200, including his dwelling.

On July 6, 1833, Bacon Tait deeded Lots 62, 63, and 64 to Lewis A. Collier, a fellow Richmond slave dealer who had extensive business connections with plantation owners throughout the South (Gudmestad 1993: 14, 28, 32). Before long, Collier began making considerable improvements to the property. In 1836, the value of buildings increased to \$3,000, then jumped to \$5,000 the following year. The figure increased once again to \$5,720 in 1838, then peaked at \$6,000 by 1840. By this time, however, Collier appears to have overextended himself financially. In 1837, he pledged the lots as collateral for a loan from the Bank of Virginia. By 1844, the bank seized the property, and found a willing buyer in Robert Lumpkin, yet another slave dealer. No doubt the 36-year-old Lumpkin was attracted to Collier’s property because it exactly suited the particular requirements of his business. In addition to the brick dwelling house, Collier clearly had added a number of additional buildings, which may have included the guest quarters and kitchen/tavern that were documented on the site in the 1860s (see excerpts from Corey’s *History of the Richmond Theological Seminary* below). Most important, it appears that Collier also had built the two-story brick slave jail while developing the property in the 1830s. The documentary evidence for this is indirect, yet compelling. An examination of the city land books make it clear that Lumpkin simply took over Collier’s existing commercial complex on the site. When he took possession of the three lots in the late 1840s, the value of buildings was assessed at \$6,000. Over the next several years their value actually declined somewhat, suggesting that Lumpkin did not undertake any new building himself. In fact, in 1854, the year that Lumpkin’s most famous inmate, Anthony Burns, was held in the jail, the value of buildings on his property had dropped to \$5,000 (see description below in Stevens’, *Anthony Burns: A History*). Thus, although Lumpkin may have been the most notorious owner/operator of the facility, “Collier’s Jail” had already been in operation for several years before he took it over.

Exactly where the jail building stood on Lumpkin’s Lots 62, 63, and 64 is not clear, and no known historic map depicts the location of the structure. However, both a

² Lumpkin insured dwelling with the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia in 1851 (vol. 121, #12767), and again in 1858 (vol. 132, #19830).

contemporary description of Lumpkin's property, and a sketch of the jail, suggest that it was located at the eastern end of the lots, adjacent to the former bed of Shockoe Creek, which had since been diverted to the east (Figure 1).

The Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia policies of Lewis A. Collier and Robert Lumpkin indicate that the dwelling house fronted directly on Wall Street/Lumpkin's Alley. The description of Lumpkin's complex provided in Charles H. Corey's history of the Richmond Theological Seminary (see excerpts below), indicates that the "old jail stood in a field a few rods from the other buildings. It was forty-one feet long and two stories in height, with a piazza to both stories on the north side of the building." The sketch of the jail included in the history depicted a structure that closely fits this description. With the porticoed elevation facing north, it appears that a fence-line separated the jail from could be the rocky former creek bed to the east. Taking into account both the written and visual evidence, then, it appears most likely that the jail was located at the extreme eastern end of the lots. Fortunately, this appears to be the only portion of the lots that was not buried by the Interstate 95 embankment, which buried Wall Street/Lumpkin's Alley, as well as Lumpkin's dwelling (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Sketch of Lumpkins Jail from Corey's, *A History of the Richmond Theological Seminary* [p. 47].



Figure 3. Projected location of Lumpkin's Lots 62, 63, and 64.

This projection was created by overlaying the 1835 Micajah Bates map of Richmond on the City's GIS base mapping. It is the most accurate depiction of the limits of the Lumpkin's Jail property that can be determined, and will be the focus of the archaeological investigation

Lumpkin continued to acquire lots on the east side of Wall Street through the 1850s, and, by the time of the Civil War, he owned Lots 61 through 66, fronting 180 feet along the east side of this block. When Richmond fell in April 1865, Lumpkin's slave trading business collapsed, and he died in late 1866. The following year his widow, Mary Lumpkin, allowed Dr. Nathaniel Colver to lease the property as a school for freed slaves. The Colver Institute operated on this site, using Lumpkin's residence, the former slave jail, and the other facilities until 1870, when it moved to the former United States Hotel building at 19th and Main streets.

Mary Lumpkin sold the Wall Street lots to Andrew Jackson Ford and his wife Mary Lucy Ford in 1873 (Deed Book 100A: 104). Based on an examination of the city land books for this period, and detailed maps of Richmond from the 1870s, it appears most likely that the jail building had been demolished by 1876. In 1892, Ford sold the lots to John Chamblin and James H. Scott (Deed Book 145A: 473). With Alexander Delaney, they established the Richmond Iron Works on the site, which manufactured architectural iron work, stationary engines, and supplies for electric railroads. Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps indicate that the large foundry and machine shop complex was situated directly atop Lumpkin's former complex on Lots 62, 63, and 64. By the early 1920s, the Richmond Iron Works was gone, replaced by a large freight depot of the Seaboard Air

Line Railroad. Eventually, the northern section of the freight depot was removed, and the lots were paved over as a parking lot, sealing whatever remained of Lumpkin's Jail and the subsequent buildings below ground.

References:

Bates, Micajah

1835 *Plan of the City of Richmond Drawn From Actual Survey*. Library of Virginia, Richmond.

Gudmestad, Robert H.

1993 *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge.

Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia

Microfilm version of policy volumes, Library of Virginia.

City of Richmond Hustings Court

Deeds and Land Books. Microfilm version, Library of Virginia.

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Excerpts from Charles H. Corey's, *A History of the Richmond Theological Seminary with Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Work Among the Colored People of the South* (J.W. Randolph Co., Richmond, 1895).

Lumpkin's jail has been referred to. Perhaps it may well, at this time, to give further particulars concerning this place. It was situated in "The Bottom" between Franklin and Broad Streets, on the west side of Shockoe Creek. It occupied a portion of the ground now covered by the establishment of Chamblin, Delaney & Scott. A narrow lane known as Wall Street, properly Fifteenth Street, led to it. This establishment, which has been often spoken of as the "old slave pen," consisted of four buildings, which were of brick. One was used by the proprietor as his residence and his office. Another was used as a boarding-house for the accommodation of those who came to sell their slaves or to buy. A third served as a bar-room and a kitchen. The "old jail" stood in a field a few rods from the other buildings. It was forty-one feet long and two stories in height, with a piazza to both stories on the north side of the building. Here men and women were lodged for safe-keeping, until they were disposed of at private or public sale [pp.46-48].

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It was putting me in a place known as the whipping room, and on the floor of that room were rings. The individual would be laid down, his hands and feet stretched out and fastened in the rings, and a great big man would stand over him and flog him [p. 50].

* * *

Lumpkin's slave-pen consisted of about half an acre of land near the center of the older portion of Richmond. The patch lay very low in a deep hollow or "bottom," as it might be called, through which a small stream of water ran very slowly. In reaching this place of sighs from Broad Street, one had to climb down the incline of a sandy embankment nearly one hundred feet. The descent was steep, irregular, and in some places difficult. In approaching the place from the Franklin Street side, the descent was quite gradual and easy by means of a narrow, crooked, and untidy lane. Around the outer borders of the said half-acre was a fence, in some places ten or twelve feet in height. Inside the fence, and very close to it, was a tall old brick building which Lumpkin had used for his dwelling-house. Near by were other buildings, also of brick, where he used to shelter the more peaceable of his slave-gangs that were brought to him from time to time to be sold. But in the center of the plot was the chief object of interest—a low, rough, brick building known as "the slave jail." In this building Lumpkin was accustomed to imprison the disobedient and punish the refractory. The stout iron bars were still to be seen across one or more of the windows during my repeated visits to the place. In the rough floor, and at about the center of it, was the stout iron staple and whipping ring.

It was in this old jail—this place of horrible memories to the blacks—that I found that noble man of God, Reverend Charles H. Corey, engaged in teaching a company of freedmen preachers [pp.75-77].

* * *

In the tall old dwelling house of the late Mr. Lumpkin, Dr. Corey kept house with his devoted, self-sacrificing, New England wife For hideous as were the surroundings, a whole race had been born in a day into liberty. In the other buildings above alluded to, colored students for the ministry were living and boarding in common. They too were happy. Glad faces greeted me on every side. The old slave pen was no longer the “devil’s half acre” but “God’s half acre” [p. 76].

Excerpts from Charles Emery Stevens', *Anthony Burns: A History* (electronic edition, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; originally published 1856), pp. 187-94.

Anthony Burns was an African-American man who escaped from slavery in Virginia in 1854 and made his way to Boston. Two months later he was arrested and tried under the Fugitive Slave Law. Despite considerable popular protest, Burns was returned to Richmond, where he was held for four months in Lumpkin's Jail. In February 1855, abolitionists raised sufficient funds to purchase him from his master. He returned to the North and became a pastor, and eventually moved to Canada, where he died in 1862 at the age of 28. This contemporary narrative of his ordeal was originally published in 1856.

* * *

Brent was accompanied to the jail by one Robert Lumpkin, a noted trader in slaves. This man belonged to a class of persons by whose society the slaveholders of the South profess to feel disgraced, but with whose services, nevertheless, they cannot dispense. He had formerly been engaged exclusively in the traffic in slaves. Roaming over the country, and picking up a husband here, a wife there, a mother in one place, and an alluring maiden in another, he banded them with iron links into a coffle and sent them to the far southern market. By his ability and success in this remorseless business, he had greatly distinguished himself, and had come to be known as a "bully trader." At this time, however, he had abandoned the business of an itinerant trader, and was established in Richmond as the proprietor of a Trader's Jail. In this he kept and furnished with board such slaves as were brought into the city for sale, and, generally, all such as their owners wished to punish or to provide with temporary safe keeping. He also kept a boarding-house for the owners themselves. Lumpkin's Jail was one of the prominent and characteristic features of the capital of Virginia. It was a large brick structure, three stories in height, situated in the outskirts of Richmond, and surrounded by an acre of ground. The whole was enclosed by a high, close fence, the top of which was thickly set with iron spikes.

To the proprietor of this prison, Burns was now delivered up by Brent. He was ordered by Lumpkin to put his hands behind him; this done, the jail-keeper proceeded to fasten them together in that position with a pair of iron handcuffs. Then, directing Anthony to move on before, he followed him closely behind until they arrived at his jail.

Here he was destined to suffer, for four months, such revolting treatment as the vilest felons never undergo, and such as only revengeful slaveholders can inflict. The place of his confinement was a room only six or eight feet square, in the upper story of the jail, which was accessible only through a trap-door. He was allowed neither bed nor air; a rude bench fastened against the wall and a single, coarse blanket were the only means of repose. After entering his cell, the handcuffs were not removed, but, in addition, fetters were placed upon his feet. In this manacled condition he was kept during the greater part of his confinement. The torture which he suffered, in consequence, was excruciating. The

gripe of the irons impeded the circulation of his blood, made hot and rapid by the stifling atmosphere, and caused his feet to swell enormously. The flesh was worn from his wrists, and when the wounds had healed, there remained broad scars as perpetual witnesses against his owner. The fetters also prevented him from removing his clothing by day or night, and no one came to help him; the indecency resulting from such a condition is too revolting for description, or even thought. His room became more foul and noisome than the hovel of a brute; loathsome creeping things multiplied and rioted in the filth. His food consisted of a piece of coarse corn-bread and the parings of bacon or putrid meat. This fare, supplied to him once a day, he was compelled to devour without Plate, knife, or fork. Immured, as he was, in a narrow, unventilated room, beneath the heated roof of the jail, a constant supply of fresh water would have been a heavenly boon; but the only means of quenching his thirst was the nauseating contents of a pail that was replenished only once or twice a week. Living under such an accumulation of atrocities, he at length fell seriously ill. This brought about some mitigation of his treatment; his fetters were removed for a time, and he was supplied with broth, which, compared with his previous food, was luxury itself.

When first confined in the jail, he became an object of curiosity to all who had heard of his case, and twenty or thirty persons in a day would call to gaze upon him. On these occasions, his fetters were taken off and he was conducted down to the piazza in front of the jail. His visitors improved the opportunity to express their opinion of his deserts; having no pecuniary interest in his life, they were anxious that it should be sacrificed for the general good of slaveholders. When curiosity was satisfied, he would be led back to his cell, and again placed in irons. These exhibitions occurred ordinarily once a day during the first two or three weeks, and, though humiliating, furnished a relief to the solitude of his confinement. There were other slaves in the jail, who were allowed more or less intercourse with each other; but between them and Burns all communication was strictly prohibited. The taint of freedom was upon him, and infection was dreaded.

His residence in the jail gave him an opportunity of gaining new views of the system of slavery. One day his attention was attracted by a noise in the room beneath him. There was a sound as of a woman entreating and sobbing, and of a man addressing to her commands mingled with oaths. Looking down through a crevice in the floor, Burns beheld a slave woman stark naked in the presence of two men. One of them was an overseer, and the other a person who had come to purchase a slave. The overseer had compelled the woman to disrobe in order that the purchaser might see for himself whether she was well formed and sound in body. Burns was horror-stricken; all his previous experience had not made him aware of such an outrage. This, however, was not an exceptional case; he found it was the ordinary custom in Lumpkin's jail thus to expose the naked person of the slave, both male and female, to the inspection of the purchaser. A wider range of observation would have enabled him to see that it was the universal custom in the slave states.

In spite of the interdict under which he was laid, Burns found a method of communicating with other slaves in the jail. It has been stated that during his illness he was released from his fetters and supplied with broth. The spoon given him to eat with,

on that occasion, he contrived to secrete, and when alone, he used it in enlarging a small hole in the floor. It was just behind the trap-door, by which, when thrown open, it was entirely hidden from view, and thus escaped discovery. Through this hole Burns made known his situation to some slaves in a room below, and at once enlisted their sympathies. The intercourse thus established was afterward regularly maintained. To avoid detection, it was carried on only at dead of night; then, throwing himself prostrate upon the floor and applying his mouth to the aperture, Burns whiled away hour after hour in converse with his more fortunate fellow bondmen. He filled their eager and wondering ears with the story of his escape from bondage, his free and happy life at the North, his capture, and the mighty effort that it cost the Government to restore him to Virginia. He was their Columbus, telling them of the land, to them unknown, which he had visited; inspiring them with longings to follow in his track; and warning them, out of his own experience, of the perils to be avoided. On their part, they communicated to him such information as their less restricted condition had enabled them to obtain. Conversation was not the only advantage that he derived from this quarter. His new friends furnished him with tobacco and matches, so that, during the long night watches, he was able to solace himself by smoking.

After a while, he found a friend in the family of Lumpkin. The wife of this man was a "yellow woman" whom he had married as much from necessity as from choice, the white women of the South refusing to connect themselves with professed slave traders. This woman manifested her compassion for Burns by giving him a testament and a hymn-book. Upon most slaves these gifts would have been thrown away; fortunately for Burns, he had learned to read, and the books proved a very treasure. Besides the yellow wife, Lumpkin had a black concubine, and she also manifested a friendly spirit toward the prisoner. The house of Lumpkin was separated from the jail only by the yard, and from one of the upper windows the girl contrived to hold conversations with Anthony, whose apartment was directly opposite. Her compassion, it is not unlikely, changed into a warmer feeling; she was discovered one day by her lord and master; what he overheard roused his jealousy, and he took effectual means to break off the intercourse.

In the search of Anthony's person at the common jail, some things had escaped discovery. He had concealed between the parts of his clothing a little money, some writing paper, and a pen, and these he still retained. Ink only was wanting, and this, through the aid of his prison friends, he also secured. Thus furnished, he wrote several letters to his friends at a distance; in all there were six, two of which were addressed to persons in Boston. To secure their transmission to the post-office, he adopted the following method: The letter was fastened to a piece of brick dug from the wall; then watching at his window until he saw some negro passing outside the jail fence, he contrived by signs to attract his attention and throw to him the letter. The passer-by was in all probability an entire stranger, as well as a person unable to read, yet Burns trusted, not unreasonably, that his wishes would be rightly interpreted, and that his letters would reach the post-office. No answers were expected in return, none would have reached him had they been written. The postmaster at the South, albeit an officer of the Federal Government, is not the less an obsequious servant of the slaveholder. If a letter addressed to a slave bears a southern post-mark, it is delivered to its claimant without question; but when the post-mark

indicates a northern origin, the postmaster withholds it from the claimant, inquires his master's name, and then deposits it in the latter's box. If the letter is found to be objectionable, it is destroyed and nothing is said about it; if otherwise, the master reads to his slave such portions as he sees fit. One of the letters written by Burns was addressed to Col. Suttle, giving an account of his illness. Suttle immediately wrote to Brent upon the subject, and the confounded agent hastened to the jail for an explanation. Burns frankly told him of the manner in which he had despatched his letters to the post-office, and enjoyed not a little his visitor's astonishment at the revelation. The consequence was that Brent deprived him of his pen in the vain hope of putting an end to his letter-writing.

After lying in the jail four months, his imprisonment came to an end. It had been determined to sell him, and the occurrence of a fair in Richmond presented a favorable opportunity. . . .