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The Future of the African American Past

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Seeing History Whole

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Inspired by Alex Haley's *Roots*, in 1977 I began a life-altering journey to identify my enslaved ancestors. By 1983, my research led me to Somerset Place plantation. The former antebellum plantation had become a tax-supported, racially segregated, recreation themed state park in 1939 and a de facto segregated North Carolina State Historic Site in 1969. I arrived clutching an 1826 Bill of Sale naming and transferring ownership of twenty-five of my Littlejohn ancestors to Josiah Collins—one of the wealthiest planters in the state of North Carolina. Only the circa 1830s fourteen-room planter's home was open to the visiting public. There I was offered the standard industry-wide all-encompassing and all too familiar elitist white male "**He**" interpretive tour. **He** cleared and cultivated the land; **He** built his "mansion-house"; **He** married and had six sons and provided them a very posh and privileged lifestyle. **He** was devastated by the outcome of the Civil War and died broke and broken hearted. End of story. Remarkably, the teen tour-guide never uttered the word "slave" or for that matter the broadly accepted euphemism "servant". A small cot tucked away in a corner of the Butler's Pantry was described as where the **"hired girl"** slept. Five extant 19th Century domestic dependencies, which would have been the domain of enslaved domestic

workers, were in varying stages of disrepair and closed to the visiting public. Off in a distant field, but not acknowledged during the tour, was an 8 x 12 sign that said "Site of Slave Quarters". Despite extensive published biographies, including Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass, and the proliferation of scholarship by historians including John Hope Franklin, Eugene D. Genovese, Herbert G. Gutman, Kenneth M. Stampp, and many others documenting the plantation life of enslaved families, there existed an institutional unwillingness to recognize the importance of African Americans in the history of the United States. By the time I left that day, holding fast to the Bill of Sale naming my enslaved ancestors, I had fully internalized the line from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* **"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."**

When unfettered options exist in shaping representations of the nation's history of human chattel slavery, we often choose, or for that matter manufacture, a story-line that conforms to and illuminates our personal biases. At Somerset Place and similar plantation sites across the South, an industry-wide **option** had been exercised to render invisible slavery's ugly stain and slavery's victims "to all generations."

By 1986 I had documented the lineage of every enslaved family from Somerset Place through the first generation born free and published my findings in *Somerset's Slave Community: An Antebellum Genealogical Study.* With proof of lineage in hand the State of North Carolina gave permission for a *little* family reunion on the grounds. As it happened, around 2,500 folks came—some from as far away as Sierra Leone. Included were descendants of enslaved people, descendants of the former slave owners, and others who wanted to be a part of such a historic event—including Alex Haley. On that day, one elderly gentleman spoke power to truth. He carefully walked through all fourteen rooms of the Collins Family Home, stopping only to inspect the impressive craftsmanship of the structure. When he finished his inspection, he stood proudly and announced, "**We** did right good work". He had fully embraced the history of his ancestors and claimed Somerset Place as his own. The event, called a "Homecoming", garnered international front-page news coverage. NBC, CBS, ABC, and CNN sent camera crews and reporters. That

broad media coverage gave previously ignored visibility to the enslaved men, women and children who lived, worked and died at Somerset Place through the proud and engaging faces of their progeny. The Honorable Clarence W. Blount, a descendant and Majority Leader of the Maryland State Senate, wrote ". . . I have always been proud of who I am. But now. . . I have found a new appreciation of from whence I have come. And, a new vision of where I, and we as a people, must go. But, now, I know why we must go" (1.)

In 1988, I accepted an offer of employment at Somerset Place made by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. The departmental objective was to tap into the African American tourism market. Within two years I became the manager of Somerset Place. My specific and limited charge when hired was to continue *(forever)* organizing annual family oriented "Homecoming" events—warm-n-fuzzy, highly entertaining, song and dance, one day festivals. The department's stated long-range plan was to one day build a state-of-the-art visitor center with some exhibits exclusively dedicated to telling the story of slavery. That would cover any and all obligations the department felt should be included on African American history without even slightly altering the core institutional interpretation of the site—which in 1988 still focused on the elitist white male "**He**" house tour. However, lessons learned during the Civil Rights Movement should have conveyed to policy makers that expected automatic deference and acceptance of status-quo representations of African American history and culture, like slavery itself, had passed irrevocably into history. As noted philosopher Will Durant put it, "Yes, I'm a devotee of perspective, an addict of integration, I want to see things whole."(2) My obligation to the past and to future generations was to eliminate the state's **option** of ignoring the existence of over 800 enslaved men, women and children who once lived on the plantation—400 of whose bodies are interred on the grounds. Despite implementation delays and suggestive threats accompanying the doggedly uncompromising administrative resistance to the very concept of mainstreaming and painting the history of slaveholders and enslaved people on one canvas, I **knew** that reconstructing permanent representative homes and other relevant structures in the former slave' community was the only logical strategy to eliminate permanently the option of

"symbolic annihilation" or erasure of people enslaved on the plantation. (3) And that would be my singular goal.

Thus began a fifteen year journey, guided by my personal affirmation: "When your purpose is noble—when your goals benefit mankind—all that you need to achieve them will be available to you." Among the resources available to me were local legislators who voted for funding at every step in the process. Also available to me was a stunning array of historians, archaeologists, and non-profit volunteers. Today, after many seasons of funding, research, restoration and reconstruction, Somerset Place has historical legitimacy. Visitors now see history whole and find integrity and intelligence in the site's interpretive program. They embrace the humanity of people once only known as "slaves." Inside the reconstructed Sucky Davis Home they are introduced to an enslaved grandmother, see images of her grand-children and learn how she struggled to balance all of life's challenges and demands. At Judy and Lewis Home they hear the story of a woman named Duko. She was brought to the plantation along with seventy-nine of her country men directly from Africa in 1786. In the plantation hospital, they understand the economic aspects of slavery. The hospital was used predominantly to protect the planter's human inventory by isolating people with communicable diseases. They see the archaeological remains of the chapel where children went every morning and were assured that obedience to their earthly master pleased their heavenly Master. Adding to the realistic portrait of life at Somerset are the stocks and archaeological remains of the jail. Visitors now tour the once off-limits restored kitchen/laundry, dairy, and other domestic dependencies. At the planter's home they no longer experience the elitist white male **He** tour. Instead, they learn how the Collinses balanced all of life's privileges. According to historian, Peter Wood, "Somerset Place has effectively changed the interpretive paradigm: one of the largest antebellum plantations in North Carolina is now a remarkable site used to educate citizens about the social history of African Americans and whites in North Carolina." At Somerset Place a paradigm shift occurred that moved the interpretation of

history from exclusivity to inclusivity; from invisibility to visibility; from the historically anemic "**He"** tour to the community narrative and historically integrated **"We"** tour.

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(1) 9/25/86 Letter from Clarence W. Blount to Dorothy Spruill Redford
(2) Will Durant, *The Mansions of Philosophy,* Simon and Schuster*, 1929 (*Page 306)
(3) Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small *Representations of Slavery, Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington 2002 (106-107)