This work is an outgrowth of a study in the “constructedness of slavery.” It is not surprising that many novelists have been concerned with the portrayal of American slave life. The fictional narrative provides an appropriate forum for an investigation of slavery. The controversial issues surrounding slavery provide the author with an irresistible opportunity to arouse and persuade the sensibilities of the reader. By definition, fiction is considered narrative writing drawn from the mind's eye; however, because the imagination is not self-perpetuating, it must be stimulated by events of the outside world. All literature is written upon the occasion of some event—or perhaps more precisely, it is born in the spirit of some happening. In the case of Life at The Davis Hotel: A Contextual Study for a Proposed Work of Fiction, the novelist considers the possibilities for writing a work of fiction based upon historical fact. In the mid to late 19th century, a series of resort hotels emerged upon the North Carolina landscape in the township of Kittrell, North Carolina. According to historical accounts, there are two hotels of significance: The Kittrell Springs Hotel and The Davis Hotel, otherwise known as the “Glass House.” This study explores the possibility of using The Davis Hotel as the primary setting for a work of antebellum fiction.

Chapter one constructs and develops the fictional biography of William Franklin Davis, the novel’s main character. It explores critical aspects of the character’s early life, giving the novelist a view of the young man’s parental upbringing, education, and personal motivations. This chapter also introduces and develops the character of frontiersman Beck Warren, a secondary but crucial character in the story’s development.
Chapter two develops the central story line of *Life at The Davis Hotel*. As a young man Davis goes south with Beck Warren on a fur-trading venture, where he meets Ella Catlin, daughter of The Kittrell Springs Hotel proprietor Hugh Catlin. The young couple fall in love, and they are soon married much to the chagrin of Ella’s parents who harbor deep resentment for Northerners. As a wedding present, Davis purchases and remolds a nearby existing hotel for his bride, and it rightfully becomes known as the elegant Davis Hotel. Acquisition of the hotel immediately places the young entrepreneur at odds with his father-in-law who sees the purchase in terms of competition. Young William’s initiation into marriage and life in the South is shocking; for as Ella insists upon using slave labor to run the hotel, he half-heartedly puts aside his anti-slavery views and reluctantly conforms to the “vile” ways of the South.

Chapter three explores the role of 19th century American women by looking specifically at the life of two historic females: Malvina Shanklin Harlan and Frances Anne Kemble.
Life at the Davis Hotel:  
A Contextual Study for a Proposed Work of Fiction

by

Derek Thomas Currin

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of English

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2003

Approved By:

________________________________  _________________________________
Chair of Advisory Committee
Biography of Derek Thomas Currin

Derek Thomas Currin was born October 15, 1963 in Erwin, North Carolina. He is the son of Nelson and Coma Lee Currin of Coats, North Carolina. He is married to the former Particia McFall of Henderson, North Carolina, and he has two children: Amelia Claire Currin and Noah Walden Currin. He received his Bachelors of Business Administration in 1986 from Campbell University and a NC teaching certificate in 1993. He spent several years working in the computer industry before returning to the study of literature. He completed postgraduate studies in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1990, and currently teaches English at Triton High School in Erwin, North Carolina.
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A special thanks to Susan Cannady, Toni McKay, and Janet Parker, who have willingly listened to my ideas and so freely shared their knowledge with me. I am forever grateful for the invaluable support of such friends and colleagues.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Thanks, especially, to my wife Patty Currin, and my parents, Nelson and Coma Lee Currin. Without your support and encouragement, this project would have never been possible. Additional thanks goes to two very special ladies who have passed before me: Bertha Westbrook and Phyllis Buckner. Your allegiance to higher education has influenced me greatly. I am grateful for all the encouragement you sent my way.
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Introduction

*Life at the Davis Hotel: A Contextual Study For a Work of Fiction* serves as a platform of thought, a place where the novelist may construct the rationale and test the possibilities for writing a proposed work of historical antebellum fiction. In the mid to late 19th century, a series of resort hotels emerged upon the North Carolina landscape in the township of Kittrell, North Carolina. According to historical accounts, there are two hotels of significance: The Kittrell Springs Hotel and The Davis Hotel, otherwise known as the “Glass House.” This study explores the possibility of using The Davis Hotel as the primary setting for a work of antebellum fiction.

Chapter one constructs and develops the fictional biography of William Franklin Davis, the novel’s main character. It explores critical aspects of the character’s early life, giving the novelist a view of the young man’s parental upbringing, education, and personal motivations. This chapter also introduces and develops the character of frontiersman Beck Warren, a secondary but crucial character in the story’s development.

Chapter two develops the central story line of *Life At The Davis Hotel*. As a young man Davis goes south with Beck Warren on a fur-trading venture, where he meets Ella Catlin, daughter of The Kittrell Springs Hotel proprietor Hugh Catlin. The young couple fall in love, and they are soon married much to the chagrin of Ella’s parents who harbor deep resentment for Northerners. As a wedding present, Davis purchases and remolds a nearby existing hotel for his bride, and it rightfully becomes known as the elegant Davis Hotel. Acquisition of the hotel immediately places the young entrepreneur at odds with his father-in-law who sees the purchase in terms of competition. Young William’s initiation into marriage and life in the South is shocking; for as Ella insists upon using slave labor to run the
hotel, he half-heartedly puts aside his anti-slavery views and reluctantly conforms to the “vile” ways of the South.

Chapter three explores the role of 19th century American women by looking specifically at the life of two historic females: Malvina Shaklin Harlan and Frances Anne Kemble. This section creates a context for creating fictional 19th century marital relationships.

*Life at the Davis Hotel: A Contextual Study For a Work of Fiction* owes its origins to several re-printed hundred-year-old newspaper articles that I clipped from *The Daily Dispatch*, a small town newspaper published in Henderson, North Carolina, Sunday, April 5, 1995. The full-page feature article about a devastating 1893 hotel fire, paired with a captivating pen-and-ink sketch of a grand 1800s two-story hotel building, known as The Davis Hotel, provided me with my first brief but intriguing view of Kittrell, North Carolina and its seemingly exotic and prosperous 19th century existence.

As for the romantic setting and the grand architectural design of the historic Davis Hotel depicted in the newspaper clipping, perhaps “a picture is worth a thousand words.” As the Sunday, April 23, 1995, edition of *The Daily Dispatch* credits Mr. T.T. Beckham of Kittrell, North Carolina, with providing the picture of The Davis Hotel, I am grateful for his contribution—without this picture, there would be little fuel for my imagination. In a telephone interview with Mr. Beckham, a contract mail carrier and self appointed Kittrell historian, I learned that this image of The Davis Hotel is taken from a railroad travel advertisement. According to Mr. Beckham, “to date, there are no known surviving pictures of the Kittrell Springs Hotel,” and relatively little physical evidence exists to suggest that any hotel structures were ever part of the Kittrell landscape. Even the highly acclaimed mineral
springs that produced the therapeutic waters and gave rise to the town’s earlier name, Kittrell Springs, are nowhere to be found. Apparently, the springs were destroyed many years ago by highway expansion projects.

Native Kittrellites such as T.T. Beckham are wonderful sources of information; however, in an attempt to gain some first hand knowledge of these hotels of old, I traveled some months ago to the small community of Kittrell, located just several miles north of the Tar River in Vance County, North Carolina. As this excursion awoke within me a familiarity—or rather, a sense of intimacy with the subject of 19th century hotels, I am compelled to recount the events of that day as they unfolded.

As I leave Raleigh around 10 o’clock and travel North on US 1 in my Chevy pick-up, I am pacified by the tunes of James Taylor—and as always with Taylor’s music—that hypnotic melody takes control: “in my mind I’m goin’ to Carolina—can’t you see the sunshine? —can’t you just feel the moonshine?”—and I immediately know that I am doomed for some uncertain time to walk the earth and hum that cussed melody.

In any event, the drive to Kittrell is a pleasant one, and as I am always moved by topographical changes in the landscape, I marvel at how suddenly the flat land gives way to rolling green hills. I love to hear the truck tires change their pitch as they leave the asphalt highway and roll onto the concrete surface of the Tar River bridge—what a beautiful sight; the muddy little river powerfully cuts its way through rock and dirt—and then, that old familiar hum of the tires returns, and I am pressing on to Kittrell. In no time at all, I arrive in the small community, hoping against hope
that the historical record is wrong—I’m hoping to turn right at the historical mile marker just off of US 1 North and find that The Davis Hotel has never burned. But this is not the case at all.

I’m armed with all the right tools. I have the newspaper clipping from the 1995 *Sunday Showcase Edition*, and I have the historic roadside marker to guide me—what more could I need? The picture shows that the hotel faces the railroad tracks, so I reason that I can find The Davis somewhere between US 1 and the railroad tracks. I turn off the highway, and within about three seconds—bump, bump—I’ve crossed the steel rails. “Time to look back,” I say to myself. But there’s nothing to look at—at least there’s nothing to suggest that a grand hotel had ever been in these parts. A little square house covered in Masonite siding and tacky blue paint is the only structure to be found. The Kittrell of yesteryear may have been bustling—but the Kittrell of 2003 is asleep.

I pull my truck off the road to look around a little. Certainly, if I stand here long enough I’ll get a sense of the place. But the more I look, the less I’m convinced that I’m even in the right place. Getting back into the truck, I drive down to the volunteer fire department. If anybody knows about The Davis Hotel—certainly it’ll be the guys at the fire station. As I drive up to the station, there’s a young man out front. A cigarette hangs from his mouth as he waxes a bright red Chevy truck.

As I approach the young man, I can’t stop thinking about the hook, ladder, and bucket company that couldn’t stop The Davis Hotel from burning in 1893. I realize that modern fire fighting equipment could certainly save the hotel—but as
such thoughts will not bring back that grand old structure, I proceed to ask the young man, who calls himself “Mick,” if he knows anything about the old hotels of Kittrell.

Mick, being a very helpful fellow, tells me, “Oh, Kittrell ain’t got no hotels, mister—old ones or new ones. But if you go on down to Interstate 85 just down the road in Henderson, you’ll find plenty of places to stay.”

Slap. Slap. Rule number one: never assume that the native citizens will be versed in matters of local history.

With a bit more explanation on my part Mick says, “On second thought, I’ve heard mention of them hotels before, but I don’t know nothing about their location. But there’s a fellow inside who can tell ya.”

In a few minutes, he returns with a helpful older gentleman. The man pops out of the fire station with his hand pointing back up the street. “You see that little blue house up there. That’s where one of them hotels was. The state cut the road through here some years back. This road—from the fire department going back to US 1 cuts right between where them two hotels were supposed to be.” Of course, this means that the dumpy little blue house sits on a portion of what used to be the property of Colonel Davis, owner of the famed hotel. I thank the nice man at the Kittrell Fire Department and proceed up the road to the little house.

As I survey the proximity of the railroad to the adjacent property, I begin to make connections between the newspaper picture and the place where I’m standing. The newspaper depicts the railroad running directly in front of the hotel—it shows the train tracks to be at an elevation lower than the hotel structure, and the piece of land that I am surveying fits the topographical profile. Upon closer observation, I notice
portions of what appear to be a tumbling retaining wall—the boulders have toppled and spilled into the weedy drainage ditch paralleling the front of the property. A dirt path, wide enough to accommodate two cars, runs between the tracks and the drainage ditch. As it beckons for further investigation, I drive on for several hundred yards. It is impossible to assess the historical use of this property; but for the time being it is overgrown and suffers from disuse. I can see that the path eventually gives way to a city street, and I have a notion that I’ll soon be out of hotel territory; however, I occasionally spot portions of the old retaining wall in the ditch—and I momentarily feel like an Egyptologist in search of some great find. But my greatest discovery is two dilapidated mobile homes tucked into a small wooded area near the end of the path.

There, in the front yard of the trailer, a black woman crowned with pink sponge curlers is taking groceries from a car. As I pull into the yard, a look of dread floods her face. Realizing that my truck window’s open, she barks a quick, “Who you lookin’ for?” I start in with the hotel story, and her face takes on that “you’re crazier than hell” look. “You done turned down the wrong street, son, if you looking for a hotel down here—matter of fact, you in de wrong town.”

As I have heard this story before, I try to explain a bit more. I point to a small and crumbling section of the retaining wall standing in the drainage ditch by her driveway. I tell her that the rocks must be the only thing left of the old structure. She looks a bit confused—and obviously she’s not impressed, that is, until I produce the newspaper photograph of the hotel.

“You mean to tell me I’m living where this hotel use to be?” she says,
“Yes,” I say, “By the looks of this picture, people back in the late 1800’s used to get off the train and walk right up to The Davis Hotel.”

The woman in curlers introduces herself as Connie Walston. Connie tells me to stay right where I am. “They’s somebody I wants you to meet—my friend Rose might know something about the hotel, cause her folks grew up in Kittrell.”

Within minutes, she returns with a short, plump black woman. Her hands are caked in what appears to be flour, and the strong odor of fried fish parades about her presence.

Looking at the photograph Rose says, “Honey, you’s got to have the wrong place cause ain’t nothin’ like this ever been in Kittrell.”

For some strange reason, perhaps because I mentioned something about writing a book, the women begin to babble and tell me all about themselves, but the conversation is short-lived. Rose takes off running and yelping, “Girl—I got to go turn them fish off before I burns the house down—I’ll be right back. You just stay right here.”

As my new-found friends converse with me so freely, Connie mentions that she had been out to pick up some fresh cornmeal; however, she says, “The mill ain’t open no more on Sardy—You see, when we fries fish, we likes to use fresh meal.”

“Mill?” I say. “Where is the mill?”

“Well,” said Connie, “It’s just a few miles down the road—they grinds fresh meal every day—the best you’ve ever eat.” Connie can’t remember the name of the mill, so she yells back to Rose who’s coming out of the trailer, “Hey, go get that bag of meal and bring it here.”
I’m intrigued by the idea of a nearby gristmill, and on Rose’s return, we examine the bag. It reads: Mosses’ Stone Ground Seafood Blend, Buffalo Mill, Kittrell, North Carolina.

I ask the women to tell me about the mill, and with a look of confusion Rose says, “They ain’t nothing to tell—they just makes cornmeal—but we can shows you where it is.”

Before I know it—Rose and Connie are crawling into my truck, and we’re off to the Buffalo Mill. But along the way, we pass a few interesting sights. The St. James Episcopal Church, a small, white, one room structure with a grand little steeple, bears that look of antiquity. I note that the building sits atop a rock foundation. The rock and masonry work bear a great resemblance to the retaining walls I’ve seen in the ditches back at Connie’s house. I begin to wonder about the age of the masonry work. Could it be the handiwork of slaves?

It doesn’t take long to arrive at our destination—and just as Connie said, the mill is not open for business. From a nostalgic perspective, the mill offers little appeal. It’s just a bunch of tin buildings, metal silos, and grain elevators. There’s no millpond in sight—I decide that the grinding operation is currently powered by electricity, and I become resigned to the fact that there is no giant water-powered mill wheel. However, instinct tells me even if the mill has been electrified, it must have been water-powered at some point.

Connie and Rose say they have been here many times, and they don’t remember seeing a pond anywhere.
But just past the metal silos, a dirt path leads up a steep embankment, and I head for the road. The tires spin out a little gravel, but the truck makes the climb with ease—and when we top the hill, there to my surprise rests a peaceful, gigantic lake—its waters are held in place by a massive stone dam. In some distant past, man has descended into the deep ravine of Buffalo Creek, carrying with him his ingenuity and brawn. With the power of his body, he has lugged and hoisted each rock into place; he has chipped and fitted each stone; he has, by his own wit, cheated nature, and held the waters at bay; he has harnessed the power of gravity; he has turned the millstones and pulverized the grain; he has made the flour and the bread—he has fed his children. The power of such thought tends to hold me in a trance; but as I glance at Connie in her pink rollers, I am once again grounded in reality, and the Chevy truck dives down the hill and makes for Kittrell.

The thought of cold fried fish is not appealing—at least not to me anyway. And though I am grateful to these ladies who so precipitously pushed their lunch plates aside, it is time for their return. As my truck rumbles by the railroad tracks on the way back to Connie’s trailer, I realize that my rubber tires are rolling over ground where wagons and carriages once passed.

Connie interrupts my train of thought to ask, “You knows why we knew it was safe to go off ridin’ with you? We knowed you won’t no ax murderer cause you got a baby seat in this truck. You’s gotta be a good man, cause you been ridin’ around wid a baby.”

As it is always reassuring to have one’s character reaffirmed by complete strangers, I thank the women for the vote of confidence.
As we approach the driveway, an automobile blocks the entrance, and judging by the size of the big black man leaning against the car, I am glad that I must pull alongside the road. When faced with fight or flight, I am inclined to choose the latter, and I reason that parking by the roadside will make for a quick getaway if the need should arise. I’m not sure if he’s been waiting for the lady crowned in curlers, or the one that reeks of fish—but I am certain that he’s not been expecting me—and when Connie says, “O hell—how we gonna explain this white man to Bobby?” I can only imagine that he ain’t gonna buy the line about the gristmill—and any mention of a hotel won’t settle well with him either. As I roll to a stop, the ladies scramble out of the truck. I give them a real quick thank you, issue a friendly wave to Bobby, and pull on down the road—all the while, I’m looking for remnants of the stone retaining wall.

The Kittrell of yesterday is gone, and I cannot physically touch the people of its past; but Mr. Beckham, Mick, Connie, and Rose are alive and well—and they have opened for me a door into the past. They have shown me the crumbling retaining walls of the old hotel, the sturdy foundations of the St. James Church, and the rocky face of the Buffalo dam. From the bluff overlooking the great millpond, I have entered an imagined past—it is the era of the antebellum Kittrell, and in this place, I will capture the life and the soul of those folks who ventured to build the great hotel, raise the church upon its foundations, and construct the great Buffalo dam. This North Carolina setting becomes the stage for Life at the Davis Hotel, a work of antebellum fiction.
Chapter One

Constructing the Life of William Franklin Davis

To commemorate the centennial anniversary of the hotel’s presence in this rural North Carolina community, *The Daily Dispatch* re-printed the original text of several century-old news articles in their *Sunday Showcase* edition with very little supporting commentary.

The oversized headline of the May 1, 1893, feature article reads:

**DISASTROUS FIRE AT KITRELL**

*The Famous Davis Hotel Burned—Full Particulars of the Unfortunate Calamity—A Heavy Loss to Col. Davis and to the Town.*

Appended to the account of the disastrous fire is an October 30, 1902, article of more substantial length entitled:

**Death of Col. W.F. Davis**

To many 20th or 21st century readers, these articles have a nostalgic flair; and the editor’s decision to minimize the editorial comments and let the articles stand on their own merit is brilliant. It allows—if but for an instant—the common reader to engage the text and become one with the period.

These newspaper articles, springboards into mid and late 19th century American life and culture, provide an entry point for the writing of this historical fiction. And as I have
returned time and time again to this *Sunday Showcase* edition of *The Daily Dispatch*, I have stumbled, it seems, into the fictional realm of The Davis Hotel—a world that takes shape by blending historical fact and truth, with copious amounts of imagination. Thus, this study constructs both a premise and a context for the writing of *Life at the Davis Hotel*.

I must stress that *Life at the Davis Hotel* is in no way an attempt to offer a completely accurate or factual account of The Davis Hotel that burned in 1893; however, the proposed novel does most notably take Kittrell, North Carolina, as its southern setting. As the protagonist of the fictional account assumes the name William Franklin Davis, the novel’s main character bears a close similarity to the hotel’s historic owner: Washington Franklin Davis. And the historic Col. W.F. Davis’s obituary, printed in the *Henderson Gold Leaf*, October 30, 1902, provides a starting point for constructing both a premise for *Life at the Davis Hotel* and for developing the story’s fictional protagonist. The death notice of the historical Col. W.F. Davis, re-printed in the *Sunday Showcase* edition of *The Daily Dispatch*, reads:

> Intelligence has been received here of the death of Col. Washington F. Davis at his home in Boston Mass. on Sunday, Oct 19. The funeral services were held at 2 o’clock Tuesday afternoon and were conducted by the Adelphi Lodge of Masons, of which Col. Davis was Chaplain at the time of his death.

> There was quite a gathering of the older hotel men, as well as members of the Masonic bodies and others, and some beautiful floral pieces bore testimony to the esteem in which the deceased was held, says the *Evening Transcript*.

> Col. Davis formerly lived at Kittrell and there are many persons throughout the community who will learn of his death with deep sorrow. He came from Boston soon after the war and was for a quarter of a century proprietor of the well-known Davis Hotel in Kittrell, which was for a long time the most famous winter resort for Northern people between New York and Florida.

> He was a man of means, broad minded and liberal in his views, of genial nature and generous disposition, and was an excellently popular and valuable citizen of the community he did so much for.
There was regret when Col. Davis and his estimable wife returned to Boston after he had retired from business, and there will be regret at his death and sincere sympathy for the bereaved widow by their friends here and elsewhere. *(Dispatch)*

Obituaries tend to create more questions than answers. Their brief look into a person’s past is often submerged in sentimental overtones; and in this genre, little evidence of the deceased’s true character ever emerges. Readers are left to wonder about the hopes, dreams, and motivations that once energized the life that is now departed, and in the case of Col. Davis, there are many questions to ask—questions that in turn form the foundation and premise for *Life at the Davis Hotel*.

In constructing a fictional character loosely based upon the historical personage of for Col. W.F. Davis, I have seized on one intriguing and important question that is not answered by the newspaper accounts: Why would a Boston man of such great “means”—who is “broad minded and liberal in his views”—come to Kittrell, North Carolina, in the mid to late 19th century to become a hotel proprietor? Any attempt to give an answer requires first, an insight into a character’s personal motivations, and secondly, an understanding of the external political, economic, and social circumstances surrounding both the character’s life and the society at large.

In the creative writing process there comes a point at which the truthful account of the historical personage becomes irrelevant; and at such a time, the writer must yield to instinct. The birth of a fictional character is a strange thing to witness. Imagine the morning sun shining brightly through the window—as it strikes the figure of Washington F. Davis, a strong and resolute silhouette takes shape against the pallid wall; and when the temporal shape will no longer cling to its mold, the man-shadow assumes an independent pose, and
William F. Davis emerges upon the page, ready and willing to engage the challenges of a new, uncharted fictional world. The following fictional account of William F. Davis provides a bit of insight into the man who will take center stage in *Life at the Davis Hotel*.

**A fictional account of William Franklin Davis, owner of The Davis Hotel—a glimpse of his early life and how he came to North Carolina**

William Franklin Davis was born July 4, 1826, in Boston, Massachusetts, the first son of wealthy fur exporter Cecil Allen Davis and his wife, Alma Peabody Davis. The young Davis, being of both strong body and intellect, was, according to his father’s design, “destined to carry on the family export business”, yet, his mother Alma, a deeply religious woman, well noted for her strong opinions on temperance, abolition, and women’s rights, felt her son’s “intellect and gregarious personality best suited to the challenges of the pulpit.” And though the determined parents saw the fate of their son’s future in opposing terms, they did agree upon one fact: regardless of William’s vocation, a Harvard College education would provide a proper start in life. Of course, this decision disregarded the opinions and desires of the young lad who was to benefit from such a plan. And, as he entered adulthood, the high-spirited youth found the parentally prescribed blueprint for his life to be out of line with the dictates of his heart’s desire for a life of frontier adventure.

From an early age, William displayed a predisposition for learning and a love of books; yet, his studies did not make him dull. Much to the contrary, he was filled with spirited life; and at the age of twelve years, he was precocious, to say the least. Once, his history tutor, Mr. Crane, awoke from a deep sleep to find Little Bill, as he was fondly called, grasping tightly in his hands several locks of newly cropped hair. Apparently, the youth had internalized the tutor’s lesson on Indian torture and had decided to experiment with the
concept of scalping; and, as the already balding Mr. Crane did not take well to losing his hair by unnatural causes, he appealed to the youth’s father for compensation and vowed never again to provide such a “demon-ridden-child” with the privilege of his tutelage. And, Mr. Crane was not at all amused with Mr. Davis’s offer of a coonskin cap to cover the unsightly gaps of missing hair. Soon after the shock of the episode had worn off, Cecil and Alma found themselves laughing about the plight of Mr. Crane, and they quickly discounted the event as child’s play. However, many years later, Alma recalled the incident with Mr. Crane, saying, “at that moment I should have revised my plans for making William into a member of the clergy. For surely a child of such imagination and action could never find contentment in passively listening to the sins of another, for want of embracing mischief of his own making.”

And, as such hindsight serves little consequence to rectify issues of the present, Mrs. Davis did not ponder the thought with much seriousness. But, it cannot be overlooked that William was in most cases respectful of his parents’ wishes. He had been subjected to that Old Testament edict, “Children, obey your parents and your days shall be long upon the earth”; therefore, though somewhat begrudgingly, he followed through with the plan of education. Yet, his life took such unforeseen turns as to make his destiny quite unrecognizable to either his parents or himself.

Little Bill was quite gifted when it came to the manipulation of numbers, and his father seized upon this talent early on, bringing the young lad into the brokerage firm to work with Mr. Hillard, his chief accounts officer. Bill became astute at managing the long ledgers with seemingly endless entries. And though he proved himself to be meticulous, he found “the counting of beans,” as Mr. Hillard called it, void of any excitement. And when he
watched the old man’s long droopy face, his tired squinting eyes peering through his spectacles over the large stack of ledgers, Bill recoiled with fear. He imagined himself exchanging places with Mr. Hillard, and he cringed at the thought of living the life of a bookkeeper.

At a very young age, Bill learned a great deal about the management of his father’s business, but it was not the counting of the money that excited him: it was the art of making the money. The people with whom his father worked held for him a true fascination. They were of two types: trappers and businessmen, and his father was sure to always stress that these men held little or no common ground. “The trapper is the most common of all men. He takes from nature and gives nothing in return,” his father said, “And the businessman, he is respectable; he makes money; he creates jobs and provides a product for the public.”

Little Bill kept his opinion to himself, but he disagreed with his father vehemently. By all accounts, Bill came to believe they should both be called trappers, for both men were engaged in a ritual of constant bargaining. The trapper always wanted a higher price for his pelt and the buyer always wanted to pay less and charge the public more. The cycle was exhausting, and Bill saw that neither man believed the words of the other. This was probably the only truthful thought that passed between the two.

Little Bill quickly grasped the secrets of his father’s success. Cecil Davis ran his business by one “rule of thumb”: you make your money when you buy, not when you sell. In the privacy of thought, Little Bill extended his father’s economic theory to say that the art of speculation is as old as mankind itself. It is an economic phenomenon that paradoxically fuels its own engine, and so long as at least two humans exist on the planet, it is likely that a system of trade will be in place to serve the wants of these beings. And, he concluded in
harsher, more blunt, and more realistic terms: so long as there are at least two people on the planet, there will be someone to exploit economically.

Be they common or not, Little Bill developed an affinity for the trappers who frequented his father’s establishment. They were the heroes of his imagination, and their stories of the rough and rugged wilderness piqued his curiosity. Perhaps it was the danger and uncertainty of their everyday lives that excited Little Bill, but regardless of his father’s feelings toward these men, William respected them immensely. He knew, as did his father, that without the Indians and frontiersmen, there would be no substantial quantity of furs for market, and thus—no fortune to amass. The American fur trapper had made the Davis family wealthy; and ironically, it was a “common trapper,” as his father called him, a husky frontiersman named Beck Warren, who would again change the future of the Davis family.

In the spring of 1843, at the age of seventeen, Little Bill convinced his father to let him travel with Beck to visit some trading posts in the Southern states. He reasoned with his father that he should “know more of the business than the ledgers,” and as he would be returning to school in the fall, this was the perfect time to learn about the land and the people who supplied the European’s insatiable desire for high quality fur products.

Cecil agreed to the young man’s argument, and with great reluctance, he set out to advise Alma that William would be “makin’ a run” to the Carolinas with Ol’ Beck Warren. As Alma had little tolerance or appreciation for the “rough and ready” men of the wilderness, and as Cecil knew that Alma looked upon such men with contempt, for she believed them to be “whoremongering drunks,” he avoided telling her of the adventure until he felt certain that Ol’ Beck and Little Bill were well on their way. Alma had been accepting of William’s working in the trading office; however, she had always discouraged any social indulgence
with traders. She saw these men “as offensive detractors of the family.” They were, according to her, “a people who lived for the moment and had no regard for the future.” On this subject, all attempts at refuting her arguments failed; she refused to find any redeeming quality in such people. On countless occasions, Cecil had pointed out the futility of her biases, and he had warned her that she, “would, if given an opportunity, cut off the hand that fed her.”

Notwithstanding Alma’s prejudices against Beck Warren, Cecil found him to be honest, dependable, and trustworthy. Cecil had known him for many years. Warren was a successful trapper, and in the off-season he often contracted his services to Cecil as a runner, that is, a buyer and transporter of furs. As there were a series of well-established trading posts situated throughout the states, fur buyers often converged on these places to bargain for high quality pelts to meet their export quotas. On this particular run, Beck intended to travel down as far as the Carolinas in search of low priced/high-quality pelts. Of course, bargaining for furs was not the only business of Ol’ Beck. There was a whole host of taverns, gambling houses, and brothels between Boston and the Carolinas, and though these places were somewhat of a mystery to William, he knew that at nightfall Ol’ Beck was a man who “hung his hat in many places.” The transformation into manhood was an issue that Cecil Davis did not wish to meet head-on; however, he did privately say to Beck with a “wink and a nod” that he knew Little Bill was leaving town as a mere lad, but he would return to Boston a “full fledged man.”

To meet Beck on the street, one would most likely characterize him as a liquor-drinking, pipe-smoking, carousing kind of man, but his roughneck appearance was by Little Bill’s assessment a bit of a misconception. Beck “took a likin’” to the boy in his youth, and
he always brought Little Bill a long strap of licorice when he came to trade pelts with Mr. Davis. The frontiersman fondly remembered the day that Mr. Crane had stomped into Cecil’s office demanding payment for the locks of hair that William had cut from his head. Beck saw Mr. Crane as the half-empty shell of a man; he was, in Beck’s words, “a weasel in a suit.” The sight of the half-shaven little man ranting and shrieking was indeed a sight to behold. Both Cecil and Beck found the situation humorous, and Beck even went so far as to laughingly say that, “there was some kind of justice in the whole situation. He’s the kinda’ man that needs a scalpin’.” It seemed as if Little Bill’s mischievous prank had made common ground for what might have otherwise been an unlikely friendship.

As Ol’ Beck and Bill began their journey south in the early spring of 1835, the brown earth was beginning to put on a fresh green jacket. Bill was eager to escape the outskirts of Boston and see more of the budding world that lay ahead. He knew that somewhere behind him, his father was probably involved with the administering of smelling salts. He imagined that if the news of his excursion with Beck Warren were not sufficient to induce his mother to faint, she would certainly feign the event. However, the young man chose not to linger on this passing thought and placed his energies on contemplating the days ahead.

Beck had packed the wagon with a good many supplies, but he was intent on stopping at the General Store for what he termed “a few more necessities of travel.” Beck passed the list to Bill, telling him to add anything he might want for the long journey. The list contained the standards: bailing-twine, black-powder, beans, coffee, salt-pork, flour, etc; but, to the bottom, he had added several items for which Bill did not quite understand the importance: four packs sewing needles, twenty spools sewing thread, various sizes and colors; straight pins, scissors, wrapping paper, and rose-scented talcum powder. As Bill was indeed a
contemplative young man, he reasoned that needles and thread would be handy if one were to pop a button, or rip a seam while traveling, yet he couldn’t quite come to terms with the thought of Ol’ Beck smelling like a rose. Rather than ask, he put his curiosity on the back shelf, and figured that sooner or later this mystery would reveal itself.

* * *

Independence was beginning to suit Bill well. He had enjoyed the long days on the trail, but it was the absence of parental influence that he liked best. In the previous summer, he had made a trans-Atlantic voyage to England with his father to negotiate trade contracts. And though the trip had broadened his view of the world, until this point, he had not felt that he had any control over his own life. He found himself in that small gap of time that connected the seasons. He believed that the magic of manhood was waiting for him around the bend, and he couldn’t wait to pass the trees that blocked his view ahead.

Beck didn’t care too much about learning, or the future, or anything that made life into a serious event, and this was a relief to Bill. Sometimes it was hard to know when Beck was being truthful or not. He told Bill, “As for myself, I don’t see much point in book learnin’.” And, with a bit of mischief in his voice he said, “Ya see, I ain’t never been to school except for two days; and one of them don’t count, ‘cause on the second day, I went in my brother’s place.” The young man always found Beck’s anecdotes amusing, so he rejoined with a smile and a laugh. Beck continued his discourse on learnin’, saying, “Of all the lessons taught by the school marm, geometry had to be the most important subject.” “Ya see,” he went on to say, “just take the circle for instance—it holds all the answers to people’s problems. It’s like this—the marm said that the circle’s got $360^\circ$—and when you understand that, it just oughta solve everybody’s problems.”
Bill didn’t know what to make of Beck’s comments, for they seemed to be born of “fool’s chat.” But just for fun, he pressed him to explain a bit more.

“Just think about it,” Beck said. “Pick an issue—any issue. Just take the question of slavery for example: is it right, or is it wrong? Now, place that question in the center of the circle. Then, you put 360 people around the circle, and tell ‘em to give you an answer. Now, what have you got Bill, just what have you got?”

The young man hated to disappoint Beck, but he didn’t know the answer, so his only reply was a look of confusion.

“What you’ve got,” Beck continued, “is 360 different points of view. Some’s a’ lookin’ at it from the front; some’s a’ lookin’ at it from the side; some’s a’ lookin’ at it from the back. And the only point is—ain’t nobody seein’ things the same way. Now you see Bill, the beauty of understanding the circle is this: most questions ain’t got no answer; they just go round and round –so far as I can see, they ain’t no need to debate, nor argue about a damn thing.”

*   *   *
Chapter Two

Constructing the Plot of

*Life at the Davis Hotel: A Novel of American Slavery*

*Life at the Davis Hotel* can be described as a story about the slave South. It follows in traditions set by a host of notable writers: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, and Margaret Mitchell to name three. The purpose here is not to create a comparative study of these works, but rather to generalize about the collective impact of these authors upon American society. Slavery, class, and social upheaval are dominant themes in the works of these writers. And for the good or the bad, each has left a significant imprint upon the American consciousness.

In some respect, all historical fiction is born in the spirit of reconciliation. Southern writers who engage this genre bear a huge responsibility—they are not charged with correcting human actions of the past. Rather, their chief obligation is with manipulating modern-day perspectives. The Southern psyche, and to some extent, the larger American psyche, still suffers from what C. Van Woodard has called “tragic experience and heritage.”

(20) In many respects, the South is like the laundress who washed, cleaned, and folded the linen without stopping to iron out the wrinkles. Each and every generation of Americans must return to the contradictions of its slaveholding past—they must metaphorically “press out the wrinkles” of contradiction—they must make sense of the past. Continued debate over appropriate use of the Confederate flag, combined with ongoing discussions about slave reparations, attests to the fact that Americans are still in the process of reconciling the past with the present. Throughout the years, many authors have been preoccupied with issues of
slavery—and without question, each writer has had an impact on the collective American psyche.

In the 1851 serial publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe captures the contradictions of 19th century American slave-holding society. Again in 1884, Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* exposes the religious and social hypocrisies of a nation. But in 1936, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* romanticized the mid 19th century plantation system, overlooking the harsh realities of the slave South. So what, then, is to be the effect of a 21st century writer who seeks to create a work of fiction set in the antebellum South? To objectively try to penetrate the Southern psyche and expose the cognitive processes that created and nurtured “southernness” is to risk setting the page afire with controversy. To write a novel that balance the satire and cynicism of Stowe and Twain with some of the ambivalent romanticism of Mitchell, is to create a new and provocative view of the good Ol’ South, and such is the author’s goal for *Life at the Davis Hotel*. Great potential value exists in putting forth a fresh and compelling story of the antebellum days. For when Emerson says that, “the use of history is to give value to the present moment,” one must believe that revisiting America’s tragic past through historical fiction can enlighten yet another generation of Americans.

Contemplating the Intricacies of Time and Place

Growing out of American Southern traditions, *Life at the Davis Hotel* is a work of fiction inspired by historical time and place. Set in the mid 19th century, pre and post Civil War America, The Davis Hotel, otherwise known as *The Glass House*, rises upon the southern landscape to meet the tall wispy pines of Kittrell, North Carolina. In this novel,
time and place are interdependent. The story highlights a pivotal point in America’s political, economic, and social history. It becomes a microcosm of the South’s and the nation’s emotional response to the pressures of the period. Throughout the story, the characters both embrace and struggle to break free from the comfortable, yet treacherous traditions of race and gender inequality. For the contemporary reader, the novel provides a retroactive view of American society, and from this vantage point it tends to validate Henry David Thoreau’s notion that “Things do not change; we change.”

In the year 2003, The Davis Hotel is part of a by-gone era and exists only in the imagination of those who wish to ponder such things. But it once stood upon the Carolina landscape with its magnificent glass façade overlooking the Raleigh & Gaston Railroad line. Flames long ago engulfed the structure, and the people who roamed its halls have all disappeared. Today the historic hotel is rarely mentioned. Its legacy is left to a leaning unkempt historical marker standing by US 1, North in Kittrell, North Carolina. But, this rural and run-down township, this literal “spot-in-the-road,” bears no likeness to the bustling 19th century community that once drew travelers from around the world to its resort hotels, and herein lies the quest and challenge for the writer who seeks to recover antebellum historical accounts.

To construct this fictional world and gain access to the nuances of its historical setting, the contemporary imagination must fuse with fragments of local lore. It must become immersed in any historical fact that survives, and it must be aware of the local color that shaped the region’s past. Anyone developing an interest in Kittrell, North Carolina will at some point peruse the pages of Samuel Thomas Peace’s delightful work of local history entitled Zeb’s Black Baby, published in 1955. And, as the book is subtitled Vance County,
North Carolina, A Short History, one might assume that this 457-page publication would provide a brief but thorough account of this northeastern North Carolina region and its origins. However, Peace’s history is at times more anecdotal than historical, which probably explains the apologetic tone of the preface, which states, “No history is complete. St. John’s Gospel on the Life of Christ closes with the admission that the Gospel is not complete. Zeb’s Black Baby is nothing less.” Indeed, Peace’s words are prophetic; he understands the limitations of his history. However, this prophecy does not stop the modern researcher from wishing for a more factual and complete text. Dorothy Critz, a librarian from the city of Henderson casually remarked in a conversation, “Zeb’s Black Baby is not a definitive history of the region. People try to make the book into something that it’s not. Mr. Peace was never trying to write a history book. He was merely writing to amuse his friends.”

Peace’s style is indeed amusing. He blends fact with anecdote, he speaks with wit and candor, but most importantly, he provides the writer of historical fiction with sparks that “fire the imagination.” For example, consider Peace’s 1954 description of the Kittrell area. It resonates with nostalgia and points to the region’s awareness of social caste, agrarian traditions, and diverse entrepreneurial legacy.

One Sunday afternoon in the good year, 1954, Mr. and Mrs. Robert G. Kittrell, my wife and I, in a new automobile took a ride through the southern part of the county. As we rode along we talked about the prominent families of that section, the Crudups, Kittrells, Capeharts, Blacknalls, Hawkins, Gills, Allens, Raynes, Peaces and others; the many slaves of old; the noted summer and winter resorts; the internationally known plant nursery, the fourteen tobacco factories around Kittrell, the two chains of stores with headquarters at Kittrell and now the Kittrell College with students from eleven states and two foreign countries. (32)

Indeed, Peace’s catalog of noteworthy Kittrell families and businesses reads like a Who’s Who list found in some lost and neglected time capsule. But in the context of this discussion,
perhaps the most noteworthy lines refer to his mention of “the slaves of old” and the “noted summer and winter resorts,” for herein lie the building blocks of this fictional account.

It is the historical existence of The Glass House that provides the writer with the potential to weave a fantastic story of Southern life, a story made exotic by virtue of its time and geographic location within American society. The historical emergence of resort hotels in the rural North Carolina landscape of mid 19th century America must be the result of very specific cultural, social, economic, political, and anthropologic reasons. The mere historical presence of such structures in antebellum North Carolina evokes two obvious questions: “What are the conditions? And, what are the situations that bring such places into existence?” Obviously, large outlays of capital combined with a calculated potential return on investment tend to make such ventures enticing. But more importantly, it is Southern culture in-and-of itself, it is this mystical insular world founded upon class, race, gender, and social protocol that allows The Glass House to materialize upon the North Carolina landscape.

In Zeb’s Black Baby, Samuel Peace notes that with the passage of time, most people have come to believe that only one hotel, bearing the name Kittrell Springs Hotel, ever existed. To place this chronology in perspective, Peace says:

There have been four hotels of importance and reputation in Kittrell. Each one built at a different time, owned and run by different people, catering to an entirely different patronage, each for a different purpose, each burned and on separate dates. Two of these hotels were by far larger and more noted than any hotel Vance County has ever produced up to and including the present day.

These four hotels are listed according to their dates:
Collins Hotel, 1856-1870
Kittrell Springs Hotel, 1858-1885
Davis Hotel, known as the Glass House, 1871-1893
DeForest Hotel, 1895-1924

(Peace 351)
Apparently, the resorts were established around a series of mineral springs that are no longer productive and have since disappeared from the landscape. However, during the mid 19th century, these springs produced waters that were believed to provide therapeutic/healing qualities. And, in seeking some rationale to explain the appearance of these resort facilities in Kittrell, NC, which spans an excess of 50 years, Peace’s research suggests that Kittrell was attractive to those seeking refuge from plague-like illnesses common throughout 19th century America. In exploring this idea Peace says:

The reader may be astonished at the claim that the Kittrell Springs Hotel had as many as 800 guests at any one time. The claim is made more understandable by information recorded in Carl Goerch’s book, “Carolina Chats,” which publishes facts taken from newspapers of the time.

“Year 1853. Yellow Fever: New Orleans—All stores closed and businesses suspended. There are more than 10,000 cases of Yellow Fever within the boundaries of the city.

“Year 1855. Yellow Fever: Hundreds of cases of Yellow Fever have broken out in Norfolk and Portsmouth. Scores of perished. Negro slaves remain by the side of their masters and nurse them faithfully. Wonder what the Abolitionists will say about their loyalty.

“Year 1865. Shocco Springs Hotel has been filled since the start of the season.

“Year 1862. Yellow Fever: News comes from Wilmington. A total of 432 cases have been reported; 103 deaths have taken place; many people have left the city in the last few days.

“Year 1878. Yellow Fever: At the present time 6,557 people are known to have perished from the dread disease. In New Orleans 2,470 persons have died and in Memphis the total has reached 2,273.

Indeed, these newspaper accounts collected by Carl Goerch are fascinating, for they explain that outbreaks of Yellow Fever caused people to engage in migratory behavior for the purpose of either convalescing or avoiding sickness. The USGenWeb Project, which compiles historical statistics regarding epidemics in the United States, expands this historical view of pattern sickness in America. These findings, listed in Appendix A, suggest that
epidemics have influenced patterns of human migration throughout American history. Clearly, many cases of people disappearing from the genealogical records can be traced to their dying in an epidemic or moving away from the affected area.

Certainly, not everyone who traveled to Kittrell in the mid 1800’s was running from plague. Peace’s account suggests that many hotel patrons who traveled to the Springs were there to indulge in pleasurable activities. Though Peace never reveals his sources, his descriptions of the hotel and its patrons paint a rather vivid picture of the activities that consume the daily lives of hotel guests.

The guests of the Kittrell Springs Hotel were almost entirely from the South. Guests of the Glass House were almost entirely from the North, mostly New England states. The patrons of the Glass House were mainly of two classes: hunters and sportsmen on the one hand and on the other, people suffering with tuberculosis. It was thought pine tree air had a curative value. The hotel was located in at least some pines, and to these, others were planted in a corner of the premises, some of which are now standing.

The hotel was frame, two stories high, porches on each story, glassed in six hundred feet. These porches were on the south and east sides for comfort and exercise for the sick. And for the invalid pure spring water, hair mattresses and spring beds were advertised. Many of the patrons brought with them their own nurses. There were seven French nurses present at one time. One of these maids had a bad disease, not the measles, yet it was catching and not the fever, yet it set Kittrell on fire. This information will have to go under the head of tradition for the reason that the sundry authorities are now dead or if living would be pleading silence under Article Five of the United States Constitution.

Washington F. Davis, owner and manager of the hotel, was well received in the community and had many friends and admirers but naturally being from Boston and just after the Civil War, he was known as “Yankee Davis.” He bought all his groceries and supplies from the northern markets. He had standing orders for regular shipments of ice from the north. The hotel’s famous cuisine was under the management of Mrs. Davis’ aunt, a Mrs. Postocker.

Mr. Davis was not only a good hotel man, he was a good mixer and a remarkable sportsman. Almost immediately upon the opening of the hotel hunters and sportsmen began to arrive, bringing with them
their horses, dogs and servants. The board and keep of the horses and dogs was quite a source of income for the hotel. (358-359)

Peace’s sources are apparently taken from interviews with people who lived in the Kittrell area. It can only be assumed that these accounts are as accurate as any oral history can be. For the purposes of this creative writing project, the validity and conformation of such information becomes irrelevant. The fictional account that follows merely draws upon the portrait put forth by Peace; liberty and creative license guide this account of a place called The Davis Hotel as it may have existed in the pre Civil War era.

Overview: Life at the Davis Hotel

In the spring of 1846, the young and well-educated William Franklin Davis travels south from Boston to the Carolinas with rowdy frontiersman Beck Warren on a fur-trading venture. Unbeknownst to William, his friendship with Beck and their venture into the southern states alters the course of his life. He adapts quickly to the rustic way of life, assimilating much of Beck’s backwoods philosophy into the high society veneer that his mother ingrains in her son. With each passing day, Bill grows fond of life away from Boston. He finds the Southern way of life exciting, comfortable, and in some ways, less complex. Thoughts of returning to Harvard to study theology, or working in the family trading house move him to bouts of melancholy. Determined to find his life’s “singular purpose,” he vows to “meet each new day on his own terms and never return to the strict and stern dictates” of his upbringing. Such thoughts feel new and strange to Bill, but his keen mind and assertive personality prepare him for difficult decisions that lay ahead—decisions that will bring him to challenge his concepts of religion, slavery, and the proper role of women in society. Instinctively, Bill knows that he will live out his days challenging his
foundations—but he relishes the thoughts of taking a stand, and internally, he dares anyone to block his path.

* * *

While visiting the Carter Plantation in Southern Virginia, Little Bill and Ol’ Beck spend several days in the hunting fields with their host, Will Carter. As the hunting party returns late one afternoon from the woods, a servant meets them with disturbing news from Boston: a disgruntled trapper has tragically murdered Little Bill’s father. Stricken by disbelief and anger, the young man mounts his horse, beats the animal mercifully, and races toward the Carter estate. The fit of passion is not without consequence, for the spirited horse revolts against such treatment and throws Little Bill into a rocky ravine, knocking him unconscious. Having sustained a broken leg and multiple injuries to the head, Bill must accept that his return to Boston will be delayed until he regains his strength; however, as he has heard much about the healing waters of Kittrell Springs in nearby Kittrell, North Carolina, he persuades Beck to make arrangements to deliver him to the Kittrell Springs Hotel. “If it is true,” said Little Bill “if the waters of Kittrell Springs have the ability to heal, then I’ll be fit and back to Boston before summer’s end.” As Ol’ Beck confesses to “bein’ a poor caretaker,” he gladly delivers Bill to the Springs, arranges for his care, and takes to the trail, promising to “check back” with the injured youth in several weeks.

Stricken by grief over his father’s death and thrust helplessly into the care of strangers, Bill finds his first days at the hotel unbearable. He anguishes over thoughts of his recently widowed mother and longs to return to Boston to handle the affairs of his father’s estate. Reading books and writing letters become his only distraction; that is, until he meets Miss Ella Catlin, the highly social, flirtatious, and musically talented daughter of Hotel
owner Hugh Catlin. Bill delights in watching Ella wisp about the hotel. Her eyes are kind and welcoming, and her presence easily wins the favor of all the hotel guests. Taken by her ambitious nature and charming spirit, Bill confides in her, revealing his need for a simpler more carefree way of life—a life away from the Boston of his childhood. Ella takes great care with William, pampering and nursing him back to health with every opportunity. In record time, the young man regains his strength and begins to speak of his journey back north. Upon Beck’s return to the Springs, Bill proclaims that the mineral waters and the fresh pine air have restored his health. Ol’ Beck laughs at such a claims, telling Bill “the only damn thing ‘round here that’s been restored is old man Catlin’s wallet.” Beck keeps his mouth shut around Ella, but thinks the magic waters of Kittrell Springs to be the biggest hoax this side of Boston.

The affection between Bill and Ella grows quickly, and as the day of Bill’s departure nears, the waters of Kittrell Springs do little to mend the broken hearts. In “the heat of the moment,” Bill asks Ella to marry him and follow him to Boston. Delighted by the proposal, the young girl accepts the offer exuberantly, vowing to follow the young man to the “ends of the earth.” Yet, Ella’s father finds the news appalling. Having many prejudices against Northerners and persons of substantial wealth, particularly those who possess financial means greater than his own, the dissatisfied Catlin forbids his daughter to follow through with the nuptial. Ella and Bill defy Hugh Catlin’s wishes, marry under the cover of night, and make for Boston by morning.

Bill leaves Catlin a heartfelt letter of regret; however, he professes his love for Ella, and explains his intention to return south as soon as his the affairs of his father’s estate are completed. However, the olive branch is not well received by Catlin. Though he publicly
Forlorn by the circumstances of the marriage and distraught by Ella’s abrupt departure, Hugh Catlin sinks into a deep depression. In an attempt to win the favor of his daughter and new son-in-law, he writes a letter of reconciliation, apologizes for his actions, and claims to accept Ella and Bill’s marriage unconditionally. In addition, he promises the young couple a gift of land upon their return to Kittrell. As their business in Boston comes to a close, Bill makes plans for a Southern return, and Ella rejoices at the possibility of seeing family and friends back in North Carolina. Drawn into Hugh Catlin’s confidence, the young couple return to Kittrell Springs Hotel in the spring of 1847 to find a great gala planned in their honor.

On the first Saturday following their return, the hotel bustles with activity. A great feast is prepared, the bands play, and friends arrive from miles around to welcome the young couple into the community. Little Bill, being overwhelmed and delighted with the Southern revelry, makes hard and fast companions with the men who occupy the side porch, a shady spot off the main veranda where the sweet smell of tobacco and apple whiskey fills the air. Here, in the midst of clanking Jefferson cups, Bill learns a bit of interesting news: the DeForest Hotel, a small but significant competitor of the Spring Hotel, is slated for sale.

Ella finds the events of the gala exhilarating, and she tells Bill that though she loved Boston, “no place on earth is more exciting than life at the Springs.” Bill delights in his wife’s social nature and often encourages her to “share her charm and grace with all.” As the
young man carefully lays out his life’s plan, Ella’s happiness becomes his priority. With that one thought in mind, he secretly arranges the purchase of the DeForest Hotel. Bill’s inheritance leaves him relatively wealthy. As his father exemplified frugality in all aspects of his life, the young man tends to follow a like pattern; however, his conservative nature “vanishes into thin air” when Ella’s happiness becomes the issue. Bill, giving little consideration to the potential for family conflict, completes the purchase and surprises his bride with title to the new property.

* * *

Filled with elation, Ella and Bill set out to revamp the now defunct hotel business. For many years, the previous owner, Margaret DeForest, ran a profitable inn; however, as the sick and aging proprietress became unable to manage the demands of the property, the hotel had fallen into disrepair and lost favor with its patrons. Through shrewd negotiations, Bill acquires the property for well below market value, quickly drafts a long-term business plan, employs an architect, and begins renovations. Bill vows to make The Davis Hotel into the most talked-about hotel in the South. His bold and confident entrepreneurial spirit brings Hugh Catlin to view his daughter and son-in-law as a threat to his own livelihood. Clearly, the rise of the Davis Empire erodes the family bonds, and in the words of Little Bill, “the cost of doing business can never be counted in dollars and cents.”

* * *

As the sick and dying Mrs. DeForest finds little use for any worldly effects, she relinquishes her ties to this world—selling to Bill Davis “lock, stock, and barrel,” all of her life’s accumulation. Bill can hardly believe his good fortune. For the mere sum of 8,000 dollars he acquires the small twenty room, fully furnished hotel; twenty-five acres of land
joining the Kittrell Springs Hotel; a smoke house; a spring house; several barns and shelters; twelve underfed hogs; a sturdy chicken coop, complete with a fine group of young pullets; two milk cows; a long-haired English Setter with nine newly born puppies; a mule; a newly planted garden; several shanties used as servant quarters; and a Negro family that had lived on the property for many years. Bill relishes the thoughts of his new possessions, and he finds the puppies to be the finest part of his purchase, but he loathes the idea of the Negro family. Bill’s father, Cecil Davis, had been an ardent abolitionist, and he knows his father would have considered such a purchase as “dirty business.” Little Bill plunges into guilt when Ol’ Beck says, “If your Pa can see you, boy—if he knows you’re using Davis money to buy slaves, he’ll be clawing his way out of that grave; and he’ll probably have hold of your ass by the next full moon.”

Bill has money to front the business venture; however, Ella, having grown up in the Kittrell Springs Hotel, has the practical knowledge of hotel operations. Bill understands that expanding the hotel requires the talents of his wife, but he underestimates the realities of such a partnership, and soon the couple begins to disagree about how the Davis Hotel will rise to what Ella calls “a rightful place of prominence.” Bill quickly realizes that he and Ella have two very different visions of what the hotel should become. Ella sees the Davis Hotel in terms of the Kittrell Springs Hotel of her youth, a place where well-to-do Southerners come to recuperate from common ailments. Bill believes there to be yet another clientele to attract: a small but wealthy group of northern gentlemen who enjoy the sport of hunting and the camaraderie of fellow hunters. He contends that in the end, the blending of both ideas will make the Davis Hotel into a “gem of the South.”
Confident in both his choice of a new wife and vocation, Bill encourages Ella to take the lead in crafting the new image of The Davis Hotel; and as a devoted husband, he supports most of her decisions; however, as they are the products of two very different worlds, he comes to see that there are many things about Ella he will never understand. Their differences are ideological in nature. Bill is from a line of New England revolutionaries. Raised in the midst of the wealthy Boston merchant class by strong-willed Unitarian parents, his liberal Christian views, and abolitionist stance are perplexing to Ella whose background differs considerably. Raised in an affluent agrarian working class family, and educated in the Richmond women’s seminary, Ella is steeped in the ideals of plantation society, and her conservative, evangelical Christian views find no sympathy for abolitionist rhetoric.

As Bill had been a guest at the Kittrell Springs Hotel for several weeks, he knows that Hugh Catlin uses slave labor to run the hotel; however, he envisions the Davis Hotel to be free of such atrocities; but as he sets out to liberate the Negro family, he meets great opposition from Ella who cannot fathom how one could operate such an establishment without Negro hospitality. According to Ella, “Only a man who never had the privilege of washing, ironing, and cooking, could speak so fool-heartedly.” Ella stands firmly against freeing the DeForest Negroes. Much to the contrary, under her business plan, the number of Negro servants and field hands will increase.

The young and contemplative Davis decides to heed Ella’s advice: “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Where issues of slavery are concerned, he adopts an attitude of indifference, and agrees to the use of slave labor so long as he is removed from the task of dealing with such affairs. Somehow Bill feels that if he can avoid the front line of management, he then has no moral responsibility for those in bondage. But as Ol’ Beck has
earned the privilege of speaking his mind, he tells Bill, “You’re like the pirate who went to
sea with the Ten Commandments and scratched out the ninth commandment, thou shalt not
steal.” Beck’s stinging commentary upsets Little Bill; however, the young man knows that
Beck is right, and his only retort is “You know, Beck—every man lies to himself about
something; so I guess when you’re pickin’ and choosin’—one lie is about good as the next.”

*   *   *

As the renovation and expansion of The Davis Hotel go forward, tensions and
animosities grow between the Catlins and the Davises. Ella’s father publicly scoffs at the
hotel’s ostentatious design, contending that, “no one will come to Kittrell to stay in a glass
house to go hunting.” Ella and Bill politely ignore such rhetoric and press forward with their
plans. Bill confidently operates under one assumption: if you build it they will come. And
much to the chagrin of Hugh Catlin, the updated and stylish Davis Hotel opens its doors to
near full capacity on December 25, 1848.

*   *   *

With the arrival of 450 guests, Ella and Bill have never been happier; however, the
first few days are hectic, and it becomes apparent that accommodating the needs of so many
guests requires a substantial number of servants. Soon after the grand opening, Bill and Ella
set about acquiring such chattel. After meeting with several gentlemen—or so-called
gentlemen, who deal in the trading of Negro flesh, Bill soon learns that trained house
servants are not in abundant supply. There are plenty of field hands to choose from, and
occasionally, there are some women of considerable age whose bodies are worn and broken
by childbirth and excess field labor; however, as Ella so well understands, “good house
servants are made—they are not bought.”
It doesn’t take long for word to spread throughout the community, and soon there are plenty of young trainable Negroes for sale. However, as Ella prefers her servants to be of mulatto stock, her choices are limited. She tells Bill to hold out for the light-skinned Negroes because “their features are not so harsh and they don’t seem to scare the guests quite so badly as the darker ones.”

Oddly enough, it is Hugh Catlin who calls upon Bill with a promising young mulatto girl who appears to be in her early to mid teens. Catlin says he purchased her from the estate of a recently deceased client who had died while staying at the hotel. She was the personal servant of a one Mrs. Clara Rousseau, a wealthy Baton Rouge socialite who sought refuge in the Kittrell Springs Hotel during a recent outbreak of typhoid fever. Rather than bear the trouble and cost of sending the girl back to Louisiana, the family sold her girl outright to Catlin who wired the monies back to Louisiana.

Bill buys the girl on the spot for $500 and few questions asked. Ol’ Beck can’t believe his ears when he hears about the rash purchase, and he tells Bill, “Son, I know you paid Catlin good money for that black wench, but I ain’t so sure I’d buy anything from that man—he’s sure to be one of them damn Greeks who comes bearing gifts.” Beck’s hard to fool, and before long, Bill begins to believe that the young mulatto who calls herself Viney Rousseau may be a Trojan horse after all.

* * *

A Brief Reflection on the Central Storyline and the Potential for Creating Subplots

Set in rural Kittrell, North Carolina in the mid 1800s, Life at the Davis Hotel is a story of American slavery. Told from the third-person omniscient point of view, the story’s central action revolves around two characters: William and Ella Davis, owners of The Davis
Hotel. The emerging themes and conflicts deal primarily with class, race, religion and
gender, and they grow out of ideological differences grounded in regional identity. The basic
plot outline—young wealthy couple buys hotel in the antebellum south—creates a story rich
in subplot potential. Set in the era of Jacksonian Democracy, and poised on the cusp of the
Civil War, the story’s subplots will explore two themes: antebellum concepts of religion and
the plantation South’s preoccupation with instructing the Negro in matters of religion—and,
the “rise of the common man” and his pursuit of material gain. As the lives of these
characters intersect, a compelling story emerges, and the contradictions of 19th century
concepts of religion and slavery take center stage.

These themes will be explored by two underling storylines: the miller’s tale, set at
the nearby Buffalo Mill; and the preacher’s tale, set at Kittrell’s St. James Episcopal Church.

*Life at the Davis Hotel* is a story about hotel life; however, it is also a story about the
community, state, and nation. The hotel is part of a larger community infrastructure. The
official church records of the St. James Episcopal Church, Kittrell, NC, make several
references to the baptism of Negro slaves in years predating the Civil War. Likewise,
historical accounts of the Buffalo mill date the construction of the milldam somewhere
around the 1850s. These two bits of information suggest that both the rise of commerce and
the proliferation of religion were taking place in this prosperous North Carolina community.
As Bill and Ella Davis run a successful hotel business in the community of Kittrell, NC, it
stands to reason that their lives, and the lives of their clients overlap with other members of
the community. Thus, the story is ripe for developing a series of subplots. (For a historical
account of the St. James Episcopal Church, Kittrell, N.C., see Appendix B.)
Chapter Three

Constructing a 19th Century Domestic Relationship

Within the context of the 19th century fictional Davis Hotel, the marital relationship between Bill and Ella Davis is paramount. The success of the hotel depends on their cohesive relationship. If The Davis Hotel is to rise to prominence—if it is to become what Bill terms the “gem of the South,” then it will be the concerted effort of husband and wife who bring the endeavor to fruition. The Davis Hotel is essentially “a home away from home.” It becomes a domestic space crafted to the specifications of its patrons. Ella knows the needs of those who come to Kittrell in hopes of escaping illness, and Bill understands the wealthy class of men who come to enjoy hunting the abundant wildlife that inhabits the Tar River Basin. Inevitably, The Davis Hotel evolves into a hybrid of the plantation—it is an “offshoot” of that convivial and genial enclave that defines traditional notions of Southern hospitality.

Within its own era, the two-story pre-Victorian style Davis Hotel is a structure of grand proportions, and as its glass facade reflects the Carolina blue sky, it becomes an exotic southern destination. The setting deviates from the stereotypical antebellum scene so often depicted in writings of the period. It is not set upon the banks of the great Mississippi; it is not part and parcel of that grand Louisiana plantation scene; it is not the place of ancient South Carolina oaks draped in lacy jags of moss. There are no rice fields to drain, plant, and flood; there are no sugar cane crops to cut and thrash, nor are there any cotton fields to pick. Though these agrarian endeavors are at the heart and soul of the antebellum society, they exist only peripherally within the context of Life at the Davis Hotel.
Without question, the architectural iconography of the South looms large in both the antebellum and modern mind. Images of the plantation house, whether cast in the pattern of Thomas Jefferson’s Roman neoclassic Monticello or Charles Drayton’s Georgian-Palladian style, Drayton Hall, are part of the Southern mystique. The planter’s residence becomes the symbol of southern power. It also announces materialism *par excellence*, the English countryside with its grand manor house and beautiful gardens transplanted into the American landscape and consciousness. Metaphorically, it is sewn into the patchwork of the American quilt with such elegance and sophistication, so as to make it a staple, an irremovable part of the nation’s psyche. As Margaret Mitchell so well understood, there is a nostalgic element at play, for though Sherman might set fire to the South, he could never incinerate the iconoclastic South.

The fictional Davis Hotel is not a grand plantation residence, but its splendid architecture creates surreal as well as romantic notions of Southern regional identity. Like the plantation house, the hotel too is an extension of gracious Southern living. It is “tuned” to a regional domestic ideal—an ideal born of both the feminine and masculine acceptance of the ideal Southern hospitality. The hotel is an extension of home and hearth, a place of warmth and hospitality, which must bring pleasure to all its patrons. Therefore, any discussion of The Davis Hotel needs to consider domestic relations between men and women.
in the early to mid 19th century American South. The hotel may be owned, operated, and marketed under the name of William Davis, but its success depends upon feminine sensibilities. In overseeing the daily tasks, it is Ella Catlin Davis who brings the demanded womanly brand of vitality to the establishment. From her sense of aesthetics to her ability to plan and execute household duties, she is the driving force of the hotel’s success. However, as her contemporary society would measure her achievements in terms of her success in marriage, she must also possess the attributes of True Womanhood.

Barbara Welter’s *The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860* explores this concept of womanly virtues by first establishing a clear view of 19th century gender roles:

THE NINTEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN MAN WAS A BUSY BUILDER OF BRIDGES and railroads, at work long hours in a materialistic society. The religious values of his forebears were neglected in practice if not in intent, and he occasionally felt some guilt that he had turned this new land, this temple of the chosen people, into one vast countinghouse. (151)

If the Man was concerned with putting the American infrastructure into place—that is, the systems of transportation and commerce—then Woman was at home “uphold[ing] the pillars of the temple with her frail hand” (152). According to Welter, these pillars of support were well defined by society at large:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.

Based upon Welter’s definition of True Womanhood, the success of Ella Catlin Davis depends on her ability to prioritize home and family before business. Indeed, the creation of a fictional 19th century female character such as Ella Catlin Davis requires an understanding of True Womanhood—an understanding that reaches past textbook definitions.
Every writer of historical fiction faces the question of how to become intimate with the characters of a different time and place. In the case of Life at the Davis Hotel or any other work of fiction, if realistic portrayals of life emerge, it is because the writer enters into a psychological bond with these characters of the past. When trying to absorb the history of bygone eras, there are three primary sources to draw upon: biographical accounts, autobiographical accounts, and accounts of third-party historical analysis. In Emerson’s Essay I “History,” he asks for objectivity in historical analysis while acknowledging the inevitability of subjective, self-derived views of history:

We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience, and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no History, only Biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know. (Emerson 6)

How can the writer of historical fiction overlook Emerson’s observation? Does one dare substitute personal experience for “emphatic facts of history”? The responsible writer “must go over the whole ground.” Emerson presses for the need for personal experience to operate through exhaustive analysis. In moving his argument from the abstract to the concrete, he employs a striking analogy:

A Gothic cathedral affirms that it was done by us, and not by us. Surely it was by man, but we find it not in our man. But we apply ourselves to the history of its production. We put ourselves into the place and state of the builder. We remember the forest dwellers, the first temples, the adherence to the first type, and the decoration of it as the wealth of the nation increase; the value which is given to wood by carving led to the carving over the whole mountain of stone of cathedral. When we have gone through this process, and added thereto the Catholic Church, its cross, its music, its processions, its Saints’ days and image-worship, we have, as it were, been the man that made the minister; we see how it could and must be. We have the sufficient reason. (7)
The writer of historical fiction must strive for “sufficient reason”; he must, in the case of *Life at the Davis Hotel*, apply his imagination not only to the grand architecture, but also to the craftsmen who built it and to those who dwell therein. Certainly, if one wishes to capture sufficiently the reasons behind 19th century womanhood, the researcher must seek authentic first hand accounts—portrayals of historically documented strong, successful women. These accounts must then be tested against standard definitions of womanhood and domesticity that have emerged over time.

There is no prescribed role, no “hard and fast” rule dictating the thoughts and actions of each and every 19th century woman. Still, there seems to be a consensus that those women held in high esteem are characteristically pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. The path of female success within this period was rigid. The cult of domesticity is in place, but as with every age, there are those rebels who by some prophetic virtue break with protocol to usher in waves of social change. For the writer of historical fiction, autobiographical accounts of 19th century women functioning in domestic capacities provide insight into the state of womanhood. By examining the memoirs of Malvina Shanklin Harlan and Frances Ann Kemble, one can see that both the conventional and non-conventional woman of the period played significant roles in molding the affairs of both home and nation. With respect to the virtues of womanhood, Malvina and Fannie stand in stark contrast. However, each also generates qualities that endeared them both to their contemporaries and to modern audiences.

Malvina Shanklin Harlan’s recently published memoir, *Some Memories of a Long Life, 1854-1911*, provides a poignant view of a mid 19th century woman’s commitment to the institution of home and family, but the memoir is more than a tribute to these domestic ideals. It is a wife’s earnest and forthright attempt to memorialize the accomplishments of a
husband who bestows dignity and integrity upon both home and country. John Marshall
Harlan’s appointment to the United States Supreme Court in 1887 placed on the bench a man
whose decisions would usher in Civil Rights reform. As a former lawyer, ex-slave owner
and Union officer, Harlan brought to the bench a perspective that was molded by the harsh
realities of a war-torn American society.

Malvina Harlan’s memoir catalogues her harmonious marriage to John Marshall
Harlan and gives a clear view of the roles played by men and women within this 19th century
family structure. At the outset, this firsthand account depicts Malvina fulfilling her primary
domestic role. She holds high the banner of purity, for her eyes are steadfastly fixed upon
John, and she rallies him to every accomplishment. She is there to care for the children, to
play an enchanting host, chat politely at dinner parties; and when she sings and plays in
public or private, John beams with pride. She seems to energize his soul. With regularity,
her beautiful voice graces the church choir. As for the virtue of submissiveness, it too is
there, but Malvina has not surrendered her soul. She meets and many times exceeds her
obligations, yet within the marital relationship she wields a high degree of autonomy. There
exists a healthy trace of defiance and mischievousness within her personality. However, it
translates in such a way as to advantage both her mate and nation. These qualities are noted
in Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s foreword to Some Memories, as she recalls Malvina in a somewhat
historic and poignant moment of playful defiance:

Malvina reported an episode showing that Supreme Court wives
attended to more than the social side of a Justice’s life. Justice Harlan was a
collector of objects connected with American history. He had retrieved for his
collection, from Supreme Court Marshall’s office, the inkstand Chief Justice
Taney used when he penned the 1857 Dred Scott decision, which held that no
person descended from a slave could ever be a citizen, and that the majestic
due process clause safeguarded one person’s right to hold another bondage. It
was a decision with which Justice Harlan strongly disagreed, an opinion overturned by the Civil War and the Fourteenth Amendment.

Chivalrous gentleman that he was, Harlan promised to deliver the Taney inkstand to a woman he met at a reception, who claimed a family relationship to Chief Justice Taney. Malvina thought the promise unwise, so she hid the inkstand away among her own special things, and Justice Harlan was obliged to report to the Taney relative that the item had been mislaid.

In months immediately following this incident, the Supreme Court heard argument in the so-called Civil Rights Cases, which yielded a judgment striking down the Civil Rights Act of 1875, an act Congress passed to ensure equal treatment, without regard to race, and various public accommodations. Justice Harlan, alone, resolved to dissent. He labored over his dissenting opinion for months, but “his thoughts refused to flow easily.” He seemed, Malvina wrote in her memoir, trapped “in a quagmire of logic, precedent, and law.” Malvina, as I earlier mentioned, grew up in a free state, in a family strongly opposed to slavery. She very much wanted her husband to finish writing that dissent. On Sunday morning, when the Justice was attending church services, Malvina retrieved the Taney inkstand from its hiding place, gave the object a “good cleaning and polishing,” and filled it with ink. Then, taking all the other inkwells from [her husband’s] study table, [she] put the historic…inkstand directly before his pad of paper.” When Justice Harlan came home, Malvina told him he would find “a bit of inspiration on [his] study table.” Malvina’s memoir next relates:

The memory of the historic part that Taney’s inkstand had played in the Dred Scott decision, in temporarily tightening the shackles of slavery…in the antebellum days, seemed that morning to act like magic in clarifying my husband’s thoughts in regard to the law that had been intended…to protect the recently emancipated slaves in the enjoyment of “equal rights.” His pen fairly flew on that day and…he soon finished his dissent. (xiv-xv)

Within this episode Malvina’s intellect sparkles. Her foresight and sense of timing cast her as a heroine of both husband and nation. Clearly, Malvina is a student of her era. The calculated seizure of the inkwell and the irony that ensues as Justice Harlan pioneers the first wave of American Civil Rights legislation is a triumph.

So far as the memoir attests, Malvina and John may be the best-matched couple of the 19th century. This marital bliss, this seemingly symbiotic existence between man and wife, is rooted in the cult of domesticity. Perhaps it is “the wisdom of parting advice” Malvina
receives from her mother following her marriage to John Harlan December 23, 1856, that brings harmony and success to the marriage. As the young bride leaves for her new Kentucky home, she recalls with clarity:

[Mother’s] advice was practically a command, and her words were, substantially, as follows: __

“You love this man well enough to marry him. Remember, now, that his home is YOUR home; his people, YOUR people; his interest, YOUR interests—you must have no other.”

Knowing, as she did, how terribly I had always suffered from homesickness when away from her, she went on to say: __

“We know you will love us, as you have always done, and that you will miss us terribly; but never let your husband know that you are mourning for your girlhoods home. Never let him hear you contrasting it with your new home, to the disadvantage of the latter. Often you will have to relieve your homesickness with a good cry; but wait until your husband is out of sight and have it over and out of the way before his return, and have nothing but smiles to greet him when he comes home.” (11)

This conversation between mother and daughter is a passing of the baton—a transfer of a social code between generations that apparently sets the stage for John and Malvina’s marriage. Within this relationship, the ideology of submissiveness and piety are locked in a relationship founded upon Old Testament allusion. Just as Naomi’s words prepare Ruth for a life with Boaz, so does Malvina’s mother prepare her daughter for life with John Harlan. Without question, biblical authority powers the cult of domesticity, and it exerts a gravitational force powerful enough to define the boundaries of many 19th century marriages.

Most readers will agree that Harlan’s memoir creates a portrait of marital bliss. As Malvina sets out to pay tribute to her husband, she makes no mention of marital discontent. Yet, as with any relationship, the Harlan marriage most likely had doleful moments—and this silence may be the “Cult of Domesticity” at work. If “dirty laundry” exists, Malvina is sure to keep it hidden. However, this is not the case with all 19th century marriages. The
high profile marriage of Fanny Kemble and Pierce Butler was notoriously “rocky,” and stands in stark contrast to the Harlan marriage.

Frances Anne Kemble, otherwise known as “Fanny,” was perhaps one of the most charming, witty, and above all, racy females of the mid 19th century—she was in many respects a woman ahead of her time. To the writer of historical fiction looking for models of progressive and provocative 19th century females, Kemble’s life and personality make for an intriguing study. As a talented English actress, Kemble rose to fame early in her life, and by the age of twenty-four, she had retired from the stage and married Pierce Butler, a Philadelphian of considerable prominence. Catherine Clinton’s introduction to Fanny Kemble’s Journals describes the shaky circumstances of the marriage:

In 1834, at the age of twenty-four, Kemble retired from the stage following her marriage to Pierce Butler (1810-1867) of Philadelphia. Butler was due to inherit vast plantations in Georgia from his grandfather’s estate. Fanny Kemble proclaimed that “as an Englishwoman” she had an aversion to slavery—presumably because the British had abolished slavery in 1831. Despite this potential incompatibility, and despite reservations family and friends had expressed to the couple when they announced their engagement, Butler and Kemble succumbed to their strong mutual attraction. Passion blinded them to fundamental differences in temperament and interests. For better or worse, they tied the knot and proceeded to make a life together.

The couple celebrated the birth of their first child, Sarah, in 1835. When he finally came into his inheritance in 1836, Butler’s immense holdings made him the second largest slaveholder in Georgia. Kemble claimed she had no idea about the course of her husband’s family money, which is highly unlikely. Although she was able to hold her tongue in public, Kemble’s passionate opposition to slavery propelled her and her husband on a collision course. (2)

Eventually Kemble did visit the Butler plantation in Georgia, and when she documented and published her findings in Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation, her appraisal of slavery was far from favorable. According to Catherine Clinton, slavery exerted tremendous pressures on the marriage. Kemble’s visit to the Sea Islands of Georgia
made her feel “that slavery was shameful and that her husband was diminished by his association with it.” Though Fanny had given birth to two children, she did not remain submissive and demure. She spoke out against her husband; in so doing she shattered the mold of domesticity that defined most 19th century relationships.

Clinton’s depiction of the degenerative marriage leaves no doubt:

The two frequently resorted to separate bedrooms (at Kemble’s request) and fought constantly over the rearing of their children. Plagued by squabbles, spats and trial separations, the Butler marriage slowly unraveled. During these years, unaware of the extent of Butler’s infidelities, friends and family urged Kemble to appease her husband. Though the couple patched up their differences and promised to make a fresh start several times, hope of remaining together faded over time. The final straw came in 1844, when her husband fought a duel with one of his friends over his alleged dalliance with the friend’s wife. The scandal was the topic of gossip in Philadelphia for some months, but Butler seemed indifferent to both the public’s and his wife’s reaction. (3)

By modern assessments, it is easy to see why the marriage ended in divorce, but from a 19th century perspective, Fanny’s decision to abandon the family constitutes a tremendous breach in the cult of domesticity.

In the case of Fanny Kemble, it seems that submissiveness has its “breaking point.” Kemble cannot be seen as an authentic American woman, nor can she be bound by the cult of domesticity that pervaded its society. Her decision to leave her husband and children speaks of both tragedy and triumph. Kemble’s return to the English stage allowed her to support herself financially, and from that standpoint, she emerges as terrifically modern. However, her abandonment of home and hearth—that is, her move toward autonomy, brought her to shatter the cult of domesticity within her own life. Perhaps Fanny Kemble fits somewhat that pattern of European women modeled by American author Henry James, who was so captivated by European ways of life. British Fanny craved something of the American
existence, yet her cultural differences made her unwilling to accept the norms of 19th century American social structures. She would not stand for infidelity, and she remained ardently opposed to the institution of American slavery.

In the context of Life at the Davis Hotel, Malvina Shanklin Harlan and Frances Anne Kemble become opposing models for constructing female fictional characters. With respect to the cult of domesticity, they represent two very different types of 19th century American women. Malvina offers an assertive, methodical, supportive, and adaptive nature, while Fanny is daring, intellectual, independent, and non-conforming. Both women possessed a great deal of talent, and each wielded a high degree of sophistication. These are the basic traits that will form the character of the fictional Ella Catlin. How will the talented and sophisticated Ella Catlin evolve in relation to the Cult of True Womanhood? This is the true challenge facing the novelist, for the domestic ideal was not born in a vacuum—it evolved in the context of the marital relationship.

In Life at the Davis Hotel, Ella becomes both wife and business partner, and these dynamics challenge the prescribed boundaries of the Cult. The play between autonomy and submissiveness is constant, and though Ella Catlin Davis will emerge more in the pattern of Malvina Harlan, the spunk of Fanny Kemble will be very near the surface of her personality. Ella Catlin is not the product of the plantation system. Rather she is the byproduct of a larger Southern existence. Her days in the Richmond Women’s Seminary have brought her into a larger circle of belles, and this is the social context that forms her concepts of a proper society. For Ella, marriage to Bill Davis exceeds the entanglement of birds and bees—it transcends passion, and its ultimate goal is rooted in securing a way of life. Ella may be in love with Bill, but she is also attracted to the possibilities of securing and perpetuating a
Southern way of life. Bill’s financial standing presents her with hopes of shifting her own social standing. In the context of the Davis marriage, dynastic impulse is strong—and in the end, the union between husband and wife becomes a means to an end. It becomes a way of securing domestic space—a place where one can raise a family.

The procurement of home and hearth does in fact “anchor” any discussion of American societal structures. Primal instincts bring mankind to seek shelter from the elements. Basic anthropologic observation reveals that the complexity and sophistication of domestic structures separates mankind from other animals. However, this does not suggest that nature does not provide intriguing insight into the basics of domestication. For example, the orange-breasted robin selects a sturdy bower beneath the branches, builds a proper nest of twig and moss, and therein raises a hearty family. She is a fierce protector of the establishment; she will crawl, dive, pluck or stand against any creature that threatens the safety of her brood. Simply put: she believes that a home worth building is a home worth protecting.

When this paradigm is superimposed on the domestic structures of the antebellum South, the dynamics of social upheaval are brought into focus. *Life at the Davis Hotel* is founded on the nesting analogy—it operates on the premise that within the homebuilding process, robin and Ella synonymously parallel the South, and the North becomes the threatening and unwelcome intruder. In this analogy, the institution of slavery is a crucial twig in the Robin’s nest. To the mother bird, the twig might be viewed as only one building straw in the nest, but oh how Robin will contest the removal of the twig. It threatens the stability of the nest; it stands to shatter a way of life robin plans for her offspring. After all, this is the way robin’s mother built her nest. This is the way Robin’s grandmother protected
her nest—and so the argument continues. A primal war on the Southern domestic front is being waged and the stakes are high. In fact, the fate of an entire nation and race lies in the balance. *Life at the Davis Hotel* reflects the novelist’s intentions for writing a fictional account of the slave South. It approaches the harsh realities of antebellum society, suggesting two primary causes for the plantation South’s demise: the blinding self-centered pursuit of material gain and an unwillingness to give up notions of a traditional feudal state.

So much has been written about the antebellum South and its people—it is not unreasonable to ask, “What more is there to say?” For the current generation, there is much need for continued discourse. Upon the passing of a father, many people are inclined to eagerly entertain thoughts of a financial inheritance; and indeed, if an estate exists, few persons refuse the benefits of such escheat. However, there is one inheritance that many Americans willingly disclaim: it is their cultural inheritance. Many Americans deny any responsibility for ancestral mistakes. Continued debate over issues of affirmative action, proper use of the Confederate flag, and the legitimacy of reparations suggests that many Americans, both black and white, have not willingly accepted their cultural inheritance—they have not thoughtfully and thoroughly dealt with the emotional, economic, and psychological fallout over American slavery. As *Life at the Davis Hotel* uses a historical setting and fictional characters to revisit a pivotal point in American history, it aims to create a story that is both compelling and informative.
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www.usgenweb.org/researchers/epidemics.html
Appendix A
The USGenWeb Project—Epidemics

- 1747 - CT, NY, PA, SC -- Measles
- 1759 - North America [areas inhabited by white people] -- Measles
- 1761 - North America and West Indies -- Influenza
- 1772 - North America -- Measles
- 1775 - North America [especially hard in Northeast] epidemic -- Unknown
- 1775-6 - Worldwide [one of the worst epidemics] -- Influenza
- 1783 - Dover, DE ["extremely fatal"] -- Biliary Disorder
- 1784 - New Bern, NC (Craven Co) -- Yellow Fever
- 1788 - Philadelphia and New York -- Measles
- 1792 - Vermont ["putrid" fever] and -- Influenza
- 1793 - Virginia [killed 500 in 5 counties in 4 weeks] -- Influenza
- 1793 - Philadelphia [one of the worst epidemics] -- Yellow Fever
- 1793 - Harrisburg, PA [many unexplained deaths] -- Unknown
- 1793 - Middletown, PA [many mysterious deaths] -- Unknown
- 1794 - Philadelphia, PA -- Yellow Fever
- 1796-7 - Philadelphia, PA -- Yellow Fever
- 1799 - Philadelphia, PA [one of the worst] -- Yellow Fever
- 1799 - New Bern, NC (Craven Co) -- Yellow Fever
- 1803 - New York -- Yellow Fever
- 1820-3 - Nationwide [starts-Schuylkill River and spreads] -- "Fever"
- 1831-2 - Nationwide [brought by English emigrants] -- Asiatic Cholera
- 1832 - New York City and other major cities -- Cholera
- 1837 - Philadelphia -- Typhus
- 1841 - Nationwide [especially severe in the south] -- Yellow Fever
- 1847 - New Orleans -- Yellow Fever
- 1847-8 - Worldwide -- Influenza
- 1848-9 - North America -- Cholera
- 1850 - Nationwide -- Yellow Fever
- 1850-1 - North America -- Influenza
- 1852 - Nationwide [New Orleans-8,000 die in summer] -- Yellow Fever
- 1855 - Nationwide [many parts] -- Yellow Fever
- 1857-9 - Worldwide [one of the greatest epidemics] -- Influenza
- 1860-1 - Pennsylvania -- Smallpox
- 1865-73 - Philadelphia, New York, Boston, New Orleans -- Smallpox
- 1865-73 - Baltimore, Memphis, Washington DC -- Cholera
  - [A series of recurring epidemics of: Typhus, Typhoid, Scarlet Fever, Yellow Fever]
- 1873-5 - North America and Europe -- Influenza
- 1878 - New Orleans [last great epidemic] -- Yellow Fever
- 1885 - Plymouth, PA -- Typhoid
- 1886 - Jacksonville, FL -- Yellow Fever
- 1918 - Worldwide [high point year] -- Influenza

More people were hospitalized in WWI from this epidemic than wounds. US Army training camps became death camps, with 80% death rate in some camps
Appendix B

History of St. James Church:
Transcribed from the personal papers of Mrs. Edith Woodlief
(author unknown)

St. James Episcopal Church, at Kittrell, was established at a date not now
known. Its first church was just one large room of frame construction located near
the famous Kittrell Springs Hotel, much nearer to the hotel than to the village. This
building still stands and is occupied by a Negro family.

The second or present church building, located on the main street of the town,
was erected a short time before the Civil War but the deed for the property was
received August 8, 1871. St. James was the only church of any denomination in
Kittrell during the war. Kittrell Springs Hotel was used as a Confederate Hospital
and 52 Confederate soldiers died there. Each one of these soldiers received Christian
burial by the Episcopal Church, Rev. M.M. Marshall officiating; and the names,
ranks, addresses and times of death of each soldier are recorded in the official records
of the church.

The deed under date of August 18, 1871 was by Margeret L. Taylor. The
vestry at that time was composed of Baldy A. Capehart, William H. Davis, Thomas
Capehart, Josephus A. Peace, and C.W. Raney. It is thought at that time the church
membership was around 200 among whom were the Blacknalls, Capeharts, Burwells,
Crudups, Hunts, Kittrells, Barnes, Raneys, Williams, Penningtons, Stones and Ellises.

In addition to the 200, the number of Negro slave members must have been
substantial. The church documents show Negro children baptized as follows and in
each case at night. At the residence of B.A. Capehart, April 17, 1864, fourteen
baptized and two weeks later at the same residence, seven baptized…making twenty-one for the Capehart home. March 6 and 7, 1865, at the residence of Josephus A. Peace, fifteen were baptized, most of which were his slaves. This makes 67 Negro children in two spring services.

On July 23, 1865 George Thomas Blacknall, son of Charles Blacknall, age four years, two months and two days was buried. The preacher arrived late and conducted a full burial service after the grave was filled. This being unusual it was made a part of the church records.

St. James has served continuously for a hundred years. Its present membership is fifteen. Its present pastor is Rev. George Magoon of Louisburg who conducts services once each month to a membership, one hundred percent present.

The present church is attractive inside and out. It has many interesting things worthy of note. The brass wall plaque, given in memory of Baldy Ashburn Capehart who died January 5, 1899, has a cross of genuine amethyst. The altar was given in memory of Richard Beverly Raney who die in 1909. The brass cross and brass book rest were given in memory of Miss Lucy Catherine Capehart who died January 1, 1908. The candelabra was a thank offering by Leigh Hunt for the safe recovery of his family. The following memorials were also given: Lectern, hand carved eagle of solid walnut for Mary A. Smith Morehead, died January 4, 1891; Pulpit in memory of P.T. Henry; Prayer desk in memory of Virginia and Emma Blacknall; Baptismal font, in memory of B.F. Moore, died November 29, 1878. The church has a very old reed organ with double keyboard and manual coupler, pumped by hand. The memorial windows are of very fine stained glass by Tiffany and Company.

Average term of pastor service is six years. St James Church sponsored or established a Mission known as Bethel some six miles distant towards Fairport, but the Mission suspended many years ago.
Appendix C

A History of Kittrell:
Transcribed from the personal papers of Mrs. Edith Woodlief.
(author unknown)

The old Glass Hotel stood on the site of what was later the office and plant of the Continental Plant Company. In 1893 this hotel was burned, and some years later was replaced by a three-story building with its porches also enclosed in glass. This was run by a Mrs. Margarita de Forest, but its popularity soon waned and she sold the place and returned to New York. It was purchased by Mr. Oscar T. Blacknall, founder of the Continental Plant Company, and used in that business until it was burned in 1924.

This nursery business was started shortly after the Civil War, and operated by the Blacknall family until after the death of Shields M. Blacknall, the last son in 1929. The vastness of the business was probably not generally known locally. The concern owned about 3000 acres of land, all in Kittrell Township. Most of this land was devoted to the culture of plants, shrubs, seedlings and strawberries. They introduced the Never-stop Strawberry and the Neva-Myss Peach. The company did a tremendous mail order business, and it grew to be one of the largest businesses in America selling direct to people, which was its policy from the beginning. Years ago when specializing was done in that branch of business, the company had as its slogan “The Largest Shippers of Strawberry Plants in the World” and this claim was never disputed or challenged. Mr. Oscar Blacknall was the son of Col. C.C. Blacknall, who won distinction in the Civil War.
Before the establishment of the nursery business, Mr. Blacknall and his brother, Mr. Charles L. Blacknall, engaged in the manufacture of tobacco at Kittrell. Their product was mostly chewing tobacco, but later they bought the smoking tobacco business of Henry and Redding Perry of Henderson.

When the plant of the Continental Plant Company was burned it was replaced by a modern stone building, which after the death of S.M. Blacknall in 1929 it was inherited by Mr. Blacknall’s secretary, Miss Mildred Purvis, with all the assets of the business. A corporation was organized at that time by Miss Purvis, Miss Lucille Ellis and Mr. A.C. Husketh, Miss Ellis acting Secretary of the company. Mr. C.M. Hight, employed as a salesman for the company was later offered a share in the corporation by Miss Purvis. A few years later when Miss Purvis retired to her home in Williamston, she left Miss Ellis and Mr. Hight in charge of the Continental Plant Company affairs. C.M. Hight, Jr. is still running this nursery business, although in a small way. Its present office is located on the exact site of the original home of the company. The stone building was sold to the Negro school there, and land divided and sold off in small tracks.

The Fetters had a boarding school for boys at Kittrell Springs in its early days. Riddick Academy, a boarding school for girls, was also at one time conducted in Kittrell after the Civil War. Until 1888 there was a white school or college located at Kittrell Springs, known as Kittrell Institute, which was run by a Mr. Davenport, and later by Mr. Guy V. Barnes. In 1888 he college was bought by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and was supported by the establishers with aid from State and Endowment funds, the greatest of which was the Duke fund. This school owned
about 30 acres of land and had six large buildings, who of which were donated and
moved from Duke University in Durham, N.C. This school at first had only white
teachers who were sent here from the North. Dr. John R. Hawkins was its president
for many, many years until his death.

It is said that when the site for a cotton mill in Vance County was being
investigated, prior to 1900, by Mr. D.Y. Cooper and others, that they first considered
locating the mill at Kittrell, but inasmuch as the Blacknalls owned nearly all the land
on one side of town, and the Woodliefs nearly all the land on the other side, and
neither would sell an acre, why Kittrell lost its chance of becoming a large and
progressive city, and today the population is smaller than it was many years ago.
However, as late as 1860, it was a more important place than Henderson. At that
time, it is said that if you wanted to come to Henderson, you had to buy a ticket to
Kittrell’s Springs (as it was then called) and then hire a horse and buggy to take you
back to Henderson. This was during the days when the healthful waters of the famed
mineral springs had made it a popular winter health resort.

Sports of all kinds were enjoyed there, including the renowned tournaments,
which were annual events and lasted for several days at the time. People came from
far and near to participate. These horsemen, reminiscent of the days of knights and
chivalry, carried long lances which were passed through rings suspended above the
race tracks, while the horses were going at high speed. The winner in the various
contests had the privilege of choosing the young lady of his choice for Queen of the
Ball. Many of our oldest citizens recalled he colorful event of seeing the Queen
chosen and crowned at the Big Ball held on the night following the last day of the
tournament.

One of the main places of interest near Kittrell was Balance Rock, a natural
formation which was of much interest to the Northern tourists and hunters, as well as
the local inhabitants. This is just over the line in Franklin County, and was a natural
curiosity, being a large rock perfectly balanced on a much larger rock base, which at
the touch of a child’s finger could move, causing it to rock backwards and forwards
until it again came to rest in perfect balance. The rock was damaged many years ago
by someone prizing it up and it does not now work as perfectly as before. There is an
old mill near there and a pond, and Dr Robert J. Gill bought this place before his
death and presented it to the Boy Scouts and other young people’s organizations in
Vance County for a camping site.