

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 24 – September 2016
Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Greetings! The Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center is excited to continue bringing our monthly newsletter, *Found in the Archives*, to you.

This month – coinciding with back to school! – we will discuss an interesting letter written to the Court, asking for permission to open a school on the courthouse grounds.

This past June, the archivists at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center revisited a collection of Civil War-era records, looking for a more efficient way to arrange them, for improved public access. The Clerk's staff was surprised to uncover a letter from January 1866, tucked in with other miscellaneous documents. The Letter was from the Freedmen's Bureau, asking the Court to allow them to use "the brick house" on the courthouse grounds, as a public school for "colored children."

The Clerk's Office wondered, "Which antebellum brick structure was this 'brick house'?" and "Where did it stand on the courthouse lot?"

Based on rough drawings of the courthouse lot in our collection, as well as the *1879 Hopkins Atlas*, we know that there were several small buildings located on the courthouse grounds. However, the Clerk's Office is not entirely certain which "brick house" the Freedmen's Bureau meant. It is a Courthouse Archives mystery.

The Letter (transcription and image) reads:

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands

Vienna, Va.

Jan. 13th, 1866

To the Honorable Court of the County of Fairfax, State of Virginia

Gentlemen of the Court:

I have the honor to request the use of the brick house which stands near the court house and which is unoccupied for the purpose of establishing a school for colored children there. I will pay a reasonable rent for the building and in case you should want it, I will vacate it at any time which you may hereafter mention.

I will further guarantee to the Court that in case any damage should occur to the building while occupied for school purposes, that such damage will be made good by this Bureau.

I trust, gentlemen, that in case it be in your favor to grant this request, you will readily and cheerfully do so. I will not presume on your intelligence by arguing the necessity of educating these people.

As officers of the same great Government – both civil and military – I trust that the necessity of a co-operation between us, for the good of the freed people and for our own good too, will be sufficient incentive to overcome all feelings of a minor consideration which may perhaps be entertained by either party.

I am, gentlemen, Very Respectfully

Your Obt. Servt.

Sidney B. Smith

1st Lt. M. C. & Supt. Trustee

Fairfax Co., Va.

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned
Lands.

Remond D.C.

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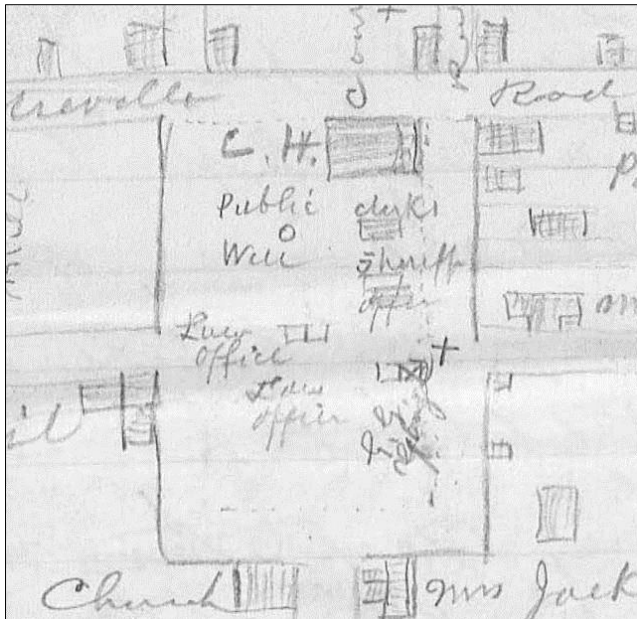
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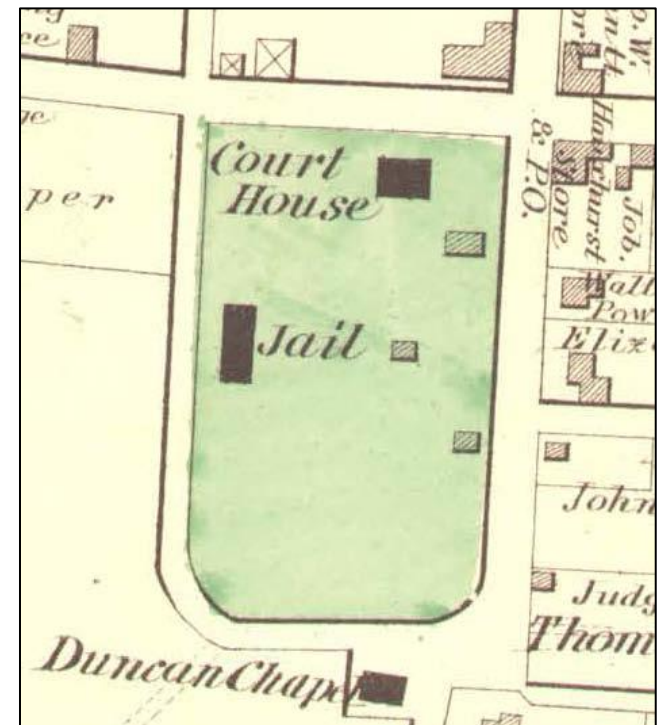
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John B. Smith
J. B. Smith
Fairfax Co. V. S.

There are two, known maps that can give us clues as to which “brick house” Lieutenant Smith referred to in this letter. After searching through the Court’s Order Books, we only have official record of the Courthouse, Clerk’s Office (a two-story brick structure), and the Jail (which was being built on the lot at that time). But clearly, based on these maps, there were several other smaller structures that were built at some point and are candidates for the mysterious “brick house” in question.



LEFT: This is part of a hand-drawn map included in an 1861 letter from southerner I. A. Young, sent to Fairfax Court House to care for his brother, Confederate soldier George Young, who was injured in the First Battle of Bull Run (First Manassas). You can see the Courthouse building (C. H.) and the Clerk’s Office (which we know of from other orders also in our Court’s Order Books). But the Sheriff’s Office, and the other two structures noted as “law offices,” we have no record of in our Court Order books. Perhaps one of these is the “brick house” to which Smith referred. (*George Young Letters*, MSS 3676, University of Virginia)

RIGHT: This is a close-up view of Fairfax Court House from the 1879 *Hopkins Atlas*. It shows the Courthouse and the Jail, and three smaller structures. The light gray, rectangular building closest to the Courthouse was the Clerk’s Office. Again, there are two small structures drawn on the map below that Clerk’s Office, which match very closely to the layout of Young’s map from 1861 – possibly the same law offices.



Reviewing our Court Order Books, no order was entered allowing the Freedmen’s Bureau to rent the “abandoned brick house” on the Courthouse lot, so the public could assume that Smith’s request to use the building for a school, was denied.

If you have any tips about how the old courthouse lot appeared and which structure may have been the candidate for the Freedmen’s Bureau schoolhouse, please let us know.

For more information about these and other records, please email the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center at historicalrecords@fairfaxcounty.gov or call 703-246-4168.

Please join us for the City of Fairfax Fall Festival on **Saturday, October 8, 2016!**

The Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center will be open for a **RESEARCH OPEN HOUSE from **10 am to 3 pm.****

Come explore your town or family history!

As part of the open house, pages from George and Martha Washington’s wills, as well as an original 1751 Test Oath (never before displayed) will be out for viewing.

Fairfax Circuit Court archivists and staff will be available for research assistance.
