

**Research on the Traffick of Enslaved People in Albemarle County Court Square**  
*Summary Report*  
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Between 2021 and 2024, a team of researchers working on behalf of the University of Virginia's Memory Project researched the antebellum history of Court Square and the Albemarle County Courthouse in an effort to uncover the site's significance as a place of enslavement and the commodification of human beings. In doing so, these researchers engaged primarily with Chancery Order Books, court orders pertaining to cases involving disputes over wills, estates, and debts due to the Court. Enslaved women, men, and children featured prominently in many of these cases as they regularly factored into the "estate" of wealthy white Virginians. In adjudicating the allocation of estate capital to various beneficiaries, the Court found that enslaved Americans posed a unique problem as people, unlike property, could not be evenly divided.

At times, enslaved persons might be granted to the deceased person's next of kin as happened in May of 1835 when the Albemarle County Court decreed that Ann Eliza and Emily, two women enslaved by Christopher Hudson, were to be bequeathed to Hudson's grandchildren after his passing. All too often, however, in order to distribute the "shares" of the deceased in a manner that the Court deemed appropriate, the Court would appoint one or more commissioners to sell the enslaved persons, essentially "liquidating" them as an asset in order to distribute their monetary value evenly among the claimants.

The Memory Project research team's efforts involved reading through all Chancery Orders of the Albemarle County Court between the years 1830 and 1865, documenting every mention of enslaved people. Researchers compiled each mention, alongside the relevant contextual information, into an index. Over the course of this research, the documents revealed that the Court directly involved itself in the auctioning and sale of hundreds of enslaved people, especially in relation to the arbitration of estate disputes. These enslaved people were sold in Court Square, very likely on an auction block, though Chancery records rarely mention a specific place of sale. Nonetheless, these sales were ordered, advertised, and administered directly by court commissioners and on the grounds of Court Square. Researchers discovered hundreds of named enslaved people whose fate was determined not by their enslavers or professional human traffickers, but by the Albemarle County Court commissioners, clerks, and judges. These names have all been recorded in an Index titled *Enslavement By the Book: An Index to the Albemarle*

*County Chancery Court Cases with Mentions of Enslaved People, 1831-1865.* This index is being turned over to the Descendants of Enslaved Communities at UVA.

This research has deep implications for further research. We anticipate that genealogists and historians can use the hundreds of names recovered in these documents to make connections and enhance their research into the history of slavery in Central Virginia. This research also holds implications for ongoing interpretation of public spaces like Court Square as it illustrates the culpability of the County of Albemarle in perpetuating and buttressing the institution of slavery throughout the antebellum period. Hundreds of enslaved people, many of whose names still reside on the record books in the Albemarle County Courthouse were enslaved and trafficked not just by planters and “slave traders” but by their own County government. This research illustrates how Court Square served as an important node of the extensive system of human trafficking that pervaded the landscape of Albemarle County during the antebellum period. In summation, this report argues that any effort to commemorate and memorialize enslaved people at Court Square must take into account that the County Court of Albemarle adopted an active role in enslaving and trafficking people of African descent.