Antebellum Women in North Carolina

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by Victoria E. Bynum

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Enslaved and Free Black Women

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Women in the Planter Class

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Women in the Poor White Class

In truth, these images are simplistic, exaggerated, and largely imaginary, and they are true for only a few women. The images ignore the experiences of enslaved women, who enabled them to fulfill their responsibilities and duties. Lucy strived to be good to her slaves, and respected their knowledge about crops and livestock, which was often greater than her own.

Although upper-class white women and enslaved women shared the same world, their lives differed enormously. Lucy, for example, sometimes weared of enslaved women's refusal to work at the pace she desired. Other mistresses expressed outright contempt for their slaves. Catherine Devereux Edmondston, for example, accused hers of malingering in order to be assigned housework instead of fieldwork. She readily accepted the concept of "proper station" in life, believing that women of African descent were expected to work from sunup to sundown in cotton fields, while white women like herself were intended to care for dahlias, make blackberry wine, or decorate elaborate cakes for family celebrations.

Enslaved and Free Black Women

This image is from the time period, but isn't necessarily from the South or the U.S. By 1865 the Civil War had raged for four agonizing years, sapping the energy and resources of the South. But it was soon to end. From April 17 to April 26, 1865, Nancy Bennett, an ordinary North Carolina farm woman, and her husband, James, provided the setting for Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston to negotiate his surrender to Union general William T. Sherman.

Nancy and her husband owed their participation in this important historic event to pure chance and their location near Durham's Station, between Hillsborough, and Raleigh. Their "nice farm," with its "oak-shaded fence" and "fine green lawn," perhaps suggested a return to antebellum "normalcy" for the war-weary generals. Whatever the reason, their request to meet on the Bennett's land allows us a rare glimpse into the life of an otherwise obscure farm woman, and how she lived in the years before the war.

Usually, women of the wealthier planter class from this period in history command our attention. Novels and movies provide us with views of women in the antebellum South who are graceful, charming "belles"—attending barbecues, county fairs, and cotillion balls until marriage transforms them into plantation mistresses.

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Women in the Poor White Class

Unlike yeoman farm women, who worked to support themselves or to assist in supporting their families, women in the poor white class lived in households where no property was owned and where economic circumstances forced them to work at options. Like spinsters (women who never married), young widows were often forced by societal pressures and beliefs of the time to live with relatives.

Women in the Planter Class

Plunder women such as Lucy Martin Battle, the wife of state supreme court justice William H. Battle, often fulfilled two roles. First, they were household managers. Lucy primarily kept accounts of the family's food and clothing supplies and planned and hosted the many social events required by people of the Battles' upper-class rank. Plunder women also filled the role of plantation mistress, overseeing the labor of the enslaved persons who enabled them to fulfill their responsibilities and duties. Lucy strived to be good to her slaves. She granted them holidays, recognized their family ties, and respected their knowledge about crops and livestock, which was often greater than her own.

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Soba, Okinawa. "The Black Nanny." In addition to shouldering heavy workloads, enslaved women became wives and mothers, though under vastly different circumstances than white women. North Carolina courts did not recognize slave marriages as legal, nor did they protect slave families from being broken apart by their masters.

Even in slaveholding households with humane masters, the laws of slavery created dilemmas for enslaved women. For example, Sarah, a "Louisburg slave," "married" James Boon, a free black who traveled the state seeking work as a carpenter. Though she and her husband could not share a private home, Sarah’s owners permitted the couple to maintain a cabin, garden, and livestock on her master’s plantation. These slaveholders sometimes allowed Sarah to visit James on the road, and they even permitted the couple’s young, enslaved son to travel the state with his free father.

Despite the relative generosity of Sarah’s owners, the realities of slavery—ultimately governed her life. She missed her husband and her son terribly during their long absences from the plantation, in a letter to James, she wrote, “Give my love to my son and tell him I hope he is doing well and attends preaching regularly.” In another, she expressed concern that her husband might be sick and in need of her care. Living together, she wrote, would “be a greater prize [sic] to me than all the money you could make.” Perhaps because of the difficulty of building a stable, intimate relationship with an enslaved wife, James eventually left Sarah and legally married a free black woman. The ease with which he did so is evidence of Sarah’s powerlessness. That Sarah, and even her slaveholders, saw her marriage with James as valid meant nothing in a court of law.

*At the time this article was written, Victoria E. Bynum was a professor of history at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas.

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Bynum, Victoria E.

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