

If old walls could talk

Researcher sheds light on life of Drayton Hall slaves

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The spiral service stairwell in the center of the main house at Drayton Hall symbolizes the relationship between the black and white residents in the plantation's early days, the director of the African-American studies at the College of Charleston says.

Slaves were the majority at Drayton Hall in the late 1700s and early 1800s and essential to the plantation's operation, Bernard Powers said. But like the stairway, they were hidden from view in the main house.

Powers, who is researching slave experiences on the plantation, presented some of his early findings to the public Thursday at Drayton Hall on S.C. Highway 61.

Through his research, Powers said he hopes to dispel misconceptions about the lives of slaves at Drayton Hall.

He's scouring the diary of plantation owner Charles Drayton, who kept a detailed record of life there from 1784 until his death in 1820. Drayton, born in 1743, was the son of John Drayton, who originally built Drayton Hall.

Powers said Charles Drayton's diary is mostly about planting and transportation between the Draytons' many South Carolina and Georgia plantations. But through his accounts about the daily operation of the plantation, it's possible to glean information about what life was like for people enslaved there.

A common misconception, Powers said, is that "a plantation was like a concentration camp, very regimented." But enslaved people had more free time than most people think.

They had a life and culture of their own, he said. "It's not true that enslaved people were nothing more than extensions of the people who owned them," he said.

Slaves who lived and worked at Drayton Hall during the plantation's early years weren't always under the watchful eye of an overseer, he said.

Powers, whose research is funded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said that so far, he's been most surprised to learn that the Drayton slaves were very mobile. The family owned a network of plantations and slaves were often moved from one of the family's properties to another when labor needs changed, he said.

He also said that many slaves worked on the family's boats, so they frequently left the plantation. "They wouldn't always run when they got to the boundary of the plantation," he said.

Slaves more often used more passive methods of resistance, Powers said, such as not showing up for work or sabotaging property or agricultural projects.

Another misconception, he said, is that slave owners attempted immediately to convert slaves to Christianity. There was, in fact, no large-scale conversion effort until about 1820, Powers said.

That's because early on, some slave owners thought, "conversion might require emancipation," he said.

Eventually, many slaves did become Christian, he said, but they still had African traditions. "It was an African brand of Christianity," he said.

Kristine Morris, spokeswoman for Drayton Hall, said Powers' research would likely be folded into the plantation's tours and education programs.

Powers said his current phase of research looks at the lives of slaves through about 1820. But he plans to continue the work, he said. "I'd like to take the story up to the great migration in the early 20th Century," he said.

"We can use Drayton Hall as the jumping off point to understand the larger slave experience," Powers said.

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On the Web

To find out about Drayton Hall's history, research and preservation, go to www.draytonhall.org.