

ABSTRACT

TAFT, KIMBERLY ELAINE. *Silent Voices: Searching for Women and African Americans at Historic Stagville and Somerset Place Historic Sites.* (Under the direction of Dr. Craig Thompson Friend.)

This thesis examines the interpretation at Somerset Place and Historic Stagville, two North Carolina Historic Sites. While the interpretation of slavery at plantation museums has received increased attention, much remains to be explored regarding the interpretation of women. In addition to examining the interpretation, this thesis explores the history of both Somerset Place and Stagville as active plantations and later historic sites. This thesis proposes that interpretations of race and gender are interconnected but not always concurrent at plantation museums. While the first chapter explores the history of Somerset Place, the second examines Stagville. The final chapter focuses on the current interpretation found at both sites.

Silent Voices: Searching for Women and African Americans at Historic Stagville and
Somerset Place Historic Sites

by
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DEDICATION

To my parents and grandparents.

BIOGRAPHY

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Introduction

Explaining history from a variety of angles makes it not only more interesting, but more true. When it is more true, more people come to feel that they have a part in it. That is where patriotism and loyalty intersect with truth.

—John Hope Franklin

Most people living in the Old South resided on small farms and owned a few or no slaves. Among those who did hold slaves, a majority owned no more than five. Only 2 to 3 percent of white men had more than fifty slaves working their farms. Two North Carolina families—the Collins family of Somerset Place in Creswell and the Cameron family of Stagville Plantation in Durham—once belonged to this small, elite group of southerners.¹

Today, Somerset Place and Historic Stagville operate as North Carolina State Historic Sites, offering guided tours of the buildings which once comprised large, bustling antebellum plantations. Whose story is told during the interpretive tours at these sites? Are *all* the voices of the past included in the interpretation? Are slaves both male and female discussed during a tour? Are the duties of white planter women mentioned? Or are visitors left with stereotypical images and ideas about these two groups' positions on antebellum plantations? While interest in and interpretation of slavery has increased at plantation museums, resulting in greater attention to black women, less is said regarding white planter women. Typically,

¹ J. William Harris, *The Making of the American South: A Short History, 1500-1877* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 98, 101, 105.

when women black or white are mentioned, the narrative is related in gendered spaces such as kitchens, bedrooms, or dining rooms.

Through examining interpretation at Somerset Place and Historic Stagville, this thesis proposes that at southern plantation museums, interpretations of race and gender are interconnected but not always concurrent. When African Americans are incorporated into interpretations, interpretations of women often emerge. When interpretations of slavery lag, women often remain silent as well. At Somerset Place, changes in interpretation did not focus on African Americans until the 1980s under the leadership of Dorothy Redford. Today, interpretations of the slave community include black women, while white women remain on the margins of interpretation. At Stagville, the site's use as a preservation center delayed consideration of interpretation until the 2000s, by which time incorporation of African Americans was less a public history problem. Still, because Stagville's interpretation has been developed so recently, attention to white women has not yet emerged. At both sites, however, current interpretations of women remain underdeveloped: gender is seldom employed when analyzing and interpreting the slave community, and women's specific roles are at times absent.

Documented interest in Somerset Place as a historic site first appeared in the 1950s. Master and interpretive plans shed light on the evolution of the interpretive use of the plantation museum. In 1954, William Tarlton's report expressed interest in developing a slave cabin at Somerset Place, followed later in the 1960s with Raymond Pisney's proposal to include the slave community in interpretations of plantation social life. However, in the

1950s and early 1960s, academic scholarship did not provide sufficient resources to expand interpretation; and audiences were unprepared to embrace such ideas. Not until the 1980s and the leadership of site manager Dorothy Redford did site interpretation transform. Slave cabins were reconstructed, and interpretation began to include more information on the slave community. Gradually as well, women black and white emerged in the interpretation.

Stagville's history as a historic site differs from Somerset Place. Its lands and buildings changed hands several times before tobacco company Liggett and Myers gave it to the state of North Carolina in the 1970s. Initially, planners designed Stagville as a preservation center. Women and blacks went unacknowledged for decades: no interpretation existed at the site until 2003. When it did arrive, however, the interpretive narrative broadly interpreted the slave community alongside the Bennehan-Cameron families.

Current interpretations at the two sites include more information on the slave communities as a whole, neglecting gender-specific issues and stereotyping or ignoring white women altogether. Like at other plantation museums, Stagville and Somerset continue to struggle against several interpretive factors: First, the historic house movement originally preserved the homes of elite white men. Second, by emphasizing the patriarch, interpretations diminished the narratives of slaves and white women. Finally, because plantation museums came to prominence in the years before academic scholarship revised the influence of Lost Cause myths, those myths continue to influence interpretation at the sites: white men are no longer valorized, but slaves and white women continue to be silenced.

* * *

The stories of the powerless are often left out of historical narratives. Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that history is produced by the powerful through specific narratives, thereby creating silences in history. Women and African Americans have longed been among those whose voices are silenced in American history.²

Within public history venues, that silence has been broken recently as representations of slaves and white women emerged at southern historic sites, largely based on revisions in historical analysis of plantations. Historian Catherine Clinton, for example, explores the plantation legend in *Tara Revisited: Women, War and the Plantation Legend*, specifically examining the relationship of Southern white women to the plantation. The Lost Cause narrative found in popular culture and stereotypes after the Civil War continues to make the plantation “contested terrain, a vital intersection of historical images that summon up warring visions of the southern past.” Clinton believes that “southern women may never emerge from the trappings of myth and nostalgia, but by systematically exploring the lives behind those images, the thorns as well as the blossoms, our historical understanding will broaden, deepen, and eventually reshape our perceptions of the plantation era.” The plantation legend,

² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 5, 25. Trouillot’s theories contributed to the work of Alisa Y. Harrison, as well, in her “Reconstructing Somerset Place: Slavery, Memory, and Historical Consciousness” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2008). Harrison’s focus on slavery at Somerset, however, is only part of the larger picture offered in this thesis.

therefore, continues to exist in popular culture, but do these myths continue to silence women's voices at plantation museums?³

Jessica Adams argues that myths do shape public history interpretations, although her interests lay with the interpretations of slavery. In *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation*, Adams examines the changing role of the plantation in the American South. Her innovative study uses oral interviews, traditional scholarship, fiction, live performance, and popular culture to argue that as plantations continued to function as agricultural entities after Reconstruction, romanticized ideals of the Old South made touring plantation homes popular with northern tourists. Such tours were filled with more fiction than fact. Adams argues that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these plantations became “haunted by property”—that is, ideas of humans as property. She argues that “the plantation house today is often a site of the erasure of slave history,” yet “careful readings of plantation images suggest that slavery’s physical and psychic violence is always active within scenes of nostalgia.”⁴

Adams’s findings are similar to those of Arnold Modlin, Jr. who examined representations of slavery at plantation museums in North Carolina. He categorizes the interpretive narratives at these sites as either production myths, which are simple statements of fiction, or meta-myths which are constructed from multiple production myths. Modlin

³ Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War and the Plantation Legend* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1995), 15, 16, 19, 23, 211-13.

⁴ Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 5, 11, 17.

argues that although researchers have found little interpretation of slavery at plantation museums across the South and have called for more “socially responsible narratives,” their call has gone unheeded, particularly in North Carolina where museums generally employ one of two meta-myths on tours: slavery did not happen at that specific site, or slavery was unique at the specific site.⁵

In their *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, sociologist Jennifer Eichstedt and African American studies professor Stephen Small examined 122 plantation museums located primarily in Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana. Arguing that most sites “tell a story of American history that centers on whites, males, and elites, and that these sites erase or minimize the presence, labor, and lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans,” the authors conclude that four narrative strategies frame discussions of slavery or slaves: symbolic annihilation and erasure, trivialization and deflection, segregation and marginalization of knowledge, and relative incorporation. Symbolic annihilation or erasure ignores slaves and slavery entirely. Trivialization and deflection occurs at sites when “slavery and African Americans are mentioned, but primarily through mechanisms, phrasing, and images that minimize and distort them.” Segregation and marginalization refers to instances when slavery is discussed in separate areas of the plantation museum or a separate tour for slavery may exist, like the Mulberry Row tour at

⁵ Arnold E. Modlin, Jr., “Tales Told on the Tour: Mythic Representations of Slavery by Docents at North Carolina Plantation Museums,” *Southeastern Geographer* 48 (2008): 265, 275, 278.

Monticello. Finally, relative incorporation exists when slavery and the enslaved are integrated throughout the main tour.⁶

In her dissertation, “Reconstructing Somerset Place: Slavery, Memory and Historical Consciousness,” Alisa Y. Harrison recently examined representations of slavery at Somerset Place by using “manuscript sources; oral histories and interviews; public documents, records and reports; and material artifacts.” The narrative that she found at Somerset Place during the twentieth century moved through Eichstedt and Small’s categories, beginning with interpretation that “was exclusive and dedicated to making and upholding myths that began with the Lost Cause,” but by the turn of the new century, “putting its environment to new use and thus showing an expanding audience that there was more to Somerset’s history and more to the institution of slavery than once met the eye.” The present interpretation reflects current historiographical approaches and “trends in African American public history.”⁷

Incorporating slavery and servitude into historic sites, however, has remained a difficult undertaking. Researcher Jennifer Pustz recently attempted to discern the level of domestic service interpretation at house museums and the extent to which social history has influenced those interpretations. Although, the study focuses on historic houses with an interpretive period of 1870 to 1920, the issues to consider for interpreting servants are similar

⁶ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 3, 4, 10.

⁷ Alisa Y. Harrison, “Reconstructing Somerset Place: Slavery, Memory and Historical Consciousness” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2008), iv, 3, 17, 18, 419.

to those for slaves. For example, Pustz discovered servants are often interpreted in their workspace or living quarters. She recognizes that “original reasons for preserving a site affect the subsequent interpretation,” but argues that interpretation of servants would work best if interwoven throughout interpretations—in other words, what Eichstedt and Small labeled “relative incorporation.” Could relative incorporation be employed successfully in interpreting slavery at Stagville and Somerset? And could it work to integrate white women as well?⁸

The attention given these questions over the past decade is not new, although we have to look back to the early 1980s for a comparable moment. Curious about women’s place in national memory, in 1981, historians Barbara Melosh and Christina Simmons visited Washington, D.C. and two exhibits in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History and the National Women’s Party headquarters. The First Ladies’ exhibit at the NMAH displayed the gowns of former First Ladies, emphasizing their roles as “hostess and supervisors of White House furnishings and decoration.” In contrast, the exhibit “A Nation of Nations” showed “men and women in a social context, emphasizing the different races and cultures which joined to form the United States.” The authors concluded that the latter exhibit discusses women in greater detail because “the show deals with social history rather than political leaders, it moves beyond symbols and prescriptions to depict women’s actual life activities.” Finally, the Sewall-Belmont House, headquarters for the National Women’s

⁸ Jennifer Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs: Interpreting Servants’ Lives at Historic House Museums* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 14, 30, 48, 60-61.

Party, “emphasizes the dedication and accomplishments of women involved in the struggle for women’s rights, while the genteel elegance of the house reveals the Party’s upper-class connections.” Still, the authors seemed to dismiss even this attempt at interpretation, describing the house and its tour as “compensatory history” since the emphasis remained on “women who were usually outspoken or accomplished in traditionally male arenas.”⁹

Despite calls for presenting women’s history at historic sites—and despite increased representations of slave communities at historic sites that seemed to have established some thematic foundations through which women could be presented—, few plantation museums attend to white or black women’s representations. This is most ironic given white women’s historical role in the South’s public memory. Historian Fitzhugh Brundage writes that white women acted as “architects of white historical memory.” Even as this new memory created a controlled history which valorized the white men who had been defeated during the Civil War, it excluded white women and their work on plantations. After the Civil War, women created a memory which protected their men at the expense of their own true positions within the plantation system.¹⁰

Still, why are women excluded or stereotyped within interpretation *today*? Excluding women and issues of gender from interpretation evinces a persisting lack of interest in the work, responsibility, and lives of women—past or present. Women’s continued exclusion

⁹ Barbara Melosh and Christina Simmons, “From Martha Washington to Alice Paul in Our Nation’s Capital,” *Radical History Review* 25 (1981): 102, 105, 106, 107, 110.

¹⁰ Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 15.

from interpretation perpetuates the invisibility of women's work as well as their evolving roles throughout history. Women must be considered within any interpretation to dispel myths or stereotypes and shed new light on an often overlooked past.

Chapter One

Somerset Place Historic Site: A Model Plantation

Like many plantation museums in the South, Somerset Place State Historic Site is isolated from other historic plantations and urban centers. Owned by one family—the Collinses—during its eighty-year tenure as an “active plantation,” Somerset Place sits in Creswell, North Carolina, off Interstate 64 near the Albemarle Sound.

In 1785, Josiah Collins and two partners, Nathaniel Allen and Dr. Samuel Dickinson, acquired a land grant for 100,000 acres of land in eastern North Carolina as part of a business venture called the Lake Company which promoted the cultivation of rice on the lands bordering Lake Phelps. In order to clear the land and dig a canal, the Lake Company purchased forty-nine African American men, women, and children. Slave artisans skillful in carpentry, masonry, and joinery assisted with the work. The same year, the Lake Company hired a ship to import slaves directly from Africa. The newly arrived Africans, eighty in number, brought significant knowledge of rice cultivation to the Lake Company’s venture.¹

In many ways, these slaves were members of what historian Ira Berlin calls a “Plantation Generation” of American slaves. Berlin outlines five “generations” of American slaves: a Charter Generation, a Plantation Generation, a Revolutionary Generation, a Migration Generation, and a Freedom Generation. Typically, the Plantation Generation lived on inland

¹ “Somerset Place: A Comprehensive View of Life on an Antebellum Plantation” (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2008); “Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation: Long Orientation,” D. Redford, comp., (Creswell: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2003), 1, 2.

plantations, miles from the coast. Planters attempted to strip away their identities in order to make them dependent on the master. This generation also saw an increase in the number of slaves arriving directly from Africa. Although chronologically more in line with Berlin's Revolutionary Generation, the slaves who arrived in the mid-1780s had all the characteristics of the Plantation Generation—geographically isolated, socially diverse (often characterized as Africans versus African Americans), and dependent on white authorities in the form of the Lake Company for survival.²

In 1816, Josiah Collins bought out his business partners and named the land Somerset Place to memorialize his English home. Upon his death three years later, his son Josiah Collins Jr. inherited the land and continued to run the plantation as a business, adding a hundred slaves to the work force. At the time of his death in 1839, his daughter inherited roughly eighty slaves. She moved them to Alabama, significantly disrupting the slave community at Somerset Place.³

Since Somerset Place began as a business venture, the Collins family did not live there until 1829 when Josiah Collins III married Mary Riggs of Newark, New Jersey, and built a home for his family. Only the slaves made Somerset Place a residence before 1829. Collins's grandfather had never brought his wife to the plantation, while his father's family had made a home in Edenton. The Collinses had always lived elsewhere as absentee farmers, a fairly rare practice in North Carolina. Mary Riggs Collins, therefore, was the first white woman to make

² Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), ch. 2; idem, "Coming to Terms With Slavery," *Slavery and Public History* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 8-17; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 5.

³ "Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation: Long Orientation," 3, 5.

Somerset Place a permanent home. Having grown up in the North (she had attended the same school in New York City as her future sisters-in-law), she was unprepared to become a plantation mistress. Still, once the Collins family moved to Somerset Place, the plantation evolved from a strictly business venture to a residence.⁴

Completed in 1835, the three-story house sat on the edge of Lake Phelps and contained fourteen rooms. A parlor, library, office, dining room, and butler's pantry comprised the first floor while the second floor held guest and family bedrooms. The top floor had a play room and bedroom for the six Collins boys; Josiah and Mary Collins had four sons within the first six years of marriage. Large families such as the Collinses were more common than not during the early nineteenth century, partially due to the lack of effective birth control, high childhood mortality rates, and southern cultural expectations about manliness and virility. Sadly, three sons died in tragic accidents on the plantation, leaving only three to reach adulthood. A smaller bedroom in the house belonged to Charlotte Cabarrus, a free black woman employed by the Collins family to care for the boys. Cabarrus also assisted Mary Collins in her plantation duties. As the family grew, so too did the slave community. By 1860, over three hundred slaves lived at Somerset Place, the third largest plantation in North Carolina.⁵

⁴ "Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation: Self-Guided Tour Brochure" (Creswell: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, n.d.); Margaret Supplee Smith and Emily Herring Wilson, *North Carolina Women Making History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 69; John Sykes, "The Women of Somerset Place," North Carolina Museum of History, <http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/collateral/articles/s94.women.somerset.place.pdf> (accessed August 30, 2009); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 18; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 11.

⁵ "Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation: Collins Family Home," D. Redford, comp. (Creswell, NC: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2003), 5; "Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation, Long

A number of dependencies sat in the yard behind the Collins house: a dairy, kitchen/laundry, smokehouse, rations building, and salting house. The dairy cooled milk, eggs, butter, and other items to prevent spoilage. In the kitchen, Grace Bennett, a slave cook for the Collins family, prepared meals over a hearth in the middle of the room. In the laundry, which shares a wall with the kitchen, slaves cleaned smaller pieces of Collins family clothing such as collars or delicate lace. The cleaning of larger pieces of clothing took place outside on the grounds and involved scalding water and large heavy pots. The smokehouse served as a storage facility for smoked meat, while the salting house stored salted meat. Typically, meats stored in these buildings were specifically for the white family's consumption. Finally, the rations buildings stored excess food and served as a location for drying herbs. Mary Collins, an avid gardener, maintained the garden and greenhouse behind the main home, assisted by three slaves.⁶

The enslaved community at Somerset Place lived in twenty-three houses aligned in a row within walking distance of the main house. Single-room houses made up a majority of the dwellings; however, a few had two stories and four rooms, with as many as nine people or more living in each room. Cypress was the primary material used in the slave cabins, and the floors were heart pine. The interior and exterior of the houses were whitewashed.⁷

Orientation," 3; Lisa Biggs, interview by author, Creswell, NC, 7 February 2009; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 152.

⁶ Sykes, "The Women of Somerset Place"; "Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation: Domestic Dependencies" (Creswell: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2003), 1-5.

⁷ "Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation: Interpretation Information for the Reconstructed Small Slave House," Dorothy Redford, comp., (Creswell: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2001), 1.

Other buildings on the site included a slave hospital, church, housing for the overseers, and Colony House which served as a boarding school for the Collins boys. The hospital provided care for the enslaved community. Placing the sick in the hospital ebbed the spread of infectious diseases. Other health procedures included tooth extractions and assistance with difficult births. White doctors tended to members of the slave community, assisted by enslaved nurses. A small church for the plantation community stood next to the hospital where an Episcopal priest held services every Sunday.

An overseer and his family lived in close proximity to the chapel. The Collins family typically had multiple overseers employed at any given time. Across the South, men who served as overseers were either related to the planters they served or were “floaters” and often considered “white trash.” Many, however, intended to earn enough money to buy a farm of their own or were content with overseeing as a life-long career. The turnover rate for overseers remained high with replacements arriving every two to three years. A storage building stood beside the overseer’s house and held meat intended for the slaves.⁸

With the onset of the Civil War, the Collinses moved westward to Hillsborough, and the slave community relocated to a plantation in Franklin County. One overseer remained at Somerset Place to watch over the plantation. In those years, the family suffered two personal tragedies, beginning in 1860 when Mary Collins suffered a stroke which left her unable to perform plantation duties, write, or speak. Three years later, her husband Josiah died. With war’s end in 1865, Mary Collins and her sons returned to Somerset Place, but the freed slaves

⁸ “Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation, Self-Guided Tour Brochure”; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 13.

refused the family's labor contracts and abandoned the plantation, reducing the Collins men and women to performing former slave tasks such as cutting firewood and washing clothes. By 1870, most of the freedmen and women had left Somerset, and the Collinses gave up farming. Eventually, the family auctioned off the property to pay debts.⁹

From 1870 to the 1920s, Somerset Place changed owners multiple times, buildings fell into disrepair, and farm land became overgrown. During the 1920s, a Rocky Mount bank gained control of the estate. In 1937, the Farm Security Administration acquired the property and made it part of the Scuppernon Farms resettlement project, a New Deal program that divided formally large land holdings into smaller farms that could be purchased by black and white farmers on forty-year mortgages. While much of Somerset Place converted to smaller farms, the estate was salvaged by the state of North Carolina which acquired a lease from the federal government for the Collins Mansion and the nearby lands in 1939 to create Pettigrew State Park. Eight years later, the federal government gifted the land and buildings to the state. Although the house and lands were in disrepair, Somerset Place had a new lease on life.¹⁰

Interpretation in its Infancy

During the early 1950s, historian William Tarlton managed excavations at Somerset Place along with archeologist J.C. Harrington. In 1954, at the conclusion of the project, Tarlton

⁹ Sykes, "The Women of Somerset Place"; "Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation, Long Orientation," 5; William Tarlton, *Somerset Place and Its Restoration* (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of State Parks, 1954), 43.

¹⁰ Tarlton, *Somerset Place and Its Restoration*, 48; "Somerset Place: Origins of Somerset," <http://www.nchistoricsites.org/somerset/history-somerset.htm> (accessed December 26, 2009).

prepared a report for the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development in which he provided a brief history of the Collins family and a plan for restoring Somerset Place. A year later, he became director of the state's newly-formed Historic Sites program. His report provides an informative window into how professionals viewed historic sites in the early years of public history.¹¹

One of Tarlton's most interesting recommendations was to reconstruct the slave cabins for

use as tourist cabins and for other purposes. The cabins could be made to duplicate the original exterior appearance of the slave cabins but be arranged inside for modern use as guest cabins. One of the cabins might be used as public toilets to serve both the historical and the recreational areas. The cabin nearest to the historical area proper should be authentically restored inside and outside and furnished as a historical exhibit.

While the presence of slaves would not be ignored, the meaning of slavery would not be interpreted.¹²

The audience of the 1950s played heavily into Tarlton's vision. The reality of slavery proved too challenging for the consensus-driven history of the era which emphasized national unity over group differences. Further, the South was segregated. Black and white children attended separate schools; black and white adults used different water fountains, waiting areas,

¹¹ Antiques and the Arts Online, "W. Samuel Tarlton, 87, Antiques Dealer and Historic Preservation Specialist," http://antiquesandthearts.com/Antiques/Obituaries/2009-03-17__11-11-48.html (accessed October 16, 2009). Carl Steen, *Restoration Excavations at Somerset Place Plantation, State Historic Site, 1994 and 2001*, North Carolina Archaeological Council Publication No. 28 (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2003), 33.

¹² Tarleton, *Somerset Place and Its Restoration*, 69. For further analysis of the slave cabins, see Alisa Y. Harrison, "Reconstructing Somerset Place: Slavery, Memory and Historical Consciousness" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2008), 192-93.

and doors. *Brown v. Board of Education* added to the racially-charged political and cultural landscapes of the South. Whites' notions about the inferiority of African Americans played into the potential interpretation of Somerset Place. To present and interpret slavery was to present and interpret blacks as victims—an idea to which middle-class whites would not have been receptive. Any exhibit would have been limited in 1954, most likely portraying slaves in a stereotypically “happy slave” manner. Since no plan for an interpretation on slaves existed, slave women would not be interpreted either. Still, Tarlton's interest in developing one cabin into an exhibit suggests that there was some interest in the interpretation of slavery—but not necessarily slaves—at Somerset.

Roughly fifteen years after Tarlton's initial report, North Carolina Historic Sites administrator Raymond F. Pisney created a new *Interpretive Plan for Somerset Place*. Pisney believed that “Somerset Place is important not because of unique historical events, personages, or architecture, but rather because the site as an entity offers comparisons and contrasts between a given historical period and today. Social history is central to the interpretation of Somerset Place.” An important American hero had not called Somerset home, and no famous battle had raged on its land. Pisney believed the best interpretation—a social history interpretation—would contrast the way people lived in the early nineteenth century to the way people lived in the twentieth century. Pisney's plan divided the interpretation into three periods: Background and Development, the Antebellum Period, and Decline. Interestingly, the “lifestyle of the people—social, domestic, and cultural life of the Collins', slaves and area residents” would be central to a social history interpretation. How could such history be presented to the public? Were

secondary sources available to develop an adequate interpretation that would include slave men, slave women, and white women?¹³

Emphasis on social history evidenced a changing cultural context in which Pisney worked. While the Civil Rights movement in North Carolina had begun years earlier, it became dramatically noteworthy in February of 1960 when students participated in a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, spawning other sit-ins by students across the state. The march on Washington D.C. and Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech followed three years later. In the same years, the women's movement resurged and demanded equality for women. Founded in 1966, the National Organization for Women dedicated itself to bringing equality to all women in all facets of life.¹⁴

In terms of scholarship, the late 1960s and 1970s witnessed a torrent of slavery scholarship. In revisiting that scholarship, historian Charles Dew wrote, "As scholars sought to understand the origins of racial inequality in the United States, they inevitably turned back to the era when that inequality was most blatantly institutionalized and oppressive." Much of the literature broadened understanding of slavery by comparing different eras such as the colonial and antebellum, examining slave families, lives, and religion. One of the first historical analyses of slavery, written in 1959 by Stanley M. Elkins, found slaves in the American South had a

¹³ North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Raymond Pisney, *Interpretive Plan for Somerset Place* (1969), 1. Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ "The International Civil Rights Center and Museum Timeline," <http://www.sitins.com/timeline.shtml> (accessed December 26, 2009); National Organization for Women, "1966 Statement of Purpose," <http://www.now.org/history/purpos66.html> (accessed December 26, 2009); William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

distinct “man-child” personality characterized by loyalty, humility, laziness, and cheerfulness. Elkins’s theory soon became known as the “Sambo thesis.” Still, he had little to say about slave women and issues of gender. The nature of this early slavery scholarship set the tone in public history. As late as 2002, many plantation museums across the South still interpreted slaves using the “Sambo” myth, portraying slaves as “happy” or “grateful.”¹⁵

Simultaneously, women’s history exploded after the feminist movement of the 1960s. However, few women historians studied the women of the Old South. Since Julia Cherry Spruill’s 1938 *Women’s Lives and Work in the Southern Colonies*, little scholarship on white southern women appeared until 1970 when Anne F. Scott’s *The Southern Lady* emerged. Scholarship on slave women was even sparser. Not until the publication of Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman* in 1985 did southern black women become a focus of scholarship.¹⁶

While Raymond Pisney’s intent may have been to incorporate white women and blacks into Somerset’s narrative through new social history methodologies, a dearth of secondary sources forced him to fall back to more familiar ground: “The logical vehicle for presentation of these themes is the story of the Collins family itself, beginning with Josiah I and carrying through the death of Josiah III, with postscripts on Mary Collins and the later history of the

¹⁵ Charles B. Dew, “The Slavery Experience,” in *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham*, ed. John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 121-22; Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 151.

¹⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Anne Firor Scott, “Women in the South,” in Boles and Nolen, eds., *Interpreting Southern History*, 454-510; Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women’s Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985; reprint, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999).

plantation land.” The interpretation was to be told through the Collins men, thereby continuing to marginalize the slave community and only recognizing white women in “post scripts.” In fact, as Pisney’s bibliography reveals, his “primary materials” included William S. Tarleton’s *Somerset Place and its Restoration* which focused specifically on the Collins men. Other materials were the Pettigrew Papers, *Edenton Gazette*, and Scuppernon Farm Records, none of which would have broadened the traditional story into a more inclusive narrative. Although Pisney desired to have a social history of the plantation, he found it difficult to move the interpretation beyond the Collins men. Further, Tarleton’s vision of reconstructed slave cabins had not come to fruition by 1969, therefore making it easy to overlook slavery without physical reminders. Historic interpreters could just ignore the story of slaves.¹⁷

Yet, white women were less easy to ignore, not because there were physical structures to spark interpretation but because in 1969 the historic interpreters *were* white women, referred to as “hostesses.” Pisney preferred the term “hostess”: “they are not to be ‘docents’ or ‘guides,’ they are not to be mechanical women, glad-handlers, or teaching machines. Rather they are to offer hospitality to Somerset’s visitors and as such they will be a vital link between this Department and the public.” Drawn from the stereotypical image of the plantation mistress found in the moonlight and magnolia version of the Old South, the hostesses were to display “generosity and courtly manners” and “provide lavish and gracious hospitality to relatives and travelers alike.” In actuality, the unseen hard work of plantation mistresses and their slaves made this myth palatable. Pisney may also have been drawing his ideas from other historic sites

¹⁷ Pisney, *Interpretive Plan for Somerset Place*, 2.

like Colonial Williamsburg which hired “hostesses” upon its inception in the mid-twentieth century. Such tour guides came from “local white gentry” who “cherished familial memories of an antebellum, slave-holding aristocracy.” Pisney believed that they could set aside personal and familial histories to provide an unbiased interpretation.¹⁸

The actual interpretive content remained undefined when Pisney’s wrote his plan. He suggested a script be put together by a task force that would visit Somerset Place after the Collins house was furnished. The task force would “become thoroughly familiar with both Mr. Tarlton’s report and with the general layout of the house and grounds,” and then meet in Raleigh to make a “skeleton tour script composed of ‘fact sheets.’” Pisney did not want the tour to be “memorized spiels” from the hostesses, believing the women should instead have a wealth of knowledge about the site in order to tailor tours to visitors’ interests. By developing the script with a team instead of a single person, the information would in theory be more “balanced.”¹⁹

Another component Pisney addressed in the 1969 interpretive plan included hostesses’ costumes. He clearly did not want the women wearing “period costumes”: “Unless twentieth-century women be taught manners, personalities, hygiene, and speech conforming to nineteenth-century standards, they will remain twentieth-century women—‘cute, but not historical.’”²⁰

Although, Pisney referred to the women in the highly-gendered term “hostess,” he did view their

¹⁸ Pisney, *Interpretive Plan for Somerset Place*, 13; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 176, 177; Eric Gable and Richard Handler, “Public History, Private Memory: Notes from the Ethnography of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, U.S.A.,” *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2007), 50; Harrison, “Reconstructing Somerset Place,” 256.

¹⁹ Pisney, *Interpretive Plan for Somerset Place*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

position and responsibility to convey accurate information to visitors an important facet of the site's mission. Asking the women to wear uniforms instead of period dresses seemingly gave the "hostesses" a higher level of authority and did not make them look like "cute" adornments to the house.

Although Pisney brought a sense of professionalism to Somerset Place through his insistence on authenticity and authority, he also realized the need to maintain visitor attendance:

The visitor wants two things from us—entertainment and meaning—"plausible learning." The opposite of entertainment is boredom; the opposite of meaning is "the state of being meaningless." Bore the average visitor, whatever his age or background, with lists, long-winded descriptions, an over-abundance of one medium, or the simple lack of things to see and do and you lose his attention. Make his visit meaningless by failing to relate the site to something within his own experience, or by isolating individual facts and ideas, and you fail in your job of interpreting, or translating, of "carrying across" the site's message.²¹

The battle for historic sites and history museums to maintain a balance between education and entertainment obviously existed in the earliest years of public history.

On a practical note, Pisney addressed two ideas—an audio-visual program and reconstructing slave cabins—which continually resurfaced in the planning history of Somerset Place Historic Site. Even in 1969, he believed it beneficial to install an audio-visual program of some kind since the "themes of the site are otherwise too complex to present effectively." However, money and space remained issues and thwarted development of a media program. Given the time and budget constraints, Pisney suggested development of a temporary slide-illustrated lecture focusing on the "life-style of the people." However, he did not indicate which

²¹ Ibid., 10.

“people” were to be described: most likely the Collins men given the dearth of information on their slaves, wives, and daughters. Still Pisney intended that the “human interest anecdotes about Somerset should be omitted from the script; the hostess will need these informations to add depth to her presentations.”²²

Not that Pisney ignored the possibility of expanding narratives. Similar to Tarlton’s interest in reconstructing slave cabins, Pinsey showed interest in the non-extant slave quarters of Somerset. He put forth two options: either interpret the remains as archeological sites or reconstruct the buildings. Yet, he recognized that, “until we decide which we want, we cannot properly channel resources for these buildings.” Clearly, funding was available for interpreting slavery; what was lacking was will.²³

Master Plans and Masterful Ideas

The Department of Cultural Resources developed a Master Plan for Somerset Place in 1970. Whereas Pisney’s interpretive plan divided the site’s interpretation into three periods, the 1970 Master Plan defined the primary interpretive story as the “development and operation of an important agricultural establishment in North Carolina during the 1830-1860 period; and the concurrent importance of the place as a social center for fashionable society of eastern North Carolina and of the Atlantic seaboard,” effectively narrowing the interpretive window to the antebellum period. By limiting Somerset’s interpretive chronology, there was a possibility the

²² Ibid., 12.

²³ Ibid., 22.

scope could be widened to include the stories of enslaved African Americans, including enslaved women. Yet, the Master Plan's emphasis on "fashionable society" seemed to eliminate that possibility.²⁴

While the primary theme focused on agriculture and the plantation as a social center, a secondary theme centered upon the architecture of the main house and how it displayed "the transition and further development of architecture of North Carolina." In 1970, the existing structures listed as part of the tour included the plantation house, Colony House, kitchen, laundry, storehouse, smokehouse, ice house, and dairy. Included in this vision of architectural interpretation was a goal to archeologically uncover lost building foundations and reconstruct them, including a chapel, a hospital, and at least one slave cabin.²⁵

The 1970 Master Plan also revised hostesses' roles at Somerset Place. Pisney's 1969 plan situated hostesses as tour leaders, escorting visitors around the house and grounds. In the 1970 Master Plan, however, "Hostesses will provide tours of the mansion house and guides will act as roving interpreters on the rest of the site." The mansion house assumed prominence in the 1970 Master Plan since it had a fixed docent, while the other buildings and grounds had only roving interpreters. Also, the person inside the house being labeled a hostess rather than an interpreter suggests little interpretation would take place within the house. Continued use of "hostess" carried with it an association with the plantation mistress in the Old South.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 2; *Master Plan for Somerset Place Historic Site* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1970), 24.

²⁵ *Master Plan for Somerset Place Historic Site* (1970), 24, 26.

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

The plan also separated the historic and non-historic contents of the site into zones. One, titled “development,” included the parking lot and visitor center. Although no visitor center existed, the plan proposed a modestly sized visitor center. The visitor would follow a specific path from the parking lot to the visitor center to “begin his journey back into history,” including a short film. The plan did not call for any exhibits, relying on the “refurnished historic structures . . . [to] provide a background for the interpretation of history in three-dimensional form.”²⁷

The 1970 Master Plan never fulfilled its objectives. Within nine years, the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources produced a new plan because “[i]t is apparent that most current visitors to the site fail to receive an understanding, as envisioned in this report, of two centuries of agrarian life in the area which once formed the plantation. To tell the broader story of the land and its people rather than merely provide an attractive house museum will require several changes in the present arrangement at Somerset Place and its environs.” Part of the problem lay with visitors’ interactions with the site. The plan suggested expanding their experiences with a walking trail that would link Somerset Place to the slave cemetery and Pettigrew’s plantation. Another trail would take visitors by the lake and canal. There was also a driving tour of Somerset’s farm lands. All of these ideas would have broadened the interpretative scope, conceivably including the stories of slaves. Still, the focus of the site

²⁷ Ibid., 24.

remained the Collins house. Without standing slave cabins, historical interpretation remained limited.²⁸

The Master Plan of 1979 replaced the “hostesses” of the main house with “guides,” but ideas surrounding southern hospitality remained. Upon their arrival at Somerset, “[g]uests at the plantation should go first to the Collins Mansion, as would have been the case with important associates of the family, rather than strolling initially past the Overseer’s House and outbuildings.” Comparing Somerset’s twentieth-century visitors to those of the 1800s insulated visitors from a more challenging and difficult narrative: a host would never make a guest feel uncomfortable by discussing a subject as difficult as slavery. Small changes signaled a shift in Somerset’s presentation, but very little had changed between the interpretive plan of 1979 and Tarlton’s 1954 interpretive plan. White women and blacks garnered little historical interpretation.²⁹

A planning committee within North Carolina’s Department of Cultural Resources met in 1989 to create a new Master Plan which outlined specific short-, medium-, and long-range plans for the site. Comprised of Cultural Resources employees, the committee defined Somerset as a representative and documentary site. As such, Somerset Place housed archeological and historical records which facilitated “a rich interpretation of the site” and served as “a vehicle for a broader interrelation of the social, cultural, agricultural, and economic history of the time, with

²⁸ *Master Plan for Somerset Place Historic Site* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1979), 61, 63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 62; Leisa Brown Greathouse, interview by author, Fayetteville, NC, 14 September 2009.

particular emphasis on eastern North Carolina.” The committee formulated a concise mission statement which read:

The purpose of Somerset Place State Historic Site is to preserve and interpret Somerset Place plantation and its history. The site will collect, preserve, research, and interpret the material culture of the social, cultural, and economic history of the owners, the slave community, and the other plantation residents. The site may research the contemporaries of these individuals and their descendants. The site will also promote and encourage scholarly research in plantation history and African-American history and culture.

The 1989 Master Plan specifically referenced Somerset Place’s enslaved community and outlined its history as a topic that needed not only further research but true interpretation. By linking the story of the individual Collins family to the bigger picture of the antebellum South, interpreters could discuss the stories of planters *and* slaves, enriching and enlarging visitors’ experiences.³⁰

The committee considered a new tour inclusive of the slave community, a short-range goal already in development. However, the plan stopped short of incorporating gender into any future interpretation of the slave community or the Collins family. Suggesting that research and interpretation would become more interactive at the site, the committee listed eleven areas where future research should be directed, but its emphasis on the garden layout and plants, furnishings, kitchen restoration and furnishings, intra-plantation race relationships, and the slave community’s African heritage neglected women’s history.³¹

³⁰ *Master Plan*, 1989, 5, Research Library, North Carolina Division of Historic Sites, Raleigh.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4, 7, 12.

As it reconsidered the content of interpretation on the guided tours, the committee explored methods of interpretation to “better interpret the vast topics encompassing Somerset Place.” As in the past, the 1989 committee planned for an exhibit area and audio-visual program, but it set forth a guidebook, outdoor signage, demonstrations and special events, and off-site programs as well. By offering expanded interpretive methods, the committee hoped the site would connect with broader audiences with multiple interests.³²

Another area of focus in the 1989 Master Plan reflected archeological resources present at the site and their potential as a “primary source of information for the study of African-American slavery at Somerset Place.” Once historical, archeological and architectural research was complete, “two slave cabins, a hospital, chapel and other buildings” could be reconstructed. Like Tarlton’s plan to convert slave cabins into modern-use accommodations for visitors, the 1989 committee similarly thought it important to keep all plantation outbuildings looking historically accurate on the exterior as they were a “vital part of the story of Somerset Place.” However, “some of the buildings should be completely restored for interpretation, while others can continue to be used for modern purposes while maintain[ing] accurate facades.”³³

The 1989 Master Plan marked the site’s growth and evolution in not only its interpretive techniques and content, but also its attention to collecting. A specific section in the Collection Policy at Somerset Place outlined that the “policies collecting, maintaining, and discarding artifact collections are determined by the North Carolina Museum of History.” All artifacts within the

³² Ibid., 12.

³³ Ibid., 17-20.

site's collection were to relate to the site in some manner, but also fall within close proximity to the interpretive date of 1860. Although Somerset could use the Museum of History as a model for a collections policy, the need to develop its own policy as it related specifically to the plantation was obvious. To a certain degree, Somerset Place validated itself as a professional museum once it recognized and began cataloging its collection. An important component of museums is the act of collecting. As one author writes, "a historic site without a collection is only a local attraction."³⁴

Somerset Place and Dorothy Redford

In 1988, Dorothy Redford succeeded Leisa Brown Greathouse as site manager of Somerset. Redford spent the next twenty years expanding Somerset's physical and interpretive offerings, adding new buildings, and offering more inclusive tours to visitors.³⁵

Eleven years earlier, Redford had been inspired by *Roots*. Redford remembers her friends and co-workers talked "about Africa, about slavery, about finding their ancestors," the week the show aired. *Roots* represented the first opportunity for white Americans "to confront slavery head on and see it through the eyes of the slave." Redford, determined to find her ancestors, began by conducting interviews with her mother, Louise Littlejohn Spruill. Her next step was to research Federal Census data at her local library in Norfolk, Virginia. She realized a

³⁴ Ibid., 21, 6; Edward P. Alexander and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Lanham, MD.: Altamira Press, 2008), 15, 188.

³⁵ Frank Roberts, "Work of N.C. history advocate brought lives of slaves to light," *The Virginian-Pilot*, 21 August 2008.

year into her study that in order “to trace my line into slavery, I would have to find the white connections.” Once she gleaned all the information she could from census records, she travelled to North Carolina to conduct research at courthouses in Washington, Tyrrell, and Chowan counties, ultimately uncovering her family tree and her ancestors who were owned by the Collins family of Somerset Place.³⁶

In 1984, Redford attended Founders Day at Somerset Place. She had been working on her family’s genealogical project, and site manager Bill Edwards asked her to set up a booth displaying her findings. Redford arrived at Somerset Place to find that she and her mother were the only black people in attendance. Other people had set up displays under trees or in air-conditioned buildings; organizers relegated Redford to the outdoor kitchen. She recalled, “We sat inside that stifling room, my seventy-seven-year-old mother and I, watching white people come and go past the door, white people who weren’t even interested in the displays their own kind had set up, much less a black woman’s charts about her slave ancestors.” From her experience at Founders Day, Redford realized how very disconnected blacks and black history had become to the site, making Somerset Place “devoid of feeling.”³⁷

Two years later, in 1986, Redford organized a homecoming at Somerset Place which became the foundation for her book *Somerset Homecoming*. Alex Hayley, whose own *Roots* had inspired Redford, reviewed Redford’s book as “the best, most beautifully researched, and most thoroughly presented black history that I know of.” Redford’s interest in her African ancestry

³⁶ Dorothy Spruill Redford, *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 4, 5, 33, 50, 61, 65; Dew, “The Slavery Experience,” 161.

³⁷ Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 173-76; Harrison, “Reconstructing Somerset Place,” 321.

coincided with what historians James and Louis Horton have described as “an extraordinary engagement with slavery, sparking a rare conversation on the American past” in the last decade of the twentieth century. Slavery history had become prominent throughout popular culture: in movies like *Glory*, *Amistad*, and *Beloved*; in TV documentaries like PBS’s *Africans in America* and HBO’s *Unchained Memories*; and in a plethora of new monuments, museums, roadside markers, and freedom trails. *Somerset Homecoming* was timely and relevant.³⁸

As Redford described, upon first walking onto the site, she did not feel like a visitor: “But I was no tourist here. This was my home, my family’s home. Their hands made the bricks I stood on. They dug the canal that led me here. They planted those trees that pointed the way. My people were born here and were wed here. And when they died, they were buried here, somewhere.” Redford’s ancestors numbered among Somerset’s slaves, a personal connection that contributed to her commitment to changing the site’s interpretation. Redford described the visitor center as “sad” with spider webs in corners. A teenager guided her tour which only consisted of the “Big House.” During the tour, the guide made only two mentions of Somerset’s enslaved community: the first attributed the digging of the canal to “African slaves,” and the second declared “hired girls” had kept the house for the Collins family. All in all, there was little interpretation about the enslaved. Still, while Redford’s first visit proved disappointing, she “felt

³⁸ Frank Roberts, “Work of N.C. history advocate brought lives of slaves to light,” *The Virginian-Pilot*, 21 August 2008; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and Public History: The Touch Stuff of American Memory* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 1.

a peace there.” She writes, “I felt connected to the land. I knew that a hundred and fifty years earlier my family walked over the very same land I now stood on.”³⁹

Despite master plan after master plan that had encouraged reconstruction of slave cabins, as late as 1988, Somerset Place had no original or re-constructed slave cabins. “There, on a lonely wooden sign no more than a foot high, were printed the words ‘Site of Slave Quarters,’” recalled Redford, “No buildings. No rubble. No remains. Just a sign and an open field. In one hand I held the names of almost one hundred and fifty slaves I knew belonged to the Collinses. In the other I held a pamphlet that said three hundred slaves once worked on this plantation. And this was their legacy—a single rotting sign.”⁴⁰ Perhaps, her initial disappointment and personal connection drove Redford’s passionate journey for change over the next two decades.

In 1994, archaeological excavations conducted at Somerset by the Diachronic Research Foundation uncovered a small slave cabin, a two-story large slave cabin, a chapel, kitchen, and hospital. Archeological research proved critical in the reconstruction of the structures. As archeologist Carl Steen points out, archeology remains one of the few resources which allow historians to piece together the lives of slave communities. At Somerset, researchers concentrated on structures along the “slave street.”⁴¹

³⁹ Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 98, 99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴¹ Steen, *Restoration Excavations at Somerset Place Plantation*, 1. Archeology can also serve as a “primary source” of information for women as well. Often left out of “government documents or economic accounts,” women come out of the shadows through archeological digs; see Julia G. Costello, “A Night with Venus, a Moon with Mercury: The Archaeology of Prostitution in Historic Los Angeles,” in *Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation*, ed. Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 177. While such attention shed light on the slave women of Somerset, it brought forth little new information about the women of the Collins house.

The first archeological dig had taken place in the 1950s under William Tarlton's direction. However, archeology followed a different philosophy at that time. Although Tarlton succeeded in discovering foundations along the "slave street," he also caused some damage by using a bulldozer. No "systematic" collection of artifacts had occurred during the digs. Additionally, in the 1930s, the Farm Security Administration had cut a road directly over former slave structures.⁴²

Fortunately, then, the 1994 dig proved successful in uncovering the remains of five structures. Within three years, the site had reconstructed a small slave cabin—the home of Judy and Lewis, two field hands who lived in an original one-room cabin with seven other family members. Other reconstructed buildings included a plantation hospital and a large two-story slave cabin which today houses an exhibit on a female slave named Sukey Davis. Slaves' stories could no longer be ignored once slave cabins appeared on the landscape.⁴³

During Redford's tenure at Somerset, nine additional buildings opened to the public, including the two slave cabins and hospital—the only one like it in the country. Upon her retirement on September 1, 2008, twenty years after Redford took over as executive director at Somerset Place Historic Site, North Carolina state Senator Marc Basnight credited her as the primary force in changing Somerset: "At Somerset, which is in a relatively isolated area, you can

⁴² Steen, *Restoration Excavations at Somerset Place Plantation*, 33, 34, 35, 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 187; "Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation: Interpretation Information for the Reconstructed Small Slave House," 1.

really see what plantation life was like in eastern North Carolina, thanks to Dorothy. She brought credibility, passion and a deep concern for the history of American plantation life.”⁴⁴

From its inception as a historic site in the 1960s until Dorothy Redford’s term as site manager in the 1980s, Somerset Place Historic Site focused its interpretation on the story of the Collins family, ignoring the story of the larger population of African American slaves. While the Collins family lived a life of luxury in the big house, their slaves crowded into wooden cabins heated in the winter by singular fireplaces and cooled in the hot summers by small windows. Not until 1989 did slaves become an integral part of Somerset’s interpretation.

Although at one time, the slaves at Somerset outnumbered the Collins family by over five hundred, Somerset’s interpretive plans had silenced their stories. Slave men, women, and children were not the only groups left out of Somerset’s interpretation—the plantation mistress did not have a voice in her own home as well. Despite Raymond Pisney’s interest in social history, a lack of resources perhaps played the most significant role in limiting interpretation. Only in 1988, through the passion of a new manager, a changing cultural context, and the plethora of new resources—genealogical research and archeological digs—did the interpretation evolve to include African American stories.

⁴⁴ Roberts, “Work of N.C. history advocate brought lives of slaves to light.”

Chapter Two

Historic Stagville: A Plantation Preserved

At the end of a long gravel road, eight miles outside of Durham, sits a grand Georgian mansion—grand, at least, by piedmont North Carolina’s standards. Less than a mile away in Horton Grove stands four wooden slave cabins constructed as the sun set on the Old South. Once this land, its buildings, and its inhabitants made up the core of the largest plantation in North Carolina, but today these buildings comprise a North Carolina State Historic Site.¹

The Stagg family first occupied lands at the confluence of the Eno, Little, and Flat rivers in present-day Durham County. In the mid-eighteenth century, Thomas and Judith Stagg owned a tavern close to the Old Indian Trading Path. Like other taverns and country stores in colonial North Carolina, Stagg’s tavern acted as important social center where local farmers met to discuss current events and exchange information. The Old Indian Trading Path ushered wagons and carriages to the tavern, helping it become a rather successful venture.²

When her husband died, Judith Stagg sold roughly sixty acres of land to Richard Bennehan. The fifth of six sons, Bennehan traveled from his home in Virginia to manage a store at nearby Snow Hill. Recognizing potential in the Stagg land and its proximity to a main

¹North Carolina State Historic Sites, *Historic Stagville: Center of One of the Largest Plantations in Antebellum North Carolina* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Department of Cultural Resources, n.d.).

²Jean Bradley Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation: The Bennehan-Cameron Family and Lands in North Carolina* (Durham, NC: Historic Preservation Society of Durham, 1985), 9. Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 95.

thoroughfare, Bennehan dedicated his resources to opening a new store in the late 1780s, naming his lands “Stagville” to honor their association with Stag’s tavern.³

The original portion of Bennehan’s house, constructed in 1788, consisted of two rooms and a sleeping loft. Eleven years later, he added a two-story addition, signifying his growing success as a planter and businessman, and his growing family.⁴ Outbuildings such as a kitchen, smokehouse, milk house, lumber house, and two slave cabins arose behind the main house. By the turn of the century, Bennehan owned close to four thousand acres of land and forty-two slaves, making him a member of North Carolina’s planter class.⁵

Richard and Mary Bennehan’s two children, Rebecca and Thomas, grew up at Stagville. They received schooling at home. Later, Thomas attended the newly-opened University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Although popular among the southern elite to send their daughters away to school, Rebecca remained at home; her days perhaps filled observing and assisting her mother in the duties of plantation management. The skills that Rebecca Bennehan learned became invaluable, particularly gardening and preserving its harvest for the year, making household goods such as candles or soap, sewing items like bedding and pillows, salting meats, and managing the household budget. Since the plantation had a large number of slaves, her mother and she assumed managerial roles in the production of household goods. They also served as gracious hostesses on occasions when company dropped by, sometimes unannounced.

³ Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, ix, 3, 9.

⁴ Diana Overbey, comp., “Historic Stagville Training Manual” (Creswell: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, ca. 2007), 46, 47.

⁵ Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 11, 12.

A furnishing list indicates that the family owned thirty-six Windsor chairs and twelve beds, suggesting that the Bennehans entertained guests frequently.⁶

Rebecca Bennehan transitioned from the role of daughter to wife in 1803 when she married Duncan Cameron at Stagville. Weddings were simple affairs, with a dinner and party usually taking place after the ceremony. The young couple initially made their home in Hillsborough where Duncan Cameron was an aspiring lawyer. While he worked tirelessly to build a successful law career, Rebecca Cameron remained at home. She wrote her husband in 1805, “I comfort myself with the pleasing hope that the period is not far distant, when you can spend more of your time at home, and that we shall enjoy more domestic felicity than if we had not been so often and so long separated.” While often apart, the young couple’s marriage was apparently harmonious.⁷

In their first four years of marriage, the Camerons had two children. In the days before reliable medical care, women of the planter class faced high birth rates and corresponding high risks of death during childbirth. Infant mortality rates were high as well. The 1850 census indicates that childbirth killed one of twenty-five white women. Although women gave birth to a large number of children, few children survived into adulthood. Rebecca Cameron gave birth to

⁶ Ibid., 11, 13; Anya Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 49, 97; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 110; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 21.

⁷ Johnson, *Ante-bellum North Carolina*, 206; Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 25.

eight children, four of whom died during their teenage years of tuberculosis. Another suffered from extreme learning disabilities.⁸

While his wife produced babies and managed the household, Duncan Cameron entered into a partnership with Richard Bennehan, creating one large plantation complex called Bennehans-Cameron. The Cameron family moved in with the Bennehans at Stagville. Soon thereafter, Rebecca gave birth to their third child, Paul Cameron. In 1810, construction began on a new home, Fairntosh. The nucleus of the plantation had been at Stagville, but it would gradually shift to Fairntosh, only a few miles away.⁹

Shortly after the Camerons moved their young family to Fairntosh, Mary Bennehan died. Richard and Thomas Bennehan remained at Stagville where the father continued to be active in the community and managed the plantation until his own death roughly ten years later. Thomas Bennehan never married and spent the remainder of his days at Stagville, with his slave Charlotte Rice as his housekeeper. He was the last member of the family to use the Stagville home as a permanent residence. Although the plantation remained in the family, upon Thomas Bennehan's death and then the death of Duncan Cameron, Paul Cameron inherited the plantation and operated it from Fairntosh.¹⁰

By the 1850s, Paul Cameron was one of the wealthiest men in the state, owning nine hundred slaves and thirty thousand acres of land, requiring construction of new slave cabins at

⁸ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 152; Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 225; "Historic Stagville Training Manual," 30.

⁹ Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 24-25. "Historic Stagville Training Manual," 31.

¹⁰ Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 16, 18, 52. "Historic Stagville Training Manual," 28.

Horton Grove a few miles away. Each cabin had wooden floors instead of the common dirt floors and brick siding for insulation, was two-stories high, and contained four rooms. Not only did the slave cabins offer better housing for Paul Cameron's slaves, but by providing the enslaved community with better housing, Cameron attempted to limit disease in the slave quarters and protect his investments.¹¹

Women living in Horton Grove's cabins likely performed work in Stagville's fields. They not only carried out their daily plantation tasks, but returned home to the slave cabins at the end of each day to begin a "second shift." Slave men worked at night hunting, fishing, or gathering firewood; chores that fell to women included cooking for the white family, cleaning, making soap and candles, and washing clothes. At least some of Cameron's slaves gained crafts skills because, in the late 1850s, slave artisans constructed the Great Barn.¹²

During the Civil War, many plantations across the South fell victim to the destruction of war. North Carolina did not see the large-scale fighting found in other southern states. Consequently, many of its plantations survived the war, only to be sold to help offset debts accumulated by planter families. Stagville not only survived the Civil War intact, but many of the former slaves remained to farm the land as sharecroppers or hired workers. When Paul Cameron died during Reconstruction, his will divided the plantation lands among his children. His son, Bennehan Cameron, inherited the plot that contained the Stagville and Fairntosh houses.

¹¹ Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 57; "Historic Stagville Training Manual," 31, 105.

¹² Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 32-33, 57; "Historic Stagville Training Manual," 105.

As his father's will described, "This square and the lands that made up the farms of Stagville & Fairtosh in the County of Durham will I hope long be held & owned by the heirs of Richard Bennehan & Duncan Cameron to which they were strongly attached." His explicit instructions emphasized sustaining those strong family connections to both Stagville and Fairtosh.¹³

During his bachelor years in the late nineteenth century, Bennehan Cameron lived at Stagville, bringing furniture out of storage that probably had belonged to his great uncle Thomas Bennehan. Still, Stagville would never again house a large family as it had at the turn of the nineteenth century. Bennehan Cameron lived at Stagville for only a few years before moving to Fairtosh where he and his wife, Sally, raised their four children. At the time of his death in the early twentieth century, his two surviving daughters divided the estate. Isabelle Van Lennep inherited the land containing Stagville which she then sold. It changed hands multiple times until 1954 when Liggett and Myers Tobacco Company purchased it for tobacco production.¹⁴

Preservation in Action

In 1975, the North Carolina Division of Archives and History sent out a survey to determine just how many North Carolinians engaged or had interest in historic preservation. The response was somewhat overwhelming, inspiring the state to spend over 10 million dollars on preservation programs in the mid-1970s. Still, despite widespread interest and financial investment in historic preservation, North Carolina needed a place where historic preservation

¹³ Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 133; "Historic Stagville Training Manual," 32.

¹⁴ Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 135; "Historic Stagville Training Manual," 33.

could be taught, somewhere not as confining as a classroom. The Historic Preservation Society of Durham approached the State of North Carolina with an answer to this need—Stagville.¹⁵

The act of saving a historic structure is portrayed as noble, but it also relates the cultural choices of those saving the property—choices of what to save and what not to save. As researchers Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small point out, “These are sites that elites have identified as worthy of saving, since an elite view of history favors their own activities as those that shaped the nation or region.” Therefore, saving an antebellum plantation preserves the Old South and the primacy of white male culture within it. By preserving a planter’s home, such as Stagville, a specific moment in southern history becomes accessible for present and future generations to revisit.¹⁶

Surprisingly, then, when the Historic Preservation Society of Durham decided to restore Stagville to its former condition and turned to the state for help, a plan was developed which did not include an interpretive scheme. The plan “gave a use to the property and did not suggest a static museum atmosphere.” State officials requested from the Liggett and Meyers Tobacco Company control over the “historic” properties at Stagville, and in 1976, Liggett and Myers donated roughly seventy acres of land, including the main house and the Horton Grove slave cabins.¹⁷

¹⁵ John B. Flowers III and John W. Kinney Jr., “Stagville Preservation Center: The Development of a Research and Restoration Facility,” Summer 1978, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹⁶ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 61.

¹⁷ John B. Flowers III, “Stagville: An Introduction,” Stagville Archives, Historic Stagville State Historic Site, Durham, NC. Flowers and Kinney, “Stagville Preservation Center.”

But was this to be a preservation center or a historic house museum? The purpose of each is different. While house museums educate the public through interpretation, preservation centers train professionals in a specific field. In early 1976, planners tried to do both at Stagville. The preservation center proposed to restore both the Bennehan-Cameron House and the area of Horton Grove. The former would be used as offices and classrooms, while the latter would become a North Carolina State Historic Site dedicated specifically to African American history. Considering that a majority of plantation museums at the time focused interpretation on “architecture, furniture and antiques, wealth and/or status of the white family who owned the house, elite family lifestyles, famous (white) people who lived or visited there, etc.,” the State of North Carolina was ahead of its time contextualizing slavery at a plantation museum.¹⁸

Additionally, the state already had a plan for a preservation center in place:

The North Carolina Division of Archives and History, in cooperation with the Historic Preservation Society of Durham, has plans for the development of the Stagville Center for Preservation Technology using the land and buildings for a research center for the study of historic and archaeological preservation technology.

Extant buildings included “the historic Bennehan House built in 1799, four antebellum slave quarters, and a large, sturdy barn built in the late 18th century and still in use today.” Still, Director of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History Dr. Larry E. Tise anticipated the

¹⁸ Ibid.; Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 71. John B. Flowers III, “Stagville: An Introduction,” Stagville Archives, Historic Stagville State Historic Site, Durham, NC

Center would “help more people understand and get involved in the practical side of historic preservation.”¹⁹

Tise recognized that North Carolina has a rich history of involvement in public history and preservation, long before the fields became recognized professions. The North Carolina Historical Commission, predecessor of the Office of Archives and History, held its first meeting in 1903 with the objective “to make the records, both public and private, available to the citizens and to ensure their preservation.” Within five years, the Commission assisted the Lincolnton United Daughters of the Confederacy in buying Pleasant Retreat Academy, which the UDC used as a museum for the Confederacy.²⁰

These two groups, the all-female UDC and all-male state-sponsored Historical Commission, evidenced a shift slowly taking place in the historic house museum movement. Women had been the first to unite around historic preservation. The nineteenth-century cult of domesticity that pervaded the American middle and upper classes dictated that women take responsibility for the religious and moral goodness of their husbands and children. This idea extended outside the home where women became “guardians of society’s culture and morals,” thereby justifying women’s involvement in voluntary associations. Women’s groups saved the houses of founding fathers to inspire a feeling of nationalism and patriotism within American society, as evidenced by their preservation of George Washington’s Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association

¹⁹ Liggett and Meyers Incorporated News Release, 5 August 1976, Stagville Archives.

²⁰ Ansley Herring Wegner, *History for All the People: 100 Years of Public History in North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Office of Archives and History, 2003), 1, 4, 6.

called on women in both the North and the South during the tumultuous decade of 1850 to not only save Mount Vernon but also ease tensions in the country. The preservation of Monticello unfolded differently than Mount Vernon, marking a change in the historic house movement. Initially, Maud Littleton approached Congress in 1912 with the idea of using eminent domain to displace the owner of Monticello allowing it to become a museum. Later, however, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation comprised of male professionals and smaller women's groups, carried on the goal of opening the house as a museum. The efforts of these early preservationists focused on the structures of famous white men, reflecting not only the traditional political emphasis of American historiography but the white patriarchal dominance of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century America—and empowering white men as “guardians of society’s culture and morals” in the process.²¹

The Daughters of the American Revolution engaged more extensively in preservation. By 1941, the organization had saved more than 250 houses, all of which reflected the course of male political history, both national and local. Saving the houses of great political male actors coincided with the goal of the organization to “achieve a society uniformly supportive of the American government.” Ironically, the historic house movement explains women’s significant exclusion from historic homes today. Because these preservation activists never promoted interpretation of the lives of slaves or women, as cultural contexts and historiographical changes

²¹ Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman, eds., *Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 17, 18, 20; Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1999), 99, 107.

took place, such women's groups found themselves increasingly distanced from public history interpretation.²²

After the turn of the twentieth century, men slowly began taking over the preservation movement and gradually turned it into a profession. Within house museums, women lost powerful leadership roles to men who, in turn, reduced them to volunteer tour guides and "hostesses" because their gender supposedly better suited the task of welcoming visitors into a home. While the Pleasant Hill Academy museum offers an example of cooperation rather than conflict in 1908, twenty years earlier, men would not have been involved so heavily in the project. By the 1960s, women were scarce as public history leaders and as subjects of interpretation.²³

In the mid-1960s, the National Park Service worked to reverse this trend. It hired more women, and roughly twenty years later, women outnumbered men in interpretive positions. The National Park Service believed "the presence of women has desirably expanded and enriched interpretive content," particularly by incorporating women. At Morristown National Historical Park, for example, women interpreters "conducted special programs on women in the Revolution, illustrated there by both camp followers and those left to manage family farms while the men were fighting." It was no coincidence that the employment of women at historic sites increased the interpretation on women.²⁴

²² West, *Domesticating History*, 45.

²³ *Ibid.*, 49, 94.

²⁴ Barry Mackintosh, *Interpretation in the National Park Service: A Historical Perspective* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1986), 74-75.

Stagville Preservation Center

In his speech at the dedication of Stagville Preservation Center in 1977, Governor Jim Hunt mentioned North Carolina's legacy of historic preservation:

It is an important day in North Carolina, for today we are dedicating a facility that will bring distinction to the state in the field of historic preservation. North Carolina has been a leader in historic preservation in the nation, and this first state-owned preservation center joins a distinguished list of other firsts in cultural resources: the first state-supported symphony, the first state-supported art museum, and the first state-supported zoo.²⁵

As part of that legacy, initial interpretive efforts at Stagville centered on the white family—as had all previous efforts in North Carolina historic preservation.

A Stagville newsletter explained, “We hope to use these rooms in spite of their precious inventory.” Researchers used an 1815 household inventory to shed light on what would have been inside the main home. Only in minor ways did white women emerge in the new interpretive scheme. Emphasis on the household highlighted Mary Bennehan's and Rebecca Cameron's influences on the home. In the nineteenth century, “separate spheres” placed women's roles inside the home and men's roles outside the home. The home was woman's domain and therefore a space to express individualism and exert authority by deciding the decoration of the home, placement of furniture, and planning of meals. While the idea of separate spaces has been associated primarily with the urban North, it was evident as well in the

²⁵ Remarks by Jim Hunt, 29 March 1977, Stagville Archives.

South even though the plantation functioned as both a home and production unit. Inclusion of furniture directly reflected the tastes and choices of these two women.²⁶

During its initial years, the Preservation Center intended to research the slave community of Stagville. The center planned to use the Horton Grove buildings as “laboratories for historians, sociologists, and anthropologists who will want to study the structure of the black family unit in both the ante-bellum and post-bellum periods.” The center recognized the research potential of the site but also expressed belief that “black history will be an important part of the Stagville Center program, and eventually we hope that the Horton Grove Quarters will become the first North Carolina State Historic Site dedicated to the history of black people in North Carolina.”²⁷

While the idea of creating a historic site specifically for African American history remained revolutionary in the 1970s, those in charge viewed the story of Stagville as a black-and-white story. The Preservation Center’s convenient location among several universities may have assisted in focusing on African American history in an effort to attract young scholars to research Stagville’s antebellum history. Several of these schools became involved with Stagville Preservation Center in the early years. An archeological field school sponsored by North Carolina State University took place at the site in 1977. Duke University’s Continuing Education program offered two classes at Stagville, with topics dedicated to North Carolina

²⁶ *Stagville Summary*, Vol. 1, February 1977, Stagville Archives; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 61, 63.

²⁷ *Stagville Summary*, Vol. 1, February 1977.

archeology and the genealogy of the Bennehan and Cameron families. There was even a proposal for a partnership with Durham Technical Institute for a program in historic preservation technology.²⁸

Eager to take advantage of the unique research and educational potential of Stagville, in October of 1979, the board of directors at the Stagville Center Corporation hired the Preservation Resource Group, a consulting firm from Virginia, to prepare a general management plan for the Preservation Center. Preservation Resource Group verified the site's potential: "Stagville Preservation Center can fill the vacuum currently existing in historic preservation education." The management plan cited ten objectives in three policy areas—education program development, preservation resources development, and institutional development—to assist the Preservation Center in its goal of "education and research in historic preservation." Most important was institutional development, believed "necessary to establish an environment in which the educational and resource programs can flourish."²⁹

The proposed educational program at the preservation center would target four different audiences: the general public, institutions or organizations interested in historic preservation, historic preservation professionals, and institutions of higher education. By providing a place to learn, practice, and exchange ideas and information, Stagville (and by extension, North Carolina) would become a leader in historic preservation as well as cooperation between these audiences. The plan called for an Education Coordinator with at least an M.A. or Ph.D. to oversee

²⁸ *Stagville Summary*, Vol. 1, July 1977.

²⁹ Preservation Resource Group, Inc., *General Management Plan for Stagville Preservation Center*, October 1979, North Carolina Collection, 10, 15.

programs, and in time, Stagville could develop workbooks, textbooks, and audio-visual material. Due to the lack of available space, however, the plan suggested that all programs be held off-site until additional classroom facilities were constructed. A library and media center would also be necessary to facilitate Stagville's educational programs.³⁰

Despite early evidence that white women and African Americans would be better incorporated into Stagville's narrative, suggested content for the educational program revealed little about either. Ideas included an Annual Conference with sessions on "documentation of historic properties, the physical development of history of North Carolina as reflected in its buildings, programs for rural preservation, [and] financing restoration." Preservation, not social history, would be the primary focus. A suggested annual festival promised to focus more on the practical side of historic preservation with "preservation crafts demonstrations." Still, the plan made allowances for "ethnic and black history activities related to Stagville Plantation." The final two ideas for program content included a lecture series and short courses in historic preservation on topics including "Introduction to Archeology (utilizing the Stagville work), Agricultural History and Plantation Life (as recorded at Stagville), North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century, the History of Tobacco, [and] Black History." While all of these topics were relevant to the site, African American history was listed last, almost as an afterthought, and women remained notably absent, suggesting that the Preservation Resource Group considered women's history largely irrelevant to Historic Stagville or historic preservation.³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 18, 19.

³¹ Ibid., 21.

Other proposed educational programs included one designed for groups or organizations interested in historic preservation; a second for professionals such as architects, builders, and landscape architects; and the career education program designed for those pursuing a degree in historic preservation. All promised content with greater focus on the practical side of historic preservation. Students pursuing a degree at one of the local universities could attend a twelve-week summer institute at Stagville and take classes while participating in field work that included “restoration of Stagville buildings, archeological (both historic and pre-historic) field investigations, furnishings and interior decoration of Stagville buildings and design and development of new facilities.” Women’s history and black history would be incorporated into the course work, only incidentally.³²

Another component of the proposed plan was the Stagville Research Program, which would work closely with the Education Program to supplement its activities. The plan recommended topics for historical study: “basic history of Stagville’s development, architectural history of buildings, furniture studies of buildings, special theme studies related to Stagville’s economic and social history and black history.” The Preservation Resource Group encouraged Stagville to use the vast number of Bennehan-Cameron papers to research topics, including “black history, agriculture, finance, commerce and transportation history” in order to reflect on how “the important transition, over the past ten years, of studies of American plantation life away from the planters to focus on the workers can be fostered in scholarly research at

³² Ibid., 23, 25, 29.

Stagville.” Although noble and correct to draw attention to the long-ignored history of African American slaves, planners mentioned nothing about white or black women.³³

A center to serve as a place for historic preservationists to exchange ideas and discuss current issues would ultimately serve as a forum on historic interpretation and education. Scholar Duncan F. Cameron explains the difference between forum and temple as “the forum is where the battles are fought, the temple is where the victors rest. The former is the process, the latter is the product.”³⁴ The Stagville Preservation Center would be a forum for professionals to discuss and debate current trends and topics in historic preservation and perform groundbreaking research on African American history at Horton Grove. In comparison, most other plantation museums across the South resembled temples with their interpretation focused exclusively on white males and the glorified plantation home.

While the Preservation Resource Group recognized history needed to be taught not just in the classroom but in the field, the near absence of women’s history in the proposed plans reflected a profession-wide problem. Historic preservation, in its focus on design, construction, and use, just did not emphasize the day-to-day use of the home. Therefore, women’s stories continued to remain silent at the Stagville Preservation Center in the 1970s.³⁵

³³ Ibid., 32, 33.

³⁴ Duncan F. Cameron, “The Museum, A Temple or the Forum,” in *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004), 70. Cameron is not related to the family at Stagville.

³⁵ Leslie N. Sharp, “Finding Her Place: Integrating Women’s History into Historic Preservation in Georgia,” in Dubrow and Goodman, eds., *Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation*, 263.

To de-emphasize domestic use further, the Preservation Resource Group proposed to convert the Great Barn into “administrative offices, meeting rooms and supporting facilities including educational material storage, toilets, lounges, a service kitchen and utility rooms.” While fitting to move the center of the historic interpretation to Horton Grove (as the plan for the site centered on African American history), the shocking suggestion of converting the magnificent Great Barn into an office building relates a devaluation of slave craftsmanship. In contrast, the Bennehan-Cameron house was too small to meet the preservation center’s needs and would only be used as a “special events building” for meetings, conferences, and receptions. Amusingly, the preservation group imagined the house would be best utilized as a social center similar to the way the Bennehan-Cameron families had used the house to entertain frequent visitors with their thirty-six Windsor chairs.

Although there was no plan in 1979 to use the house as a museum or historic site, the group had not ruled out the possibility: “At such time that the public interpretation becomes a major activity at the Center, the house could be used for exhibits or as a museum building.” Judging from the group’s interest in historic preservation and architecture, it is unlikely that any exhibit would have related the roles of the Bennehan-Cameron women inside the home, the lives of Stagville’s slaves, or the relationships between white and black women.³⁶

In 1979, the state of North Carolina suggested adding an interpretive component to the Stagville Preservation Center. The state recognized certain problems with the Stagville Center

³⁶ Preservation Resource Group, Inc., *General Management Plan for Stagville Preservation Center*, 47.

Corporation's proposed management plan, specifically that historic preservation could hinder a site's interpretation at times, and that Stagville's interpretation remained underdeveloped and in its "infancy." An interpretation program could invite students and historians to create a more appropriate narrative for Stagville.³⁷

By 1980, a report on the Horton Grove community evidenced a plan to interpret the slave cabins. The authors expressed frustration regarding the resources used to determine the furnishings of the cabins. "Houses are usually interpreted according to their earliest period of residency or to the period with the most complete sources of documentation," they explained, but little documentation existed on the interior of the slave cabins during the antebellum period. Due to the cabins' unique structure, similarities could not be drawn from other antebellum slave cabins elsewhere in the state. Therefore, the authors suggested an interpretive date around the turn of the twentieth century and the use of oral interviews to determine the contents of house's interior. Researchers stressed the urgency in conducting oral interviews of former residents of Horton Grove:

Towards this end, we recommend that a series of oral interviews be conducted now. Even if a decision is made later to interpret the houses in another fashion, the interviews could be used by historians of social life and material culture. If one waits too long, the former residents will have passed on.³⁸

As a result of the oral history project, researchers decided to include personalized exhibits discussing the sharecropper families who used the cabins after the Civil War.

³⁷ Ibid.; Larry E. Tise, "Stagville Center Management," 26 January 1978, Stagville Archives; Stagville Center Policy Review Committee, "A General Plan for Stagville Center," June 1979, Stagville Archives.

³⁸ Carl Lounsbury and George W. McDaniel, "Recording Plantation Communities: Report on the Architectural and Historical Resources at Stagville," July 1980, Stagville Archives, 15-16.

The 1980 report called into question the success of Stagville as a preservation center. At the time of the report, several “local buildings important to the context of Stagville” had fallen down or were in a state of extreme neglect, including an overseer’s home. With buildings collapsing around it, Stagville Preservation Center needed better direction and guidance, opening the possibility for new interpretive directions.³⁹

Still, the research emphasis in the 1979 plan inspired some scholars whose work began to appear in the 1990s. First published in 1977, George W. McDaniel’s *Stagville: Kin and Community* was updated and published again twenty years later by African American Studies student Kathryn L. Staley. In the 1997 forward, Staley wrote,

Five months ago, I read in a local newspaper about a program at Historic Stagville. I was very surprised to learn that such a place existed. Having minored in Afro-American Studies at a local university, I expected to have been told that one of the largest plantations in North Carolina was just miles down the road. But not one professor spoke about Stagville. Stagville was simply forgotten.

The site was not forgotten by everyone during this period. African American historian Alice Eley Jones researched the slave community at Stagville and published findings in *Keeping Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*.⁴⁰

But Stagville’s planners in 1979 and 1980 just aspired to be too many things. According to a 2003 article, former director John Flowers stated, “A teaching center, which is what Stagville was then, really was a fish out of water. And though all the best minds knew it was the

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰ George W. McDaniel and Kathryn L. Staley, *Stagville: Kin and Community* (Durham, NC: Historic Stagville, 1997), ii; Alice Eley Jones, “Sacred Places and Holy Ground: African Spiritualism at Stagville Plantation,” in *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*, ed. Grey Gundaker and Tynes Cowan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 93-112.

way to go, [they] did not know exactly where to put it.” This perhaps explains the eventual shift in 2001 which moved Stagville from the state’s Division of Archives and History to the Historic Sites Division. The direction of the site changed in 2003 from a historic preservation center to a historic interpretive site.⁴¹

An Inaugural Interpretation

Jennifer Farley arrived at Historic Stagville in 2003 as site manager. When Farley arrived, no guided or interpretive tours existed. Visitors could take a self-guided tour of the downstairs of the Bennehan-Cameron House or follow a brochure explaining Horton Grove. Yet, visitors could not enter the buildings! For example, the second floor of the Bennehan-Cameron house was an office and off limits to visitors. Certainly, lack of access contributed to the low annual visitation of six thousand visitors. Farley, trained as a public historian, recognized changes needed to be made quickly. In terms of interpretation, she created an educational program with informational packets to send to area schools and developed an interpretive tour that included the Bennehan-Cameron House, a slave cabin at Horton Grove, and the Great Barn. The offices located on the second floor of the house moved to a nearby classroom facility, thus opening the upper floor for interpretation. By creating more interpretive spaces, Farley created opportunity for women’s historical interpretation. While not writing a tour script, believing scripts do not come out “organic,” Farley compiled information so tour guides could speak at ease during a guided tour and answer questions. Finally, she contacted Jim

⁴¹ Jim Wise, “New Focus On Stagville,” *The (Durham) Herald-Sun*, 23 August 2003.

Wise of Durham's *Herald-Sun* who wrote an article on the changes at Stagville to stimulate interest in the site.

Realizing the need to differentiate Historic Stagville from other historic sites in the area, Farley saw the same potential in Horton Grove as John Flowers and others had decades earlier. By focusing more on African American history and increased interpretation at Horton Grove, Stagville would set itself apart from other historic sites. A majority of plantation museums ignored slavery. If slaves were mentioned, the information seldom reflected historical reality. While many visitors "turn away from history that is unflattering or uncomfortable," Farley determined that Historic Stagville would present the story of slaves and slavery to its public.⁴²

Farley had bold long-range ideas of moving the visitor center closer to Old Oxford Highway, the main road used to reach Stagville. She wanted to reconstruct some of the outbuildings buildings behind the main house, a space that had been claimed by slaves where they forged a strong sense of community.⁴³ However, the yard was also gendered space. The tasks that required slaves to work in the plantation house, yard, and kitchen were typically those carried out by female slaves. Plantation mistresses visited the kitchen to supervise its activities. Because the kitchen served as a distinct slave woman space, however, white women did not linger.⁴⁴ By re-constructing the dependencies behind the Big House, more opportunities arose in

⁴² Jennifer Farley, interview by author, Durham, NC, 20 October 2009; James Oliver Horton and Louis E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Touch Stuff on American History* (New York: The New Press), 36, 37; Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 65.

⁴³ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 16.

⁴⁴ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 98.

which to interpret women, specifically slave women who would have worked in the kitchen, dairy, laundry, and other outbuildings.

Inspired by the republication of *Stagville: Kin and Community* and Farley's dedicated attention to African American history, a genealogy project on the slave community began at this time to develop greater public investment in the site. This project has continued during the tenure of other site managers. At one time, Paul Cameron owned over nine hundred slaves. Thousands of people, therefore, were conceivably connected to ancestors at Stagville. Today, the historic site's website links to a family tree containing biographical information on members of the slave community. Descendents are encouraged to share biographical information or photographs with the site to help expand the database.⁴⁵

Farley also sought to strengthen women's place in Stagville's interpretation. She drew information from family letters to draw conclusions about white planter women's experiences, particularly in regards to how women responded to plantation isolation. However, the letters, shed light on only a few of the women who lived at Stagville. Farley similarly attempted to highlight slave women at Horton Grove by focusing interpretation on the grandmother of a slave family and her role as care giver. Still, as late as 2009, women's interpretation at Historic Stagville remained less impressive than its successful interpretation of the plantation's African Americans.

⁴⁵ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 17; The Historic Stagville Foundation, "Genealogy," Historic Stagville, <http://www.stagville.org/genealogy/> (accessed February 24, 2010).

Chapter Three

Insights on Interpretation

Departed are the days when Rebecca Cameron walked the halls of the Bennehan-Cameron House or Mary Collins tended the flowers and herbs in her garden. The sun has set on the era when slave men and women from both plantations toiled from dusk to dawn to enable the Cameron and Collins families their privileged lifestyles. Both Somerset Place Historic Site and Historic Stagville have rich histories, not only as active plantations, but also as plantation museums. But the journey to incorporate gender and race into their narratives has been a slowly unfolding one and remains incomplete. How does interpretation at these two sites present the history of southern planter women and enslaved communities today? Is the enslaved community still silenced on tours? Are planter women portrayed as “southern belles” or as managers of productive plantations? At both sites, African American history garnered more attention than women’s history. If a reason to explain historic sites’ hesitance to interpret slavery is because Americans are not comfortable with the topic, what then is the reason women remain largely left out of the interpretation at historic plantations?

Silences and Stereotypes

Not surprisingly, in the early twenty-first century, both Somerset Place and Historic Stagville provide balanced tours representative of not only the white planter families’ experiences but those of the slave communities as well. Balanced, representative tours are not

always found at southern plantation museums. Most continue to valorize a white male culture and erase or minimize white women and enslaved African Americans.

At sites typified by symbolic annihilation and erasure, interpretation mentioned slaves three times or less, and enslaved communities “are either completely absent or... mention of them is negligible, formalistic, fleeting, or perfunctory.” More than half of the sites visited by Eichstedt and Small practiced symbolic annihilation and erasure in their interpretation.

Trivialization and deflection, in contrast, refers to instances where slaves are mentioned but in humorous or mocking ways, creating a “demeaning, distorted, and trivialized understanding of slavery.” Segregated and marginalized interpretation occurred when discussions of slavery took place separately from main tours or in different parts of historic sites. Finally, only three percent of plantation museums practiced relative incorporation. Such sites make distinct efforts to incorporate information regarding slavery and slaves into their main tours. These sites “are much more likely to raise issues that disturb a positive construction of whiteness and challenge the dominant themes that each state tends to present about its own history.”¹

Where slaves are incorporated into plantation museums, they are often characterized by myths which deflect interpretation from more difficult questions about the morality of enslavement. Two types of myths exist within historic interpretations: The first is “meta-myths,” the “broadest themed myths” which “deflect public attention away from the discussion of slavery.” The second are production myths or “building blocks of meta-myths” which are

¹ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 2, 4, 107, 108, 147, 170, 204.

simple, specific statements found within interpretation. Two commonly found meta-myths at North Carolina plantation museums were “slavery did not happen here” and “slavery was unique or more humane here.” So, while plantation museums in North Carolina discuss slavery, the historical context is not always correct.²

Both Somerset Place and Historic Stagville ranked highly in Modlin’s study for their references to slavery on tour. Somerset Place mentioned slaves or slavery more than any other plantation in the state, and Stagville ranked fourth. However, Modlin did find one production myth at Stagville: the “slaves were part of the family.” A docent stated that, “Mr. Cameron had special housing built for the betterment of the slaves’ health,” but did not elaborate on how this act was less altruism than a business decision. By building better housing, fewer slaves would become ill; therefore, a cabin was an investment. By leading visitors to believe that Cameron was benevolent, the tour reinforced a meta-myth that slavery was more humane at Stagville.³ Since 2008, however, Stagville’s docents do point out Paul Cameron’s business incentives when discussing the cabins.

Arnold Modlin specifically praised “Somerset Place near Creswell, North Carolina [which] has made major changes in the way it approaches the discussion of slavery since Dorothy Redford, an African American, became the site administrator.” With Redford as a model, Modlin called for more African American involvement in historic homes: “it would be more satisfying to see real change and the potential benefits of this change, which can be brought

² Arnold E. Modlin, Jr., “Tales Told on the Tour: Mythic Representations of Slavery by Docents at North Carolina Plantation Museums,” *Southeastern Geographer* 48 (2008): 275, 276, 278.

³ *Ibid.*, 281.

about through the greater involvement of African Americans in the operation and administration of plantation sites.” They could act as advocates for the enslaved communities that once lived at the plantation sites and work to incorporate their stories into the narrative.⁴ Although at both sites, docents convey a significantly greater amount of information regarding slavery during tours of the slave quarters than during tours of the Collins Mansion or Bennehan-Cameron house, both Somerset Place and Historic Stagville relatively incorporate slavery into their interpretive narratives.

In contrast to slavery and the enslaved community as topics discussed at both sites, gender has been less evident as an interpretive category at Somerset Place and Historic Stagville. However, gender in addition to race should be used to create a more complete analysis. As historian Joan W. Scott argues, gender must be used in conjunction with race and class to create a new history, not one that simply interjects women’s stories. Historian Elsa Barkley Brown points out that recognizing a difference in race, class or gender is not enough. Rather it remains important to consider the ways in which race affect each woman’s own experiences and relationships with each other. This would be most important to remember when discussing women on plantations. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham also writes that race has the power to “preclude unity within the same gender group but often appears to solidify people of opposing economic classes.” She further argues that traditional women’s studies have “rested upon the unstated premise of racial (i.e., white) homogeneity and with this presumption proceeded to universalize ‘woman’s’ culture and oppression, while failing to see white women’s own

⁴ Ibid., 266, 284.

investment and complicity in the oppression of other groups of men and women.” Therefore, women’s historians must consider that traditionally, women’s history has centered on the history of white women. Race can therefore be used to analyze women and provide a better understanding of her experiences.⁵

Eichstedt and Small’s four categories can be used to discuss representation of women in southern plantation museums as well. Women can not be discussed at all, characterized as “southern belles, mammies or jezebels,” relegated to interpretation in kitchens or bedrooms, or smoothly interwoven into the master interpretation. For example, Somerset Place relatively incorporates women into its interpretation. Both the plantation mistress, Mary Collins, and the enslaved women are integrated into the narratives. However, the interpretation remains segregated and stereotypical at times. Historic Stagville, in contrast, interprets women in such a way that would fall between symbolic annihilation and trivialization. Either women’s specific experiences are left out of interpretation or their experience becomes distorted by emphasizing one aspect of their lives.

Arnold Modlin’s model of meta and production myths prove useful as well in a discussion of gender at plantation museums. For example, simple statements of “the plantation mistress acted as hostess” or “slaves worked in the kitchen” could possibly act as production

⁵ Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1054; Elsa Barkley Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” *Feminist Studies* 18 (summer 1992): 298-300; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17 (1992): 255.

myths. Though true, broad statements such as these could possibly deflect a full discussion of gender roles on a plantation.

Where Are the Women?

At both Somerset Place and Historic Stagville, the inclusion of women into the historic interpretation remains problematic. At the former, Mary Collins is mentioned twice in the interpretation inside the Collins house: first, in the family office, downstairs off the main hallway. Yellowed, aged family documents sit upon a table in the middle of the square room. There is a large fireplace on the far wall, and furniture lines the other walls. Books pile inside cabinets and on top of tables. In this room, Collins's role as secretary for her husband is highlighted. Planters' wives generally took care of household budgets. In fact, women typically managed plantations efficiently and innovatively.⁶ Collins managed Somerset until a stroke in 1860 left her unable to perform daily tasks. Here, Somerset does well to discuss her in what might usually be seen as male space.

The dining room provides the second venue in which Somerset Place discusses Mary Collins. Taking up nearly an entire end of the main house, the room contains two large windows that allow light to stream in through the aged blurry glass. The dining room table, which seats fourteen, is set as if guests will walk in at any minute and take their seats to begin an extravagant meal. The interpretation relates that this room was the mistress's domain. She decided what

⁶ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 21, 25. My descriptions of the tours and structures at Somerset Place and Stagville are based on personal visits made in 2009 and 2010.

would be cooked for meals, where and when it would be served, and what it would have been served on. The pleasure of her guests and her reputation were on the line every time she hosted a dinner party. To a certain degree, however, Somerset's portrayal of a plantation mistress is a production myth.⁷ By emphasizing her role as hostess, the interpretation presents a romanticized image of a gracious southern belle with stereotypical southern hospitality. Audience could be a possibility this interpretation's use. Somerset Place visitors could possibly have a greater interest in this stereotypical plantation mistress duty. While Collins did fulfill important hostess duties on the plantation, she also acted as a manager within the household—hard and demanding work that challenged the “southern belle” ideal.⁸

Charlotte Cabarrus also emerges in Somerset's interpretation. Fathered by Augustus Cabarrus, a French businessman from Edenton, and his slave Rose, Cabarrus gained her freedom from her father at birth. Hired by the Collins family to care for their six boys, Charlotte lived on the third floor of the house next to the boy's bedroom and playroom. The Collins family paid her one hundred dollars a year. Yet, while Somerset acknowledges her story, the interpretive narrative does very little with the unique role she had as a free black.

More notably segregated in the narrative are slave women who worked inside the Collins home, although there were twenty-five house slaves at any given time. Instead, representations of slave women occur outside the main house in the re-constructed slave cabins and dependencies. As part of its interpretation of slave life, Somerset incorporates general

⁷ Modlin, “Tales Told on the Tour,” 278.

⁸ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 7.

information about women into its narrative as well as anecdotes of actual slaves who worked its fields. For example, slave women woke early in the morning to clothe and feed their children, worked in the field for over ten hours a day, and returned home in the evening to care for their own home (what historian Stephanie Camp has called the slave women's "second shift"). Slave men worked at night hunting, fishing, or gathering firewood, but women's second shift demanded more cooking for the family, cleaning, making soap and candles, and washing clothes.⁹

At Somerset Place, visitors learn about the lives of Sukey Davis, Becky Drew, and the cooks, Lovie and Grace. These enslaved women are represented through themes of reproductive function, household labor and resistance. In one of the two-story slave cabins, an entire exhibit highlights the life of Sukey Davis, discussing her in terms of the number of her descendents—131 descendents by 1860. The focus, therefore, is on reproductive function. The narrative notes that after a slave woman had her first child, her value to the planter skyrocketed, making clear the business of owning slaves. Somerset Place de-bunks the myth that "slaves were part of the family," by explaining the plantation as a business.

The kitchen offers further interpretation of women. Visitors learn of the true skill and danger involved in cooking during the mid-nineteenth century. Beyond highlighting artifacts such as Dutch ovens, waffle irons, and pie safes, the small outside building testifies to the skills of Lovie and Grace. The two women cooked everything from single-pot dinners to seven-course

⁹ Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 32-33.

meals for multiple guests. The kitchen was dangerous, however: for example, women's long dresses put them at risk near open fires. Since cooking is traditionally thought of as a female activity, audiences often translate it into a safe or harmless activity. Somerset's interpretation points out the dangers of the act, successfully breaking stereotypes of female labor as easier or less dangerous than that of men on a plantation.

Becky Drew, another enslaved woman, also receives attention in the guided tour's interpretation. Drew attempted to run away from Somerset, but failed and was caught. As punishment, and in order to set an example for other slaves on the plantation the overseer placed her in the stocks. These stocks remain today and docents relate how Drew sat in the stocks so long that blood flow to her legs ceased, resulting in necessary amputation of both. According to plantation records, Drew went on to marry, bear children, and continue working on the plantation. Notorious acts of resistance or revolt are remembered as male activities, as with Nat Turner's and Denmark Vessey's slave revolts. Due to their role as mothers, fewer women than men ran to freedom in the North. However, men and women practiced other acts of resistance such as truancy or running away temporarily. Somerset shows visitors how enslaved women actively engaged in acts of defiance.¹⁰

At Somerset, women are interpretively relevant in both the Collins house and outside in the slave structures and dependencies. Still, the interpretation at times reinforces production myths. Mary Collins's duties as plantation manager remain undetailed, while her role as hostess receives emphasis. Charlotte Cabarrus gains attention as caretaker for the Collins boys, but her

¹⁰ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 36-39.

unique position in the antebellum South as a free black remains under-interpreted. Finally, the interpretation highlights Sukey Davis's reproductive role, but African American motherhood in the slave cabins goes unexplored.

Possibly more problematic is that women's relationships to each other are not discussed at all. Did house slaves have a closer relationship to Mary Collins? What type of relationship existed between Cabarrus and Collins? The interpretation segregates Somerset's women. Twenty-five slaves worked inside the house, but domestic slave women's duties are not mentioned at all in the great house, while Collins seems to have never strayed from it. Would she have ventured beyond the white fence of the "owners compound"? On some plantations, the mistress cared for slave children during the day or nursed sickly slave children if an elderly female slave was not available.¹¹ To its credit, Somerset Place does well to use race and gender to discuss the experiences of slaves and women, but the interpretation could be expanded to integrate women's roles further.

At Historic Stagville, the tour is an hour long, and visitors must drive from the Bennehan-Cameron House to the Horton Grove area to the Great Barn. Therefore, interpretation time at Stagville faces limitations that do not exist at Somerset Place.

Additionally, Stagville has worked hard to make slavery the heart of interpretation. Inside the Bennehan-Collins house, visitors gaze through the window of the Butler's Pantry and look at the hearth of the old kitchen. Behind the kitchen remains, the foundations for three

¹¹ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton and Company, 1999), 53.

domestic slave cabins stand. At this point docents relate differences between domestic and fields slaves, specifically in regards to the difficulty domestic slaves had in retaining their African heritage due to the close proximity of living with and working for the Bennehan-Cameron families. Consequently, the unique find of a cowry shell within a slave cabin foundation receives attention. Since no slaves arrived at Stagville directly from Africa, the shell must have served as a family heirloom, passed down through generations.

Such detailed emphasis on slavery leaves little interpretive space for women. Rebecca Cameron gave birth to Paul Cameron in the downstairs bedroom. Here, docents point out the loneliness of white planter women like Rebecca Collins, relating how such women did not leave the plantation to attend school like their male counterparts. Instead, the women remained behind on the secluded plantation, with little company.

But the main narrative in the house is the family's status. The parlor evidences the family's wealth through its paint, multiple windows, and a hand-cut wooden mantle. Generally, a yeoman farmer's family lived in a house the size of this one parlor in the Bennehan-Cameron house. Down the hall, inside the bright-yellow dining room, three pictures of Bennehan-Cameron men hang on the wall, each indicating the chain of title as it moved from one generation to the next. The women's memory is seldom present in this house, even in the dining room. Only in the introductory video in the Visitor's Center do the plantation's white women receive more careful attention. The video briefly delineates the experiences of the Bennehan-Cameron women, covering their loneliness as well as their duties on the isolated plantation.

At Horton Grove, visitors have access to the bottom floors of one slave cabin and the Great Barn. Typically, interpreters discuss “slaves,” using ungendered language to describe the group, and much of the discussion centers on the construction of slave cabins and architecture with a brief mention of slaves who lived inside the cabins. By discussing gender, a richer narrative will emerge. For example, the specific roles of the men and women within the slave family would add a new dimension to the current interpretation.

Women, black and white, appear in interpretations at Somerset Place and Historic Stagville in one of three ways: they are left out of interpretation, they are interpreted in gendered spaces, or they are presented in stereotypical ways. In this regard, both sites employ different tactics to both address women’s history and to ignore it. At Stagville, for example, largely ignores women at both the Bennehan-Cameron house and Horton Grove. When docents mention women—as with, Rebecca Cameron in the bedroom of the Bennehan-Cameron House—the context centers around gendered space associated with Victorian ideals surrounding womanhood and the home. At Somerset Place, the main interpretation of Mary Collins similarly takes place in gendered space—the dining room; the narrative of Charlotte Cabarrus depends upon her position as nursemaid in the children’s room; and the kitchen represents yet another gendered interpretive space.¹²

At Somerset Place, there is adequate representation of women and also there are few production myths or meta-myths. Modlin’s theory can be tweaked for the use of women’s representation. For example, a production myth can be “white plantation mistresses lived a life

¹² Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (summer 1966): 162.

of leisure.” This of course was not the case; white plantation mistresses had demanding managerial roles within the household production unit.¹³ However, Somerset Place has few production or meta-myths found in the interpretation of the site.

Neither Historic Stagville nor Somerset Place Historic Site addresses the relationship between black and white women on plantations. Given the isolation of the plantation and the loneliness of white planter women, the possibility that these women developed relationships with other women, female slaves, is worthy of consideration and interpretation. Of course, such contact differed in character from that of their male counterparts. As historian Thaviola Glymph explained, “In the kitchens, bedrooms, and parlors, where mistresses were expected to rule, no parallel division of slave management offered the kinds of buffers masters enjoyed through the employment of overseers and factors, and the use of slave drivers.” In other words, women both black and white came into closer contact daily, which could result in violence, primarily by mistresses on their slaves. The possibility of violence and white women’s privileged positions made it unlikely that slave women ever found common emotional bonds with white women.¹⁴ Though isolated at Stagville, both Rebecca and her female slaves remained distant in large part because of the institution of slavery.

¹³ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 7.

¹⁴ Thaviola Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of The Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5, 31, 49, 51

Influences on Interpretation

Current interpretations at Somerset Place and Historic Stagville demonstrate the slave communities of these once large, bustling plantations are receiving a significant portion of the interpretation. Why, however, is gender still largely left out of these sites' interpretations? Eichstedt and Small concluded that plantation museum interpretations consistently reflect the story of white male elites. One reason may be that paternalism kept slaves and white women dependent on white men, and consequently kept white women's and blacks' narratives contingent upon white men's histories. As historian Drew Faust points out, southern paternalism acted as a type of "race control, and it similarly worked to institutionalize the subordination of white women, for the master was the designated head of what he frequently characterized as his 'family white and black.'" This strong sense of patriarchy and male power in southern society influenced how women, both white and black, interacted with each other. As historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes, "Women were bound to each other in the household, not in sisterhood, but by the specific and different relations to its master." Paternalism subordinated women, influencing the type of resources left behind by southern women and shaping the type of research conducted on southern women.¹⁵ The patterns of the past limit the extent to which women have been incorporated within plantation museums' interpretations.

¹⁵ Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 4; Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 32; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 4; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 101.

Compounding the problem is a “Lost Cause” narrative that depicts southern white men as gallant heroes. This narrative largely rejects the importance of slavery to the Old South and to its historical interpretation. Similarly, the “Lost Cause” narrative diminishes women’s roles. In glorifying their ancestors, white southern women—many members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy—valorized the past “by erecting countless monuments, staging parades, preserving historic homes, surveying cemeteries, chartering organizations, naming streets, unveiling past, and establishing parks.” As historian Fitzhugh Brundage points out, this collective memory “transmits selective knowledge about the past.” White southerners created the way they wanted to remember their past, and they devised a social identity separate from the rest of the Union. “Southern white women understood how power makes historical narratives possible and silences others.” Brundage continues, “Because the collective memory promoted by white women came to be viewed as authoritative tradition, it became an instrument of power.” Similar to ways in which the women’s historic house movement of the late nineteenth century can be viewed as an extension of women’s domestic role, southern white women’s roles as “guardians of the past” provided a way for them to protect their sons, brothers, and fathers from the judgment of history. At this time, African-American communities did not possess the same resources as white southerners to erect monuments or preserve historic homes; however a separate memory existed in their oral tradition, Emancipation celebrations and school lessons.¹⁶

¹⁶ Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, And Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 2; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 4, 14-15; Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 18.

Since southern white women created the historical memory of the Old South in the years after the Civil War, it is easy to understand why stereotypes of “happy” and “content” slaves, and even the marginalization or complete dismissal of slaves, occurred. Historian Jessica Adams writes, “remembering through forgetting is not only a product of dominant culture’s ability to hide things in plain sight, . . . [but] the challenges of representing slavery in a plantation context stem from other factors in addition to white denial and disinterest.”¹⁷ The conveniences of memory created and perpetuated by these southern women endured well into the twentieth century, having a profound effect on interpretations in plantation museums.

Interestingly, white women created a historical memory in which their female ancestors remained subordinate as pampered southern belles. In fact, many plantation mistresses provided domestic labor. Historian Catherine Clinton, for example, recounts an experience from a visitor to an antebellum southern plantation in which he found his hostess working in the yard. He did not stop to greet the woman but kept walking because he had “caught his hostess behind the scenes, accidentally violating the rules by wandering backstage.” The façade that Clinton suggests was put in place by the southern planter class continued as the UDC and other white women’s groups created a memory where they had ideal yet unremarkable lives within an ideal South.¹⁸

Additionally, the origins of the historic house movement shed light on why women have been left out of interpretation. As historian Patricia West writes, “the history of the founding of Mount Vernon as a museum reveals that the preservation of historic ‘shrines’ was appealing to

¹⁷ Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 68.

¹⁸ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 7, 16-17.

conservative as well as activist women because it was consistent with women's private, domestic role." Mount Vernon, once a plantation, served as a model for other women's preservation groups and the establishment of other historic houses. But from the beginning of the historic house movement, such groups considered only the homes of elite white males worthy of saving. As a result, little room existed to discuss women or slaves whether working inside and outside the homes. Although women held an instrumental role in saving historic homes, they remained dedicated to perpetuating the story of the white men who once had resided in them.¹⁹

All of this was complicated by the dearth of scholarship on southern women. As plantation museums emerged in the South, and specifically by the time Historic Stagville and Somerset Place became North Carolina state sites in the mid-twentieth century, historians had produced little scholarship to contextualize women within public history interpretations. Although research had begun on southern women as early of the 1920s, it was not taken seriously until fifty years later. A group of five women living in North Carolina between 1927 and 1940 were pioneers in women's history. The scholarship of Virginia Gearhart Gray, Marjorie Mendenhall, Julia Cherry Spruill, Guion Griffis Johnson, and Eleanor Boatwright examined southern white women, even though women's history was not a recognized field in the early twentieth century. "Women were not deemed to be part of 'history' as it was usually defined," explains Anne Firor Scott, "People who work on invisible subjects rarely become visible themselves." Their scholarship went largely unnoticed until the "feminist revival" of the

¹⁹ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museum* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 2, 5. Adams, *Wounds of Returning*, 54.

1960s when feminist historians re-discovered this earlier research. Sadly, even among scholars, scholarship on southern women went unacknowledged as recently as forty years ago, a sentiment that perhaps continues to influence interpretation.²⁰

Not only did a lack of scholarship and lack of appreciation for women influence interpretation, but audiences remain a factor as well. Some visitors travel to historic sites to learn the “true” history of a given historical period; other visitors desire a certain level of entertainment. People who come to historic sites have varying interests, and while some may have a genuine interest in the slave community, others are more interested in period furnishings. Many simply do not want to confront interpretation that is uncomfortable. As Eichstedt and Small discovered, some historic homes cater to visitors and avoid negative aspects of history. Many tours “construct an image of the preemancipation life of white enslavers in the South as honorable, refined, gracious, beauty-loving people.” Eichstedt and Small found “it is only when sites work to incorporate discussions of enslavement that the pretty picture gets disturbed. It is no wonder, then that the primary ways that enslavement is discussed serve to erase, minimize, or trivialize the fact and experience of slavery.”²¹ Insufficient scholarship, ignorance of the truth, and lack of audience interest all influence the information found on tours at plantation museums.

²⁰ Anne Firor Scott, ed., *Unheard Voices: The First Historians of Southern Women* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 1, 58.

²¹ James Oliver Horton, “Slavery in American History,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Louis E. Horton (New York: The New Press, 2006), 36; Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 101.

Marginalized by Myths

Despite our deep understanding of the realities of plantation culture and regardless of the historical evidence, we cling to the comfortable familiarity of stereotypes. The actual experience of men and women, black or white, under southern slavery bears small relation to either idyllic or the torrid tables of life on the plantation as it has been projected in myth, legend, and folklore. The American popular imagination has proved tenaciously fond of its failed stepchild, the Old South.²²

As Catherine Clinton relates, it is no surprise certain stereotypes have formed as a result of the memory constructed by elite white women in the late nineteenth-century and the desire today to construct an agreeable history that does not offend. Romanticized ideas of moonlight and magnolias are what many Americans imagine in the history of the American South. Perhaps, the film most responsible for pushing this image into American minds is the 1939 blockbuster *Gone with the Wind*. The movie continues as part of the cultural landscape of America due to its iconic characters and repeated showings on television. The character of Scarlett O'Hara dominates the popular image of the Old South and remains "the quintessential southern belle."²³ While O'Hara in actuality does not fit the typical image of a southern belle, other iconic characters in the movie like Melanie Wilkes, Scarlett's sisters, Aunty Pitty, Mammy, and Prissy iconize the image of southern belles and southern slave women. Wilkes is depicted as constantly being weak and lacking O'Hara's spirit. She is also dependent upon her husband, Ashley and ignores the flirtation between Scarlett and Ashley. Scarlett's sisters and Aunt Pitty are pictured as needy, dependent, and concerned with simple things such as beaux, dresses, and china.

²² Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 223.

²³ Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, And Forgotten*, 45; Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1.

O'Hara is appealing, however, because historically the "belle" represents the years of courtship for white planter women. Once married, women became inundated with pregnancies, managing households, and raising children. Very often, these young women led pampered lives in the homes of their parents and found themselves unprepared for the challenges of managing plantations on their own. Therefore, it is no surprise that the period of a woman's life remembered in popular culture is one that women viewed as a brief yet bright stage of their lives.²⁴

The image of the southern belle continues in celebrations today. Every April since 1948, Wilmington, North Carolina celebrates the beauty of spring during the annual Azalea Festival—a celebration that includes concerts, displays, tours of gardens, and "Azalea Belles," incorporated into the garden tours in 1969. The Belles dress in hoop-skirt antebellum dresses and act as hostesses. Today, over a hundred young women participate as belles, each sponsored by a member of the Cape Fear Garden Club or the Azalea Belle Committee. Youth, dress, hospitality, and rank in society continue as trademarks of the stereotypical southern belle.²⁵

These ideals of the southern belle—dependence and hospitality—are found in the presentations of Rebecca Cameron and Mary Collins. Somerset Place emphasizes Cameron's loneliness suggesting her dependence on her brother and then her husband, and portraying her as a stereotypical southern belle who was needy and dependent. Mary Collins's portrayal as a

²⁴ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 61-62, 118; Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Legend*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 43.

²⁵ North Carolina Azalea Festival, "Azalea Belles," <http://www.ncazaleafestival.org/AboutUs/Belles/tabid/70/Default.aspx> (accessed January 2, 2010).

hostess emulates the stereotypical idea of the southern matron, exuding hospitality to her neighbors and guests.

Stereotypes also plague historical interpretation of slave women. The “mammy” arose from domestic slaves who worked inside the planter’s home and cared for the planter’s children. In *Gone with the Wind*, Hattie McDowell epitomized the stereotypical Mammy, acting in almost a motherly role to Scarlett. Mammy represents a positive relationship between whites and blacks, an ideal constructed during the antebellum period by white southerners in response to attacks by anti-slavery groups. Some attribute the resilience of this stereotype to black women’s continued roles as caretakers for white children.²⁶

Interpretation of Charlotte Cabarrus of Somerset Plantation exemplifies the stereotypical idea of mammy. Hired by the Collins to care for their six boys, Cabarrus fits the role of black caregiver to white children. Although free, she lived in the home with the Collins boys to provide constant care. She continued to live with the Collins family for thirty years, well after the boys had grown, signifying a strong relationship between herself and the family.²⁷

The “Jezebel” was another image of black women. A creation of white southerners as well, the Jezebel “legitimated the wanton behavior of white men by proclaiming black women to be lusty wenches in whom sexual impulse overwhelmed all restraint,” as Fox-Genovese explained. Very often slave women found themselves victims of sexual exploitation by their white masters who justified this act through their “ownership” of the woman’s body. Whites

²⁶ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 201-202, 292; Adams, *Wounds of Returning*, 70; White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* 47.

²⁷ “Somerset Place Historic Site Interpretation, Long Orientation” (Creswell, NC, 2003), 5.

believed that African American women were naturally promiscuous and enjoyed sexual relations with masters.²⁸

Although neither of the historic sites discusses possible relations between masters and female slaves, similarities exist between the image of the Jezebel and Sukey Davis. By 1860, Davis had 131 descendants on Somerset Plantation. While slave women with many children may have been viewed as having little restraint on their sexual impulses, the lack of reliable birth control more fully accounts for large numbers of descendants. As constructed white southern memory has translated into public history narratives; the stereotypes have survived.

²⁸ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 292, 325-26; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* 29, 38.

Conclusion

A majority of Americans believe museums and historic sites provide the most accurate and true historical information.¹ It is the job of public historians to strive to tell “the complex and contradictory national story in public spaces.”² Since women, white and black, were integral actors in American history, their continued marginalization and even neglect in public history narratives is puzzling. If public historians continually fail to incorporate women’s voices and women’s stories into interpretation, false assumptions and popular myths concerning women’s roles will continue to exist, diluting the true and rich history of women of all races.

In recent years, African Americans have received increased attention within the interpretation found at plantation museums. However, the interpretation can evolve further by incorporating issues of gender. Historic Stagville offers an example of a general interpretation of slavery; however, gender could be employed to discuss more specific examples and experiences. Overall, Somerset Place Historic Site offers a balanced interpretation of the Collins family and the slave community while also highlighting specific women. However, more interpretation could be included on the life of Mary Collins.

Very often white women are mentioned briefly, discussed in stereotypical ways or gendered spaces. By expanding the interpretation to include more of white women’s experiences

¹ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 21.

² James Oliver Horton, “Slavery in American History,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Louis E. Horton (New York: The New Press, 2006), 36.

a better understanding of plantation life would emerge. Somerset Place does well to discuss Mary Collins in the office and her duty as bookkeeper. While Stagville points out the loneliness felt by Rebecca Cameron while she lived on the isolated plantation, however, the loneliness implies a sense of idleness and dependence. Again, interpretations should be broadened to fully discuss Rebecca Cameron's duties as plantation mistress.

Finally, African American women on plantations held dual roles within the plantation community. In the slave quarters these women filled the role of mother, wife, sister, daughter and the duties that went with each while also being responsible for their own plantation work during the day. Their unique position should not be oversimplified within a broad interpretation. As Higginbotham points out, the history of women's studies has at times viewed gender to be the same for white and black women. Gender assumptions for white women are transferred to black women. However, she writes historians must consider what gender means for different races. Therefore, slave women experienced implications of gender differently in the slave community than white women in the plantation home.³

As discussion of the slave community continues to increase and improve at southern plantation museums the interpretation of women continues to be mentioned briefly or in stereotypical ways. In so doing, the importance of both black and white women's role on the plantation remains secondary to that of white men. Therefore, the paternalism found on plantations in the antebellum period continues to exist in the twenty-first century.

³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (1992): 255.

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