RECONSTRUCTING SOMERSET PLACE:
SLAVERY, MEMORY AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
History in the Graduate School
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2008
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In the century and a half since Emancipation, slavery has remained a central topic at Somerset Place, a plantation-turned-state historic site in northeastern North Carolina, and programmers and audiences have thought about and interpreted it in many different ways. When North Carolina’s Department of Archives and History first adopted the former plantation into its Historic Sites System in 1967, Somerset was dedicated to memorializing the planter, Josiah Collins III; the enslaved rarely made it into the site’s narrative at all, and if they did it was as objects rather than subjects. In the final decades of the twentieth century, Somerset Place began to celebrate the lives of the 850 slaves who lived and worked at the plantation during the antebellum era, framing their history as a story about kinship, triumph and reconciliation. Both versions of the story—as well as the many other stories that the site has told since the end of slavery in 1865—require careful historical analysis and critique.

This dissertation considers Somerset’s history and varying interpretations since the end of Reconstruction. It examines the gradual invention of Somerset Place State Historic Site in order to explore the nature and implications of representations of slavery, and the development of Americans’ historical consciousness of slavery during their nation’s long transition into freedom. It employs manuscript sources; oral histories and interviews; public documents, records and reports; and material artifacts in order to trace Somerset’s gradual shift from a site of agricultural production to one of cultural
representation, situated within North Carolina’s developing public history programming and tourism industry. This research joins a rich body of literature that addresses southern history, epistemology, memory, and politics. It is comparative: it sets two centuries side by side, excavating literal cause-and-effect—the ways in which the events of the nineteenth century led to those of the twentieth—and their figurative relationship, the dialectical play between the ante- and post-bellum worlds. By examining the ways twentieth-century Americans employed the antebellum era as an intellectual and cultural category, this dissertation sheds light on slavery’s diverse legacies and the complexity of living with collective historical traumas.
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Acknowledgments

As an historian, I’m tempted to go back to the beginning to thank all of the people whose cumulative efforts over the last 35 years allowed me to produce this dissertation. But since that would result in acknowledgments longer than the text of the work itself, a few highlights will have to suffice.

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I wrote most of this dissertation away from North Carolina, from a different country on the opposite side of the continent. As such, I relied on thorough long-distance help from three research assistants who retrieved documents at the State Archives in Raleigh: Caitlin Donnelly, Matt Vernon and Lindsey Hinds-Brown.

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my father taught me by example that the personal really is political, I am a feminist because of my mother, Dr. Carol Herbert. Her work as a scholar/mother/clinician/activist imprinted on me long before I had any idea that my life might, in any way, mirror hers. I thank her especially for providing invaluable and uniquely diverse support during this project: she baby-sat daily while I wrote the first draft of chapter 4; read and commented on this dissertation—as snippets of chapters, conference papers, and in its entirety—more than once; and answered numerous pleas for all kinds of advice. And it was a conversation with her in the summer of 2001 that pushed me to begin this project. I hope she will see as much humor as I do in the fact that her admonition to “lighten up” was the origin of my research question.

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ways I can scarcely describe. She, like her sister before, is a gift. My relationship with
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paces and I thank him for his patience, love, generosity and unending faith. We are
partners in every sense of the word. Paul, I love you.
Introduction

Slavery, Antebellum Plantations and Epistemology

The politics of the past is no trivial academic game; it is an integral part of every people’s earnest search for a heritage essential to autonomy and identity.¹

How a person thinks about...slavery historically makes a great deal of difference here and now; it tends to locate him morally in relation to a whole range of very immediate political, social, and philosophical issues which in some way refer back to slavery.²

A rag doll lies on the bed in the corner of the reconstructed slave cabin. The doll has no legs; its torso simply squares off at the bottom, with long arms sloping out from each side. When I toured Somerset Place State Historic Site, a representative antebellum plantation on the shore of Lake Phelps in northeastern North Carolina, the guide told us that dolls like this once belonged to children who worked there as slaves. She suggested that the doll’s missing legs represented the children’s lack of freedom.³

There is no way for an individual visitor to Somerset to know what this doll actually meant to the children who may have played with it. But this nagging inability to know is eclipsed by the impact of the guide’s story, which makes the legless doll a poignant metaphor for all of Somerset’s enslaved children.

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³ The doll which now rests on the bed of the small slave cabin at Somerset is a replica of a doll originally found at Stagville Plantation in Durham, North Carolina. When I toured Somerset in September 2003 and April 2004, guides pointed out that it is representative of the dolls that children at Somerset would have played with as well.
Objects like the rag doll can be assigned many different meanings, which in turn perform many different functions. For me, standing in the cabin, looking at the doll on the bed, and following the guided imagery of children playing on the bare wooden floor, the doll metaphor spoke to the ways that slavery permeated every aspect of plantation life, right down to how children played. It functioned as a tool pushing toward the site’s main goal: to emphasize the slaves’ lives and experiences in order to show how they confronted the constraints of slavery, and how their skills, their knowledge, and their labor were central to the success of the antebellum South.

This goal is evident in the structure of Somerset’s exhibits beyond the slave cabin. Within the planter’s mansion, the romantic centerpiece of most plantation museums, there is no shortage of the material possessions that tourists seeking to glimpse the antebellum splendor of popular imagination crave. But luxurious details and decorations, such as long oak tables, fine china dinnerware and crystal candlesticks are positioned alongside the sparse furnishings of a nursemaid’s small upstairs bedroom; and tales of the planter’s white children playing in the well-appointed nursery across the hall are recounted as part of a story about the life of the black woman who cared for and raised them. Before entering the mansion, visitors first encounter a range of other spaces either fully refurbished or marked at their foundations—including a kitchen, storehouses, a hospital, and several cabins—that were once workplace, refuge and home for the slaves who did the majority of the plantation’s labor. Entry to Somerset’s grounds is marked by
stocks, reconstructed at the site of their original foundations, in which enslaved people were held as punishment for disobeying the plantation’s rules and regulations.⁴

Presently, Somerset Place differs from most of the other southern plantations that have become historic attractions, which revise African-American and poor white people out of the historical record altogether, or segregate history into dichotomous and reductive narratives of ‘white’ and ‘black.’⁵ Unlike interpretations at most other places, at Somerset there are no denials of slavery through euphemistic references to ‘servants’ or apologetic claims that the owners, the Collinses, were ‘good’ masters. Instead, Somerset positions slavery and the enslaved at the front and center of all its exhibits and interprets the story of an antebellum community through the voices of white and black, owner and worker, rich and poor. But Somerset only began to tell this story in the late 1980s. This dissertation asks what it was like before that and precisely when, why and how Somerset Place became the site it is today. It offers an historical critique of Somerset’s varying interpretations within the context of North Carolina’s developing public history programming and tourism industry, and in the process, it explores the nature and implications of representations of slavery during the state’s long transition into freedom.


The development of Somerset Place State Historic Site provides an intriguing case study of changes in North Carolinians’ historical consciousness of slavery. Over the course of one hundred years, Somerset evolved from one of the largest working plantations in the state to a state historic site dedicated to memorializing its antebellum planter, Josiah Collins III. When the Department of Archives and History first adopted Somerset into its Historic Sites system in 1967, the enslaved rarely made it into the site’s narrative at all. But over another quarter of a century, Somerset developed interpretations of slavery, plantation society and the antebellum South that set new precedents for how to represent these subjects in public spaces, especially plantation museums.

By developing new interpretations that celebrated the lives of the 850 slaves who had lived and worked at the plantation, programmers at Somerset broke a popular trend set by proponents of the Lost Cause in the years after Reconstruction, who designed monuments and public historic sites to sanitize America’s history of slavery and racism and to commemorate a romanticized image of the southern past. In the 1880s, elite white southerners led the effort to rethink the region’s past and envision an Old South that would explain and justify the existence of the New. They developed an ideology that recast the antebellum period in nostalgic, heroic terms which allowed white southerners to simultaneously celebrate a war they had lost, reunite with the victorious North without feeling as though they were capitulating, and imagine a prosperous and newly powerful
Their primary strategy was to “use history”—to preserve structures and stories that seemed to embody the grace and nobility at the core of their vision of the Old South—to redefine and bolster their position in a region in social and economic flux.⁷

Lost Cause ideology has been remarkably persistent and become increasingly common over the past century, adapting and moving far beyond the original circles of social elites and historic preservationists. A range of people have come to regard the antebellum past as a powerful intellectual category, and used it to shape a master narrative of southern history based on the notion that real history—history worth

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remembering—was made before the Civil War. At Somerset Place, successive
generations drawn from various parts of the population—white people of all classes,
African Americans including the descendants of slaves, government bureaucrats,
politicians, academics, and more—have all tried to tie the site back in to the antebellum
past, to justify their presence there based on its relationship to what they understand as its
most ‘authentic’ period.

In all of Somerset’s various iterations, the site’s express goal has always been to
serve as a monument to aspects of the antebellum era. Its twentieth-century story thus
highlights the continuing and adaptive power of ideas about the antebellum South, and
offers a chance to examine central questions about history, memory and representation,
and how these activities intersect with economic, political and cultural trends.  

Investigating how Somerset’s meaning has changed over time helps in understanding
historical consciousness as an epistemological issue: how do people define what counts
as ‘historical’? How do they narrate the history they sense around them, and how do they
interpret its relevance and connect it to the important events and ideas in their daily lives?

By studying Somerset I explore the interactions between groups of people and a setting

8 Walter Benjamin cautions, “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty
time, but time filled by the presence of the now….” It is crucial to examine the details of each ‘time’ and
how all the various twentieth-century interpretive ‘presents’ were related to the nineteenth-century past.
display in a museum may simply be telling a story, but the existence of a museum has a story to tell.” The
“If the meaning of a historical fact is not intrinsic but changes with context, then public historians can
investigate the successive contexts created by the author, by institutions of communication, and by
audiences, tracing the social organization of knowledge about the past in particular settings.” David
they have understood as ‘historically significant,’ and consider the ways in which they lived with historical evidence and worked themselves into history’s remains. 9

Intellectually and practically, Somerset Place has long played a powerful role in the state of North Carolina. It was built in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to be a slave plantation but in the aftermath of abolition, when its concrete purpose was gone, narration and nostalgia about its so-called ‘golden years’ of 1830-1860 continued to give it meaning. Long before it became an official state historic site it was already significant to white people trying to refashion their identity in the wake of the war, trying to create a narrative of antebellum slave society that made its experience and its destruction more bearable. For African Americans, Somerset had a different kind of power. From the moment of Emancipation, it had a power so strong that most worked hard to shield themselves from it until much later, after several free generations had established themselves so that their ancestral past no longer had to conjure immediate images of degradation and victimization. 10

9 For a rich discussion of popular uses of history, see Raphael Samuel, Theatres of Memory (London: Verso, 1994).

The dominant notion in the public statements of the descendants of Somerset’s slaves—and the dominant analysis of their words among those who have spoken with them—is that until the late 1980s, they were too ashamed to talk about the plantation and slavery. I attempt in this dissertation to understand and find the source of that shame, but there is also likely another story about their historical relationship with Somerset Place, which remains mostly unexamined. There may be other explanations for what has appeared to be their silence on the subject of the plantation and their ancestors’ enslavement, including the possibility that, over time, they found ways to talk and think about the past that did, in fact, confront slavery, but that most observers—especially those outside the circle of descendants—were never intended to understand. If this is the case, my hope is that further research, particularly interviews with a wider sampling of descendants, will complicate the dominant ‘shame’ analysis. Although I try as often as possible in this dissertation to infer what the scholar James Scott might call former slaves’ and descendants’ “hidden transcripts,” I am compelled to focus on the evolution of dominant memories and uses of Somerset Place not because those memories and uses are more significant—this is by no means the argument I would make—but because, for the time being, a lack of evidence preempts definitive analysis of anything else.11

11 James Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). For particularly helpful applications of Scott’s formulation, see Tera Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after The Civil War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Robin D.G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: The Free Press, 1994). According to Brundage, for decades, African Americans’ “counternarrative was either ignored by whites or was largely invisible to them.” The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 10. It is possible that former slaves were more forthcoming about slavery, and less hemmed in my feelings of shame, than some of their descendants have been. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau and Steven Miller’s edited volume, Remembering
In the meantime, it seems from available evidence that Somerset Place has consistently symbolized both white and black people’s pleas to versions of the antebellum past that might bring some comfort in contested presents. Even as the antebellum era receded further and further into the chronological past, it has remained central to contemporary quests for self-definition. Self-definition—the ways in which various groups of southerners have tried over time to shape their regional and national identities—is a major theme in southern historiography, and I address it by asking questions about the relationship between Somerset’s historical reconstructions, social memory and historical consciousness: what has it meant for black and white southerners in the twentieth century to make claims to Americaanness through physical reconstructions of antebellum slavery and plantation life? Why might various groups

*Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences with Slavery and Freedom* (New York: The New Press, 1998) provides some clues into this history. While I would hesitate to generalize their analysis to former Somerset slaves, Berlin, et al., offer thoughtful discussion of how freedpeople interviewed by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s remembered slavery. (Only one former Somerset slave was ever interviewed; a brief transcript is the only concrete, firsthand evidence of what the enslaved there thought of the plantation and their masters. See Transcript, Uriah Bennett interview, May 1937. North Carolina State Archives, Farm Security Administration papers.) They suggest that former slaves were eager to talk about slavery, though the stories they told had significant variation: “Some interviewees preferred not to dredge up painful memories, much less share them with a white interviewer. Others answered in vague generalities that owed at least as much to their suspicions about the questioners as to the dimness of their recollections. A common pattern was to characterize their own treatment under slavery as benign, while describing that of neighboring slaves as brutal” (xix-xx). Overall, they argue, “From the start, the former slaves’ recollections of slavery focused on the last years of the institution” (xliii). “In conveying the history of slavery to their own children and grandchildren,” they write, “they also emphasized their own part in the drama of emancipation—partly because those stories were the ones their descendants wanted most to hear and partly because they were the ones the ex-slaves themselves wanted most to tell. Slavery’s memory thus became increasingly short-term, with the direct, personal confrontations with slaveholders in the foreground” (xliv). By the Depression era, former slaves viewed “bondage as a prelude to freedom and all its possibilities—both fulfilled and unfulfilled” and “remembered slavery as a trial they had persevered through, as a condition they had (in Booker T. Washington’s metaphor) come up from” (xlv). But by the 1950s, when the first researchers began trying to speak with descendants, forthcoming attitudes seem to have disappeared, replaced by resistance and obfuscation. At least for Somerset descendants, the situation seemed to get worse before it got better in the late 1980s.
have wanted to do this? What does the recent phenomenon of the plantation museum tell us about the ways a sense of history shapes discourses of politics and power? How do plantation museums like Somerset both create and grapple with contradictory images of southern distinctiveness, and the South as American?12

Somerset’s history offers a window into the process by which southerners have created a sense of their own heritage, and the ways in which they have presented stories about that heritage to other southerners as well as to audiences from the rest of the United States and the world beyond. Historical tourism has been a primary means of representing southern heritage to the public. Tourism has become increasingly significant in the South since the 1920s, and examining its development as an industry may enable historians to produce what W. Fitzhugh Brundage has called a “social history of remembering” in the region. Brundage suggests historicizing memory in the South by studying plantation museums, wildly popular sites that have cropped up all over the region but that have, to now, almost completely escaped scholarly attention.13


13 Brundage, ed., Where These Memories Grow, 2-3 and 18-22. For an excellent discussion of the significance of mass culture in the formation of southern identity and narration of southern history in the first half of the twentieth century, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (New York: Vintage, 1998). In addition, there is a useful, interdisciplinary
The limited analysis they have received tells a distressing but unsurprising story.

A recent survey of 122 plantation museums in three southern states concludes that the majority of plantation museums either ignore slavery completely or else treat it as benign. They thus reflect and promote the white supremacist historiographical trends that were prominent in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite subsequent scholarship, grounded in a wealth of archival evidence, and which offers a much more nuanced picture of the antebellum era, images of a romantic, even idyllic Old South still figure prominently in popular notions and representations of southern history. Plantation museums are particularly effective sites for the promulgation of this myth.\(^{14}\)


This became clear to me seven years ago when I visited another plantation museum in Charleston, South Carolina. My visit to Magnolia Plantation and Gardens while on a family vacation is actually what drew me to my current work. I want to focus for a moment on my experience at Magnolia, mainly because I think it is important to point out that my original interest in representations of slavery was not academic. I began to think critically about plantation museums because of the evolution of my own reactions to these sites, over the years, as a tourist. I first confronted some of the central questions I am asking about history and memory, about national identities, and about historical authenticity and the commodification of history in two successive trips to this one plantation museum. These trips were separated from each other by a decade, and their juxtaposition highlights the real-life difficulties that consumers of historical tourism, with varying degrees of background knowledge about the sites they visit, face in their attempts to recognize and make sense of historical narratives and the silences they always


My most recent trip to Magnolia took place shortly after moving to Durham, North Carolina, from the West coast of Canada. As I mentioned, I had been to Magnolia a decade earlier, on my first trip to the South. I remembered spending a day riding a rented bicycle through beautiful gardens and on paths around a reed-filled lake, and wandering through a well-appointed mansion, and I looked forward to repeating the experience. I was not prepared for what I would find in the summer of 2001, however, when I discovered that while in ten years Magnolia Plantation had not changed at all, the world I inhabitted had.

Everything looked exactly the same: it was beautiful. There were the charming miniature horses in the field in front of the house; the beguiling driveway and huge trees leading up to the museum; the spectacular gardens; the still water and so on. But this time I was disconcerted by the striking commerciality of the place, by the cost of entering the museum complex, and the overwhelming number of tour packages available for us to choose at the entryway kiosk, quickly, as a line of cars formed behind: did we want to take the tram around the gardens? How many people wanted to tour the house, and who would stay with my daughter who was forbidden to enter due to her young age? Did we want to rent canoes? Bicycles? Pedal boats? Should we start with the informational movie, or with the guided house tour? Would we like tickets to cruise the boardwalks of

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the alligator swamp next door? Were we interested in buying a season’s pass that would, over time, give us discounted rates to all of the above?

These questions answered and money forked out, we entered the site, parked the car, and split up, my daughter going on the tram with her grandparents and my husband and me heading for the movie. The film offered as background knowledge for visitors presented slavery as a system of benign paternalism, where ‘good’ masters looked after grateful slaves. According to this film, there were no contested power relations, and people of African descent were of only token importance to building the site, and in the history of the antebellum South. The historical markers around the gardens were more of the same: erasures, apologies, and amnesiac commemorations of the American past. And in contrast to the meticulous mansion, filled with antebellum-era antiques, and protected from the hordes by high ticket prices and a ban on entry to anyone under age 12, the slave cabin was a disintegrating shack filled with litter, situated adjacent to a petting zoo. Instead of the guided interpretation offered in the big house, in the quarters, there were only a few brief words carved into a plaque stating that slaves had once lived there. Mannequins, inanimate replicas of stock slave characters, stood in several spots in the cabin, set to look as though they were cooking and engaging in other domestic activities. It was clear where the administrators of Magnolia Plantation had chosen to direct manpower and resources, and where they had not. My husband and I left the slave cabin and went to join our daughter, who we could see a few yards away, behind a chain-link fence, feeding a goat.
For the rest of that day and for a full year afterward, I could not stop thinking about Magnolia’s portrayal of the antebellum era and its commercialization of history. I was angry about the museum’s blatant racism and grossly skewed representation of the past. But most of all, I was disturbed by the fact that on my first visit there, ten years earlier, anger had been the furthest thing from my mind as I strolled the grounds. I wondered what had to have happened to allow me to enjoy the erasure of slavery from American history and the valorization of white supremacy? I had always been active in causes for social justice, and I had been raised with an acute sense of my own group’s history of oppression and with a corresponding sense of responsibility to remember and talk about histories of oppression. I also came from a country that—accurately or not—defines itself in opposition to America’s legacy of slavery and racism.\textsuperscript{17} So what was attractive to me, and to the many others who visited annually from all over the world, about this narrative of the southern past?

When I returned from Charleston, I immediately sought out a copy of the historian Peter Wood’s essay, “Slave Labor Camps in Early America: Overcoming Denial and Discovering the Gulag,” in which he examines the difficulty of thinking and

teaching about slavery in early America. He argues that Americans are in denial about
the history of slavery, a “deep trauma that has been repressed rather than healed.”
Slavery, Wood suggests, was more “harrowing than all but a few have dared to portray
it,” and such a harrowing history is not one that can be faced with any ease as it casts
doubt on America’s commitment to its self-image as a land of freedom and opportunity.

Wood offers two strategies for overcoming this denial in order to reconsider the
history of American slavery: one is to study slavery in a comparative perspective,
 juxtaposing it with modern-day bondage and exploitation around the world; the other is
to replace the term plantation with the phrase slave labor camp. He writes, “I am sick of
seeing glossy magazine ads for ‘plantation tours’ that will introduce us to the elegant
living of olden times. Examples abound.” “Southern plantations,” he continues,
“beyond the carefully maintained elegance and cultivation of the big house, were in fact
privately owned slave labor camps, sanctioned by the powers of the state, that persisted
for generations” and enabled “a world of perpetual exploitation and incessant degradation
built on racist ideology and overwhelming physical force.” Wood asks how American
historiography and history education would change if scholars were to confront and work
against this denial, and what a reconceived sense of the history of slavery would do to
“the expanding new industry of ‘heritage tourism’ now taking hold in the South, a
business premised on the idea of balancing and reconciling inherently contradictory images of the region’s past?”

My current work tries to answer Wood’s questions and others by tracing Somerset’s evolution from working plantation to historic attraction to state historic site, and the interpretations it has offered at every step along the way. Whereas most other plantation museums remain mired in a much older, and now discredited, historiographical period that erases the stories of the enslaved, Somerset’s present-day exhibits stand out in part because they reflect current historiographical approaches. They also reflect trends

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18 Wood, “Slave Labor Camps in Early America,” 230; 227-8; 230; 234; 227. Indeed, Wood is absolutely correct that examples of romanticized, dressed-up plantation museums and tours abound throughout the South. One need only do a brief Internet search to come up with dozens of web pages dedicated to advertising these places.

19 An abbreviated summary of the historiography of slavery in the US: Early in the 20th century, the historian Ulrich B. Phillips published a series of works that became extremely influential, but which reflected the white supremacist politics that at that time governed much of the nation. See Phillips, American Negro Slavery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press [1966] 1918), and Life and Labor in the Old South (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1929). Phillips’ paradigm was revised in the 1950s by historians such as Kenneth Stampp and Stanley Elkins, though their emphasis on slavery’s cruel and oppressive nature led them to portray African Americans as passive victims. See Stampp, The Peculiar Institution (New York: Knopf, 1956) and Elkins, Slavery (1959). In the 1970s, a new generation of American scholars motivated by the social and political changes wrought by the civil rights movement radically challenged the framework for studying slavery by introducing new questions about the dominance of masters over slaves, and the ways in which both masters and slaves worked with power—albeit under extremely different circumstances—in order to maintain the slave system. See for example: Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Knopf, 1974); Herbert Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); and Peter Wood, Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion (New York: Norton, 1974). Some examples of the most recent generation of scholarship, which draw on the insights of the 1970s historians, but complicate our notions of how power works in part by their explicit use of the mutually constitutive analytical categories of gender, race, class and sexuality, and also by considering culture in new ways include: Ira Berlin, Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Kathleen Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Laura F. Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1997); Barbara Fields, Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill: University of
in African American public history, which frequently leans toward creating liberatory narratives of African American cultural integrity and resilience. Somerset’s current exhibits were premised, from their inception, on the notion that the histories of the enslaved and the enslaver are mutually constitutive. As such, both stories need to be told together in a way that emphasizes their relationship. Liberation may come from recovering and contextualizing the once-suppressed stories of Somerset’s slaves, and also from emphasizing their descendants’ ongoing struggle against the oppression of forgetting.

The fact that Somerset makes enslaved people central to the story of the antebellum South sets it apart from most other sites. Somerset is also a state historic site, which places it in a decidedly different frame than a private museum like Magnolia, or a private foundation such as the living history exhibits of Colonial Williamsburg. I do


not mean to juxtapose Somerset and Magnolia or other similar places simplistically, as the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ of the plantation museum world. I have drawn attention to important differences between the kinds of knowledge that each museum chooses to foreground. But to use the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s terminology, both Somerset and Magnolia carry their own particular bundles of “traces” and “silences.” All historical artifacts function as traces of the past and yet simultaneously—and often unintentionally—work to silence it. So the question is first, how does this work in different contexts, and then, how and why is it that we come to know what we know?²²

There are vast differences in presentation and intent between Somerset and Magnolia. But both attempt to reconstruct an antebellum past, and both invite visitors to “step into” it by entering gardens, buildings and fields. Once “inside” each of these sites, we hear markedly different stories. Surrounding this is a larger problem, however; indeed, a major irony. In inviting us to “step in,” by their nature, historical reconstructions also invite us to overlook important components of the dialectical relationship between the present and past, and between the production and consumption of history. They ask us to “experience” the past, as though we can tap into it, whole and unchanged, by getting in touch with the right objects and spaces. Reconstructions ask us to close our eyes to the impact of time’s passage and to the constraints it puts on what

²² Trouillot, passim.
knowledge can and cannot be produced at a given moment; in many ways, they ask us to close our eyes to power.\textsuperscript{23}

Somerset and Magnolia have each developed into the kinds of museums that they have because of specific events that took place over the course of the last century. There is nothing inevitable or natural about the interpretations offered at either one. Somerset’s interpretations fit much more closely with the evidence that recent historians have marshaled to make claims about the history of slavery. Many would say, with good reason, that its interpretations are more true, and most would agree that they are certainly less racist, and less guided by the conventions of white supremacy. No doubt, these are extremely important distinctions. But these distinctions are not the whole story.

Although Somerset represents slavery and plantation life without romanticizing the slaveholders or denigrating the enslaved, it is still a representation, and still involved in the perplexing effort to recreate in a tangible way a vision of the antebellum South.

Making history tangible has its benefits, but there are also always problems with producing and gaining historical knowledge experientially through interactions with physical evidence. Physical evidence—the concreteness of walls and floors—can mystify because it often appears unassailable.\textsuperscript{24} In fact, no evidence is transparent. All

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\item For more on questions of memory, experience and ‘authenticity,’ see Alison Landsberg, \textit{Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture} (New York: Columbia, 2004).
\item Michael Kammen writes that artifacts are “all the more deceptive because they seem to be so empirically sound. Photographs and elderly relations surely don’t lie. They are real windows on the past, albeit dim and dangerously opaque, at time, in their revelations.” See Michael Kammen, \textit{In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture} (New York: Oxford, 1997), 204. David Brett points out that historians tend to have difficulty with non-textual sources. If historians favor documents over artifacts, where does
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the sources we have, whether they are documents or buildings or people’s recollections, were created within a particular context. They continue to exist, and are perhaps repeatedly reinvented, within contexts that are constantly changing. History is thus always cumulative. No one is ever able to go back to the past as if the intervening years—the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’—never happened.25

Ever since Somerset became an historic site, its exhibits have focused on the antebellum era; but its more recent history—its last century—is tied up with every comment it has ever made on the more distant past. Indeed, Somerset’s varying interpretive forms have all been products of a tense engagement between a range of presents and versions of antebellum pasts.26 Interpreters have chosen to foreground different stories about the mid-nineteenth century in the exhibits at Somerset, and their choices have been conditioned largely by the periods in which they have operated and all that leave interpretations of artifacts—objects, the built environment, and so on—in public settings? He writes, “Objects, pictures, and spaces do not behave in the mind as do words; our experience of them is always in some large measure ‘preconceptual’” (7).


26 Somerset has been constituted by an historical dialogue that Trouillot calls the “two sides of historicity:” history as events that happened and are over, and history as a contemporary activity, as fact creation, information gathering, and story-telling (24-26).
of the ideological, political and disciplinary exigencies of their particular contexts. But the circumstances under which and reasons why they made these choices are often difficult for audiences to see, and the site’s interpretive silence on its changing methods of interpretation—its reluctance to historicize explicitly the process of making history, a reluctance common to the vast majority of historic sites—further mystifies rather than explicates what has happened there over a long period of time, how and why.

Cumulative history and what the historian Edward Linenthal has called “collected memory” are difficult for any site to portray. The process of collecting often gets glossed over in favor of the product. My project with Somerset, therefore, takes a comparative approach, setting two centuries side by side, excavating literal cause-and-effect—the ways in which the events of the nineteenth century led to those of the twentieth—and their figurative relationship, the complicated intellectual play between the ante- and post-bellum worlds. It questions the circumstances under which evidence at the site got created in the first place; asks why, how and by whom it was saved, preserved or reconstructed; and examines what it means for different groups of people to look at and make themselves part of it today.

Edward Linenthal uses the term “collected memory” when he discusses his efforts, along with Michael Kammen, to encourage interpreters at Valley Forge National Historical Park, a part of the National Park System, to adopt a more cumulative approach. Linenthal explains, “To my mind, the virtues of this are obvious. History is no longer presented as a static truth handed down by omniscient, anonymous experts whose interpretive take is hidden behind the aura of ‘fact,’ cloaked in text, artifact, interpretive program, and exhibit design. Visitors to the Little Bighorn or Valley Forge understand that the place where they are standing is the site of an important event and that the event has been read differently, given the cultural fashions and political needs of particular times. Each generation, they will learn, develops its own take on the story. They stand on a site and on the collected memories of a site.” Linenthal, “Committing History in Public,” Journal of American History (81, 3, The Practice of American History: A Special Issue: December 1994): 989.
Although there is a sharp contrast between the exhibits at Somerset Place and those at other sites, at base, Somerset is a representation like the rest, no more ‘authentic’ because it is more historically accurate. If anything, its greater historical accuracy makes its interpretive and performative qualities that much harder to see and critique. Whether we are talking about Somerset, Magnolia, or any other site, the general notion of a plantation museum is one that needs critical historical analysis because antebellum plantations are not easy places to represent. The relationship between these places and those of us living in the present is complicated, and it is important to examine this relationship by studying how we forge connections with the artifacts of slavery and thus create a sense of collective memory about it. This is part of the work I am doing with my case study of Somerset, a place I am still struggling to understand, and a place which is an attractive research subject because it occupies a complex position on the plantation museum continuum.
Chapter One

Imagining the Lords of Lake Phelps: Reconstruction to 1939

[The slaves] were the people on whose backs the Collins fortune was built. When they were set free, the family was ruined.¹

In a hundred years, the lifestyle at Lake Phelps had improved from that of a huntsman in the wilderness to that of a wealthy planter with all the social amenities. Ironically, the planter’s way of life disappeared, to be preserved only as a museum display; while the huntsman’s descendants…survived the isolation, the weather, the diseases, and the abolition of slavery, to continue their occupation of the land for the succeeding century, very probably because they had never depended on slavery for their livelihood.²

When plantation owners tear down deserted cabins, Negroes will never be able to claim them again, for the Black Belt will become pasture…³

Traveling down “an avenue of trees” toward the mansion at Somerset Place one day in 1905, a young visitor decided, “one can never imagine what a little slice of the ‘Garden of Eden’ would be like till they visited [this] old [plantation].”⁴ “For the last eighteen years,” Miss Matilda Kessinger told readers of her local newspaper, “I have been looking around for southern plantations to come up to the ideals of the plantations one always reads about but never sees. It has been said by consoling people that ‘all

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things come to those who wait.’ In this instance, that too has come true.”⁵ Kessinger stood in awe of Somerset Place, reading in the trees that flanked the road on approach; the lake which lapped its shores; and the structures that once supported a community and its labor a story of grandeur, beauty and success. Yet by the time she visited Somerset it was actually quite past its prime as one of the “[g]reat plantations” that had “made the old Southern culture possible.”⁶ It had been decades since the end of Somerset’s golden era, when Josiah Collins III’s estate at Lake Phelps was one of the “show places of the Southern Albemarle,” among the “great farms” of northeastern North Carolina.⁷ Kessinger described Somerset in glowing terms, but there were considerable discrepancies between her lofty commentary and the site where she had actually stood.

Despite its physical decay and its separation from the high society for which it was once known, in the decades bracketing the turn of the twentieth century, Somerset’s legacy endured. Only a few years after Kessinger’s visit, Eloise McArthur Owens, a schoolteacher who had recently settled in the nearby town of Creswell, took her class on a hike “to the Collins’ house,” because she “had heard a lot of history about that area.” What she found when they arrived after a long walk on “terrible dirt roads” was not a gracious antebellum estate, but a house “in bad repair, and in need of much attention,” inhabited not by plantation elites but by sportsmen using back rooms as rest-stops during

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⁵ Kessinger in Tarlton, 140-1.


excursions in the surrounding forest and lake. But the sportsmen themselves as well as a range of other visitors went to Somerset because of its history, a history that seemed to remain alive, somehow, even as the site’s physical presence crumbled.

To many people, Kessinger among them, however ragged and unkempt Somerset and neighboring estates might have become, the plantations once owned by Collins and his colleagues—who were sometimes known collectively as the “lords of Lake Phelps”—still symbolized the “peak of the cultural development” of the Albemarle region. For thirty years, from 1830 until 1860, Somerset was one of the state’s “glittering social centers,” a distinction that emphasized the planter’s wealth, which was underwritten by his successful exploitation of land and slaves. The Civil War interrupted Collins’ work and the end of slavery destroyed plantation society—to some observers, the very heart of “southern culture”—and with it, Somerset Place. Yet in the words of Mrs. T.C. Holmes, recalling her time at the plantation in 1885, “So the ‘old order changes yielding place to the new’, but although the glory of the past has faded, the memory of those days lingers in the hearts of those who have known and loved the old ‘Somerset Farm’.”

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8 Kessinger mused, “A lady told me this morning, that had visited [the Pettigrew] place before the war, that it seemed nothing but a wreck now. What could it have then?” Kessinger in Tarlton, 140-1; Frances Bickel Jones and Shirleyan Beacham Phelps, eds., Washington County, NC: A Tapestry (Winston-Salem: Washington County NC Board of Commissioners, 1998), 451.

9 N&O, May 28, 1939.

10 RBWCN, December 1937.

11 Tarlton, 133-4.
Many recalled Somerset with fondness, remembering family gatherings in the mansion, Sunday school picnics on the grounds, afternoons dipping herring from the canals, and adventures on the lake and in the surrounding forest. Others, however, preferred to blot the site from memory entirely. African Americans left Somerset as soon as they could once they were free from slavery. Perhaps their recollections included family homes and community events, but they were framed by compulsion and coercion, by the limitations of life as a slave on one of the largest plantations in the state. Much later generations would, ultimately, find new ways to think about their ancestors’ antebellum past, but for many decades after Emancipation, most African Americans with direct ties to slavery at Somerset seemed to want nothing to do with the place.

In the early twentieth century, Somerset became a place where white North Carolinians—apparently unchallenged by either planters felled from grace by the Civil War or former slaves, to whom they were unlikely to have listened even if they had wanted to speak—re-imagined the meaning of the antebellum past. Both one hundred years ago and today, dominant memories of Somerset Place have focused on its short-

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12 Tarlton, 34; Elizabeth Cahoon, telephone interview with author, February 24, 2006; Virginia Haire, telephone interview with author, February 6, 2006; John Phelps, telephone interview with author, April 4, 2006; Betty Pledger, telephone interview with author, June 7, 2006; Louis Spear, telephone interview with author, July 13, 2006; Bob Spruill, telephone interview with author, January 26, 2006.

13 While this appears to have been the case at Somerset, Berlin, Favreau and Miller note that in the first decades after Emancipation African Americans were not so much silent on slavery as silenced by whites who were disinterested in their memories and commentary. It remains to be seen if Somerset’s freedpeople really did not want to talk about slavery, or if, out of self-protection, an interest in privacy or other motivations they consciously shrouded their speech in mystery so that observers outside their communities would not understand. See Berlin, et al., eds., Remembering Slavery, xiv, xx.

14 Brundage, The Southern Past, 10.
lived antebellum peak. The only time in Somerset’s history that has really mattered is the era during which it was a productive farm; the years after that, particularly those associated with its transition toward recreation and tourism, have been at most a postscript. To be sure, the antebellum years were the plantation’s heyday, and there is no doubt about their significance for understanding the history of the South. But disproportionate focus on Somerset’s antebellum days has given the impression, however unintended, that when the Civil War ended so did the site’s history.

In fact, in its capacity as a landmark and an official state historic site, Somerset’s more recent past is part of the story of how some North Carolinians adapted to the demands of a new century. The site held continuing significance first within its local context, and then in gradually widening circles. At the turn of the century, Somerset was a microcosm for the larger changes taking place across the South as a result of the abolition of slavery, changing ideas about nationhood, new economic practices, and shifting social hierarchies—all of which were deeply related. People who lived in the counties around the site had to renegotiate their relationship with it as it lost its original significance yet remained an imposing feature in their environment and within both their individual and collective consciousness. Throughout this process, from the end of the

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15 Hewison writes of Britain, the heritage industry “absorbs considerable public and private resources...because it is expected more and more to replace the real industry upon which this country’s economy depends. Instead of manufacturing goods, we are manufacturing heritage, a commodity which nobody seems able to define, but which everybody is eager to sell, in particular those cultural institutions that can no longer rely on government funds as they did in the past.” The heritage industry grows because “whatever the true figures for production and employment, this country is gripped by the perception that it is in decline” (9).
Civil War through the beginning of the new millennium, it maintained a place in the lives of people in Washington and Tyrrell counties and in North Carolina as a whole. The questions remain, what place, for whom, and how did it change over time?

This dissertation begins by examining the early phases of Somerset’s history, moving back to the plantation’s founding at the end of the eighteenth century, and through to the first attempts at transforming the site from a place for agricultural production to one for recreation and historical representation. In the early twentieth century, Somerset Place became a symbol of historical consciousness in North Carolina, and a marker of popular, state and business investment in ideas about the antebellum South. White North Carolinians in several sectors gradually found ways to weave a set of historical images of Somerset Place into their vision of a New South that was to be about progress and development. Somerset thus represented the dialectic between past and present, and signified that it was possible to be about the past and yet not be stuck in it. Indeed, as a central place for the development of new government-sponsored historic and recreational programming and for a tourism industry that was expected to pull the state out of its economic doldrums, Somerset symbolized the promise of the antebellum past for North Carolina’s twentieth-century future.

The Rise and Fall of Somerset Place, 1786-1890

Somerset Place began as part of the early exploration and economic development of the Albemarle region of northeastern North Carolina. When the British entrepreneur Josiah Collins I arrived in Edenton with his son, Josiah II, in the mid-1770s, the
businessman Nathaniel Allen and physician Samuel Dickinson were already involved in
surveying land around Lake Phelps (then known as Lake Scuppernong) in the area of the
East Dismal swamp. Collins, Allen and Dickinson joined together in 1784 and
established the Lake Company in order to drain and cultivate 100,000 acres of that land.16

Two years later, Collins imported 80 slaves from West Africa to begin digging a
six-mile long canal from the lake to the Scuppernong River. The land it drained would
become a profitable site for the production of rice, wheat, corn and lumber, partly
because of the water power that the canal enabled the Lake Company to harness and use
to operate agricultural machinery.17 With the canal complete, the African laborers moved
to join a group of the three entrepreneurs’ American-born slaves in building the new
plantation site. Within a few years, a community was taking shape, which one visitor
described as “a little world unto itself,” wherein “most of the needs of the inhabitants are
manufactured or grown right on this mammoth development.”18

Somerset soon became a marvel, boasting feats of agricultural engineering and
displaying incredible productive potential. But as well as the plantation did in its early
years, Allen and Dickinson ultimately found themselves in debt to Collins, unable to pay

16 Historic Washington County (Plymouth, NC: Washington County Historical Society, n.d.), NCC. The
Lake Company’s project has been called “one of the earliest large-scale land development schemes in
eastern North Carolina.” See Jones and Phelps, 11.

17 Historic Washington County, NCC.

18 Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 134; John Darden, The History of Washington County (unpublished, no
page numbers), North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.
up. By 1803, the Lake Company was “dissolving.”\textsuperscript{19} After trying for thirteen years to solve the financial quagmire through lawsuits and a court-ordered a settlement, Collins—known in Edenton as a “financial wizard”—bought Allen and Dickinson out and became the company’s sole owner.\textsuperscript{20} Armed with a crew of 114 slaves, Collins determined without his partners to continue to develop the plantation, which he christened Somerset Place, after Somersetshire, the county in England where he was born.\textsuperscript{21}

Collins lived in Edenton with his children and wife, and the family stayed at Somerset periodically for rest and relaxation. When Josiah I died in 1819, Josiah II and seven grandchildren inherited his estate. The oldest grandchild, Josiah III, received 100 slaves and 5000 acres of land, including Somerset Place.\textsuperscript{22} He had the distinction among the grandchildren of inheriting “cleared land with all the improvements,” and he was expected to move from Edenton as the first Collins man to live there on a full-time basis.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, upon graduation from Harvard University Josiah III and his new wife, Mary Riggs, moved into the colony house, a two-story structure that Josiah II had built to stay in when conducting “overnight business” at the lake.\textsuperscript{24} The colony house served for years as the family’s lake cottage, but it was too small for a permanent residence, so

\textsuperscript{19} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 89.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Historic Washington County}, NCC.
\textsuperscript{21} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 89.
\textsuperscript{22} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 88.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Historic Washington County}, NCC; Darden, \textit{The Story of Washington County}, NCC.
\textsuperscript{24} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 108.
Josiah III began building the mansion at Somerset in 1830.\textsuperscript{25} The mansion lent a new air of “social importance” to the estate, and Somerset became a frequent destination for a variety of guests, some of whom stayed for extended periods of time.\textsuperscript{26}

Once he was in residence, Collins could now observe the daily activities at the plantation firsthand, including the behavior of his many slaves. Josiah I, II and III acquired their slaves gradually, and over time a total of about 850 were held at Somerset Place. In 1860, 328 slaves worked on the plantation, and based on property at Somerset alone, Josiah III was the third largest slaveholder in North Carolina. The slaves’ lives had changed irrevocably with his and Mary’s arrival. Josiah III built a row of at least twenty-one slave cabins along the lakeshore, separated from his mansion by only a fence and walkway, and easily monitored from his second-storey bedroom window. As a result of his surveillance and imposing presence, inscribed in the landscape by the site’s configuration, social relations on the plantation changed: “No longer was there a flow on the grounds, a free mingling of blacks and whites. No longer was there an absentee owner and a loose affiliation with outnumbered overseers. Now there was a master in residence, with a house that needed staffing. Now there was a necessity for distinctions.” There developed hardened distinctions between the Collinses and their slaves, and there

\textsuperscript{25} Darden, \textit{The Story of Washington County}, NCC.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Historic Washington} County, NCC.
were also distinctions between newly forming classes of slaves as Collins began to demand domestic servants in addition to construction and agricultural workers.\textsuperscript{27}

The slaves at Somerset Place enabled the Collinses, ensconced in the mansion, to enjoy a dazzling social world in what was once only a “haunt of beasts,” a thick, eastern Carolina swamp.\textsuperscript{28} A veritable army of coerced labor made possible the lavish lakeside entertainments and fabled hospitality for which the Collins and Somerset names became known.\textsuperscript{29} As a result of this dependence upon the enslaved, when slavery was abolished at the end of the bloody and exhausting Civil War, a short 35 years after the Somerset mansion was built and the lords of Lake Phelps had fully established their kingdom, the Collins family’s world came crashing down.

The Collinses and their contemporaries did not give up without a fight. When the Civil War began, Josiah III and his neighbor, William Pettigrew, “financed a company of men for the [C]onfederate army,” and Collins’ sons enlisted in the Confederate Army.\textsuperscript{30} James Johnston Pettigrew would soon become a war hero, especially venerated for his service at Gettysburg, and commemoration of Pettigrew’s wartime achievements would have an impact on the ultimate fate of Somerset Place and its surrounding land. Josiah III supported the war effort, and also took pains to protect his investments on the home front.

\textsuperscript{27} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 88 and 117; 109; 143-4.

\textsuperscript{28} Historic Washington County, NCC.

\textsuperscript{29} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 140, 143.

\textsuperscript{30} Historic Washington County, NCC.
Early in 1862, as Union troops approached the Albemarle region, Josiah III moved or “refugeed” most of his slaves away from Somerset Place, taking them to an alternate plantation, Hurry Scurry in Franklin County, in order to prevent them from cooperating with invading soldiers or from seeking their own freedom. After the fall of Roanoke Island, Collins, his wife and children joined a group of refugeed slaves in Hillsborough while poor whites and Union soldiers ransacked his land and home in the east. The 66 slaves that remained at Somerset, mostly older men and women, had to contend with all of the disruption of war, including invading soldiers who sometimes encouraged them to seek freedom but also targeted them with a fair share of abuse.31

When Union soldiers rode to Somerset in 1863 to inform the slaves of the Emancipation Proclamation, those who remained on the plantation began to test the limits of their new freedom. Major Bartholomew of the U.S. army announced to the freed slaves at the plantation that they “could do as they pleased,” and that the plantation’s overseer, George Spruill, had no more power over them.32 In the final years of the war, therefore, African Americans at Somerset Place “began working more for themselves and less for the overseer.”33 Almost immediately, they demanded that Spruill compensate them for their work. When he refused to pay, they refused to work, which meant that the


32 Quoted. in Durrill, *War*, 140.

33 Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 120. See also 165-6.
mill shut down and crops grew over in the ground. Yet despite this controversy, the freed
slaves remained on the plantation, which Bartholomew said now “belonged to them,” and
where soldiers had ordered Spruill to store corn for their subsistence.\textsuperscript{34}

For their part, the former slaves set to work to establish themselves as free people
and adapt the plantation to serve their new way of life. They claimed rights to land, tools,
livestock, crops and food. They redistributed land and farm animals among themselves;
they bought two plow horses from unionists in the area; and in the spring of 1863 they
planted a crop of corn and vegetables. At times, landless white men challenged the
former slaves’ rights to Collins’ property. The historian Wayne Durrill has examined the
Civil War in North Carolina as a conflict between planters and non-planters, and as much
as the former slaves felt entitled to the land that Collins left behind when he went to
Hillsborough, landless whites also considered the property to have been abandoned by
the planter and left free for their taking. At Somerset Place, this meant that landless
whites picked, chose and made off with what they wanted of Collins’ equipment; forced
the overseer to allow them access to the water power generated by the mill and canal; and
attempted to seize the plantation and then sublet it to “fellow poor whites in the
neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{35} These men did not prevail, however, and the former slaves continued
on at Somerset Place, uncertain about their own or the plantation’s future.

\textsuperscript{34} Durrill, \textit{War}, 141.

\textsuperscript{35} Durrill, \textit{War}, 181-2. For more on class distinctions between whites in Washington County both during
and after the war, see 224-27.
The former slaves worked with the approval of the United States army, and also under the eye of George Spruill, who continued to encourage them to stay at Somerset, despite the proprietary attitude they had begun to take toward the land and its assets. Spruill was confident that the entire plantation—slaves and all—would eventually return to the ownership of Josiah Collins, and believed his duty was to maintain the condition of the slaves and the farm for the future, for after the war when he was convinced things would return to normal. But he found himself contending with newly empowered people who were determined to work for themselves, and not for him or their former owner. Spruill struggled with the former slaves who suddenly demanded that he value their work and recognize their claims to land and property, and who began to express undisguised hatred for the man they now labeled, derisively, “Old Collins.”

Despite Spruill’s apparent faith in the future, things never did return to ‘normal’ at Somerset Place. Josiah III died in June 1863, still in exile, and Mary received his entire estate in accordance with the terms of his will. When Mary and her sons first returned to Somerset after the war ended in 1865, they were accompanied by most of the refugeed former slaves, who went back to the plantation to search for “familiar ground and family.” Indeed, the returning refugees’ family members waited to greet them, having come close to starvation during the spring, yet at the same time having tried to lay food

36 Durrill, War, 141-2.

37 Will of Josiah Collins III, Washington County Will Book 1: 510, quoted in Somerset Structures Timeline, SPSHS.

38 Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 121.
by and ready the plantation for the reunion.\textsuperscript{39} Despite their families’ efforts, however, when the refugees returned they found a plantation that had been destroyed in every way: “…some located houses and outbuildings and personal possessions they had owned before the war. Others did not. But no one returned home. There was no home to be found in the summer of 1865. The community had destroyed itself, body and soul. Physically, there was little left. Socially, practically nothing survived.”\textsuperscript{40}

George Collins, Mary and Josiah III’s son, who took over management at the plantation, tried to reestablish control of the formerly enslaved workforce, insisting they work as sharecroppers. But he was met with significant resistance: African American men “did as little as possible” in the fields and refused to allow the women to work at all.\textsuperscript{41} By the late fall, when Josiah IV supplanted George and refused to rent the African American workers land that would enable them to become independent farmers, the freed people left, “…this time for good.” In December 1865, finally accepting that the land where they had lived and worked for decades would never be theirs, they began to flee in large groups. Some tried farming nearby at Beech Island, on land that belonged to local planters but which the freed people believed that they “had a right” to use. Some moved “into the swamps to cut shingles to sell in Edenton.” Both these groups supplemented their diets, and possibly their incomes, by fishing in Lake Phelps. Other freed people

\textsuperscript{39} Wayne K. Durrill, The Black Community at Somerset Place, 1786-1870: A History and Recommendations for Site Development (Historic Sites Section, Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources: June 1981), 159.

\textsuperscript{40} Durrill, War, 227.

\textsuperscript{41} Durrill, Black Community, 160-1.
moved to Edenton to work as house servants; took jobs as field hands on neighboring farms; or relocated further away in Virginia and other states.\(^{42}\) Although life was difficult for all of them when they left Somerset, and Collins family members circulated rumors about their imminent return, they never did go back. Five years after the war, only 24 of the Collins’ former slaves still lived in Somerset’s township, and only two remained on the plantation itself: Luke Davis and Joyce, both house servants.\(^{43}\) Indeed, it would be another century before African Americans in any large numbers would again begin to venture on to the property or deign to call Somerset their own.

Mary and her sons attempted to pick up where they had left off and run the plantation themselves without the benefit of either slave or free black labor. In her new position as a mistress without slaves, Mary had “to do her own housework. Her sons cut firewood and took care of other chores they had always left to the slaves. The best they could find in the way of hired help were three local white women.”\(^{44}\) It became difficult

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\(^{42}\) Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 121, 168; Tarlton, 43; Somerset Place training reports, scripts 2006, 23-5, SPSHS; Durrill, *Black Community*, 161-2. As of 1870, a number of former slaves still lived on the plantation: the Somerset Structures Timeline, SPSHS, refers to the 1870 federal census and states, “Dwellings 221 through 225 were headed by former Somerset Place slaves. These five households may have been tenants living in the plantation’s former slave housing” (31). Descendants of Luke Davis, a former Somerset house servant, continued to live in the Weston farm tenant house through the 1930s (Structures Timeline, 35), and the 1910 census continued to list former Somerset slaves as residents of Shepard Farm and the area around Weston Farm (Structures Timeline, 46). The 1920 census of Washington County also noted former slaves and descendants living in dwellings on and around Somerset, some of them on land they had bought from H.S. Neal, who first bought into the property in 1914 (Structures Timeline, 48-9). My next stage of research will involve a close examination of census data as well as land deeds in order to trace precisely patterns of tenancy and ownership among both freed Somerset slaves and individual white farmers who purchased former Collins land after Reconstruction.

\(^{43}\) Durrill, *Black Community*, 164-5. A handful of African American workers remained at Somerset after 1865, but they “made every effort to maintain some independence from the Collinses” (164).

\(^{44}\) Redford, *Somerset Place*, 121; Tarlton, 43.
for her to maintain the plantation, however, and she began to sell off her property to try to keep up with the costs. Even before it faltered under her direction, the plantation was already permanently scarred by the war; indeed, it seemed to have sustained the worst damage of all the plantations in Washington County.  

With high expenses, little income, substantial debt, a minimal labor force, and insufficient agricultural knowledge, “the Collinses were forced to admit defeat and sell the plantation.” Mary Collins sold the bulk of the land to William Shepard, Josiah III’s nephew and former ward. She also sold a small ten-acre tract that bordered the Pettigrew plantation to John Johnston, who then “instructed Mary to deed [it] to Washington Bennett, a former slave of the Pettigrew family.” Bennett and his family “built homes and businesses on their land. They used it for collateral on loans, donated some to the church, and had enviable financial security within a few years after emancipation.” The Bennetts also donated one and one-third acres to St. Mark A.M.E. Zion Church for the construction of a church building. It is not known for certain why Johnston gave the Bennetts this land. There may have been a family connection between the Pettigrews and the Bennetts; it is also possible that Washington Bennett and John Johnston had arranged a private sale between themselves. Either way, the ten acres was a boon to the Bennett family, as both Washington’s son, Ransom, and his daughter-in-law, Catherine, bought land of their own adjacent to the first property. More than a century later, descendants of Washington Bennett still lived on Catherine’s land, and St. Mark A.M.E. Zion Church

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45 Durrill, War, 211-12; Tarlton, 43.

46 Historic Washington County, NCC; Tarlton, 43.
remained standing and active. The rest of the land gradually passed into other hands as the Bennetts themselves moved away from Washington County.\textsuperscript{47}

A small portion of what had been the Collins estate allowed at least one formerly enslaved family a new beginning after the Civil War. The same was not true for surviving members of the Collins family. Although she sold her husband’s estate, Mary continued to live at Somerset, probably as a renter, until her death in 1872. Josiah IV died in 1890, and shortly after that Josiah V relocated to Seattle, Washington. Mary’s son, Arthur, still lived nearby as late as 1880, in dwelling #192 at Weston Farm; he tried several times to exert control over portions of the land, but his efforts were unsuccessful. Arthur began to drink heavily, and ultimately moved in with two former Somerset slaves, which observers interpreted as a sign that he had sunk to new social depths.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} Dorothy Redford, “Looks Just Like Me” (Somerset Place Foundation, 1998), 4-7, SPSHS. I will explore further this and any other similar stories that might exist in subsequent research.

For a discussion of how another group of former slaves continued to use plantation lands after emancipation, see Laurie Wilkie, \textit{Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana 1840-1950} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), esp. 243-46. Wilkie writes, “While African Americans lost much of their negotiating power following Emancipation, they retained the value of their labor. Cotton could not be grown without cheap labor, and blacks were seen as better adapted than whites to agrarian life. The right to build churches and schools on plantation lands, and sometimes even the gift of a small parcel of land from a planter, represent the ways in which tenants continued to negotiate power on the plantation.” She explains that younger people left the plantation to work elsewhere, but elderly people stayed, “with the unspoken permission…of the planter” (246).

\textsuperscript{48} Structures Timeline, 35, SPSHS; regarding Arthur’s attempts to exert control, see Letter to David M. Carter, 11 July 1873, David M. Carter Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, quoted in Structures Timeline, 33, SPSHS; Daily Diary 1875-1878, Josiah Collins Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, quoted in Structures Timeline, 33, SPSHS. Sam Tarlton describes Arthur Collins’ demise: “There was one character there, Arthur Collins, was left in the community, and he lived to be a pretty old man, a drunk, just sort of lived off the former slaves. And they all looked down on him as somebody who was a renegade from some kind of standards. And he was a loser… He was living down in the Western Farm, and then they say he lost it and he probably did. Then the story I got was that he moved in with some…would have said ‘niggers,’…drunken. He really reached
The Collinses who remained in North Carolina died in poverty, but not only because they could not keep up with the demands of work at Somerset Place. Even if Arthur and the other surviving Collinses had been able to continue planting and harvesting on their own, they still would have inhabited a very different world from before the Civil War. Slave society, which had reached what some consider its pinnacle in the plantations of the South, was over and Somerset’s inherent value could never be the same again. Even if Josiah III’s descendants had restored it to economic productivity, the plantation could no longer have had the same social or political function. At the end of the nineteenth century—with another series of shifts in ownership of farms adjacent to Somerset and associated with the Collins estate—in virtually every way, the Collins’ reign at Somerset was over.

The downfall of the Collins family and destruction of their fortune mark the usual end point of narratives of the history of Somerset Place. Existing narratives tend to be detailed and dramatic from the time of the early explorers of the East Dismal swamp—

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49 Berlin, Many Thousands Gone; Berlin, et al., Remembering Slavery, xxiv-xxvii.

50 In future revisions, I will trace much more closely the various land transactions that divided Collins’ estate in the forty years after the Civil War. This dissertation has relied on several excellent secondary sources for this information, and I will follow up with primary research in later stages of this project. See Mrs. T. C. Holmes, “Somerset Plantation Sixty-Five Years Ago—1885,” in Tarlton, 127-34. Holmes’ father, Mr. Sexton, was employed by Mr. H.H. Page of Edenton to operate Somerset at this time.
before Josiah Collins’s entry into the picture at all—to the end of the Civil War. But the following century-plus of history is then generally summed up in several sentences, perhaps a few short paragraphs, if it is mentioned at all. The gist of the plantation’s twentieth-century history usually goes something like this: after the Collinses sold their estate, Somerset was passed from one absentee owner to the next and virtually ignored until the 1930s when the federal government began to settle impoverished farmers from other states and regions of North Carolina on the land as part of a New Deal relief initiative. The New Deal program failed, however, and the federal government sold the land to the state, which was to develop it into Pettigrew State Park. In the 1950s the state sponsored a survey of the grounds and began to restore the Collins mansion. The mansion and several outbuildings were opened as a state historic site in 1969, which committed individuals in the 1980s and 90s developed into a premier exhibit of African American history.  

This narrative offers a reasonable chronology of some important events that occurred at Somerset Place after the Civil War. But within this chronology are multiple errors of omission and problematic interpretations. The road to becoming a state historic site was anything but straight, and it wound its way through a number of other developments. Before the Civil War, Somerset’s position in North Carolina’s economy was fairly clear: it was a large plantation that produced a range of cash crops. With the emancipation of the slaves and the destruction of the South’s economic system, however,

51 See, for example, Redford, Somerset Homecoming; 122-40; Jones and Phelps, 11-14, 19-28; Elizabeth Cahoon, “The History and Restoration of Somerset Place State Historic Site” (M.A. thesis, East Carolina University, Greenville, 2004), passim.
the entire region was forced to retool and reorient. Somerset’s transformation into a state historic site was part of this process. Somerset’s story illustrates the ways in which portrayals of history were crucial to building the state’s twentieth-century image and rebuilding its economy out of the ashes of the nineteenth, both through a developing public history bureaucracy, and the promotion of recreation and tourism. Studying Somerset demonstrates the breadth of history’s reach across political, social, cultural and economic sectors. It offers a glimpse into the evolution of new branches of North Carolina’s government and industry, and the ongoing impact of ideas about the antebellum era during contemporary times.

**Recreation, Tourism and Historical Consciousness, 1890-1939**

State officials had long been interested in the ways they could use history to bolster North Carolina’s public image. In 1843, Governor David Lowry Swain, then president of the University of North Carolina, formed the North Carolina Historical Society. According to Governor Swain, Americans elsewhere mocked North Carolina as the “backward,” “Rip Van Winkle State of the Union,” and increasing the state’s attention to its history would counteract this accusation. The Civil War interrupted the state’s efforts to formalize historical research and commemoration, but after the war was over, state officials and interested citizens joined a broad preservation movement building

throughout the country, which had particular significance in the South.\footnote{For detailed discussions of preservation movements in the US from the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} through the early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, see Hosmer; Robert E. Stipe, ed., \textit{A Richer Heritage: Historic Preservation in the Twenty-First Century} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Lindgren; Michael A. Tomlan, ed., \textit{Preservation of What, For Whom? A Critical Look at Historical Significance} (Ithaca, NY: National Council for Preservation Education, 1998); Norkunas.} By the end of Reconstruction, the state had defined for itself a central role in preservation and commemorative efforts.\footnote{Willis Whicard, “North Carolina,” in Jones, \textit{Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic}, 94.}

State officials spent decades crafting comprehensive historical programming. In 1903, in keeping with a trend throughout the nation for states to support local “archival and historical programs,” the legislature established the North Carolina Historical Commission, probably the most influential historical body to be developed in North Carolina in the first half of the twentieth century.\footnote{Larry Tise, “State and Local History: A Future from the Past.” \textit{Public Historian} (1, 4: Summer 1979): 16; Letter to Carolina Pettigrew, Feb. 9, 1914. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, 1915, Box 24, Folder: Pettigrew Papers; Frontis Johnson, “The North Carolina Historical Commission 1903-1978,” in \textit{Public History in North Carolina 1903-1978: The Proceedings of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary Celebration March 7, 1978}, edited by Jeffrey J. Crow (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1979), 7; \textit{N&O}, April 26, 1942. See also, “Present at the Creation: R.D.W. Connor Reminiscences, 1948,” in \textit{Carolina Comments}, Vol. 51, No. 2 (April 2003): 51-62. For a good overview of the first one-hundred years of government-sponsored public history in North Carolina, see Ansley Wegner, \textit{History for all the People: One Hundred Years of Public History in North Carolina} (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, NC Department of Cultural Resources, 2003).} Four years later, an amendment to the act that established the Commission defined the state’s commitment to marking historic places, a precursor to its eventual work in dedicating official historic sites. In this early phase, government bodies worked cooperatively with patriotic groups associated with the Lost Cause, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which shared their interest in...
commemorating and memorializing the spaces where historic figures lived and worked and events took place.\textsuperscript{56}

During the period when North Carolina’s legislature was establishing a strong and effective bureaucratic structure to guide the state’s historical programming, Somerset Place appeared to fall further and further into disrepair. But Somerset’s struggle did not preclude development: indeed, this was an important time of transition during which local people worked to establish what the site meant to them. Their efforts might have been forgotten because they did not seem to ‘improve’ Somerset in the long term or make it more economically productive, yet they remain significant for the ways in which they underwrote the state’s later claims to the site’s ongoing historical value.

Even as the old Collins estate was subdivided into smaller tracts of land, the mansion crumbled and the canals began to fill with weeds, local people’s memories of the past enabled the site to maintain its antebellum legacy.\textsuperscript{57} Even as it faltered, there were periodic attempts to draw the legacy out. New families took up residence at the site in the early part of the century, and they did what they could to restore the plantation in

\textsuperscript{56} Robert R. Garvey, Jr., “North Carolina’s State Historic Sites,” in Crow, \textit{Public History in North Carolina}, 55. William Murtagh writes, “The principal motivation of preservationists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a desire to instill in the American people a deeper regard for their history,” and in North Carolina that was, primarily, taken on by patriotic women’s clubs. “Even after the NC Historical Commission was established in 1903,” he continues, “efforts to preserve structures continued to fall upon the shoulders of private groups or special commissions. Because of higher priority commitments and a limited budget, the historical commission could do little more in the field of historic preservation than express concern and offer advice” (“Historic Preservation in North Carolina,” in Crow, \textit{Public History in North Carolina}, 66).

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{N&O}, June 12, 1927.
ways that might recall its past glory. The family that lived at Somerset from 1889 until 1894, for instance, tried to redecorate and repair the mansion, which still smarted from the wounds inflicted by the Civil War. Harvey Terry, his wife and extended relatives tried to fix the site’s appearance to give it “a new lease on life.” They even renamed it, temporarily, the Lakeside Plantation. Terry’s sister-in-law Jane Davis recalls that even with the improvements, “certainly it never could compare with the beauty of former days.” Davis undoubtedly had a point. Yet Somerset’s value derived from more than its visual appearance. Indeed, its collapse—its loss of productivity and its evident shift from beauty to decay—was precisely what enabled a new kind of life to emerge at the plantation.

The new life was largely informal and often unsanctioned, initiated mostly by people who were neither owners nor even residents, which may be why it is virtually invisible on the historical radar. Almost immediately after Reconstruction, in the absence of both the land barons and slaves, common whites—the small farmers, merchants and their families, who had been under Collins’ thumb for so many years—began to take the plantation for themselves. Residents of Washington and Tyrrell counties considered

58 See Mrs. T. C. Holmes, “Somerset Plantation Sixty-Five Years Ago—1885,” in Tarlton, 127-34. Holmes’ father, Mr. Sexton, was employed by Mr. H.H. Page of Edenton to operate Somerset at this time.

59 Structures Timeline, 39, SPSHS; See Jane Davis, “Memories of Lake Phelps—47 Years Ago,” in Tarlton, 137. See also Redford, “Looks Just Like Me,” 52-3, SPSHS.

60 Farm families lived at Somerset in 1900, some in rented houses, and some possibly in buildings “in the former owner’s compound.” Structures Timeline: 41, SPSHS. Somerset’s shifting ownership through the early 1900s has been documented, and there exists some record of who occupied various living quarters. But compared with the decades before and following, this period in Somerset’s history is relatively muted. The names of the owners and residents, and the details of the transactions that transferred the property from
Somerset to be their land, and they had their own ideas about how to use it and the significance of the structures that remained. They may never have had any legal claim to it but it was where they lived nonetheless, and it was part of what they understood as home.⁶¹

Home, for many, was symbolized by the churches that had long stood at the site.⁶² Since the late eighteenth century, many whites in the area had been attending St. David’s Parish, built by enslaved hands on land donated by Collins and Pettigrew.⁶³ During the war, both Union and Confederate soldiers “used the church for shelter and storage,” and they left the church in a terrible state of disrepair. Church members persisted in their attempts to restore the building right up until they sold it in 1921. Despite the congregation moving to a new facility in Creswell twenty years earlier, they seem to have maintained an emotional connection with the original structure, which the author of the parish history called “a shrine of sacred memories,” its “ancient walls” standing “Beside a city of the dead!” Church members never separated their church from its origins in the historic kingdoms of the “princes on the banks of Lake Phelps.” To them, it was a

hand to hand say little about the nature of how the plantation was used during that time. Very little evidence survives to describe the experiences of the people who owned Somerset, and lived or worked there during this time. Land deeds survive and successive sales of the property are well summarized in the Structures Timeline.

⁶¹ Haire interview; Spear interview; Spruill interview; Pledger interview; Cahoon interview; William Edwards, telephone interview with author, April 23, 2004; Tarlton interview; Phelps interview.

⁶² Haire interview; Spear interview.

product of Collins’ prominence, and they were proud of their links to his plantation.

Indeed, when a new minister of the parish founded the Galilee Mission at Lake Phelps in 1922, it seemed only natural to use Collins’ former slave hospital for its services, and the colony house for mounting Christmas programs. Galilee moved to a larger building a year later, following a donation for new construction from Mrs. Annie Shephard Graham, “perhaps a distant relative of the Collinsses,” but local people still recall fond memories of attending the mission at the lake.64

In the first thirty years of the twentieth century, local people kept returning to Somerset out of religious tradition, and also to assert their customary rights to the site and its environs. They claimed the site’s structures and fields, and the pristine Lake Phelps as their own, as places to explore, to have picnics, to go fishing, and to gather for all manner of community and family celebrations. Although common whites from the counties around Somerset had expressed contempt for Collins and his planter colleagues before the war, in the decades that followed, they began to visit the site and use it to enact in their own way legends of the antebellum past: to claim embodiment of an imagined grace, and to get away from their normal lives by placing themselves within what they understood as Somerset’s pastoral setting.65

64 Holmes, History, 8; 5 and 16; 13; 15, NCC. Nearly a century later, local people still recall with fondness Lona Bell Weatherly, who taught the mission school there. See Pledger interview; Spear interview.

65 Cahoon interview; Edwards interview; Haire interview; Phelps interview; Pledger interview; Spear interview; Spruill interview.
Common white people were able to imagine themselves this way in part because there were few people left at Somerset to complicate their claims. The elites who had once owned the plantation were gone, as were most all of the African Americans who had been the site’s captive laborers. Unlike the situation for whites, African Americans did not—perhaps could not—see Somerset as a place for recreation and fun. It may have been their ancestral home, but it was also the place where they had been bound to serve; memories of slavery were still fresh and may have underwritten a strong urge to separate from the site in every possible way. In any case, had African Americans not left Somerset by choice, they probably would have been driven away by force as whites brought new customs as well as the growing legal apparatus of segregation to bear on all manner of recreational spaces.66

Somerset was becoming a place for a particular kind of leisure and recreation that had white supremacy at its core. When visitors enjoyed Somerset, they were not simply enjoying any lake or field or old structure; they were, quite consciously, enjoying a former plantation that had been home to antebellum heroes distinguished for their role in building and defending slave society, and they were doing so as white people with all the

privileges that their racial categorization implied. In the era of Jim Crow, the almost total absence of African Americans—whether by choice or compulsion—reinforced the growing significance of whiteness for those who did remain at the site.

In the context of Lost Cause mythology, a retrospective view of the antebellum era, even for those who had been excluded from the planter class and themselves had never been more than hired hands, usually involved mourning white people’s loss of the right to own slaves. The value of recreation at Somerset was entwined with narratives of the site’s history that emphasized—however unintentionally—its role in making a particular brand of southern whiteness constituted by the ideas of benevolence and honor that underwrote white people’s perceptions of relationships between planter and slave.67

In the early twentieth century, white people may not have always or even usually gone to Somerset with the conscious intention of celebrating slavery or commemorating Josiah Collins, but a nostalgic sense of Somerset’s historical role in plantation society was rarely far from their minds. As one writer put it, “No one visiting the old house that stands as a relic of the prosperity of the old days can help from admiring the activities of the time when it was built.”68 One article that encouraged white visitation did so in poignant tones, reflecting the site’s ongoing draw as an embodiment of the lost world of an honorable and bountiful plantation past:


Along the lake there the avenues of mighty sycamores still keep ghostly watch over the scene and the ancient cypress stir in the winds that sweep across the blue miles of Scuppernong. Alien hands with strange machines till the fields where the slaves used to slag, and fabulous crops rise out of them, but the ancient day of the Pettigrews and the Collinses is gone. Melancholy silence broods in the deep shadows of the cypress and the solemn oaks that hide the great houses. Now the place is infinitely remote, and infinitely lonely, peopled only with ghosts of days and things that are gone.

Articles like this appealed to visitors who would be intrigued by a site that was a moving reminder of long-gone “romantic days before the war,” and by structures that stood as monuments to a better time.\textsuperscript{69}

Yet at the same time as Somerset’s great legacy endured in the minds of local white people, the site nonetheless seemed doomed to physical decay. Near-constant turnover in ownership and residency at the plantation as well as periodic vandalism were taking their toll.\textsuperscript{70} By the 1920s, the site appears to have reached a sort of stalemate: Somerset was no longer what it had been in the years before the Civil War, and despite local whites’ customary use and the legend they continued to imagine around it, subsequent owners had not yet established what its core structures and fields would become in a world of highly different demands.

But as the 1920s gave way to the Depression, a new context facilitated a shift at Somerset Place. The Depression seemed to renew the plantation’s significance as local

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{N&O}, June 12, 1927. In 1928, the UDC organized a ceremony to dedicate a bronze tablet and memorial fence at the gravesite of James Johnston Pettigrew, which the group had spent ten years refurbishing. The ceremony was solemn, and included local dignitaries and music performed by the Creswell High School choir. The president of the Pettigrew Chapter of the UDC congratulated local people for taking the initiative to clean and beautify the site, and received attendees at a luncheon “in the Collins estate,” served by “the ladies of Creswell and Columbia.” \textit{N&O}, September 28, 1928.

\textsuperscript{70} Jones and Phelps, 362.
residents and a variety of people involved with historic preservation, recreation, and the growing industry of tourism looked to Somerset for opportunities to formalize their connection to the past. By the 1930s, representations of the antebellum past were all the more important as economic crisis increased Americans’ anxiety about the disappearance of this seemingly great era. The passage of time meant an ever-increasing gap between the antebellum world and the world of the present. Clinging to Somerset eased the fear people felt as the antebellum era disappeared behind them, and assuaged their concern that they were being left to float in a rootless and disorderly present. According to Larry Tise, much of the state’s focus on history at this point was “to glory in the golden age of declining Brahmin classes,” as an increased focus on the elites of yesteryear might help reduce the sting of present-day poverty and crisis.  

Interest in historic preservation increased, but statewide, the movement faltered. The Depression made it impossible for North Carolina’s Historical Commission to deal properly with the state’s historic sites. It simply did not have the finances. Although the federal government continued to fund national public history projects by creating the National Archives and the National Historical Publications Commission, and by passing the National Historic Sites Act of 1935, there were serious economic limits to what the state of North Carolina could accomplish. The Historical Commission had to abandon

\[71\] Tise, “State and Local History”: 16.

\[72\] Tise, “State and Local History”: 16.
much of its work, including its historical marker program, which, on and off since 1917, had placed inscribed tablets in locations across the state.

The economic crisis of the Depression interfered in a variety of ways with government attention to public history, and then institutional structure complicated the allocation of the scarce funds that the state was able to muster.\textsuperscript{73} In the midst of this economic and bureaucratic puzzle, C.C. Crittenden, the Commission’s new director, suggested that it might be best to establish a private society that could support building and maintaining historic sites.\textsuperscript{74} The North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, founded in 1939, could not, however, substitute for a coordinated, state-sponsored historic sites program, and it would be more than a decade before the General Assembly moved to consolidate interest in preserving historic sites into one centralized body administered by the Department of Archives and History.\textsuperscript{75}

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\footnotesize 73 George Esser, “Department of Archives and History: Historical Development,” rough draft, 1954: 6. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1954, Box 218, Folder: Department of Archives and History. While the Depression may have hindered history programming in North Carolina, Barbara Shubinski argues that it was an especially significant era for historic preservation in the U.S. as a whole: “…the unprecedented degree of federal involvement in preservation during the New Deal, including the shift in scope of the National Park Service, the establishment of the Historic American Buildings Survey, and the passage of the Historic Sites Act, has left a legacy that is bedrock to the infrastructure of preservation today” (62). The Historical Division of the FSA—a federal agency which receives considerable attention in chapter two for its resettlement projects in Washington and Tyrrell counties—played a particularly important role in emphasizing the importance of a sense of history and “eulogiz[ing] small towns and rural life” (64). “The Mechanics of Nostalgia: The 1930s Legacy for Historic Preservation,” in Tomlan.

\footnotesize 74 Garvey, in Crow, \textit{Public History in North Carolina}, 57.

\footnotesize 75 George Esser, “Department of Archives and History: Historical Development,” rough draft, 1954: 6. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1954, Box 218, Folder: Department of Archives and History.
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Indeed, shifts in bureaucracy are part of how Somerset, for several decades, evaded historians’ hands. Rather than drawing attention from the state’s historical organizations, Somerset came under the purview of a different arm of government. The Commission had not expressed interest in Somerset Place either before or during the Depression years. Instead, Somerset landed on the Department of Conservation and Development’s list of interests. Conservation and Development had begun to examine ways it could promote historic sites as part of its mandate to operate the state’s parks, and it looked toward Somerset as one of “several” sites with “sufficient recreational value to be operated as parks.”

The idea of using Somerset Place as a site for recreational activity was not new, and Conservation and Development’s plans to highlight its recreational potential did not pose any kind of inherent threat. Indeed, formalizing activities that might invite a broader audience might have been a way to encourage continued allegiance to the site’s historical mythology, and this mythology was something that a range of people, both historians and otherwise, found attractive. Local boosters—newspaper editors, businessmen and civic leaders—predicted that with renewed attention and government assistance from Conservation and Development, Somerset Place could become “one of the show places of eastern North Carolina,” a testament to the superiority of antebellum

76 The Appropriation of Funds for Historical Sites: A Preliminary Report to the Commission on Reorganization of State Government, Donald Hayman, UNC-CH Institute of Government, June 28, 1962. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1965, Box 279, Folder: Historic Sites Oct.-Dec. 1965. Pettigrew State Park—developed out of the land including Somerset Place—would ultimately be one of these parks.
architecture and the lifestyle of the planter class. They welcomed new initiatives that emphasized the plantation’s recreational value, and offered a structure for activities after decades of informal use.

Some began to see recreational development and historic commemoration woven together as a means to an end, which was to encourage a new industry—tourism, particularly based on automobile travel—that promised to revamp the Albemarle’s economy. The region was among the oldest in the country, and it boasted multiple sites that could attract visitors from elsewhere in the state and beyond to see evidence of the nation’s founding and of celebrated moments in its past. Economic disasters—first, the end of plantation society as a result of the Civil War and the rise of sharecropping and tenancy, then agricultural depression and the mass crisis of the 1930s—offered, however ironically, a new set of opportunities: perhaps Somerset could no longer be a site for agricultural or industrial productivity, but it might find new use as a place for cultural reproduction. Economic decline meant that it was now possible to aestheticize what had once been only pragmatic, to redefine the fields, barns, houses, and canals that were so central to agriculture as objects to look at as well as to use, objects for leisure as well as work.

77 RBWCN, December 1937.
78 See Shaffer or an in-depth discussion of changes to American tourism in the first half of the twentieth century.
79 See Benjamin, 243-44, for more on the notion of war rendering “politics aesthetic” by changing an object’s “aura” and use value. Brett also examines the process by which a country or region is aestheticized (esp. 38).
Somerset Place and the entire Albemarle region became key sites at which representatives of the private and public sectors began to explore linking history and nature in recreational and tourist attractions. In 1934, the state Highway Commission acquired the Lake Phelps road and opened it to the public, and there was talk of transforming Somerset, “this historical place,” into a year-round resort with facilities for hunting, “fishing, boating, bathing and dancing.” All that was required for this to happen was someone with “money and foresight” who might “take advantage of this opportunity.”

Several years later, one local booster told a group of visiting journalists and travel writers that communities in the region were most apt to draw tourists by offering them a combination of “history and sports,” as nothing could “interest the traveler like the romance of history and the thrill of hunting and fishing.” Washington County began to recognize that it could benefit from offering its history and its natural bounty to the rest of the world. As one business man put it, “Rich in history and beautiful scenery, this area is an undeveloped empire that can be commercialized.”

In the late 1930s, residents of the entire southern Albemarle region were eager to show off their home, “where industry, agriculture, natural resources and hunting ground combine to make a unique and favored spot in all the land.”

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80 RBWCN, August 3, 1934.
81 RBWCN, October 22, 1937, November 5, 1937, and November 12, 1937.
82 RBWCN, June 16, 1939.
As part of an effort to marry business pragmatism, recreation, nature conservation and historic preservation, the Southern Albemarle Association, which had formed in 1935 to represent Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell and Washington counties and to promote the four counties’ economic health, met in Plymouth on April 29, 1937, and adopted a resolution asking the state to create a park on what had been Pettigrew and Collins property alongside Lake Phelps.\(^4\) The Association noted that the Lake Phelps property “was the home of General Johnson Pettigrew, one of the most distinguished of the Confederate Generals, [and] also the site of the settlement of the famous Collins family,” and was therefore “the most fitting place for the establishing of a State Park.” Commissioners from each county submitted resolutions to Conservation and Development supporting the Association’s request.\(^5\) At the resolution meeting, the group planned for the county historian John Darden to introduce the idea in Washington County, and local descendants of the Pettigrew family along with members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Colonial Dames, Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Southern Albemarle Association would urge state politicians to pressure federal officials to reserve a portion of their land for the park.\(^6\)

Negotiations continued through 1937 and 1938. Conservation and Development hoped to be able to convince the federal government, which had bought former Collins

\(^4\) *RBWCN*, April 30, 1937.

\(^5\) Darden, *The Story of Washington County*, NCC.

\(^6\) *RBWCN*, April 30, 1937.
land in order to establish New Deal relief projects in the area, that it should have a tract including “portions of the old Pettigrew and Collins plantations, on which the old mansions are still standing” and “the old Collins barn, one of the most unique buildings of its kind found anywhere.” Conservation and Development believed it should administer the park through a “general policy agreed upon and adopted” by authorities at both levels; it recognized that in order to secure sufficient land, new roads, and recreational facilities, cooperation between the state and federal governments was essential.

The federal government, through the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which was responsible for the relief projects, told Conservation and Development that it shared the state’s interests in these areas, and assured concerned citizens that the developments it sponsored would respect what they perceived as the area’s historical significance. At one point, the FSA’s George Mitchell responded to a letter from a woman in Virginia who had written to the Raleigh News and Observer urging the United Daughters of the Confederacy to insist that state and federal officials follow through on plans to establish the park at Lake Phelps in order to honor James Johnston Pettigrew. Mitchell wrote,

> you may be assured that every consideration has been given to the historical associations of the Pettigrew plantation, with the permanent preservation of the property in view. We earnestly desire to work with the civic and patriotic

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87 *RBWCN*, December 24, 1937. Chapter 2 of this dissertation provides a detailed discussion of the federal resettlement projects at and around Somerset Place.

organizations in every way in order that the best possible for a development program even broader than the establishment of a park may be evolved.  

Mitchell also responded to a North Carolina citizen who expressed concern about federal activities at Pettigrew Cemetery. This time he told the man that not only would the federal government do what it could to preserve the area and to support state efforts at developing the surrounding park land, but he also foresaw the entire area around the lake becoming “a noteworthy tourist attraction,” accompanied and shored up by the federal government’s “well tended model farms in the vicinity.”

On April 8, 1939, the U.S. Department of Agriculture transferred land to the state in a 99-year lease that established Pettigrew State Park, the sixth state park in North Carolina, under the management of Conservation and Development’s Division of State Parks. The state’s first priorities were to bring a health-department approved water supply into the park; to provide picnic areas; to build cabins for overnight and weekend visitors; to restore “the houses [at Somerset] as shrines”; and attend to the “historic cedars and sycamores,” which had been planted by Collins’ slaves. At that time, there were only

89 Letter, George S. Mitchell to Mary Winder Osborne, May 8, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 73. NARA-SE; Letter, M. Key Hart to B.A. Blenner, May 1, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 73. Osborne also responded to Mitchell several months later, thanking him for his assurances. NARA-SE, FHA 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 724.

90 Letter, George Mitchell to John E. Anderson, April 12, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 73.

two state parks in eastern North Carolina: one was Pettigrew, and the other was located at Fort Macon near Morehead City. W.R. Hampton, a member of the board of Conservation and Development, hoped that Pettigrew would be developed along the lines of parks elsewhere in the state, where the government had spent upwards of $100,000 on improvements. But, he cautioned, money would have to come from both the private and public sectors, as the government had scaled down its budget drastically for work of this kind.92

From the beginning, government officials and residents of the area debated the significance of Pettigrew State Park and precisely which parts of it were most significant. As important as history had always been, in the park’s initial phases of development, the split between attention to ‘natural’ areas—including the forest and the lake—and ‘historical’ ones—encompassing the Collins house and other structures at Somerset Place—was pronounced. It seemed important for state officials to decide what the park’s focus would be. The local paper announced: “Fishing, boating and bathing would be made the main attractions of the park, with the historical background adding to its appeal

92 RBWCN, January 27, 1939. In 1939, after drawing $2500 from Scuppernong Farms’ maintenance fund to pay for repairs to the exterior of the Collins mansion, the FSA stated unequivocally that no more money would be forthcoming from them. State representatives of Washington County looked to the General Assembly’s $35,000-appropriation for North Carolina’s state parks, believing that $9000 would be marked for Pettigrew. But by the summer of 1939 no money had yet been designated. W.L. Whitley, chairman of the Pettigrew Park Committee for the Southern Albemarle Association, believed that if the state allotted $9000 to Pettigrew then the federal government would add another $27,000. Whitley and his group were concerned that since the state had not yet given Pettigrew any money, the park lands might revert back to the federal government, which had stipulated in its lease to the state that work must begin on improvements to the park immediately. Within several months after signing the lease, however, no work had commenced. See RBWCN, July 28, 1939. The Department of Conservation and Development finally surveyed the park land in the fall of 1939 to determine what improvements to make, in order to maintain title to the property. See RBWCN, September 21, 1939.
to visitors…. The place has been extensively advertised and is well known throughout the state, which it is believed would serve to attract thousands of visitors there annually."93 Officials responsible for development seemed to conclude that the park should be mainly recreational, with the historical component as an added bonus; this would, they claimed, be the winning combination to attract maximum visitation. Including the old Pettigrew and Collins plantations magnified the park’s importance but from the point of view of Conservation and Development, the reason for the park’s existence was to allow the government to properly administer Lake Phelps, one of the largest state-owned lakes, known for its unusual shape and excellent fishing.94

But while state officials may have focused on the park’s recreational potential, the public’s view of its significance was another matter. When redevelopment began on the old Collins land, the News and Observer featured a major article on Pettigrew State Park. The article foregrounded the park’s historical weight, insisting that its construction was responsible for “Restoration of the lost glory of the magnificent plantations,” in “One of the richest parts of the nation agriculturally and historically…” It went on,

The beautiful Collins mansion is being restored to something of the grandeur it knew when Josiah Collins [III] built it on the shore of Lake Phelps. The great canals, dug by slave labor, have been cleaned out again by steam shovels and drag lines. Good roads have been built through the swamp… The massive 19th Century barn will be preserved for posterity along with the Somerset Plantation house as part of the 221-acre Pettigrew State Park. Folklore of the past comes to light each time the swamp is pushed back to what once was the boundaries of the great farms. A few of the old Negroes born in slavery remember the Collins home, Somerset, as it was 75 years ago, with its blacksmith shop, cabinet shop, 

93 RBWCN, March 21, 1940.
94 RBWCN, May 26, 1939, and December 13, 1937.
bakery, meat house, tannery, grist mill, sawmill, schools and hospital for the slaves. Speaking with hushed voices, they will point out a fallen log across the old transportation canal about 50 yards from Lake Phelps and tell you that of the 100 slaves that started digging the ditch at the Scuppernong River, six miles below, only one lived to reach that point. Not far away is the slave graveyard and the number of mounds now covered by the luxuriant swamp foliage seems to bear them out.95

African Americans chose forty or fifty years before to excise Somerset Place from their own lives and the new park was being designed for a white audience, yet it was the voices of unidentified former slaves that the paper employed to sell an almost mystical history that underwrote the park’s present-day significance. The paper used “the old Negroes[‘]” memories cautiously, careful to point out other evidence that might support their claims and making clear that their descriptions of the past were not so much history as “folklore.” Perhaps it was true that 99 slaves died digging Collins’ canal; or perhaps it was merely a tall tale, signifying the awesome project Collins undertook when he set the slaves to work. When it came to understanding slavery in Somerset’s history, African Americans’ memories were significant at the same time as they were suspect, important as much for what they symbolized to white audiences as the stories they might have told on their own terms.

As developers shaped an historic attraction and park around Somerset, images of slavery remained commonplace while the enslaved themselves began to sink further and further from sight. When Blount Baker, a 107-year old former slave, recounted his memories of the institution, he questioned whether or not newspaper readers considered

95 N&O, May 28, 1939.
him important at all: he talked to one interviewer “between grins and snickers that were caused by the thought, apparently, that anyone would be interested in ‘an old nigger like me.’” B. Baker’s skepticism was understandable. From the 1900s through the 1930s, even as white people used ideas about slavery in a variety of public discussions, they seemed less interested in the former slaves as real people and independent agents than as vehicles that might enable their feelings of nostalgia and awe. Even when they talked about slavery and the enslaved, it was with the understanding that white people—their heritage and their history—were the primary subjects of the discussion.

More often than not, in Washington County, public discussions of slavery took place in settings from which independent African American actors were excluded. When white people acknowledged the enslaved, they generally appeared not as autonomous agents but as objectified stereotypes that shored up white supremacist notions of white southern gentility and honor. For the most part, whites read former slaves as evidence of the myth that before the Civil War life was easier for everyone: the poverty that followed and that only got worse with the Depression was an anomaly in a region whose real past—whose real identity—was defined by wealth and grandeur, security and civility. In the 1930s, towns across the state held events like “old slave days” to encourage people to reenact the past as a story of loving relationships between good masters and grateful

96 N&O, July 17, 1939.
97 RBWCN, September 23, 1932, November 9, 1939, June 17, 1943.
slaves in a fine and orderly society. When former slaves died, newspaper articles and other public testimonials often claimed that their passing signaled the tragic death of an old order. When “Aunt” Susan Jones died in 1937, for example, her “passing marked the fast diminishing number of negroes of Washington County who were born in slavery,” “negroes” who stood as living reminders of a more pleasant economic time, and who could best relate details about “the life of the white people” for whom they worked. Charles Horton, a former slave who was believed to have fought behind Confederate lines, was remembered as “the last Confederate connection of Washington County.” The United Daughters of the Confederacy memorialized the death of this man who claimed to be “a white man’s negro,” and who they said valued, above all else, “the good will of the white people here…”

White people could create and enjoy these stories because African Americans had few opportunities to challenge them. At Somerset, not only were the former slaves themselves mostly gone, but major traces of their physical presence were also being

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98 See, for example, the story of “Uncle Demus,” an ex-slave in Pinehurst, passed away at the age of 113. A year before his death, he “had a final fling that brought back the memories of his earlier days. Southern Pines held an ‘old slave day’ and Uncle Demus, as the oldest slave in Moore County, carried the day.” N&O, December 7, 1934.

99 Berlin, et al., xlvi.

100 RBWCN, December 3, 1937.

101 RBWCN, November 8, 1935.

102 RBWCN, October 11, 1935; RBWCN, January 22, 1932. As it happens, Horton was not actually a Confederate soldier. An article published upon his death confirmed that he never claimed to have been a soldier, but rather a servant to his master, a white soldier, who “had carried special messages to officers.” See RBWCN, October 11, 1935.
wiped out: the last three slave structures on the lakeshore, for instance, were destroyed in 1929. As such, whites could insist on a version of the past that did not have to account for slavery as it might have been experienced by the men and women who were its captives, and they could emphasize the goodwill that they claimed had always existed between black and white. Occasionally, local celebrations, commemorations and press coverage acknowledged that, at least for the enslaved, slavery may have had its downside. An article in the *Roanoke Beacon* noted “Uncle Oscar” Downing’s sense that “His master was good to him, but there is nothing like freedom…” But such limited acknowledgments were muted by the overall message that slavery as seen through nostalgic white eyes evoked feelings of security, productivity, and warmth. As an economic institution, slavery was dead and gone, but white people were determined to keep the feelings it conjured for them alive.

White people in Washington and Tyrrell counties looked for ways in which the new park at Somerset might satisfy both emotional and practical needs. Locals expected the United Daughters of the Confederacy to lead the way in playing up the connection between the park and the heroes of war, commerce and society who had once lived on the land, and they called for a fanfare at the time of the park’s dedication. People from surrounding communities were eager to be involved in the festivities, which they

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104 *RBWCN*, November 28, 1930, and May 12, 1933. See also *N&O*, August 3, 1930.
suggested should include representatives from the entire Albemarle area.\textsuperscript{105} Yet some residents were hesitant to plan too much too soon, arguing that any dedication ceremonies should wait until the park was more built up. W.L. Whitley, an attorney and chairman of the Pettigrew Park Committee for the Southern Albemarle Association, argued that more had to be done to “increase the usefulness” of the park before a dedication ceremony or else the publicity would leave a “bad taste” for new visitors.\textsuperscript{106} Whether ‘natural’ or ‘historical,’ the existing land and structures in the park were not, in and of themselves, sufficient for representatives of the Albemarle region to publicize. Rather, the entire park needed embellishment. For even the ‘natural’ phenomena to be worthy of attention, human intervention was necessary: the lake needed piers and docks, and the forests needed trails. And the best way to showcase the ‘historical’ areas was to refurbish the buildings to eliminate the signs of aging that had accrued over time and thus restore them to their antebellum state.

The park, in its present condition, was not enough to warrant widespread and sustained attention. It was not enough to portray things as they were, as testaments to a cumulative past that included the decades immediately preceding the present. Instead, the most immediate decades—the last fifty years or so—had to be erased, and the ‘real’ significance of what was left at Somerset Place had to be drawn out, pulled from inside overgrown brush or cracked paint. It was not enough for Somerset’s buildings and land, canals and Lake Phelps, to be as they were in the moment; they had to mimic the

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{RBWCN}, June 23, 1939.

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{RBWCN}, July 28, 1939.
antebellum past in order to justify attention. More precisely, they had to represent a particular view of the antebellum past, which called up the glory days of the lords of Lake Phelps, and emphasized the positive impact that their reigns had on the surrounding communities.

Leaving the structures ‘as is’ risked leaving room for alternative interpretations. From the existing evidence in 1939, a visitor’s interpretations of Pettigrew Park and Somerset Place might not have jumped directly back to the lords of Lake Phelps; rather, confronting the present might have led a visitor to note the ultimate failure of the plantation economy to provide long term stability in the region by focusing on the people currently trying to eke a living out of the land rather than those who had benefited most from its exploitation. In order for the park to fulfill the goals of both local citizens and state officials who wanted a celebratory narrative of a mythologized past, the ties had to be emphasized between the sites that visitors to Washington County would see when they arrived at the park, and how those images stood for greater, more important days gone by.

In the 1930s, local, state and federal interests combined to initiate the first organized efforts to reconstruct Somerset Place on new terms, which made traces of an antebellum world serve a changing context. Somerset Place no longer produced any significant quantities of grain, lumber, corn or rice, but situated within a new state park; developing amenities that would attract sportsmen and their families; and capitalizing on the sense that a glorious past was inherent in the site, it began to make its mark on a tourist industry that was becoming crucial to North Carolina’s economic health. Business
leaders believed that tourism was one of the keys to the state’s economic recovery during
the middle years of the Depression: indeed, in 1937, more than 3 million out of state
visitors passed through North Carolina as drivers and passengers in cars, spending more
than $60,000,000.\textsuperscript{107} The value of tourism in North Carolina tripled between 1936 and
1939 alone.\textsuperscript{108} By encouraging tourism at Somerset through recreation and
commemoration, the plantation might stay both literally and figuratively useful even after
the demise of productive agriculture.

But agriculture maintained a unique value in the minds of Americans during this
time. To many, Somerset’s authentic past was the time when it was a productive farm.
The tendency to focus only on Somerset’s antebellum history, to the exclusion of
anything that followed, may be related to belief in an agrarian myth, where agricultural
production is the only true or worthy American pursuit; nonproductive industries, such as
tourism, may make money but they do not constitute “real” work.\textsuperscript{109} And in the 1930s
and 1940s, a group of people made one last ditch effort at productive farming on what
was once Josiah Collins’ land.

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107 Richard Starnes, “Creating a ‘Variety Vacationland’: Tourism Development in North Carolina, 1930-
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108 \textit{N&O}, May 18, 1940. By 1940, tourism grossed $100,000,000 per year in North Carolina. \textit{RBWCN},
March 21, 1940.
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109 Twelve Southerners. \textit{I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition} (New York: Harper,
1930); Joyce Appleby, “The Vexed Story of Capitalism Told by American Historians,” in \textit{A Restless Past: History and the American Public} (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 163-82; Nora Pat Small,
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In 1935, the federal Rural Rehabilitation Corporation had bought Magnolia Farm—one of the plantations that had belonged to the Collins’ neighbors, the Pettigrews—to establish a rural resettlement program as part of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. In the earliest years of the park’s development, there were at least 200 families living in federal resettlement projects that spilled over into parts of Somerset Place, and while state and federal representatives negotiated the boundaries and scope of the new park, the government continued to build new houses near the lake.\footnote{J.S. Holmes, State Forester, Memorandum to the Director, Proposed Phelps Lake State Park, June 21, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 28; Letter, George S. Mitchell to J.S. Holmes, July 12, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 28.}

The \textit{Roanoke Beacon and Washington County News} noted with hope that while the days of the lords of Lake Phelps were over, the combination of federal projects and the new state park would once again make the area a “show place, if not a fashion and social center as before the [Civil] war.” “If present hopes materialize,” the paper suggested, “the government will not only carry out a great experiment in agriculture here, but will rebuild and recreate a bit of the historic past on the shore of this beautiful lake.”\footnote{\textit{RBWCN}, December 1937.} This is the story to which chapter two shall turn.
Chapter Two

Developing a Land of “abundant life”: Rural Resettlement at Scuppernong Farms, 1935 to 1945

The Agricultural history of the Scuppernong Farms unfolds the wildest dreams of the early settlers, more than realized by the leisurely living of their grandchildren during the era just before the War between the States, but blasted in the nightmare evidenced by the ravages of that War, and again building up the stamina of the people whose worse set-back was the world-wide depression which somehow must be turned into an asset—new opportunities in a new era. The Scuppernong Farms is the beginning of a new era of agricultural opportunity, just as the Albemarle colony ushered in a new era of opportunity to those early settlers who braved new conditions with hope and courage and the determination to wrest social security for their children.¹

At the same time as local and state authorities pushed to formalize recreational opportunities at and around Somerset Place and to build tourism in the Albemarle, federal officials used the site to launch an experiment in agriculture and social relationships. In the midst of the Great Depression, Somerset Place and adjacent plantations that had been part of the Collins and Pettigrew families’ lands became known as Scuppernong Farms, a New Deal project through which the Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) tested resettlement as a solution to the problem of rural poverty. Land that was once the domain of the lords of Lake Phelps and worked by

hundreds of slaves was now designated by the federal government as a haven for impoverished farmers, white and black.²

With Scuppernong Farms, the federal government brought a new kind of attention to the former Collins estate. For years, Somerset’s primary purpose had been informal recreational use. Groups of local white people enjoyed the former plantation for its beautiful surroundings, the intrigue of its remaining built structures and the historical symbolism that those who remembered the antebellum days—firsthand or through


At first, the resettlement programs were administered by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in the Department of the Interior and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) took over from the FERA, and Roosevelt created the RA to oversee the early community-building efforts. New Deal officials had to work quickly to combine the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, agencies in the FERA, state rural rehabilitation corporations, sections of the Agricultural Adjustment Agency, and a range of other small agencies into the one administrative body ultimately known as the RA. They were under time pressure because the people who the RA was meant to target needed immediate relief. Conkin suggests that the speed with which administrators had to act doomed their attempts from the start. Settlers in the communities were desperate for economic security. In the short-term, they may have been willing to submit to government agents who introduced new cooperative approaches to rural life, but in the long run, they did not share the administrators’ interest in fundamental economic reform. Whereas New Dealers may have been as interested in process as product, settlers were focused quite strictly on the bottom line: their goals were focused on economic recovery, not on ideological or social revolution (Conkin, 327-29). Two years after the formation of the RA, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act transferred responsibility for the RA’s programs to the new FSA, a part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The FSA, the body primarily responsible for the resettlement programs at Somerset Place, lasted until 1946, when President Truman replaced it with the Farmers Home Administration. For more on the transition between the RA and FSA, see Baldwin, esp. 123-5; 170; 188. For a detailed synthesis of work on the development of resettlement programs, see Mertz, passim.
stories—could read. But with crop land remaining fallow and the entire site falling more and more to the mercy of the elements, it was becoming an increasingly mute testament to the wealth of the past. The recreational developments that were a central part of the state’s growing nature conservation and historic preservation bureaucracies, and which provided crucial outlets for federal work programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were important, to be sure. But in the 1930s, federal, state and local officials all seemed to agree that there were still other options—better options—when it came to really maximizing the use of the former plantation lands.

New Deal programming reopened Somerset to productive agriculture, premised on arguments about the authentic purpose of the land. According to officials with the RA, Somerset had always been meant for exploitation and it was destined to bring success to anyone who committed him or herself to working it. They pitched Scuppernong Farms as a way of connecting poor farmers with purportedly better days by bringing them to land that was historically rich, its legacies of colonial audacity and antebellum grandeur borne out in fertile soil and productive farms. They insisted that while the once-great plantations had fallen apart because the system of tenant farming that had replaced slave labor was not profitable, the land was still top quality and ripe for re-development.\(^3\) George Mitchell, the Director of the RA’s Region IV, which included

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\(^3\) Facts About Scuppernong Farms, January 19, 1939. National Archives and Records Administration-Southeast Region, Farmers Home Administration, Record Group 96, Farm Security Administration-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60.
North Carolina, proclaimed Somerset and its environs a “land of ‘abundant life’” that had enabled “an era of civilization never duplicated in the history of the world.” He declared the land unequaled in its fertility, with an optimal climate for all kinds of agriculture, and the potential to expand existing crop yields as well as develop a range of new industries.4

The RA and FSA appealed to historical precedent to justify building Scuppernong Farms. Justifications, especially those that linked Scuppernong to tradition, were important because of the intense controversy surrounding rural resettlement activities. Republicans in Congress and supporters of corporate farming in the Extension Service, the American Farm Bureau Association, and the Department of Agriculture hated resettlement, which they considered collectivist and a dole for farmers.5 The government created the FSA—excising the word ‘resettlement’ from the agency’s name—with the hope of escaping the frequent and intense attacks critics heaped on its predecessor.6 But the same people who had vilified the RA honed in on the FSA’s resettlement communities as an example of government assistance gone too far. For many, no matter what agency was in charge, the strategies at the heart of resettlement—particularly cooperative farming and government supervision—were linked too closely with

communist-inspired radicalism. The critics’ unrelenting opposition, more than anything else, doomed the programs from the start.\footnote{De Jong, 254. Hatred of the RA and FSA was partly also a response to the growth of other kinds of radicalism growing in rural circles, such as the creation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, which formed in July 1934 partly in reaction to the inequity of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). Beginning in the spring of 1933, the AAA aimed to deal with overproduction by paying planters to destroy crops and livestock; planters were supposed to then distribute a share of the payments to their tenants and sharecroppers, but they rarely did so. In addition, as planters were producing less they also required less labor and sharecroppers and tenants found themselves pushed off the land and rendered homeless. Mertz explains, “In 1934 a study of 825 dispossessed tenants in North Carolina revealed that about three-fifths of them had been displaced between 1929 and 1932. Fewer were dislocated in 1933, but the number increased again in 1934 due to New Deal acreage restriction” (15). See also Mertz, 17-31.}

Throughout its life, the FSA struggled as an organization to justify its existence to a broadly hostile audience.\footnote{The FSA remained a target of criticism and its existence was never secure. As Baldwin puts it, “…the FSA remained something of an anomaly—an agricultural agency of government pursuing reform goals but finding its justification and defensive symbolism in the past, led by men most of whom were not agriculturalists, exercising considerable political power but operating outside the mainstream of political power in agriculture, structurally a part of the USDA but operating as an island within it, dedicated to the interests of a clientele but from whom little effective political support could be derived, and supported by basic legislation but not enjoying a clear cut congressional mandate. Like the honeybee, the FSA defied the laws of flight” (322).}

It is impossible to understand what happened at Scuppernong Farms outside the context of widespread antagonism toward resettlement and the FSA. Whereas most accounts of Somerset’s history deem Scuppernong Farms a largely irrelevant failure, Scuppernong’s limitations and disintegration should be seen as part of the wholesale destruction of resettlement programs, mostly on ideological grounds, by hostile forces within the U.S. government.\footnote{This is the primary narrative provided currently at Somerset Place State Historic Site and it is echoed in every published source I have seen. See, for one primary example, the official website published by North Carolina’s Department of Cultural Resources, \url{http://www.nchistoricsites.org/somerset/history-somerset.htm}, accessed May 8, 2008. See also, for example, Cahoon, “The History and Restoration of Somerset Place State Historic Site,” 2 and 44.} Scuppernong Farms was, indeed, gone by 1945, but it departed in good company. All of the FSA’s resettlement communities were expunged
from government policy that year as the finale in a large-scale attack on the agency and its particular attempt to assist the nation’s small farmers. Scuppernong did fall apart, but its story remains significant for the ways it illustrates a revolutionary period in American history and represents an era of considerable change at Somerset Place.

When New Dealers launched the resettlement projects in northeastern North Carolina, their intention was to rehabilitate the land and the people who farmed it: to transform the region by transforming its poor farmers, “the people whose tumble-down cabins...have been an apparently incurable Southern eyesore...” and return the area to an economically productive state. Administrators in the RA described their work as a means of returning the region to past prosperity and the idea of resettlement garnered positive attention from at least some local farmers who believed that the New Deal programs offered them a unique opportunity to receive desperately needed assistance. Yet there was some irony in the resettlement agenda. Prosperity had never existed for the class of small farmers that the projects served. The prosperity of the past that resettlement administrators sought had depended not on the success of independent small farmers, but primarily upon planter dominance and the coerced labor of slaves. In fact,


11 In an editorial on December 21, 1934, the Roanoke Beacon and Washington County News declared farmers’ vigorous approval of Roosevelt as a result of his aid programs: “For once we have had an election in which the poor and the rich, the black and the white, stood together in perfect accord, and with the best of feeling prevailing. Friday found the farmers standing together to support the government in its efforts to help them. It was no more in a spirit of hope that they might get some future benefits than it was an expression of thanks for the benefits they had already received... This shows the confidence in a government that has left that particular class out of its benefit programs for so long. They now know the government is a much better friend than the fellows who have grown so rich out of the Southern farmer.”
what the RA and FSA wanted was not really a return to the past at all, but the creation of a new system in the present where those who had borne the brunt of rural poverty and exploitation might receive a share of the land’s potential bounty.\textsuperscript{12}

Resettlement programs like the one at Scuppernong Farms thus posed some threat to the status quo at the same time as they left most social, political and economic conventions untouched. They tried to offer poor farmers a chance to climb out of economic depression, but accepting that offer meant working under a paternalistic model that reinforced pervasive inequality. Farmers were treated as virtual wards of the state, and black and white remained segregated from one another according to the customs of Jim Crow, with black people the targets of especially pronounced constraints and discrimination. Resettlement was a mixed bag: it was radical and conservative, successful in some areas and woefully inadequate in others; it was innovative and it was flawed, and the assistance it provided was both intense and fleeting.

The government’s efforts and its ultimate failure through resettlement to reestablish productive agriculture at Somerset Place helped usher in a new phase of life for the plantation. When it launched the resettlement projects there, it transformed a site known primarily for its history as a slave plantation: albeit for a very short time and with uneven results, under the auspices of Scuppernong Farms, Somerset and its environs became a place where people who had never before had the opportunity—who had been

\textsuperscript{12} For more on continuity, change and the FSA, see Pete Daniel, \textit{Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880} (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 65, 182 and 243.
actively prevented from having any opportunities—could farm fertile land for themselves and ultimately hope to own a small piece of what was once the empire of the lords of Lake Phelps. For most, this hope became an unrealized dream and poverty in northeastern North Carolina remained a serious problem. Resettlement ended, farmers continued to struggle, and Somerset Place became a different entity, redefined by a new sense within the government and among the general population about what the site meant, and who and how it was to serve.

**Back to the Land**

Rural resettlement was one prong in President Roosevelt’s multi-pronged attempt to combat the Depression’s disastrous impact on rural America. Farmers had been struggling with economic downturn since at least 1925, and the general depression that shook the whole United States a few years later highlighted existing and pervasive rural southern poverty. Rural resettlement in part was a product of the agrarian myth: “a cluster of ideas, beliefs, sentiments, and values presumably representative of the ideal rural way of life….” According to the myth, rooted deeply in American history, “Agriculture was the only truly moral way to secure wealth and happiness. Rural life was healthier and more righteous than life in the cities. Virtue lay in individualism and self-reliance; wealth and success were the rewards of initiative, hard work, and thrift. Poverty was the wages of sin and sloth.”

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nation’s cities could not support all of their residents, and despite the fact of prolonged agricultural crisis, more Americans began to look for salvation in rural living: “to the land, to the old homestead, to security, to a memory.”

The agrarian myth was part of what compelled Roosevelt to take action to combat rural poverty. Decades before the onset of the Depression, he declared “country men and boys” to be the nation’s “political salvation.” On March 4, 1933, in his inauguration speech, the new president avowed, Americans must “recognize the overbalance of population in our industrial centers and, by engaging on a national scale in a redistribution, endeavor to provide a better use of the land for those best fitted for the land.” Roosevelt and his advisors discussed their dreams of helping unemployed


15 Baldwin, 37.

16 New York Globe, Feb. 6, 1911.

17 Quoted in Conkin, 84.
Americans by placing them on subsistence homesteads, and agrarian romanticism underwrote their push to create rural resettlement programs to assist impoverished farmers.\textsuperscript{18}

When organizers in the RA and FSA began to shape the resettlement projects at Scuppernong Farms, they rested on the notion that settling small farmers on land that was historically rich—both in terms of the precedent for agricultural productivity there, and in the reflections it seemed to offer of times past—would return them to a better life, to a life they argued had been lost in the rush off the farm and to the cities, and in the focus on industrial instead of agricultural production.\textsuperscript{19} Yet pervasive rural poverty during the Depression, the evidence of which was everywhere, clashed with the idea that Americans could assure their own success by tying themselves to the land. The small farmers that resettlement aimed to serve had left the land either as the result of force or in a desperate attempt to escape poverty, and bringing them back to rural life required relief measures that would deal with both the immediate crisis and the systemic exploitation that caused the underlying problems. At the same time as relief administrators reveled in the agrarian myth they searched for ways to deal with the harsh reality of endemic poverty that they

\textsuperscript{18} Conkin, 34-36.

could see around them. But for all their efforts at innovation the programs and policies they developed ultimately fell short.\textsuperscript{20}

In northeastern North Carolina as elsewhere, the land did not provide the security and self-sufficiency that the myth seemed to promise. To begin with, few American farmers around the time of the Depression were the independent yeomen of the popular imagination. By 1930, more than 45 percent were tenants or sharecroppers: in other words, almost half were dependent on someone else’s financing and land.\textsuperscript{21} There was no small irony in the notion of returning to the land for security when the land was a more or less ruined former plantation, and when many of those who worked it were only a generation or two from slavery. Although there was a sizable “back-to-the-land movement” in the first two decades of the century, especially in the South the actual value of attachment to the land was often sentimental. The farm did not guarantee financial security; rather, “it was the problem child of the nation.”\textsuperscript{22}

By the mid-1930s, North Carolina was already the site of the government’s largest rural resettlement communities.\textsuperscript{23} As the decade progressed, the communities

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\textsuperscript{21} Baldwin, 39.

\textsuperscript{22} Conkin, 18-19; 22-3. Anderson argues that by the 1930s, the agrarian myth was usually articulated as an “economic creed,” without previously dominant moral overtones (4), though moralizing did remain significant in the South (5-6).

\textsuperscript{23} These communities included Roanoke Farms and Penderlea Homesteads, each of which involved total capital investments from the federal government of over $2 million by 1941. See US, FSA, \textit{Report of the Administrator of the FSA, 1941}, 34. See also Thomas Mitchell, “Destabilizing the Normalization of Rural Black Land Loss: A Critical Role for Legal Empiricism,” \textit{Wisconsin Law Review} 2 (2005): 557-615; and
established in Washington and Tyrrell counties enabled farmers in the Albemarle to lease 40- to 60-acre plots of reconditioned land on a trial basis. First the government settled white farmers on individual homesteads, and then both white and black in segregated farming cooperatives. The farmers received federal loans in order to purchase seed, fertilizer, tools, livestock and other equipment, and worked to establish themselves according to the advice of farm and home managers. If they proved successful at cultivating and maintaining their land and they were able to create a family farm that satisfied the managers’ expectations they would have the option to buy the farms for themselves through a financing agreement with the government, thus turning tenants into owners.  

The federal government looked to resettlement as a way of improving not only farm conditions and crop yields, but the circumstances of the farmers’ entire lives. According to one observer in North Carolina, the South needed solutions to the problems confronting its small farmers that went beyond “soil reclamation” to “social reclamation.” The New Deal programs took a holistic approach, aiming to put poor farmers back on their feet by providing both financial support and personal assistance.

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Mertz, 2-15.

*N&O*, July 14, 1929.
through “loans, coupled with planning and technical guidance,” focused around a farm and home plan that government supervisors established for each family.\textsuperscript{27}

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) laid the foundations for Scuppernong Farms in 1935 when it purchased 1400 acres at Magnolia plantation. Magnolia, once owned by the Pettigrews, had belonged since 1914 to the Commerce Guardian Trust and Savings bank of Toledo, Ohio. Whereas Somerset had suffered under the reign of successive absentee landlords, the Toledo bank had arranged for a family from Creswell to care for Magnolia: “Unlike Somerset after the War Between the States, Magnolia was not forgotten.” As a result of the FERA’s purchase, “Relief agencies of the very modern New Deal” gained “one of the most historical properties in this section of the country because no group in all history is known wider than the rich lords of the Lake Phelps section.”\textsuperscript{28}

Most of the land at Magnolia was already “cleared and ready for cultivation,” and the FERA began almost immediately to move white tenants from nearby communities and from Tarboro, about 70 miles away in Edgecombe County, into 22 temporary dwellings and 20 existing houses.\textsuperscript{29} The agency intended to create a community of more than 300 people who would grow potatoes for personal use and corn, cotton and soybeans

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\textsuperscript{28} RBWCN, May 10, 1935.

\textsuperscript{29} RBWCN, March 29, 1935; RBWCN, May 10, 1935; Facts About Scuppernong Farms, January 19, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60.
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Developers planned to build a community house, library and other recreational areas for client families, and they seemed encouraged by the Department of Conservation and Development’s plans to establish Pettigrew State Park and build amenities that clients could use at Somerset Place.

Not long after Magnolia was established, the local paper made explicit links between resettlement and recreational development, and the ways in which poor farm families could benefit from both:

These men and women will have their sports, as they dip in the beautiful waters of the ancient Lake Phelps or cast their fish hooks into canals and streams running through the premises and angle for fish, while hunters can chase the deer, bear, squirrel and other game thru a preserve that will be held by the government. There will be fire lanes through the forests to protect the game and timber. Men and women will be trained to fight the fire plague and will be taught the rudiments of health, happiness and hard work with no dole but ever pleasant life to those who work hard and are frugal.

The paper’s commentary was more a pastoral sales pitch than a reflection of reality, however. It seems that client families at Magnolia and later at Scuppernong had enough to do between farming, home work, and building the project’s infrastructure, and many were in poor enough health to make outdoor recreation and strenuous activities such as fire fighting either unpleasant or inadvisable. There were no facilities built for black

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30 RBWCN, May 10, 1935.
31 RBWCN, September 13, 1935.
32 RBWCN, May 29, 1936.
33 For detailed reports including the health status of clients at Scuppernong see: Monthly Narrative Reports. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1; Medical Services. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 52, Folder 936-04.
patrons at the park, and while some white clients undoubtedly did use the lake and forests for leisure, it is difficult to assess how frequently or under what circumstances, and there is no evidence that this ever occurred on an organized basis. Nonetheless, while the paper’s description of what nature offered may not have reflected how people actually lived, government administrators with the projects emphasized the potential benefits of having the park and recreational facilities at the clients’ doorstep, and they sought to protect the trees, lake and other natural resources that made the area so attractive.\textsuperscript{34}

But as hard as officials pushed for recreational development at Somerset, most seemed to agree that recreational development alone was an insufficient use of the site’s surviving structures and the old Collins land. The civic leaders, local businessmen and politicians who supported plans at Somerset for developing the state park, building a pier on Lake Phelps and converting the Collins mansion into an inn for hunters and fishermen, hesitated to allow the site to move completely away from its history as an agricultural marvel, and approved of efforts to return parts of it to practical use. Federal authorities welcomed the recreational developments but mostly as support for the resettlement projects, as ways of attracting client families to the land and not as ends in themselves.\textsuperscript{35} Representatives of the RA told North Carolinians in the northeastern counties that the long-term goal of their programs was to “utilize the land of the nation for the purpose to

\textsuperscript{34} Letter, T.W. Armstrong to C.B. Faris, December 12, 1936. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 136.

\textsuperscript{35} RBWCN, March 22, 1935; March 29, 1935.
which it is best adapted and to readjust the people to the land resources.”\textsuperscript{36} The dominant sense was that the “best,” most valid use of land and resources was for productive agriculture: land could be “converted” when agriculture was “unprofitable” or impossible, but ideally, it would be actively farmed. The federal government both committed itself to adaptive reuse projects that included recreational development, and seized on a widespread sense that Somerset’s true value lay in what it could offer as a productive farm, arguing that its history made it the right spot for agricultural and social
rebirth.\textsuperscript{37}

When the local paper announced the FERA’s purchase of Magnolia, it also noted that the agency was “considering the purchase of additional land on the famous Somerset plantation near the historical farm.”\textsuperscript{38} Magnolia was only the first step in the government’s plans, and officials seemed bound and determined to establish the project there as soon as possible in order to continue expanding and settling a larger area. But the rush to begin resulted in a project that was only barely satisfactory: the men and women who settled at Magnolia certainly did not enter into the “ever pleasant life” about which later publicity would boast.\textsuperscript{39} The clients who applied and were approved for resettlement were eager to take advantage of the opportunities the initiative offered, but

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{RBWCN}, February 14, 1936.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{N&O}, December 10, 1935.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{RBWCN}, March 22, 1935; March 29, 1935.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{RBWCN}, May 29, 1936.
what they found instead were incomplete communities that did not have all the services
they required and homes in conditions that left families despondent. The interior walls of
houses were papered in black, which made “the mothers feel very crushed”; a noisy and
“nerve racking” wind whistled through ceilings and walls; and flues were so unsafe that
one administrator warned the community would soon find its homes “in ashes.”

Moreover, the RA designed farm and home budgets that were almost entirely
impractical for the families expected to live by them. Mrs. W.S. Carawan, a relief agent,
complained that the budgets approved in Raleigh were too small. Officials in the Raleigh
office crossed out the specialized plans Carawan had created in cooperation with the
families and employed standardized plans instead that did not take into account specific,
individual needs. Some families under her supervision were afraid “they will actually go
hungry.” She described one example: “A Mr. Jones has a family of seven. His small
baby has been sick for months, and doctor told me that she could not live without $1.00
worth of milk each week. That means that the Jones family would only have .80¢ per
week for food. You can see readily that this food budget is impracticable.”

However much poor farmers may have embraced the notion of federal assistance and resettlement
in theory, the reality of living in the new farm community at Magnolia was far from ideal.

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40 Letter, W.S. Carawan to Kathleen Tyer, November 1, 1935. NCSA, Emergency Relief Administration,
District Administration Records, Box 487, Folder: Correspondence

41 Letter, W.S. Carawan to Mrs. Thomas O’Berry, et al., February 28, 1935. NCSA, Emergency Relief
Administration, State Administration Records, Box 46, Folder: Tyrrell Co.-General; District Project
Supervisors’ Reports, April and May 1935. NCSA, Emergency Relief Administration, State
Administration Records, Box 46, Folder: Supervisors’ Report District #22.
Yet from the perspective of most administrators Magnolia seemed to be well underway by the spring of 1936, and rumors circulated of a much bigger project in the works. By purchasing more land, the RA set out to expand Magnolia to resettle at least 600 families at the newly-created Scuppernong Farms, and formally incorporate vast new recreational tracts at and around Somerset as “a place of amusement for colonists who will till the soil under government supervision in the area desired.”

Publications and news reports of the project at Magnolia had already waxed lyrical about Washington County’s history, as if to suggest that new developments both were predestined by and assured the return of a grand past. The Roanoke Beacon and Washington County News had promoted the land’s antebellum legacy with enthusiasm, from the “silvery water of Lake Phelps,” which, directed into the canals, had “provided power, transportation, drainage and other such conveniences with the best herring fishing ever known,” to the “regal state” in which the “lords of Lake Phelps” once lived. “Space will not allow,” the paper continued, “to enumerate the traditions and legends that have grown out of the capers of the lords and ladies who ruled this section but a nation waits to learn of the

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42 RBWCN, May 29, 1936; RBWCN, June 26, 1936; Letter, Homer Mask to Rexford Tugwell, February 24, 1936. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 703. On land acquisition and the split between farming and recreation see: Memorandum to the director: Proposed Phelps Lake State Park, June 21, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 028; Letter, George Mitchell to J.S. Holmes, July 13, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 028; Letter, C.B. Faris to J.C. Lowery, October 4, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60; Letter, Homer Mask to Rexford Tugwell, February 24, 1936. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 703
progress of modern systematic government farming.” Evidently, the land’s history as part of Collins’ antebellum empire held out a promise for the future in federally-sponsored agricultural projects.

The RA described Scuppernong Farms, the project “which Uncle Sam is developing,” as a way of adapting “large tracts of lands—relics of past generations” to best suit “present day needs.” When George Mitchell presented a report in preparation for breaking ground there, he repeatedly linked historical significance with the natural hardiness of Scuppernong’s environs, indicating his sense that the region was always destined for material success, always an area of natural bounty attracting settlers of the


44 Interestingly, Tyrrell County appears to have a different history from Washington County, where the bulk of resettlement took place, and in which the majority of Collins’ land was located. Mrs. Addie L. Brinkley, a former register of deeds, published research in 1935 that described Tyrrell County’s attempt to cultivate a different image than its neighbor, Washington. Washington played up its historical association with large plantations and antebellum aristocracy. Tyrrell County was a different story: residents of Tyrrell were unlikely to “point out to you the decaying remnants of great plantations that were, in another day, seats of a feudal aristocracy.” When Washington County was carved out of Tyrrell in 1799, “copped off with it were the great estates between the Albemarle and Lake Phelps, and left was the democratic end of the county seat of the Scuppernong.” Instead of a land of “lords” overseeing laborers on profitable and opulent plantations, Tyrrell was “a region of smaller farms…with a family holding not more than itself and perhaps a few slaves could manage…[with] thrifty landholders who work their own lands, take timber out of their own woods. It makes for thriftiness—and for a fine sort of democracy.” As for its relationship with Somerset and other plantations that would become the pride of Washington County, “they had little imprint upon the county. They were outcroppings of the feudal civilization that took root at Edenton across the Albemarle and were not actually a part of Tyrrell ever. Tyrrell was the haven of the small-landed settler.” An article which denied Tyrrell’s relationship to the wealth of Somerset, Bonarva and Magnolia plantations, extolled the virtues of the FSA projects at Scuppernong, which straddled the Washington-Tyrrell county line, and seemed to claim these projects—experiments in cooperative farming and assistance to impoverished but hard-working farmers—as the county’s own. See RBWCN, August 16, 1935; N&O, May 18, 1940. See also Virginia Haire, et al., Bridging Generations Through Tyrrell County Memories (Columbia, NC: Scuppernong River Festival, 1996).

45 Division of Information, RA, “Suiting the Farms to the Times at Scuppernong Farms,” April 23, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 163-01.
highest caliber. Mitchell wrote that the land around Somerset on which Scuppernong would be built was “the cradle of our American history.”

Not only was it famous for its contributions to antebellum society, but the Albemarle was also where English settlement in what would become the United States first began: Roanoke Island, “just off the peninsula on which the Scuppernong Farms are located,” was where “the first child of English parentage was born in August 1587,” and as such, “The history and traditions of the first English settlement, the struggles and victories of those living on the land from that time on are the heritage of those privileged to live on Scuppernong Farms. These new farmers may be considered as pioneers in the new economic and social venture.”

He suggested that those who settled the Albemarle hundreds of years before were virtually guaranteed success, and the ease with which they acquired “comfort and plenty,” allowed them to “[grow] mentally because they had the leisure to devote to the cultivation of the mind…” Historians, Mitchell argued, had misread the planters as “lazy ‘lords and masters’” who relied on the work of “women and slaves,” when, in fact, what really underwrote their charmed lifestyle was a natural environment that made it impossible for them to fail. “Slave labor was conducive” to their lifestyles, but it was much less central to their success than the region’s perfect climate and fertile soil. The area was ideal: it was ripe for industrial development, as well as for leisure, settled by

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those of the highest moral and physical character. There was a historical precedent for success to follow if only the government and the farmers at whom it aimed the new projects would take the opportunity.

When Mitchell and other federal officials before him made these kinds of statements, they drew on a past in northeastern North Carolina composed of two separate stories, each with an uneasy and at times contradictory link to the other. On the one hand, there was the antebellum grandeur and prosperity that they hoped to revive and redistribute from the elite planter class to the masses. On the other, there was the memory of slavery as an institution diametrically opposed to American notions of independence and self-sufficiency. Slavery underwrote aspects of the agrarian myth by providing the labor force to enable white farmers to establish themselves and build their fortunes, yet it also stood as the myth’s antithesis: it created dependency and relied upon exploitation and brute force, and had long thus troubled even those who benefited from it most.49 The local press reminded contemporary audiences of how bound labor was responsible for clearing what would be Scuppernong’s land and building the great canals, for cultivating crops and bringing “wealth to their masters on every hand” under working conditions that were at best grim. Those who built the canals “were kept in stockades as they worked with the incarcerations built over the workmen and when a certain space was dug the men and stockade were moved at the same time.” The stockades prevented the

slaves from “escaping into the dense forest,” and those who repeatedly questioned their treatment “were slain, for the canal digging must continue at a certain pace.”

When New Dealers such as Mitchell decried this kind of brutality and exploitation—they did not deny even as they downplayed the centrality of slavery to the planters’ success—they were motivated partly by genuine moral outrage and also by defensive strategy. They proposed the resettlement communities in a context opposed to anything with even the most tangential association with collectivism. New Dealers met their critics’ concerns with assurances that resettlement was less a step to the left and more a reinforcement of truly American ideals of individualism and independence; it was about modernization, democracy and productivity. At least one report from the RA noted that at Scuppernong Farms, the federal government would take land that was once tilled by slaves and adapt it to fit a contemporary “social scheme.”

Through the resettlement projects, the federal government would see the grandeur of the antebellum days and raise it: not only would the relief agencies make the land productive once again, they would improve on the past by settling the land with independent, tax-paying citizens instead of tax-exempt slave owners and coerced labor.

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50 *RBWCN*, May 10, 1935.

51 Leighninger, 150. Others who approached resettlement as a possible way to solve the problems of exploitation inherent not only in American life generally but in New Deal programming specifically included Rexford Tugwell and Harold Ickes.

Mitchell developed the point of view that slavery was incidental to the success of those who settled the Albemarle in the colonial and antebellum eras; productivity derived primarily from the bounty of the natural surroundings and the hardiness of the planters. For Mitchell and other boosters of the Scuppernong Farms project, slavery was never central to the nation’s economy. It was instead an isolated, deplorable mistake in the past, a blemish on a region with a history that was otherwise cause for celebration and pride. Relief administrators affirmed heartily that slavery belonged “to an age that is past.” By thus divorcing the success of the pre-Civil War economy from the institution of slavery, Mitchell and his cohort were then able to make the logical leap that the Albemarle was simply a natural place for any farmers—not only the wealthy planters like Collins, not primarily those who had command of a labor force of slaves—to prosper.

In fact, there was considerable irony in resettlement’s placement of poor farmers, especially those whose ancestors had been enslaved, on former Collins land as modern-day embodiments of the agrarian myth, and to claim the grand antebellum estates as precedent for contemporary rural resettlement. Positioning Somerset and surrounding plantations as a base from which poor folk could claim independence and self-sufficiency was a drastic break with the past, not a continuation of historical trends. But officials in the RA and FSA saw no break. Instead, to them Scuppernong was another step in an ongoing march of progress: resettlement of poor farmers, white and black, on land that once belonged to major southern planters and slaveholders was logical to those who

believed progression toward freedom and justice was natural, and that exploitation of any kind was never fundamental to society, only a mark on an otherwise great system.

Even in its nascent phases, Scuppernong was a jewel in the crown of administrators who presided over the resettlement initiatives. It seemed to be proof that with proper management the American system—despite the beating it was taking by the current financial crisis—would persevere. When Rexford Tugwell, the Director of the RA, confirmed on June 23, 1936, the spreading rumors of an enlarged colony on Lake Phelps, he was enthusiastic about a project that he considered “one of the very best in the nation.” Tugwell overlooked the lack of efficiency and poor construction and implementation of plans at Magnolia. He envisioned Scuppernong giving a “fresh start” to struggling farmers by providing each family with arable land and a new four-to-six-room “modernly equipped” home, and by furnishing the community with buildings including a meeting house, cannery, blacksmith, woodworking shop, fire department, cane mill, cotton gin and warehouse.54

To Tugwell and his colleagues, the proof of resettlement’s success was to be found in the behavior of the clients themselves. The administrators banked on the fact that virtually all 320 families in Washington, Tyrrell and Hyde counties to which they had loaned over $90,000 that year were making their installment payments on time, and demonstrating considerable improvements in both morale and material assets. Even if there were flaws in the government’s settlements—if the bureaucracy and administrative

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54 RBWCN, June 12, 1936; RBWCN, June 26, 1936; RBWCN, August 27, 1937.
procedures had hiccups, if work was not being completed in the most timely manner, and accommodations in the communities did not meet the level that officials had promised or that they continued to claim existed at the site—the clients’ evident progress showed the resettlement officials that their projects were working, and they looked forward to inaugurating Scuppernong Farms as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{55}

But by the middle of 1937 their ambitious plans had to change. Areas of the West had become a dust bowl, and the federal government had to reduce its costs in the East in order to meet the crisis there. This meant less money for projects in the works including Scuppernong Farms, which developers therefore had to scale down.\textsuperscript{56} They were forced to forgo immediate construction of new homes for clients and instead settle them on existing “small farms cut out of [larger] estates,” and to cut corners in a variety of ways in order to rush Scuppernong to a spring completion.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{RBWCN}, April 30, 1937. To kick off construction on the project, the RA hosted a “get-together” on December 18, 1936, a “social gathering of officials, employees, landowners from whom the Resettlement Administration is purchasing land, commissioners and boards of education members of both Tyrrell and Washington Counties, and neighbors, out at the lovely old Collins House on Somerset Farm.” A large group gathered to hear RA officials explain the history and purpose of the project and of resettlement as a whole. Local people had a chance to introduce themselves, to ask the officials questions, and also to tell RA officials about the work they were doing. When the meeting was over, “everyone viewed the lovely old Collins house, which, by the aid of the Resettlement boys, had put on a gala holiday appearance, heard the legends of the old plantation, and marveled at the beautiful sunset on the lake…. A barbecue prepared by the Resettlement boys made the guests feel ‘Scuppernong Farms’ was a good idea, after all.” \textit{RBWCN}, January 1, 1937; Letter, T.W. Armstrong to C.B. Faris, December 14, 1936. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 30. The following summer, the “ladies” of the Parent-Teacher Association of Creswell met with a group of people from Raleigh, Plymouth, Columbia and Creswell interested in resettlement work “on the lawn of the old Somerset farm home.” They had a picnic dinner followed by fishing on Lake Phelps. “Some spent the night in the camps on the shore of the lake.” \textit{RBWCN}, June 18, 1937.

\textsuperscript{56} Division of Information, RA, “Suiting the Farms to the Times at Scuppernong Farms,” April 23, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 163-01; \textit{RBWCN}, August 27, 1937.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{RBWCN}, April 30, 1937; \textit{RBWCN}, August 27, 1937.
Funding for Scuppernong was always a concern, and despite the enthusiasm of authorities in the RA and FSA, the project seemed to be touch-and-go. Even after purchasing well over 10,000 acres of land in Washington and Tyrrell counties, valued at more than $300,000, the government’s initial allotment to the project was only $50,000, with no further contributions in sight. People in the area remained hopeful. It seemed only logical for the government to become more heavily invested in an area with such rich agricultural potential, and which was simultaneously growing in other ways, as evidenced by the establishment of the North Carolina Pulp and Paper Company in Plymouth, and the opening of the new Albemarle Sound bridge. Moreover, local people doubted “that Uncle Sam would go so far as to purchase several thousand acres of land and then walk off and leave it.” Indeed, Uncle Sam’s attention was essential: no other body had the financial wherewithal to take on the massive drainage projects necessary to free up more land for growing numbers of farmers. Where slave labor had once filled this need, now only the federal government could marshal the equipment and workforce required, and proponents of Scuppernong Farms had faith that it would come through.\(^58\)

Though they were perpetually underfunded, the existence of the resettlement projects in Washington and Tyrrell counties suggested that the federal government was finally turning toward the best interests of the South in general and the Albemarle in particular, “because the times demand the proper economic use of our human and natural

\(^{58}\) RBWCN, September 3, 1937; Division of Information, RA, “Suiting the Farms to the Times at Scuppernong Farms,” April 23, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 163-01.
resources.” Indeed, the times demanded federal intervention in a place where intervention was typically considered tantamount to assault. The Depression focused new attention on the South as the region’s economic health became a gauge of the nation’s strength as a whole. And whereas impoverished southerners were once likely to have rejected federal intervention out of resentment left over from the Civil War and Reconstruction, in the 1930s they looked to New Deal programs to help them out of dire straits. The Depression was thus a transitional time in the relationship between the federal government and the South, and the anxieties associated with that transition played out in small and large ways as both government developers and local people worked to build the resettlement projects in the Albemarle.

The federal government recognized that it could play a pivotal role in solidifying northeastern North Carolina’s economic health, and while the RA and FSA faced financial constraints other federal agencies stepped in to try to help solve the problem. The WPA put 37 men to work during the fall of 1937 to widen the canals dug by Josiah Collins I’s slaves and clear out the overgrowth and debris that had accumulated over the past several decades. Despite the concerns of Scuppernong’s community manager, T.W.


61 RBWCN, August 27, 1937; RBWCN, September 10, 1937.
Armstrong, that WPA laborers were “insufficient and [of] a very poor class,” and his determination to replace them with other workers, the project pressed on and the laborers succeeded in draining and improving the land around Lake Phelps.62

The WPA workers provided service to the projects that would enable renewed cultivation at Somerset and continued improvement of neighboring farms. Armstrong reported to the Roanoke Beacon, “from now on the old farms north of the Lake are expected to be the scene of an experiment which may prove to be of great importance to American agriculture.”63 In addition, the WPA also began the first government-sponsored restorations to the site’s buildings. Workers made repairs to the roof and porches of the Collins house “in order to preserve the building,” and to adapt the mansion and dependencies for use as workshops and storage facilities for the FSA’s supplies and tools. The mansion also functioned as a shelter for men who were guards and emergency workers and thus needed to be on the project site at early or odd hours.64

Officials in the FSA persevered in building Scuppernong Farms, and construction bids on the first 23 family farms at Somerset and adjacent farmland to the east—furnished with houses, smoke houses, barns, outdoor privies and driven pump wells—

62 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, September 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1. See also Memorandum, Fred Drayer to George Mitchell, April 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 120; RBWCN, September 10, 1937.

63 RBWCN, September 10, 1937.

opened on November 24, 1937. But less than a month later, six of the families who had been accepted as clients and received building loans had already withdrawn from the project because it had not met their expectations. The farmers were enthusiastic about resettlement in principle, but they did not always appreciate the specific situation that Scuppernong could offer. As one client explained, “I don’t like where the places is at [sic] and I decided not to farm any more. Therefore, I wish to withdraw and cancel loan made me during June for $2300.00.” Another client, Mrs. C.G. Craddock, wrote to Armstrong, “I am not willing to move on the lake, I just don’t like the place as the convenience for the school child will be bad so I don’t want to go.” In Armstrong’s estimation, few of the clients who withdrew did so on solid grounds: “The majority of reasons given [by the farmers] were general dissatisfaction with location in what is known as the lake section. The truth of the matter is their wives are dissatisfied with the selection and wish to still remain living on a public paved road, which is impossible in this case.” Scuppernong Farms was isolated: road access to and from the project was limited, and it was a considerable distance from the towns that might offer consumer and other services, such as Plymouth or Columbia.

For a variety of reasons it was difficult at first for Scuppernong Farms to generate enough applications from prospective clients. Organizers believed this was because the

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65 RBWCN, November 12, 1937. For more on the impact of the WPA, see Tarlton, 49-65.

66 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, November 27, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1. See also Samuel Furlough to T.W. Armstrong, November 12, 1937; Mrs. C.G. Craddock to T.W. Armstrong, November 2, 1937; and James T. Spruill to T.W. Armstrong, November 1, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 51, Folder 912.
families they were targeting did not read the newspapers where they placed advertisements for occupancy. As a result, organizers requested that county farm agents and rural rehabilitation supervisors begin making direct referrals of clients to the project. Instead of considering the possibility that there were flaws in the project that made it less than entirely attractive even to farmers who were otherwise destitute, they surmised that all they needed to do was provide more effective marketing in order to fill the spots available in the settlement.

The FSA was convinced that its methods of farm and home management offered the best pathway to success and independence for poor farm families, and they stepped up their efforts to provide guidance to prospective clients in order to get them to understand the opportunities that Scuppernong could provide. The FSA prided itself on being an agency that eschewed handouts of money and worked with clients to help them learn techniques for self-sufficiency. According to one supervisor in Washington County,

It isn’t just money that FSA borrowers need. They also want help in developing a farm plan to eliminate the unwise practices that have contributed to their failure in the past and to substitute practices that will enable them to succeed. The borrower’s ability to repay his FSA loan depends largely upon his desire to change from the system of farming which has not in the past proved successful. We help him draw up a sound plan of operation for his farm, and after making sure the plan is workable, we lend him the money to buy the things necessary to carry out the plan. Then, as we go along, we help the borrower keep on the right track and show him how to do the things necessary for farming success.

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68 RBWCN, April 27, 1944.
The FSA’s philosophy was based on the notion that it had the answers to the problems facing the poorest farmers, and that its primary task was to persuade and teach its client base—sometimes at their request, and sometimes not. The agency’s credo stated:

“…We believe that sound farm and home management can do as much (and more) for the poor families as loans and grants… We believe rehabilitation can be attained only after the families are taught better farm and home practices. We believe our program to be so sound that the people who understand it will accept it.” The key, according to FSA officials, was to find farmers who had the capacity to learn and practice the techniques, and who would internalize the agency’s ideals and methods as their own.69

Family selection and client satisfaction were ongoing concerns at Scuppernong Farms. Supervisors and administrators used a detailed screening process to identify the best clients from pools of applicants for residency in the communities. According to Homer Mask, a regional director of the RA, “each farmer selected for the Creswell project [Scuppernong] must be physically fit, morally dependable and mentally capable of successful farm operation.”70 Families were required to submit general application forms; a Family Information Schedule completed by the Farm Management Specialist, Home Management Supervisor or the Family Selection Specialist in the presence of the husband and wife; reference letters; a medical screening report; and a narrative report detailing family background, children, work record, farm experience, “cooperative

70 RBWCN, June 12, 1936.
spirit,” financial status, and present living conditions. Project supervisors preferred young couples for the project, though they occasionally accepted older people who could prove that they were stable, hard workers. In every case, before receiving funds, farm families were required to work with government officials—primarily from the office of the county resettlement supervisor or agricultural agent—to design a plan of action that would show how their farm would generate cash for survival and to pay off their loan.

In addition to fulfilling demographic, physical and practical requirements, to be eligible for a loan, families also had to demonstrate certain moral qualities: they had to show that they were “industrious” and despite bad luck and circumstances, “deserve[d] a chance to prove their worth.” If a family’s morals were not up to standard, they were not approved. For instance, a farm management supervisor rejected the farmer Ashby Haire’s application for occupancy at Scuppernong partly because he was in poor health but also because his “girls are wild and not desirable residents of the community.” Supervisors rejected the family of S.J. Sexton because of Mr. Sexton’s tendency to go “on drunks for a day or two at [a] time,” during which “his wife has had the habit of taking up with a Negro man.” Families were rejected for all manner of reasons, most

73 RBWCN, January 31, 1936.
74 RBWCN, January 31, 1936.
commonly when some members had reputations for laziness, poor housekeeping, alcoholism or perceived sexual impropriety.75

Once a family made it through the arduous screening process and was accepted to Scuppernong, however, supervisors pledged to give members a fresh start. “To meet the psychological need of these families for a complete change in life as they become participants in the new community, with the assurance that not too much of their past record is carried over as a factor affecting this new relationship,” screening records were not kept on the project itself. Instead, summaries of pertinent information were transferred on to cards that allowed the community manager access to information necessary for the project’s function, and in a format that would be practical for him to use.76 The screening process was fairly discreet, but the FSA went out of its way to continue monitoring client families once they were in occupancy.

Professional supervisors, who kept an eye on the progress and behavior of clients and who were charged with developing the clients’ farm and home plans, were in many ways the heart of the FSA’s resettlement programs. The resettlement and rehabilitation projects involved authorities at all levels of government, but the basis of the structure was the county office staffed by supervisors and assistants who dealt with everything concerning the farm family’s homestead. “We believe,” the FSA’s credo read, “that the success of the Farm Security program depends on the intelligence and eagerness to serve

75 E.P. Welch to C.B. Faris, October 26, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 911-045.

on the part of all Farm Security Administration employees, and particularly on the part of
the county staffs….”77 There was always some tension between county workers and
officials in Washington; the federal office was legitimately concerned about the county
and district supervisors’ tendency to work mainly with the “upper-crust” of the low-
income farm population and, particularly in the South, to discriminate against African
American applicants when they judged applications for resettlement services.78 Yet the
district and county offices allowed the FSA to maintain close ties to the particular
communities they served; therefore, it was crucial that the federal office allow local
officials, in particular county farm and home supervisors, some discretion. Of all the
FSA officials, the farm and home management supervisors tended to have the most
frequent, regular contact with farm families. The supervisors may not have been
powerful in terms of setting FSA policy, but they had an enormous impact on the climate
of the projects for clients, and the home supervisor played a particularly important role.

Structured home management programs were not new in Washington County.
For nearly 25 years home demonstration agents had been working with “country women”
to blot “out the ugly, drab word ‘drudge,’” and add “to their limited vocabularies…a
beautiful, shining new word ‘Homemaker.’” Local women appear to have taken to home
demonstration work with enthusiasm. When the FSA instituted home management
strategies at Scuppernong Farms it thus included resettlement clients in trends already

77 Gaer, 66-7.
78 Baldwin, 254. For more on discrimination in selection see Leighninger, 164.
popular in the broader local community. The FSA’s home supervisors did not stand out from home management agents elsewhere in society, but the agency’s focus on home management did distinguish the resettlement programs from earlier methods of rural relief. With home supervisors, the FSA attended not only to the male household head or farmer and material goods that composed the farm, but to his wife and children and their home as well. This meant that every member of the family was given explicit value in the work of resettlement.

Home management supervisors impressed upon farm families that every member of the household played an important role in ensuring resettlement’s success. The overall goal of the home management supervisor was to help the family become self-sufficient by recognizing “the importance of household operations in any family economy, particularly among families who work on a very small margin…”

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79 Darden, The Story of Washington County. NCC; RBWCN, June 5, 1936; RBWCN, November 27, 1936.

80 “The experience of the FSA during these years represented a major innovation: on a very large scale, professionally trained technicians were providing assistance not only to the low-income farmer’s chickens and cows, but also to him and his family” (Baldwin, 249-50). There is a vast and varied literature that discusses historical links between the domestic and public economies and the health of the home—particularly via women, mothers and children, the actors that many have considered embodiments of that notion—with the health of the nation. For just a few of the many examples, see: Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in The Early Republic (New York: Oxford, 1990); Antoinette Burton, Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture 1865-1915 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford, 1995); Stephanie Shaw, What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” History Workshop Journal 5 (Spring 1978): 9-56.

management supervisors at Scuppernong were women trained in home economics—usually hired by the government from outside of Washington and Tyrrell counties, but occasionally drawn from the local population—who spent most of their time talking with farm women about almost every detail of their lives, from food preparation and housekeeping to marital concerns and child-rearing. Even the community manager seems to have taken on aspects of this task, requesting booklets from the FSA for distribution at the project that included the titles, “Child Management,” and “Are You Training Your Child to be Happy?” The FSA relied heavily on the home supervisors’ relationships in the field with client families, and home management became one of the hallmarks of the resettlement projects.

From the perspective of the supervisors and other officials, careful supervision of clients was necessary in order to rehabilitate poor farm families, to best use available farmland, and thus to protect the government’s investment. As the chief administrator of the RA, Will Alexander reported in 1937, “Liens on the clients’ chattels and crops are required as security for rehabilitation loans… Nevertheless, the cooperation between clients and county and home supervisors in working out farm and home plans, and the supervision given by these representatives have constituted the best security for funds


83 Baldwin, 252-3.
advanced to these clients.” Families may have been lucky to be accepted to the projects, but with the loans and other kinds of assistance came the constant obligation to prove their merit. Families had to repay the government in both literal and figurative terms: they needed to make their installments in cash and demonstrate their productivity in crops, and they also had to show in less tangible ways that they deserved the help that the government had deigned to give.

To Mitchell, the FSA’s strategies were working, and he was proud of what the agency accomplished in North Carolina in 1938. He wrote to the county supervisors in the Albemarle, “The…farm families farming under the Rural Rehabilitation program of the Farm Security Administration in Region IV have made definite progress during the past two years and you and those associated with you are to be congratulated for the part you have played in making this possible.” Resettlement families were repaying their loans; they had increased their net worth, required less credit, and overall raised their quality of life significantly from their position only two years before. 86 80 percent of cleared land was in cultivation, and all families who were living at Scuppernong started the year showing a good yield of crops.

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85 RBWCN, May 29, 1936.

86 RBWCN, May 13, 1938.

87 Monthly narrative project report for Scuppernong Farms as of August 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 100.
Although they faced some challenges such as construction delays and poor weather, client families tried to keep a positive attitude toward the project and the FSA forged ahead with more ambitious plans.\textsuperscript{88} Officials at Scuppernong continued to review new applications for occupancy and developers thought seriously about how to encourage a sense of community among client families.\textsuperscript{89} One of their strategies was to construct a Community Building for white clients on what used to be the great east lawn of Somerset Place, where “several members of the Collins household” were buried, and where the Collinses had once grazed sheep, and raced horses on two concentric tracks.\textsuperscript{90} On the lawn, in the canals, in the mansion and elsewhere, Somerset Place began to see more activity than it had in years. For the first time in decades, farmland at the site had been drained and was being actively cultivated; there was new construction; and the WPA carried on with renovations and restorations of some existing buildings.

There was widespread approval for the restoration work as the popularity of historic preservation grew quickly in Washington County. Somerset Place ranked high on the list of places that residents wanted not only to preserve but to upgrade in order to


\textsuperscript{89} Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, April 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1; Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, January 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.

\textsuperscript{90} Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Master Plan 1979}, 45, NCHSS; Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, September 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1; Tarlton, 66.
encourage continuing use and thus maintain the site’s relevance to the contemporary population. In some ways, however, the restorations were one step forward and three steps back: they involved maintaining and saving some historical features but in the process destroying others, all in the name of improvement. In order to build service roads, for example, that would allow workers better access and modify the site to provide visitors with a more pleasant experience, the WPA and FSA made significant changes to the site’s nineteenth-century façade, and they razed remainders of its slave community to the ground.\footnote{For more on the changes the WPA and FSA made to the site, see Tarlton, 49-52; see also 65-66 for a specific discussion of the east lawn.}

At the time, such destruction seemed a justifiable move. Perhaps more accurately, for those who were most directly involved in the work, the destruction of the slave community was immaterial as they never considered the quarters or outbuildings to be the kinds of features worth preserving in the first place. If anything, these were evidence of exactly the kind of poverty and exploitation in the past that the federal projects aimed to stamp out. And while some might see the restored Collins mansion as a reinforcement of oppressive elitism, the WPA, FSA and local supporters identified it simply as a beautiful structure that reflected the wealth of the land and “added new interest” for the homesteaders and “outside people” in the surrounding communities.\footnote{Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, May 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.} The history in which developers and local observers were interested was the history of...
the Collinses, which they adopted as the heritage of white people in general, ignoring any class divisions that had existed in the past or persisted in contemporary life. Perhaps in an effort to link them to the Collins’ lofty story, Scuppernong’s community manager encouraged residents, who were all white, to record their memoirs and document the history of the area.93

Local interest in preservation entwined with an impulse that ran throughout the broader constellation of New Deal initiatives to collect historical data on the daily lives of regular people.94 Members of the Collins family were hardly regular people themselves, and there was a notable irony in the attention bestowed on their home while so much of the rest of the plantation, where common workers and slaves would have lived and toiled, was sacrificed to the bulldozer. Yet this irony either went unrecognized or was simply swept aside. Mitchell concurred with Armstrong’s impression that collecting historical

93 Letter, T.W. Armstrong to George S. Mitchell, January 29, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60. Thomas Pettigrew, whose ancestors had once owned some of the land on which the government project was being built, wrote to Armstrong in October 1939, offering to help Armstrong as much as possible “as to the Pettigrew or Collins families, or anything about the past conditions of the plantations.” Letter, Thomas Pettigrew to T.W. Armstrong, October 9, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 160. For his part, Armstrong suggested that Pettigrew talk with Morris and Norse at the State Park Service. See letter, Armstrong to Howard Gordon, October 26, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 160. Pettigrew was already elderly at that time, but Armstrong trusted that his memory was sound, and that he could offer useful information about the land as he remembered it, some six decades in the past. Letter, Armstrong to Howard Gordon, October 26, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 160. Pettigrew reassured him that this was the case, and that additional visits to the region were unnecessary. Instead, he offered to “make free hand sketches of the building layout on Bonarva, Somerset, Lake-field, Weston, Magnolia and Belgrade with such notes as occur me… You know, that one can remember local conditions often better if he does not get himself mentally confused by the great changes in the actual ground.” Letter, Thomas Pettigrew to Armstrong, October 23, 1939, and Letter, Armstrong to Howard Gordon, October 26, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 160.

94 Berlin, et al., xv.
data at and around Scuppernong was crucial: he had “always felt a sense of responsibility for the history of the lands which we are greatly altering, and it is really in order that people later on may have all we could get about the way the land used to be tilled that I asked for this information to be compiled.” Historical information could provide keys to ongoing successful farming in the area, and on the whole, the RA and FSA remained as alert as ever to the ways in which Somerset’s historical value could lend legitimacy and bring positive attention to the Scuppernong project.  

Mitchell, Armstrong and others looked with great interest to the built environment at Scuppernong Farms for material links with the past. Yet that built environment caused them some measure of anxiety as they were not convinced that the state was pulling its weight when it came to preserving the historic structures under its jurisdiction. When one federal administrator visited Somerset in December 1938, he remarked on the “sad” comparison between the inside and outside of the mansion: he was pleased with the repairs the WPA had made to the exterior, and he urged the state of North Carolina to fulfill its promises to repair the inside of the house. He wrote that if state officials with Conservation and Development would visit and “see what [federal agencies have] accomplished, it might shame [them] into initiating some repairs to the interior.”

Indeed, a few months later, federal, state and local authorities gathered together and

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95 Letter, George S. Mitchell to T.W. Armstrong, February 2, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60.

96 Letter, Leo Stock to George Mitchell, December 28, 1938, NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 784.
announced their combined pledge to restore the mansion “as an inn with the outhouses, including the old kitchen and the office of the overseer, preserved for future generations…” 97

The FSA repeatedly walked a fine line between justifying Scuppernong through appeals to Somerset’s fabled history and claiming that the resettlement projects were a way for land that risked becoming an anachronism to remain useful in the present. When the agency made the decision to add two cooperative farms to the homesteads at Scuppernong, one of its prime justifications was that the cooperatives would permit clients to try their hands at “large-scale or modern plantation” cultivation at an historical farm. 98 Initially, Scuppernong Farms was based on a model of “individual family-sized farms,” which spoke to the agrarian ideal but was not necessarily the best way of allowing the most destitute farmers to compete in an environment that was becoming

97 RBWCN, August 8, 1940. In 1939, the engineering department at the University of North Carolina supervised a project to refurbish the cemetery near Lake Phelps, which included the grave of General James Johnston Pettigrew. Workers in the project cleaned the graves, fixed the stones, and cemented the cross on Pettigrew’s grave in place. It had been some years since St. Paul’s Episcopal church of Edenton had transferred responsibility for the cemetery to UNC, but the university did not make good on its promise to keep it in good condition until persuaded by a Pettigrew descendant living in Tryon. When the restoration was complete, T.W. Armstrong, the caretaker of the new federally-sponsored cooperative farm settlement at Somerset Place, promised that he would also recondition the land adjacent to the cemetery. RBWCN, August 31, 1939.

98 Facts About Scuppernong Farms, January 19, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60. Baldwin describes the structure of the cooperative associations on p. 206. The associations promoted a range of group services, including neighborhood action groups, medical care, debt adjustment and tenure improvement. In Washington County, the FSA established group health plans, which included dental and medical care. North Carolina was the first state to develop a hospital insurance plan for FSA clients (RBWCN, June 1, 1944). According to Baldwin, “group and cooperative activities became one of the most important and controversial instruments of rural rehabilitation” (203). “By the end of June, 1942,” he states, “more than $8 million had been loaned to over 16,000 cooperative groups then active” (203).
dominated by corporate agriculture.\textsuperscript{99} Many resettlement clients were unable to gain security while working on their own, and the family farms were leaving a sizeable potential client base—not least of all, African Americans—untapped.\textsuperscript{100} Cooperatives, by contrast, enabled farmers to pool their resources and thus purchase the expensive equipment and other supplies that would allow them to adopt new methods. From the FSA’s perspective, situating cooperatives alongside family farms meant that “the advantages of each type of farming can be compared one with the other on the same project.”\textsuperscript{101} Whereas the individual homesteads were intended as examples of farming as in Josiah Collins III’s day, in 1939 “modern plantations” were established at two cooperatives: the Scuppernong Mutual Association, 4900 acres for white farmers, and the Weston Mutual Association, 1600 acres for black.\textsuperscript{102}

As they emphasized group work and ownership of equipment, and introduced African American clients to the previously all-white Scuppernong Farms, the cooperatives were controversial from the start. According to one observer, “More than any other factor, the collectives have endangered the entire rehabilitation program.”\textsuperscript{103} FSA officials considered the associations “exciting social laboratories,” but critics in and

\textsuperscript{99} Facts About Scuppernong Farms, January 19, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60.

\textsuperscript{100} Mertz, 191-5, 205-7

\textsuperscript{101} Facts About Scuppernong Farms, January 19, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{N&O}, May 28, 1939; Facts About Scuppernong Farms, January 19, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 60.

\textsuperscript{103} Stephens, “FSA Fights for Its Life”: 482. See also Leighninger, 154.
out of Congress hated the notion of shared ownership of land and supplies, and they referred to the cooperatives as communist-inspired collectives.\textsuperscript{104} Opponents denounced the intense supervision that was, in their estimation, bad enough in the individual resettlement communities and worse in the cooperatives.\textsuperscript{105} There may have been some legitimacy to this concern. The FSA’s chief administrator enthused, “The large number of farmers grouped closely together on a leased plantation makes supervision of farm work easy. For this reason many of the plantations serve as a sort of training school for the more backward farmers.”\textsuperscript{106} To some in the agency, ease of supervision was a boon. But to many on the outside it was an example of unnecessary coddling and government meddling in what should have been personal affairs.

It was hard enough for some to accept federal intervention, redistribution and pooling of resources. But when the cooperatives made land and opportunities available for African Americans, they threatened to step completely beyond the pale. Overall, the New Deal did not have a good track record when it came to assisting African Americans: many of its most well-known relief programs, perhaps most spectacularly the AAA, were blatantly discriminatory. Yet within the context of resettlement, individual administrators, politicians and others urged an alternative course. Will Alexander, for

\textsuperscript{104} Quoted in Baldwin, 207. See also 78\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 2\textsuperscript{nd} Sess., House Report #1430, Activities of the Farm Security Administration: Report of the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration (Washington: USGPO, 1944), passim.

\textsuperscript{105} 78\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 2\textsuperscript{nd} Sess., House Report #1430, Activities of the Farm Security Administration: Report of the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration (Washington: USGPO, 1944): passim; Mertz, 79-80, 135.

\textsuperscript{106} US, FSA, Report of the Administrator of the FSA, 1940, 20.
instance, who led the government’s resettlement initiatives, had long been committed to assisting black clients on an equal basis with whites. In 1934, Eleanor Roosevelt invited African American leaders to the White House to discuss the scope and implications of segregation in the resettlement projects. The following year, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads declared that African Americans should be involved on an equal basis in decision-making regarding the communities, and that 10 percent of the homesteaders should be black. At least some federal officials and leaders knew from the early days of resettlement that they needed to serve African Americans. The problem was how to make that happen in a climate generally hostile to the idea.

As of 1935, despite a clear and immediate need for rural relief, impoverished black farmers rarely received adequate financial assistance; there were still no communities under construction specifically for African Americans, and creating integrated farms was a practical impossibility. Further, African Americans had little voice in the advisory committees and other bureaucratic structures formed to direct resettlement projects and funding. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads answered some of these problems by declaring that they would not build any more white

107 Mertz, 93. Of all the New Deal initiatives, the FSA was the most committed to eliminating “racial discrimination,” yet the process of selecting clients “was plagued with grassroots inequities” (Mertz, 193).

108 Conkin, 200.

homesteads until they could confirm that black clients were being served equally.\textsuperscript{110} This declaration resulted in two new projects for black clients in Virginia, but it did not solve the basic practical problem of providing sufficient relief to African Americans overall. Nor did it touch the underlying issue, which was white resistance to government spending on assistance to black people, period.\textsuperscript{111}

The FSA persevered in the face of “numerous” and effective protests by “white citizens” against extending relief to African American clients.\textsuperscript{112} Over the next several years it designated eleven cooperatives across the South for black farmers and their families, including the Weston Mutual Association at Scuppernong Farms. When news of the plan to build Weston reached North Carolina’s Congressman Lindsay Warren during the spring of 1938, Warren expressed his grave concern to George Mitchell:

Information comes to me that you are contemplating locating a negro settlement on the Pettigrew Farm of the Scuppernong project. I certainly trust that this is not true and that no negro settlement will be placed on any part of this particular farm.

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\textsuperscript{110} Division of Subsistence Homesteads, “Colored Projects,” n.d. NARA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, quoted in Conkin, 201.
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\textsuperscript{111} This resistance permeated government programming. Of 192,000 displaced black tenants in the South, only about 2,000 received purchase loans through the FSA. Abrams: 172. See also his section on Tillery, the black settlement in Halifax County, where he describes discrimination including Henry Wallace’s decision to spend less than budgeted on housing (173). See also Baldwin, 279-80, for a discussion of white resistance to black projects. For more on discrimination against black clients, see De Jong, 238.
\end{flushright}

Since 2005, the Concerned Citizens of Tillery have been operating the History House Museum, “an original Resettlement home and celebrates the history of Tillery with informative and interactive exhibits.” See \url{http://cct78.org/History percent20House.htm}, accessed May 8, 2008. They have recently produced a documentary film and radio program on Tillery in conjunction with Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies.

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\textsuperscript{112} Division of Subsistence Homesteads, “Colored Projects,” n.d., NARA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, quoted in Conkin: 201.
\end{flushright}
It will cause a howl of protest not only in North Carolina but in other southern states and it will have a very bad reaction.\textsuperscript{113}

Warren and others did not relish the change that Weston Mutual threatened. In Scuppernong Farms’ early years, while the government resettled white farmers at Somerset and Magnolia, “black tenant farmers and sharecroppers—many of them former Somerset slaves” remained on the periphery, living around “the outer edges of the estate,” where they “scraped a living from the land they had moved onto when they were set free.”\textsuperscript{114} If Weston were built, it was likely that former slaves might just receive something like their forty acres and a mule, and this was not a prospect that many whites could easily stomach.

The FSA tried, with the black cooperatives, to find a workable—if uncomfortable—balance between its wish to extend agricultural and social reform to African Americans and its need not to rock the boat too hard on American racial conventions. Despite plans to establish Weston for black farmers, integration was not the project’s goal: “…it is our desire to set up two separate and distinct farms,” Mitchell explained, suggesting that there were limits to the FSA’s radicalism.\textsuperscript{115} He reassured Congressman Warren that only minimal land was allocated for African American farmers

\textsuperscript{113} Letter, Lindsay Warren to George Mitchell, May 4, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 900.

\textsuperscript{114} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 122.

\textsuperscript{115} Letter, George Mitchell to Will Alexander, April 11, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 48, Folder 101.
and it was physically removed from the areas designated for whites, according in part to local expectations. “One or two people,” he wrote,

have told me that there would be objection to placing colored people near the cemetery and the Pettigrew homestead proper. This was never intended. So far as I had been able to learn the use by Negroes of the northern part of the Magnolia tract, well-removed from the lake front, met with no objection. I am anxious to take advantage of your intimate knowledge of local circumstances and to have the project a source of satisfaction to opinion in the counties and to you.116

Mitchell was sure to point out to critics such as Warren the FSA’s respect for segregation. The new cooperative, therefore, both upheld and challenged Jim Crow, as it maintained the practice of segregation while providing significant assistance, for the first time, to African American clients.

All the cooperatives got off to a rocky start but the process of establishing black projects such as the Weston Mutual Association proved to be especially arduous. Weston’s first stumbling block was finding clients. Reportedly, all African Americans “within the 25 mile area” were informed about the new cooperative, but they did not appear interested in becoming a part of it.117 A family selection specialist believed that “Local negroes are not in sympathy with the cooperative farming idea. It is thought that large land-owners in this immediate section have discouraged [them]…”118 African American tenants and sharecroppers who might have been interested in the cooperatives


117 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, November 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.

118 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, December 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.
likely experienced intimidation and threats from the landowners upon whom they usually relied for their subsistence, and officials with the FSA recognized that this was probably enough to keep them away from the programs that were offered.\footnote{Daniel, 194.}

There is no doubt that landlords and furnishing merchants often moved to control the lives of impoverished farmers; at the same time, some of the resistance to join the cooperatives also stemmed from the farmers’ personal preferences and the kinds of living conditions they considered attractive. Whereas many were interested in securing individual units on the homestead project, they turned up their noses at the idea of moving to the cooperative farm. Some may have been hesitant to support these ventures: the FSA’s self-proclaimed exciting experiment may have looked like a foolish risk to a lot of the farmers to whom it tried to appeal.\footnote{Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, November 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.} They may have been wary of being placed on segregated land, perhaps concerned that it was less fertile than the areas designated for whites. It was normal for poor black farmers to suffer discrimination and abuse—that was the precedent set not only by planters and landowners but also by most New Deal programming. They were accustomed to being exploited and had no reason to believe the FSA’s promises that Weston offered them a better situation than they might find anywhere else, and which was not inferior to services provided for whites. For families who were used to moving frequently, constantly searching for more productive
soil and better living conditions, making an apparently permanent commitment to a resettlement project may have been a dubious and daunting prospect.\textsuperscript{121}

In addition, the project at Weston had particular flaws, which were not at first clear to its organizers but which were enough to give potential clients pause. For instance, it was years before the community manager at Weston realized that a major obstacle in the way of convincing black families to join was substandard access to education for their children, since the county refused to provide transportation and the school was located approximately six miles away.\textsuperscript{122} One of the biggest stated concerns for all client families throughout Scuppernong Farms was access to schools. The white clients at the homesteads and at Scuppernong Mutual managed to secure cooperation from the School Board, which ensured that adequate school bus services would be available and worked with the project to build a school as a joint undertaking on FSA land adjacent to the town of Creswell.\textsuperscript{123}

On the very same issues, however, residents at Weston had no such luck.\textsuperscript{124} The Washington County School Board refused to transport any black schoolchildren, whether they lived at Weston or not. Knowing bus service was outside the scope of what any

\textsuperscript{121} De Jong, 235; Daniel, 188; Mertz, 194, 201.

\textsuperscript{122} Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, December 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.

\textsuperscript{123} Memorandum, C.B. Faris to George Mitchell, September 20, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 900.

\textsuperscript{124} Memorandum, C.B. Faris to George Mitchell, September 20, 1937. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 900; Monthly narrative project report as of August 27, 1938 for Scuppernong Farms. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 45, Folder 100.
African Americans could expect, Armstrong and residents at Weston worked together to try and secure a black instructor to teach the ten children living at the cooperative. The School Board agreed that once there were 25 children at Weston, it would ask the State School Commission to fund a teacher and hold classes in Scuppernong’s community building.\(^{125}\) Neither the School Board nor the state Commission appears to have followed through, however, and it is clear that authorities remained unsympathetic to black residents’ plight. Instead, the farmers and their families improvised solutions and by the fall of 1941 were able to use a truck they had purchased to transport children to and from school. By the end of the year it was expected that 35 children would use this service, and residents felt justified in asking again for formal support from school authorities.\(^{126}\)

Again, however, the residents hit a brick wall. In November 1941, the community service supervisor of the regional office of the FSA asked the State School Commission to fund a school bus for the children who lived at Weston. The State School Commission responded that it “was unable to deal with an individual or corporation in the matter of transporting children and return[ed] the responsibility of providing school facilities to the county board of education.”\(^{127}\) But the county also claimed it had no legal basis for forging such an arrangement. Early in the new year an attorney for Washington County’s School Board advised that it had no authority to enter into a


\(^{126}\) RBWCN, November 6, 1941.

\(^{127}\) RBWCN, December 4, 1941.
contract with Weston Mutual Association and that in any case, a rubber shortage made any arrangement untenable. The Roanoke Beacon reported the county attorney’s comments to the effect “that the shortage of tires and heavy taxes in prospect, coupled with financial difficulties faced by the county, called for curtailing expenses rather than increasing them…[and] any funds available should be spent on the school buildings rather than for new trucks….“128 Despite their pleas, and despite the fact that inequities like the School Board’s failure to provide both black and white clients with schools and bus service was actually keeping Weston from attracting as many settlers as it otherwise might, the black cooperative remained distinctly underserved.

Instead of looking carefully at the conditions at Weston, however, and trying to ascertain the degree to which the cooperative actually served the interests of the families it targeted, organizers assumed—just as they had when they inaugurated Scuppernong Farms—that the farmers simply needed time to learn about the benefits the cooperatives could offer. They refused to acknowledge the persistent inequalities between services for white and black clients and they were convinced that the central problem was black farmers’ attitudes, which would change once they saw the success of the white cooperative build.129 In the meantime, the FSA hired Isaiah Hilliard, a “negro family selection specialist,” to try to convince more black farmers to join. He had limited success. By the end of December 1938, only four black families had filed applications

128 RBWCN, January 22, 1942.
129 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, November 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.
for membership.\textsuperscript{130} These families became the poorest of the poor at Scuppernong, mostly young couples with few possessions and very little money. The community manager requested that the FSA provide grants to help them buy basic necessities, such as stoves, heaters, groceries, and clothes. They were deemed by the FSA to deserve assistance and to have a strong potential for rehabilitation, yet they presented a narrow and somewhat unstable foundation for a project that was already a considerable risk.\textsuperscript{131} Still, these families helped Weston to get off the ground. Although it was still operating at less than half its capacity, over the next five months the number of black families on the project rose to twelve.\textsuperscript{132}

Within the year, FSA advisors argued that all the projects at Scuppernong were succeeding. Conditions had improved over 1938: the weather was better and the bulk of the clients took pride in their land and worked hard to make up for earlier crop failures.\textsuperscript{133} 70 households were producing 33,000 bushels of beans and 60,000 bushels of corn, and raising 14 hogs, 700 tons of hay, and food and feed for personal use.\textsuperscript{134} A nationwide

\textsuperscript{130} Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, December 27, 1938, NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.

\textsuperscript{131} Letter, T.W. Armstrong to George Mitchell, January 14, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 51, Folder 912.

\textsuperscript{132} Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, May 27, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.

\textsuperscript{133} Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, May 27, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1; Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, November 27, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{RBWCV}, December 28, 1939, and Letter, Marshall Thompson to John Fischer, December 6, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 163-01.
survey, which included reports from the 275 FSA borrowers in Washington and Tyrrell counties, showed that farmers working in the FSA resettlement program were increasing their net worth, repaying their debts, and making a better living.\textsuperscript{135} Indeed, the entire project was beginning to break even financially, including the cooperatives.\textsuperscript{136} An observer for the agency wrote that the crops at the cooperatives were better than on the homesteads, and that homesteaders were requesting to be transferred to Scuppernong Mutual.\textsuperscript{137} Armstrong and other officials continued to seek out ways of attracting additional settlers to the projects, especially after the FSA bought another 534 acres of land in November, which enabled the agency to open contracts for 41 new houses, repair 18 others at the cooperatives, and thus accommodate growing numbers of families.\textsuperscript{138}

But as they expanded the project officials became more selective about the families they would accept. This was largely the result of a difficult experience during the previous year when they resettled ten families from the Guntersville Reservoir in northern Alabama.\textsuperscript{139} The Alabama families arrived about a month earlier than organizers at Scuppernong had expected, and they had to scramble to find these new

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{RBWCN}, July 14, 1939.


\textsuperscript{137} Letter, Marshall Thompson to John Fischer, December 6, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 163-01.


\textsuperscript{139} Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, December 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.
clients temporary lodging. As a result, some were placed with families already living at
the project, and others in the Collins house. There was no shortage of work for the
farmers to do at the cooperative, and “they were immediately put to work by the
Scuppernong Mutual Association clearing and cleaning ditches, arranging and storing
corn, hay and soy beans which were being purchased by the Association for 1939
operation.” But project supervisors soon began to suspect that the new settlers were
not up to the task of successful farming either there or on individual land. Within a
few months of their arrival the Alabama families were causing the project “considerable
embarrassment” by heavy drinking and fighting.

More problems ensued as it became clear that the new clients were in failing
health. At first, managers believed that their illnesses were “probably due to a change in
climate.” But Armstrong discovered shortly that some of them had arrived with
preexisting conditions, including tuberculosis. At the request of the Tennessee Valley
Authority, the FSA’s Assistant Regional Director, C.B. Faris, had gone against protocol
and postponed physical examinations of the clients until they arrived in North

November 28, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 911-045; Narrative report,
Scuppernong Farms, December 27, 1938. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.

141 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, May 27, 1939, NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47,
Folder 183-1.

1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 50, Folder 911-045.

143 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, December, 27, 1938, NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4,
Box 47, Folder 183-1.
Families in the Alabama group required weeks of medical supervision in order to recover, and some ultimately chose to return home. Authorities at Scuppernong Farms were angry at Faris’ choice not to carry out standard medical screening, and insisted that in the future, family selection must include “a very thorough examination” by a government-approved doctor. Faris’ decision to cut corners with the Alabama resettlement led to stricter controls overall. On the bright side, the project made a special effort to ensure the recovery and ongoing health of the families that remained, and the community nurse recommended a course of instruction for all residents—those from Alabama and those from North Carolina—in the importance of preventative health care. At the same time, Armstrong and Faris agreed that the experience with the Alabama recruits was so bad they should make it a policy to deny occupancy to any more applicants from that state.

The incident with the Alabama families aside, however, by 1939 organizers at Scuppernong Farms were mostly pleased with the composition of the project’s client base. There were client families who needed constant supervision in order to fulfill the


145 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, February, 27, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1. Of the ten families that had been resettled from Alabama, three chose to leave. They requested permission to return later on, though their requests were denied.

146 Public health report for Scuppernong Farms, June 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1. One of the FSA’s primary contributions was its attempt to create health plans—including preventative health care and health insurance—for impoverished farm families. See Grey.

FSA’s goals, but the organizers believed they were finally rid of the worst ‘undesirables,’ some of whom had left voluntarily after being grandfathered into the project because they already occupied dwellings when the government first bought the land, and others who had joined the project as clients and either withdrawn or left on request. The farmers that remained were committed to their own and to Scuppernong’s success. Withdrawals from occupancy at the project varied between ten to eleven percent, which was lower than the turnover rate on private plantations, and Armstrong justified the choices of the families who left, explaining that “some of the farms turned out to be not as well drained and productive as others.” Many of the families still lived in less than comfortable conditions, but a county supervisor pointed out that building up a farm is a gradual process, and therefore the long range goals of the FSA—improving soil condition, establishing quality homes and farms, developing the land and infrastructure, and enabling farmers to become independent—were still to come. In the meantime, the clients were fairly patient; they saw themselves working at Scuppernong for the long haul and were willing to put in the effort it took to build their community.

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148 Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, March, 27, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1. See also subsequent monthly reports re. the necessity for constant supervision.

149 RBWCN, July 14, 1939.


151 RBWCN, July 14, 1939.

Yet there was still the matter of the degree to which Scuppernong Farms could fulfill the client families’ growing sense of independence and desire to control their own lives. As the projects developed, there was marked improvement in the land and the economic standing of the farmers, and there were noticeable changes in the clients themselves as they began to take more control over the way their community was run.\footnote{Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, May 27, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1.} For instance, in the spring of 1939, residents formed a Community Council elected by popular vote. Armstrong approved of this move, primarily because the Council could help to mediate disputes between residents and therefore would “be of considerable aid in the management of the Project as a whole from a community interest standpoint and the saving of considerable embarrassment and possible court cost to the homesteaders and cooperatives.”\footnote{Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, April 27, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1. There is no indication in the documentary record of whether or not this council included black representatives of Weston.} In addition to mediation, the Council also organized white clients socially by sponsoring community recreational and educational events including the first two annual farm and field days in August of 1939 and 1940.

The field days attracted large crowds, and at least for whites helped to “create a neighborly feeling among the clients and outside neighboring families” through the shared experiences of parades and pageants, picnics, speeches, farm tours, games and athletic events.\footnote{Narrative report, Scuppernong Farms, August 27, 1939. NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 47, Folder 183-1; RBWCN, August 24, 1939. The records of field days and leisure activities at the white}
community building showcasing information about historical events, health, women’s club work, and advances in farming since “old plantation days.” There was a “Somerset Club booth” that included “paint-up and fix-up-the-homestead exhibits,” and other exhibits featuring live-at-home plans, canning demonstrations, and information on maternity and infant care.\textsuperscript{156} Residents also held an Occupants’ Picnic in the summer of 1939, with 1,000 farmers and farm families from Scuppernong and surrounding communities in attendance.\textsuperscript{157} Shortly thereafter the \textit{Roanoke Beacon} began reporting on social events at Scuppernong Farms in regular columns alongside details of social scenes in other communities in the area, noting visitors to the settlement, births and deaths, and a variety of activities initiated by residents.\textsuperscript{158}

These kinds of developments were significant markers of how far some client families had come in only two to three years. Families came to the project suffering the paralyzing effects of poverty and dislocation: resettlement clients were drawn from pools of people who had exhausted all other options and were especially desperate for help. They were economically, socially and politically disadvantaged, and they were also frequently ill: the root causes of the apparently “lazy, shiftless” behavior that some client community house do not specify that black clients were excluded, but based on the conventions of segregation, the likelihood that they were welcome to participate is very low. There was a community house on the black cooperative farm, but there is no record of equivalent organized events taking place there.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{RBWCN}, August 8, 1940; \textit{RBWCN}, July 25, 1940; \textit{RBWCN}, August 1, 1940.

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{RBWCN}, August 31, 1939.

\textsuperscript{158} See \textit{RBWCN} beginning September 21, 1939.
farmers had exhibited before resettlement were malnutrition and related disease, which made initiative of any kind a struggle.\textsuperscript{159} As they lived at Scuppernong Farms, their physical and psychological states changed, and new behaviors followed.\textsuperscript{160}

Even as the FSA assisted farmers in improving their lives, it also encouraged them, mostly unintentionally, to begin to take more control of their day to day activities and to question the agency’s advice. In the spring of 1940, Faris actually chastised Armstrong for wielding too much power over the clients at the cooperative farms: he argued that the clients were not sufficiently included in planning the farm work and informed Armstrong that many people involved with Scuppernong disliked his management style. Faris wrote:

I feel that you personally stand much higher in the esteem of those above you than you do with your own employees and your own Project families. The reason for this, no doubt, is your uncompromising position on matters of compliance to each and every order and to your desire to get work done. At any rate, such a position makes for insecurity and is a poor foundation upon which to stand. I feel that you need to cultivate an attitude of helpfulness, patience, as well as an attitude of give and take since you are dealing with human beings. …I am asking that you make yourself one of your people…and that you assume also the attitude of staying in the background while actually, of course, in the lead.\textsuperscript{161}

Considering that guidance through close supervision and detailed farm and home plans were the cornerstone of the FSA’s work with resettlement clients, Faris’ request for

\textsuperscript{159} Stephens: 484.  

\textsuperscript{160} Grey, \textit{passim}.  

Armstrong to back off and cooperate with rather than tell clients what to do was especially significant.

The resistance of client families to the agency’s guidelines was equally telling. The strategies that FSA workers recommended were sometimes at odds with clients’ understanding of proper use of land and the various roles that family members played on the farm. As they spent longer at the project they began more frequently and with greater strength to fight back. Farming men argued that the FSA was asking them to do “woman’s work,” and they took issue with being told to plant at times and with methods that bucked longstanding tradition. They also took issue with being told how to spend their money. Tenants and sharecroppers in the South were used to spending some of the money they received at the end of the season on new clothing or something that was a relative luxury, such as special food or something for their home, but FSA administrators designed farm and home plans so that clients were required to reserve the money for practical purposes only.  

FSA workers were consistently surprised by the resistance they confronted from clients. They did not expect poor farm families to have a problem with their approach. The FSA tried to resettle small farmers at Scuppernong in order to bring productivity back to Somerset and its environs without the exploitation of either slavery or tenant farming; indeed, it tried to bring back productivity by stamping out historical forms of exploitation. But federal administrators seem to have underestimated the degree of

\[^{162}\text{Baldwin, 275-6.}\]
control that was central to resettlement efforts. The position of the resettled farmers was not akin to slavery by any stretch of the imagination. But the settlers were not entirely free either.\textsuperscript{163}

The FSA’s strategies of resettlement depended on intense control and supervision. Administrators and supervisors underestimated the degree to which the farmers would resist being told what to do, and they were caught off guard when farmers expressed anxiety about participating in the resettlement programs at all. Low-income rural people were sometimes anxious about taking what they considered “charity” from the FSA.\textsuperscript{164} In a 1942 study, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics found that many farm families considered the FSA to be an “undesirable solution” to their problems, and one which they tried to avoid when ever possible.\textsuperscript{165} Guy Earnest, a resettlement client in Nebraska declared, “Four years ago I went to the Farm Security Administration for help, and at the present time I am satisfied that I made a terrible mistake.” He felt that the supervisors ruled with an iron fist: they told him what to do, and treated him with condescension. He summarized the project where he lived as a dismal failure where farmers were bought and bullied into silence by government officials.\textsuperscript{166} In a congressional debate in March 1942,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{163} Division of Information, RA, “Suiting the Farms to the Times at Scuppernong Farms,” April 23, 1937, NARA-SE, FHA, RG 96, FSA-Region 4, Box 46, Folder 163-01. See also US, FSA, Report of the Administrator of the FSA, 1941, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Baldwin, 274.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Earl H. Bell, “Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community,” Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Rural Life Studies II (Sept. 1942): 67, quoted in Baldwin, 274.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Congressional Record—Senate, 77\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 2\textsuperscript{nd} Sess., 1942: 4301.
\end{itemize}
the Representative for Georgia noted that clients said they were forced into debt beyond their abilities to repay; that they became responsible for the high costs of land purchases and unnecessary improvements; that all borrowers were saddled with paying the overhead costs of the cooperatives; and that FSA supervisors employed “dictatorial methods of supervision.” Politicians may have read such criticisms because they viewed resettlement through an already disapproving lens. They may very well have sought out negative commentary with the specific intention of using it as a weapon against the FSA, and when they reiterated the farmers’ complaints they were less concerned with helping the farmers themselves than mollifying the planters and their allies in the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service. Yet the politicians’ agenda does not negate entirely the fact that it was easy to find farmers who were displeased with the situation at the resettlement farms, and willing to voice their displeasure publicly.

Despite growing resistance among clients and difficulties elsewhere, however, the FSA continued to expand its projects. American entry into the Second World War seemed at first to offer a new opportunity for the FSA to demonstrate the significance of its work. In late 1941 and the beginning of 1942, the FSA expanded its emphasis on self-sufficiency for client families to include a “Food for Freedom” component in the farm and home plans. At Scuppernong Farms, residents were instructed to write production

goals into their annual plans, stipulating production levels above subsistence and financed by additional FSA credit, which would help supply goods for the open market.\textsuperscript{168}

The Food for Freedom program capitalized on one of the FSA’s main goals, which was to enable farmers to develop more efficient methods of production through highly organized management techniques. Roy Stillman, the chairman of Washington County’s Agricultural Defense Board, explained,

> When a family keeps a record book and carries on farming like business men carry on their business, then it isn’t difficult to increase production… Those [families] who have taken part in the rehabilitation program under the U.S. Department of Agriculture long enough to have worked out plans in previous years, now have their farm record books to help them plan for future operations.\textsuperscript{169}

Their efforts at production were a success, with families growing Victory gardens that flourished and boasted a wide variety of vegetables. Families on each farm within the Scuppernong project competed monthly for the prize for the best and most varied Victory garden, and farms competed with each other as well: in August 1942 the \textit{Roanoke Beacon} reported, “The colored families on Weston Farm lead all the other farms with an average variety of 14.7 per family.” The women of the farms went to work canning the surplus vegetables, with each farm challenging the others to see how much they could put up.\textsuperscript{170}  According to FSA officials, the farmers’ Victory gardens and their participation in

\textsuperscript{168} \textit{RBWCN}, January 22, 1942.

\textsuperscript{169} \textit{RBWCN}, March 26, 1942.

\textsuperscript{170} \textit{RBWCN}, August 20, 1942.
the Food For Freedom program were crucial parts of the US war effort.\textsuperscript{171} Vance E. Swift, the FSA State Director and member of the state USDA War Board, told an audience in Raleigh in August 1942, “We must take vigorous action to bring the little farmer into maximum production to help fill the United States bread basket.” Another delegate at the meeting suggested that the FSA farmers were in the ideal position to offer large amounts of food to the country’s stores.\textsuperscript{172} The US Secretary of Agriculture agreed, and directed the FSA to give full support to client farmers who were willing to do their part.\textsuperscript{173}

By tying the projects to the war effort, the FSA tried to boost its failing popularity with the public and the government and to thus redefine its social and political significance. As Will Alexander put it, the “troubles” of poor farmers “urgently concern the whole Nation—particularly at a time when every effort is being made to build up the national defense…These are exactly the kind of disheartened, hungry people to whom spreaders of discontent can appeal most effectively. Their interest in the defense of America would be much greater if they had more of a stake in the country.”\textsuperscript{174} The FSA provided services to the poor, which, according to Alexander, were crucial not only to fighting the war abroad, but to defending the front at home: resettlement could

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{171} RBWCN, October 15, 1942.
  \item \textsuperscript{172} N&O, August 29, 1942.
  \item \textsuperscript{173} RBWCN, October 15, 1942.
  \item \textsuperscript{174} US, FSA, \textit{Report of the Administrator of the FSA, 1940}, 3.
\end{itemize}
“salvage...rural people themselves...their health and self-confidence...their abilities and ambition. All these contribute in a large measure to the strength of our democracy.”

Even the cooperatives, which critics had always maligned as communist and anti-American, in fact stood “as a bulwark of democracy. Cooperative organizations, in which everyone is called upon to take his part, in which the success of each depends upon the effort of the whole, are the best possible training schools for the type of citizenry this country needs today.”

In order to save the agency as resettlement became dwarfed by the exigencies of American involvement in the war, Alexander and others in the organization moved quickly to defend it on ideological as well as practical grounds.

They aimed to show the nation that even though the Depression had lifted, the FSA and its programs still had enormous value. On an economic level, this made clear sense: with resettlement, the government spent about $75 per year assisting an individual family, compared with direct relief, which cost $350 per year per family. Alexander pointed out that now as much as ever the government needed to spend wisely in order to maintain its ability to fund its military efforts.

Yet, as the Second World War became more entrenched and changed the American economy and daily life, the FSA fell further and further out of favor. In September 1942, the Secretary of Agriculture directed the FSA to move its actions toward preparation and support for the war effort. But beyond

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encouraging farmers to grow more food and raise more livestock, the FSA was not equipped to meet these demands. 178

Ultimately, the FSA’s resettlement programs were destroyed through politics as the Roosevelt administration shifted its attention away from New Deal economic and social reform to war production and international affairs. There was guarded toleration for the FSA when the Depression was at its worst. 179 But at the first signs of improvement, the façade of toleration began to crumble. One newspaper in Alabama charged that the FSA promoted “socialistic dreams, dreams of things nearer revolution than reform, dreams of a governmental paternalism that goes beyond good sense or good policy.” 180 After several years in the spotlight, local newspaper coverage of activities at Scuppernong Farms tapered off quickly after 1942. In mid-1943 the number of FSA districts in the state was reduced from 12 to four, and federal funding for rural rehabilitation was restricted as part of an attack on the programs led in part by Harold D. Cooley of the Fourth North Carolina District. Cooley was sympathetic to the needs of the


179 According to Baldwin, “As long as the physical manifestations of general rural poverty were clearly visible and widely felt, the iconoclasm of the more militant New Dealers was tolerated. But as the pendulum began to swing back toward greater economic stability, poverty again retreated toward the dark side of the crescent moon, and the challenge to the status quo, implicit in the attempt to combat the hard core of that poverty, reawakened old fears” (267).

180 Birmingham Age-Herald, Mar. 11, 1943, quoted in Baldwin, 284.
small farmers that the FSA set out to help, but he disagreed vehemently with the FSA’s emphasis on cooperation and government control.  

The problems that arose for the resettlement projects in 1943 were hardly new. The FSA faced ongoing hostility from Congress throughout its life. In the early 1940s, Roosevelt needed Congress on his side and the New Deal communities were, at best, an embarrassment worth sacrificing in order to secure political support for the government’s war aims. Some suggested that Congress attacked the FSA as a scapegoat, an agency that took “the brunt of buffeting directed at the Administration….” In general, the FSA was a convenient target for “anti-New Dealers, Roosevelt-haters, and bureaucrat-baiters…” Congress had never supported it and had always been particularly resistant to rural resettlement and ready to attack as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

As early as 1939, Congress refused to fund the final phases of construction on existing resettlement communities; in 1940, it put a stop to all funding for the cooperatives. Overall, the FSA’s programs had always received inadequate support and in North Carolina even the money they did get did not always go to the neediest people:

182 Conkin, 227.
183 “Pillar of Democracy”: 225.
184 Baldwin, 318.
185 Conkin, 223.
the tenant purchase and resettlement programs were restricted to an almost insignificant number of the state’s farmers."\textsuperscript{186} Part of the problem was that resettlement agents intervened on behalf of the laboring class of farmers. This put the RA and FSA in direct conflict with the “advantaged” farmers, who held a fair degree of local political and social power. When the RA moved in to try and help people at the bottom of the rural hierarchy, it highlighted the class tensions that already existed, and made them tangible in new government policy.

Commentators at the time pointed out that Congress’ problem with the FSA was not that it spent large sums of money, but that it tried to assist the people who would otherwise form the “large and easily available supply of cheap labor” for particular types of farming. With the FSA rehabilitating the poorest farmers and thus interfering with the labor supply, “Now the larger farmers, through the Congressional farm bloc, are out to kill. Their best weapons are the blunders which the FSA made.”\textsuperscript{187} And blunder it did: in general, the FSA seriously overestimated the profit that resettlement communities could make and their ability to be self-sustaining; and they offered clients two often contradictory goals, the goal of becoming independent and the goal of cooperation. As one scholar puts it, even without Congressional hostility,

\begin{quote}
the projects were in trouble. Individual units were often too small for clients to make enough money to hope to buy their own land; it was difficult to find suitable clients, especially after the start of the war; and individualistic clients failed to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{186} Badger, 45.

\textsuperscript{187} Stephens: 479. Stephens defines the “bloc” as the Extension Service, AAA and Farm Bureau pitted against the FSA and Farmers’ Union (481).
support cooperative activities, resented supervision, and were dismayed by the lack of progress toward purchasing their own farms. In fact, the ultimate solution to the problem of rural poverty would come not from the New Deal but from expanding employment opportunities in the cities. In the 1940s and 1950s black and white rural North Carolinians left the farm in large numbers to seek their fortunes in the burgeoning cities both within and outside the state.\footnote{Badger, 46.}

In the depths of the Depression, cooperation was attractive; but in time, individualism won out.\footnote{Stephens: 483.}

By 1942, the FSA was under serious attack in both the House and the Senate for the degree of government control it placed over agriculture. Many representatives did not believe that the FSA was operating along the lines of its mandate, as set out in the Bankhead-Jones Act. They argued that the Act had required resettlement projects to be liquidated as soon as possible; but rather than liquidate, the FSA instead expanded them and entrenched itself as what looked to critics like a permanent watchdog over small farming operations across the nation. The resettlement communities were always caught in this battle between blocs in Congress, blocs that argued over the agency’s ideological bent, political motivations and practical accomplishments.

After a full investigation of the agency, a congressional committee recommended that some of the FSA’s projects—but not the resettlement communities—be restructured in a new agency, the Farmers’ Home Corporation, which was free of the paternalistic and collectivist taint of the FSA.\footnote{Conkin, 227-9.} Scuppernong Farms, like all the resettlement projects, was

\footnote{188 Badger, 46.}
\footnote{189 Stephens: 483.}
\footnote{190 Conkin, 227-9.}
dismantled as the federal government turned its back on the FSA’s programming. It also came apart because of the changing context of wartime: men in the projects were drafted; and as new job opportunities opened up nearby, particularly at shipyards in Norfolk, Virginia, and at the pulp and paper mill in Roper, North Carolina, FSA client farmers elected to leave the land and move on to higher-paying industrial work.\(^{191}\)

In November 1945, the *Roanoke Beacon* announced on its front page that Scuppernong Farms would be liquidated.\(^{192}\) The FSA began auctioning off its land in North Carolina in the summer of that year, starting with farms in Richmond and Robeson counties, in compliance with a Congressional mandate that the FSA liquidate resettlement projects that it began between 1935 and 1937.\(^{193}\) The land at these projects and at Scuppernong was auctioned off under the care of Britt Davis of Columbia, Tennessee, a specialist in large-scale real estate operations.\(^{194}\)

For the most part, local residents of Washington County bought the land that was Scuppernong and reorganized it into private farms, sometimes combining several FSA properties into one, and sometimes enlarging the houses the agency had constructed for their own families to use.\(^{195}\) The Scuppernong auction included 8,000 acres of land, 80 dwellings, 340 buildings and 7,500,000 feet of timber, and it was expected to attract

\(^{191}\) Tarlton interview; Spear interview; Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Master Plan 1979*, 23, NCHSS.

\(^{192}\) *RBWCN*, November 13, 1945.

\(^{193}\) *N&O*, August 4, 1945.

\(^{194}\) *RBWCN*, November 13, 1945.

\(^{195}\) Tarlton interview. According to Cahoon, the home of the present-day site manager at Somerset, Dorothy Redford, may also have been an FSA house. Cahoon interview.
major attention. But the article that publicized it understated and dismissed the past eight years of work in one fell swoop. “This property,” it simply stated, “was bought by the FSA in the middle 30’s and operated as a resettlement project by the government. A large number of modern four and five room dwellings, with electricity and other conveniences, were erected. The project never proved successful, and Congress has ordered liquidation of this and similar undertakings undertaken by the FSA.”

This was the first time that the Roanoke Beacon published an article that questioned the success of Scuppernong Farms.

But the paper’s assessment is not surprising when one places the project in the context of national politics, a context that was markedly differently in 1945 than it had been less than a decade before, when federal, state and local officials collaborated to try to change the lives of some of the most impoverished Americans, and to redesign at least one corner of the poorest region of the state. The resettlement projects were, in some ways, the FSA’s most intriguing failure, given the intense controversy they attracted while they never accounted for even 10 percent of the FSA’s total spending. In 1945, all observers could see was that this experiment—which critics had magnified beyond all proportion—was over, abolished by government decree.

What they missed, indeed, what has left little or no trace, was what Scuppernong Farms had meant to each individual family that took up residence there. As one scholar

196 RBWCN, November 13, 1945.

197 Baldwin, 215.
has put it, the central story of the resettlement projects, albeit one that is almost impossible to tell, is the one that mattered to the homesteaders and cooperative farmers themselves, the “story of one community, their community.”

Louis Spear, who grew up in Washington County, worked on the old Collins land as a boy, and knew many of the FSA settlers well, says there is no doubt in his mind that Scuppernong Farms was a good project that helped a lot of people; it ended because the context changed, not because the farmers failed or the program was fatally flawed.

Scuppernong Farms was a victim of resettlement’s demise. Whether one sees it as having succeeded or failed for people in Washington and Tyrrell counties and on its own individual terms, by 1943 the FSA as a whole was in trouble and resettlement was no longer in keeping with the times. The resettlement communities at Scuppernong Farms grew out of an argument based on historical precedent and present-day need: the land in Washington and Tyrrell counties had been among the state’s best in the past and could be made productive again, and farmers in the region desperately needed help getting back on their feet. But when the latter argument was wiped out—by politicians who insisted that government intervention was no longer useful, and the end-of-war

198 Conkin, 233. The individual stories have proven impossible to recover. There are only a handful of people still living in the area who have any recollection of the FSA projects, and their memories are hazy at best (see, for instance, Spear interview); and, from what I can tell, the client farmers left no written records to provide clues about what their lives were like and what they thought of the project. This is a major and regrettable gap in the evidence, which I will continue working to fill as I revise this dissertation for publication.

199 Spear interview.
economic boom that masked the endemic rural poverty that continued—the former was not enough to sustain the project.

When Scuppernong Farms’ present—its collection of small farmers working as homesteaders and as members of cooperative associations—fell away, it was replaced only by memories of an increasingly distant and mythologized past. The FSA had tried to return the land to its pre-Civil War agricultural abundance, but run by government technicians instead of planters, and worked by relatively independent farmers instead of slaves. Whether or not it had helped individual farmers and their families, it was not able to accomplish this overarching task. In 1945, the land’s significance was still defined primarily by its history. But now the point was not that history justified present-day agricultural innovation; rather, it was that history was the reason for the land’s being. The end of the FSA’s resettlement projects thus ushered in the next phase of development at Somerset Place, a phase that abandoned productive agriculture entirely, and instead embraced and began to exploit in earnest the land’s cultural resources.
Chapter 3

“No longer anybody’s pride:”
Redevelopment Begins, 1939 to 1960

I had the pleasure of visiting Lake Phelps in the summer of 1935, and the old mansion was about all that was left to remind us of our first home here in America. It would be wonderful if the place could become a State Park and the mansion furnished and restored to its original beauty. Certainly it would attract tourists and visitors from all parts of the country who enjoy nature and beauty in which the State of North Carolina abounds.¹

Tourism is a more profitable crop than tobacco. ²

When the federal government liquidated Scuppernong Farms in 1945, Somerset Place might have followed in the footsteps of most other southern plantations and fallen into complete oblivion, its land dispersed among multiple owners and its main living compound exposed to the elements and crumbling. But this was a new context. What rescued Somerset as the curtain fell on its role as a productive farm was the continuing impulse among local whites to use the site for its historical and recreational benefits, and new recognition among business and government leaders of the economic potential in doing so. Somerset Place was saved by the growth of tourism, and the ways in which tourism was linked to the state’s evolving recreation and historic preservation bureaucracies. The federal government gave up on its efforts at returning Somerset to old levels of productivity, and state agencies moved in to make the plantation’s remnants—

¹ Jane Davis, former resident of Somerset Place ca. 1890, 1937. See Tarlton, 137.
fields, barns, houses, and canals—things to look at and think about as well as to use, spaces for leisure and the development of ideas as well as work. Located in the recently-created Pettigrew State Park, and boasting unique natural and historical features, Somerset Place appeared to developers from a range of sectors to be a potential gold mine for drawing visitors—and their wallets—to the Albemarle.

As early as 1940, tourism’s benefits in North Carolina were already clear. In terms of profit, it ranked second only to the tobacco industry, and it measured three times more valuable than the state’s cotton crop. Tourism was estimated at bringing $886,950 into Washington County alone each year, most of it from travelers using the area’s highways. Indeed, nationwide, the Automobile Manufacturers Association termed 1940 “Travel America Year” as war abroad plus expanding facilities for vacationers within the United States led to increased domestic car travel. Whereas railroad travel focused on scenic attractions that passengers riding en masse could enjoy from the window of a train, automobile tourism allowed travelers to make individual choices about where to go and how long to spend at various places, which expanded the possibilities for out-of-the-way

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3 See Benjamin, 243-44 for more on the notion of war rendering “politics aesthetic” by changing an object’s “aura” and use value. David Brett also examines the process by which a country or region is aestheticized. See also Brett, *The Construction of Heritage*, esp. 38.

4 Michael Wallace points out that in the late 1940s and 1950s, people who had been focused on preservation and beautification efforts began to connect their historical pursuits with the growing industry of tourism. See Wallace, “Reflections on the History of Historic Preservation,” in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, edited by Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Breyer, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 166-76.

5 *RBWCN*, March 21, 1940.

6 *RBWCN*, June 27, 1940.
places and less-well-known attractions to draw visitors to their midst. By the middle of the decade American tourism literature promoted historic attractions as places to stop and enjoy a region’s local color in an independent, “authentic” experience, and historic attractions became primary outlets for travelers enjoying a new freedom of movement.\(^7\)

The phenomenon of offering tourists a firsthand, three-dimensional taste of local history became especially pronounced in the South, where people had worked since at least the interwar period to transform the region’s past into a saleable commodity. In North Carolina, public officials and ordinary citizens alike were developing a keen sense of the connections between building historic sites and attracting tourism.\(^8\) C.C. Crittenden, for example, the director of the North Carolina Historical Commission, became a founding member and president of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), which united historical societies across the nation in order to encourage the preservation of historic sites and “stimulate interest in historical tours and pilgrimages.”\(^9\) Crittenden’s colleagues in the state’s Department of Conservation and Development also supported historical tourism when they urged motorists to make stops along “History’s Highway,” their new name for Highway 64, which ran east to west across North Carolina and took in Pettigrew Park and Somerset Place. Travelers tended to move through North Carolina on their way up and down the coast, and tourism

\(^7\) Shaffer, 320; 132.

\(^8\) Brundage, The Southern Past, 184; N&O, November 30, 1941; Starnes: 143.

\(^9\) N&O, January 5, 1940 and N&O, January 4, 1941.
boosters hoped that emphasizing the plethora of historic attractions within the state would convince them to stay longer.\textsuperscript{10} The state needed the money that travelers had to spend, and it also seemed to need the assurance that other Americans were interested in a place that referred to itself with some regularity as the “valley of humility between two mountains of conceit.”

North Carolinians were eager to explore the potential for history-based tourism to offer the state a new hook at a time when its social and political identity and its economy were in flux. A range of observers sensed that the state was lagging far behind its neighbors in marketing its historical resources, and encouraged preserving and promoting history as a method for North Carolina—always an underdog sandwiched between Virginia and South Carolina—to compete for the nation’s attention. In particular, the restoration projects at Colonial Williamsburg had a strong impact on the movement toward historic preservation and building historic sites further south. The commercial and ideological success of Williamsburg was a large part of what motivated North Carolina’s General Assembly to gradually increase funding for preservation and to support the creation of an historical agency under the state’s umbrella.\textsuperscript{11} Virginia’s

\textsuperscript{10} RBWCN, September 1, 1949.

\textsuperscript{11} See David Louis Sterrett Brook, \textit{A Lasting Gift of Heritage: A History of the North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities 1939-1974} (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1997), esp. 3-6; Tarlton interview; “Historic Halifax: Challenge and Opportunity.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, 1954, Box 218, Folder: Historic Sites Commission; Untitled speech, n.d. (ca. 1957). NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: Speeches; Crittenden, “History Can Be Big Business.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: Speeches; “Dr. Crittenden Makes Appeal for Restoration of Halifax,” unidentified Rocky Mt. newspaper clipping, November 29, 1953. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office,
example galvanized preservationists on a local level throughout the state as well; they hoped to turn the town of Bath, for instance, into “A Waterfront Williamsburg.” In communities from the mountains to the coast, and in the legislature in Raleigh, historical tourism seemed to hold promise as a way to finesse North Carolina’s transition from a struggling agricultural backwater to a state that was a relevant part of a growing national consumer economy focused on a strong present and a progressive future.

Yet as historic attractions became a crucial part of the state’s tourism campaigns the General Assembly actually had relatively few under its control, and those it had were not administered by historians. In part to get a foot in the historic-attributions door even though they were outside its mandate, the Historical Commission had supported the creation in 1938 of a private organization, the North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities (NCSPA), which was to sponsor efforts to build historic attractions and sites. But the Commission also looked with interest beyond the NCSPA toward the handful of sites, like Somerset Place, which were located in state parks under the jurisdiction of the Department of Conservation and Development.

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12 N&O, November 30, 1941.

13 For more on the South’s relationship to the national consumer economy, see Hale.

Development took historic sites seriously as it recognized that the sites could draw additional traffic to the parks and thus contribute to the state’s tourism industry, but its priority at state parks was to inspire, offer recreation, and educate; historic preservation was only one option among many for realizing these goals, and the agency’s commitment to historic sites as independent entities was, therefore, precarious. In some ways, Somerset’s status during the 1940s reflected the state’s varying commitment to supporting the development of its historic properties and attractions, and the site became a testing ground for the relationship between Conservation and Development and an evolving historic preservation bureaucracy.

Somerset Place thus offered opportunities as well as challenges. The site was long valued for some of the stories it could tell about the antebellum past, and Pettigrew Park defined and protected the natural resources that contributed to making the site unique. In the 1940s, Conservation and Development, in concert with local and federal supporters, worked to enhance Somerset’s potential as a recreational site by formalizing its perennial status as a kind of historic shrine and linking its now-inactive agricultural land with the expanding tourism industry.

The trouble was that despite its reputation, Somerset was not a particularly impressive place to go. For over fifty years, white people had been using the site on an

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15 Minutes, Recreation Commission and Inter-Agency Consultants Meeting, October 18, 1957. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: State Recreational Commission.
ad hoc basis, linking it to local memories of plantation society’s glory days. But making these links required significant effort: when visitors went to Somerset in the first half of the century, it was less observation and more imagination that allowed them to see in it grandeur and beauty and connect it with the halcyon days of Somerset’s planters and the fabled lords of Lake Phelps. In the early 1940s, soon after North Carolina acquired the property from the federal government, visitors would have confronted a site visually dominated by a deteriorating living compound: a rundown mansion and ramshackle outbuildings in the midst of small farms and homesteads that aspired to allow poor families to subsist, but were certainly nowhere near the level of production that put Collins among the wealthiest planters in the state. In the words of one observer, in the middle of the twentieth century, Somerset Place may have conjured “fond memories” for some, but it was also “no longer anybody’s pride.”

Sometimes they used it for personal activities such as family outings and weddings; other times, Somerset was the setting for community-wide commemorative events. For example, several local men—among them the historian John Darden—organized Memorial Day services in 1940 that began with an address from C.C. Crittenden at St. David’s Episcopal Church in Creswell, and was followed by a picnic and commemorative ceremonies at Scuppernong Farms’ community house at Somerset. The emcee, W.L. Whitley, delivered a eulogy to General Pettigrew and bands from the high schools in Plymouth, Creswell, Columbia and Edenton played the “Star Spangled Banner,” “a southern song,” and “Carolina.” Other speakers that afternoon included T.W. Armstrong and a representative from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. To close the day, participants followed the bands, Boy Scouts, clergy, choir, “firing squads” and members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy to the Pettigrew cemetery at the old Bonarva plantation, where local chapters of the UDC laid wreaths on the Pettigrew graves. RBWCN, May 9, 1940. Similar programs were mounted for Memorial Day in each of the following three years, and all of them were designed to emphasize the area’s historical significance. RBWCN, May 22, 1941; RBWCN, May 28, 1942.

Groups of local people had used Somerset informally throughout the first half of the twentieth century, picnicking on the lawn, rowing on the lake, exploring the abandoned mansion and so on. See Haire interview; Pledger interview; Spear interview; Spruill interview; Tarlton interview.

Tarlton interview.
Even as Somerset continued to be an important historical symbol, its present use had changed considerably in recent years with an impact that was not always in line with preservationist or commemorative intentions. This was a site where, over time, people had made a variety of adjustments and repairs, but nonetheless had allowed the “continued decay” of its “historic fabric.” In particular, the WPA had altered the appearance of the site through earlier renovations and construction of new roads; the FSA had put many of the remaining buildings to use as storage facilities and administrative offices; and Scuppernong Farms’ community building sat on what had once been the vast formal lawn across the canal from the mansion. Signs of a grand past were there, but their original significance had faded; in its present-day use and appearance the site was a long way away from the one that Josiah Collins, his descendants and their slaves had built.

State officials realized they had a lot of changes to make if Somerset was ever to become widely marketable and useful to the agencies that were being established to manage tourism and historical programming in North Carolina. It would take a great deal

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19 Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Master Plan 1979*, 28, NCHSS.

20 Somerset Place does not qualify as one of Pierre Nora’s *lieux de memoire*, yet his commentary is nonetheless instructive: “Lieux de memoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of lieux de memoire—that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. Conversely, if the memories that they enclosed were to be set free they would be useless; if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no lieux de memoire.” Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* (26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-memory: Spring 1989): 12.
of work and money to ensure the site would transmit the messages they desired to the
visitors they summoned, and, in turn, that the visitors would come. In its present
condition, Somerset was seriously lacking. It was no longer enough for the site to host an
old house that was once great; it was not enough for it to be a rundown estate that
signified good times past even as it looked somewhat worse for wear in the here and now;
and using its historic structures to fulfill contemporary demands was becoming
increasingly problematic.

In order to move Somerset Place to a new phase of life, it was time for developers
to create a welcoming environment that a tourist audience would go out of its way to visit
because it offered them a break from their normal lives through a taste of nature and a
better past. It was time to emphasize to sportsmen the abundance of wildlife in the lake
and forest, and to restore the hospitality and charm of the Collins house and grounds.
Underwriting this whole process was the already-dominant narrative of the plantation’s
history, which venerated Josiah Collins and antebellum slave society, and which would
ultimately give Somerset a new identity as an historic site as opposed to simply the set of
fabled old buildings, fields and canals that it had been since the turn of the century. \(^{21}\) It
was time to make it official. Although developers in the 1940s and 50s could not bring

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\(^{21}\) Differentiating between a site that possesses old or historic features and an historic site is complex and
has more to do with how observers think about a place than the features of the place itself. David
Glassberg asks, “What cognitive changes occur when an environment is considered as ‘historical,’ either by
government designation or popular practice, or when a civic organization such as a local chamber of
commerce creates maps and historical atlases that recognize some historical places but not others?”
Glassberg, Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life (Amherst: University of
back to life the era of greatness on whose recalling their projects relied and for which they felt so much nostalgia, they would start on the path to resurrecting the image.

Making Up and Making Over

In 1939, the state of North Carolina began to purchase land around Somerset with the express goal of making the former plantation and its environs a destination for tourism tied to recreation and historic preservation. There was already a strong precedent for both ideas, and the resettlement projects at Scuppernong Farms further intensified the government’s interest in developing the site. It might seem a strange juxtaposition to place a tourist attraction in the midst of a major relief settlement, but Scuppernong’s existence meant that there was already a federal bureaucracy in place in the region, providing a structure through which to plan land use and muster and direct labor. Representatives from the Department of Conservation and Development began to work with the FSA and WPA to guide Somerset’s transformation into a resort centered on the mansion, which they expected would become a lodge for hunters and fishermen. Their idea was that as visiting sportsmen indulged in their favorite outdoor activities, they might feel a connection with a powerful past of hardy planters and explorers staking a claim on wilderness. Then, after a long day on the lake or in the forests, they could retire
to the refitted mansion to relax in an environment that called up images of the Collins family’s leisurely antebellum social world.\textsuperscript{22}

The WPA furnished the labor for the renovation, which was to follow up on previous restorations of the mansion’s exterior and return the interior to what “it was at the time it was built at the start of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.” At the same time as 40 WPA workers installed plumbing and lighting fixtures that were necessary to a modern, functioning sportsmen’s inn, they also set about demolishing some of the earlier twentieth-century additions and concealing electrical wiring. The WPA’s plans indicated that when the inn was complete, the main floor would feature a dining room, kitchen, living room, toilets, and a lounge, and there would be guest bedrooms and bathrooms on the upper floor, some of which would be furnished with antiques by the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. In preparation for the “thousands of additional visitors” that the restorations were expected to draw annually, the U.S. secretary of agriculture expanded public access to the site by dedicating a series of roads along its border in Tyrrell County to the state, and Conservation and Development hired a local man, Tom Davenport, as a guide to assist visitors who arrived to explore the park, and

\textsuperscript{22} A variety of agencies at all levels of government supplied money and manpower. In 1940, the budget consisted of $500 from Washington County, $23,000 from the WPA, and $7500 from the state. \textit{RBWCN}, November 14, 1940. See also \textit{RBWCN}, September 26, 1940; Report to the Board, July 1, 1940-December 31, 1940. NCSA, Board of Conservation and Development-1940s, Box 2 (W-1, Row C Front), Folder: Board of Conservation and Development, Report Semi-Annual to the Board, July 1, 1940-December 31, 1940, General CY 1940; \textit{RBWCN}, November 14, 1940.
who could also watch over the site, protecting its resources and the construction projects underway.  

A variety of actors worked together to restore Somerset to its antebellum elegance and sophistication, to build a physical environment that reflected a story about the Collins men’s courage and ingenuity in business and agriculture, and the family’s lavish lifestyle. This was no easy task. During the initial decades of renovation and restoration, there were a number of stories that could have been told about the plantation’s antebellum past, and it took a great deal of work to write out the competing narratives that jockeyed for position. Partly by default and partly by design, those who directed the projects erased other histories that could have been read in the site: most problematically, the antebellum history of slavery, and the recent history of economic instability that plagued the northeast region.

The image that Conservation and Development sought portrayed an Old South where planters ruled all, uncontested, and where everyone else—white women and non-elite white men, slaves and free blacks—knew their place and occupied it happily. Developers molded Somerset to fit this vision of the past in large part because they believed that was the story that would sell: they believed that was the story with which

23 Jones and Phelps, 569; quote from Report to the Board, July 1, 1940-December 31, 1940. NCSA, Board of Conservation and Development-1940s, Box 2 (W-1, Row C Front), Folder: Board of Conservation and Development, Report Semi-Annual to the Board, July 1, 1940-December 31, 1940, General CY 1940; RBWCN, March 6, 1941; Certificate of Dedication, Plan No. 115:1, February 14, 1941. SPSHS, Cabinet 2, Drawer 1; RBWCN, September 26, 1940; Report to the Board, July 1, 1940-December 31, 1940. NCSA, Board of Conservation and Development-1940s, Box 2 (W-1, Row C Front), Folder: Board of Conservation and Development, Report Semi-Annual to the Board, July 1, 1940-December 31, 1940, General CY 1940; RBWCN, November 14, 1940; N&O, June 8, 1941.
tourists would identify, and which might eventually persuade North Carolinians to support publicly-funded historic preservation efforts. A core message of public history in the South for a full century after Reconstruction was that white supremacy and elite white male rule was natural and normal. The white women and men who would come to compose most of Somerset’s twentieth-century audience may have been prevented by gender or class difference from identifying directly with the planter, but racial privilege linked them all in ways that were persuasive enough to assure their allegiance to the myth.

African Americans presented a more serious threat, but a combination of de jure and de facto segregation protected the site from many of the alternative stories they might have told. For a full century African Americans neither volunteered to go to Somerset Place nor were they welcome there. When white people went to Somerset it was for


25 Brundage points out that in *The Southern Past* that in the century after the Civil War, “whites ensured that public spaces conspicuously excluded any recognition of the recalled past of blacks” (10). Public parks and other spaces were usually off limits not only to black visitors themselves, but also to their memories and ideas. Moreover, he writes, “Historical tourism was a project conceived of by whites and for white consumers. With segregation precluding black patronage at most tourist facilities, African Americans were incorporated into southern tourism not as full equals but as domesticated ‘others’ represented for public consumption. Tourists could enjoy the picturesque spectacle created by servile African Americans without needing to understand them… To acknowledge the black past, at least as understood by blacks, would have raised knotty questions about the legacies of slavery as well as current race relations, thereby subverting the carefully nurtured images of gentility, romance, and nostalgia that sustained southern tourism” (184-5). Similarly, according to Starnes: “Even as tourism grew more important, public and private boosters continued to market North Carolina to white, almost exclusively middle-class visitors. The harsh realities of segregation defined tourism as much as any other segment of southern society” (148).

26 There were individual reasons why local African Americans did not visit the site, including feelings of shame and anger about their history of slavery at the plantation. However, even had they wanted to go to Somerset, segregation would have sorely limited their opportunities to do so. For an interesting discussion
rest and relaxation, neither of which meshed well with confronting the abuses of coerced labor or the economic disaster that resulted for everyone when the slaves finally went free. White visitors and developers either ignored or misinterpreted the traces that were left in Somerset’s built environment of the plantation’s enslaved population: the canals were symbols of Josiah Collins’ ingenuity, not of slave labor; the mansion stood for the planter’s comfort rather than the slaves’ compulsion to toil. When visitors picnicked on the lawn, took marriage vows in the big house, or rowed boats on the tranquil waters of the lake, they did so in the spirit of carrying on a heritage of leisure and gentility.

Neither developers nor visitors denied that slavery happened; rather, they interpreted it in a selective fashion, which recognized the existence of the system while erasing from history the individuals whose work was at its heart. As important as boosters—journalists and newspaper editors, state and federal officials, local politicians and supporters of the restorations—claimed that history was at Pettigrew Park, they were interested only in a particular strain of history, in a particular narrative. It should come as no surprise that this narrative did not feature slaves as central agents.  

of this problem, see Dorothy Spruill Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, passim, esp. 176. See also Tarlton interview.

27 Shaffer notes that the popular series of American tourism manuals, *See America First*, published in 21 volumes from 1912 to 1931, focused on communicating a patriotic, celebratory story, in which “the sectional and racial strife that had resulted in the Civil War,” was “strikingly absent.” “Civil War battlefields and Civil War heroes were glaringly absent from the guides. Focusing primarily on the West and New England and skipping over the South, except for Florida and Texas, the series told the story of the golden age of the Revolution and westward expansion. This omission clearly reveals the objective of the series to construct a narrative of national unity…. In other words, the guides recounted a history of American progress that glorified white, Anglo-Saxon America, thus allowing tourists to retreat into this idealized America, escaping the realities of racial and ethnic conflict and other growing tensions in American society” (199).
articles covering the developments at Somerset acknowledged that the Collins family used slave labor to cultivate their fields, but showed definite disinterest in the people who did that labor. They referred to the slaves’ activities in the passive voice: for example, as in this description of building the great, four-story barn, known widely to have been constructed by the enslaved, “The shingles were cut by hand and all of the cypress beams were whip-sawed by hand.” A reference in the same article to the slave quarters on the plantation noted decisively that unlike other outbuildings that had disappeared but for which there was clear evidence of their former location, “These will not be restored.”

Indeed, the slave quarters had long fallen down or been bulldozed to free up land for FSA housing, thus eliminating from vision evidence of the personal lives of hundreds of Somerset’s antebellum workers and residents. But this made no matter to developers in the 1940s because when it came to the historical structures, the Collins mansion was the central attraction that drew people to the park. Restoring slave quarters and emphasizing the work of generations of bound laborers would have been at odds with Somerset’s romantic atmosphere and its “picturesque setting,” which drew a broad range of visitors and made the site a popular venue for wedding ceremonies and receptions.

28 N&O, June 8, 1941. While it is unsurprising that restorations at Somerset would have ignored African American subjects, given the context of segregation in the U.S. at that time, it is important to recognize that around the time of Somerset’s early development other sites were already beginning to consider the difficulty of portraying the past without addressing African Americans’ presence in history. At Colonial Williamsburg, for instance, debates about the “Negro problem” began in 1946. See Greenspan, 74.

29 Somerset’s caretaker, Tom Davenport, was a justice of the peace who regularly married couples in the Collins mansion and on the surrounding grounds. See, for example, RBWCN, March 27, 1941; April 23, 1942, August 9, 1945, October 25, 1945, February 14, 1946, September 26, 1946, February 6, 1947, January 8, 1948; and N&O, June 8, 1941. There is no record of how the people who held weddings and other events at Somerset felt about the New Deal projects surrounding the site. Their feelings would shed
The majority of Somerset’s several-hundred weekend attendees who came to the site from across the country in the first years of the 1940s were lured by nature and nostalgia: the opportunity to enjoy a piece of North Carolina’s wilderness and to wander through the mansion and thus imagine themselves inside a romanticized antebellum past.  

With improvements “progressing satisfactorily,” and government laborers beautifying the site by clearing underbrush and debris, Somerset Place and Pettigrew State Park were beginning to work as a unit to pull significant numbers of visitors to Washington and Tyrrell counties. In May alone Pettigrew Park saw 500 registered guests, both local and from out of state. In June, there were 406, and in July 450, some of whom came in groups to eat “lunch on the lawn of the Collins house by the shore of Lake Phelps.” Yet Conservation and Development struggled to define the relationship between the park and the site. It aimed for the park to operate “primarily to portray to the public many aspects of life on a large plantation in the years before the War Between the States…” and in order to do so, it insisted that the park had to keep nature and history light on the relationship between resettlement clients and the population at large, as well as Scuppernong Farms and Somerset Place.

30 N&O, June 8, 1941. The month after the WPA began its work, visitation was up and the guestbook included signatures from North Carolina, Massachusetts, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Alabama and Washington, DC. RBWCN, April 3, 1941.

31 RBWCN, May 22, 1941.

32 RBWCN, June 5, 1941; RBWCN, July 10, 1941; RBWCN, August 21, 1941.
“entirely separate,” for fear of the natural areas watering down the historical ones and vice versa.  

Officials put these and other concerns on hold after 1941, however. With the country’s entry into World War II and associated wartime shortages, the best that Conservation and Development could do was to “protect and maintain the area in a state of limited development”: this was the time to keep Pettigrew Park afloat rather than to tweak its management. At every level, the government scaled back funding and budgets for improvements fell short at all the state parks, Pettigrew included. Facing “drastic restrictions” on construction materials and demands to redirect labor to the war effort, federal workers at Somerset finally had to lay down their tools at 5:00 in the evening on June 24, 1942. The restorations they had begun were far from complete, but according to Conservation and Development the buildings were “in good shape,” and research into the plantation’s antebellum history—research that was to serve as a “valuable guide both for future restoration work and for the portrayal to the public of the historical value of the area”—remained “underway,” on hold but not forgotten. 

33 Department of Conservation and Development biennial report 1942, cited in Jones and Phelps, 570.  

34 Jones and Phelps, 570. For more on shortages and their impact, see N&O, June 8, 1941; Letter, George Ross to D.S. Coltrane, August 3, 1951. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, State Parks and Lakes File 1930-70, Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, Division of State Parks and Recreation, State Lakes and Parks 1947-67, p-22(3), Page 114, Item 1, Box 13, Folder: Project 2804-1947 Appropriations Historical Restoration-Pettigrew.  

Wartime shortages and labor demands interfered with the restorations as well as public access to Somerset and Pettigrew Park. By the middle of 1942 no state park was in full operation: gasoline and tire rationing meant that visitation suffered across the board as motorists cut back on traveling, especially to places off the beaten track. By May, although Somerset remained a draw, with visitors still coming to tour the mansion, barn and other extant buildings, and while overall attendance was still increasing at Pettigrew, the numbers were “considerably” lower than expected and reduced fee collections posed a financial hardship.\(^{36}\)

The remaining war years were mostly quiet, with the site and the park in a holding pattern.\(^{37}\) But excellent fishing conditions made the first half of 1945 a good season for

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\(^{36}\) Report to the Board for the Period July 1, 1942-December 31, 1942. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, Misc. records, 1935-65, Box Ft. Macon/Ft. Caswell, etc., Folder: WPA Project No. 5901 Correspondence Etc. General Pettigrew CY 1942; Jones and Phelps, 570.

\(^{37}\) In September 1944, the new Superintendent of State Parks, R.J. Pearse, suggested that Pettigrew Park could provide welcome recreation and vacation space for “war weary veterans and civilians,” and that “one of the old canals built by slave labor…can be developed into a yacht basin with complete protection for a number of boats.” See Pearse, “Development of Parks and Playgrounds in Eastern North Carolina after the War,” Sept. 1944. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, Misc. records, 1935-65, Box Park Superintendent Meetings, Agencies, Public Use, Folder: Publicity Articles, etc., Prepared for publication General CY 1944; and Letter, Pearse to Edward Fales, November 22, 1944. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, Misc. records, 1935-65, Box: Park Superintendent Meetings, Agencies, Public Use; Folder: Information Requested, Misc. General CY 1944.
Pettigrew Park, and after fighting ceased in Europe, Conservation and Development allocated $5000 to purchase furniture and equipment to hasten the long-talked-about process of opening the mansion as a lodge. The Department also stated its support for building twenty vacation cabins, and improving beaches and water sports facilities. Indeed, as the war ended, Conservation and Development renewed its commitment to state parks in general, to conserving North Carolina’s natural resources, and to pushing ahead with an “aggressive advertising program directed toward centering the attention of the nation on the tourist, industrial and agricultural advantages of the State…” Conversion back to a peacetime economy came with considerable anxiety for the state’s business and political leaders, and they all looked to tourism’s potential for comfort.

Immediately after the war, therefore, developments at Pettigrew resumed, and in fact were given new urgency by the federal government’s decision to liquidate Scuppernong Farms. When the FSA announced its plans to sell the land it occupied, releasing it from federal control and back into the private domain, Conservation and Development “made a formal request…for 300 acres of land adjoining the Park.” Part of the reason the department wanted the land was to “protect the park area from possible


40 “Pettigrew State Park,” North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, November 1977, NCHSS.
intrusion of hot dog stands, honky tonk joints, and undesirable buildings on the north side of the road opposite State Park property.”\textsuperscript{41} “The request was not granted,” however, “and on November 20, 1945, all Federally owned land and buildings adjoining the park were sold at a public auction.”\textsuperscript{42} Conservation and Development did not have the money with which to buy the land outright at that time, so the property ended up being “parceled and auctioned off to a number of different buyers” who converted them into individual farms and homes.\textsuperscript{43}

One of the buyers was Pettigrew Park’s caretaker. Tom Davenport purchased the old community building on the east lawn with the intention of renovating it and opening a clubhouse, inn and recreation center. He considered the park a potential “mecca for sportsmen,” and bought the building in the context of additional improvements being made to control the depth of Lake Phelps and maintain water levels in the canals. Perhaps frustrated by the limitations of government-sponsored work, he expected that private development adjacent to the park could still capitalize on the beauty of Lake Phelps and its bountiful fish stocks as well as Somerset’s historical attractions, and he hoped that visitation would continue to increase as it had done every season since the


\textsuperscript{42} “Pettigrew State Park,” North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, November 1977, NCHSS.

\textsuperscript{43} Jones and Phelps, 571; Tarlton, 48.
park opened.\textsuperscript{44} However, in the middle of 1946 Davenport still had not been able to secure the materials and labor necessary to refit the community building or to complete his plans to build a swimming beach by the mansion, with docks and fishing boats for public use.\textsuperscript{45} A year later, therefore, he sold the community building to Conservation and Development, which had since reorganized its budget and could thus afford the expansion.\textsuperscript{46}

Several months following, in December 1947, the federal government made the decision to deed over 200 acres of the Somerset land to the state of North Carolina. Somerset, therefore, combined with land that had belonged to the Pettigrews to permanently and formally establish Pettigrew State Park.\textsuperscript{47} But work at Somerset remained stalled. After a decade of planning to build an inn at the mansion, authorities finally scrapped the idea for good in 1949. Wartime gasoline shortages that had made it impossible to justify the expense of operating an inn that precious few people could


\textsuperscript{46} “Pettigrew State Park,” North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, November 1977, NCHSS.

\textsuperscript{47} “Pettigrew State Park,” North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, November 1977, NCHSS. The park was later enlarged again in 1952 and 1961 through further land purchases from private owners.
afford to visit were resolved. But the General Assembly enacted new legislation that prohibited operating inns and lodges in state parks and thus made the entire project redundant.48

With an abrupt end to a project long in the works, developments at Somerset Place would have been at an impasse, if not for a blessing in disguise. Although Conservation and Development had managed to acquire more land at the site, for years the state had budgeted very little money for research or additional restoration beyond what the WPA had accomplished in 1941 and 42. But on March 14, 1949, a fire sparked by brush burning nearby destroyed the barn at Somerset Place.49 On its face, the fire was a disaster, devastating a structure that was much beloved by visitors to the park, local residents and officials associated with developments at the site. Several years earlier there had been talk of transforming the barn into a farming museum, and at least one County Commissioner had lobbied to commit resources to preserving it.50 However, what felt at


49 RBWCN, March 17, 1949.

50 N&O, June 8, 1941; Tarlton interview.
first like a blow turned out to be a boon, leading to much grander and more intensive preservation and development at Somerset than anyone had imagined during the 1940s. Rather than use the insurance pay-out to rebuild the barn, the state allocated it as seed money toward a general program of new research, thus providing new funding and direction for a site that otherwise might have floundered.

Between October 1951 and July 1954 the Department of Conservation and Development sponsored what was then the most significant survey of Somerset to date, which included the first archaeological studies of the property; repairs and restorations; recommendations for future work; and established a great deal of the site’s original plan. The Division of State Parks prefaced the survey with an inspection in June, which reinvigorated an old debate over the differential significance of historical versus recreational attractions. The inspector declared Pettigrew State Park primarily important for its “historical aspects,” whereas “the recreational features are of secondary importance. Authentically restored on the basis of facts secured by accurate, competent historical research and excavation, Pettigrew State Park would be of great interest as an historic area because of its importance as an excellent example of a large slave-operated plantation.”

On this basis, the inspector recommended a series of improvements,

51 Spruill interview; Tarlton interview.
52 Jones and Phelps, 571; Tarlton interview.
53 Tarlton, 49.
54 Letter, C. Sylvester Green to Mr. Allen, June 16, 1951. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, State Parks and Lakes File 1930-70, Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, Division of State Parks and Recreation, State Lakes and Parks 1947-67, p-
including restoring and furnishing “as many of the original Somerset Plantation buildings as funds permit”; building a dock on Lake Phelps and buying boats for public use; and securing land not originally included within the park’s boundaries, including land on which the slave quarters, chapel, overseer’s house and other buildings stood, and space to build a maintenance and service center.  

Convinced that understanding Somerset’s history was vital to the operation of Pettigrew Park, and because the legislature had quashed the old plans to build a lodge in the mansion, Conservation and Development was persuaded to redistribute to the survey funds it would have spent on building the resort. The department hired William S. (Sam) Tarlton as the primary researcher. Tarlton was a college history instructor with a
Master of Arts degree from Wake Forest University and several years of advanced graduate work in history at Duke under his belt. He had worked with a professor at Wake Forest who was involved in the developments at Colonial Williamsburg during the 1930s, and he envisioned the same type of activity taking place in North Carolina.  

The stated goal of the new research project was to allow Pettigrew Park to develop an interpretive program depicting Somerset’s history, specifically the period from 1850 to 1860, which Tarlton and his crew identified as the time when it “was at the peak of its prominence as a gathering place for many of North Carolina’s best-known people.” As his project began, Tarlton addressed a meeting of the Plymouth Rotary club: “Mr. Tarlton commented that the state with the interest and support of the people of this section is building an historical shrine at Lake Phelps. He stated that this will be a monument to the way of life which has contributed much to the colorful existence of the present community.” From the start, Tarlton made an effort to appeal to residents of Washington County, particularly the vocal and energetic minority that was already making a concerted effort to preserve historical features in Plymouth, Creswell and beyond.

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57 Tarlton interview.
58 RBWCN, February 28, 1952.
59 RBWCN, November 1, 1951.
60 Tarlton interview.
Tarlton recognized that his work at Somerset Place fit into pre-existing local
trends toward commemoration and preservation, and he lent his—and, by extension, the
state’s—support to those actions. As part of his effort to maintain residents’ cooperation
with the survey, he accepted John Darden’s invitation to speak at the organizational
meeting for a new Washington County Historical Society. Darden was a central figure in
the county’s preservation circles; most recently, he had been a leader in organizing a
massive historical pageant celebrating Washington County’s sesquicentennial. The
pageant had involved hundreds of members of the community as performers and drawn
thousands as spectators, and he hoped to attract equally enthusiastic participation in the
Historical Society.61 When Tarlton addressed the meeting, he echoed Darden’s sense that
the community had to take initiative to record and maintain evidence of its past. He
noted that the county was changing, moving “from poorer to more prosperous
conditions,” and he implored residents to protect their landmarks and customs from loss
during the shift. “We ought to make the effort to gather materials that will tell the story
of our history,” he explained. “…We ought to collect old objects that symbolize the life
of our forefathers, such as tools, furniture, books and the like, and display them in a
museum where they can be seen and appreciated by our people and by visitors to our
county.”62

61 RBWCN, October 13, 1953. For coverage of the sesquicentennial, see: N&O, September 20, 1949; N&O, September 21, 1949; RBWCN, September 15, 1949; RBWCN, September 29, 1949; Darden, The History of Washington County, NCC.

62 RBWCN, October 22, 1953.
Tarlton’s words at the meeting reflected his efforts at Somerset Place. He had begun restorations in earnest the previous year, following a period during which the state carried out more historical and archaeological research and excavation than ever before.\textsuperscript{63} J.C. (Pinky) Harrington, an archaeologist with the National Park Service, consulted at Pettigrew for two days in April 1952 to offer practical advice on how to maximize limited funding. Harrington recommended focusing on restoring existing buildings rather than reconstructing those that had been lost to time. He stated that the most interesting “historical aspect is the human interest factor (the demonstration of human energy and initiative in opening the forbidding and isolated Lake region),” and he favored “treating the Collins place as a relic rather than trying to develop it as a functioning plantation set-up.” Harrington suggested making the site as “esthetically attractive” as possible by filling the canals with water, landscaping the old carriage drive, and developing the east lawn “as a park,” with sheep grazing there as they had during antebellum days. Although he urged Tarlton to include foundations of buildings from the slave community in a tour that would focus primarily on the mansion and nearby outbuildings, he recommended against “an intensive study” of the slave “street.” Similarly, while he advocated

furnishing the mansion and kitchen, in his view the remaining structures were best used for practical adaptive purposes.\textsuperscript{64}

In accordance with Harrington’s assessment, Tarlton’s project emphasized restoration rather than research, and what research he did was limited to gathering information about Somerset’s prior appearance in order to facilitate rebuilding some of the plantation’s landmarks. To this end, Tarlton made at least two public pleas for people to send in old photos of the plantation. He and the superintendent of State Parks, Tom Morse, were convinced photos existed somewhere, perhaps taken during one of the “many picnic parties [that] used to visit the old place,” and now “in some dusty attic trunk, lying forgotten at the back of some bureau drawers.”\textsuperscript{65} Tarlton and Morse tried to involve the public with the restoration by calling on them for evidence, and in other ways, as well, such as holding a public meeting at the old community building to discuss the state’s plans to improve Somerset Place and Pettigrew Park.\textsuperscript{66}

Tarlton needed public support. He recognized how much more difficult it would be to work alone to piece together a narrative of Somerset’s history, even to the limited degree required for his project. In an interview in 2004, he said that when he began, there

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\textsuperscript{64} Tarlton, Report of Mr. J.C. Harrington’s visit to Pettigrew State Park, April 22-24. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, State Parks and Lakes File 1930-70, Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, Division of State Parks and Recreation, State Lakes and Parks 1947-67, p-22(3), Page 114, Item 1, Box #13, Folder: Project 2084-1947 Appropriations Historical Restoration-Pettigrew. At some point between 1952 and 1954, the Scuppernong Farms community building on the east lawn was removed as part of Tarlton’s restorations, but the precise moment of removal is not entirely clear.

\textsuperscript{65} Jones and Phelps, 572; \textit{RBWCN}, February 28, 1952 and July 10, 1952.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{RBWCN}, December 4, 1952.
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was only “a very sketchy history nobody knew much about,” and he was relying on people’s recollections and assistance to clarify the story he was charged to tell. The assistance he secured was only partially useful. When Tarlton arrived at Somerset in 1951, he found the caretaker and his family living in the colony house. Davenport did a good job as caretaker, and “he was a nice old gentleman from the area. Baptist preacher, retired. He was very interested in the place. He’d grown up knowing it, so he took great pride in having people come around.”

The difficulty for Tarlton was that the stories Davenport could provide—and the stories he told visitors when he guided them around the site—were limited to folk tales and legends about “blood on the floor. And the crazy woman in the attic.” These tales were important in and of themselves as evidence of how Somerset figured in local people’s imaginations. But Tarlton was interested in architecture, not ideas or folklore. Others confirm that his work was neither archaeological nor anthropological, but architectural: although he did learn about lifestyles and practices on the plantation, he was much more focused on understanding the built environment than the people who had once lived at Somerset Place. Mostly, he wanted facts about the site’s material composition, about how it looked and who used it, with little regard for what those people thought or what the site meant to the larger community. Stories like the ones

67 Tarlton interview.

68 Tarlton interview.

Davenport offered were not helpful for gaining a concrete sense of the plantation’s nineteenth-century layout and the methods people used to build it.  

Tarlton found Davenport’s stories irrelevant, and he had a difficult time getting other people to talk to him at all. He tried approaching people who had actually lived on the plantation, including former slaves and their descendants, but this was problematic. He explains, “I needed to talk to other people who had some knowledge of things down there, family related people and whatnot. I went to see a lot of blacks in the area who had descended from slaves there. I didn’t always find very positive interest. One old lady said, ‘Oh what are you doing working at that old house, I wish it had burned down.’ They didn’t have good memories.” Most of the descendants of slaves to whom he spoke were not antagonistic toward him, but they found the topic of his research distasteful—they were at best “indifferent” when he brought up slavery and Somerset—and offered little information with which he could work.

It became readily apparent to Tarlton that descendants of the Collins’ slaves were not interested in the developments at Somerset Place. Their disinterest was partly a factor of not wanting to talk about a painful history, and it also reflected their isolation from the plantation that was their ancestral home. Some of that isolation was of their own free will; for the most part, there had seemed little reason to return to or even think about the place their forebears had fled so many decades ago. But in at least equal

70 Tarlton interview.
71 Tarlton interview.
72 Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 176.
measure, their isolation also stemmed from the fact that as recreational sites, Somerset and Pettigrew Park were geared explicitly to white people. Even with the new state-sponsored developments, that showed no sign of changing. The reality was that African Americans in the surrounding communities had long been excluded from discussions of county and civic improvements—at Somerset and beyond—and there was no reason why they should suddenly feel any investment in the new developments starting at Pettigrew Park.

Tarlton therefore began his survey with minimal information. Oral sources were limited, and at any rate, he was hesitant to use data based on the testimony of local observers as anything more than a “tentative guide.” He was not helped much by the documentary record either, finding little in the state or local archives to provide clear information about Somerset’s physical plan, which was said to have been “quite elaborate even into the twentieth century.” But he was determined to complete an “authentic” restoration, and to carry out the detailed survey that would allow him to do so. The mansion and six other structures at Somerset, all concentrated near the shore of the lake, were well-enough preserved to offer “an attractive possibility for restoring a typical early plantation dwelling area.” A road—the old carriage drive—and the main Collins canal were still evident, and there were several areas where researchers identified original plantings such as trees and bushes.\(^3\) Slowly, Tarlton cobbled together a series of

\(^3\) Tarlton, 49-50 and iii.
sketches, based on a combination of observers’ reports, old maps and fragmentary evidence, and began archaeological investigations in April 1952.

By today’s standards, Tarlton’s excavations were more destructive than productive, and extremely limited in their research design.74 Tarlton was mainly compelled to explore the “natural situation,” where the Collins family had drained a massive amount of swampland that other people “thought was worthless” and turned it into a thriving plantation.75 There are many aspects of the plantation’s history about which Tarlton’s work offered no comment and there are aspects of the history that it contributed to erasing from sight. But for all the flaws in his surveys, they became the ‘gold standard’ for research at Somerset, providing crucial evidence that underwrote the first three decades of restoration and redevelopment at the site. It is vital to examine what Tarlton did at Somerset in the 1950s because of the impact he and his crews had on the land at the time, and because of the ways in which future developments depended on his work, folding both its erasures and discoveries into an accumulating sense of the site’s past.

74 Recent analyses have thus described Tarlton’s work and its focus on examining the plantation’s architecture rather than performing rigorous archaeological investigations, and following methodology designed to preserve evidence buried underground. See, for example, Steen, Restoration Excavations at Somerset Place Plantation State Historic Site, 33; Christopher Hughes, “Independent Study on Slave Archaeology: Somerset Place,” unpublished paper (Duke University, April 27, 1983), NCC, North Carolina Historic Sites Section Research Reports File 1960-85, microfilm reel 3; Robert A. Penny, “A Historical and Archaeological Overview of Somerset Plantation,” M.A. thesis (East Carolina University, Greenville, 2003).

75 Tarlton interview. Christopher Collins, great-great-grandson of Josiah Collins III, also believes that the feat of draining such a vast swampland and creating productive farmland as one of the most significant developments in the plantation’s history. Christopher Collins, telephone interview with author, January 5, 2006.
For better or worse, Tarlton’s excavations launched the most all-encompassing effort to date at piecing together Somerset’s history. He and his team first dug a trench from the old kitchen building to the shore of the lake, which uncovered an original brick walkway that connected the main house with the back yard. It turned out that this walkway criss-crossed with other brick walkways, and also extended back toward the site of the overseer’s house at the north end of the property. The entire network of walkways was buried under about ten inches of “intrusive soil” that Tarlton had bulldozed away under careful observation in an effort to prevent “damage to original features...” He considered this bulldozing to be restoration work rather than research as it brought the grade of the yard to its original level in order to allow researchers to consider the main house in its “proper scale.” Tarlton continued his excavations to uncover an intact foundation of the overseer’s house, and nearby, the foundation piers of another original building destroyed in 1950, which he believed had been a storehouse for rations for slaves.76

Excavations continued further around the storehouse, and toward what was later determined to be the slave chapel. The chapel, like all the other features the team encountered, was completely excavated and its site mapped. Tarlton then dug across a “modern public road” to uncover and map a slave hospital. Beyond the hospital was deep dirt fill that had been placed there recently in order to build a new road into the park; Tarlton bulldozed this dirt in order to continue his project. Further exploration in this

76 Tarlton, 51-3.
immediate area turned up a woodhouse, storehouse and other structures, some of which appeared to have been built during a much earlier phase of the plantation’s history and were therefore “outside the scope of the restoration project.” He also found “a remnant of a narrow brick walk…which was in a line leading to the row of slave quarters outside the main lot. This walk was restored from the main walk at the yard fence west of the Colony to the western limit of the restoration area.” Throughout his explorations, Tarlton traced changes in the use of various features and structures over time, comparing their role during the Collins’ years at Somerset with subsequent uses by other residents and owners.77

When modern roads made further excavations impossible, Tarlton and his team moved their focus back to the area of the mansion, where they removed sand and clay fill, and then mapped a range of physical features including walkways, terraces and outbuildings. The most exciting and unexpected discovery they made there was of a formal garden layout.78 At least a decade earlier, Uriah Bennett, a former slave had indicated to WPA interviewers that there was a “big flower garden behind the mansion,” but it took Tarlton’s work to locate it.79 Although they had difficulty establishing precisely what kind of plantings would have been in the garden around 1850 and what kind of design the Collinses might have used, Tarlton and his crew did what they could to

77 Tarlton: 51-5 and 60-1.
78 Tarlton: 56.
79 N&O, June 8, 1941; Transcript, Bennett interview, May 1937. NCSA, FSA Papers.
restore it, which included reopening drainage ditches, restoring gravel walkways, and removing trees, debris, small buildings and barbed wire fencing.  

In addition to excavations, Tarlton also conducted research into the original paint color used on the exterior of the mansion, “so that the painting scheduled for the house in the spring [of 1952] as a maintenance measure could count as a historical restoration measure as well.” It took some time, however, to obtain the correct colors, and the painting was therefore not complete until the spring of 1953, around which time the team also investigated and repainted other existing buildings, and then determined paint colors of non-extant buildings by deduction. 

Restorations in late 1952 and early 1953 included reconditioning the surface drainage system in the main yard area; repairs to the smokehouse and kitchen storehouse; and replastering and “removing modern changes” that previous owners had made in the mansion, including five bathrooms, a kitchen, plumbing, and electrical lines. Repairs to the mansion, which continued into the summer of 1954, were facilitated in part by salvaging materials from Bonarva, the house that stood next door on the former Pettigrew plantation. Bonarva’s main use at that point was “as a shelter for goats grazing along the

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81 Tarlton, 57-9.
lake shore,” and it was in such a state of disrepair “as to be a fire hazard.” Tarlton’s team thus tore it down, taking fixtures for the mansion and brick from Bonarva’s chimneys to restore walkways and other features at Somerset Place.

In 1954, Tarlton pressed ahead with additional repairs inside the mansion and to its surroundings, including upgrades to the carriage drive and the kitchen storehouse. In moves that had as much to do with present-day use as historic preservation or restoration, he had a pier built on Lake Phelps in the early part of 1954; directed the reconstruction of the overseer’s house to serve as the park superintendent’s residence; and oversaw construction of new paths around the mansion and roads into the park. Conservation and Development built the roads on land freed up when Davenport retired and moved away from the site. The new routes were necessary to facilitate better access to the park, and they replaced old ones that the FSA had built in suspected historical areas, which Tarlton then blocked off, graded and investigated for signs of building foundations, including the site where food was cooked for “the slave field force.”

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83 Tarlton, 59. It is no small irony, given the antagonism that existed during the antebellum years between the Collinses and their neighbors that present-day visitors to Somerset Place, at least in figurative terms, walk on the Pettigrews as they explore the site.

84 Tarlton, 62.


86 Tarlton, 62-3.
Public visitation was somewhat restricted at Somerset during the restorations, and the site was closed briefly in the initial phases. But the state encouraged visitors to go see the project when they could, particularly “the slave quarters excavation work in one of its most interesting phases,” and by the summer of 1954, the park’s new caretaker, Paul Bannerman, reported that it was again a popular destination, welcoming 274 visitors in the last week of July alone, and averaging 194 visitors per week during the month of August. In the midst of the survey, visitors continued to use Somerset in much the same way they had for the previous half-century, as an idyllic place for outings and gatherings and an intriguing spot to explore. It also remained a site for community celebrations, including a homecoming for the congregants of St. David’s Church, who assembled 200-strong for a picnic on the lawn. In the mid-1950s, as Tarlton wrapped up his project, those who used Somerset and Pettigrew Park were only minimally aware of the work

87 RBWCN, March 5, 1953 and May 28, 1953.

88 Quotation from N&O, June 15, 1952; RBWCN, July 29, 1954; RBWCN, August 5, 12, 19, 1954, and RBWCN, September 2, 1954. Bannerman’s work at Pettigrew was short lived. Although there appeared to be no problems with his performance that summer and fall, Governor Hodges ordered Bannerman fired the following spring, after just ten months on the job, for failing to respond to a forest fire burning near the park. The fire began on the shore of the lake and spread through hundreds of acres in Washington, Tyrrell and Hyde counties. Bannerman argued that fires in the area were not unusual and this one did not seem to require any attention from him; when he noticed it burning one April evening, he did not feel compelled to drive the six miles to Creswell to find a telephone and report it to additional authorities. (There was no phone line at the park at this time.) However, a representative of the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company reported the fire and Bannerman’s lack of response to Hodges. Bannerman commented that the Governor “must have been ‘pressured’ into taking direct action by someone who lost timber in the fire and by someone who would not accept blame for his lack of fire protection for his company’s property.” Local residents were outraged by Bannerman’s dismissal and wanted to petition to have him reinstated, but he convinced them not to take any action and said that he would have resigned his position soon anyway. See RBWCN, June 23, 1955.

89 RBWCN, August 19, 1954.
Conservation and Development was doing. Of course they could see some of the excavations and restorations in progress, but as far as they were concerned, the site’s general purpose was unchanged.\textsuperscript{90}

The full impact of Tarlton’s survey would take some years to materialize at the site itself; however, his work made immediate waves elsewhere. By the time funding for the survey dried up and Tarlton moved on to an administrative post in Raleigh, the state government had made a significant shift in the way it managed its historical programming, particularly its historic sites. Between 1951 and 1954, as Tarlton dug in Washington County, the Department of Conservation and Development acquired in rapid succession a series of historic sites across the state. Prior to this time it had only owned three, and government officials were compelled to re-examine the ways in which these sites were administered and presented to the public.\textsuperscript{91} In the context of change and development, Somerset Place became a vehicle for building a cooperative relationship between Conservation and Development and a newer, expanding agency, the Department of Archives and History.

The General Assembly had carved Archives and History out of the Historical Commission in 1943, and eleven years later, historic sites were the only aspects of the state’s historical programming that Archives and History did not administer. Mostly by

\textsuperscript{90} Haire interview; Spear interview; Spruill interview.

\textsuperscript{91} George H. Esser, “Report on State Agencies in the Cultural and Historical Area of State Government,” prepared for the Commission on the Reorganization of the State Government, July 1954: 49. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, 1954, Box 218, Folder: Department of Archives and History.
default, historic sites were, rather, under the jurisdiction of Conservation and Development. Conservation and Development had simply been created first, and the historic sites it owned were primarily on its roster because they were located within its state parks. By the mid-1950s, officials across several agencies began to question this arrangement.

According to Tarlton, Conservation and Development and its Division of State Parks were not maximizing the potential of existing historic sites within the state.92 Among other problems, Conservation and Development could not handle the volume of requests for funding and assistance that came from all manner of local preservation groups and historical societies, whereas Archives and History was going through a period of major growth, with its total budget increasing by almost half between 1948 and 1951. Officials were convinced that Archives and History was going to keep expanding. Not only would it be able to handle better the demands of an historic sites system, but a singular structure was likely to be more efficient, and it also lent strength to the notion that the state should manage and assess historic sites as a division of historical programming, rather than a component of North Carolina’s natural scenery, recreational facilities and parks.93

92 Tarlton interview. At that time, the only other state in the country with such a unified body was Pennsylvania.

Indeed, as part of the process of reorganizing North Carolina’s state government in 1955, a governor’s commission determined that historic sites should be managed by a dedicated historical agency. Two years earlier, the General Assembly had created an Historic Sites Commission within Archives and History to act as an advisory body to Conservation and Development. However, Archives and History’s consistent interest in historic sites gave the legislature a strong basis on which to recommend establishing an even more highly coordinated system. The report of the Commission on Reorganization of State Government acknowledged, “The various functions performed

North Carolina was not the only place where attention to historic sites was growing; this was, indeed, a national phenomenon, and other states were looking to North Carolina for guidance in shaping historic sites programming. North Carolina’s Department of Archives and History was “generally rated as one of the best such agencies in all the 50 states.” For examples of other states’ interest in North Carolina’s programming, see Letter, Sam Tarlton to Harry V. Conroy, March 18, 1965, and Letter, Sam Tarlton to Kenneth Redford, April 2, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 39, Folder: Miscellaneous (Inquiries)—publicity and PR; quote in “A Few Problems to be Considered,” July 26, 1966. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 301, Folder: Publications Program: Articles and Addresses. The trend toward historic preservation would only increase over the next few years with the passage of the National Preservation Act of 1966 and other opportunities for federal aid to historical projects. Tarlton, “North Carolina’s Historic Sites Program: Past, Present, and Future,” January 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1967, Box 295, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.

The Historic Sites Commission set out the following guidelines for judging a site’s historical significance, an assessment that was “the most important factor” in deciding whether or not the state should purchase and administer a particular site: “It is connected with important events, movements, or persons; It possesses a high degree of artistic or architectural significance; It dates well back into the past (ordinarily, sites or buildings of very recent date will not be included in this program); It typifies the life of the people of the state, or a segment thereof, for a given period of periods; It exemplifies or sheds important light on the life of aboriginal man within the present borders of the state; It is related to other important historic sites or buildings.” See Report of the Historic Sites Commission, tentative draft, August 31, 1954. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 24, Folder: Historic Sites Commission Reports.

Garvey, in Crow, 57.
by an historical agency can, with some logic, be redistributed among several state agencies. To follow this practice would, however, constitute denial of a tradition that has existed in North Carolina since the creation of the Historical Commission in 1903.°°

The General Assembly thus established the Division of Historic Sites within the Department of Archives and History, which gave the historical agency official responsibility for historic sites, and transferred control out of the hands of Conservation and Development.°° Tarlton’s “good marks” for his work at Somerset earned him a position as the division’s first superintendent.°° For officials in Archives and History, the shift was a positive move; they would still work with Conservation and Development and other relevant agencies, but they would take more of a leading role.°° Others concurred that the shift was a good thing, and that it came just in time as major historic restorations—most importantly, Tryon Palace in New Bern—were set to open shortly.°°°

°° Commission on Reorganization report quoted in H.G. Jones memo, December 2, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 46, Folder: Miscellaneous Administration and Management.

°°° Chapter 543, Session Laws of 1955, quoted in Twenty-Sixth Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1954-1956 (Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1956), NCHSS.

°°° Tarlton interview.

°°° George H. Esser, “Report on State Agencies in the Cultural and Historical Area of State Government,” prepared for the Commission on the Reorganization of the State Government, July 1954: 5. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, 1954, Box 218, Folder: Department of Archives and History. See also C.C. Crittenden, notes on talk by George Esser, February 4, 1954, NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, 1954. Box 218, Folder: Department of Archives and History.

In the midst of the bureaucratic shuffles, Somerset Place occupied a somewhat liminal position. It was one of only two sites which Conservation and Development did not relinquish control of in 1955. Somerset Place and Carteret County’s Fort Macon were unique in that they were sites of historical interest contained within state parks renowned for their “scenic and recreational values,” and Conservation and Development thus “retained” them “for park purposes.”

Public interest in both state and national parks was growing fast, and as far as the state was concerned around the time of the reorganization, when it came to Somerset, Pettigrew State Park was the principal attraction; the historical value of the mansion and related structures was secondary to the scenic and recreational value of the lake, forests and wildlife. But visitors were definitely interested in both aspects of Pettigrew, and by 1958, the park’s superintendent stated that it was becoming necessary to employ “a part-time historian” in addition to the

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102 On national parks, see N&O, June 16, 1955; on state parks, see RBWCN, July 12, 1951, and June 19, 1952. For overall growth, see RBWCN, June 23, 1955; George H. Esser, “Report on State Agencies in the Cultural and Historical Area of State Government,” prepared for the Commission on the Reorganization of the State Government, July 1954: 44. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, 1954, Box 218, Folder: Department of Archives and History.
park ranger, and to build “some type of museum. The continuing interest in history is demanding more and more of the Ranger’s and Attendant’s time.”

However much state agencies tried to simplify the situation, to make it either about history or recreation, the reality was that no such division really existed; Somerset was both, both because of its position within Pettigrew Park and because of the nature of the site itself. Somerset remained technically outside the fold of the new Historic Sites Division, but in practice, its administration required cooperation between Conservation and Development and Archives and History. Officials in both agencies agreed that a cooperative relationship was both desirable and logical. Even before the reorganization, Archives and History already considered Somerset within the scope of its interests, and it had lent periodic assistance to Conservation and Development’s work there in the 1940s and included the site on a variety of lists of places it was watching and where it planned to become more directly involved.

But instituting a dual-management system was tricky. Officials examining the issue noted that designating Archives and History responsible for Somerset’s historic


104 Twenty-Fourth Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1950-1952 (Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1952), 43. NCHSS; Twenty-Seventh Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1956-1958 (Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1958), 15. NCHSS.
structures while Conservation and Development remained in charge of natural features would probably require an entirely separate administrative structure to be placed within the park. Archives and History seemed willing and eager to work through this process, to find a way to maintain Conservation and Development’s obligations at Somerset Place so that the site could benefit from the specific services that the agency was most equipped to offer—for instance, in planning facilities for public use at the site, landscaping, and general maintenance and operation—while elevating the historical elements of its management to primary importance.\footnote{George H. Esser, “Report on State Agencies in the Cultural and Historical Area of State Government,” prepared for the Commission on the Reorganization of the State Government, July 1954: 44-5. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, 1954, Box 218, Folder: Department of Archives and History.}

There was no easy resolution to the debate over how to best manage Somerset Place, however, and it would remain a thorn in the side of both state agencies for at least another decade. In the 1950s, both Conservation and Development and Archives and History felt entitled to control of the site, for different and equally valid reasons. But from the point of view of Archives and History, theirs was the up-and-coming agency, and once they had taken on the majority of the state’s historic sites it seemed only logical to pursue adopting them all.\footnote{Crow, ed., Public History in North Carolina. Before the transfer to Archives and History in 1955, there was no budget for a historic sites program; by 1967, the annual budget was more than $300,000, “the staff [went] from zero to forty-eight, and the number of historic sites to a total of thirteen….” See, Christopher Crittenden, “North Carolina’s Historic Sites Program—Where and Whither,” 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1967, Box 295, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee—meeting. See also, W.S. Tarlton, “North Carolina’s Historic Sites Program: Past, Present, and Future,” Jan. 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1967, Box 295, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.} In the meantime, the department was convinced that it
could be of use in a recreational setting like a state park if “the line between recreation and education is not too rigidly drawn….”

To Sam Tarlton, the whole question of conservation and development versus historic preservation seemed to be a red herring. In his estimation, Archives and History’s Division of Historic Sites was as interested in conservation as Conservation and Development. “The basic purpose of the Historic Sites Program,” he wrote, “is the conservation and development of historic site properties for public use.” Preserving and developing “public use sites and structure properties that are significant in the history of our State…is a practical program of conservation and development. The difference between this type of conservation and that involving forestry and wildlife is largely one of subject.”

There was some truth in Tarlton’s comments. At the same time, significant methodological differences existed between the two agencies. Conservation and Development was not staffed by historians or even people with specific interest in history. It took on the responsibility for historic sites as part of a mandate to provide recreational facilities to citizens of and visitors to the state of North Carolina. Its work with parks and historic sites was linked much more strongly to its support of North

107 State Department of Archives and History, Interagency Consultant Report to the North Carolina Recreation Commission, 1957. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: State Recreational Commission.

108 Twenty-Seventh Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1956-1958 (Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1958), 34. NCHSS.

109 Tarlton, “Division of Historic Sites”: 1. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1960, Box 30, Folder: Biennial Report 1958-60.
Carolina’s tourism industry than to a commitment to the craft of history or to building North Carolinians’ historical consciousness. While historians in Archives and History also expressed explicit interest in tourism and the potential to use historic sites to generate profit, their interests in that regard were checked by their socialization in the conventions of scholarly history.

What these subtle but more than semantic differences meant in practice was that when it came to managing sites, Conservation and Development might make pragmatic decisions—such as the plan to convert Somerset Place into resort for hunting and fishing—that were at odds with what a historian might have considered the best practice. There was nothing inherently wrong with Conservation and Development’s policies. Adapting old sites and structures for contemporary use can make sound environmental and economic sense. But they were definitely different from those that might have been instituted by an exclusively historical agency.

Indeed, for Archives and History, historic sites were not merely about use value or, Tarlton’s remarks about conservation notwithstanding, even simple preservation in the sense of drawing attention to a site or saving it from destruction simply because it was old, beautiful or associated with a famous historical event or figure. Historic sites had a purpose that superseded the practical; they were, ultimately, focused on transmitting an argument and carrying a message about the past to a contemporary audience. The means of transmission mattered, and the agency was directly concerned with “effective”

110 William S. Tarlton, “North Carolina’s Historic Sites Program.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: Speeches.
communication, which would mix “the authentic substance of history” with “old fashioned showmanship” in order to bring to the public “a consciousness and appreciation of their history.” Archives and History, just like Conservation and Development, was concerned with audience reception and strove to develop sites that would both educate and entertain, that would provide an experience that visitors would remember and enjoy. But whereas Conservation and Development wanted audiences to take pleasure in sites that preserved physical aspects of the past—for Conservation and Development, the physical setting and composition of the sites was itself the subject—Archives and History wanted to bring its interpretive power to bear on material evidence, to use the evidence as a tool to tell a larger story.

The potential for interpretation at Somerset Place became clearer in 1957 when Tarlton finally released a report detailing the findings of his survey and excavations. In the intervening years, Tarlton had maintained a distinct personal interest in Somerset Place, and requested that Conservation and Development “call on” him if he could provide any assistance at all to future projects at the site. Tarlton’s report—issued

111 Twenty-Seventh Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1956-1958 (Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1958), 34. NCHSS.

112 “The idea here is that it is not the physical components of heritage that are actually traded, such as historic monuments or sites, but intangible ideas and feelings such as fantasy, nostalgia, pleasure, pride and the like, which are communicated through the interpretation of the physical elements. When historical sites or artifacts are ‘sold’, the physical product is rarely exchanged but an experience is.” J.E. Tunbridge and G.J. Ashworth, Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 8.

113 Letter, Tarlton to Morse, April 30, 1957. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1957, Box 27, Folder: Information Given.
through Conservation and Development, but reflecting in at least equal part the direction and methodologies of Archives and History—was the first comprehensive publication of any kind on Somerset’s built environment, and it offered a series of recommendations for further development of the “historical area” at Pettigrew State Park in order to “restore” Somerset Place to its 1850s state.¹¹⁴

According to Tarlton, which ever agency ultimately managed the site, the state should always take pains to make it hospitable to visitors by providing facilities for their convenience and emphasizing the harmony and hospitality of the structures and grounds. His first priority was for the park to acquire and develop the lawn to the east of the canal in order to set the tone for the site. He explained, “The lawn was the ‘front yard’ of the Somerset Place establishment. Until it is developed, the restored dwelling will not have a proper front prospect and the impression created by the whole development will lack proper balance.”¹¹⁵ He then included a series of instructions indicating ways of adding more conveniences for visitors around the site while maintaining an overall focus on historic restoration. The challenge was to construct a site that could serve the immediate needs of visitors—picnickers, campers, sportsmen and others—while exposing them to the architecture and built environment of an earlier period and thus encouraging them to feel as though they had moved back in time. It was necessary to create a setting where

¹¹⁴ Tarlton, 65.
¹¹⁵ Tarlton, 65.
they could step back into aspects of the antebellum world without forsaking the conveniences of the present.

It went without saying that when it came to the built environment, attention focused first and foremost on the mansion. But Tarlton had excavated a range of other structures, including a number of foundations in what had been the slave community. In 1952, he had told the *News and Observer* that uncovering remnants of the “slave quarters” was among his project’s “main objective[s].”\(^{116}\) It was not immediately clear, however, how the foundations of slaves’ homes, their hospital, chapel and other buildings would fit into an historic site intended to entertain white visitors and to celebrate the state’s past. When the WPA had launched its restoration projects more than a decade earlier, it had dismissed the slave quarters as simply unworthy of attention; they had no place in that organization’s view of Somerset’s contemporary use.\(^{117}\)

Tarlton took a different approach, connecting preservation of many traces of the past with the need to provide activities and amenities to observers in the present. His report suggested placing a variety of visitor facilities in “the lakeshore area between the historical area as now defined and the Thirty Foot Canal.” This would concentrate “historical and recreational development in a limited area.”

Yet the concentration would not seem to mix the historical and the recreational aspects to an objectionable degree. This view is based on the thought that it would be well to reconstruct several of the slave quarters that stood in this area for use as tourist cabins and for other purposes. The cabins could be made to

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\(^{116}\) *N&O*, June 15, 1952.

\(^{117}\) *N&O*, June 8, 1941.
duplicate the original exterior appearance of the slave cabins but be arranged 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 cabins nearest to the historical area proper should be authentically restored inside and outside and furnished as a historical exhibit. The wooded area in front of the slave quarters and the open area behind them, and possibly the small wooded plot in the field near Thirty Foot Canal, could be developed as picnic areas.118

For Tarlton, each and every structure and piece of land at Somerset Place had historical weight: it was all a remainder of things past and worth making tangible for present-day visitors. But some parts were worth more than others; some parts had value on a different scale. The mansion needed meticulous restoration that would emphasize the planter family’s refinement. Its primary use would be as a spectacle for visitors to behold and regard. By contrast, the slave cabins were a spot where visitors could satisfy their creature comforts. Perhaps one cabin could serve as a historic display. But it would do so situated beside others that may have looked ‘historical’ on the outside, but on the inside were merely toilets and sleeping quarters.119

The historical remains at Somerset Place were perplexing for Tarlton and his crew, and also, perhaps, for local observers who set about publicizing the developments at the site and trying to attract more visitors’ attention. The park’s appeal was its tranquility: its pristine natural setting, and the beauty and gentility of buildings that

118 Tarlton, 69.

119 It was not entirely coincidental that Tarlton endeavored to reconstruct slave quarters as facades for cabins and toilets. A range of scholars have noted that the process of racialization often includes connecting a racialized group with base human functions. See, for example: Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995); Annie Coombes, Reinventing Africa: Museums, Imperial Culture, and Popular Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Ann Stoler, Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality And the Colonial Order of Things (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
called up the history of the white Collins family. But neither those responsible for
developing the site nor observers who visited could ignore entirely the other traces of
history that were present in the lake or the mansion house, and which recalled a story that
was at least as much toil as it was tranquility.

In the summer of 1955, the Roanoke Beacon had published a photo of the
Transportation Canal on its front page, titled, “Tranquil Scene at Pettigrew Park.” It
portrayed the canal as a symbol of leisure. Visitors could come and relax on its edge, in
the shadow of cypress trees and a restored antebellum mansion:

Painted and renovated throughout, the famous old Collins house at Pettigrew State
Park is now ready for visitors to this popular resort area. It is one of the
outstanding examples of Colonial architecture in this section of the state and it is
in a fine state of repair since restoration work was completed during the past
year.120

Yet the canal, and the plantation as a whole, was more than this romantic setting—and
the newspaper, developers, and local residents knew it. Try as they might, no one could
erase completely the complexities of Somerset’s past, whether those complexities
emphasized the history of slavery, the story of the Collins dynasty’s dramatic fall from
grace, or the economic decline of the entire region as a result of the Civil War. The
Roanoke Beacon tried to attract visitors by emphasizing the peaceful look of the canal in
its restored state. But it was still a canal that had been dug, maintained and used by
slaves as they moved the crops to market that Collins forced them to grow, and that for
most of the past century had laid neglected and idle, largely because the slaves had gone

120 RBW CN, June 30, 1955.
free. Although neither of those stories figured prominently at the park when Tarlton released his report in 1957, they remained at the back of people’s minds, disguised in only the thinnest ways by the facelifts and touch-ups performed on Somerset Place.

However problematic the restorations at Somerset Place may have been, they allowed the state to begin packaging the site for public consumption, and by the end of the 1950s, the state was hard at work trying to impress on North Carolinians the significance of historic sites and the value of investing money in their preservation and restoration. Historic sites were important for ideological, commercial and cultural reasons. Displaying evidence of the nation’s cultural life was a means of “assert[ing] the superiority of American civilization over that of American rivals and competitors.”

Business leaders, politicians and private citizens all made the connection between tourism, recreation, conservation and historic preservation. As one woman put it in a letter to the governor, “I know that the relics of the past (famous buildings, birthplaces, etc.) are the first things, the first places a traveler seeks out… In these times of change it will benefit us as a state and as individual citizens to examine our set of values. The past has always held a message for us, a message of greatness. It is ours to respect and to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.” The “chief purpose” of restoring historic sites was “to stand as stimulating incentives towards a better citizenship and Americanism of the

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121 William B. Hesseltine, “The Challenge of the Artifact,” paper delivered at the American Association for State and Local History, October 7, 1957: 1. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: Speeches.

122 Letter, Alma Graham to William Umstead, August 4, 1954. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1954, Box 218, Folder: Historic Sites.
future based on present use and understanding of the most wholesome traits and achievements of predecessors.”

Developing historic sites did not hurt America’s bottom line either. As one of Archives and History’s reports put it,

The development of thousands of historic sites throughout the Nation has proved beyond any shadow of doubt that these are major tourist attractions, and that as such they can yield large financial returns, both in the form of taxes to the State and local units of government and as profits to businessmen. It has been stated that if Rockefeller had not restored Colonial Williamsburg, it would have paid the State of Virginia to do so. There is a similar great potential in many of the historic sites in North Carolina.

Similarly, the News and Observer published a front-page article advertising history as a profitable enterprise. C.C. Crittenden, appointed the director of Archives and History, told the press that historical reconstructions alone could make the state $42 million a year through tourism, especially if the state put more energy into what he foresaw as extremely popular Civil War sites. The businessman Henry Belk declared:

Make no mistake about it. This new interest in preserving local history is much, much more than an appreciation of what has gone before. It is much, much more than gathering, collecting, printing and preserving the facts of the years and the people. It can mean more money in the bank. More can be sold, and at a fair profit, and after you have sold it you can sell it over and over again. More remains after it is sold than was there before it was sold. What other saleable item can this be truthfully said about? In this attitude there is nothing of cynicism. It

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124 Twenty-Seventh Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1956-1958 (Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1958), 16. NCHSS.

125 N&O, October 27, 1957. See also Crittenden, “History can be Big Business.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: Speeches; “Restoration of Historic Sites is Sound Economic Investment,” Smithfield Herald, October 29, 1957. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, Scrapbooks, 1936-60 (Vol. 7, 1956-60).
is sane, it is practical, and yet it detracts not one whit from the strange warming
every man gets when confronted intimately with great names, great events, great
trends which went this way ere we arrived.\textsuperscript{126}

Even the Department of Archives and History adopted a language of consumerism and
sales. A report on the agency’s 1950-52 biennium summarized its move toward greater
interest in administering historic sites as “a more aggressive effort to sell North Carolina
history to the people of the state…”\textsuperscript{127} History was a hot commodity marketed to the 10
million travelers who spent $183 million in North Carolina in 1957 alone.\textsuperscript{128} Statewide,
the industry increased its value steadily, jumping up 135 percent in one decade to $350
million in 1958.\textsuperscript{129} Governor Luther Hodges emphasized, “We must keep advancing and
meet competition with new attractions, up-to-date accommodations and the most
effective advertising possible.” He pointed out that more people than ever before could
travel—it had become cheaper and more accessible, and there had grown a dizzying array
of choices for consumers looking for things to do and places to go. By the end of the
1950s, North Carolina and Florida led the South in “travel volume and investment in
advertising travel attractions.”\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{126} Henry Belk, “Money in the Bank,” \textit{Goldsboro News-Argus}, April 11, 1956. NCSA, Department of
Archives and History, Director’s Office, Scrapbooks, 1936-60 (Vol. 7, 1956-60).

\textsuperscript{127} Twenty-Fourth Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1950-1952
(Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1952), 8-11. NCHSS.

\textsuperscript{128} N&O, March 18, 1958.

\textsuperscript{129} N&O, October 6, 1959.

\textsuperscript{130} N&O, March 18, 1958. In fact, most of the value in the tourism business in North Carolina seems to
have been from travel through the state, rather than travel to it, and overall, at the end of the 1950s, North
Carolina was one of the least visited states on the Eastern Seaboard. See \textit{N&O}, October 27, 1959.
Interest in historic preservation was motivated by a combination of patriotism and nostalgia, mixed with the utility of securing tourist dollars for North Carolina, and developers tried to keep all of these balls in the air as they revamped their presentations of the state’s historic sites. Historic sites were venues for celebrating the past in a way that emphasized present-day ideological and political goals and disguised the varied and often contradictory narratives that produced the sites—the evidence for restoration—in the first place. Whereas Somerset Place in fact represented a range of stories, what developers wanted to preserve in the 1940s and 50s was a singular narrative of a venerable antebellum plantation, a narrative of a dominant class’ tradition, heritage and pride. As Crittenden put it, “The best traditions are those for which our ancestors stood. Too frequently these traditions are not understood or are disregarded by our people today. The staff of this department will do well to keep those traditions in mind, to work together for the common purpose of keeping them ever before our citizens.”

Who “our ancestors” were was, of course, relative. It is highly unlikely that Crittenden was speaking to the descendants of slaves or focusing on their forebears and what they had thought and done. Rather, Crittenden venerated the heritage of white southerners, whether they descended from the aristocracy or from common folk who were separated from the South’s ‘best’ people by class difference but linked to them by racial

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131 Twenty-Seventh Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1956-1958 (Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1958), 15-16. NCHSS.

132 C.C. Crittenden, notes on talk of George Esser, February 4, 1954. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, 1954, Box 218, Folder: Department of Archives and History.
privilege. And it was the heritage of white southerners that was proving to be the hot commodity, in demand from both North Carolinians and out-of-state tourists in the middle of the twentieth century.

Appropriations to Historic Sites increased through the end of the 1950s. In 1957, the General Assembly appropriated $321,481 for the acquisition, restoration, repair and maintenance of fifteen historic sites. Historic Sites officials emphasized that the department chiefly required funding for capital improvements, primarily restorations of existing historic structures and the construction of visitor and employee facilities at each site. It was proving difficult to impress on the public that the program was not “an office program, but rather a field program of large and widespread dimensions, consisting of real estate which needs to be developed for large-scale public use.” In order for the state’s prior investments in historic sites to “pay a return in educational benefits and tourist dollars,” more money was required to develop the sites and ensure that they could both receive visitors and provide an adequate service.

However, despite heartfelt pleas from Crittenden, Tarlton and others in Archives and History, and despite the appropriations the General Assembly had already made, North Carolinians rejected the notion of allocating additional government funding to

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134 Untitled speech, n.d. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: Speeches.

135 *Twenty-Seventh Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1956-1958* (Department of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1958), 41-2. NCHSS.
these projects. In October 1959, they went to the polls to vote in a special referendum on bonds that would allocate $250,000 to preserving historic sites. Archives and History had initially requested $438,000, “But they quickly learned the art of picking up votes from legislators who cast wary eyes at the idea of public dollars for historic restoration.” In the campaign leading up to the vote, Tarlton spoke to the *News and Observer*, explaining that the state had a number of existing historic sites, but that they were pointless when presented without on-site interpretations. He also reminded voters of the potential financial value their investment could turn: “To develop adequately one of these sites can mean as much to the State and to a community as bringing in a sizeable new industry.”136 Voters, however, were unconvinced. They rejected Archives and History’s proposal while approving $33,900,000 for other areas, including education, training, hospitals and port facilities. In the eyes of the public, historic sites were a minor issue not worth their tax dollars.137

Historians, too, debated the potential of historic sites. One historian, speaking to the Association for State and Local History, told his audience,

…if objects have only illustrative value—serve only to enable bus loads of school children and station-wagon loads of picnickers to ‘visualize’ some irrelevant fragment of the past then historians can make no use of them and historical


agencies, whose primary purpose is to advance the study of history, should ease wasting money and man-power on them.

The jury was still out on how historians could convert relics and artifacts into “historical facts” that would tell observers something useful about the past.\footnote{138} But just as scraps of pottery found in archaeological digs at Jamestown, Virginia, provided clues about life and culture at the settlement that were not contained anywhere in the written record, the structures at Somerset Place—and the additional evidence that subsequent researchers would find there, still buried in the 1950s beneath the ground—would enable future historians to cobble together a story about the antebellum past that was both utterly central to but also considerably richer than the story of the Collins family alone.\footnote{139}

In a report covering the 1958-60 biennium, Tarlton stated that a lack of funds was seriously hampering the potential of the program, keeping it merely good but neither “complete” nor even “effective.”\footnote{140} It was, evidently, well known that North Carolina “lagged behind” other states in the field of historic preservation and that something needed to be done. Archives and History established an advisory committee on historic sites in 1959 to help guide government spending, but it had no official authority and was

\footnote{138}William B. Hesseltine, “The Challenge of the Artifact,” paper delivered at the American Association for State and Local History, October 7, 1957: 9-10. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: Speeches.

\footnote{139}J.C. Herrington, “Some Lessons from Archeology,” paper delivered at the American Association for State and Local History, October 7, 1957: 6. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1953-56, Box 28, Folder: Speeches.

\footnote{140}Tarlton, “Division of Historic Sites”: 2. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1960, Box 30, Folder: Biennial Report 1958-60.
therefore ineffective, ignored by the General Assembly.\textsuperscript{141} The failure of the referendum on the bond issue resulted in a “hiatus” in development at the sites; Tarlton pointed out that stalling further work on existing projects made it hard “to justify the investment that has already been made in starting the program. We will continue to be in the position, as now, of administering a half-finished program, which, due to the lack of facilities for receiving the visiting public, offers all too little appeal to the otherwise interested populace.” That said, he acknowledged that most sites were in such an early stage of development that there was, in fact, nowhere to go but forward; any work done was good work. But when Tarlton asked the General Assembly for more money to administer several historic sites in 1961, Somerset Place was not yet a formal part of the state’s program and was therefore not on the list.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{141} Historic Sites Advisory Committee meeting, May 7, 1963. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, General Correspondence 1963, Box 263, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.

\textsuperscript{142} The sites he did identify as most worthy of additional funding in the 1961-63 operating budget for Historic Sites were: Brunswick Town; Fort Fisher; Aycock Birthplace (where he recommended adding outbuildings to the site including a slave quarters—see 5); Bentonville Battleground; Alamance Battleground; Town Creek Indian Mound; and the Zebulon B. Vance Birthplace. See Tarlton, “Division of Historic Sites”: 3-10. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1960, Box 30, Folder: Biennial Report 1958-60.
Chapter Four

“In history as tourist bait”: Inventing Somerset Place State Historic Site, 1960 to 1969

Within the past few years there has occurred among our people a veritable historical renaissance. No longer can it be said that we are not interested in, do not care about, our history…. There can be no doubt that, more than ever before, our people are far more conscious of and interested in their history.¹

Under the moss-hung trees miniskirts replaced the ruffled hoop-skirts of antebellum days…No one present could have danced a quadrille! But there was laughter and joy and friendship….The breezes blow across the lake, the sun sets, the gnarled cypress cast weird shadows across the mansion house—all is well, however, for Somerset Place is alive again.²

At two o’clock in the afternoon on Saturday, September 6, 1969, in a ceremony “on fresh cut greens,” “under the spreading cypress trees that have shaded the plantation for almost 200 years,” Somerset Place was dedicated North Carolina’s fourteenth state historic site.³ The dedication was polished and refined, “in the tradition of” Somerset’s “gracious style of living,” featuring a marching band, invited speakers, and refreshments

¹ C.C. Crittenden, “History and Historical Activities in North Carolina 1900-1976,” March 19, 1963. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963, Box 261, Folder: Department of Archives and History Executive Board.


catered by Creswell’s Women’s Club. The local paper covered the event with a front-page story, noting that Somerset Place State Historic Site stood for “a tangible part of society and life that flourished over 150 years ago.” It dubbed the years from 1830 to 1860 that the site represented to visitors Somerset’s “happiest time,” when the plantation “was a social center for a reading club, parties, [and] fancy-dressed balls.” By the time of the dedication, state authorities had long been convinced that the antebellum era was the natural period for Somerset to represent, and they had spent several decades developing the site to emphasize its glory days as a center of high society, a place that attracted people seeking culture and refinement.

On the surface, the dedication ceremony was a straightforward celebration marking the opening of a new historic site. But it was also much more than this. The dedication was also an opportunity for contemporary North Carolinians to fashion their heritage. It enshrined Somerset Place as a material realization of dominant ‘memories’ of the antebellum Collinses. The memories were figurative: none of those who attended the dedication had actually been alive to experience those years. But the acts of the dedication mimicked the days of the lords of Lake Phelps. In isolation from both the larger context of life on an antebellum plantation, which they were meant to represent, and from 1960s North Carolina, from which they were meant to give attendees a break,

4 Letter, September 12, 1969, H.G. Jones to Mrs. Jenning Davenport. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place.

5 RBWCN, September 10, 1969.
activities such as lounging on the lawn, enjoying refreshments in the mansion, and hunting in the forested areas allowed those who came to celebrate Somerset’s opening to stake a personal and immediate claim on a romantic, honorable southern past.\footnote{Note that deriving pleasure from relaxing on the manicured lawn or wandering through the restored mansion was not necessarily inherently problematic: “The objection, of course, is not to pleasure and diversion, but to the ease with which hard-won understandings can be lost” (Brett, 152). Brett makes this statement in the context of a discussion of Ireland’s Strokestown Famine Museum, which he thinks is, overall, well done because of the complexity of the narrative it presents. See also 140.}

In a letter written several days after the event, H.G. Jones, Director of Archives and History, expressed gratitude to everyone at Somerset who had helped make honoring that heritage possible.\footnote{Letter, H.G. Jones to Robert Morgan, Sept. 11, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place; Letter, H.G. Jones to Mrs. Jenning Davenport, Sept. 12, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place.} Above all else, he recognized the 150 descendants of Josiah Collins who made the trip to Somerset. Archives and History and North Carolina’s Literary and Historical Society had feted them with a candlelit reception at the mansion on Friday night, and to them Jones gave the greatest praise:

It is particularly gratifying for us to welcome ‘back home’ so many of the members of the Collins family…It was a delight to have them gather here last night and see their restored homestead, and we want the Collins family to maintain their interest in Somerset, for in so doing they will make it more than a house; it will retain much of its original atmosphere. One bedroom of furniture used by the family has been returned to the house…and we hope that others will want to add authentic pieces from time to time. We need more of the original furnishings. So, to all Collins descendants, I say, on behalf of the State of North Carolina, welcome….\footnote{Dedication of Somerset Place State Historic Site, Sept. 6, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place.}
For Jones, his colleagues, and others who attended the dedication, Somerset was synonymous with the Collinses and the ultimate proof of its promise was that it had drawn members of the family back to their ancestral home.

In 1969, Somerset Place was shaped to tell a familiar story that emphasized the planter and his family and marginalized all the others who lived and worked there, especially the enslaved population.9 Historic Sites staff presented visitors to the site with simple tales of wealth and grace, under the assumption that that was all they wanted to hear; the site—segregated by law until 1964 and by custom for many years after that—was operated by whites for whites, and it was meant to educate but always within the confines of offering guests a hospitable, comfortable day’s activity. Archives and History made Somerset a state historic site because it could be interpreted to serve larger programmatic goals for state agencies and officials, and it was judged as saleable to a specific target audience. African Americans were not part of this audience, and the white people who visited seemed content with a story that sugar-coated the nature and consequences of decades of planter rule.

9 See Elizabeth Wilborn, “Somerset Place: The Collins Plantation on Lake Phelps,” *North Carolina State Ports* (Fall 1969). NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place. Moreover, Historic Sites administrators were not the only people who displayed this attitude. See, for example, David E. Davis, *History of Tyrrell County* (Norfolk: James Christopher Printing, 1963), for white-centric discussions of Somerset and the surrounding areas. At one point, Davis writes that there were few large planters in Tyrrell County; Josiah Collins was the exception to the rule, and in any case, slavery was mostly a benevolent institution: “The Negro slave lived in a cabin called the quarters near the master’s house. Usually he was treated well by his master. He was provided food and medical attention and allowed to marry and raise a family. Occasionally a hard-hearted master or overseer made the lot of the slave a hard one, but such cases were not common. Cruel masters, it is said, were scorned then just as people who treat animals cruelly are scorned today” (11).
The guests at Somerset’s dedication made an automatic connection between the site and a widely-shared vision of the Old South that cast the planter as a benevolent hero and plantation society as gracious and leisurely. But that narrative that seemed so obvious in fact took twenty-eight years of work to produce at Somerset Place. Since Reconstruction, Somerset had been an important site for commemoration of the antebellum past; in the 1960s, the process of formalizing that role required emphasizing particular stories and, categorically, ruling out others. In order for Somerset to become a state historic site—as opposed to simply a location people knew as historic and that possessed important features from the past—Archives and History had to work harder to regulate the narratives it told.

This chapter explores Somerset’s transformation in the context of the rapid growth of the Historic Sites program and developments at Pettigrew State Park, entwined also with the expansion of the tourism industry. The impoverished Albemarle was in desperate need of the “tourist bait” that history turned out to be, and tourism was a way for the government to justify spending on public historical programming. By restoring Somerset and opening it to the public, the state was able to market narratives that focused on the natural bounty and human ingenuity of the often neglected northeastern region. These narratives paid off. For developers, government administrators and Somerset’s audience, they reinforced social and political privilege, shored up ideas about common

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10 *N&O*, October 18, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1965, Box 279, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.

11 Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Interpretive Plan* (Division of Historic Sites: 1969), 21, NCHSS.
identity, and helped to inculcate pride of place; and for the state, they went a long way toward promoting “economic development” by bringing dominant notions of heritage “alive.”

As popular and useful as the mythology of the gracious Old South may have been, however, the interpretations at Somerset in the 1960s were not inevitable. Most importantly, African Americans had long offered popular narratives that countered Old South romanticism, and in the era of the civil rights movement and black power—both of which had important roots in North Carolina generally and in the eastern part of the state specifically—there were a host of alternative interpretations available to those charged with developing the site for public visitation. Based on available evidence, the enslaved

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12 Christopher Crittenden, “Let’s Take a Moratorium—Historic Sites Advisory Committee, A Proposed Program for the Next Five Years,” October 20, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.


14 When tourists went to Somerset in 1969, they saw a commemorative narrative of the Collins family, carefully constructed by state authorities. What they did not see—and what may not have crossed their minds—was the “unmapped and unimagined” landscape “attached to a community” and which “remained the private preserve of locals.” Even today, that landscape is extremely difficult to find; indeed, I was not able to recover it for this dissertation, though I will continue to search as part of my research for later versions of this work. Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 188-9. In a discussion of the reconstruction of Charleston, South Carolina, as a tourist mecca commemorating the Old South, Brundage states, “Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of Charleston’s transformation into a memory theatre of the Old south is that it seemed so natural, so appropriate, and so inevitable that it aroused little dissent” (225). The same can be said of Somerset’s reconstruction in the 1960s.

could have been recalled in discussions of the architecture of the structures—for who actually built them?; the furnishings of the mansion—for who actually was responsible for their care and maintenance?; the agricultural marvel of the canals—for whose hands dug them from the soil? Theoretically, all of these stories and more could have been part of the narratives presented at the site in 1969, for all of this activity was well known to authorities at the time. One hundred years after the fall of the lords of Lake Phelps, there remained traces of Somerset’s past economic and social vitality, but embedded there were other stories about the past, too, which were far less congratulatory, and some of which offered a clear critique of a none-too-perfect present.\(^\text{15}\) White supremacy could not obliterate evidence, but it did make alternative readings distinctly unwelcome.

The purpose of Somerset Place State Historic Site was to commemorate and venerate those at the apex of slave society.\(^\text{16}\) Veneration did not mean ignoring entirely the reality that Somerset was built and maintained by slave labor. By the 1960s, there was no way the Division of Historic Sites could ignore slavery completely: even though developers and interpreters read around the extant evidence and evaded, as much as possible, direct discussion of the enslaved, the broader context of an ever-strengthening


\(^{16}\) See, for example, Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Master Plan} (Division of Historic Sites: 1970), 2-3, NCHSS.
popular movement against Jim Crow and growing black cultural nationalism made outright denial impossible.\(^{17}\) In fact, the department made clear in numerous policy statements its goal of telling sound and ‘complete’ historical stories, which would have to include slavery. The department’s staff managed not to realize this goal when they shaped Somerset’s new exhibits, but at least in their correspondence and planning of the site, they could not deny that slavery was a significant part of the story: try as they might, they could not deny the story they already knew about who had done what to and for whom in the antebellum South.\(^{18}\)

Rather, as state authorities shaped an historic site at Somerset Place, they had to find a way to acknowledge that slavery had happened, and even that it was bad for its victims, and yet still celebrate the plantation society that it enabled. At Somerset’s dedication, Cadwallader Jones Collins, an attorney from Norfolk, Virginia, and a sixth-generation descendant of the planter family “praised the beauty and graciousness of Somerset Place, but deplored the system of slavery upon which the grandeur was built.”\(^{19}\)

In his brief statement—singular, as he was the only person to mention slavery that day—

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\(^{17}\) Martha Norkunas notes that while social movements had an impact, “in the 1960s preservation remained the hobby of a small, well-to-do elite,” which explains why developers at Somerset could both acknowledge slavery’s significance and be aware of its history yet produce exhibits that essentially ignored it as a subject (28).

\(^{18}\) See, for only one of many examples, Untitled tourism leaflet. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, 1961-63, Box 7. I also thank Paul Krause for this phrasing.

\(^{19}\) N\&O, September 7, 1969. To borrow Lowenthal’s words, “Critics decry…cover-ups [of slavery at plantation museums]… But these sites are patriotic shrines. It is their custodians’ function to regret slavery yet salvage owners’ reputations.…” David Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 154.
Collins performed the neat trick of rendering slavery irrelevant through what the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls a formula of banalization. Trouillot suggests that banalization trivializes an event that cannot be denied: it “sweeten[s] the horror…of a situation by focusing on details.”\(^{20}\) Collins’ words, which summed up the Department of Archives and History’s message at the site, had the effect of saying, *slavery was terrible, of course we all regret it, but Somerset was not all about slavery and the plantation was great nonetheless, so let’s move on and celebrate.*

The plantation’s remembered greatness depended upon forgetting the abuses and coercion that its labor force had suffered; indeed, forgetting the members of that labor force as much as possible, noting the institution that held them at the plantation without acknowledging the people being held or their fundamentally dire circumstances. Although developers could not avoid the story of slavery, reading out the story of the enslaved became a vital part of making Somerset Place a state historic site.\(^{21}\) Slaves could not be the subjects of a narrative that memorialized the planter and his wealth and claimed an immediate connection between contemporary North Carolinians and the antebellum past. At best, they could be objects, but they certainly could not be real individuals with valid histories of their own. The story of the canals that drained the swampland and enabled Josiah Collins to become one of the richest planters in the state was a story of technological breakthroughs and business acumen; it was decidedly not the

\(^{20}\) Trouillot, 96-7.

story of African workers at the mercy of insects and the elements, held captive in stockades to dig until they died. The story authorities chose to present in 1969 and the story that sold—despite any apologetic declarations that slavery was “deplorable”—was a story premised on and maintained by white supremacy. Although much changed at Somerset and in North Carolina in the 1960s, white supremacy remained at the core of the state’s economic, social and political realities, and it was the dominant principle that guided authorities’ views at Somerset Place of what counted as history and what stories could be told.

Reconstructions

Once the Department of Archives and History secured responsibility for historic sites in 1955, North Carolina’s State Historic Sites program grew quickly, supported by an expanding preservation movement at both the state and national levels. In the decade following the transfer, Historic Sites grew so much that it accounted for “approximately one-third of the Department’s total maintenance budget.” Between 1953 and 1963, the


23 Christopher Crittenden, “Let’s Take a Moratorium—Historic Sites Advisory Committee, A Proposed Program for the Next Five Years,” October 20, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.
General Assembly appropriated more than $1.6 million for historic sites and memorials, much of that in the two years after 1961.  

In the early 1960s, Somerset Place was still outside the Historic Sites program, remaining one section of a state park, and it was caught in between two state agencies with overlapping responsibilities: Conservation and Development, which had formal control, and Archives and History, which had no official claim on the site but watched it carefully for opportunities to exert some of its newfound authority. The relationship at Somerset between Conservation and Development and Archives and History illuminates the fact that Somerset existed within a false dichotomy, where administrators and audiences both tended to pit “scenic” against “cultural” landscapes, as though the two were completely separate entities. Americans in general had begun to discover new recreational value in the environment, and the recreational and historical sections of Pettigrew Park—always somewhat clumsily divided—competed with each other for both visitor and state attention.  

Public opinion and state interest were fickle, shifting favor regularly from the historic site to recreational opportunities and back again. 

What remained consistent were efforts to position the various aspects of Pettigrew Park so that they appeared, both separately and together, to benefit the state. From the perspective of most administrators, whether they were celebrating history or nature was less important than the ability to use the state’s attractions to draw attention to North  


25 Genevieve Keller and Timothy Keller, “Preserving Important Landscapes,” in Stipe, 188.
Carolina, and hopefully attention with a financial return. State advertising featured Pettigrew Park in promotions designed to increase tourism to North Carolina by emphasizing the variety travelers would find there.\(^{26}\) Because Pettigrew boasted a combination of natural and historical attractions it was particularly useful to tourism boosters in and out of government. The superintendent of the park labeled it “one of the greatest potentials within the Division,” and called on State Parks to “accept and plan for…future responsibilities.”\(^{27}\)

One step in the direction of taking advantage of what Pettigrew could offer was to buy land to broaden the park’s boundaries. In October 1961, therefore, Conservation and Development purchased an additional twenty-five acres. The expansion was a crucial move to “protect and preserve from encroachment” Pettigrew’s historical features and also to meet increasing demands for recreational space in the state’s northeast.\(^{28}\) All


\(^{27}\) Thomas Hampton, Superintendent’s Annual Report Pettigrew State Park, Fall 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, Misc. records 1935-65, Misc., Records of park Division 1935-65, Superintendents’ Meetings, Reports.

\(^{28}\) Meeting of Committee on State Parks, October 2, 1961, NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, 1961-63. See also minutes of the meeting of the Board of Conservation and Development, October 1, 2 and 3, 1962. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2, Box 1, Folder: Board Members; Memo, Roy Wilder to Hargrove “Skipper” Bowles, October 24, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, 1961-63. In 1962, Pettigrew welcomed 20,316 visitors between January 1 and October 31, mostly for picnics and fishing. In general, visits to state parks were up again, and the state was in sore need of more park facilities, especially for camping, to accommodate the visitors. See State Parks Public Use Record, January 1, 1962-October 31, 1962. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Box 7, Division File, 1961-63; *N&O*, January 29, 1963. Between 1961 and 63, parks use was apparently four times greater than it was a decade earlier. See Explanation of Permanent Improvements Budget Requests for State parks for Biennium 1961-63. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Box 7, Division File, 1961-63.
told, Pettigrew State Park served 1,626,351 visitors in 1961 but was able to provide them with only temporary picnic grounds composed of six tables (picnicking was by far the most important activity at the park), four boats for rent, limited space for camping, and a partially-restored Somerset Place.29

Conservation and Development looked toward continuing increases and further expansions, but the north shore of the lake, where most of the amenities were located, offered limited recreational possibilities. Edward Evensen, the manager of the Chamber of Commerce in Plymouth, appealed to State Parks for expanded services on the south side for swimming, camping, water sports, and public facilities. “It is believed,” Evensen wrote, “that such an area development would complement Pettigrew State Park and its fine historical attractions, and would bring many visitors to the Park, other than local residents.”30 He insisted that with the right kind of development, the park “could become

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See also Thomas Ellis, Progress and Accomplishments. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, Box 7, 1961-63.

29 Report on cost per visitor for operation of NC’s State Parks During the Fiscal Years 1959-60 and 1960-61. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2; Memo to Roy Wilder, December 5, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, 1961-63. In 1959, officials noted that the capacity for picnicking at the site was approximately 60 people on 3 acres. Inventory of Designated Non-Urban Public Outdoor Recreation Areas-Pettigrew State Park. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, State Parks Division, General File, 1937-73, Department of Natural and Economic Resources, Parks and Recreation General, N-Y, 1937-1967, Page 114, Item 2, Box 2, Folder: Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission General. By September 1961 visitation was up ten percent over the previous year, and the state had spent $14,429 on capital improvements at the park. See Report, September 11, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2, and Monthly report on capital improvement September 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, 1961-63.

30 Memo to Roy Wilder, December 5, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, 1961-63; Letter, Edward Evensen to Thomas
a major asset to the State.” Conservation and Development assured Evensen that the state would take his suggestions under advisement, but that State Parks needed to determine on its own whether or not it would be worth expanding in this way.

As State Parks debated the direction of Pettigrew’s future, however, it was abundantly clear to visitors that the park needed significant upgrading. One was so displeased with what he found on arrival that he felt compelled to meet with Eric Rodgers, a member of the Board of Conservation and Development, who then wrote a strongly worded letter to the department’s director demanding improvements in services. According to Rodgers, the lake at Pettigrew was a “muddy waterhole,” hostile to fishing, and the park itself inhospitable to camping. Rodgers took the complaint about low water and copious mud in Lake Phelps seriously. He wrote, “This lake, as you know, is about the only reason for a park at Pettigrew.” Apparently it was the common opinion among locals that the lake was no longer any good for fishing since nearby farm developments had been draining the water level. Rodgers concluded his letter wistfully: “Some years ago we organized fishing parties in this area to go to Lake Phelps several times during the

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Ellis, October 25, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2.

31 Letter, Edward Evensen to Thomas Ellis, November 14, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2.

32 Letter, Thomas Ellis to Edward Evensen, November 6, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2. Ellis knew that the existing park did not have appropriate land for the kinds of developments Evensen wanted: the shoreline that the park currently contained was too muddy for swimming and other activities, and most of the park’s above-water acreage (only 270 acres) was already occupied by the historical structures of Somerset Place. See Memo, Tom Ellis to Hargrove Bowles, December 5, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2. Ellis refers to the park’s dry land as “primarily for historical purposes.”
spring, summer and fall season but in recent years we have given that up because the trip was not worthwhile. I thought when the State took over the facility that there would be improvement.”

State Parks prickled at Rodgers’ criticisms. To whatever extent authorities in the division might have agreed that recreational facilities needed expansion, they knew that they were committed to a sometimes contradictory set of goals, and they struggled to keep all the balls in the air. For better or worse, Conservation and Development was mandated to care for and promote Pettigrew’s historical features. If at times that meant giving the recreational ones short shrift, they knew that sooner or later the balance would also tip the other way. Tom Ellis, Superintendent of State Parks, defended Pettigrew, saying it was never meant for camping, and was expected to host only limited picnicking. According to Ellis,

At the present time, it should be kept in mind as far as facilities are concerned, Pettigrew State Park is now developed primarily, and rightly so, as a historical development rather than as a recreational development. If a state park on Lake Phelps is to ever be a success from a recreational standpoint, it would have to be located on some other part of the lake where swimming and boating can be adequately provided.

Thomas Hampton, the park’s superintendent, contradicted the complaints entirely, stating, “All facilities have been kept in a neat, clean, and orderly manner. The efficiency

33 Letter, Eric Rodgers to Hargrove Bowles, April 17, 1962. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2, Box 2, Folder: R: General.

34 Memo, Thomas Ellis to John Allen, April 19, 1962. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2, Box 2, Folder: R: General.
of this operation has surpassed even this superintendent’s expectations.”

Nonetheless, Ellis’ superiors demanded a “plan of action.” If Pettigrew could not be developed “as it should be,” one of them wrote, “we should not continue to operate it on a half-way basis.”

Yet facing the complicated task of administering both an ancient lake and forest stands and a complex of beloved historic features with a small budget and almost no manpower, half-way operations seemed to be the order of the day. The whole park suffered neglect. Conservation and Development continued to request money to build storage, service and maintenance structures so it could move park supplies and administrative paraphernalia out of the historic complex. In 1963 it requested $16,500 to construct several frame buildings to meet these needs, and $23,500 to carry on with the WPA restorations, which the state began in 1941 but never completed. If performed, this work would involve grading, seeding, and fertilizing ten acres of land; fixing brick work; and planting hundreds of trees, shrubs, and perennials. It would also include reconstructing two slave quarters and the slave chapel. But despite the fact that the total


37 Letter, John Allen to Eric Rodgers, April 25, 1962. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2, Box 2, Folder: R: General.

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appropriations request was the second smallest of all the parks in the system, only the former request of $16,500 was approved.\textsuperscript{38}

While park officials negotiated with the state government for funds to improve what seemed was quickly becoming a bad situation, they also entered into discussions with the private sector about ways to make the area more amenable to visitors. In February 1963, Lake Phelps Farms, an agricultural development corporation, offered State Parks a 500-acre tract to expand Pettigrew, provided the park would “put it to use in the reasonable future.”\textsuperscript{39} In 1960, Lake Phelps Farms had bought 125,000 acres in Washington, Tyrrell and Hyde counties, including land west and south of Lake Phelps, from Roper Lumber Company to develop and sell: “Land once considered worthless, and bypassed for centuries, is being developed into a vast new agricultural frontier in Eastern North Carolina.” The company and its boosters trumpeted the developments as signs of progress. The company stated that small, subsistence farming was a no-win situation; in order to succeed, farmers needed to build large mechanized operations. The days of celebrating the yeoman ideal were over. Now, success would come from “deciding to be

\textsuperscript{38} Explanation of Permanent Improvements Budget Requests for State Parks for Biennium 1961-63. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, 1961-63, Box 7. The state had already requested this $16,500 for construction of service and storage areas before. See Capital Improvements: Department of Conservation and Development, Bond Issue, NC State Parks, Recommendation by the Governor and the Advisory Budget Commission. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2, Box 1, Folder: Bond Issue.

\textsuperscript{39} N&O, February 3, 1963. Edward Evensen of Plymouth had already suggested to Tom Ellis in late 1961 the possibility of getting land from Lake Phelps Farms in order to expand Pettigrew Park and offer more services to visitors. See Letter, Edward Evensen to Thomas Ellis, October 25, 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2. See also HB 1353, Session 1963, North Carolina General Assembly.
big and businesslike,” from buying land not to establish an independent farm but to make an investment—any investment—that would generate a concrete return. Indeed, Lake Phelps Farms targeted its marketing toward businessmen who could bring capital from other ventures to take advantage of land and create large farms in the coastal plain.  

The company’s relationship with the park was a touchy one and they squabbled over property lines. State Parks believed that the company was encroaching on park land, and as a result stepped up its efforts to protect its interests, especially the water level in Lake Phelps. The conflict was serious enough that it had to be settled by the state Attorney General’s office, which decided that State Parks rightfully owned the land. As a result, in 1962 the company was forced to deed 820.6 acres covered by Lake Phelps to the park.  

The following year, the company offered the state the additional 500 acres, 

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40 The company advertised for sale 160-acre units for $23,200 each. These could be combined to form larger scale units, and each purchase came complete with a full management package. They forecast a total loss of $7936 for the first three years, fully deductible from any income, and by the fourth or fifth year a projected gross income of $14,400. See: “Lake Phelps Farms, Inc.: Farms in units of 160 acres in the coastal plain of North Carolina, designed to satisfy the requirements of professional and business men who want a second source of income.” NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Division File, 1961-63, Box 7. In 1960, Lake Phelps Farms sold 12,000 acres to local farmers, as well as farmers who relocated from the Midwest. N&O, August 6, 1961.

41 Memo, Thomas Ellis to Hargrove Bowles, December 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2; Thomas Hampton, Superintendent’s Annual Report Pettigrew State Park, Fall 1961. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Misc., Records of Park Division 1935-65, Superintendents’ Meetings, Reports. See also minutes of the meeting of the Board of Conservation and Development, July 8, 9, 19, 1962. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Assistant Director’s Office, Subject File 1961-2, Box 1, Folder: Board Members. Citizens in the area were apparently concerned about the water level in the lake again through the late 1960s and into 1973. See Minutes of Board of Conservation and Development, March 8, 1973. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources, State Parks Division File, 1973, Folder: Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of C&D, 10/73; Resolution. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, Misc. records 1935-65, Box: Reedy Creek, White Lake, Folder: Board of Conservation and Development Parks Committee; Report to the Board by the State Parks Committee. NCSA, Department of Conservation and
which included sandy beach on the south side of Lake Phelps. The transfer was complete in July, and came with a special appropriation of $5000 from the General Assembly to begin developing the new area.

Lake Phelps Farms’ project was an indication that the northeast was in transition. The small-farm agricultural model had struggled throughout the century, and by the 1960s, the economy overall was “lagging” and unemployment was on the rise. Not only were innovations in agriculture necessary, but a variety of new industries were required to bring prosperity to this part of the state. State officials and business leaders had long believed that the strongest possibility for solving the region’s financial woes lay with tourism, which was reaching record proportions in North Carolina: 1962 marked the thirteenth consecutive year that tourism in the state had hit a new peak. Both parks and

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44 “Welcome Traveler.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Coastal Historyland.

45 N&O, January 29, 1963. Between 1961 and 63, parks use was apparently four times greater than it was a decade earlier. See Explanation of Permanent Improvements Budget Requests for State parks for Biennium 1961-63. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Administration Section, Director’s Office, Box 7, Division File, 1961-63. See also Thomas Ellis, Progress and Accomplishments. NCSA,
historic sites were crucial to promoting tourism, and many looked to Somerset Place and Pettigrew State Park as two features that could be highlighted in a developing market.\textsuperscript{46}

Observers claimed that historical tourism—already taking off in the Piedmont and the mountains—could give the Albemarle a much-needed “shot in the arm,” and government agents imagined that tourism could eventually replace agriculture as the northeast’s number-one industry.\textsuperscript{47} Archives and History suggested the region was ripe with “historical raw material…ready for packaging for sale to the tourist trade.”\textsuperscript{48}

Building the industry in the northeast required careful attention: even twenty years earlier, a public relations representative with the Department of Conservation and Development had explained, “Although the tourist crop requires no plowing, fertilizing, and no seeding by the communities which harvest it…it does require cultivating and tending if a good harvest is to be reaped each year.”\textsuperscript{49}

In an effort to tend the “crop” in the Albemarle, therefore, in 1963 Conservation and Development created the Coastal Historyland Trail, which combined a variety of historic attractions, including Somerset Place, in a self-guided driving tour. The

\textsuperscript{46} Tourism ranked third as the state’s most valuable industry, behind only textiles and tobacco, in which North Carolina also led the nation. See \textit{N&O}, October 23, 1960.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{N&O}, January 28, 1963 and “Welcome Traveler.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Coastal Historyland.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{N&O}, March 31, 1963.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{RBWCN}, March 21, 1940.
Historyland Trail was proposed by Charles B. Wade, Jr., vice president of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, a member of the State Board of Conservation and Development, and head of the department’s advertising committee.\textsuperscript{50} The non-profit Coastal Historyland Association promoted the Trail by situating North Carolina’s historical resources within its multi-million-dollar tourist industry, signified for the last two decades by a “Variety Vacationland” campaign that insisted North Carolina was at least “as rich in history as it is in vacation resorts.”\textsuperscript{51} The Association published a pamphlet in which it offered discounted tickets to various historic attractions, with the tag line, “Here in this Land of Beginnings are opportunities for every member of the family to enjoy a FUN Vacation and absorb American History leisurely and pleasantly.”\textsuperscript{52} An endorsement by Governor Terry Sanford stated: “The 34 counties composing the Coastal Historyland Association can contribute tremendously to the new trend of ‘family vacations’ which seem to be increasing nationally. Mothers and fathers will delight in seeing ‘Variety Vacationland’ while giving their children first-hand knowledge of North Carolina’s 300-year-old-

\textsuperscript{50} Conservation and Development declared that Eastern North Carolina had been “[l]ong predominantly agricultural and facing drastic transition… By discovering, restoring and improving the rich historical resources of this region, and by making them more accessible and better known to tourists…travel [could become] the No. 1 industry of the region.” “Welcome Traveler.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Coastal Historyland.


\textsuperscript{52} “Free Tickets to add to your Vacation Fun in North Carolina.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1964, Box 36, Folder: Historyland Trail.
The Historyland Trail could demonstrate that the history of North Carolina was not “only something studied in dry history books and very very dead, but…quite real and alive, romantic and exciting.” Chartered in March 1963, the project had the support of the state’s Travel Council, the departments of Archives and History, Conservation and Development and Public Instruction, the Highway Commission, the Board of Health, and the Governor’s office, and its original board of directors included representatives from around the region, including history professionals, politicians, and business men.

Tourism seemed, in the 1960s, the northeast’s best chance at revving up “a new era of progress.” “The East is waiting,” the *News and Observer* editorialized. “It has now made the important step of placing its past in historical perspective and of recognizing its significance. It has, furthermore, recovered its conviction that it can repeat in the 20th

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53 “Welcome Traveler.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Coastal Historyland.

54 Letter, Beverly S. Alfors to Charles B. Wade, January 29, 1963. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1963, Box 34, Folder: Miscellaneous, Programs.

55 “Welcome Traveler.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Coastal Historyland. Beyond Historyland, the state continued to fund other ventures associated with historic sites to promote tourism. In May 1963, to the tune of $50,000, it released a television movie promoting North Carolina’s attractions. The next month, Conservation and Development spent $18,000 to bring a group of cabbies from New York City for a tour of the state so they could push the state to customers back home. Interestingly, this was an integrated group, including “three Negro cabbies in the group of 26.” Ted Cramer of Bennett Advertising, which arranged the visit, explained, “We invited three Negro drivers, just as we invited Puerto Rican, German, Jewish and other drivers.” Cramer picked the ones who he thought were “most talkative and friendly” as he rode around New York City on a scouting mission.” The department hoped that “the cabbies would help give the state’s tourist industry a shot in the arm by telling their passengers and others of their trip by air, land and sea to at least eight cities, a ‘ghost town,’ an Indian village, a cigarette factory, an antebellum estate, plantation, mountain pageant and a battleship.” *N&O*, June 28, 1963.
century what it once did in the most crucial phase of the State’s history.” Booster
suspected that tourism might help the region return to the highs of its antebellum years in
a way that agriculture and manufacturing had never managed to do. The Coastal
Historyland Association argued, “Eastern North Carolina has raw resources ideally suited
for development and promotion as tourist attractions,” and “the travel-serving industry”
offered new opportunities “to absorb workers freed by mechanization on the farm and in
factories.” Tourism substituted “cultural opportunities” for productive ones, thus
redefining the northeast’s fundamental value.

Historyland’s promoters believed they could set a precedent in the state for
“developing and promoting a package of historical attractions,” and that such a package
might also help North Carolina to compete with its neighbors, especially to the north:
“You read and hear again and again of events in old New England and in early Virginia
which helped shape the course of history. Historyland sponsors want to let visitors—and
Tar Heels too—know events just as important occurred in North Carolina.” In an

56 N&O, May 24, 1964. Interestingly, in a follow-up article several months later, Jenkins claimed that
along with cultural opportunities, the way to improve eastern North Carolina was through recreation and
athletics, including exploiting the potential for recreation in natural resources. N&O, October 25, 1964.

57 “Welcome Traveler.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General
Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Coastal Historyland. Crittenden also acknowledged later that while
“a historic site does not pay for itself per se...the impact in the community in many cases does yield a
profit....” See Crittenden, “Preserving our Tar Heel Heritage: Historic Sites of North Carolina” (notes for
a talk to Civitan Club, Asheville, August 15, 1967). NCSA, Department of Archives and History,
Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 301, Folder: Publications Program: Articles and
Addresses.

editorial, the *News and Observer* returned to the familiar North Carolina-as-underdog theme:

New England and other areas have capitalized on history and scenery which is no better than the history and scenery of this State… Pride in the past is a well-known Eastern North Carolina trait. Still that pride often amounts to little more than lip service which does not mean much if it is not accompanied by action to preserve valuable historical sites. And saving such sites offers double rewards of making the people aware of their heritage and giving tourists some reason to visit the area.

The Historyland Trail would keep visitors on the coast, preventing them from getting stuck on the new Interstate 95. The Trail would go down Highway 17, with side routes taking travelers off the road, including along Highway 64 to Creswell and Lake Phelps.\(^{59}\)

While Conservation and Development trumpeted the benefits of the Historyland Trail, however, Archives and History struggled to prove the merits of its Historic Sites program to the public. North Carolina led the handful of states in the nation that considered historic sites to be “in the public interest,” and Archives and History took pride in the time and money it had expended to build the program, in contrast to states including Virginia and South Carolina where historic preservation was mostly a private enterprise.\(^{60}\) But not everyone was convinced that the government should be spending money on preservation efforts.

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\(^{59}\) *N&O*, March 31, 1963. See also, “Challenge: to develop and promote coastal North Carolina’s outstanding historic resources into travel attractions that will become its prime economic asset.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1963, Box 34, Folder: Miscellaneous, Programs.

\(^{60}\) Tarlton interview.
Critics began to lambaste the General Assembly for what they considered profligate spending on Historic Sites, detached from any kind of regulatory body or long term plan.\textsuperscript{61} An advisory committee struck in 1959 had been all but ignored in order to pass a succession of special appropriations for state and local projects. In addition to the normal budget, the General Assembly had allocated over $200,000 in “grants and gifts for various purposes, especially for the restoration of historic sites,” many of which the advisory committee held in dubious esteem.\textsuperscript{62} The upcoming centennial of the Civil War promised a boom in tourism to the South in general and to the region’s historic sites in particular, and demand for historic commemorations seemed to be increasing; nonetheless, the public called Archives and History on the carpet to explain its historic sites policies and justify the division’s existence.\textsuperscript{63}

The General Assembly reacted, perhaps defensively, by demanding new controls on the Historic Sites program, and in April 1963, after careful study, it created a new

\textsuperscript{61} Historic Sites Advisory Committee meeting, May 7, 1963. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963, Box 263, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee. See also \textit{N&O}, April 4, 1963.


\textsuperscript{63} Governor Sanford allocated $10,000 to five historic sites focused on the war, and the Division of Historic Sites had also already committed $15,000 to develop Civil War historic sites in order to meet the expected rise in demand. See \textit{News and Observer}, March 21, 1961, and Tarlton report, Box 30, Folder: Quarterly Reports, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1960.
Historic Sites Advisory Committee. The 1963 committee, like the 1959 one, was composed of a number of citizens and public servants from across the state, and charged with reviewing appropriations for approval before they could be released to any state-funded preservation initiative. Where it differed from the older committee, however, was that its authority was enshrined in law, and it thus appeared to be an effective way for North Carolinians to keep tabs on their tax dollars. The Advisory Committee was just one of the many ways in which the state’s Historic Sites program grew in 1963 to a new “level of maturity.” The General Assembly’s appropriations for historic sites had swelled by 33 percent over the previous biennium and the division’s staff was reorganized to reflect the expansion of the program. Historic Sites had gained visibility and had garnered significantly more public interest than ever before.

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64 Historic Sites Advisory Committee meeting, May 7, 1963, Box 263, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963.

65 Crittenden, “A Milestone of Progress,” A Milestone of Progress: 30th Biennial Report of the NC Department of Archives and History 1962-64, 6. NCHSS.

66 When it came to a vote in March, the advisory committee bill passed by a “wide margin.” See N&O, March 15, 1963; Historic Sites Advisory Committee meeting, May 7, 1963. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963, Box 263, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee. It was composed of several state administrators including the director of the Department of Conservation and Development; the chair of the Department of History, University of North Carolina; Dean of the School of Design at North Carolina State College, and three appointees serving four-year terms, with at least one drawn from the Piedmont and from the east, respectively. H.B. 84, Session 1963. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963, Box 263, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee; N&O, February 21, 1963; N&O, March 3, 1963.

67 A central Operations Manager was located in Raleigh, who supervised Historic Site Assistants at each site. The Historic Site Assistants were billed as specialists with “suitable experience and education for managing a historic site,” though the only requirement for the job was a high school education. There was also a Staff Historian appointed to the Division to work on special research projects and a full-time Restoration Specialist hired to meet the increasing demand for preservation and restoration across the state. The archaeology program was growing exponentially, having started at the Brunswick Town site. Biennial Report. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence
Promoting North Carolina’s sites and attractions highlighted a potential problem, however, for state officials. They recognized that as they encouraged more people to come to North Carolina, they also needed to reconsider and improve on the ways in which they interpreted its history to the public. Archives and History, therefore, made the conscious decision to adopt new places into its official Historic Sites System, places which possessed the qualities most amenable to interpretation, including existing “authentic” period structures and artifacts with a strong potential for restoration. By 1963, Somerset Place was beginning to appear to state officials.

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68 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 20, NCHSS; Biennial Report. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1964, Box 36, Folder: Biennial Report; State Historic Sites Policy. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 320, Folder: State Historic Sites Policy; Tarlton, “Organizational Changes for the Historic Sites Division.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963, Box 263, Folder: Historic Sites.

69 RBWCN, September 10, 1969; State Historic Sites Policy. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 320, Folder: State Historic Sites Policy.
authorities as an excellent candidate for inclusion in its program because it had features that seemed ripe for interpretation.  

But in order to make the most out of Somerset as an interpretive resource and shift its status from mere historic attraction to official state historic site, Archives and History needed more control, which required transferring responsibility away from Conservation and Development. Archives and History had suggested that it should have responsibility for the all of the park land, but none of Lake Phelps. Christopher Crittenden told Tom Ellis that this plan made sense because Pettigrew Park was “primarily historical…and even though the Division of State Parks has done a good job in the operation…the Department of Archives and History might be able or would be able to do even a better job and that it would be consistent with good government [for the park] to be under the Department of Archives and History.” State Parks understood Crittenden’s point, but was unwilling to give up land, and felt that “two agencies operating in one area…would not work too satisfactorily.”

Interpretation was a multi-faceted process of telling a site’s story, but it could not be applied just anywhere. See Tarlton, Historic Sites Biennial Report 1966-68. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 48, Folder: Biennial Report 1966-68. It was “an art rather than a science, but even art has a set of scientific ground rules. One such interpretative rule is ‘make the physical site as authentic as common sense allows.’” Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 20, NCHSS.

Minutes, n.d. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Div., Misc. records 1935-65, Box: Reedy Creek, White Lake, Folder: Board of Conservation and Development Parks Committee; Report to the Board by the State Parks Committee. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Division, Misc. records 1935-65, Box: Reedy Creek, White Lake, Folder: Board of Conservation and Development Parks Committee.
The issue remained on the table. Sam Tarlton considered the park “a historical restoration project at Lake Phelps.” But he noted that as long as historic sites were administered by Conservation and Development, they would be a “peripheral concern,” occupying “a secondary status.” Given this, and a major increase in visitation to historic sites—40,194 in January and February 1965 compared with only 17,731 during the same period in 1964—Archives and History declared it would take all necessary steps to assume responsibility for the park. After intensive lobbying by Representative Carl Bailey of Washington County and Ashley Futrell of Beaufort County, Conservation and Development finally agreed with this plan.

The ultimate division of Pettigrew Park was amicable, but it was not the end of the debate in North Carolina and beyond over the relative merits of historical versus environmental or natural programming, and whether or not it was possible or advisable to combine the two. The buildings at Somerset Place were labeled “historical,” but the rest of it—the lake and parkland, and perhaps most problematically the slave-built canals outside the property lines of the Historic Site—was not. Limiting the commemorations to the family’s central living compound may have been a practical necessity. It would have been near impossible to commemorate as vast a region as what once was the entire Collins estate: much of it was privately owned, having been divided into parcels and sold many decades ago. Yet however understandable, the limitations were still problematic.

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72 Tarlton, Historic Sites Division report, March 16, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Executive Board Administration and Management; Tarlton, “North Carolina’s Historic Sites Program: Past, Present and Future,” January 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1967, Box 295, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.
Historical evidence was everywhere but there were places where, consistently, no one chose to look, with the impact of silencing whole groups of actors and erasing the possibility of recalling events. At Somerset, Historic Sites officials without fail examined only the built environment, and within that, they focused the better part of their commemorative energies on the Collins mansion. It would have been expensive and difficult to examine other areas: for instance, the forests surrounding the house, the walls of the canals, or the bottom of the lake. But practical explanations notwithstanding, it is important to note a choice was made to focus on the built environment alone, a choice that sifted out evidence as, a priori, less important and perhaps even unknowable. Designating some areas as ‘natural,’ officially not historical, in some sense let interpreters off the hook for stories outside the walls of the big house.

Whatever categories developers and others invented, the scenic and cultural, or natural and historical landscapes at Pettigrew Park still overlapped because, in fact, each was inherent in the other. The forests and lake were of immense significance to the people who used Somerset Place over the years. In the antebellum era, forests and swamps all over the South were known hiding places for runaway slaves, and there was at least one instance of slaves at Somerset Place setting off into Lake Phelps, willing to drown trying to return to Africa rather than suffer enslavement on Collins’ plantation.73

Outside the section of the plantation that was directed toward production, so-called

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natural areas were sites of resistance and they were also crucial to the plantation’s function, offering places for the enslaved to rest and worship, and to reap other benefits we can only imagine. Later in the twentieth century, oral history testimony reminds us that these areas retained their importance for local white people, especially children and teens, to play and to imagine themselves as part of escapades that might have taken place there in the past, even if they were never officially considered important to Somerset or part of the site’s ‘real’ history.\textsuperscript{74}

An additional reason for recognizing the division between natural and historical at Pettigrew to be a red herring is the scholar Charles E. Roe’s point about the environment in the United States: “No natural area is so remote or so wild not to retain vestiges of human presence and change. Every natural area that is preserved also saves a historic site.” Perhaps ironically, it took intensive management to keep places like Pettigrew Park ‘pristine.’\textsuperscript{75} In the words of President Kennedy, one of the hallmarks of twentieth-century progress—indeed, of modernity—was the move toward “systematic” action “to defend and enrich our natural heritage,” in order to protect Americans’ experience of their nation and their national security.\textsuperscript{76} The meaning of nature was changing with the

\textsuperscript{74}Spear interview; Spruill interview.

\textsuperscript{75}Charles E. Roe, “The Natural Environment,” in Stipe, 235. Roe also writes, “It is unlikely that there is a single ‘natural area’ in North America that lacks signs of human culture and human imprints” (237); Bordo writes, “In the American discourse, ‘wilderness’ was nature in its most pristine and untouched state,” yet, “The American landscape is always witnessed” (in Nelson and Olin, 160).

\textsuperscript{76}John F. Kennedy in Stewart Udall, The Quiet Crisis and the Next Generation (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Books, 1988), quotes on xi, see also xii-xiii. On modernity, see Dean MacCannell, The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 82. Indeed, Howard L. Green writes, “Historic preservation as we know it, though it has earlier antecedents, is a piece of the environmental
creation of “newly institutionalized settings” at parks around the country, and with increasing urbanization and suburban sprawl, many Americans looked to parks and other settings they could define as ‘wilderness’ for relief and even redemption.\(^77\)

As treasured as Somerset’s history was, Lake Phelps and the forests surrounding it were also precious commodities precisely because they did not originate with the work of human hands; their history was valuable because it represented a time presumably before human intervention, outside the complexities of culture. A promotional film for the Historyland Trail tried to sell the notion that visiting natural attractions would allow people to access the most authentic past: “Much of the coast today is still unchanged and uninhabited. Great preserves for wildlife, game, and the seashore, protect its future. If we want to enjoy the unspoiled past, we can do it, along North Carolina’s coast.”\(^78\) In the 1960s, the link between environmental conservation—keeping nature as it ‘was,’ as though it were ever static—and historic preservation was absolutely direct, if not

\(^77\) MacCannell, 82; Bordo, in Nelson and Olin, 160. Recreational programming of all kinds was discussed as more important than ever before: “Through the process of urbanization America is rapidly being transformed into a nation of city dwellers who need and seek periodic relief from the tensions of urban life and the routines of earning a living.” Ironically, it was the massive increase in car ownership that appeared to be the single most important factor in whether or not people would seek out forms of recreation, and where they would go. The state was generating a range of choices for its citizens, including state parks, and historic sites, which were created in a program “not deemed to be all-inclusive, but rather to be selective. Primarily, the state program has been constructive, balanced, and statewide in geographical and topical distribution.” See “Supply, Demand, Needs and Planning Methods,” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 42, Folder: State Planning Task Force (State and Federal Outdoor Recreation).

\(^78\) Land of Beginnings script. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 39, Folder: Misc. State Agencies and Commissions.
recognized explicitly or acknowledged with any frequency. Although conservationists and preservationists may have seen themselves working at cross purposes, in fact, both were concerned with controlling development and protecting what they defined as true beauty, whether in trees and lakes or buildings and formal garden plots.  

At Pettigrew Park, the competition between history and nature continued. By the middle of the decade, the historical program seemed to be lapping the natural one. Requests for information about the historical areas and for tours of the mansion far outweighed interest in the park’s natural phenomena, and the single hiking trail along the old carriage drive could not compete with the compelling opportunities for exploration in

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79 Officials in North Carolina’s government were concerned with the simplistic equation of beauty and history. In April 1966 the Governor held a Conference on Beautification to study whether or not recent economic developments in North Carolina—including those resulting from the tourism industry—were “ruining the natural beauty of our State.” North Carolina was among a number of states and Federal agencies becoming interested in issues of beautification. At least one historic programmer, involved with Tryon Palace, stated, “No matter how HISTORIC a site is, I find that more people are perhaps interested in its attractive appearance and beauty than in its history…” Crittenden noted with concern that people believed historic preservation to be about “pretification.” Yet the delegates to the Historic Sites Subcommittee of the Natural Resources Committee (which included Sam Tarlton) declared that a strong historic sites program was a key part of beautifying the state: “The people expect their leadership to be concerned about our environment in North Carolina, which environment certainly includes our historic sites.” Governor’s Conference on Beautification: An Invitation. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 41, Folder: Governor’s Conference on Beautification; Memo to Principal Participants from J.W. York, March 21, 1966. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 41, Folder: Governor’s Conference on Beautification; Letter, Tryon Palace Commission to James Gray (Old Salem), March 17, 1966. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 41, Folder: Governor’s Conference on Beautification; Crittenden, “Planning for Historic Preservation.” March 10, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 301, Folder: Publications: Articles and Addresses; Report of the Historic Sites Subcommittee, Natural Resources Committee, Governor’s Conference on Beautification April 7-8, 1966. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 41, Folder: Governor’s Conference on Beautification. According to Wallace, “traditional preservationists” “felt, in their bones, that ‘historic’ meant beautiful…” See Wallace, “Reflections,” in Benson, et al., 184.
the mansion and other buildings of Somerset Place. Crittenden had to reassure at least
one state representative that Archives and History would still allow picnicking at
Somerset after the transfer from Conservation and Development, and that recreational
pursuits—as though exploring the mansion and immediate grounds were not
recreational—would not be halted completely.

Ultimately, the General Assembly “declared Somerset Place to be more properly a
state historic site than a state park” and began to earmark funds for continued
restoration. The Act passed by the General Assembly stated that the park was “a
historic site of prime importance and might appropriately be developed and administered
as a State Historic Site;” that “the Department of Conservation and Development,
heretofore administrator of the project, finds that the park no longer serves the best
interest of the State Parks Program for administering Lake Phelps State Lake,” and that
“the two Departments have mutually agreed upon the transfer of the project to the
Department of Archives and History…. “

80 Superintendent’s report 1965. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Div.,
Misc. records 1935-65, Box: Park Superintendent Meetings, Agencies, Public Use, Folder: Park

81 Letter, Crittenden to the Honorable Carl L. Bailey, Jr., April 6, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives
and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1965, Box 279, Folder: Historic Sites May-
September 1965.

82 Richard Knapp, North Carolina’s State Historic Sites: A Brief History and Status Report, Historic Sites
Section, November 1985, 51. North Carolina Historic Sites Section Research Reports File, 1960-1985,
NCC.

83 Document re. adoption of Pettigrew Park into Historic Sites Section. NCSA, Department of Archives
and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Legislation—
Administration and Management.
was effective July 1, 1966, the transfer of Somerset from Conservation and Development to Archives and History actually took two years to complete.

In the end, the General Assembly’s decision was that “Pettigrew State Park land on the north shore of Lake Phelps…is principally of historic interest,” whereas the south shore of the lake was “primarily of scenic and recreational interest,” therefore there should be a “physical division” of the Park.84 Lake Phelps and the 500 acres deeded by Lake Phelps Farms would remain under the jurisdiction of Conservation and Development, while the historic buildings and “a limited amount of acreage” were transferred to Archives and History.85 The General Assembly allocated funds to develop both halves of the park, including $19,000 to the historical section and $8,527 per year for two years for the recreational side.86 The appropriation for Somerset Place was the

84 S.B. 196, H.B. 421, Session 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Legislation—Administration and Management. For more on the slowness of the transfer process, see Letter, Tarlton to Honorable W.R. Roberson Jr., March 29, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 300, Folder: Historic Sites, Jan.-March 1968.

85 Report, Committee on State Parks, April 28-29, 1965. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Div., Misc. records 1935-65, Box: Board of Conservation and Development 50s and 60s, Folder: Board of Conservation and Development Parks Committee. The plan was for Historic Sites to maintain the mansion, outbuildings and restrooms in the historic area, and for State Parks to continue to do grounds maintenance throughout the park, but with input from Historic Sites in the area around the historic structures. Historic Sites and State Parks would share storage space, as well as office facilities in the Colony House. Memo, Richard Sawyer to Raymond Pisney, June 16, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place.

86 The $19,000 was broken down as follows: $2500 for painting and papering the interior of the mansion; $5000 to install electrical services; $3500 to install a heating plant; $3000 for repair and restoration of marble mantels and woodwork; and $5000 to buy period furnishings. The money allocated to recreation was to pay for boating and other amenities. S.B. 196, H.B. 421, Session 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Legislation—Administration and Management; Pettigrew State Park explanation of S.B. 196, H.B. 421. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965,
second-largest appropriation for a historic site granted that year, at a time when Archives and History’s annual budget was becoming one of the largest in the nation and its sites were attracting record numbers of tourists.87

With visitors flocking to both state sites and parks, Tarlton road the coattails of the General Assembly’s appropriation and asked for a federal matching grant from the Land and Water Conservation Fund.88 North Carolina qualified for funding because it had a statewide outdoor recreation and planning program, and governed itself “[i]n accordance with President Johnson’s natural beauty program.” Tarlton therefore requested $230,000, a bit under a quarter of which would pay for full restorations and

Box 37, Folder: Legislation—Administration and Management; 1965 Legislative Roundup, Recreation Leaflet, NC Recreation Commission. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Land and Water Conservation; Outline of appropriation for Somerset Place, March 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1965, Box 279, Folder: Historic Sites Program, March and April 1965.

87 The largest appropriation, $20,000, was allocated to the General William Lenoir Home. Tarlton, Division of Historic Sites Biennial Report 1964-66. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 42, Folder: Biennial Report. In addition, in 1965 the North Carolina General Assembly apparently authorized an initial appropriation of approximately $80,000 to Archives and History for a new Historic Sites program at Somerset Place. See House Bill 421. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Legislation, Administration and Management; House Bill 352, Session 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence, Box 295, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee—meeting.

In 1965, the annual budget for the Department of Archives and History passed $1 million for the first time, “so that it now rank[ed] among the half dozen largest of such agencies in the nation.” N&O, January 3, 1966. This increased budget came along with the fact that altogether, State and National Parks and historic sites in North Carolina were visited by two million more people in 1965 than in 1964. N&O, January 23, 1966. The numbers several years later were even better, with 1968 showing a record summer tourist season. N&O, September 29, 1968.

88 State historic sites saw an increase of more than 43,000 visitors, and North Carolina’s state parks saw record attendance N&O, September 29, 1968. 1965 was a particularly important legislative session when it came to making policy around recreation. Including the decision to split Pettigrew State Park, there were 164 bills and resolutions on the topic. See 1965 Legislative Roundup, Recreation Leaflet, NC Recreation Commission. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Land and Water Conservation.
furnishing of Somerset’s mansion.\(^{89}\) Illustrating the links between history and conservation, Tarlton declared Historic Sites’ need for Land and Water Conservation Fund money: “A well-developed Historic Sites Program is an important ingredient of the overall recreational development in North Carolina. In planning for expansion of the general recreational potential, historic sites and related development should be considered for expanded development.” He explained:

…historic sites and other types of historical attractions constitute one of the primary interests of at least 50 per cent of the traveling public. Many people going to Atlantic Beach, for example, will visit Fort Macon just because it is there. It is the same story for Fort Fisher, Somerset Place, Vance Birthplace, and Brunswick Town. On the other hand, there are historic sites that stand entirely on their historical merits. Town Creek Indian Mound, in a remote location, attracts approximately 50,000 visitors a year entirely for the sake of Indian history and archaeology.

Tarlton argued that overall, the goals for recreational development in North Carolina should include both historical programming and opportunities and facilities for environmental recreation.\(^{90}\) Yet despite Tarlton’s plea to meld recreation and preservation, and so soon after the state’s vote of confidence in the historic areas, the

\(^{89}\) In 1965 and 66, the state received a total of $1,673,712. US Department of the Interior news release, Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, May 31, 1966. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 41, Folder: Land and Water Conservation; Tarlton, “Some Recommendations for Federal Assistance to the Historic Sites Program under the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 38, Folder: Land and Water Conservation.

\(^{90}\) Tarlton, “The Land and Water Conservation Fund Program Definition of Goals for the Historic Sites Program,” April 26, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 42, Folder: State Planning Task Force (State and Federal Outdoor Recreation).
federal government only supported recreational pursuits at Pettigrew Park: Tarlton’s request was only approved for money to build a new boating facility.  

While the flurry of activity in 1965 at Pettigrew and Somerset Place was evidence of an ever-increasing interest in expanding North Carolina’s parks and historic attractions, increasing interest was not necessarily all good. By the end of the year the Division of Historic Sites was overwhelmed. Visitation overall was up by 80 percent from the 1961-63 biennium and there were “no longer any slack seasons.” The Historic Sites program had developed by “leaps and bounds,” reaching its high point in a very short span of time, and the department was reeling from the speed of this change.  

North Carolina was not the only place where attention to historic sites was growing; this was, indeed, a national phenomenon, and other states were looking to North Carolina for guidance in shaping their programming.  

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92 Tarlton, Biennial Report 1964-66 Division of Historic Sites. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1966, Box 42, Folder: Historical Review News 1966.

93 Commission on Reorganization report quoted in H.G. Jones memo, December 2, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 46, Folder: Miscellaneous Administration and Management.

94 For examples of other states’ interest in North Carolina’s programming, see Letter, Sam Tarlton to Harry V. Conroy, March 18, 1965, and Letter, Sam Tarlton to Kenneth Redford, April 2, 1965. NCSA,
Archives and History was “generally rated as one of the best such agencies in all the 50 states.” The trend toward historic preservation would increase further over the next few years with the passage of the National Preservation Act of 1966 and other opportunities for federal aid to historical projects. Through acts of Congress, the federal government had allocated to historic projects two million dollars the first year, and 10 million dollars for each of the three following years. In order to qualify for matching funds from the federal pool, each state had to have a statewide historic sites plan, which meant that federal legislation had the direct result of expanding state programs. The federal government was moved to action due to the upheavals of urban renewal programs, and because of the advocacy of state officials and the National Trust. The National Preservation Act expanded the National Register of Historic Places, provided preservation funds, and created a watchdog federal agency, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, all of which combined “to preserve not just nationally significant landmarks, but all historic places important to communities in order to provide ‘orientation to the American people.’”

Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 39, Folder: Miscellaneous (Inquiries)—publicity and PR.

95 A Few Problems to be Considered, July 26, 1966. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 301, Folder: Publications Program: Articles and Addresses.


97 Crittenden, North Carolina’s Historic Sites Program—Where and Whither, May 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1967, Box 295, Folder:
The excitement and activity around historic preservation led to saving a number of important sites, but it also sometimes got out of hand. Crittenden noted that North Carolina’s program occasionally lurched forward “without proper thought, planning, or control.” Despite the 1963 Advisory Committee that was supposed to keep spending in check, Crittenden was particularly concerned about members of the General Assembly railroading pet local projects through the House, often without the consent of Archives and History “or any other experts in the field.” This type of behavior had made the Historic Sites program prey once again to the accusation that it was “pork barrel,” and Crittenden declared that if things continued as they had been going for the preceding decade, the state might end up with “every little crossroads community” funded for historic sites: “If George Washington did not sleep there, then perhaps old Zeb Vance told a good story on the spot, or Aycock rested under a tree, or possibly some good men just spat in the dust.”

If this happened, North Carolina’s national reputation in the preservation movement would be shattered.

The Historic Sites Division was out of control and overwhelmed. In 1965, therefore, Crittenden proposed a five-year moratorium on acquiring new Historic Sites or securing state funding for any new projects: specifically, he proposed halting all

98 Christopher Crittenden, “Let’s Take a Moratorium—Historic Sites Advisory Committee, A Proposed Program for the Next Five Years,” October 20, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.
appropriations for new state sites or any grants-in-aid for new non-state sites until 1970. Tarlton explained that the moratorium would “be a period of catching up on the backlog of needs, not a rest.” But even with the moratorium in place and despite the reorganization of staff and services that had looked so promising in 1963, through the middle of the decade Archives and History continued to suffer from such “major weaknesses” as inadequate research, restoration, maintenance, and public relations services, and an underpaid, under qualified staff.

As the Division tried to sort out its internal politics, it also engaged Conservation and Development to try to nail down a structure for administration at Somerset Place, which was set to become an official state site the following year. A new system was necessary to facilitate Somerset’s transition to Archives and History, and to “protect the legitimate purposes and position of each agency” at the park by limiting any overlap between their responsibilities. After several conferences, the agencies established a plan premised on “the expectation of future growth in both the park and the historic site projects.” It made clear that Conservation and Development would use its “personnel,  

99 Christopher Crittenden, “Let’s Take a Moratorium—Historic Sites Advisory Committee, A Proposed Program for the Next Five Years,” October 20, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.


101 “A Few Problems to Be Considered,” July 26, 1966. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 301, Folder: Publications Program: Articles and Addresses. In fact, the moratorium only continued until 1968. See Tarlton, Division of Historic Sites, 31st Biennial Report of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History 1964-66, NCHSS.
equipment, and funds” to maintain Somerset Place “as part of Pettigrew State Park,”
while Archives and History would be responsible for any further historical restoration
and development. When it came to maintenance issues, the State Parks Division would
seek advice from Archives and History “concerning matters of historical authenticity.”
The plan stated, in no uncertain terms, “Cooperation will be important.”\textsuperscript{102}

It appears that some observers, including one member of the General Assembly,
did not understand the split administration of the park. When Historic Sites adopted
Somerset, the state budget included a number of appropriations for historic sites,
including $59,000 for restoring Somerset Place’s “historic buildings and ground,” and
$9500 between 1967 and 1969 for maintenance and operation.\textsuperscript{103} Some believed that

\textsuperscript{102} Proposed Agreement for the Administration of Somerset Place State Historic Site at Pettigrew State
Park, December 20, 1966. NCSA Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General
Correspondence 1967, Box 43, Folder: Legislation. At the end of 1966, there was still some controversy
over the area of the park on the south shore of Lake Phelps. Lake Phelps Farms had deeded it to State
Parks with the restriction that it be developed for park use as soon as possible. That restriction had not yet
been met, largely because there was no reliable, year-round road accessing the south shore, and
Conservation and Development was withholding development there until the state adopted the existing road
into its highway system and improved it significantly. While the Governor was behind Conservation and
Development on this, local residents of Washington County were very concerned about losing acreage
designated for the park. See Report on the status of state lake property on the south shore of Lake Phelps,
August 22, 1966. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development-State Parks Div., State Parks and
lakes File 1930-70, Box: Div. of State Parks and Recreation, State Lakes and Parks 1947-67, Folder:
1967-69 Capital Improvements Pettigrew Temp File; Letter, Van W. Respess to Dan Moore, Sept. 19,
1966, and Letter, A.D. Swindell to Dan Moore, August 29, 1966. NCSA, Department of Conservation and
Development-State Parks Div., State Parks and lakes File 1930-70, Box: Div. of State Parks and
Letter, Dan Moore to Carl Bailey, August 22, 1966. NCSA, Department of Conservation and
Development-State Parks Div., State Parks and lakes File 1930-70, Box: Div. of State Parks and

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{N&O}, July 14, 1967; Session 1967 H.B. 352, NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of
Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1967, Box 43, Folder: Advisory Committee on Historic Sites;
Letter, Crittenden to Members of the Historic Sites Advisory Committee. NCSA, Department of Archives
and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1967, Box 295, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory
Committee.
with such a major appropriation there should be money to build more camping facilities; the fact that most of the money was earmarked for historic restoration was lost on them.\textsuperscript{104} In any case, the primary reason for holding off on building camping facilities at Pettigrew in 1967 was because it lacked sanitation facilities in the picnic area where campers had typically set up before. However, the superintendent of State Parks did recommend to the director of Conservation and Development that a capital improvements request should be made for building campsites on land north of the lake, the area most easily accessible and adjacent to the historic buildings.\textsuperscript{105} The Parks and Tourism Committee authorized a request for $38,000 to be transferred from capital improvement projects at Umstead Park to build an addition to the picnic area and a group camping addition at Pettigrew, and $2000 from Duke Power State Park to build an information center.\textsuperscript{106}

In light of these and other appropriations forthcoming, some observers, including the editor of the \textit{Greensboro Daily News}, yet again trotted out familiar allegations of “pork barrel projects” and claimed that the General Assembly had stolen money from


legitimate things such as school buses in order to spend it on “appropriations for the restoration and preservation of historic sites of dubious authenticity.” It was unclear precisely which “dubious” sites the editor was referring to, and the Historic Sites Advisory Committee took umbrage at this accusation.\textsuperscript{107}

Suggestions that historic sites were a waste of money were offensive and they were serious. Indeed, they may have been part of what motivated Governor Dan Moore to try to reemphasize that recreational and preservation programs in the state were not merely pleasurable pastimes but money-making industries. Moore was certainly not the first to make this connection, but he took it a step beyond his predecessors. In 1967 he suggested that Conservation and Development reorganize into three separate bodies: conservation, development, and tourism. Moore believed that the agency for tourism could fold together the existing Recreation Commission, Travel and Promotion Division and State Parks Division of Conservation and Development, as well as the Historic Sites Division of Archives and History.\textsuperscript{108} History was perhaps not inherently significant to Moore and others. Rather, its significance stood in relation to the profit it might draw: history was valuable primarily when exploited for the tourists who brought money into the state. It made sense, therefore, to include Historic Sites within a larger agency devoted to promoting all of the state’s attractions.

\textsuperscript{107} Letter, Chair of Historic Sites Advisory Committee to Editor, \textit{Greensboro Daily News}, June 14, 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1967, Box 295, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee.

\textsuperscript{108} H.G. Jones memo, December 2, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 46, Folder: Miscellaneous Administration and Management.
Not surprisingly, Archives and History’s new director, H.G. Jones, felt differently. Jones urged the Governor to abandon his proposal. He explained that the successes of the Historic Sites program—its move to national leadership in the area—relied on having a separate state historical agency. It was only since Historic Sites shifted into Archives and History in 1955 that the program had grown the way it had. According to Jones, having a separate state agency was part of North Carolina’s heritage:

The present system is in line with our North Carolina custom and tradition. For many years our state has recognized the historical function as separate and distinct and has assigned it to a single agency established specifically for the purpose. Now to cut out from the program administered by that agency one of its essential parts (the historic sites program) [in order to transfer it to a Tourism agency] would indeed approach an act of mayhem. It would inflict a grievous wound from which complete recovery would be difficult.

In Jones’ view, North Carolina’s legacy included a longstanding historical consciousness, which private citizens and public servants alike had taken concrete steps to protect and express. Jones was concerned that shifting Historic Sites to the purview of a new tourism agency might “emphasize tourism above carefully researched, accurate, well-balanced, and well-proportioned historical restoration, preservation, and interpretation…”

Archives and History was the only agency equipped to conduct the kind of research necessary for Historic Sites and other programs of public historical education.

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109 H.G. Jones memo, December 2, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 46, Folder: Miscellaneous Administration and Management. “Both the character and the level of state support for historic preservation were influenced by the location of the state historic preservation office within state government. Many state programs were set up in existing park and recreation agencies, in state archival agencies, and in state historical societies. Some states established new agencies to administer the program.” Elizabeth Lyon and David Brook, “The States: The Backbone of Preservation,” in Stipe, 82.
Moreover, a shift away from Archives and History would make it more difficult to control the Historic Sites program itself, “so that local pressures [could]…force it out of hand,” back to the very problems of directionless spending that the Historic Sites Advisory Committee and the moratorium were intended to solve. He concluded, “It would in a sense penalize a state department which, under legislative mandate, has taken a previously undeveloped program and, in the short space of a few dozen years, has developed that program to major proportions.” Instead, he recommended continuing “close coordination between the state’s historical and tourist agencies… Tourism and tourist promotion might continue to be handled by the present agency or turned over to a new agency, but it is urged that the historic sites function be left where it now lies.”\textsuperscript{110}

Despite concerns about the agency’s status, the project at Somerset went ahead. In 1967, by far the single largest expenditure for historic sites covered by state appropriations was the restoration of the mansion, projected to cost $30,500 over two years.\textsuperscript{111} The Historic Sites Advisory Committee believed that the 1967 appropriations would go a long way toward completing the restorations at the site and thus allowing the department to begin showing its recent acquisition to the public.\textsuperscript{112} But the work

\textsuperscript{110} H.G. Jones memo, December 2, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 46, Folder: Miscellaneous Administration and Management.

\textsuperscript{111} Somerset Place Historic Site. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1967, Box 43, Folder: Advisory Committee on Historic Sites.

\textsuperscript{112} Historic Sites Advisory Committee minutes of meeting, May 19, 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1967, Box 295, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee Meeting.
proceeded slowly, in part because of difficulty organizing the logistics of installing new electrical service, climate control, and plumbing. In the spring of 1968, under pressure from above to get the project moving, Tarlton noted that it was impossible “to operate Somerset Place in the standard way this season.”

Interior restorations continued through the summer as a consultant from Washington, D.C., was hired to furnish the mansion’s interior, and workers replaced fences, and a marble mantle inside; repainted the exterior and interior of the house; and reconstructed the bath house based on similar structures in Murfreesboro.

When the exterior restoration of the mansion and the reconstruction of the bath house were finally finished, Sam Tarlton was not there to celebrate. He had resigned from Historic Sites, the division of which he was the founding director, to go into private antiques dealing. Upon Tarlton’s departure, H.G. Jones noted that “North Carolina’s historic sites program is one of the finest among the states of the Union…due in large

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113 Letter, Tarlton to Honorable W.R. Roberson Jr., March 29, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 300, Folder: Historic Sites, Jan.-March 1968.

114 News for Carolina Comments, Historic Sites Division September 26, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 49, Folder: Historical Review News, Publications; Letter, Tarlton to Honorable W.R. Roberson Jr., March 29, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 300, Folder: Historic Sites, Jan.-March 1968; A.L. Honeycutt, Jr., Monthly report to the Historic Sites Superintendent, December 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1967, Box 45, Folder: Monthly Reports—Restoration Supervisor; Historical News, Division of Historic Sites, Sept. 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 48, Folder: Historical Review News Publications; Memoranda from Richard Sawyer. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 48, Folder: Monthly Reports 1968.
measure to Sam Tarlton."  Yet the project at Somerset that Tarlton had pioneered continued and expanded without him. The division hired more outside consultants and secured additional money in order to complete its plans for furnishing, painting, and other interior decorating. It also asked for moderate capital improvement funds, some of which would be spent on restoring various outbuildings, including the Colony House, which would do triple-duty as Somerset’s visitor center and offices for the State Park and Historic Site. But while Somerset had great potential and visitation there was growing exponentially, Historic Sites often passed it over when it came to assigning manpower and completing projects: the needs of other sites seemed frequently to be more

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116 Memo, Richard Sawyer to Christopher Crittenden, December 4, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 300, Folder: Historic Sites Oct.-Dec. 1968. Ed C. Allen, owner of the Eighteenth-Century Workshop in Garner got the furnishing contract. Allen spent six months restoring approximately 75 pieces of period furniture for the site, furniture that left his shop looking “as if it had been bought yesterday, instead of 130 years ago.” Allen’s restored furniture was meant to allow “citizens and tourists…to enjoy the beauty of an ‘Old South’ plantation home. Not many of these visitors will realize that the skill and care of Ed Allen’s craftsmanship has helped make this enjoyment possible.” “A Modern Craftsman Revives the ‘Old South’.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 49, Folder: Publicity and PR.

117 In total, Somerset requested $25,000 for 1969-71. Visitation figures for Somerset in 1967-68 were 5,684; 1968-69 10,074. Untitled document. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 46, Folder: Budget Accounting and Finance. Archives and History renovated the Colony House for the visitor center, possibly because of a lack of land and space, but also in order to “maintain the nineteenth century plantation atmosphere.” This required shifting the park caretaker’s residence to the reconstructed overseer’s house. Richard Knapp, North Carolina’s State Historic Sites: A Brief History and Status Report (Historic Sites Section, November 1985), 51. North Carolina Historic Sites Section Research Reports File, 1960-1985, NCC. See also Jerry L. Cross, A Profile of State Historic Sites Administered by the Division of Archives and History (May 17, 1974), 108. North Carolina Historic Sites Section Research Reports File, 1960-1985, NCC; Tarlton interview.
In the first few months of 1969, a great deal of work remained to be done at Somerset Place before it could open to visitors. The work that remained was more than physical: the structures and artifacts that Historic Sites had restored also needed historical interpretation, and staff spent several months reviewing existing documentation on the site’s history for this purpose. The division relied almost entirely on Tarlton’s 1957 report, as it had not yet commissioned any additional research into the people who had made Somerset their home. For better

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118 Tarlton, Historic Sites Biennial Report 1966-8. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 48, Folder: Biennial Report 1966-68; on Somerset’s visitation, see Untitled document. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 46, Folder: Budget Accounting and Finance; Monthly report of the audio-visual curator, August 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1968, Box 48, Folder: Monthly Reports; Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 12, NCHSS; Samford interview.

119 Monthly report, March 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Monthly Reports, Operations Supervisor.

120 Some additional research for the site’s interpretive program was done using the Collins papers. But for the most part, Historic Sites was so confident about the quality and scope of Tarlton’s research that they contemplated republishing his report as a guidebook to distribute at the site. Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 3; 19; 21, NCHSS; Raymond Pisney, Report for Quarter ending June 30, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Quarterly Reports; Monthly report of staff historian, February, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites Monthly Reports 1969; Monthly reports of the staff historian, February, April, May 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Monthly Reports, Historic Sites Researcher.

The Historic Sites Division had been concerned for some time that its furnishings research was not on par with places such as Old Salem, and listed Somerset Place as one of the sites that could benefit from more careful attention to historical furnishings and appointments. Sam Tarlton, The Case for the Curator of Exhibits and the Curator of Arts and Crafts on the Historic Sites Division Staff, May 21, 1963. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963, Box 263, Folder: Historic Sites. Similarly, when Sam Tarlton answered a request from the National Trust for information on Stagville Plantation near Durham, he explained that its potential as a restoration project was as a representation of a particular type of architecture or, perhaps, as part of a museum about tobacco culture and manufacturing; he made no mention, whatsoever, of the plantation’s social history nor of the history of its slaves. See Tarlton, Stagville Plantation, February 2, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and
or worse, staff decided that Tarlton’s work was more than sufficient and developed an interpretive plan that made his discoveries and his blindesses the basis of Somerset’s exhibits. Tarlton had paid occasional lip service to Somerset’s world beyond the Collins family and their big house. Accordingly, the interpretive plan Historic Sites issued in June 1969 also acknowledged the range of people who lived and worked on the plantation, and it recommended that the site’s exhibits discuss the lifestyles of all the plantation’s residents, including those of African descent.¹²¹

A range of government agencies outside of Historic Sites were already discussing ways of incorporating African American history into previously exclusive stories. Their interest had been sparked primarily by the movement for African American freedom, which rocked American society in the 1950s and 60s. Education was one of the movement’s central themes: participants learned how to seize their civil and political rights, and broad public audiences were informed about the nuance and depth of African American history and culture. By early 1969, North Carolina’s Department of Public Instruction made its first gestures toward expanding the state’s curriculum to meet “a

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¹²¹ Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Interpretive Plan* (1969), 1-2 and 22, NCHSS.
growing awareness that the Negro should be given more thorough treatment in the teaching of this nation’s history.” At least some government administrators knew that black history was important, and Historic Sites staff said as much in Somerset’s 1969 interpretive plan. Yet their feelings and beliefs did not translate into the site itself.

Somerset Place was certainly not unique in its interpretive exclusion of African American history in 1969. The historic preservation movement in general was very much still segregated, with mainstream museums remaining mostly disinterested in the histories of people of color. African American museums and historical organizations demonstrated different possibilities for preservationists, but they had little concrete impact. Somerset and other contemporary sites and museums tended not to portray African American history at all—not even a sanitized or apologist version and certainly not the way black historians frequently chose to do so in their own spaces: as independent, indignant, resistant, and political.

122 Social Studies teachers were given a “supplementary bulletin” to provide them with tools for discussing “the Negro’s role at every period of American history” up to the present…. “N&O, September 1, 1968. The department acknowledged, “The need [for such a supplement] has been here all the time, we just haven’t looked at it before. The times dictated it….” The introduction to the supplement for the eleventh grade said, “Since many of the current social, economic and civil rights struggles are centered on the role of the Negro in all phases of contemporary life, it becomes important to know how these problems came to be, for such understanding is necessary in finding satisfactory solutions that will not rip further the fabric of society and disrupt the economic and political life to such an extent that orderly progress will not be possible.” N&O, November 24, 1968.

123 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 2, NCHSS. See also Elizabeth Cahoon, “The History and Restoration of Somerset Place State Historic Site,” M.A. thesis (East Carolina University, Greenville, 2004), 86.

124 Stewart and Ruffins, in Benson, et al., 330-1; Brundage, The Southern Past, 10; Michael L. Blakey, “American Nationality and Ethnicity in the Depicted Past,” in Gathercole and Lowenthal, 42; Lowenthal, Possessed By the Past, 154.
Instead, state officials transformed Somerset Place into an exhibit of grace and
gentility by aestheticizing the plantation’s history, interpreting the site through a lens
focused on its picturesque setting and the mansion’s distinctive architecture. Slavery
was a silenced subtext: slave labor created the structures and the environment the site
celebrated but interpreters read the evidence at Somerset only in terms of those who
benefited from the planter’s fortune, and not in terms of those who built it. Interpreters
thus depended on the products of the slaves’ labor at the same time as they muted the
history of the slaves themselves, erasing them at the same time as they used them.

A major reason officials with Historic Sites constructed a narrative at Somerset
that silenced the history of the enslaved was their commitment to providing an
interpretation that they believed was directly relevant to the lives of the site’s visitors.
Failing “to relate the site to something within [the visitor’s] experience” made the
visitor’s experience “meaningless,” and was thus a failure to interpret or translate the
site’s message. This assessment of contemporary relevance depended upon largely

125 Understanding a site in terms of its picturesque setting and architecture implicitly reinforced an unequal
division of power: “To be able to view a tract of countryside (that is, an arena for effort)…as if it were a
painting is to take up a privileged position of detachment and disinterest. Those who work the land very
rarely regard it as art. And those who live in sublime landscapes frequently regard them as dreary
wilderness from which they long to escape” (Brett, 40). Presenting history at historic sites by arranging “an
array of artifacts,” whether original or restored, “and then trying to visualize the patterns of life that would
have emerged around them…is an essentially ‘artefactual’ [sic] history, in which a whole variety of social
experiences are necessarily ignored or trivialized, such as war, exploitation, hunger, disease, the law, and so
on” (Urry, 112).

126 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 1-2; 11; 19, NCHSS. Authorities had far
more information about architecture and furnishings than anything else, and in North Carolina, house
museums were a particularly trendy type of exhibit, but these facts alone fail to explain interpreters’
narrative choices in the late 1960s. See also Raymond Pisney, Report for Quarter ending June 30, 1969,
NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969,
Box 50, Folder: Quarterly Reports. On museum trends, see N&O, November 30, 1941.
unexamined and insidious notions of white supremacy. When authorities thought about Somerset’s audience in order to develop a “relevant” interpretation, they worked with the unspoken assumption that those visitors were exclusively white. While none of the reports covering the site’s development ever articulate this assumption in so many words, there are at least two factors that point to this conclusion. The first is that African Americans, in fact, did not go to Somerset Place. The Civil Rights Act’s guarantee of equal access to public accommodations notwithstanding, in 1969, Somerset Place State Historic Site was a place geared toward whites only.

Second, Historic Sites officials interpreted the site in ways that essentially required those who experienced it to be white. Authorities at Somerset took for granted that all visitors would naturally identify with the Collinses: they considered the planter family’s story “the logical vehicle for presentation…” and the Collins mansion was the site’s primary attraction and crowning glory.127 Historic Sites’ position here was typical. As the historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage puts it, in the South, public history had long been a means of “fostering an organic solidarity among residents who shared a distinctive and proud history.” The assumed audience for, and the subjects of, public history were almost always white.128 Even if a non-white visitor could have made some kind of

127 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 2 and 9-12, NCHSS. Officials also assumed a white solidarity that crossed class lines. White people of all classes did, in fact, use Somerset informally in earlier years; it is unclear whether or not this changed once it was formalized and developed as an historic site. It is possible that the historic site attracted a more exclusive audience focused on the middle and upper classes.

personal identification with the planter—which was unlikely in the late 1960s, at the tail end of the civil rights movement and during the flowering of black cultural nationalism, when critiques of white supremacy were especially prominent—there is no way that Josiah Collins would ever have considered that person worthy of enjoying Somerset’s sophistication or entering his mansion through its front door. Similarly, Somerset’s exhibits erased class differences among white visitors. Historic sites were free, which meant that despite the elitist realities of the Collins’ social circles, the potential audience for the antebellum fairytale at Somerset might include people from all economic classes. But interpreters created a narrative where racial links trumped any possible class divisions.

Intentionally or not, Historic Sites staff limited Somerset’s target audience by race when they designed the site’s exhibits to welcome visitors as if they were guests in the planter’s home. Throughout their stay, visitors were encouraged to see themselves within the Collins’ domestic space: from the moment they arrived at the entrance to the site until the end of their tour through the mansion they were accompanied by “hostesses” whose primary goal was to ensure that they experience the kind of gracious lifestyle the planter family would have enjoyed. The interpretive plan states adamantly that the hostesses were neither tour guides nor docents: they were “not teaching machines. Rather, they [were] to offer hospitality to Somerset’s visitors…. ” Most visitors were expected to attend in late spring and summer, when the weather was hot and humid and the air filled with mosquitoes. They would arrive after a long car trip through an area with few to no services, tired, hot, and probably hungry and thirsty. It was vital that the
hostesses allow them to “relax” and “unwind” before suggesting a tour, and the tour must be offered, not forced.\textsuperscript{129} Indeed, the hostesses’ primary responsibility seems to have been as much to help visitors recuperate from their journey as to inform tour groups about the plantation’s history.

The hostesses were crucial to Somerset’s function. Not only did they facilitate visitors’ experiences on-the-spot, they were also charged with promoting Somerset both to actual and potential attendees. Historic Sites staff relied primarily on word-of-mouth advertising, and hostesses were expected to play a large role in convincing visitors to tell their friends to come see the plantation. Ultimately, Historic Sites supplied the hostesses with a loose tour script to guide their presentations, but they were always warned against particular \textit{faux pas}, including “memorized spiels, [making] visitors…feel patronized, hostesses regimented so tightly that they cannot tailor their tour around a ‘furnishings nut,’ Mrs. Jones’ fourth grade, or the little old lady from Pasadena.” Instead, based on ten days of training at the beginning of August, hostesses were instructed to draw on their knowledge of Somerset’s history and work ‘off the cuff,’ adding human interest items to the tour as they saw fit.\textsuperscript{130}

The interpretive plan stressed the importance of the hostess’ conduct, and made it clear where they could help ‘sell’ the site and where they might pose problems. One potential pitfall was if the hostesses were to take on roles as interpreters of living history,

\textsuperscript{129} Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Interpretive Plan} (1969), 6-13, NCHSS.

\textsuperscript{130} Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Interpretive Plan} (1969), 6-7 and 13-14, NCHSS.
assuming the identity of someone who had lived on the plantation during the nineteenth century and performing that role while conducting the tour. The problem was not living history per se so much as the challenge of modern women representing the antebellum era. The plan specified that the hostesses should wear professional uniforms rather than period costumes because, “Unless twentieth-century women can be taught manners, personalities, hygiene, and speech conforming to nineteenth-century standards, they will remain twentieth-century women—’cute, but not historical.’”

While authorities considered it inappropriate for contemporary women to play ‘old-fashioned’ roles, however—kitschy and “cute” at a site meant to be serious and commemorative—they had no difficulty with men on the site demonstrating antebellum crafts. The plan suggests that the site’s program should include demonstrations of the handicrafts and “home industries” that slaves might have practiced, especially carpentry and harness shops: “Such crafts would be closely linked to the overall operation and maintenance of the plantation. The shops could be opened either as simple exhibits or, if funds and staff are available, as demonstration areas.” Despite the fact that they would be demonstrating work performed mostly by slaves, and the site’s commitment to “authenticity” notwithstanding, it is highly unlikely that interpreters hired as craftsmen would be black. Evidently, neither black people nor white women were acceptable as living history representatives of the antebellum era at Somerset; that job was reserved only for white men.

131 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 18, NCHSS.

132 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 22, NCHSS.
As interpreters, developers and audience members, white people dominated Somerset in 1969. The site was supposed to represent the antebellum era, but in its limited living history performances and its general physical exhibits, staff designed it to evade discussion of the majority of people who had been at the plantation’s heart: the enslaved. The process of detaching Somerset from its historical role as a site of forced labor for most of its residents, and opting instead for a story about the verandas, porticoes and furnishings enjoyed by a select few was an act of privilege enabled by whiteness, and it was an act that reinforced longstanding unequal divisions of power.\textsuperscript{133}

Privilege, power and the overwhelming sense that whiteness was normative underwrote all of the restorations that led up to Somerset’s dedication, particularly the state’s choice to restore the mansion but not the slave quarters. Representatives of Archives and History—and Conservation and Development before them—knew where the quarters had been located, and they knew in considerable detail how the enslaved had lived. The problem was not a lack of information. While interpretations specialists at Somerset in 1969 discussed the possibility of reconstructing some of the buildings in what had once been the slaves’ area of the plantation, the express goal of these reconstructions was to offer only “facades” to “‘fill out’ the historic area and add to the total impact of the site.” It would not be necessary to concentrate on their interior detail—that type of attention was reserved for the Collins mansion alone—but rather to

\textsuperscript{133} Brett, 40; Nomination form, National Register of Historic Places, Envelope: Somerset Place Historic Site. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites and Museums, Research and Restoration Section, Survey Unit, Entries, National Register, 1969-1972 (Wake- Yadkin).
place them as secondary buildings, playing a supporting role to the mansion and its gardens.¹³⁴

When Somerset opened on August 15, several weeks before its formal dedication, it was billed as “a monument both to a major entrepreneurial venture and to a high social life style of the 1830s period.”¹³⁵ In its first month over 5,000 people visited, which was an impressive figure, especially considering that August marked the second month in a row that showed an overall decrease in visitation at all sites. In the late-summer heat, Historic Sites performed final touch-ups, adding window treatments, painting and extending the picket fence around the mansion, and placing furnishings brought in from antique stores out of state.¹³⁶ While Historic Sites staff worked at a good clip, and they benefited from a new site assistant and temporary helpers on loan from other sites within the division, some crucial aspects of the project remained incomplete as the dedication day approached: the visitor center in the Colony House still needed work, the furniture

¹³⁴ Somerset Place State Historic Site, Interpretive Plan (1969), 22-23, NCHSS.

¹³⁵ News for Carolina Comments, Historic Sites Division, September 26, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 49, Folder: Historical Review News, Publications. This figure of 5,000 may be incorrect, as it is contradicted by another report that states visitation in August 1969 was 2145. Either way, however, attendance was strong. See Monthly report to the historic sites administrator from the operations supervisor, August 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 49, Folder: Historical Review News, Publications.

¹³⁶ Monthly report of restorations supervisor, July 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Monthly reports, restorations supervisor.
inventory was unfinished, the security system needed to be installed, photographs of the entire site were yet to be taken, and barrier ropes still had to be hung in the mansion.137

When September arrived, despite the questionable state of some of the restorations, Historic Sites presented Somerset Place on a silver platter. For the division, 1969 marked a kind of renaissance for the plantation, “alive again” after being “saved” by the state of North Carolina.138 Having fallen from grace after the Civil War, its ascent was now well underway. The intervening century was reduced to an insignificant blip, as it was neither a time of production at Somerset nor a time when the plantation was keyed in, in a direct way, to the state’s cultural or economic life. Although local people had continued to use Somerset in a range of ways throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the dedication ushered in the “first time” that Somerset would welcome “meaningful public visitation”: it was only once visitation received state sanction that use began to count.139

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137 Additional work was supplied by people from the following historic sites: Caswell-Neuse, Town Creek Indian Mound, Brunswick Town, Alamance Battleground, Aycock Birthplace, and Bentonville Battleground. Monthly report to the historic sites administrator from the operations supervisor, August 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 49, Folder: Historical Review News, Publications; Monthly report of the Audiovisual Curator, August 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Monthly Reports, Interpretations Specialist.

138 The Division of Historic Sites’ staff in 1969 was: Larry Misenheimer, Audio-Visual Education Curator; Stanley South, Staff Archaeologist; A.L. Honeycutt, Restoration Manager; Richard W. Sawyer, Operations Manager; Elizabeth W. Wilborn, Staff Historian. Elizabeth Wilborn, “Somerset Place: The Collins Plantation on Lake Phelps,” North Carolina State Ports (Fall 1969). NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place.

139 News for Carolina Comments, Historic Sites Division, September 26, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 49, Folder: Historical Review News, Publications.
And now that the state was counting, it was pleased with what it saw. Attendance at Somerset was good in its first few months of operation.\(^{140}\) The site was advertised as a prime destination for families on vacation, and publicized as part of the Historyland Trail, nestled within “a typical farm community,” which had formed on the land given up by the Collins family after the Civil War.\(^{141}\) In order to maintain strong visitation, administrators hoped to develop a “public participation program” that would involve the surrounding community with the site, and help to secure items—furniture, photos, and other things—that only local people could provide. To this end, they planned to have a Christmas festival, concerts in the garden, and perhaps a garden club project.\(^{142}\) H.G.

\(^{140}\) Monthly report of the Audiovisual Curator, September 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Monthly Reports, Interpretations Specialist. Despite concerns with the system as a whole, Somerset continued to outshine all expectations with 3,153 visitors in September; almost 2,000 in October, and 1,400 in November. By the end of 1969, the system overall seemed to be picking up: there was a 23 percent increase in November and by the end of December the numbers were virtually back to normal, standing at 61,265 in the final three months of 1969, with a decrease of less than 1 percent from the same quarter the previous year. Monthly reports, October 1969 and November 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Monthly Reports, Operations Supervisor; Joye E. Jordan, Report for the Quarter Ending December 31, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Quarterly Reports.

\(^{141}\) H.G. Jones, “Last Days of Summer,” August 26, 1970. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1970, Box 315, Folder: Publicity and Public Relations: In the Light of History; Elizabeth Wilborn, “Somerset Place: The Collins Plantation on Lake Phelps,” *North Carolina State Ports* (Fall 1969). NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place. 3,153 people visited Somerset in September, a respectable showing relative to other sites: the only ones higher were the always popular Brunswick Town and Fort Fisher. However, overall, visitation at Historic Sites was down from its level the year before, and quarterly visitation for all sites was also lower than the previous year, down by approximately 44,000. Administrators suggested that the decreases may have been due to excessive rain, which cut down the number of tourists at the beach and had a direct impact on big-draw sites such as Fort Fisher. They also realized, however, that in order to boost visitation figures back up they needed to update the exhibits presented at the older sites. Monthly report, September 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1969, Box 50, Folder: Monthly Reports, Operations Supervisor.

\(^{142}\) Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Interpretive Plan* (1969), 19, NCHSS.
Jones also encouraged Collins descendants to keep coming to the site and to consider holding an annual reunion there, taking advantage of new facilities built in Pettigrew Park. He told Mrs. D.H. Joyce, “Introduce yourself as a Collins descendant and our attendant will be happy to show you through the house.”

To staff, he noted that courting the Collinses could pay off as the Division would probably get more family furniture donated “if we ‘play our cards right.’”

For their part, Collins descendants seemed excited about what Historic Sites and Archives and History had done, and they were pleased to be involved. A few weeks after the dedication, one wrote Jones to say, “Mr. Rianhard and I, with our daughter, visited Somerset a few years ago, when the house stood open but empty. It was a delight, this time, to see the old place looking as it should, and lovely by candlelight. Its present appearance is, surely, a tribute to the careful work of your department.” Mrs. Rianhard was perhaps more correct than she knew: Somerset’s appearance in 1969 was a direct result of painstaking effort over approximately thirty years, carried out by a range of

143 Letter, H.G. Jones to D.H. Joyce, September 10, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place; Letter, H.G. Jones to Mrs. Frederick Blount Drane, Sept. 29, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place.

144 Letter, Mary B. Cornick, to Frank Klapthor, Nov. 10, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place; and Memo, H.G. Jones to Division of Historic Sites, Sept. 9, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place.

145 Letter, Alice Ruffin Rianhard to H.G. Jones, Sept. 23, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place. See also Christopher Collins, telephone interview with author, January 5, 2006.
government agencies with vested interests in protecting and presenting a common but narrow set of ideas about the past. They had succeeded in making their interpretations look like *the* story of Somerset Place, the most natural story the site could possibly tell. But for all their success, the work was nowhere close to over. As a new decade began, Somerset was in many ways a work in progress. It was still sparsely furnished, with little budget available to remedy the situation, and it was sometimes difficult for visitors to secure guided tours or information on arrival at the site.146

Moreover, the narratives Somerset offered required constant reinforcement to preserve their strength. As of its dedication, the site was a monument to the antebellum past and a testament to many contemporary North Carolinians’ wish for connection with an earlier, supposedly better period.147 Historic Sites authorities built this message into interpretations of the buildings and immediate grounds of the site, and by extension—because it avoided specific interpretive work in other places—a vast surrounding area, which it declared the Collinses “reclaimed from swampland by means of an elaborate system of canals and ditches…[and was] still intact and presenting pretty much the same picture as before the Civil War…”148 With Somerset newly restored, Archives and

146 Letter, Mary B. Cornick, to Frank Klapthor, Nov. 10, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place; and Memo, H.G. Jones to Division of Historic Sites, Sept. 9, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites, re. Somerset Place; Pledger interview; Haire interview.

147 *N&O*, September 18, 1968.

148 North Carolina Historic Sites with Comments Concerning Highway Problems, July 27, 1967. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1967, Box 45, Folder: Misc. Programs.
History and Historic Sites tried to isolate and promote a romanticized antebellum era. Here was Somerset Place, their exhibits seemed to say, as relevant as it had ever been during Josiah Collins III’s lifetime, untouched by decades of poverty and neglect. Indeed, poverty and neglect did not figure into the story of the plantation’s history at all. But the state’s goal of animating the distant past for the use of contemporary consumers required the wholesale obliteration not only of the slaves’ presence but of one hundred years since the end of the Civil War. As the years passed, maintaining this ruse became increasingly untenable. For a time, the state could present the antebellum era as the only period worth representing and the Collinses as the site’s only logical subjects. Developers used Somerset to tell a typical, even cliché, story of the antebellum South. They knew there were other stories there, and eventually, in response to a new political and cultural context and the demands of an expanded public history clientele, the site would represent much more. But as of 1969, developers were both unable and disinclined to expand the site’s interpretive horizons. Change was yet to come.
Chapter Five

Making a Bow to Minority History:
Roots of Revision, 1970 to 1986

History, like it or not, is a relativistic pursuit. If it were not, we would not have historiography. While some things in history are more relative than others and while some of the concerns of historians are mere passing fads, it is a fact that certain themes and topics will be of continual concern. There is likely not a single historical agency in America that has not made its bow to minority history. But as faddish as the study of minorities has been in recent years, it is not likely that the concern will die out.¹

History in northeastern North Carolina is the same thing as textiles are in the Piedmont…It’s our chief industry.²

“Well, you know,” the manager of an historic site near Somerset warned his colleagues at the grand opening of Historic Hope Plantation one spring afternoon in 1974, “once all the hoopla is over, you’re going to be ignored.” Bill Edwards, who had become the manager at Somerset two years earlier, digested these words with wistful familiarity as he mingled with the other site managers at the former home of North Carolina’s Governor David Stone.³ When Edwards transferred to Somerset from Alamance


3 William (Bill) Edwards became site manager at Somerset Place on May 1, 1972. He had started working for Archives and History in 1969 as a clerk in the state archives; transferred to Alamance Battleground in November 1970 as a General Utility Man. He had taken part of a history degree at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and had a working knowledge of photography. When he was hired at Somerset, he seemed equally or more experienced and educated than others in similar positions at other sites, though he was one of the two lowest paid. See William B. Edwards, Jr., Historic Site Manager, Somerset Place. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1972, Box 325, Folder: Historic Sites and Museums, Correspondence, #1 Jan.-Feb. 1972.
Battleground State Historic Site, he felt like he had “been sent to the edge of the earth.” Usually, Historic Sites managers “stayed for life,” but after only a short time at the site Edwards understood why Somerset’s first manager, William Toler, had become so bored so quickly and decided to leave. Edwards knew well from his two years at Somerset what happened to a site once the excitement and attention of its early days had passed and the dull, endless cycle of trying to maintain the facilities, attract visitors, and scramble for scarce funds set in. He knew that whatever promise might appear on dedication day, the reality of the days and months that followed would be considerably less satisfying.

At Somerset, what should have been a beginning in 1969 turned out to be more of an end. In a scant eight months after the pomp and fanfare of the dedication, the site underwent a precipitous decline. In the decade that followed, Somerset appeared to have fallen into stasis: there were no significant projects undertaken, no new restorations or interpretive developments, and no capital improvements. Although the Albemarle region was frequently touted as “the land of [North Carolina’s] greatest concentration of history,” sites like Somerset, tucked away in the northeast corner of the state, were being lapped by attractions in the Piedmont, the mountains and the southern coast.

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4 Edwards interview.

5 Letter, Thomas Hampton to Thomas C. Ellis, August 24, 1970. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1970, Box 316, Folder: State Agencies, Department of Conservation and Development, Division of State Parks.

6 H.G. Jones to the Honorable Voit Gilmore, April 17, 1972. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1972, Box 325, Folder: Historic Sites and Museums, Correspondence, #2 March-May 1972; Roy Wilder, Jr., to H.G. Jones, March 21, 1972. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1972, Box 325, Folder: Historic Sites and Museums, Correspondence, #2 March-May 1972. The northeastern part of the state
was never a priority when it came to new funding and visitation did not increase as administrators had expected. Indeed, the numbers dropped drastically, from a high of 23,355 people in 1973 to only 7,862 in 1978. In the words of Betty Pledger, who lived near Somerset in the site’s early days and later worked there as a guide, Somerset was like “a total wrecked vehicle…” broken and ignored on the edge of Pettigrew State Park.

There were not many visible developments at Somerset during the 1970s and early 1980s; judging by outward appearances, this period can be characterized more by regression than progress. Such a characterization, however, misses the point. The fifteen years after Somerset’s dedication were a time of major flux, not in the exhibits that visitors saw when they went to the site, but in the ideas, information and research methodologies that underwrote those exhibits. These years were a time during which American historical consciousness underwent a major and irrevocable shift with what would ultimately be remarkable consequences for Somerset Place.

Isolation, Recreation, Commemoration

remained a primary focus of Archives and History. Between 1977 and 1979 the General Assembly appropriated $80,000 to historic sites in northeastern North Carolina on the premise that the region was the “most ancient portion” of the state; it provided the initial “impetus for settlement, growth and development”; and it had “the most complete and intact collection of historic properties and sites” which constituted an “extensive untapped education and tourist [attraction]…merely waiting to be properly developed and promoted.” Promoting the sites of the northeast represented “one of the most important pursuits of the people of North Carolina” and deserved adequate funding and careful management. Chapter 1084, Session Laws 1977, H.B. 1189. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 1, Folder: Grants (General).

7 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan 1979, 25-6; 91, NCHSS.

8 Pledger interview.
Within months of its dedication, Somerset was already becoming an anachronism. In 1970, Somerset Place State Historic Site was all about architecture and furnishings, but this had appeal in increasingly limited sectors. Somerset was one of twenty historic sites in North Carolina adopted into the National Register of Historic Places that spring. Adoption meant protection from encroachment on the property, and inclusion in a published list of Historic Places, which functioned as “the nation’s historical guidebook.” History professionals at the state and federal levels perceived Somerset’s primary significance to be the mansion’s design: it was “one of the best extant examples of coastal plantation houses of its period.” But such a distinction offered diminishing returns as fewer and fewer people were being attracted to sites solely on aesthetic grounds. While the National Register may have recognized Somerset’s architectural significance, its appearance was not remarkable enough to overcome its isolation and draw sufficient numbers of visitors. Remote and “incomplete [in] development and interpretation,” throughout the 1970s, Somerset was “one of the least visited state historic

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11 Nomination form, envelope: Somerset Place Historic Site. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Historic Sites and Museums, Research and Restoration Section, Survey Unit, Entries, National Register, 1969-1972 (Wake- Yadkin). The same description of Somerset’s architecture can be found in Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan (1970), 12, NCHSS.
Somerset was only a few miles away from the popular vacation destinations of the Outer Banks, but Edwards explains, “[T]hat’s where everyone was going…they didn’t care about lingering [here] in the swamps...”

Isolation was a two-pronged problem: it made Somerset hard for visitors to reach thus keeping the numbers low; and it made Somerset easy for officials in Raleigh to either forget or ignore. Somerset’s decay was caused mostly by its separation from those who controlled the Historic Sites system and allocated its resources. Historic Sites had only one supervisor who was “unaware of the ‘larger picture’” of the state system, and for whom remote attractions like Somerset were mostly out of sight, out of mind. After the flurry of activity in preparation for the dedication, Historic Sites essentially walked away from the site, leaving multiple projects incomplete and other still-pressing needs unmet. By the spring of 1970, Somerset was beset with problems that only got worse over the summer months: fencing was missing or broken; grass and trees were dead; shrubs were overgrown; the canal was full of debris; bathrooms were barely functioning;

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13 Edwards interview.

14 Department of Cultural Resources Program Plans for the 1975-77 Policy Cycle, August 1, 1974: 77. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 2, Folder: Reports.
there were wasp and hornets’ nests in the shutters and along the porch of the mansion; the mansion’s door had no doorknob; and signage was either missing or insufficient.15

Archives and History’s virtual abandonment of Somerset Place bothered Bill Edwards, but perhaps even more it irked staff in Conservation and Development’s Division of State Parks. Historic Sites and State Parks were supposed to be working together for the combined interests of Somerset and Pettigrew State Park, but State Parks considered the relationship to be dramatically unequal, with them putting in far more effort than the historical agency. Officials at Pettigrew were often annoyed by Historic Sites’ sense of entitlement to use grounds under State Parks’ jurisdiction, thus benefiting from their work without providing adequate return or even maintaining Somerset at minimum acceptable levels. Thomas Hampton, the Parks Superintendent, was furious when he discovered how rundown Somerset had become in only its first year of operation, declaring the site an embarrassment to his division.16

Morse criticized Archives and History for having failed to maintain Somerset’s historic areas. By contrast, he determined that the areas for which Conservation and Development was solely responsible—“the picnic area, washhouse, boat dock and campsites”—“were exceptionally clean and well maintained.” He concluded, “If this is

15 Letter, Thomas Hampton to Thomas C. Ellis, August 24, 1970. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Division of State Parks, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1970, Box 316, Folder: State Agencies.

16 Letter, Thomas Hampton to Thomas C. Ellis, August 24, 1970. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Division of State Parks, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1970, Box 316, Folder: State Agencies.
supposed to be an example of dual management, I believe that any future ventures would be hard to culminate.”

H.G. Jones brushed off Morse’s assessment. He argued that there was no clear division of responsibilities between State Parks and Historic Sites, and until both agencies finalized their terms of operation in writing it was unfair to expect the site manager at Somerset to know what to do. He assured the division that cooperation was his ultimate goal in order “to present to the public historic sites and state parks which do credit to the state.” Despite all assurances, however, ongoing neglect meant that the site’s decay got worse before it got better. In the early 1970s the Historic Sites system struggled just to stay on its feet, and while Somerset was not the only site to suffer from all-around hardship, it did seem to suffer the most, appearing repeatedly at the bottom of the state’s list of priorities when it came to allocating funds to recreational areas and historic sites.

Neglect was usually unintentional: Historic Sites wanted to do more but circumstances prevented anything from happening. Somerset’s first master plan, produced in 1970 when Historic Sites tried to formalize interpretations at all locations

17 Letter, Thomas Hampton to Thomas C. Ellis, August 24, 1970. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Division of State Parks, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1970, Box 316, Folder: State Agencies.

18 Letter, H.G. Jones to Thomas Hampton, August 26, 1970. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Division of State Parks, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1970, Box 316, Folder: State Agencies.

19 Letter, H.G. Jones to Thomas C. Ellis, August 26, 1970. NCSA, Department of Conservation and Development, Division of State Parks, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1970, Box 316, Folder: State Agencies.

and required each one to submit a long-range plan, had outlined an ongoing program of restorations. State officials recommended an extensive string of projects and appropriations between 1971 and 1977, including construction of a 3-bedroom on-site manager’s residence; major restoration work of the kitchen, store house, and other extant outbuildings for educational purposes and in order to create storage and maintenance space; and restoration of the canal and grounds, which included building new brick walkways throughout the site. But Somerset, along with the rest of North Carolina’s public history programming, got caught in the state’s budget crunch and little of this work was actually completed.

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21 Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Master Plan* (1970), 12, NCHSS. Following the 1969 interpretive plan, Historic Sites developed a Master Plan for the site in 1970, which outlined a series of proposed developments. The 1970 master plan was developed in the context of the division’s need to organize the Historic Sites program, and to set “thematic and regional priorities.” It developed master plans for each site in the program in order to organize and rationalize interpretive methods and goals throughout the division. State Historic Sites Policy, April 1971. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 320, Folder: State Historic Sites Policy.

22 Letter, R.G. Bourne to Mary Cornick, February 18, 1970. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File, 1969-79, Box 1, Folder: Capital Improvements Budget, Administration. In 1971, the General Assembly provided Archives and History with an operating budget of nearly $3 million for 1971 to 1973—up by approximately $250,000 since the previous biennium. *Carolina Comments* (September 1971): 83-6; General Assembly Appropriates Funds for History. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 319, Folder; Legislation-NC General Assembly Appropriation Bills; Memo, H.G. Jones to Ashley Futrell and Clyde Norton, June 1, 1971. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 319, Folder: Legislation-Congress.

Proposed Capital Improvement Project for the Biennium of 1971-1973, January 15, 1970. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File, 1969-79, Box 1, Folder: Capital Improvements Budget, Administration. 1973-77 proposals included: an increase of $9500 in operating funds (up from an existing annual level of $22,730, mostly earmarked for repairs; $16,623 for another housekeeper and assistant and more repairs; $15,000 to restore the kitchen and storehouse; $23,500 to build a site manager’s residence; and $17,000 to restore the ice house, smoke house and dairy. Summary Sheet. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 2, Folder: Reports.
North Carolina’s Historic Sites system was in a precarious position during much of the 1970s, overwhelmed by its own fast growth and a lack of money and manpower.  

In the face of a national economic crisis and social and political upheaval, taxpayers questioned the wisdom of investing in historic preservation.  H.G. Jones insisted that it was a measure of “progress to preserve for continuing usefulness and education the sites and structures that have become a part of our heritage.”  

But most did not agree.  A statewide survey in 1975 found little support for any increase in funding; more than a quarter of respondents believed that North Carolina was already spending too much.  

Although costs were rising, appropriations dropped by approximately 30 percent, programs were postponed, and historic sites were forced to continue operating without...
sufficient resources or equipment. The General Assembly orchestrated several structural shifts that might have protected the historic preservation bureaucracy, including creating a new Department of Cultural Resources to house the re-named Division (formerly Department) of Archives and History and its subsidiary Historic Sites Section. But the workload remained “out of hand” and the sites continued to suffer. Instead of continuing to build Somerset through capital improvements and better interpretations, meager funding plus ongoing problems caused by deficiencies in the initial restorations and general wear and tear thwarted attempts to keep the site in working order and to attract visitors. Historic Sites’ inability to maintain restored buildings at Somerset and


27 Department of Cultural Resources Program Plans for the 1975-77 Policy Cycle, August 1, 1974: 78-83. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 2, Folder: Reports. For details on the bureaucratic transitions see Wegner, History for all the People: 57-8.

28 Cross, “A Profile of State Historic Sites Administered by the Division of Archives and History,” May 17, 1974. NCC, North Carolina Historic Sites Section Research Reports File 1960-85, microfilm reel 2; Department of Cultural Resources Program Plans for the 1975-77 Policy Cycle, August 1, 1974: 78. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 2, Folder: Reports.
beyond threatened the state with a hefty future bill and presented “a shabby face to the public.”

But looks were not the only problem. If Historic Sites could not keep buildings and grounds intact, it was struggling even harder to provide effective interpretations. In the early 1970s, the division worked to define a system-wide interpretations policy, waffling between attempts to disguise programmers’ interventions and the desire for more tools to use at sites to help audiences read historical narratives in material artifacts. In some cases, Historic Sites took a ‘what you see is what you get’ approach, where visitors were to make sense on their own of the buildings and objects on display. According to one policy statement, the main objective was,

…to reduce the spoken or written word to the minimum—to let the visual facts speak for themselves…. For example, consider an empty room in a house. One could identify it by using a simple label, or by furnishing it with appropriate period furniture. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a three dimensional re-creation of the original would be worth several thousand words. In addition to

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30 Department of Cultural Resources Program Plans for the 1975-77 Policy Cycle, August 1, 1974: 78-83. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 2, Folder: Reports; Raymond Pisney, Historic Sites: Outline of Projects in Progress, Dec. 1, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites Aug.-Dec. 1969. A major difficulty with historical exhibits is the sheer volume of information that they need to convey to an observer in, sometimes literally, the blink of an eye. There is no room for footnotes; no time for long narrations to provide context. It is almost impossible for observers at a site—most of whom are not familiar with historiography or even, perhaps, the history currently up for examination—to know “the range of choices from which the objects were selected.” Neil Harris, “Museums and Controversy: Some Introductory Reflections.” Journal of American History (82, 3: December 1995): 1110.
heightening the dramatic effect, the furnished room communicates something of the culture of the time and the personality of the people who occupied it.\textsuperscript{31}

At sites like Somerset, programmers adopted a perspective common since the beginning of preservation efforts in the United States, which was that structures and furnishings had inherent stories that would shine through to observers. Preservationists believed that their job began and ended with the purportedly simple act of putting material artifacts on display, and that after that, “the buildings themselves would do the teaching.”\textsuperscript{32} But just as frequently, programmers made it clear that they needed more resources in order for the sites to reach their full interpretive potential. To add more context to the exhibits, they stressed the need for audio visual programs, usually in on-site visitor centers, as well as published material on specific aspects of the department’s research.\textsuperscript{33}

As the decade wore on, the Department of Cultural Resources, which now housed the Division of Archives and History, wanted to do more to solidify the meaning and purpose of interpretations at Historic Sites, and to improve programming in order to counter “public (including legislative) criticism” of the Historic Sites system.\textsuperscript{34}

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31 State Historic Sites Policy, April 1971. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 320, Folder: State Historic Sites Policy.

32 Charles Hosmer notes this was a major problem in the preservation movement, especially when it first began, when participants only instituted “explicit educational programs” when they sensed a building’s story needed further highlighting, and that most of the time, without these explicit programs, preservationists believed that they had no impact on the narrative that a building would communicate (300).

33 As early as 1970, officials affirmed the necessity of building a formal visitor center with an audio visual presentation at Somerset. This never happened. Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Master Plan} (1970), 3; 21; 25, NCHSS.

34 Historic Resources—Program, Historic Sites and Museums Services Sub-Program, Identification and Restoration of Properties Element (Current Operations Expansion), 1973. NCSA, Department of Cultural
Administrators wanted to create a survey to get clear feedback on the interpretive programs in place, and to develop a general interpretations philosophy that could be tailored to the needs of individual sites. They also recognized that all sites needed better training for their interpreters in order to offer visitors more interesting and educational tours. But there was simply insufficient money to do much of this at all, and with only two researchers employed to serve all of the sites, it was “virtually impossible…” to complete the “thorough research” necessary to create strong and attractive exhibits. At Somerset Place, Historic Sites officials insisted that Tarlton’s report remained a sufficient basis for interpretations, despite the state’s acquisition in 1969 of important archival material in Josiah Collins’ papers, which might have been examined for the additional information they could provide.

35 Department of Cultural Resources Program Plans for the 1975-77 Policy Cycle, August 1, 1974: 78-83. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 2, Folder: Reports.


37 Pisney, Historic Sites: Outline of Projects in Progress, Dec. 1, 1969. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1969, Box 308, Folder: Historic Sites Aug.-Dec. 1969; Memo, Dot Redford to Rob Boyette and Ricky Howell, April 24, 1995. SPSHS, File: 1995 Paint Mansion/Outbuildings. The Master Plan of 1970 suggests that programmers were aware of several new directions in which they could take the interpretations, particularly in terms of acknowledging the enslaved more fully. But none of this awareness seems to have gone beyond the pages of the report as the exhibits and tour remained the same as they were at the time of the dedication. See Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan (1970), 21, NCHSS.
With little support from Historic Sites, Somerset looked for ways it could use Pettigrew State Park to add value to visitors’ experiences, and to help solidify its interpretations. Sharing space with the park was a double-edged sword. On the one side it meant dealing with a sometimes uncomfortable juxtaposition between history and recreation. Programmers wanted to reserve Somerset’s grounds for observances of “serious commemoration,” and shift all recreational activity to Pettigrew Park.\(^{38}\) They employed a variety of strategies to establish “proper screening” between designated recreational and historical areas in order to “eliminate any harmful effects” and avoid incursion on the “historical mood.”\(^{39}\) The steps that Historic Sites took to protect Somerset from the park’s encroachment had far-reaching effects. Somerset was one of several sites that pushed Archives and History to declare a blanket policy of acquiring as much land as possible around each historic site in order to create buffer zones so that visitors were not “distracted from the appreciation of the historical environment and the historical theme of a site by the intrusion of modern developments.”\(^{40}\)

With screening and buffer zones established, Historic Sites could look to Pettigrew as a safety valve that would absorb the recreational activities that contravened

\(^{38}\) Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Master Plan* (1970), 22, NCHSS.

\(^{39}\) Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Master Plan* (1970), 6 and 26, NCHSS. The plan envisioned the site split into three separate zones: “a zone for modern development, a recreation area, and a historic area” (24).

\(^{40}\) State Historic Sites Policy, April 1971. Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 320, Folder: State Historic Sites Policy; Somerset Place State Historic Site, *Master Plan* (1970), 3 and 21, NCHSS.
the new “rules and regulations” for appropriate behavior at the site.\textsuperscript{41} It was an ironic twist that in order to preserve “history” programmers worked to forbid the recreational activities—especially sports and picnicking—that had been primary historical uses of the land. The unexpected result of declaring these activities verboten at Somerset was that in the process of trying to protect the site’s historical interpretations, programmers drove away visitors. Indeed, some residents of Washington County suggest that by formalizing and limiting Somerset’s operations, and ending the days when it was open for people to use as they wished, Historic Sites dissolved the connection between the site and the local people who were then most likely to frequent it.\textsuperscript{42}

Dissolving its connection with local people was a particular problem for Somerset Place. With its remote location, Somerset relied more than other sites on attracting people from the surrounding communities who might form a core of regular visitors.\textsuperscript{43} But programming already excluded all African Americans, and soon after the dedication most white residents also shifted their attention elsewhere.\textsuperscript{44} Washington County’s Historical Society held several meetings at Somerset, which included tours of the mansion and picnics on the lawn, as well two well-attended candlelight receptions where

\textsuperscript{41} Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Master Plan} (1970), 22, NCHSS.
\textsuperscript{42} Cahoon interview; Spruill interview.
\textsuperscript{43} Larry Misenheimer, telephone interview with author, December 20, 2007.
\textsuperscript{44} Cahoon interview.
“Hostesses in each room...described the furnishings to guests who toured the house.”

But the Historical Society’s interest in Somerset—already limited—was the exception to the rule. Even wealthy descendants of Josiah Collins felt distant from their ancestral home. Descendants who remained in North Carolina were centered in Edenton, which was far enough away from Somerset to prohibit regular visitation or involvement, and for descendants living elsewhere in the country, Somerset was a virtually unknown commodity.

Somerset seemed to have little to offer as it lacked the kinds of activities and facilities that most people felt made a visit to an historic site both interesting and enjoyable. Financial hardship stopped Historic Sites from building the freestanding visitor center that the site needed to welcome and orient visitors, and programmers differed with audiences in their opinions of the site’s central purpose. Just as programmers wanted to limit the site to “serious” historical commemorations, visitors wanted the opposite: they wanted more than exhibits to look at, more things to do that were in fact “peripheral to the core ‘history’ of a site.”

Residents of Creswell and Plymouth had long appreciated Somerset’s historic value, but for most of the twentieth


46 Collins interview.

century they had done so on their own terms, considering it less a shrine to guard and protect, and more a landmark to adapt and use. Somerset had been attractive to them as a place they could go for free access to the lake, fields and old structures. They did not object to the renovations that the state undertook, but formal exhibits were never their top priority.\(^{48}\)

Authorities with Pettigrew Park tried to cater to local people’s interests. Officials at the park could not control the management of the historic site proper, but they moved to raise Pettigrew’s profile in the state by promising local residents and tourists alike new and improved recreational opportunities. Traditionally, like Somerset Place in the system of Historic Sites, Pettigrew Park had received less attention than parks elsewhere in the state.\(^{49}\) But unlike Somerset Place, where tight economic times meant cinching even further an already tight belt, a national financial crisis actually enabled new developments at Pettigrew Park. State Parks got additional money from the General Assembly because they provided free services for financially-strapped citizens; they drew visitors from out of state who patronized nearby businesses during their stay; and their focus on nature and conservation seemed the perfect antidote to widespread anxiety over energy shortages and perceived environmental decay.\(^{50}\) Some of the new funding went to Pettigrew Park, which was targeted for development because of the unique shape and properties of Lake

\(^{48}\) Pettigrew State Park Report (North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, November 1977). NCHSS.

\(^{49}\) Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan 1979, 26, NCHSS.

\(^{50}\) N&O, May 25, 1975.
Phelps. The park’s earlier attempt to build a recreational area on the south shore had failed, but in 1977 State Parks made new plans for the north shore adjacent to Somerset’s boundaries, including a day use area to the west of the historic site, and two 70-site camping loops to the east, each of which boasted a washhouse and toilet building.\footnote{31}

Historic Sites watched State Parks’ moves carefully, monitoring and occasionally criticizing the impact of projected developments. Officials in Historic Sites had never been convinced that State Parks should maintain any control over historical resources, and their backs went up at some of the park’s proposals, such as building a complex of group campsites on the so-called “tangle of small shrubs and vines” that was once Somerset’s slave cemetery.\footnote{32} For the most part, however, State Parks cooperated with Historic Sites when their plans appeared to pose any threat to historical areas, and they presented expansions and developments at the park as equally beneficial to Somerset and Pettigrew.

It seemed as though developments which would draw more visitors to the park were bound to have a positive effect on Somerset’s ever-shrinking visitation statistics. Whereas Somerset was struggling to attract an audience, Pettigrew Park was booming.

\footnote{31} The south shore had turned out to be impossible to develop and difficult to access, and its remoteness made it a prime target for “vandalism and destruction.” Pettigrew State Park Report (North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, November 1977). NCHSS.

\footnote{32} Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Master Plan} (1970), 23, NCHSS. Historic Sites was justifiably critical when State Parks’ plans threatened existing historical areas as well as areas that had high potential to yield artifacts and other historical attractions. See, for example, Memo, Richard Sawyer to Keith Morgan, March 26, 1979. NCHSS, Folder: Pettigrew State Park. See also: Memo, Terry Harper to Larry Misenheimer, June 27, 1985. SPSHS, Folder: 1996/97 clearing lakeshore; Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Master Plan} 1979, 53, NCHSS; Pettigrew State Park Report (North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, November 1977), NCHSS.
Visitation at Pettigrew increased by 27 percent in the three years after 1974, and if improvements went as planned, authorities believed that attendance would double. Park authorities argued that increased attendance at the park would also mean more than doubled attendance at the historic site, which by 1977 had seen its visitation rates decline considerably since their high point five years before. Somersett was one of the few historic sites in the entire state not showing increased visitation, which was all the more alarming considering that overall, 1977 was the second year in a row that the state broke its own record for tourism revenues.

For all of Historic Sites’ concern, programmers understood that the park in fact offered more of a promise than it posed a threat. Pettigrew’s pristine appearance helped to maintain the sense of the former plantation as a pastoral site, and visitors who came to see unspoiled natural scenery at the park often found themselves wandering through Somerset as well. Somerset and Pettigrew therefore began to develop joint activities “based around cohesive historic-resource and physical planning,” including “history trails” that could “serve both educational and recreational needs” by linking “botanical and ecological interpretation…to the geography, topography, and history of each site.”

53 Pettigrew State Park Report (North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, November 1977), NCHSS. For visitation figures for 1969-78, see Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan 1979, 91, NCHSS. The 1979 plan shows visitation peaking in 1972 at 24,181 visitors; by 1978, it was down to 7,862 visitors.


55 Program Plans for the 1975-77 Policy Cycle, August 1, 1974: 77. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 2, Folder: Reports.
At Somerset, visitors might complete their experience of the house and grounds by walking one or both of the two trails being built at Pettigrew State Park: an interpretive trail that linked Somerset Place, the slave cemetery, the Pettigrew homesite, and Pettigrew cemetery; or a nature trail formed from the old transportation routes used by the Collins family and Somerset’s enslaved workers, lined with markers explaining the significance of the cypress stands and other natural growth in the surrounding areas.\textsuperscript{56}

For Archives and History, the point of nature trails and picnic facilities on the grounds of or adjacent to historic sites was to encourage visitors to the park to also go to the site and stay as long as possible.\textsuperscript{57} Somerset could not attract enough visitors on its own the way it was; it needed the park’s nature trails and recreational setting.

Linking itself more closely to the park could make Somerset more fun, but it could not make it a more informative historic site. The only way to do that was to reframe its interpretations with evidence gleaned from new research. Somerset’s interpretations reflected a tired historical image that North Carolina’s public history officials and tourism boosters had been forcing for decades with only limited success. They had tried repeatedly to mirror the opulent antebellum past presented at historic sites in other states, but in the early 1970s they began to wonder if perhaps they were attempting the impossible: perhaps there was actually nothing in North Carolina that could compete with that kind of imagery? H.G. Jones contended that North Carolina simply did “not

\textsuperscript{56} Somerset Place State Historic Site, \textit{Master Plan 1979}, 63, NCHSS.

\textsuperscript{57} State Historic Sites Policy, April 1971. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 320, Folder: State Historic Sites Policy.
have a legacy of great plantations and homes comparable to that of Virginia and South Carolina. Consequently, if we show off our ‘finest,’ we still come in far down the list of states with great homes.”

Rather than concede defeat, perhaps they could find success in presenting a different narrative, one that examined not only the plantation elite but regular people as well.

As they approached the nation’s Bicentennial and the one-hundredth anniversary of the end of the Civil War, officials in Archives and History were determined to change North Carolina’s historical image. They did not plan to abandon historical narratives of wealth and prestige, but they acknowledged that on their own, these narratives neglected many of the stories embedded in the state’s sites. In April 1971, Archives and History

58 H.G. Jones to the Honorable Voit Gilmore, April 17, 1972. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1972, Box 325, Folder: Historic Sites and Museums, Correspondence, #2 March-May 1972.

59 In 1975 and 1976, claiming no need to “resort to razzle-dazzle to sell our state,” Archives and History did away with slogans such as the old “Variety Vacationland.” N&O, January 6, 1976.

60 A decade earlier, the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association called a meeting “designed to…fuse together hitherto scattered elements of all backgrounds and races represented in our State.” The Association proposed a series of conferences “to gather together the refined and talented and intelligent souls of all classes and all races and all attainments and emphasize personal fellowship, aimed at (not legislation, but) A CHANGE OF HEART of our people.” The Association justified its focus on merit, and the “total elimination of privilege” using the precedents set two hundred years before, in 1765-1775, as “revolutionary rumblings were directed against privilege…” “In short, such a gathering (and gatherings) would accord us opportunity to join in loving fellowship and provide the impetus for united (Caucasian, Indian, Jewish, and Negro) social activity which alone will qualify us to observe the Bicentennial of our American Revolution in 1976.” “The entire South would come alive right here in this great State. People and dignitaries from all states would gather here with us. Then, and only then, shall we gain nation-wide recognition for our Halifax Resolves. For our deeds will have followed our words. Our fellowship will have been made universal and have left exclusive privilege behind.” ‘The Spirit of ’65.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963Box 263, Folder: Historic Sites.

61 They were determined also to act on the call from their previous director, Christopher Crittenden, to wrest ownership of American history away from New Englanders, away even from Virginians and South
had released a policy statement on Historic Sites, building on the previous director’s sense that programming had a “lopsided” focus on “the upper crust,” and noting that in the previous ten years the program had been unbalanced, with far too much emphasis on historic houses to the exclusion of other things. In addition to telling visitors about great antebellum planters and Civil War heroes, state officials also looked for ways to present a history of difference and dissent, thus widening the possibilities for new interpretations at historic sites like Somerset Place and the potential audiences they might attract.

Programmers started to realize that they had spent years trying to force Somerset Place into the wrong interpretive mold. Aesthetically, Somerset paled beside most other preserved or restored antebellum sites; for all the claims about the unique architecture of the mansion, it simply did not have the kind of grand appearance that would conjure

Carolinians, and to re-place it, squarely, in the hands of Tar Heels: “We have a history,” he told them. “What we need is to make it known—to our own people and to the 180 million citizens of our Nation.”

Christopher Crittenden, “History and Historical Activities in North Carolina 1900-1976,” March 19, 1963. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1963, Box 261, Folder: Articles and Addresses, Publications.

State Historic Sites Policy, April 1971. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 320, Folder: State Historic Sites Policy. Christopher Crittenden, “Planning for Historic Preservation,” March 10, 1968. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1968, Box 301, Folder: Publications Program: Articles and Addresses. See also, Christopher Crittenden, “Let’s Take a Moratorium—Historic Sites Advisory Committee, A Proposed Program for the Next Five Years,” October 20, 1965. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Division of Historic Sites, General Correspondence 1965, Box 37, Folder: Historic Sites Advisory Committee. Christopher Crittenden urged the department to preserve not only the great plantation houses, but also “frontiersmen’s log cabins…, the humble living quarters of tenant farmers, even samples of tenement houses of our urban slums.” He did not note that, perhaps, sites such as great plantation houses could be interpreted in terms of the tenant farmers and other workers who built them.

N&O, July 24, 1976. The bicentennial was expected to provoke a major surge in travel to North Carolina, one of the original 13 colonies, with at least a 14 percent rise in tourist revenue. See N&O, May 16, 1976 and May 18, 1976. Washington County’s Bicentennial Festivals Committee cooperated to host Somerset’s annual Christmas candlelight reception on December 21. See Carolina Comments (March 1976): 45. See also Stewart and Ruffins, in Benson, et al., 332-3.
images of great wealth. The mansion might have been unique but it was not particularly beautiful or even that large, and the overwhelming majority of Collins’ land holdings had long since been broken up, subdivided and sold to multiple smaller owners. The primary symbols of his wealth—vast acreage and slaves—were long gone and despite Historic Sites’ high hopes in the 1960s, it turned out that what was left in their place was not enough to attract tourists hoping for a nostalgic trip into the antebellum past.

Perhaps Somerset was not, after all, the ideal vehicle for promoting the myths of the Lost Cause. But it might be one that could communicate new ideas about the South’s past. Somerset Place became a primary testing ground for Jones’ notion that North Carolina’s “history has been a common man’s history,” and that the state, therefore, should “put its preservation dollars into the task of preserving representative historic buildings and sites with a view toward a broad picture of our past.”64 As the 1970s unfolded and the 80s began, public history professionals discovered gradually that Somerset boasted an incredible array of documentary and material evidence upon which Historic Sites programmers might develop the kinds of innovative interpretations that Jones and his colleagues sought.65 Archives and History had reached a crisis point at which it became clear that maintaining a singular focus on architecture and high society

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64 H.G. Jones to the Honorable Voit Gilmore, April 17, 1972. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1972, Box 325, Folder: Historic Sites and Museums, Correspondence, #2 March-May 1972.

65 Durrill, Black Community, 178. When Redford first visited the site in 1983, she had the sense that it was “hollow,” not at all the “magnificent” site the state’s publicity had suggested. Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 96.
neither did North Carolina’s history justice, nor enough to attract visitors to the state. After decades of vying for tourists with Virginia and South Carolina, it seemed to be time—and opportunities began to present themselves at Somerset and elsewhere to make it possible—to find North Carolina’s own niche.66

Social Movements and Social History

H.G. Jones’ declaration of Archives and History’s new interest in the “common man” was motivated by more than a need to improve marketing strategies for the state’s historic sites.67 It also reflected changing ideas about what and who constituted legitimate historical subjects. The department picked up on a broad trend that transformed historiography in the 1960s and 70s, moving it away from narratives

66 H.G. Jones to the Honorable Voit Gilmore, April 17, 1972. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1972, Box 325, Folder: Historic Sites and Museums, Correspondence, #2 March-May 1972. In the late 1970s, Historic Sites authorities were still praising North Carolina’s leadership in the national movement for historic preservation. H.G. Jones claimed that the “scorn” shown to the state by its neighbors—Virginia and South Carolina—had pushed it to work harder and to progress further. To meet the challenge of other states that claimed North Carolina was less significant, North Carolinians developed a “spirit that pervaded our historic preservation movement—a spirit that exudes confidence in the future by preserving the benchmarks of the past to reveal our progress.” H.G. Jones, “Preservation in North Carolina,” 1977. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1971, Box 320, Folder: State Historic Sites Policy.

67 Jones always sought to balance economic necessities with producing history for history’s sake. In 1972, he had been called to explain, specifically, how historic preservation contributed to the state’s economy, and the quantifiable relationship between preservation and tourism. Jones responded that the department was mostly concerned with “authenticity and has consciously refrained from ‘selling’ historic preservation on the grounds of tourism. Although we will continue this emphasis, we are certainly ‘loosening up’ to the extent that we realize that there is little point to preservation if the historic property is not used or seen or enjoyed by the public. For that reason we anticipate working closer with the state’s travel and promotion unit in the future.” Letter, W. Warner Floyd to H.G. Jones, March 22, 1972. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1972, Box 325, Folder: Historic Sites and Museums, Correspondence, #2 March-May 1972; Letter, H.G. Jones to W. Warner Floyd, March 27, 1972. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1972, Box 325, Folder: Historic Sites and Museums, Correspondence, #2 March-May 1972.
concentrated exclusively on the elite and toward those that incorporated ordinary people. In the academy, this trend was labeled the new social history, and it spread throughout the nation’s colleges and universities as both a product of and answer to several postwar phenomena, primarily the African American freedom struggle and related liberation movements.  

Social history’s development and the evolution of the civil rights movement went hand in hand. The movement changed the context in which both academic and public historians worked, with dramatic results for everyone, especially scholars of African American history and African American subjects. Desegregation was finally becoming reality in the 1970s, and it expanded faculties and student bodies at schools that were previously whites-only, either by policy or custom. With new prominence in the academy and an escalating sense of their political and cultural power, African American scholars, students and their allies, including progressive whites, began to revise the white supremacist historical narratives that dominated mainstream discourse. Indeed, revising

68 Gathercole and Lowenthal, 42; Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4; Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. chapter 14. Novick notes the significance of the civil rights and women’s movements to creating an historiographical sea-change in the late 1970s as they made “oppositional” history the norm, and multiplied the legitimate perspectives from which one could study and interpret history. But he also argues that this fragmentation—this breakdown of consensus—began much earlier, in the period after the First World War. See also Samuel.

69 As Joyce Appleby puts it of the early scholars who brought the new methods of social history to bear on studies of the South, “…it is one thing to know that there is an institution called slavery but quite another to identify with the slaves’ experience by learning the dimensions of their living space, the traditions they brought from diverse parts of Africa, and the patterns of work and respite that defined the terms of survival in the cruelest labor systems.” See Appleby, A Restless Past: History and the American Public (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 52.
historical narratives was one central element of their ongoing freedom struggle. African American intellectuals and activists had long claimed historical knowledge as a prerequisite to empowerment and the public declaration of their historical trajectory to be part and parcel of political liberation. In the 1970s, a growing group of people took on this task with new zeal.

Academic historians responded more quickly to the demands of the liberation movements than public historians seemed willing or able to do. If integration was hard won in the academy, public history posed an even stiffer challenge, maintaining fairly distinct ‘white’ and ‘black’ spheres—with the former clearly dominant—for significantly longer. Whether public historians in the ‘white’ sphere felt personally opposed to incorporating new kinds of evidence and stories into their sites; whether they were concerned that the government and taxpayers who controlled their funding would object to such changes; or whether they simply could not find the time or money to implement any changes they might have envisioned, the result was the same: it took an extra decade

70 On African American history and empowerment, see esp. Glymph; Clark; Blight, *Race and Reunion*. Scholars in black institutions had been teaching African American history since 1911 and creating an alternative academic network in which to create and present their work for much of the 20th century, but white supremacy’s grip on mainstream academia meant their voices were mostly silenced. Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 154. See also Stewart and Ruffins, in Benson, *et al.*, 332-3; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). Manning Marable writes, “I think most African American intuitively understand [the political significance of the past], and recognize that their moral claim on American institutions is inextricably bound to their past. For us, the past is not simply prologue; it is indelibly part of the fabric of our collective destiny. Indeed this alternate understanding of history, even more than race or culture, is the most important quality that makes African Americans as a people different from other Americans.” Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 14. See also Charles Wilson, telephone interview with author, October 13, 2007.

71 Stewart and Ruffins, in Benson, *et al.*, *passim*. Note the language of spheres is mine, not theirs.
for the narratives about African Americans that were becoming commonplace in the academy to make their way into public discourse. And since more Americans learned their history from historic sites and museums than from the scholarly establishment, this meant that for most Americans, despite the revolutionary impact of social history on the academy, popular conceptions of history remained focused primarily on white elites until the end of the 1970s.\(^2\)

That façade, however, became more vulnerable with each passing year. White supremacist narratives remained dominant at most historic sites, but public historians were starting to sense that the \textit{status quo} would not suffice for very much longer. Public history professionals in North Carolina began to feel a particularly strong push to make their “bow to minority history.”\(^3\) Officials in Archives and History sanctioned Somerset’s white supremacist narrative when it was dedicated in 1969, but only a year later, at a departmental level they were already called on the carpet. In August 1970, H.G. Jones received sharp comments from an associate who was concerned about a lack of African American history represented in the state’s plans for historic preservation,

\(^2\) Gertrude Fraser and Reginald Butler, “Anatomy of a Disinterment: The Unmaking of Afro-American History,” in Benson, \textit{et al.}, 130; Thomas A. Woods, “Museums and the Public: Doing History Together.” \textit{Journal of American History} (82, 3: December 1995): 1111-12. Public historians in the ‘white’ sphere faced different challenges than academics as they confronted myriad practical obstacles, not least of which was the expensive and time-consuming task of rebuilding physical spaces and rewriting interpretive frameworks on shoestring budgets in order to put historiographical developments into practice. In the 1960s and 70s the NPS changed its interpretive approaches at various sites to become more complex, etc. Edward T. Linenthal, “Committing History in Public.” \textit{Journal of American History} (81, 3, December 1994): 987. As Brundage puts it, “Revision of exhibits that unabashedly defended white supremacy, glorified the Confederacy, or celebrated the antebellum South was probably inevitable after desegregation began. Even so, reinterpretation at most sites came about slowly and unevenly” (\textit{The Southern Past}, 293).

\(^3\) Brundage, \textit{The Southern Past}, 10; 291; 293; quote from Tise, “The Philosophy and Practice of Public Historical Administration”: 23.
particularly the notable exclusion of “the slave economy of the colonial and plantation period, and the contribution of the black man to our progress...” Jones reassured his colleague that the state proposed “to devote particular attention to the preservation of historic places associated with the black race in order to create a more visible appreciation of their life and times in North Carolina.”

But while bureaucrats discussed what to do to desegregate the state’s public history programming—to fulfill Archives and History’s long-ago promise of presenting history “for all the people”—African American history made its way into the center of national popular consciousness. “The single most important public history event of the 1970s” was not a museum exhibit or historic site but a television miniseries, *Roots*. Based on Alex Haley’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Roots* was a ratings phenomenon. Over eight consecutive nights in January 1977, 85 percent of all television homes watched the series. Many Americans were contemptuous of the notion that they should

74 Memo, G.A. Jones to H.G. Jones, August 24, 1970. NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence 1970, Box 313, Folder: Historic Sites: An Interim NC State Plan for Historic Preservation. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a surviving copy of the actual Interim State Plan.


76 Wegner, *passim*.

77 Stewart and Ruffins, in Benson, *et al.*, 333.

view their nation’s past through the eyes of those who had been its slaves. Roots went out to this resistant audience, and while it by no means convinced everyone that African Americans were equal actors in narratives of the country’s development, it did make the subjective experience of enslavement part of the mainstream historical lexicon. Whether Americans as a whole recognized it or not, after Roots, African American history from the perspective of African American subjects began to find a central place in popular American historical thought.

Roots walked a fine line as a public declaration of African Americans’ historical perseverance and strength at a time of considerable backlash against their recent political accomplishments. It answered the contemporary racist notions that barring a minority of radical troublemakers, African Americans were passive victims of crushing oppression; and that as a group they lacked a strong work ethic and were incapable of establishing solid families or communities. Roots situated African Americans within classic American tropes of progress, hard work and family, offering stark contrasts to white supremacist narrative structures all the while upholding traditional notions of

79 In the 1968 presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, Thomas Bailey surveyed then-recent early American historiography and concluded, “This determination to stand American history on its head, so characteristic of minority groups, may stimulate pride among Negroes, but it can win little support from true scholarship. The luckless African-Americans while in slavery were essentially in jail; and we certainly would not write the story of a nation in terms of its prison population.” Quoted in Peter H. Wood, “I Did the Best I Could For My Day’: The Study of Early Black History During the Second Reconstruction, 1960 to 1976,” William and Mary Quarterly 35, 2 (April 1978): 219.

80 By the mid-1970s, for the first time, black history became a mass phenomenon for the nation at large, with Black History Month enjoying wide celebration, and black heroes commemorated in televised “Bicentennial Minutes.” By 1980, for the first time in American history, a positive image of the black past had become a fixture in public expressions of American culture.” Stewart and Ruffins, in Benson, et al., 332-3.
respectability and morality. The broadcast of *Roots* brought prominent themes from African American public history—stories of African American agency and integrity—to the mainstream; and it enabled white Americans to identify with African Americans’ struggle by presenting their history in familiar terms.81

*Roots* told a story about slavery through the widely-accessible framework of family: generations of Africans and their descendants who were enslaved in America, and the connections between past and present in one family line. In the process it changed the ways in which Americans thought about their history, and touched off what can be seen as a movement to new historical consciousness.82 Americans embraced the idea that ‘real’ history, the history that mattered most to them, was premised on personal connection and identification.83 White and black Americans alike responded to *Roots* by

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81 Alison Landsberg writes, “What was new about Roots was its attempt to use the mass media to portray a sympathetic black character with whom a white audience might identify” (103).

82 Many scholars have discussed the massive impact of *Roots* on portrayals of American history. For several especially intriguing analyses see Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 295; Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 16 and 34; Ruffins, “Revisiting,” 398; Stewart and Ruffins, in Benson, *et al.*, 333; Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 155; landsberg, see esp. 102-106.

83 This was in the context of a time when “there has been increasing public interest in North Carolina’s ‘roots.’ Much of this has been reflected by an increase in local pride for ‘their’ [historic] sites.” Supplemental Budget Justification 1977-79. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 1, Folder: Cuts, Budget.

William Price, the new head of Archives and History, considered the new interest in family history a result of “the disorientation and dislocation that people are feeling in American society today. I think it’s that sense of asking, ‘Who am I and where am I and what am I?’” And researchers were looking for different information than they had in the past. According to Price, “They’re not looking just for their immediate ancestors. They’re not doing their ‘begats so much as asking what these people did in their communities and what the communities were like.” History, he explained, “is absolutely essential to our definition of ourselves as a people, our sense of where we came from, our sense of where we’re placed in this whole crazy world that rages about us. History as a dull recitation of facts will never survive and indeed never should survive. But as something that is a living presence in our lives, that provides some sense of who we are and maybe where we ought to go, then it’s a vital force.” *N&O*, October 11, 1981.
taking a voracious interest in their family histories, and using these histories to articulate their ideas about the American past overall.84

Viewing American history through a lens of family had particularly dramatic implications for African Americans because of their historical oppression. Slavery had threatened African American families because masters held legal control over every aspect of their lives, including marriage, childbearing and rearing, and household structure. Enslaved African Americans responded to this situation as best they could by defining family in fluid terms and forging adaptive kinship patterns. But frequently, despite the slaves’ best efforts, families were fractured as people were separated from one another by sale, and conventional family hierarchies were trumped by the master’s overwhelming control. Resistance was far from futile, but it was certainly an uphill battle. As dearly as enslaved people might cling to their kinfolk and try to affirm the integrity of families in the quarters, through no fault of their own, disconnection was one of the hallmarks of their lives.85

Roots offered an opportunity to reconnect and it rebutted critics and policymakers who mistook common social problems confronting contemporary African American

84 Lowenthal writes, “…personal and family legacies have come to intertwine with national and minority heritage” (Possessed by the Past, 57). Rosenzweig and Thelen’s 1990s study shows that most Americans think about history in terms of their own lives and experiences. Rosenzweig and Thelen, Presence of the Past, esp. 22 and 116. My reading of the evidence suggests that this seems to have begun around 1976/77.

families in the 1970s to be the result of “pathology” rather than history. By telling the story of Kunta Kinte, it declared that despite oppression, instability and the apparent decimation of slave family lines, African Americans did have families that could be traced back through the centuries—even back to a time before enslavement—and these families were fundamental to the nation’s history. Roots insisted that as an institution the black family deserved celebration rather than disdain, and in doing so alerted a broad audience to the fact that the full stretch of African American history could be told. It demonstrated that there were ways to use existing documentary evidence—from deeds and bills of sale for slaves to census data and beyond—to rediscover the lives of individuals and their kin. Suddenly, a past that had once seemed to most people to be

86 Scholarship on African American families took off in the 1970s as a rebuttal to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report, The Case for National Action on the Negro Family. Moynihan based much of his report on the findings of E. Franklin Frazier. It was also in line with such influential historical accounts as Kenneth Stampp’s, The Peculiar Institution, in which Stampp claims that slave families were matriarchies constituted by stunted relationships between husbands and wives, and parents and children, and in which he writes, “In the life of a slave, the family had nothing like the social significance that it had in the life of the white man. The slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother, and home-maker” (343). Moynihan’s report was the target of considerable scholarly rebuttal because it took such limited analyses of slaves as men and women—and as later scholars would point out, of gender—and laid them out as the foundation for late-twentieth-century federal policy. The earliest and most significant rebuttals to Moynihan and his allies include Blassingame and Gutman. Gutman’s work was not infallible, however: Nell Painter places Gutman’s book within a trend toward emphasizing African-Americans’ capabilities and humanity by denying individuality and reifying community through portrayals of a monolithic, patriarchal, strong “black family.” See Nell Irvin Painter, “Toward a Fully-Loaded Cost Accounting of Slavery,” in U.S. History as Women’s History: New Feminist Essays, edited by Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), esp. 127-32. See also Stevenson, xii; Jacqueline Jones, “Race and Gender in Modern America,” Reviews in American History 26, 1 (1998): 234; Kelly, Race Rebels; Deborah Gray White, Ar’n’t I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: Norton, 1985); Victoria Bynum, Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), esp. ch. 2.

87 Afi-Odelia Scruggs, “They Came to Make Somerset Place Their Own,” American Visions vol. 2, no. 6 (December 1987): 28.
silent and gone was blasted open, ready to be mined by those willing to use new tools at their disposal.\textsuperscript{88}

The tool that came to dominate popular historical study was genealogy, with what ultimately would be dramatic implications for Somerset Place. The fascination with genealogy knew no racial boundaries but there was an especially marked explosion of African American interest in the practice.\textsuperscript{89} Although libraries and archives had rarely been welcoming places for African Americans, after \textit{Roots}, they flooded in.\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Roots} and the genealogy craze that followed it allowed African Americans to understand their

\textsuperscript{88} In North Carolina, in preparation for the bicentennial William Price, the head of Archives and History, noted there was “a marked increase in research in 1975, which all of us in the archival business had anticipated in connection with the Bicentennial. We all pretty much assumed it would die out in 1977. But then, of course, ‘Roots’ came on the heels of the Bicentennial. Now what all of us are scratching our heads about today is wondering when it is going to end.” \textit{N&O}, October 11, 1981.

\textsuperscript{89} William Gordon, “Returning to Somerset Place,” \textit{Colonial Williamsburg} 12 (3), Spring 1990: 28. Archives and History was overrun with genealogical researchers after \textit{Roots}: “The demand for reference services in the Archives Search Room rose by 28 percent, and mail inquiries were up by 17 percent. So much assistance was needed at the reference desk that arrangement and description work languished as staff members were called upon to help researchers.” See Wegner, 67. Of its connection with the genealogy craze, Landsberg writes, “Genealogy is for the living, not the dead. Constructing genealogies of this kind is a way of claiming connection to experiences one did not have and, in the process, racializing oneself. Kunte Kinte is meaningful to Americans because he possesses an honorific body imprinted by history. He represents a black body that Americans can inhabit to remember prosthetically a past that has for too long been the site of shameful silence” (105). See also \textit{N&O}, October 11, 1981. In 1984, Charles Wadelington, an interpreter associated with the proposed Charlotte Hawkins Brown site presented, “A Layperson’s Guide to Collecting and Preserving History in the Black Community,” at a Black History Awareness Conference on June 9, 1984. His presentation focused on genealogical research. NCC, North Carolina Historic Sites Section Research Reports File, microfilm reel 5. See also Mary Jones-Fitts, telephone interview with author, July 17, 2006.

\textsuperscript{90} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 52-3.
ancestors as more than victims of slavery; rather, as a group, the enslaved and their descendants had a proud past of triumph over adversity.  

*Roots* punctuated a decade of increasing black cultural pride by cementing African American history firmly within America’s cultural mainstream. In North Carolina, the combined effect of *Roots*, academic shifts toward social history, and the need to attract broader audiences meant that after 1977 African American history occupied a new position in state-sponsored historical displays. This was particularly clear at the Museum of History, which launched its first-ever exhibit dedicated to the subject the following year.  

The Department of Cultural Resources congratulated itself on this achievement. The organizer, Rodney Barfield, said the museum had long wanted to mount the exhibit. Funding was a crucial step toward enabling the exhibit, as was actually getting the material: “Once people got over their initial distrust of a honky doing their history, they just opened up and gave me lovely information and supporting documents.” He stated, “This is a first for North Carolina, a big first.” Funded by the NEH, the exhibit was “packed full” of material that would inform visitors and also “destroy a few myths about black society in North Carolina.” One of those myths was that slaves were unskilled. *N&O*, October 1, 1978. The museum had already presented a small exhibit on the African American craftsman Thomas Day in November 1975. See Wegner, 69-70. Even Williamsburg and the Smithsonian made changes. Slavery

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91 Michael S. Durham, “The World is ‘Slaves’: A Trip into Black History,” *American Heritage*, April 1992 [http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1992/2/1992_2_89.shtml](http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1992/2/1992_2_89.shtml), accessed November 17, 2005. Stewart and Ruffins write, “It adapted the older narrative concept of Afro-Americans as a heroic and chosen people to the history of a single, ordinary black family. Although ‘Roots’ endorsed uplift and upward mobility, its more important message was the continuity of the Afro-American experience from its origins in an African past through the travail of slavery into a more tolerant American present. For many blacks as well as white Americans, ‘Roots’ offered a disturbing education in the history of slavery; many angered blacks were forced to admit, ‘I didn’t know slavery was that bad.’ For whites, ‘Roots’ confirmed what the radical rhetoric of the 1960s had announced—that much of American history had been a tragic hell for a people whose only salvation seemed to be in the heroism displayed by ordinary people, white as well as black” (in Benson, *et al.*, 333). By contrast, Landsberg argues, “Rather than forcing white Americans to take a hard look at their own attitudes toward race, rather than forcing them to own up to the crimes of slavery, the mass media stimulated instead a fascination with the project of genealogy. Perhaps the message of Roots was too much about the pleasure of healing and not enough about the pain of remembering” (106). As Ruffins puts it, genealogy enabled people to learn about histories that were “life-affirming, because they connect[ed] back through the generations.” The history of slavery could “be incorporated as [the history of] family rather than as a social institution…So genealogy [could] be a way into the material without having to confront all of the ugliness of slavery as an institution.” Ruffins interview.

92 The organizer, Rodney Barfield, said the museum had long wanted to mount the exhibit. Funding was a crucial step toward enabling the exhibit, as was actually getting the material: “Once people got over their initial distrust of a honky doing their history, they just opened up and gave me lovely information and supporting documents.” He stated, “This is a first for North Carolina, a big first.” Funded by the NEH, the exhibit was “packed full” of material that would inform visitors and also “destroy a few myths about black society in North Carolina.” One of those myths was that slaves were unskilled. *N&O*, October 1, 1978. The museum had already presented a small exhibit on the African American craftsman Thomas Day in November 1975. See Wegner, 69-70. Even Williamsburg and the Smithsonian made changes. Slavery
on drawing “attention to minority cultures,” and a column in the *News and Observer* stated that all citizens, black and white, should take steps to remedy their ignorance of black history and embrace it as a source of immense pride.

A flowering of interest in the history of African Americans throughout the state allowed programmers to recognize the resources that Somerset had to offer and ultimately redefined its significance both as an historic site open to visitors and as a research center for scholars across several disciplines. In 1979, a team of staff members from the Historic Sites Section produced a revised master plan for Somerset Place, which picked up on H.G. Jones’ earlier wish to broaden North Carolina’s public history programming and include examinations of ordinary people. The plan stated programmers’ intentions to create “a well-rounded historic site,” to avoid presenting “merely an attractive house museum,” and to focus instead on “two centuries of agrarian

came to the Smithsonian a year later, at the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in 1979. See Ruffins, “Revisiting,” 402. Williamsburg began to interpret African American history in 1979. Visitors had been commenting on the absence of black history at the site since the 1960s, and site administrators had been wrestling with the question of how to present it through the following decade. In 1979, years of discussion, meetings, workshops and research came to fruition in several new programs at the site, which covered a range of aspects of the history of colonial slavery. However, these programs remained largely outside the main tours—people can still go to Williamsburg and not hear about slavery, if they wish. See Rex Ellis, “A Decade of Change: Black History at Colonial Williamsburg,” *Colonial Williamsburg* vol. xii, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 14-23. Ruffins suggests that “by the mid-1980s, Williamsburg had become a leader in the burgeoning efforts to discuss slavery in a public context…” Ruffins, “Revisiting,” 402. See also Eichstedt and Small, esp. 171; 179; 199 and 201; Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 295; Handler and Gable; Greenspan.


life.” “Somerset Place,” it declared, “should be interpreted as much more than merely an elegant home in an isolated setting.” The 1979 plan stands out for the way in which it proposed to do this: more than anything else, the shift to examining ordinary folk at Somerset Place was going to come from study of the site’s enslaved population, a population which programmers acknowledged, for the first time, was central to the Collins’ empire.95

In order to tell this story, the plan called for new programs of historical and archaeological research to be initiated at Somerset Place. The last time the state sponsored any comprehensive research into the people at Somerset—as opposed to its architecture and furnishings—was Tarlton’s study in the 1950s. Calling for additional research and then acting on that call was a crucial step for the site, and it set an important precedent as every major project that followed was premised on the goals of expanding knowledge about the workers and residents of the enslaved community.

The first new research project was led by Wayne Durrill, then a graduate student in the Department of History at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Archives and History hired him in 1981 to follow up on its hunch that a focus on black history would distinguish Somerset from other plantation sites, and be the ‘hook’ they needed to pull the site out of its doldrums.96 Through his work Durrill reassured the department that there was copious data on which to base a new focus on African American history.

95 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan 1979, 26; 62; 58; 1, NCHSS.
and he distilled the documentary evidence he found into readable narratives about enslaved life during the antebellum period. But he recognized that providing information to the site’s programmers was barely half the battle. The guides who presented interpretations to the public and the physical site that the public visited both needed improvement. Guides lacked historical knowledge and interpretive skills which Durrill made clear contrary to common practice, they could not learn through “study in their spare time.” Rather, if they were going to work with the material he supplied, they would need more comprehensive training and better incentives to learn, starting with higher pay. Moreover, the new information in the pages of his report would be hard for them to communicate through existing facilities; the site needed significant restoration as well as reconstructions, particularly in the area of the slave community.97

Most of Durrill’s recommendations were probably unrealistic given the financial realities of the Historic Sites system in general and Somerset in particular. But his report’s significance goes well beyond its immediate impact on programming and policy, and it has been considerably more influential than Historic Sites programmers usually acknowledge.98 Durrill set several important precedents. He was the first to ground Somerset’s exhibits in the new historiography of slavery. The three tours he proposed creating at the site examined African Americans as individuals and members of families; as thinkers; as skilled workers; as an immigrant group; and as cultural innovators. He

97 Durrill, Black Community, 178-186.

98 Crow cautions against writing the report off as insignificant because it was not used immediately; rather, he suggests that it probably was extremely important in the log run. See Jeffrey Crow, telephone interview with author, November 13, 2007.
catalogued the slaves’ work, family, and religious lives; their relationships with each other, with the Collinses, and with whites in the region; their response to the Civil War and emancipation; and their economic status on the plantation and in the community. He described the backbreaking labor the enslaved were forced to do in order to build the canals, cultivate a range of crops, clear cypress forests, and tend the Collins family’s needs, as well as the effort they put into their personal lives when they could find the spare time to do so.99

The rich detail in Durrill’s report provided a justification for future work at the site, and it validated the Department of Cultural Resources’ program objectives for 1981 through 1983, which included the preservation of “folk heritage” in North Carolina, and an effort to “assure the delivery of cultural resources to minorities and special constituencies throughout the state.”100 Any future wish to consider African American history or the history of common folk at Somerset could now be based on evidence rather than merely marketing schemes or ‘special interest’ politics, and the report demonstrated that interpretations of African American history had broad potential. When programmers maintained the site’s focus on the white Collinses despite Durrill’s recommendations, it was not because they lacked information to do things differently.101 After Durrill’s report


100 1979-81 Budget Document, Office of the Secretary. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 1, Folder: Format, Budget.

101 Durrill interview.
it was impossible for anyone to argue legitimately that there was not enough known about the enslaved community to envision mounting a thorough and frank exhibit.

The narratives that Durrill offered were a crucial piece of a research puzzle, which fit together in the early 1980s with other developments in scholarship on slavery, particularly in the field of archaeology. Archaeologists had begun excavating American slave sites in the early 1970s at Kingsley Plantation in Florida. A decade later, historical archaeology of slavery was becoming a lively field through which researchers could use material evidence to explore retentions from Africa, work patterns on plantations, and how slave communities changed over time.  

Excavations were nothing new at Somerset Place: Tarlton’s surveys in the mid-1950s had relied on archaeological investigation, however crude his methodology appeared to observers two or three decades on. Both the 1979 master plan and Durrill’s report called for a long-overdue expansion of Tarlton’s project, which they suggested might mark the foundations of slave quarters along the lakeshore on park land; excavate the remains of slave buildings and cabins; restore the canal and ditches; and preserve and interpret the slave cemetery. Durrill also advocated restoring the kitchen and rebuilding


103 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan 1979, 43; 71; 75; 80, NCHSS; Durrill, Black Community, 186.
and furnishing “at least one slave cabin,” complete with a ‘negro patch,’ or garden,
behind.  

Archaeologists recognized Somerset as a prime research lab for the expanding study of plantation and slave archaeology, and in 1981, as Durrill was putting the finishing touches on his report, archaeology once again became a vital complement at Somerset to efforts in historic preservation. The state did not have the budget to fund excavations. But the site had the good fortune of being one of only two or three to host archaeology field schools for two consecutive summers, in which students from Duke University and Durham Technical Community College, under the supervision of state archaeologists and several professors, dug and explored areas of the slave community. Although it is not clear exactly whose idea it was to launch the field schools at that

104 Durrill, *Black Community*, 186.

105 John Mintz, telephone interview with author, November 29, 2007. Mintz discusses the importance of Stanley South in pioneering historical archaeology in general and in North Carolina in particular. Upon its inception, the Division of Historic Sites was set up mostly to focus on preservation; South’s archaeological research pushed the envelope in many ways. He was frustrated during the 1960s by Archives and History’s apparent disinterest in historical archaeology and the lack of research funding, and ultimately left when it became clear he would never have the budget necessary nor be compensated adequately for his work. But while South left, he also left an indelible imprint on Historic Sites, which gradually became much more convinced of the benefits of historical archaeology for its sites; North Carolina’s developed a state archaeology program starting in 1973. Mintz suggests that Somerset was unique because of its long term combination of archaeological and historical research methods. See Wegner: 64. See also John H. Sprinkle, Jr., “Uncertain Destiny: The Changing Role of Archaeology in Historic Preservation,” in *Stipe*, 256-7.

precise time, Historic Sites welcomed the researchers who worked for free to provide the site with much-needed services.\textsuperscript{107}

During the first five-week dig, researchers uncovered “historical buried treasure” that “area residents and visitors who have toured the house and grounds of Somerset Place for years probably walked right across...without knowing it was there,” including evidence of slave buildings and artifacts, a brick bulkhead and channel, and a posthole and part of a post.\textsuperscript{108} In the summer of 1982, students removed the tarps that they had laid down to protect the trenches they dug the year before and continued their efforts to “piece together a picture of what the slave culture was like on the Josiah Collins family plantation.”\textsuperscript{109} The dig was hampered by carelessness, poor record keeping and lack of knowledge on the part of the student workers. Nonetheless, over the ensuing months they succeeded in locating 7000 artifacts, 6748 of which could be identified; they pinpointed a line of twenty-seven slave quarters along the lake shore; and partially excavated one large

\textsuperscript{107}RBWCN, July 1, 1981; Samford interview; Mintz interview; Ann Smart Martin, telephone interview with author, November 29, 2007.

\textsuperscript{108}RBWCN, August 19, 1981; \textit{N&O}, August 13, 1981. Whereas historic preservationists tended to focus on interpreting the built environment, historical archaeologists believed their work could offer a direct and unmediated view of how people lived. Hughes, “Independent Study on Slave Archaeology: Somerset Place”: 1. NCC. See also 2-3 for more on the ways in which Hughes believes archaeological evidence to be whole, complete and unmediated. As Sprinkle puts it, “...archaeologists love the archaeological record. They continue to believe that material culture found in the ground is a revelation about history. Buried stuff—if you can tease out its mysteries—has true meaning about the past. Archaeologists live and breathe data—because the archaeological record is an elusive, sexy, democratic past—not one generated by clerks, accountants, or politicians, but by the folks” (in Stipe, 270). See also Sprinkle, in Stipe, 253. Also, “Most archaeologists still appear to believe that an objective study of the past is both possible and what they themselves are engaged in.” See P.J. Ucko, “Foreword,” in Gathercole and Lowenthal, xiii. Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 72. By contrast, Barbara Heath states, “Human experience cannot be recovered from the detritus of everyday life” (3).

\textsuperscript{109}Hughes, “Independent Study on Slave Archaeology: Somerset Place”: 14. NCC.
structure that had housed two families. When researchers unearthed stoneware at Somerset that they knew had been fashioned by African American slaves, they began to realize that much of the pottery archaeologists had been recovering for years at other sites was also likely African American in origin, rather than Native Indian as most had formerly thought. Through their digs and associated research—including oral history interviews with people in the area—the students were discovering a previously “undocumented” African American culture.

Yet the changes percolating at the site and in Raleigh were confined to those most closely associated with the work. The general population and casual visitors had little inkling that any of this was going on. Somerset’s downfall was the fact that to most outside observers it was still simply—perhaps dully—a “furnished 1830 plantation home.” In fact, this was a transitional period fraught with contradiction: while fewer and fewer people were interested in coming to Somerset to see another house museum, common sentiment held that plantation sites were significant because the ideas they represented—whether or not they possessed visual evidence of grandeur—could bring out the “Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler in almost everyone.”

110 Hughes, “Independent Study on Slave Archaeology: Somerset Place”: 6; 12; 14. NCC; Wood, “Digging Black History”: 64.


112 N&O, July 30, 1982; N&O, August 13, 1981. Unfortunately, it is not known what happened to the records of these interviews, or if records were ever kept.

113 N&O, July 30, 1982

Somerset looked nothing at all like Margaret Mitchell’s Tara, yet the plantation archetype—the word *plantation* itself conjuring images of wealth and grace—was enough to capture many people’s imaginations, if not to convince them to actually go to the site.

Somerset’s programmers tried to move the site away from comparisons with opulent antebellum imagery just as the mostly-white audience for historic preservation persisted in identifying plantation sites as places where they might assume the roles of fabled southern heroes and heroines. Bill Edwards remembers hosting at least one *Gone with the Wind*-themed wedding at the site, and in the summer of 1981 a couple exchanged their vows in Somerset’s garden, apparently oblivious to the implications of holding the ceremony only steps away from the newly-excavated foundations of the slave quarters.\(^{115}\) Despite gradually changing paradigms in both popular culture and public history, plantation sites across the state still held their romantic mystique, still beckoned visitors with the allure of ‘stepping back’ into an elegant and noble past, and for this reason remained “chief attractions” in organized tours.\(^{116}\)

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\(^{115}\) Edwards interview; *RBWCN*, August 19, 1981.

\(^{116}\) *N&O*, June 4, 1978; Edwards interview. At Poplar Grove Plantation in Wilmington, the emphasis was still on how the planter, Joseph Foy, “must have felt when he surveyed his land…from [his] second-story pinnacle.” The restoration at Poplar Grove was to include living history interpreters, “just as they were in plantation days,” but it is extremely unlikely that there would be any living interpretations of slavery. See *N&O*, May 9, 1980. The supporters of the Hope Foundation—and five hundred guests from among the wealthiest residents of eastern North Carolina—gathered annually for their Springtime on the Plantation party: “They came to celebrate—to see and be seen.” See *N&O*, May 19, 1980 and May 18, 1981. A celebratory article about Magnolia Plantation outside of Charleston, South Carolina, described the meticulous flower gardens and their “ever-changing array of color…linked by centuries-old brick lined paths and mysterious black lakes that once were the plantation’s rice fields.” *N&O*, April 4, 1982. There was no mention of the slaves who planted the gardens, laid the bricks for the paths, or contributed the
It would take a lot more work before the changes occurring at the bureaucratic level would filter through to the museum-going public, and then capture new audiences who were not swayed by romantic mythology, and who might be attracted to Somerset for the first time only if it became less consumed by exclusive narratives. Whatever allure Lost Cause mythology still held for many whites, it was not at all attractive to the African American audiences that Archives and History hoped to draw to its programming. Whereas white people might enjoy the lark of ‘stepping back’ into the archetypal images of plantation master or mistress, African Americans were unlikely to relish the thought of assuming the dominant identities available to them, such as Mammy or Buck.\textsuperscript{117}

African Americans began to use Pettigrew State Park for family and church gatherings, but they remained either unaware of or resistant to acknowledging their historical connections to Somerset.\textsuperscript{118} Peter Wood, an historian from Duke and the

skilled labor required to grow the rice that underwrote the Drayton family’s fortune. Claude Sitton, a renowned reporter of the civil rights movement, journalist for the \textit{New York Times}, and editor of the Raleigh \textit{News and Observer}, urged readers to accept that it was impossible for the scholar to “travel back in time to that which Southerners not only knew but also felt. Only the novelist can do that. And even the novelist is limited.” He then went on to list southern writers—including Tom Wolfe, Ferrol Sams, and Flannery O’Connor—for whom the South was never “columns or crinolines.” “Candid it is,” he wrote. “Pretty it is not.” See reprint in \textit{N&O}, September 12, 1982.

\textsuperscript{117} For involved discussions of Mammy, Buck and other archetypal images of African Americans in antebellum slavery see, for example: White, \textit{Ar’n’ t}; Hale; Fox-Genovese; and Patricia Hill Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought} (New York: Routledge, 1991). Landsberg suggests in \textit{Prosthetic Memory} that mass-produced imagery and experiential sites can allow anyone to adopt any identity from the past. However, I suspect that while people with privilege might choose to take on an oppressed role for interest’s sake or on a lark, the reverse is much less often true. People who start out lower in the social, political and economic hierarchy are probably considerably less likely to have the option of climbing it through historical imagining; historical oppression is more likely to be duplicated and reinforced than exploded.

\textsuperscript{118} Durrill interview.
Historical Coordinator for the 1982 field school, remarked on the lack of connection between what archaeologists were doing at the site, and the people who descended from the slaves whose cabins they were excavating. Wood noted, “Scores of relatives from as far away as Chicago and Philadelphia gather at the public campsite where their ancestors once lived. They park their cars within feet of the hearths where slaves once cooked and ate, and they play softball in a broad field their forebears cleared by hand.” He gathered that the descendants who met at Pettigrew had no idea that they celebrated only a few yards away from where academics were unearthing their ancestors’ homes.

But while historical links may have been invisible to most descendants, Wood and the other researchers at the site were beginning to see exciting connections. As they added material evidence to an already-comprehensive documentary record, they realized that Somerset was beginning to offer an unprecedented and invaluable collection of evidence of plantation life in North Carolina. Helped by their research, Somerset was becoming a resource unrivaled anywhere in the South. Drawing from a range of sources, disciplines and methodologies, researchers at Somerset had begun to paint a uniquely detailed picture of an enslaved population. “For the first time,” Wood explained, “we now have access to numerous slave house sites and to specific names of residents, building by building on the same plantation,” and their research enabled “whole family

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trees [to] take root and grow again inside the foundations…” At Somerset, researchers were getting to the point where they might stop speaking about generic slaves, and instead begin to tell specific histories about particular individuals and groups. For scholars who were pioneers of or members of the first generations trained in social history, this was a fascinating development and programmers responded by working to secure funding to further interpret the new material.122

But the promising work that researchers were doing at Somerset Place in the early 1980s came to a halt because of a crushing financial blow. In 1982 Archives and History saw its budget slashed as part of an attack at the federal level on government funding for historic preservation. State archaeology programs were hit especially hard, and funding to Somerset slowed to a virtual stop.123 Employees at Somerset remained some of the least well-paid of all historic sites in the state, and instead of lively inquiry, work at the site seemed to be set back to basic maintenance only.124

In the past, if the state had dropped the financial ball Somerset’s development would have ground to a total halt. But in the early 1980s, unbeknownst to state

employees, there was someone else studying the history of the site, an individual who had
erred the crest of the genealogy wave set in motion by *Roots* and who was poised
independently of Archives and History to bring her knowledge, passion and skills to bear
on Somerset Place. Dorothy Spruill Redford, a social worker from Portsmouth, Virginia,
was one of the thousands of African Americans who had flooded libraries and archives in
the winter of 1977.  

She went because of her then-13-year old daughter’s pleas to know
about her own past, and the shame and outrage she felt when she realized she was unable
to answer her questions. Redford recalls, “My daughter was demanding her past, but I
could not give it to her without discovering my own.” Although she grew up with the
sense that slavery was “some kind of distant stain…deep in the soul of the South, far
removed from me…”, the tide of interest in black history that *Roots* and other factors
unleashed, her daughter’s unceasing questions, plus her own sense of self-worth pushed
her to connect that past to her present.  

When Redford began her research, she had never even heard of Somerset Place.  

But six years of listening to all the immediate family who would talk, as well as pouring
over wills, deeds and census data ultimately led her to trace her ancestry back to the
plantation’s original 80 slaves imported from the West coast of Africa in 1786, and to
catalogue the generations of slave families that evolved at Somerset in subsequent years.

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125 Ruffins contends that the genealogy boom in the late 1970s was fueled by both the broadcast of *Roots*

126 Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 5; 21-2; 33. See Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 79,
regarding the birth of a child as a common turning point to spur people to want to know their past.

127 Scruggs: 28.
In her autobiography she writes, “What I had denied as a child, refused to think about as a woman, was now staring me in the face. Of course it was no surprise. Where else could I have come from? Where else could almost every black I’d ever known have come from?” Slavery was not such a “distant stain” after all, as the reality hit Redford that she was, in fact, a part of only the third generation born free.\textsuperscript{128}

Redford visited Somerset for the first time in 1983. She was an “outsider” to the state’s public history system, but she had a link to Somerset that no programmer or bureaucrat could claim, and which had particular salience in the early 1980s: she was family.\textsuperscript{129} When she arrived, she was saddened but not surprised to see her family’s history rendered irrelevant. She recognized that erasing the history of slavery was the norm not only at plantation sites but in most spaces throughout the country.\textsuperscript{130} She had already seen black history erased from public view in the nearby town of Edenton, once the Collins family’s urban home. Edenton was touted for its ‘historical’ appearances: the Cupola house, gardens, historic homes, and Confederate memorials. But there was another side to it as well: “the black part of town. There are no statues there, no historic markers, no walking tours or open houses… there was no indication in the brochures I

\textsuperscript{128} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 56.

\textsuperscript{129} Misenheimer interview. Unfortunately, Redford has declined to be interviewed for this project. My analysis thus relies primarily on descriptions of her life, research process and early involvement at Somerset Place contained in her autobiography, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, and transmitted through other public documents and interviews with her contemporaries.

\textsuperscript{130} As Eichstedt and Small point out, as late as 2002, the vast majority of plantation sites in the United States erase slavery entirely. Erasure of slavery is the norm at plantation sites. Eichstedt and Small, \textit{passim}. Ruffins writes, “Before 1980 there was a virtual silence about slavery in American museums” (“Revisiting,” 394).
picked up at Edenton’s visitors’ center that blacks ever even lived there.” Redford saw the situation in Edenton mirrored in the quiet main street in Creswell and along the country road that led to Somerset Place. She gazed at rows of trees planted by men she had just learned were her ancestors, and drove alongside the canals they had dug, which were now ditches “choked with weeds.”

Her ancestors’ work had made this landscape, but the ancestors themselves had been not merely forgotten but purposefully erased.

The ironic silence—the reliance on the work they had done and simultaneous denial that they had ever existed—was particularly infuriating in light of the persistent and often crippling poverty so obvious in the Albemarle region. For the first time in over two decades, African Americans were returning to the northeastern counties, “coming back for jobs, coming back for personal aspects like family ties, safety and a sense of belonging.”

But what Redford and others found when they got there were people in financial dire straits, alienated from their land by corporate interests. The disappearance of small farms had a disproportionately negative impact on African Americans, who understood the situation as another step in a long process of exploitation stretching back to slavery. One observer commented, “Sharecroppers are the people who cleared the land the big farmers are now tending. When you go through the country you see white farmers and their beautiful homes as a result of land blacks cleaned up and made

131 Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 72: 94-5.

farmable.‘’\textsuperscript{133} Whether they had worked the land during the antebellum era, reconstruction, or any part of the twentieth century, African Americans’ labor sank from sight, underwriting development and growth for some but scarcely benefiting them at all.\textsuperscript{134}

Redford went to Washington and Tyrrell counties with many of these workers in mind: she held in her memory the names and identities of the men and women who, over time, had worked the plantation lands and made the counties what they were. When Redford arrived at Somerset she knew who had lived there; she knew the names of generations of people who had been born, worked, and died at the site. But as she parked her car and then walked up the brick path, she found a place devoid of life: there were no other visitors and there was no sense of the hundreds of people who had made their lives there over the centuries. When it came to the remnants of the enslaved community, the only notation at the site was a marker that read, “Site of Slave Quarters”: “No buildings.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{N&O}, May 16, 1982; Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 177 and 203. In February 1981, during black history month, an article in the \textit{Roanoke Beacon} declared, “The history of European-Americans has been told in textbooks for years. The history of African-Americans has not been told. It is time that their story, also, is known to everyone. African-American history should be a part of all history. ‘Why is this?’ many African-Americans keep asking. ‘Didn’t people WANT us to know?’ ‘Didn’t people WANT to know us?’ Could this alliance be a plot? Was our history ignored on purpose?’ The article drew a connection between history and the present for African Americans: “Where there is an absence of historical truth, there is an absence of self-worth, positive identity, unity, self-motivation and human communications.” It concluded, “A distorted history gives people a distorted concept of who they are and what they are capable of achieving.” \textit{RBWCN}, February 25, 1981. Mary Jones-Fitts, a descendant of the branch of Somerset slaves that Collins sent to Faunsdale Plantation in Alabama in 1843 describes a similar feeling that prompted her to begin learning more about African American history in order to teach it to her children. See Mary Jones-Fitts interview.

\textsuperscript{134} As one feature story on eastern North Carolina put it, “Elegance and grandeur are on one hand and poverty and deprivation on the other in the land ‘where it all began’ in the history of North Carolina.” \textit{N&O}, May 25, 1975.
No rubble. No remains. Just a sign and an open field...this was their legacy—a single rotting sign.” \(^{135}\) Whatever excavations of the quarters that volunteers with the field schools may have been performed in the two years prior, the site still boasted no interpretations of any slaves’ lives: there was still no intentional recognition of their historical presence at Somerset Place. \(^{136}\) Redford found no comfort in the fact that Somerset was mirroring the same trend evident at all plantation sites. Indeed, the ubiquity of erasures of slavery, capped off by the silence at Somerset, only magnified the insult. \(^{137}\)

As Redford walked around the site, like others before her, she was struck by its crumbling appearance. But whereas earlier observers had been angry about mismanagement of a state-owned property, she was angry about the lack of respect given her ancestral home. She felt personally offended when she saw a reception area that was “sad,” staff members who seemed disinterested in their work, and generally shabby surroundings. She had to ask for a tour, which was led by a teenaged girl who spoke mechanically and made only two brief references to slaves as she led Redford through the “Big House.” “Even the Collinses were almost forgotten in this place,” Redford mused, which “was an echoing shell, the souls of the people who once lived here—black and

\(^{135}\) Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 97.

\(^{136}\) Redford does not mention the excavations at all in her book, which suggests that perhaps they were not visible, or possibly if they were visible their significance was not clear even to an educated onlooker.

\(^{137}\) This is another example of Trouillot’s formula of erasure through banalization. See Trouillot, 96-7.
white alike—long vanished.”\textsuperscript{138} Somerset’s problems were primarily the result of the government’s “benign neglect,” an economic climate that did not support public history, and a social and political context hostile to critical interpretations of slavery.\textsuperscript{139} But at the heart of it all, Somerset also suffered because there was no single person or group of people ensuring that the site received the care and attention it required, or pushing for interpretive improvement and change.

Somerset faltered, and by 1983 the stakes were higher than ever before. Despite the innovative research undertaken there between 1979 and 82, Somerset began to lose its position within the Historic Sites system to a new site that moved in to fill what some considered the state’s African American history niche. Because of support from a group of people insisting on its further development, the Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, near Greensboro, became the premier site for interpreting African American history in North Carolina. The Palmer site, known colloquially as the Charlotte Hawkins Brown site, benefited from concentrated attention from boosters who cultivated relationships with local legislators who then pushed the General Assembly to allocate funds for restoration and interpretation. When it came to developing new programming at historic sites, it is hard to overestimate the significance of local bases of support; this was the primary reason why the Palmer Institute grew while Somerset failed.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{138} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 99.

\textsuperscript{139} Misenheimer interview.

\textsuperscript{140} The Stagville Center for Preservation and Technology near Durham was another site which was not formally in the Historic Sites system during the 1970s (it was adopted during the 1990s) but which
A secondary reason, however, had to do with content. Americans’ uncomfortable relationship with the history of slavery may also have played a role in the state’s decision to press for development of black history interpretations at Palmer while dropping the projects at Somerset. Richard Knapp, a past director of Historic Sites, notes, “There was some concern in various quarters that what was perceived to be a positive thing for African American history should be emphasized, not slavery, with its degrading factors and so forth.” At that point, the dominant sense of the history of slavery, which was the ‘black’ story Somerset would have represented, was that it was something horrible, something shameful, something for which whites must atone and African Americans mourn. By contrast, the Palmer Institute was a celebration of a successful educational facility—ultimately, according to Knapp, an African American prep school—founded by a black woman born in the first generation after emancipation. Knapp points out, “Education is…a safe topic. Slavery is controversial. Whatever you say about slavery, you might offend somebody or hurt someone’s feelings, whereas education is like apple pie and Chevrolet and whatever else we’re supposed to all stand up and cheer for.”

Whereas Somerset seemed depressing and negative, the Palmer Institute told a story of success and progress, which seemed fundamentally American. It was, therefore,

formally became an important location for interpreting African American history. Formed from the plantation holdings of the powerful Bennehan and Cameron families, Stagville was a gift to the state from the Liggett Group in 1976. It gradually developed into a place for studying “preservation technology and techniques,” and—largely because of its “sturdy” extant slave cabins at Horton Grove—“important elements of black history.” “Descendants of slaves and workers who lived in the cabins say people were proud to live in the cabins and kept the cabins tidy with gardens and orchards of their own.” N&O, August 6 and August 23, 1976. An interesting comparative study could be done between the developments in the 1970s-90s at Stagville and Somerset. See also Richard Knapp, telephone interview with author, December 13, 2007; Wegner, 59.
particularly attractive as a state historic site, and offered a relatively easy way of folding African American stories into an existing nationalist narrative. Although the Palmer Institute was not dedicated formally until 1987, by 1983, observers considered it to be “the lead site for black history” in the state.¹⁴¹

Somerset was languishing, isolated from Raleigh and in the growing shadow of sites like Palmer. No one seemed willing to do anything about it, least of all Bill Edwards. At any site, the manager had enormous impact on day-to-day function and long term presentation.¹⁴² Accounts suggest that Edwards was, on both counts, as much a hindrance as a help. He had grown lax in his maintenance duties and was not proactive when it came to bringing Somerset’s interpretations to meet current historiography. He sympathized with the general idea of studying the “common man” at Somerset, but evidently only if that “common man” was white. Bill Edwards describes himself as a “soul mate of the overseer’s”: he did not deny the importance of African American history at the plantation but he also did not consider it a priority. Even his forays into social history research, through which he tried learn more about the day-to-day lives of the Collins family and white workers at Somerset and neighboring plantations, fell short of a systematic commitment to concrete change.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Knapp interview; Misenheimer interview; Edwards interview. See also Brundage, The Southern Past, 296.

¹⁴² One internal document explains, “Operation of a particular site…is usually as good as the site supervisor is conscientious.” Department of Cultural Resources Program Plans for the 1975-77 Policy Cycle, August 1, 1974: 77. NCSA, Department of Cultural Resources, Administrative Services, Business Office, Business Officer’s Working File 1969-79, Box 2, Folder: Reports.

¹⁴³ Edwards interview.
Edwards was prescient enough, however, to recognize that there was some unique value in the work Dorothy Redford was doing. In a gesture toward broadening Somerset’s audience and interpretive scope, Edwards asked Redford to provide “something on the slave experience” at Somerset’s Founders Day celebration, which he organized in May 1984 in response to Historic Sites’ request that managers at sites around the northeast host events to coincide with the opening of the Elizabeth II at Roanoke Island Festival Park.\(^{144}\)

Edwards invited Redford to present her research, but it seemed to take a backseat to other activities that day, particularly the always-popular demonstrations of “heritage crafts” such as shingle-making that were generally reserved for the site’s annual Christmas open house. Edwards arranged stations for craftsmen at various prominent spots around the site.\(^{145}\) Redford, by contrast, sat with her mother amid her carefully drawn charts, maps and family trees in what was once the plantation’s kitchen, the place where the slaves cooked for the Collinses, and “the room where” Redford recalled the enslaved woman “Lovey Harvey had been raped….\(^{146}\) Whether Edwards had intended

\(^{144}\) Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 175-6.

\(^{145}\) Edwards interview. In 1976, Somerset began to host an annual Christmas Open House where local people would come in and decorate the site in the style of a nineteenth-century plantation Christmas celebration. Participants were virtually all white, with the exception of Odessa Cabarrus. Cabarrus was a descendant of Somerset slaves, though she believed erroneously she descended from Charlotte Cabarrus, the free black nurse who worked for the Collinses. Redford speculates that Odessa Cabarrus maintained a connection with Somerset, unusual in black communities, because she believed she had free rather than enslaved ancestry and therefore felt no shame in acknowledging her history. *RBWCN*, December 9, 1981; Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 183-4.

\(^{146}\) Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 175.
to do so or not, he relegated Redford and her mother to the fringes of the celebration where few of the visitors—almost all of whom were white—paid them any attention.  

“We sat inside that stifling room,” she explains, “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.” Sweating in the heat of the kitchen and boiling with anger and frustration, Redford realized that her own separation from Somerset was part of a larger separation due not only to her family’s tendency to avoid talking about slavery, but also to white people’s attempt to excise the slaves from the history of the plantation. It would have been impossible to deny that the institution of slavery had existed and, indeed, flourished; but through a series of historical turns, they could and did wipe from memory the enslaved themselves.

In the kitchen that day at Somerset Place, the complex relationships between remembering and forgetting, accepting and denying became almost palpable:

It was a humiliating day….I realized [then] that blacks had nothing to do with this place…. Blacks didn’t come out for this special day. Nor did we come out any other day. Why would we? To take a tour of the Collins mansion? I looked at those white men cutting shingles for fun, and thought about the slaves who had done nothing here but slice cypress all their lives, day in and day out. For the descendants of those slaves, shingle-making was a heritage. For these white men, it was a hobby.

The Founders Day celebration was the first time Redford had shared her work with a general public audience, and she had had high hopes that people would be as drawn as

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147 Edwards interview.

148 Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 175.
she was to the story her family trees told. Instead, not only did she confront disinterest, her afternoon in the kitchen reminded her of just how vast a gulf had emerged—created in different ways on all sides—to separate the slaves and their ancestors from the dominant history of the site. She realized that whatever work it would take to close that gap could not be left to Edwards and current programmers; she and her fellow descendants would need to craft and tell a new story.149

Redford was probably right in her sense that current programmers could not be counted on to interpret sufficiently the history of the enslaved. That was certainly the evident precedent they had set. Any interest they had in African American history was set firmly behind the scenes. As the middle of the decade approached, public history professionals associated with Historic Sites continued to talk about the importance of incorporating African American history into Somerset’s interpretations. When William Moore of the Greensboro Historical Museum assessed Somerset Place for the state in 1984, for example, he reiterated what had become a common sentiment that addressing African American history might help both to increase visitation in general and “to reach special interest groups not otherwise entertained or educated.” He viewed Somerset as Historic Sites’ prime candidate for testing this theory. To Moore, Somerset’s central value was the unrivaled diversity of its historical features, which, if interpreted, “could reach a lot of different audiences.” He stated that new research into the enslaved

149 Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 174-6.
population was expanding Somerset’s significance over all. But despite Moore’s comments and ongoing negotiations between bureaucrats about ways to change Somerset’s exhibits, on the surface it remained a largely exclusive site, still wedded to the same central white supremacist narratives as it had opened with in 1969.

The result was that despite Historic Sites’ wish to increase visitation and draw more attention to Somerset, the site remained peripheral, with local communities as isolated from it as ever before. Of all the communities in the surrounding counties, none were more isolated than African Americans. When Redford packed her things at the end of the Founders Day celebration and drove away, she left knowing that she needed to take action to bring other African Americans, especially descendants of the enslaved, to Somerset Place. Redford spent the next two years building a new bridge between them and the land that their ancestors had left one hundred years before.

In the summer of 1984, Redford began to take what she had learned through her research out into the communities around the site. She got involved with black churches and community events to spread the word about her genealogical study, to learn more about the complicated family trees she was piecing together, and to begin the often challenging task of informing people about their backgrounds. Having spent seven years

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150 William Moore, Museum Assessment Report of the Somerset Place State Historic Site, 1984. NCHSS.

151 One of Moore’s primary recommendations was to find ways to encourage local participation, in order to enable residents of the area “to feel a closer association to the site.” William Moore, Museum Assessment Report of the Somerset Place State Historic Site, 1984. NCHSS. Historic Sites officials had long ago recognized the need to reach out to local communities around Somerset, but had not managed to establish a clear and strong connection. Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan 1979, 26, NCHSS.
collecting evidence of the generations of her family that lived, worked and died at Somerset Place, she was determined to make a change at that site, not only for the good of its interpretations, but for the good of her kin.

For many, Redford’s research was their first introduction to their family history, and even to Somerset Place itself.\(^{152}\) When Redford began her outreach work she already had “a sense of the distance Somerset descendants had put between themselves and the plantation—not in miles but in their minds. Some had done it consciously, others without even realizing it.” When residents of Cherry, a tiny community along the boundary line of Weston Farm, looked out across the fields that separated them from Somerset Place, they did not recognize what they saw as former Collins land. Rather, they saw farms owned by generations of Davenports, descendants of the overseers at Somerset and Pettigrew’s plantation, Bonarva, who had bought the land after Collins and Pettigrew lost their fortunes. “It was ironic,” Redford commented, “that the Collinse’s overseers and not the Collinse themselves ended up with all that land—poorer whites taking over what the rich man had left behind.” The people who lived on the edges of what was once the Collins’ vast empire, “no longer even referred to Somerset by name.” They talked about

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\(^{152}\) One woman first learned of her husband’s ancestry at Somerset in a letter her daughter brought home from school. Another man, Phillip Leigh, grew up in Creswell and yet at 40 years old, heard about his ties to Somerset for the first time. Leigh was touched by a “deepening sense of identity.” The plantation itself, he said, “doesn’t do that much…I came up here when I was younger, but I thought there were only 10 or 15 slaves here.” Redford’s research alerted him to a very different history. Scruggs: 29-30. See also Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 176. Redford discusses the issue of shame over slavery a great deal in her autobiography. See, for example, 21-2; 190. See also Ruffins interview. Ruffins acknowledges that shame is a common feeling among black people when recalling the history of slavery. Perhaps as one result of that shame, among other reasons, she speculates that there are a large number of African Americans—probably, in her estimation, equal to those who want to visit plantation sites—who wish that plantations and other slavery-related sites could be torn down or demolished. See also Durrill interview.
Sheppard, Magnolia and Weston (sometimes also known as Western) farms, but as separate entities, without reference to their origins in the estates of the lords of Lake Phelps.\textsuperscript{153}

If contemporary residents were unaware of who owned the land in the antebellum era, what the owners had used it for and who had worked it, their lack of knowledge was partly the result of a resistance that seemed prevalent among local African Americans to thinking about slavery. Lack of knowledge may have been the result of—or perhaps even a euphemism for—deliberate ignorance: to local African Americans in the later twentieth century, Somerset likely represented a time of victimization and oppression; it was a place where the people who dominated them celebrated their history, and African Americans therefore made every effort to stay as separate from that as possible.

This attitude can be read in people’s responses when the topic of Somerset came up. Many did not welcome Redford when she went door to door looking for relatives and talking about the plantation “More than a few reacted like the gray-haired woman who gathered her grandson into her arms, refused to look at me and would say only, ‘Don’t know nothin’ ‘bout that place. Nothin’.’”\textsuperscript{154} Durrill had encountered the same

\textsuperscript{153} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 176-7; 179. Elizabeth Cahoon notes that residents of Washington County frequently use varying names to refer to former plantation lands, such as Weston/Western. See Cahoon interview.

\textsuperscript{154} Redford, \textit{Somerset Homecoming}, 178. Mary Jones-Fitts has been working on her family’s genealogy for more than two decades. For the most part, family members have reacted positively. But some, particularly the elderly ones, have been hesitant: they “are not quite enthused because they still remember kind of how it was even after slavery. I have a great aunt that is 88 years old and…she says there are a lot of scars. Even though she wasn’t in slavery, her mother was born in slavery, and her mother would tell her stories about what would happen so she’s not too enthused.” Jones-Fitts interview.
phenomenon when he was doing the research for his report in 1981. “Blacks in the area,” he wrote, “do not have much awareness of the history of the plantation and may be opposed to learning about it.” When he talked with African American congregants at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Edenton, they “positively did not want to hear about blacks in slavery.” The elderly African American woman who took him on a tour of the church “went absolutely silent” in response to his questions about the congregation’s relationship to Somerset. “She just did not want to talk about it,” he recalls. “She didn’t want to talk about slavery, didn’t want to have anything to do with Somerset Place. For her, the history of this church started in eighteen-seventy-something.” It was clear to Durrill that people like this woman had no idea that the history of slavery “might reflect well upon their ancestors,” and he noted, “that message should be communicated to blacks in the area at every opportunity.”

This was precisely what Redford tried to do, taking advantage of the fact that while she faced challenges similar to Durrill’s, her identity as an African American woman without professional historical training or motivations—as opposed to a white male academic—and her family connections might facilitate the process in some way. But as she spent more time at and around Somerset it became clear to her that chipping away at decades of fear and shame had to involve more than just commiseration and talk. Something concrete had to happen in order to really touch people’s sense of history and

155 Durrill, *Black Community*, 183-4; Durrill interview. Indeed, he suggested creating a black history tour of northeastern North Carolina that would include the Episcopal Church, Elizabeth City State University, and several former plantations, among other sites.
self and make a lasting change. Redford, therefore, decided to organize a mass reunion at the site—the first of its kind—which she hoped would allow descendants to reconnect with the land, their history, and each other. She planned the reunion, which she called a homecoming, with some sense of urgency. She saw that older folks were dying and young ones were leaving, and felt that if the reunion did not take place soon it would cease to be possible at all.\textsuperscript{156}

When Redford approached Larry Misenheimer, the director of Historic Sites, about her plans, he welcomed the idea and thought it would be well-timed to take place in the summer of 1986 and thus coincide with state celebrations of the 400\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Lost Colony. Redford paid lip service to Misenheimer because she wanted the state’s permission to use the site, but she had no intention of diluting the homecoming she was planning by linking it to an unrelated state celebration and thereby losing control of the event. As far as she was concerned, the real significance of the summer of 1986 was that it was the 200\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the arrival of the *Camden* in North Carolina, the ship that carried her earliest enslaved ancestors to work at Somerset Place. The homecoming commemorated the enslaved, first and foremost, and it needed to be organized by and for their descendants:

> My generation is the first one that could think about a gathering of slaves’ children. Less than three decades ago this was the officially segregated South. No one would let us lay claim to our ancestors’ contribution. And nobody was going to give us credit for it today, just because some laws had changed. That’s why it was so important for us to do it ourselves, to be sure that if there is going to

\textsuperscript{156} Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 178; 191-2; 199-200.
be even just one black at a historic event, at a site our people built, that person won’t be relegated to the kitchen.”

After her experience at the Founders Day celebration, she vowed that Somerset would never again be a place where she or any other descendants would feel victimized or sidelined. The homecoming would mark the beginning of a new era where descendants of the enslaved accepted Somerset as their ancestral home, took action to reshape it in the present, and in the process gained control of their past.

Neither Misenheimer nor Bill Edwards could foresee the extent of Redford’s plans when she first floated the idea of the homecoming. They and others in Historic Sites saw her as merely an interested citizen hosting a personal event at a public site. No one was hostile to her project, but nor did they view it as a priority. Redford worked more or less alone for over a year, until press attention finally sparked popular interest in what she was doing. A feature story in a Norfolk, Virginia, newspaper in February 1986—reprinted in newspapers throughout North Carolina—followed by stories in a range of national media outlets, including the front page of the Washington Post, pushed people to take more interest. “The press,” she explains, “had a sense of what this homecoming meant, more than many of the people who were closest to it. The reporters recognized the scope, they had the broad perspective.”

157 Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 191-2; 200. Redford went to talk to Misenheimer while she was in Raleigh on a grant copying papers at the State Archive. She had not planned to talk to him about the homecoming, but did so on the spur of the moment. Long before Redford’s request, Historic Sites had already made the following policy: “The department wishes to cooperate whenever possible with groups that wish to conduct within the site activities and programs that are closely related to the serious commemoration of the historical significance of Somerset Place.” Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan (1970), 22, NCHSS.

158 Misenheimer interview; Knapp interview; Crow interview; Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 206.
the press reports made all the difference. With the homecoming advertised in newspapers and magazines across the country, the wheels of North Carolina’s government began to turn, and Historic Sites began to help organize the logistics of a reunion of slave descendants at Somerset Place.\textsuperscript{159}

**More than a Bow**

In the decade and a half after Somerset’s dedication, the interpretations at the site did not change much. On the surface—even as Dorothy Redford urged her kin to come to the site, to throw off the shame many felt about their history in slavery and to celebrate their past—Somerset Place still told the shopworn story of a planter and his economic success. But the fact Redford could be there at all was testament to significant contextual shifts that had occurred since 1969, both at Historic Sites and beyond.

By the time Redford arrived in Misenheimer’s office, her plans to show the descendants of the enslaved their roots at Somerset were not farfetched. Although most of the 1970s and early 80s were dominated by economic crisis and interpretive stasis at the site, a range of people working with new research tools behind the scenes set the precedent that African American history was important. It was important for a host of reasons, from the most basically pragmatic (as a hook to bring in more visitors) to the politically emancipatory (to empower descendants of the enslaved by recognizing their ancestors’ agency and accomplishments). The new narratives that archaeological, genealogical and historical researchers discovered did not become part of Somerset’s

\textsuperscript{159} Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 208-16; WP, July 23, 1986.
interpretations: visitors to the site during this period were unlikely to sense much less understand the sea change that was brewing beneath the surface. But when Redford came along with her study and her ideas, she did not have to cajole or convince Misenheimer that what she was doing was legitimate; he already understood this to be the case, and saw her as someone with the drive and the time to follow up on projects the state had already begun but stopped short of exploring in a truly comprehensive way.¹⁶⁰

Redford read Misenheimer’s response as what might be described as good-natured condescension: he did not stand in her way but he did not jump to offer her the state’s assistance, and she was not convinced that he took her entirely seriously.¹⁶¹ Mostly, Misenheimer simply did not understand what Redford was doing and she either could not or would not articulate an explanation. In her mind, the homecoming was no extension of the state’s earlier “bow to minority history.” The homecoming itself and her work to bring it to fruition sent the message that whatever evidently minimal gestures toward her history the state might have made, she and her kin—descendants—were now taking matters into their own hands.

As the summer of 1986 approached, Redford was still struggling to amass a solid popular following. Elderly people in the African American communities to which she appealed—the folks who were most likely to remember grandparents or even parents who

¹⁶⁰ Misenheimer interview; Knapp interview; and Crow interview. There is not a lot of accessible documentation about the details of organizing the first homecoming; the vast majority of the work was done by Redford herself and a small core of friends, family and others who believed in what she was doing and offered their assistance.

had been enslaved, and to have a more personal sense of what life had been like in those
days—remained skeptical and even a bit suspicious: “They couldn’t comprehend
something like this happening, not at a place where black people had hardly set foot for
decades. There had never been a reason for them to go out to that site. To suddenly be
told they themselves were the reason was hard to believe.” But younger folks understood
and together with Redford and a small core of allies they pulled older generations
along.¹⁶² Between movement at the grassroots level and a slow but significant paradigm
shift in government-run public history programming, this was the beginning of major
change.

¹⁶² Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 203.
Chapter 6

“We are not here to talk about slavery”:
Heritage and Healing, 1986 to 2001

Us going to Somerset was empowering. Yes, we know we all were enslaved, our families were enslaved, we experienced this, but to know where they walked, to know where they were, that is so empowering. And that overshadows any of the negative tragedy elements that one might feel there. …I didn’t walk around the site feeling pain and sorrow. I walked around the site feeling joy and enrichment and empowerment, which was just kind of an interesting twist.¹

Despite the negative things ‘gone on,’ we are a people who have assimilated into the broader society of America after the Emancipation Proclamation; and within two generations, born-free blacks have attained parity with many whites whose ancestors have never been slaves. We are a people who have been about the business of being prosperous and moving as fast as we can. And if there is bitterness or hurt, it is about things that are happening today. We don’t have to go back to things that happened 200 years ago.²

Home

On Labor Day weekend in 1986, two hundred years after Josiah Collins I brought their West African ancestors to North Carolina, two thousand descendants of the enslaved population at Somerset Place gathered to claim a heritage at the former plantation. They were invited to the site by one of their own: Dorothy Spruill Redford traced her ancestry to the first group of slaves compelled to dig Collins’ canals, and then organized a massive reunion for herself and her newfound kin. Reunions were already a common occurrence

¹ Wilson interview. Charles Wilson is a descendant of Kofi and Sally, two of the first slaves Josiah Collins I imported to Somerset Place.

² Dorothy Redford, quoted in Gordon: 31.
around Somerset. For years, African American families had gathered in the group camping area at Pettigrew State Park, and white families on the plantation’s lawn. But the reunion that Redford called Somerset Homecoming was unique: it was the first reunion specifically for descendants of the enslaved population, held on the plantation where their ancestors had toiled.

Descendants gathered not to mourn their forebears’ bondage but to celebrate the families that had begun at Somerset when it was a working plantation, and to transform it from a site that venerated the planter class to one that honored the enslaved. When Redford took the stage set up adjacent to the mansion she told her audience, “We are not here to talk about slavery. We are here to honor our family…” Governor James Martin echoed Redford’s comments in his address, stating that the day’s events “focused attention on the descendants themselves, not the slavery and segregation they had suffered.” For descendants, the homecoming “was hardly all sad stories. To the background beat of African drums, descendants ate chitterlings and corn pone and forged new ties with kin never before seen.” As one put it, “This is kind of eerie, everyone being related… But it has to do with people not being so remorseful about slavery, but

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3 Wood, “Dorothy Spruill Redford”: 1; Wood, “Digging Black History”: 62. The Homecomings at Somerset recalled a well-established tradition of Homecomings at churches and among families in the area. Only a month before the first Somerset Homecoming, for instance, Rehoboth Church held its 16th annual Homecoming in a building described as the product of slaves of the J.S. Norman family: “Every piece of lumber used in the building is said to have been cut and ripped from area forests by the slaves, and all the wood pieces in the church were also hand-carved by them.” RBWCN, July 2, 1986.


reaching for a heritage. Not dwelling on the hurtful things, but looking for something positive. I just feel good about it. I think this has made a lot of people feel good about themselves.”

Whereas the descendants’ history of slavery had once seemed shrouded in secrecy partly out of shame for their victimization, the homecoming in 1986, with its official title, “Coming Home: A Celebration of Family and Life,” allowed them to embrace publicly a new narrative of cultural resilience, kin and community, and to understand African Americans as primary actors in a story about the antebellum past. Two years later, descendants would gather to celebrate again, allowing people who had been unable to attend the first homecoming their chance to connect with the site and extended family. The homecomings became regular events, repeating in 1991, 1993, 1996 and 2001. Overall, their purpose was less to address the history of slavery than to emphasize healing for those for whom slavery at Somerset was family lore.

The interpretive changes that took place at Somerset between 1986 and 2001 attempted to offer some resolution to the problem of older interpretations based on white supremacist exclusions. The site went from one that refused to acknowledge the history

8 Redford had not imagined having anything beyond the first homecoming, but its power made the 1988 event, attended by 1800 people, almost a necessity. See *N&O*, July 26, 1988 and June 9, 1991.
9 Redford explained, “Being descended from slaves is not an issue. The overriding interest is in finding connections. That is what slavery did—it disconnected…. It’s very significant that we can return to the very site where our family lines began and hold this special celebration of life and family.” *RBWCN*, July 23, 1986. See also Starnes, 149.
of the majority of its antebellum population to one that emphasized African American contributions to “carv[ing] from the wilderness Somerset Place.”

Whereas Somerset used to present only the Collins family as significant, its new approach shifted to link the Collins family and the generations of other families that had their roots in the plantation. “From this day forward,” Redford explained, “there will always be a shared recognition…They’ll think of the Josiah Collins family, but they’ll think of my family too.” The site would now be “a living monument to ordinary folks—to our toil, our lives, our lineage.”

As a result of sustained effort by Redford and her allies, new research yielded solid evidence about both owners and enslaved, and allowed the site to tell a much larger variety of stories; to conform to current historiographical treatments of the history of slavery, African Americans, and the South; and to attract a wider range of visitors, as the narratives it presented neither excluded African Americans nor vilified whites.

The homecomings ushered in a new era for Somerset Place State Historic Site in which it became clear that change was possible. Due to a combination of contextual shifts and the entry of Dorothy Redford, a leader with vision and drive that were unprecedented in the Historic Sites system, new narratives were developed and new exhibits put into place. Programmers at Somerset Place declared proudly that in its new

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10 *Coming Home*, Somerset Homecoming, August 30, 1986. Pamphlet, DUSCL.

11 *NYT*, August 31, 1986. In a telling twist, Christopher Collins, a descendant of the owner Josiah Collins, remembers being surprised when he visited Somerset in 1993 that white people were in the minority at the site; he assumed, because of his ancestors’ dominance, that white people would be in the majority. In fact, white people had always been the minority group at Somerset Place. See Collins interview.
form, the site was inclusive and finally told the “whole story” of the antebellum era at the plantation. Programmors’ intentions were to offer balanced representations that welcomed those who had once been excluded and depicted aspects of the past that had long been silenced. But they did this by continuing to avoid dealing directly with the ever-present politics of representing slavery.

What were dramatic improvements on one level obscured problems on another. Programmers expressed the genuine belief that because what they were doing was a drastic improvement from both historical and moral standpoints, and because it was based on solid research, it was not editorial: they claimed, more or less overtly, to be reporting ‘just the facts.’ While much of what they did was an improvement over the site’s initial interpretations, and while their intentions were undoubtedly honorable, such claims downplayed the inevitable filtrations that happen at so many levels when shaping and communicating historical narratives. Moreover, they did not give serious weight to the particular filtrations that took place at a historic site communicating a message of empowerment through the story of antebellum slavery.

Programmers scored a cultural coup as they finally made the enslaved and slavery overt parts of the site’s interpretations. But they did so through an often ahistorical

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12 See Redford’s comments in N&O, August 25, 1994; N&O, September 1, 1991. In 2002, the historian John Vlach suggested that Somerset’s “completeness” could be the “marketing hook” that the site’s programmers were looking for. Transcript, Somerset Place Scholars’ Meeting, June 21, 2002. SPSHS.

13 One training document states, “Our purpose is to report historical information—not to editorialize.” Standard Operating Procedures, New Employee Introduction, January 2006. SPSHS. See also “What all interpreters (tour guides) need to know,” SPSHS.
process that both reiterated and reinforced American progressivist mythology, framing the narrative presented in a way that hid as much as it disclosed. They emphasized that Somerset’s story was less about conflict and pain and more about reconciliation and resilience, largely in order to keep the site safely within the American mainstream.

Programmers presented Somerset as a place to celebrate and recover “a lost heritage,” but in the process—however unintentionally—they shortchanged the history it might have told.

**Heritage and History**

The homecomings and the interpretations that followed were designed with a particular end in mind: to demonstrate how far the descendants of the enslaved had come, and to pay homage to the ancestors who had laid the foundations for present-day African Americans’ success. The new interpretations at Somerset Place developed as part of a larger movement in North Carolina to define areas worthy of preservation according to “end result[s]” rather than “context.” According to a state legislative report released in 1989, areas to be preserved possessed “form, character, and visual qualities derived from arrangements or combinations of topography, vegetation, space, scenic vistas, architecture, appurtenant features, distinctive natural habitats, natural formations, or places of natural or cultural significance, that create an image of stability, comfort,

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14 Fath Davis Ruffins states that any time slavery is included in a public exhibition, “you know that the people who worked on that exhibit struggled mightily to get it in.” Ruffins interview.

15 My phrasing here is drawn from the subtitle of Redford’s extremely successful autobiography, *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage.*
local identity, and livable atmosphere.” As the historian Robert Stipe explains, “This new emphasis was to be less concerned with artifactual content than with ambiance and the preservation of place.”

Somerset differed in that programmers made an emphatic commitment to basing interpretations on both documentary and artifactual evidence. Nonetheless, through the homecomings, they began to build narratives to illustrate a pre-determined conclusion, which was that African Americans’ trajectory from the antebellum era to the present was one of creativity, survival and ever-increasing prosperity. Press releases for the 1988 event, “The American Black Contribution,” stated, “Those coming this year may find an event that is as much a festival of black culture as it is a reunion.” It was an event designed to “celebrate black contributions to American culture.” Clarence W. Blount, the majority leader of the Maryland state senate and a Somerset descendant, said, “We don’t agonize over slavery. We who are descendents of these slaves are not here to mourn. What we are here to do is rise from the ashes of slavery…to celebrate, walk proudly.” Blount’s great-grandfather lived his entire life at Somerset, and his grandfather lived there until he was ten years old. Recalling his family’s time at the

16 Quote from Legislative Research Commission on Historic Preservation, Report to the 1989 General Assembly of NC, 1989 sess., Legislative Proposal 7, in Robert E. Stipe, “Where Do We Go from Here?” in Stipe, 465. David Glassberg writes, “Historians begin their inquiries into the past by identifying a particular social or political process, then looking for the places where it happened; the public begins with a place that it cares about and then asks, ‘What happened here?’” Glassberg, Sense of History, 111.


plantation, he continued, “We’re a hell of a people. They had to be a great people, of great strengths to get through the things they did and just survive… We came here in chains. To go from that, to majority leader of the Maryland senate or whatever else we can claim, is something to be truly proud of.”

Blount had a point. There was no shortage of proof that things were better for African Americans at the end of the twentieth century than they were at the end of the nineteenth, and celebrating that improvement was entirely valid. In the context of a plantation site, emancipation alone was a massive victory: the enslaved at Somerset won their freedom, and their descendants embodied that triumph, among others. But Blount and others made an unintended mistake when they conflated the act of celebrating positive changes with analyzing history.

From a historian’s perspective, it is inherently problematic to examine history only in light of subsequent events: historians refer to this phenomenon as presentism. Examining Somerset’s history in terms of subsequent progress was a particular problem because that progress, while significant, was intensely flawed. Emancipation

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21 This impulse to empower through public celebrations that emphasized improvement was not new in African American culture: African Americans throughout the early 20th century staged shows, parades and pageants celebrating their progress through history in order to counter the white supremacist politics of segregation. See Alessandra Lorini, Rituals of Race (University of Virginia, 1999), passim, but esp. 221. She explains, the goal was to create “an educational ‘usable past’ for African Americans, who were generally excluded from mainstream pageants and historical parades” (224).

notwithstanding, when viewed from a broad perspective, the history of slavery has no straightforward happy ending. It is defined instead by contradiction and dissonance: African Americans’ experiences within the slave system and its aftermath were characterized by a continuum that spanned oppression and agency, coercion and opportunity, persistent discrimination and sustained struggle.²³ Whatever experiences any individual or discrete group of people might have had, they had them within the context, indeed the confines, of a system intended by those at its apex to circumscribe, control and compel.²⁴ The fact of emancipation and subsequent success cannot reduce the significance of oppression in the past and should not obscure evidence of ongoing injustice. African Americans, for the vast majority of United States’ history, lived in chains. America was a slave society for much longer than it was a free one, and even after the Emancipation Proclamation liberty and justice for African Americans came only in fits and starts.²⁵

Programmers at Somerset never wanted to paper over evidence of that oppression, and in time, they began to acknowledge the complexity of the story they might tell. Yet slavery entered the official narrative at the site as a story that was primarily about

²³ Michael Blakey notes, “The black historical record remains highly skewed...with undue emphasis on song and art, servitude, the abolitionist movement, and, perhaps, women. The emphasis on the ending of slavery rather than the long-term effects of that system is especially evident.” See Blakey, “American Nationality and Ethnicity in the Depicted Past,” in Gathercole and Lowenthal, 43. Ruffins concurs that most exhibits in the U.S., including those designed and executed by African Americans, tend to look only at a “postservitude history of achievements” (“Revisiting,” 394).

²⁴ Brundage, The Southern Past, 343. See also Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll; Johnson, Soul by Soul; and Stevenson.

²⁵ Berlin, Many Thousands Gone, passim.
community and family, connection and resolution. Those themes continued to dominate until at least 2001. As the Department of Archives and History put it—intending no criticism—with the advent of the homecomings at Somerset, “history took a back seat to family.” The interpretations that developed at Somerset during the era of the homecomings were premised on the metaphor of family with the purpose of enabling empowerment and healing. They acknowledged the danger and lack of choice that the enslaved faced, but in muted tones. Stories about cruelty, coercion and long term injustice continued to evoke widespread pain and anger; neither the descendants of the enslaved nor of the owners were eager to confront any of that, especially while economic disadvantage remained such a blatant problem for African Americans in the present. But they could and did get behind stories that celebrated the lives that African Americans as a group had built since the days of slavery ended, and that honored the best of what their ancestors had to offer.

26 Proposed Interpretive Tour Historical Context, A Question of Scope, 2002. SPSHS, File: Scholars’ Meeting—Interpreting New Buildings in the Slave Community, 2002. The final homecoming took place that year. Redford wrote, “Please note that this is the last event at Somerset to be termed a Homecoming and the last event to focus on the descendants of the plantation and their ancestors.” It is possible that this signaled the beginning of a planned interpretive shift. There is not enough evidence to know conclusively, but it appears that after 2001 Redford began to move, however tentatively, away from a commemorative approach and toward one that was more scholarly. See Letter, Redford to Paul Bock, September 12, 2000. SPSHS, File: 2000/01 CI Projects. This is supported at least in part by the fact that she continued to cultivate relationships with academics around the state, including Peter Wood and Syd Nathans in the Department of History at Duke, and she organized and held a scholars’ meeting in 2002 that brought an interdisciplinary team from universities across the country to the site.


29 Durrill interview.
There was definite value in telling stories of African American success, particularly for a group of people that had often been labeled as passive, beaten down and dehumanized by gross oppression, and targeted as the scapegoat for the nation’s worst problems.\textsuperscript{30} It pained Dorothy Redford to see persistent negative characterizations limit the ways in which people examined African American subjects. She has expressed her sense of being “at a saturation” point about “negative reports about African Americans” that “impede[ed] the assimilation process.” “If it’s about black folks,” she has said, “there are no real positive studies being done. I’m bothered by the fact that there are so many studies that are not positive.”\textsuperscript{31} At Somerset, therefore, Redford insisted that research and interpretations aim to produce positive narratives. She thus made the Somerset venture part of a long standing effort in African American public history, which “arose out of the twin desire to foster the black community’s self-esteem and to challenge both popular and academic white racism.”\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Marable writes, “It is perhaps not a coincidence that during the current conservative political period—with the dismantling of affirmative action, the elimination of minority economic set asides and scholarship programs, and other reforms—African-American efforts have turned towards preserving the lessons and personal examples from a more heroic era” (26).

\textsuperscript{31} Gordon: 31. Among other places, this problem has played out in the academy. See, for example, Elkins; Orlando Patterson, \textit{Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). For an analysis of this problem, see Eric J. Sundquist, \textit{Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 49. Frequent equation of African Americans with social problems implies that the group has inherent flaws; Redford insists, “Be wary of statistics, particularly if the statistics show us in a negative light. Focus on our history. Know who we are.” \textit{Fayetteville Observer}, January 17, 1990. See also Marable, 24-5.

For generations, the academy and other institutions charged with developing official narratives of American history had excluded African Americans and told them—both implicitly and explicitly—that their past did not matter. African Americans, therefore, developed alternative methods of recording and transmitting their history, and for them, telling stories about past heroism, ongoing resilience, and present accomplishment was an important means of resisting degradation.\(^{33}\) Foremost among their historical methods was an oral tradition where elders passed narratives down, designed to bolster each generation in its effort to define itself and to struggle against oppression. When African Americans began to build their own historical institutions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ideas of resistance and resilience, learned through generations of practice, were at their core. As the public historian John Fleming puts it, “…African-American museums grow directly from the culture and history of African Americans. They grow out of a desire to preserve what is of value to the people, out of a need to define and interpret the core culture that sustains African Americans.”\(^{34}\) At least for the last several decades, when African American history has been represented in public settings, heroism and accomplishment have been the most

\(^{33}\) As this dissertation has demonstrated, for most of its history, Somerset Place—indeed, the entire Historic Sites system of the state of North Carolina—fit this picture. As I continue to study Somerset and revise this dissertation into a book manuscript, I will examine the alternative means by which African Americans, specifically the descendants of Somerset Place, understood their history: How did they communicate historical narratives? What stories prevailed and why? What was the nature of Somerset’s black descendants’—those who were excluded from the mainstream narratives that developed about Somerset for most of the twentieth century—historical consciousness?

dominant themes. Stories of defeat have not always been entirely absent, but they tend to be framed as temporary obstacles on the way to overcoming adversity.  

African Americans were not the only ones who designed sites, exhibits and museums “to project the best version of their story.” The trend to emphasize the positive and embrace celebratory narratives is a common one in public history overall. History museums in the United States emerged “because towns and cities and states and ethnic groups want to tell their story,” both “to other people but also to themselves.”  

Some scholars have named this form of vernacular historical work *heritage*, distinguishing it from *history* based on academic methodology. *History*, in this relationship, leans heavily toward written documentary evidence about events or actors in the past with often only tangential concerns about their impact on the present; *heritage*, on the other hand, is a view of the past that claims authenticity for its contemporary relevance to living people and their interests, and for its purported survival in material evidence.  

As the historian David Brett puts it in his analysis of historic sites in Ireland, it is possible to define vernacular history, or heritage, as an analysis that “assumes the existence of the people or groups whose history it tells, and gives them identity in telling. Scholarly history, on the other hand, by disclosing its assumptions through self-critical reflection, is always in some measure ‘deconstitutive’ or at least non-tautological. In principle, it admits of

35 Stewart and Ruffins, 333.
36 Ruffins interview.
37 Kammen, *In the Past Lane*, 215-20.
alternative and has to defend itself.”

According to David Lowenthal, a site such as Somerset emphasizes heritage rather than history because it uses historical traces and tells historical tales, but these tales and traces are stitched into fables that are open neither to critical analysis nor to comparative scrutiny… To vilify heritage as biased is thus futile: bias is the main point of heritage. Prejudiced pride in the past is not a sorry consequence of heritage; it is its essential purpose. Heritage thereby attests our identity and affirms our worth… *Heritage diverges from history not in being biased but in its attitude toward bias.*

Heritage is at least as much about the present as the past, which makes it more difficult to critique than history as it is virtually impossible to question its values and conclusions without offending and thus alienating contemporary audiences.

General audiences are widely skeptical of academic history, partly because of scholars’ often condescending tone toward knowledge produced outside the ivory tower, and partly because academic and vernacular work seem frequently to be at cross-

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38 Brett, 155.

39 Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 121-22. See also Ruffins interview for a discussion of the analytical limitations on public historians.

40 Distinguishing between heritage and history runs the risk of both oversimplification and condescension, and it takes place within a political minefield where professional and amateur historians in the academy, public and private sectors, and other actors who engage with historical questions battle over whose interpretation is most legitimate and whose story should prevail. Raphael Samuel argues that heritage is not a lowbrow form of history, but a democratic form of history that admits active participation by people from any class or political background (265-7). Samuel writes, “…heritage is being attacked not because it is too historical but because it is not historical enough. It lacks authenticity. It is a simulation pretending to be the real thing” (266). It is impossible to excuse my dissertation from this political context, but with all dangers accepted there is still value in understanding heritage and history as different forms of knowledge about the past, not in order to rank one as better than the other but to articulate more precisely the form, purpose and function of different interpretations, and to know more clearly what audiences confront when they go to historic sites. It would be disingenuous to suggest that I do not have a preference for academic history; my position within the academy testifies to this fact. However, all of us—whether we are scholars or not—have use for and attraction to both heritage and history, and the goal of my study is not to damn anyone for one or another narrative or methodological choice, but to try and articulate which choices we make, when and why.
purposes. Yet all historians—professional and amateur, academic and vernacular—have much to say to one another. Encouraging dialogue between the various forms of historical work might enable all practitioners to tone down the antagonism that is so ubiquitous in debates over who is best qualified to represent the past and how. Dialogue does not require collapsing all categories: rather, it seems important to work harder to clarify methodological distinctions and the variety of motivations that fuel historical explorations. Clarification, rather than denial of difference, is essential in order to illuminate the places where historical forms overlap and encourage cooperation to occur. By understanding the range of ways in which individuals and groups learn about the past and through cultivating relationships between methodologies—without threatening the integrity of any one—practitioners and their audiences might be rewarded with enriched and broadened narratives and analysis.

To some extent, Somerset Place has been an experimental site for forays into this kind of sharing. After 1986, Dorothy Redford began to work in consultation with academic historians, and her relationship with the academy deepened over time. However, she never allowed her initial vision for the site to be subsumed by scholarly predilections and conventions, and her conviction proved to be a double-edged sword: it was the reason for Somerset’s popular success and it contributed in no small way to what academic historians might see as limitations of the site’s analysis.

41 See Rosenzweig and Thelen, esp. 12-13 and 90-111.

42 I should emphasize that had academic historians prevailed Somerset would have been beset by a whole different collection of limitations, but limitations nonetheless. Again, the point is not that Dorothy
Somerset Place, from 1986 to 2001, aimed to recover “a lost heritage” for descendants of the plantation’s antebellum residents. The revisions to Somerset’s interpretations began with Redford’s genealogical research—research that was fundamentally about family—and the return of African Americans to the site. Redford had spent a decade studying the generations of enslaved people that were born and lived at the plantation, and she meant for the homecomings to strengthen bonds between Somerset families by putting them in touch with each other and with the land their forbears were said to have called home. After the homecoming in 1986, Redford explained,

The need to belong. That’s what this was all about. Not just my need, but the need of our entire people, whose destiny was out of our hands for so long, and who are still struggling to shape our identity, our sense of place in a society that was not of our making. In the beginning, when we were first brought to these shores against our wills, our strength was in our selves, in our bonds with one another. Somewhere along the line, in complex and subtle ways, those selves were severed, the bonds broken. My journey, climaxed on this day, was a reunion in every sense of the word.43

Gathering at the site made an important statement: “It’s a commitment to Somerset Place. All descendants identify Somerset Place as their ancestral home. There’s a sense of ownership.”44 The sense of ownership required some cultivation, however, for many of the descendants, including those who lived nearby were unaware of their connections

Redford’s approach was bad and a professional scholar’s approach would have been good. It is that Redford was the one who prevailed, and it is important to analyze the reasons why and the results.

43 Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 236.

to the former plantation and unclear that they were surrounded by not-too-distant kin. After the first homecoming, Barbara Eason Gadson, who lived in Queens, New York, but grew up in northeastern North Carolina declared, “There were such mixed emotions, living so close all those years and still not knowing we had any ties to the place. Now, I don’t feel bitterness. I feel we are found!” For the first time since Reconstruction, large numbers of African Americans took their collective place at Somerset.

The early homecomings and the new narratives that followed them enabled descendants of slaves to claim a specific identity rooted in the quarters and fields at Somerset Place, an identity linked to the American body politic. One descendant, Frances Leigh, commented that as a child growing up near Somerset, she “didn’t see” its historical value. “It was just a big old plantation house. Now, well, this is where I am from. Where my family calls home. I hope the place is here for my grandkids.” And according to Willis Phelps, “Today, I feel as if it were Christmas and I were waking up on Christmas morning. This is the one time in my life I can say where I started from.” William Phelps, Jr., whose great-great-great grandmother was born a slave at Somerset, stated, “Today I can tell my children where I came from. No more will I have to say, I came from Africa. I am from Washington County—Creswell. I have roots.” His daughter, Carolyn Phelps Benton added, “My children have begun asking questions. They know nothing about slavery. I will have a lot of explaining to do when we get home. I know where I came from—Washington County, North Carolina—Africa is


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Celebrating African American life no longer had to focus on celebrating Africa: Redford pointed out, “Now, at least for the descendants of Somerset, we can focus on the contributions of our ancestors on America’s shores, for America is where our truer interest lies.” Locating themselves physically was an important step toward understanding themselves politically. The need to locate themselves in space went beyond a desire to connect with personal family history; it expressed African Americans’ collective struggle to find a place to belong in the nation at large, to define themselves proudly as they lived on American soil, in constant interaction with traces of oppression, present and past.

A plantation site may seem an unlikely place for descendants of slaves to foster a sense of national pride and belonging. After all, this was where their ancestors had lived in chains, and for several decades it was a place that none-too-implicitly celebrated their oppression by honoring people who were their owners and masters. But the descendants resolved any sense of irony by expanding the cast of characters in the narrative of

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48 Sundquist, 100-03; Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past, 2 and 9; Marable, 5-6. See also Cheryl Finley, “Committed To Memory: The Slave-Ship Icon in the Black Atlantic Imagination,” Chicago Art Journal v. 9 (1999): 2-21. The process of identity-formation for descendants at Somerset, including Redford who not only used Somerset to fashion her own identity but also took active steps to shape the presentations of her kin at Somerset, is quite different from what Finley describes. Finley’s discussion of a series of artists who work with images from slavery and the middle passage suggests that memories of slavery can be used to make connections with origins beyond the confines of the United States: “Deliberately choosing to revive bits and pieces of the past, they consciously connect themselves to a common black-Atlantic identity. Their work is a part of a tradition of remembrance that is strong among diaspora blacks and tied to the social processes that control the continued reconstruction of personal and group identity” (14).
Somerset Place: when they ‘returned’ to the site beginning in 1986, they became central actors in a story that focused not on a past that was over, but on a present that embodied the past. As Redford put it, “We’ve brought descendants back to this plantation, which means we’ve brought history forward.” The concept of ‘returning’ was in itself metaphorical, for on the whole, descendants had never been there before. When they went to the site in the 1980s it was not a literal return. Rather, they went ‘back’ as proxies for their ancestors who had, perhaps, been removed by sale; refugeeed to alternate locations during the Civil War; or fled after Emancipation. After 1986, descendants took possession of the site on behalf of their ancestors, projecting their own sense of connection with place and each other backward. They read the evidence of their ancestors’ existence at Somerset as a story about family foundations, and understood themselves as the realization of their ancestors’ efforts to build security, comfort, success and ‘home.’

The descendants of the enslaved read Somerset in terms of presentist perspectives and a celebration of heritage as opposed to history, both of which were underwritten by


50 Redford notes, “…part of identifying who you are includes the physical surroundings that you lived in. Finding your beginnings is not only finding people, it’s finding a piece of geography. A place.” Virginian-Pilot, September 15, 1992. Marable writes that for African Americans, “The desire for inclusion and the benefits of selectively forgetting America’s ‘mistakes’ are powerful incentives toward assimilation” (24-5). See also Wood, Blind Memory, 7; Marianne Hirsch, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” Yale Journal of Criticism 14 (Fall 2001): 8-10; and Sundquist, who suggests that those who claim to “remember” slavery today engage “vicariously” in a practice common in Holocaust literature of “retrospective witnessing on the part of second or third generations in which the original trauma is adopted as one’s own” (459). According to Sundquist, for Jews, this kind of retrospective witnessing is based on the notion that the Nazis intended to exterminate all Jews, everywhere, so that “every Jew is a survivor” (208). It is debatable whether or not it is useful to apply this analysis to the memory work of African Americans, though it does seem at least tentatively applicable to descendants of Somerset.
believe in an ideology of integration. In the half-century after the Second World War—especially after *Brown v. Board of Education*—integration became, for all intents and purposes, the country’s “official ideology,” and most African Americans believed that embracing it was the best way to ensure their own progress, and indeed, the progress of the nation.\(^{51}\) Progress would come from assimilation rather than liberation, from claiming a firm stake in a flawed system rather than illuminating the norms and assumptions embedded in American society and amplifying new voices that might ask them to change.\(^{52}\)

Perhaps for these reasons Dorothy Redford has stated emphatically that Somerset Place is an *American* history site, not a black history site or a site for any particular special interest. Elizabeth Cahoon, a native of Creswell and a student of Somerset’s history, explains, “Thus, the site does not participate in Black History Month. Redford

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\(^{52}\) Antoinette J. Lee has the issue entirely backwards when she asks, “However successful America has been in integrating the story of race and ethnicity into cultural heritage programs, many lingering questions remain. How much will be enough? How many more groups must be studied, documented, and interpreted? How many more stories can be told of any one historic site or outdoor village? How many diverse professionals will be needed to counter deficiencies in the interpretation of standards and criteria? Should diverse professionals be expected to undertake primarily diverse projects? … The larger question facing the historic preservation field is the long-term effect of this emphasis on diversity. Will it lead to a greater appreciation and acceptance of diverse groups, or will it lead to resentments and alienation? Will these efforts knit the nation together into a coherent whole, or will they lead to the unraveling of national unity? Monolithic and singular norms of cultural heritage programs obviously did not reach the nation’s diverse cultures, forcing them to develop their own programs and approaches. But how may approaches can the nation sponsor and still contribute to a sense of national identity, in addition to group identity?” Lee, “The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Historic Preservation,” in Stipe, 403.
argues that whether it is white or black history, it is American history.” 53 But perhaps black history should always stand out, even within American history? As Lowenthal declares, “Mainstreams trivialize minority legacies by standardizing them.” 54 The point is not to reify blackness, but to examine the specific historical path of a group of people who were enslaved, whose descendants have had to deal with the legacies of extreme inequality, and to situate them all within a nation that owes its existence to slavery.

Somerset Place began to address African American history at a time when radical critiques of American racial politics and slavery were unlikely to find either government funding or a mass public audience. The 1980s and early 90s was the time of the culture wars in America, which played out in part as battles over the boundaries of tolerance for artistic and intellectual expression. 55 The nation’s cultural producers were forced to consider how far they could push before getting silenced, and what subject matter, just by mere mention, was beyond the pale. In this climate, simply addressing African American actors as subjects at a state-sponsored plantation site was a radical move as it had the


54 Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past, 86.

55 On the American culture wars, see, for example, Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996); and Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dun, History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past (New York: Random House, 1997).
potential to offer a critical lens through which to understand the history of the United States and the development of its unique definitions of liberty, justice and democracy.\textsuperscript{56}

Moreover, Somerset’s transformation took place within what one commentator called “a boomlet in [the] numbers and budgets” of museums designed by and focused on African Americans. John Kinnard, director of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C., explained that African Americans had already successfully changed the nation’s political system through insistence on striking down segregationist legislation. They had conquered “the political kingdom,” but they still had to address “the cultural kingdom.” “Culture,” he stated, “embraces religion, lifestyle, heritage and all the questions that have to do with being. So, we are saying who we are… The museums are responding to this need to define ourselves. For the first time, not only was there widespread, express interest in seeing African American history represented in public settings, there were also increasing opportunities to do so.\textsuperscript{57} But this boom in popularity came through vehicles such as \textit{Roots}, which read black history as an all-American success story, and funneled popular engagement with it through such personalized

\textsuperscript{56} According to Michael Blakey, “Today, exhibits increasingly display all groups, stereotypically portrayed, within a common context of national history. These changes reflect increased awareness resulting from the racism-antiracism dialectic. But the ideology of white racial supremacy remains institutionalized in the public delineation of nationalism” (“American Nationality and Ethnicity in the Depicted Past,” in Gathercole and Lowenthal, 39).

pursuits as genealogy. Overall, in the 1980s and 90s, there were a host of reasons why the site stopped short of exploring the most incisive critiques that a story focused on slavery might have offered.

Attracting a broad audience required a specific kind of presentation. In order to appeal to African Americans who might not have wanted to think about their ancestors’ history in slavery, and white people who were either hostile to considering African Americans as subjects or wary of being pegged as responsible for injustice in the past, museums and sites that focused on African American history had to choose careful interpretations that welcomed rather than alienated, affirmed rather than challenged. Somerset began to offer the public narratives of reconciliation and celebration. It wove its subjects into an American historical master narrative, and tied them to a normative national identity; it celebrated purportedly American virtues such as independence, hard work and resilience, and argued that African Americans deserved as much as whites did to be included in the national mythology. But the story of slavery is not ‘complete’ because it includes both whites and blacks, nor when it acknowledges the humanity of

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58 For critical discussions of Roots, see Marable; Landsberg; Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past; Brundage, The Southern Past; and James A. Hijiya, “Roots: Family and Ethnicity in the 1970s” American Quarterly (30, 4: Autumn 1978): 548-56.

59 According to Brundage, the biggest issue in representing slavery is how to develop interpretations that embrace its contradictions, both the coercion and the agency evident in the historical record (The Southern Past, 343).

60 Marable criticizes projects that attempt to fit African American history into the mainstream American historical narrative: “What must be accomplished instead is the subversion of the master narrative itself. This must involve to a great extent the deconstruction of the legitimacy of white identity, and must uncover the massive evidence of crimes against humanity routinely sanctioned by corporate and state power. The corpses must be exhumed, not for purposes of ritualistic ancestor worship, but to study the forensic evidence to determine who was actually responsible for the crimes that have been committed” (28-9).
both: these kinds of inclusions are important prerequisites, but they are beginnings not endings. As Rex Ellis, the former director of African-American Interpretation and Presentations at Colonial Williamsburg put it in 1990, “We are not where we need to be but, thank God, we are not where we were.”\(^6\) By including both owners and enslaved in a story about the ways people lived, Somerset was poised to tell a holistic story, but it was not there yet.

**New Interpretations**

As programmers at Somerset began the shift away from a narrative of white supremacy, there were cultural and political limits to what they could say and what audiences could see or hear. In the days of the first homecomings, the cultural significance of slavery was as contested as ever, and at Somerset the traces of its history moved in and out of focus: although evidence of slavery was embedded in the landscape, it proved difficult for most to see. State employees since the 1960s had failed to interpret the evidence of slavery at Somerset Place in terms of the lives and activities of the enslaved. However, later observers who criticized the interpretive *status quo* that excluded slaves from the site’s narratives also had their own share of blindesses. An employee with the Historic Sites Section commented that while the Collins family “held hundreds of slaves…the only remaining evidence of the blacks is primarily

\(^6\) Ellis: 23.
archaeological in nature; the slave cabins have disappeared.\textsuperscript{62} Visitors remarked on what one reporter termed “the lack of actual reminders of slavery” left at the site.\textsuperscript{63} No doubt, there was little in Somerset’s interpretations at that time intended to reflect the history of the enslaved. But there were multiple “actual reminders” of slavery at Somerset Place. At the same time as they rightly criticized the exclusive nature of Somerset’s interpretations, the commentators themselves did not recognize the degree to which remainders of slavery were already all around them. The problem was not a lack of evidence; it was a collective lack of vision about this evidence conditioned by context and circumstance.\textsuperscript{64}

The limitations of an audience’s reading should not be equated with the limitations of the evidence. Although most took for granted that there was nothing to ‘see’ at Somerset about slavery, without the labor of the enslaved, Somerset Place would have still been a swamp: the plantation would never have existed at all. The fact that the mansion could be, and for so many years was read without regard for the slaves who built it does not lessen its significance as evidence of the work of the enslaved. Public consciousness of the history of slavery remained slippery over a long period of time, even as people’s attitudes toward it changed. Even as new actors came on the scene who


\textsuperscript{63} \textit{NYT}, August 31, 1986. See also \textit{RBWCN}, July 9, 1986.

\textsuperscript{64} Tunbridge and Ashworth confront the problem of dealing with sites of atrocity, how to manage sites that may lack physical evidence of what took place there, and how these sites may be marketed to the public (esp. 109-29).
rejected the exclusions of the past and insisted that Somerset embrace different and more varied narratives, engaging with slavery’s evidence—recognizing its traces, figuring out how to talk about and portray them—remained exceedingly difficult.

At the centre of the problem was the fact that at the end of the twentieth century, the evidence of slavery was usually quite unremarkable because slavery’s impact remained so fundamental to American society. It was harder to imagine a landscape, particularly in the South, without the traces of slavery than to pinpoint them within it. Ironically, its very ubiquity, its very commonness, may have been what made it so hard to see, like identifying one tiny thread in a tightly woven cloth: it can be done, but requires unraveling the cloth first and runs the risk of not being able to weave it back into its original form.

The work that the enslaved did in the nineteenth century and before still occupied a prominent place in twentieth-century northeastern North Carolina: even the county line dividing Washington from Tyrrell was a canal dug by Somerset slaves, and to some it served “as a permanent memorial…” to their labor. But to others it was merely a canal, and at any rate, most of slavery’s traces were much less obvious, much smaller in scale. Perhaps the more sympathetic observers who entered the conversation in the 1980s and 90s missed the evidence because they were looking for something dramatic, some signs

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65 Somerset News (Fall 1999), SPSHS.
of big things that had happened, rather than whispers of day-to-day, year-to-year mundanity that allowed much of America for so long to be a slave society.\textsuperscript{66}

Whatever the reason, in 1986, no one responsible for interpretations at Somerset thought it necessary to insist that visitors read slavery in the evidence. Despite Wayne Durrill’s research and some gestures in North Carolina’s public history programming toward greater focus on African American history, the vast majority of the time, Bill Edwards, guides and part-time workers at Somerset talked only about nineteenth-century farming techniques and the Collins family’s lifestyle. Visitors could go to Somerset, walk through the mansion and outbuildings and across the grounds, and never hear anything about the slave labor that was responsible for it all.

Redford launched the homecomings in part because she needed to put that kind of confusion to rest. She describes an “ulterior motive in having the homecomings.” When she first “visited Somerset Place, typical ante-bellum plantation, there was nothing to let you know African-Americans ever lived there. But once you bring the bloodlines back, bring the present back, it is very difficult to deny the past.”\textsuperscript{67} She believed that visitors should have no option but to learn about the enslaved at Somerset, particularly as representations of their ancestors’ resilience, and as illustrations of collective perseverance. One of her primary goals in drawing descendants to the site was to put

\textsuperscript{66} My analysis here is informed by Charles Payne’s discussion of the 1950s and 60s freedom struggle in the Mississippi Delta. See Payne, \textit{I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

“tangible evidence” of slavery back on the plantation: to her, there was no greater evidence of slavery than the living, thriving descendants of those who had been enslaved.\footnote{RBWCN, July 23, 1986.}

But bringing descendants to the site was not enough. The homecomings were influential, but they were impermanent: after the descendants left the site, Bill Edwards made no move to change the interpretations, and while the enslaved were implicit in every tree, every building, every brick, every canal, there was no remaining visual evidence that would allow future visitors to see and experience something of their existence and significance. According to Cahoon, who visited the site with her school in the early 1980s, because there were no slave cabins, slavery never crossed her mind: “There were no slave cabins so you didn’t wonder what went on. You just had the tour of the mansion and you were told the Collins family lived there, and slaves might have been mentioned when the tour guide discussed preparation of food or something like that, but it was never discussed and we really didn’t question it.”\footnote{Cahoon also points out that her school never visited Somerset specifically to see the plantation; it was always an added stop on a visit to Pettigrew Park, which they went attended to see Native artifacts that had been recovered from the lake. Indeed, she states that Somerset was never included in her history or social studies education, even in the 8th-grade unit on North Carolina. Cahoon interview.} Visitors were surrounded by evidence of slavery but they were still not being asked to read the evidence in terms of the enslaved.

Redford picked up immediately on the potential at Somerset for ongoing, massive change. And more than anything else, Redford sensed that change would turn on
rebuilding the structures of the slave community. In her autobiography, she describes her sense of what could be done at the site as the first homecoming came to a close. After all the visitors had gone, as the sun set, she looked around the property and visualized the next stage in the project she had begun a decade earlier in the Norfolk, Virginia, public library. She describes the moment like this:

… This [homecoming] was a day, one day. But there was more to do here at Somerset. Here, I knew, was an opportunity for more than a picnic. Here was a place, a chance to build a monument to the lives and labors of my family, a monument that would remind others of what their families did at other places just like it across the South. I could see a completely reconstructed, working plantation rising from this ground. The barn rebuilt as it once was, with oxen once again pulling carts. Water, clear and strong, flowing once again through the canal. The gardens lush and full. The church standing once more, its pews as they were when my ancestors sat in them. The tools wielded by the black artisans in place again. And the homes of the slaves themselves, standing and glowing with the aura of life that once filled their rooms.70

Redford wanted explicit visual and concrete representations that left people no option but to focus on the enslaved, and she insisted that the primary theme in the story was life. If the buildings were rebuilt, it would be “impossible to ignore or diminish” the survival and strength of the enslaved and their descendants, or “the significance of African American history at Somerset Place.”71 Because people were not reading the site as it stood in terms of the enslaved, other structures had to be built to testify to their presence.

It was especially important to rebuild the slave quarters in order to depict the story of family and home. The mansion, canals and kitchen were evidence of slaves’ labor; but

70 Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 236-7.
71 Transcript, Somerset Place Scholars’ Meeting, June 21, 2002, SPSHS.
what about their personal lives? The reconstruction of the slave cabins, torn down at least forty years before, would allow visitors to understand that though the slaves’ private lives were terribly circumscribed, there was more to slavery than abuse and coercion: there was life and family as well. Through the reconstructed cabins, evidence of the slave community would stand alongside the Collins house and dependencies so that visitors to Somerset could see the ways in which the planter and workers lived, their proximity to one another, the contrast in their lifestyles, and the physical structures of power that separated them and that oppressed the enslaved but also allowed them to create their own communities.72

This was not a straightforward task. Despite the inspirational homecoming on August 31, 1986, on September 1, the site returned to business as usual. Historic Sites personnel were not necessarily hostile to Redford’s vision, but they could not immediately picture its possibilities. After 1978, the primary obstacles to Redford’s vision were lack of imagination on the part of others and work. Redford seemed able and willing to supply both. Without fail, observers note Redford’s involvement as the key variable that enabled the sea-change in Somerset’s interpretations, and the speed with which the changes were enacted. There was growing interest throughout Archives and History in African American history, but snail’s pace movement on actually changing institutions. Unlike the bureaucrats, however, Redford felt a sense of urgency and took steps that others would or could not in order to make things happen. Historic Sites lent

72 Scruggs: 30.
some support to her efforts by publishing a new brochure that included “information on the black presence and role at Somerset,” but the division did not yet have a sense of where or how to go beyond that.\footnote{Mintz interview; Samford interview; Spruill interview; Knapp interview; Misenheimer interview; Greathouse interview; Crow interview; \textit{Carolina Comments} (November 1986): 155.}

Redford, however, was not troubled by Archives and History’s slow bureaucracy. She had plans of her own and ideas about how to realize them, and she capitalized on the success of the homecomings to claim a legitimate place in administration of the site. The first two events demonstrated her ability to envision and create new attractions, and they laid bare the fact that people were interested in the history of the enslaved at Somerset Place that she presented: if that history were adopted as part of the site’s program, people would come to see it.\footnote{In fact, African American visitation did increase considerably once the interpretation focused more clearly on the enslaved population. Redford explained, “African-American visitation is large because information is presented in a way that is affirming.” \textit{N&O}, February 7, 2001. “Somerset’s visitor tally has doubled to about 20,000 in the past few years, and that number now includes many blacks.” See \textit{N&O}, August 25, 1994. Indeed, other sites in the Historic Sites system saw increases in their visitation as a direct result of renewed attention to the system overall because of Somerset’s “rejuvenated program.” Visitation began to rise immediately after the first homecoming, and continued on that trajectory for several years. It was up to 15,000 in 1989, a 50% increase from 1988, and in the first nine months of 1990 there was another marked increase from the same time in 1989. \textit{Carolina Comments} (March 1987): 33; \textit{VP}, November 8, 1990. More than 15,000 visited in 1991. See \textit{Somerset News} (v. 1, no. 1, Spring 1992). Re. “rejuvenated program,” see \textit{Carolina Comments} (March 1991): 37.} After the first homecoming, Redford became a permanent fixture at Somerset Place. In short succession she transitioned from being, in the view of Historic Sites staff, “that lady,” a more or less anonymous “outsider” doing independent research, to Program Coordinator.\footnote{Knapp interview.} She was not altogether pleased with her initial position. The pay was low and it lacked the prestige she had expected: “I had been an outspoken...
advocate for the rights of African Americans and all of a sudden I felt like a slave back at the plantation.”\textsuperscript{76} But she was hired to work alongside Bill Edwards, which gestured toward the state’s interest in pursuing the research Redford had started independently, and incorporating it into Somerset’s regular program.\textsuperscript{77}

Edwards did not last long at Somerset Place after Redford joined the payroll. There were a host of problems, most of them stemming from different management styles. Edwards says he could not work with Redford. She wanted to move quickly, he had gotten used to moving slowly: “When I first moved out there I was an impatient person. I was from the twentieth century. That part of the world [the area around Somerset], even today, is still in the nineteenth. And people that live there just kind of roll with the tide.” He also was not willing to get involved in the political negotiations necessary to secure funding to push the site to a new interpretive level: he oversaw the early field schools and some new research, but the products of those excavations remained covered with tarps and gravel because he refused to go to local politicians “hat in hand” to ask for support. Finally, Edwards perceived a “cultural” division between

\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in Greg Townley, “‘Preserving the Past for All People’? Finding the Best Voice for Plantation Museum Tourism,” Undergraduate Research Journal-North Carolina State University vol. 1, issue 1, \url{http://www.ncsu.edu/undergrad-research/urj/VOL1_ISS1/index.htm}, accessed June 5, 2007, and Somerset Place Foundation, Inc. ID-No. 56-1633064, description of Foundation’s assistance to Somerset Place Historic Site, Somerset Place Foundation Binder 1992, SPSHS.

\textsuperscript{77} Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 261.
Redford and himself: “I’m white she’s black. I saw myself as a soul mate of the overseer’s there.”

Evidently, this “cultural” divide was too wide a gap for the two to bridge.

Edwards’ wishes for the site—to host Civil War re-enactments and events commemorating people including the Confederate general James Johnston Pettigrew, to focus more on Josiah Collins III’s agricultural engineering and perhaps to rebuild the great barn as a testament to that—fell by the wayside as Redford, more and more strongly as time went by, insisted on shifting gears to bring African American history more clearly into the picture. Both Edwards and Redford had a great deal of personal investment in Somerset Place. Edwards had been working there for the better part of two decades. Ultimately, however, for him managing Somerset was a job; whereas for Redford, working at Somerset was not only a job but a personal mission.

Whether or not she felt adequately compensated as Program Coordinator, Redford continued to work to build the site in ways that would fulfill her vision. In April 1988, funded by a grant from the Northeastern Historic Preservation Office, Redford and others

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78 Edwards interview. Redford’s later comments suggest that she also believed that racial definition made a difference in how a person might act as director of a site like Somerset; in her view, African Americans were better suited to the task. She stated, for instance, “Although all of us in attendance, with our years of experience interpreting slavery, genuinely felt it was unintentional, however, without ever considering the input from one African American historian or interpreter, the staff at Mt. Vernon decided they knew best how to tell the African American story. They completely and utterly discounted both the perspective and the scholarship African Americans could bring to the table.” See letter, to Jeffrey Crow, April 15, 2000. SPSHS, File: 2000/01 CI Projects. See also Townley.

79 Edwards interview.

80 There is relatively little literature on the relationship between genealogy and history, and genealogists and historians. See for example, Sheila O’Hare, “Genealogy and History,” Commonplace (2, 3: April 2002), http://www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-03/ohare/, accessed January 22, 2008.
involved with the site formed the Somerset Place Foundation, Inc. The Foundation was a private group established to provide support, including fundraising, for the site. It was composed of scholars, descendants of the enslaved and the planter class, history professionals, and other interested individuals, and Redford was the first chair.

In her dual role as chair of the Foundation and employee at the site, Redford worked alongside Edwards and then Leisa Brown, who replaced Edwards when he left to manage the Queen Elizabeth II site in Manteo. Brown, however, was somewhat hamstrung during what became only a one-year tenure. There was little published research on which to base any new developments. Redford could work from her own materials that she had been gathering, but Brown had only Tarlton’s then 31-year old report to go on. She focused most of her energy on getting the lakeshore cleared over the protests of State Parks about disturbing vegetation, then conceded leadership of Somerset to Redford and left to work at a museum in Fayetteville.

Before she left, however, Brown was involved, along with Redford and several curators, archaeologists and historical interpretations specialists, in writing a new master plan for Somerset Place. Released in December 1989, the plan projected a decade into

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81 Memo, Larry Misenheimer to William Price, November 12, 1986. NCHSS. Redford received $2600 from the Northeast Historic Places Office (NEHPO) in May 1985 toward her research on the black community at Somerset. See Carolina Comments (May 1985): 76. The NEHPO provided further funding in 1987 for setting up the Somerset Place Foundation and to study the question of land transfers. See Carolina Comments (May 1987): 60.

82 Somerset Place Foundation, Inc. ID-No. 56-1633064, description of Foundation’s assistance to Somerset Place Historic Site, Somerset Place Foundation Binder 1992, SPSHS; and Somerset News, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1992), SPSHS.

83 Greathouse interview. Leisa Brown has since married and changed her name to Leisa Greathouse.
the future, and intended to guide the activities of both the Somerset Place Foundation and the Historic Sites Section. The plan recommended an overhaul of the site, both in terms of its management and its interpretations. It emphasized the need for new promotional and fundraising activities; connections with other sites and with educational institutions in the state; new facilities for visitors and staff; and bringing the site up to speed with contemporary historiography. Most of all, the plan called for new programs of research in order to improve existing exhibits and to mount long-overdue new ones.  

Insisting on new research re-opened long standing debates between State Parks and Historic Sites over land use and control. The master plan declared, “Future development of Somerset Place as a state historic site will continue to be greatly hindered as long as State Parks retains management of the property consisting of the former main living complex of Somerset Place,” and all of the plan’s recommendations were “contingent” on land reallocation. In 1989, Historic Sites managed only seven of Somerset’s original 100,000 acres; much of what was once the plantation—including the site of the slave quarters—had, under the watch of the Department of Natural Resources, become overgrown with trees and brush. Somerset Place State Historic Site was supposed to represent an antebellum plantation, but some of the central, most

84 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan (December 1989), passim, NCHSS.

85 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan (1989), 8-10, NCHSS.
representative characteristics—primarily, the area of the slave community—had been excluded from its domain. 86

The authors of the master plan wanted to pursue archaeological research that would increase the scope and quality of representations of the enslaved. They felt a sense of “urgency,” as Redford had contended since the fall of 1986 that the site move to raise private money to support excavations in the area of the slave community. 87 As well, they were eager to revise the tour so that it would no longer be focused disproportionately on the Collinses. 88 Reorienting encompassed beginning the tour with the grounds where the enslaved worked and lived, rather than at the Collins mansion as programmers had done since 1969. Ultimately, the tour would begin at the visitor center in the Colony House then progress through a stop outside the owner’s compound, the buildings in the slave community, and only then to the formal garden and the mansion. 89

Neither the excavations nor reorienting the tour could happen, however, unless Historic Sites gained control of more of the site, specifically, contested land that was controlled by State Parks but which Historic Sites knew possessed historical features. 90

86 Somerset Place Foundation, Inc. ID-No. 56-1633064, description of Foundation’s assistance to Somerset Place Historic Site, Somerset Place Foundation Binder 1992, SPSHS.

87 Memo, Larry Misenheimer to William Price, November 12, 1986, NCHSS.

88 Townley.


90 Somerset Place State Historic Site, Master Plan (1989), 8-10, NCHSS.
Although the site and the park had jockeyed for power and attention for several decades, it gradually became clear that the state was finally going to place its emphasis on the site. The state had already preempted development at Pettigrew Park that threatened historical features, and Historic Sites continued to emphasize the importance of protecting Somerset’s “cultural heritage” by checking the growth of vegetation in the campsite to the west of the historic area, an area of park land they believed possessed considerable archaeological deposits.\footnote{91 Memo, Terry Harper to Larry Misenheimer, June 27, 1985. SPSHS, Folder: 1996/97 Clearing Lakeshore; State Parks-Historic Sites meetings, April 29, 1989, and June 8, 1989. NCHSS; Land Acquisition and Management Goals—draft, May 15, 1989. NCHSS.}

Despite State Parks’ concerns about “significantly damaging the natural resources at Lake Phelps,” Archives and History managed to secure permission to clear trees and undergrowth from four meters between the lakeshore and the mansion in order to provided the unobstructed view of the lake that antebellum inhabitants of the plantation would have enjoyed.\footnote{92 Letter, James Hallsey to Jim McPherson, June 13, 1988. SPSHS, File: 1996/97 Clearing Lakeshore; Draft for Jim McPherson 6/9/97, Clearing Lakeshore at Somerset. SPSHS, File: 1996/97 Clearing Lakeshore. A decade later, the park declared that it needed over $3 million in improvements, many of which—including a visitor center and additional camp sites—had been unfulfilled requests for more than 20 years. See Pettigrew State Park Report. SPSHS, Folder: 1996/97, Clearing Lakeshore.}

In 1990, the Foundation focused its energy on getting land transferred to the site from Pettigrew State Park. While Historic Sites officials hoped to establish a cooperative relationship with the park, the best decision, in the end, required shifting responsibility entirely.\footnote{93 Letter, Philip McKnelly to William Price, July 12, 1990, and Letter, William Price to Philip McKnelly, August 27, 1990. NCHSS. Among other things, although State Parks was originally supposed to maintain the grounds it controlled but that were used by the historic area, in fact, Historic Sites ended up doing it on 368}
land transfer, but it did secure a 99-year lease beginning in 1992 to the area where the slave cabins once stood, “clearing the first hurdle toward [their] reconstruction.” As part of that shift in responsibility, the department also took possession of the great lawn, and the barn and mill sites; and, it purchased the overseer’s house, which had been the park ranger’s residence since 1954, from State Parks. Altogether, these additions increased the site’s total acreage to thirty one and one-half.

These physical changes and more were spearheaded by Redford as she progressed to Site Manager in 1990. Observers credit her work as most responsible for the shifts that took place at the site in the following decade: it was her energy, her vision, and her initiative, including publications such as her autobiography, *Somerset Homecoming*, which spread word of the site far beyond North Carolina’s borders.

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95 Minutes, Somerset Place Foundation Executive Committee meeting, Nov. 21, 1992. SPSHS, Somerset Place Foundation Binder 1992; Report to the Somerset Place Foundation, Inc., on Somerset Projects and Activities 1994-99, May 22, 1999. SPSHS. Indeed, by the late 1980s, attention to the park seemed to decrease significantly. Several archaeological digs recovered Indian artifacts and ancient pottery, which were placed on show at the park. But overall, when it came to allocating scarce funds and attention, Pettigrew State Park was not a priority. See Mintz interview; Jones and Phelps: 565-73. In general, North Carolina spent far less on its parks than most other southeastern states: Whereas other southeastern states earmarked an average of 3 percent of the total budget to state parks and recreation, North Carolina allotted less than 1 percent. See *N&O*, January 22, 1988; *N&O*, August 27, 1988.

96 Redford was the first black director of a plantation site in the United States. Peter Wood, “Dorothy Spruill Redford”: 2.

97 Carl Burke, telephone interview with author, January 12, 2006; Knapp interview; Crow interview.
most important contributions was her ability to raise money to support the site. She had started the Foundation as a private organization that could fundraise on the site’s behalf, and one of the organizations to which the Foundation appealed was the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company through its Office of Governmental Affairs. After reviewing Somerset’s development plan and learning about Redford’s intention to reconstruct buildings in the area of the slave community, Reynolds awarded the site what would become an annual grant. Securing money from R.J. Reynolds meant that for the first time since the field schools in the early 1980s, there was funding to support Redford’s long-standing belief that even larger projects were possible, including the excavation of the area of the slave quarters.

Redford added to the archaeology project—and, indeed, expanded well beyond it—by forging links with a powerful local legislator, senate leader Marc Basnight. When Bill Edwards was site manager he had steadfastly refused to enter the political game. He was somewhat contemptuous of Basnight’s control and balked at putting himself or the site in a position of subservience. As a result, under Edwards’ tenure Somerset remained essentially a marginal entity. Redford took an entirely different approach and

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98 For details on the caucus meeting at which R.J. Reynolds first examined the site’s plan, which took place at Somerset in mid-December 1990, see Carolina Comments (March 1991): 39. The Somerset Place Foundation proposed a development program costing $1.2 million. It appealed to attendees at the caucus through their senses, treating them to “a lunch of chicken and dumplings and venison stew cooked outside in iron pots as in bygone plantation days.” See also Somerset News (v. 2, no. 1, Summer 1993). SPSHS.

99 Somerset Place Foundation, Inc. ID-No. 56-1633064, description of Foundation’s assistance to Somerset Place Historic Site, Somerset Place Foundation Binder 1992. SPSHS.

100 Edwards interview.
developed a mutually beneficial relationship with the senator. Basnight’s association with Somerset began in September 1990 when he attended a concert at the site. The North Carolina Symphony performed “African-American selections and Civil War-era music” as part of a celebration of the 125th anniversary of the end of the Civil War. Funded by the North Carolina Humanities Council and “several dozen local contributors,” the concert featured a narrative written by Professor Alex Albright of East Carolina University, which told stories of “bittersweet memories of slavery, separation from families, freedom, homecoming, and healing…”

The site was not in good shape: years of relative inattention had resulted in serious structural and other problems. Senator Basnight remembered, “I walked around this beautiful site and I saw plaster falling and water stains and rotting wood… I knew the roof [of the mansion] was falling in, and I thought that somebody would be talking soon about removing the building.” As Chair of the Senate Base Budget Committee, Basnight joined with Representative Howard Chapin to earmark $50,000 for repairs to Somerset Place that year. This was a major contribution to the site, which had an annual operating budget of only $45,000. Basnight provided crucial assistance to Somerset throughout the 1990s, primarily through helping the site to secure significant financial contributions.

He received some criticism for his actions, which opponents argued

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102 VP, November 8, 1990.
103 Crow interview; Mintz interview.
were too focused on local issues, but he responded that his work on behalf of Somerset was part of his goal to get the northeast the long-overdue attention it deserved: “…when the legislature makes appropriations, we’re at the head of the table now, whereas before we weren’t even at the table.”

The responses to Basnight’s support of Somerset are a reminder that appropriations for historic sites had long been a target of criticism. Indeed, they continued to be targets as politicians, business and civic leaders, and analysts questioned whether such funding was a wise choice when citizens had other pressing practical needs. Commentators in the past had stated that the best way to preserve the rural South was not through building museums, but by revitalizing small farms: farms would keep land economically viable, whereas historic sites “both represent a public burden and luxury.”

As the 1990s progressed, others felt that notwithstanding a significant growth in public attendance at historic attractions, funding public historic sites just did not make any economic sense. A Republican representative from Iredell County, for instance, claimed it would be cheaper to pay North Carolinians each $10 to stay away from historic sites than to continue to fund the operations. He asked, “What, are we trying to compete with the Smithsonian Institute, with all these places we've got around the state?”

106 *Wilmington Star-News*, May 8, 1997. See also Crow interview.
Basnight, however, was undeterred from supporting sites in the northeast, perhaps because he recognized that doing so won him valuable points with his constituents, and also, perhaps, because he knew that historic sites were a magnet for visitors who would then contribute to other parts of the economy during their travels. For a host of reasons, Basnight continued to champion Redford’s projects. In 1993, he arranged a breakfast meeting for her with House Speaker Daniel T. Blue and Governor Hunt so she could introduce to them her vision for reconstructing the slave quarters.\textsuperscript{107} Basnight proposed that 5 percent of the state’s building and renovations budget for 1993-94 be given to the Albemarle region; of that 5 percent, he reserved $100,000 for Somerset Place.\textsuperscript{108} In all, the state appropriated $300,000 for research and development of the slave quarters at Somerset in 1993, and much of that was Basnight’s doing.\textsuperscript{109} The following year, coinciding with the site’s application for an additional $700,000 in funding for the reconstructions, he encouraged the Advisory Budget Commission to visit Somerset as part of its tour of the state. The \textit{Virginian-Pilot} called the visit “a coup” for Somerset as what was expected to be only a brief stop became a ninety-minute lunch of cornbread, black-eyed peas and catfish.\textsuperscript{110}

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\textsuperscript{107} \textit{VP}, July 25, 1993.
\textsuperscript{108} \textit{VP}, May 20, 1993. The paper noted, “Since the General Assembly did away with its formal system of allocating a certain amount of money for projects in legislators’ home districts, the capital budget has often been packed with pork-barrel projects. The inclusion of those projects is considered a test of a legislator’s power.”
\textsuperscript{109} \textit{VP}, September 4, 1993.
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{VP}, September 29, 1994.
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In preparation for the reconstructions, and as a result of several years of planning, forging connections with a select group of politicians, and concentrated fundraising, Redford and the Foundation developed a new research program at Somerset that enabled the site’s programming to move beyond where it had stood, almost entirely static, since 1969. Redford’s ongoing genealogical research began to be folded into the interpretations, and for the first time in a decade, archaeologists began to excavate the area of the enslaved community. In the summers of 1992 and 1993, under the direction of Dr. David Phelps, a team of researchers from the Institute for Historical and Cultural Research at East Carolina University uncovered the foundations that were the first step toward reconstructing the slave quarters.\footnote{VP, August 5, 1992.}

Further excavations, which included five buildings on what was known as the slave “street,” were carried out between June and September of 1994.\footnote{Cahoon, 62; Carl Steen, \textit{The Somerset Place Excavations 1994} (Raleigh: Archaeology Branch, Historic Sites Section, Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, Diachronic Research Foundation, 1995), \textit{passim}. NCHSS.}

The research was “problem oriented,” meaning that rather than carry out general excavations, the work was targeted to find information for the specific purpose of reconstructing buildings associated with the slave community. Somerset had often been criticized for its out-of-the-way location; indeed, its remoteness was frequently cited as a factor in its relatively low visitation. But Somerset’s isolation paid off when it came to archaeology. Because it was off the beaten path, there were considerable undisturbed
archaeological deposits. As well, since the slave quarters under excavation were demolished in the nineteenth century, the archaeological deposits offered an excellent record of the ways in which the enslaved at Somerset lived. A combination of undisturbed land with high potential to yield strong archaeological evidence, and funding to pay for research enabled historical archaeologists to perform major excavations, which went far beyond the work done at other sites.

That said, the budget was hardly unlimited so the excavations focused only on recovering the footprints of the buildings and a space of approximately three feet around the perimeter: a highly specified, practical research design preempted a wider focus. The digs therefore supplied excellent information about the buildings themselves, but not about other important areas around the buildings—for instance, yards and trash heaps—from which researchers might have gleaned additional information about the slaves’ lifeways.

Even with these limitations, Somerset’s program leapt forward in 1996 and 1997. First, the state appropriated $150,000 for restorations to the kitchen and laundry, and

113 Samford interview; Mintz interview; Knapp interview; John Vlach in Transcript, Somerset Place Scholars’ Meeting, June 21, 2002. SPSHS.

114 Steen, *The Somerset Place Excavation*, 1-3; 165.


116 Samford interview. In general, Samford describes Historic Sites’ activities as “reactive” rather than “research-driven,” for the simple reason that the organization operates on a “shoestring budget.” She points out that basic maintenance has to take first priority and it is usually difficult to find the funds to go beyond that at any given site. In that context, Samford says, Historic Sites has served Somerset remarkably well. See also Mintz interview. For an in-depth analysis on changes in archaeological investigations of slavery, see Wilkie; Robert Paynter, “Afro Americans in the Massachusetts Historical Landscape,” in Gathercole and Lowenthal, 53-60; and Heath.
“[f]or the mutual benefit” of Somerset Place and Pettigrew State Park, State Parks transferred the ownership of Somerset to Historic Sites, thus ending the decades-long battle for control between the park and the site.\textsuperscript{117} In 1997 and 2001, Redford’s long standing vision for Somerset was realized as two slave quarters—the homes of Judy and Lewis, and Sucky Davis—as well as the slave hospital were rebuilt.\textsuperscript{118}

Reconstructing parts of the slave community complex had always been central to Redford’s sense of Somerset’s potential to represent a home for the enslaved during the nineteenth century and their descendants in the present. Rebuilding the quarters, in particular, was a way of making concrete the notion that the enslaved at Somerset were more than anonymous workers or faceless victims. They were individuals as well as members of families, who maximized their scarce personal time and limited privacy in the best ways they could. Rather than tell people this, the reconstructions aimed to show them by welcoming visitors into cabins appointed with typical furnishings—beds and chairs, cooking utensils, children’s playthings, and other objects that looked as though they were in the midst of use, and residents had stepped away for a moment or gone to a

\textsuperscript{117} VP, November 15, 1996. The work that took place in 1996—as well as work at other times in the 1990s and afterward—was completed in part by the use of convict labor, which was much less expensive than hiring free workers. See, for example, Report to the Somerset Place Foundation, Inc., on Somerset Projects and Activities 1994-99, May 22, 1999. SPSHS; and Memo, Dorothy Redford to Ricky Howell, June 24, 1992. SPSHS, File: 1995 Paint Mansion/Outbuildings. While of course there is no direct comparison with the nature of unfree labor in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, it is not hard to see some irony here. Agreement, Transfer of Property at Somerset Place. SPSHS, File: 1996/97 Clearing Lakeshore.

\textsuperscript{118} Cahoon, 65-6 and 83-4. See also Somerset Place Foundation Spring Board Meeting, May 21, 1999. SPSHS; Linda F. Carnes-McNaughton and Dorothy S. Redford, “The Somerset Place Report: Afterward,” in Steen, \textit{Restoration Excavations at Somerset Place Plantation State Historic Site}. 376
day’s work elsewhere on the plantation. Programmers also hung family trees on the wall at Sucky’s to explicate the story of the generations that called the cabin home.

Programmers at Somerset later discussed presenting Judy’s and Lewis’ home as a contrast to Sucky’s, to emphasize the tenuous nature of ‘home’ and domesticity within the institution of slavery. In her book, Redford points out that as much as the cabins were homes, they were not the private, single-family dwellings of popular imagination: they were “barracks, packed with several families in each of four rooms…. Collins clothed his slaves like an army—in outfits bought and sewed in bulk—and they were housed the same way. This was a labor camp.” Consulting with scholars in 2002, Redford suggested that Judy’s and Lewis’ home could represent the story of “the deconstruction” of family, referring to the fact that Judy’s mother arrived at Somerset after being stolen from her family in Africa; in turn, Josiah III removed Judy from her family at Somerset

119 Transcript, Somerset Place Scholars’ Meeting, June 21, 2002. SPSHS. The cabins were spaces to interpret every day life for the enslaved, presenting furnishings and household effects that typified what enslaved people might have needed or wanted. Both Sucky’s and Lewis’ and Judy’s homes thus fit with Somerset’s definition, using the American Association of Museums’ criteria, as a representative site (as opposed to aesthetic or documentary), which meant that rather than interpreting a particular person’s life or a particular event, Somerset’s goal was “to help the visitor understand what factors, activities, and events characterized southern agricultural history, including the lives and lifestyles of its various socio-economic groups.” When it could not provide direct evidence of the past—actual artifacts used by people who lived there during the antebellum era, for instance—it instead supplied examples of items that would be typical of a place like Somerset. The reconstructions are based on extensive and sound research; but they are not ‘buildings as in the past,’ but rather best educated guesses on what was there, and representations of the kinds of buildings that were likely to have stood. See Somerset Staff Training Outline, December 19, 1994. SPSHS. File: Staff Training Outlines, Somerset Place Archive. For the research that went into the reconstructions, see, for example, M. Ruth Little, The Slave Hospital and the Large Slave Quarter at Somerset Place, Architectural Research and Structures Report (Raleigh: Longleaf Historical Resources, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, April 1999). NCHSS; and Steen, The Somerset Place Excavations.

120 Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 28, 1986; Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 140.
and, along with 81 other slaves, sent her to Faunsdale Plantation in Alabama in 1843.121 Indeed, such a distinction might have added an important critical element to Somerset’s exhibits. The reconstructions of the slave quarters at Somerset could have thus thrown into question conventional notions of public versus domestic space, and highlighted the ways in which the institution of slavery collapsed the two. They could have historicized the notion of ‘home,’ and pointed out that ‘home’ for the enslaved during the antebellum era meant something different from what it meant a century or a century and a half in the future: the colloquial, present-day definition of ‘home’ suggests a level of security and comfort that even at the best of times for the enslaved was never there, and also masks the significant ways in which the enslaved created adaptive and unique family structures, household relationships and divisions of labor.122

121 Proposed Interpretive Tour Historical Context, A Question of Scope. SPSHS, File: Scholars’ Meeting—Interpreting New Buildings in the Slave Community, 2002. If establishing a contrast between the two cabins is presently the site’s interpretive goal, it might be helpful to include a statement to that effect in the most widely accessible written description of the two reconstructed cabins, Somerset’s Web-based tour. As it stands, the contrast is not mentioned. See http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/Sections/HS/somerset/somerset.htm, accessed January 30, 2008.

122 The idea that the family structures and households that African Americans created within slavery, and the gender roles and divisions of labor that became normative in their communities were adaptive rather than dysfunctional has held vital historiographical and political weight at least since Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report in 1965 that used the work of E. Franklin Frazier to label black families a “tangle of pathology.” See Moynihan, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965); E. Franklin Frazier, The Free Negro Family: A Study of Family Origins Before the Civil War (Nashville: Fisk University Press, 1932). More generally, the public/private dichotomy is a central theme for historians in a range of fields. Scholars of African American women and families in particular have generated a vast literature that marshals compelling evidence to suggest that the two “spheres” were as often collapsed as they were separate. For work on the topic of slavery and the meaning and politics of domestic space, see, for example, Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household; Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, And the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Peter Bardaglio, Reconstructing the Household: Families, Slavery and the Law in The Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995; Gutman, The Black Family; Ann Patton Malone, Sweet Chariot Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
It is unclear, however, whether or not programmers ever moved this interpretation from discussion to implementation. If they wanted to ensure that general audiences understood the site’s critique of the idea of ‘home’ and its argument for an historically specific definition, interpreters would have needed to develop an especially careful presentation. These are complex ideas that might otherwise be easily missed. So much of the site was framed as a celebration of family and life, and most audiences would likely have assumed that words and ideas have consistent meanings over time. Without explicit guidance toward an alternative interpretation, instead of standing as evidence of the ways the enslaved challenged dominant notions of domesticity and home, the reconstructions might instead have functioned to fold the enslaved into a normative paradigm based on the experiences of upper- and middle-class whites.

The reconstructed cabins communicated a range of messages, but they were also significant not only for what they were intended to represent, but for being reconstructions. In the context of the state’s public history programs, the growing industry of heritage tourism, and ongoing concerns about eastern North Carolina’s ever-lagging economy, the reconstructions were meaningful unto themselves. 123 They were, to

1992); Stevenson; Marli F. Weiner, Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-1880 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press); White, Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Forthcoming work by Thavolia Glymph promises to be another important intervention in this field. See Glymph, Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). In addition, while they do not focus specifically on slavery, Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom; Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion; and Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow, also offer valuable insights to the particular problems raised by evidence and interpretations at Somerset.

123 Tourism continued to be a major industry in the state during the 1980s and 90s, and, indeed, according to Richard Starnes, “some forecasters argue that it will replace agriculture as the state’s leading economic activity in the twenty-first century” (150). He continues, “By the 1990s, the ‘Variety Vacationland’ of
use Fath Davis Ruffins’ term, “museumized” versions of original buildings, which provided the chance to incorporate both owner and slave into the representational landscape without engaging the issues at the heart of an ongoing debate over tourism, beauty and which appearances the state ought to preserve.\textsuperscript{124}

It seemed obvious to tourism boosters that an antebellum mansion or an elaborate garden would attract visitors to the region; there seemed no doubt that most visitors understood these things as beautiful and therefore suitable attractions to consider during a vacation or family outing. By contrast, even with increasing African American tourism, it did not seem as though anyone—white or black—necessarily wanted to confront the literal or figurative ugliness of the history of slavery, and certainly not the majority of visitors who might have passed through the rural northeast on their way to the coast for beach vacations.\textsuperscript{125} It may be fair to say that a sizeable number of African Americans chose not to visit sites like Somerset, and certainly did not care to see slave quarters, because many of them were living in substandard housing themselves. This would be

booster visions was thriving and had been for nearly thirty years. Tourism had emerged as one of North Carolina’s leading economic endeavors, a catalyst for social and demographic change, a medium of cultural interaction, and a defining force in many communities. Yet, tourism within the state and region has received scant scholarly attention” (153).

\textsuperscript{124} Ruffins, “Revisiting.”

\textsuperscript{125} The National Black Tourism Network estimated in 2002 that African American travelers spend $60 billion per year. Tourism boosters and public history professionals began to ask, what will they get out of historic attractions? How are issues of heritage and diversity relevant to that audience? The Director of African American Programming at Old Salem stated, “People are finally recognizing that African-Americans are traveling. When we travel, we want to learn about our history…. Once people start seeing slavery dealt with at one site, they’ll want to know why it’s not at another.” \textit{N&O}, February 24, 2002. But African American tourists were not necessarily any more likely than whites to want to see a history that emphasized hardship. If hardship was the subject of an interpretation, it was more palatable when framed within a story of perseverance and ultimate success. See Ruffins interview.
particularly likely for southerners—and even more specifically residents of the Albemarle region—who remained targets of an especially pernicious combination of poverty and racial oppression. As late as the mid-1970s, 65 percent of the nation’s substandard housing was in the South. In Wilson, a town about a two-hour drive west of the site off Highway 64, “Hundreds, perhaps thousands…still reside in the neo-slave cabins called shotgun houses.” The *News and Observer* declared, “The preservation of these properties, not out of any concerns for historic or architectural value, but because no better housing was available for vast numbers of poor Wilson residents, is a shameful legacy. The distinction Wilson has won for its ‘fine collection’ of shotgun houses is not one to emboss on the city seal.”

In this context, tourism boosters considering audiences who might have wanted to see something ‘historical’ or educational but primarily wanted to have fun doubted the benefits of preserving structures such as a slave cabin or a sharecropper’s shack. Indeed, many of the original slave quarters at Somerset were long gone precisely because the state had bulldozed them years before after declaring them obstacles in the way of accommodating visitors to Pettigrew State Park; an earlier generation had not considered them worthy of preservation.

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127 Ted Ownby asks, “Does cultural tourism in the South have to choose between depressing honesty and cheerful lies, worst represented by the many pilgrimages to antebellum mansions that avoid serious mention of slavery?” Ownby, “Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve Seen, But Does Anybody Want to Hear About Them While They’re on Vacation?” in Starnes, 244. See also Eichstedt and Small, 99.
In contrast to reconstructions, which created new buildings that stood in for something old, preservation of actual old structures seemed to invite criticism. Although preserved structures were likely to be cleaned up and carefully presented, their connection with the crumbling shacks and cabins that already dotted the rural landscape was sometimes too close for comfort. Visitors condemned North Carolina as “more than a little rundown at the heels” because of the ubiquitous “decaying” buildings that remained. Leaders in industry were eager to get rid of these blights on the landscape, which were the ruins of failed economic systems and long term inequity, and which made the northeast difficult to sell.\(^{128}\)

Change seemed necessary if the maximum promise of tourism was ever to be realized in the Albemarle region. In 1985, the Eastern North Carolina Chamber of Commerce founded the Carolina Clean Countryside Campaign to attract new industry and tourists. By 1988, the campaign had spread statewide, and it is perhaps unsurprising that it began to threaten historic areas. Bill Edwards had supported the project at first, but when he saw it encroaching on historic sites, despite the Department of Archives and History’s official endorsement, he took a step back. Edwards was concerned that an effort to “clean up” one person’s “glaring eyesores” would translate into demolishing another’s historic buildings. He saw a dangerous precedent already set at Somerset: only six of the 40 buildings that once stood there were left because most—including the chapel, slave hospital and cabins—had been destroyed in order to make the area “more

\(^{128}\) N\&O, February 1, 1988; Pepi-Southern and Woods, 4 and 30.
While tourism boosters may have been legitimately concerned about the appearance of crumbling farm buildings that elicited “snide remarks” from visitors as they made their way to the beaches, preservationists retorted that there had to be a better solution than to simply “sterilize” the landscape.130

Reconstructions offered a possible solution, reframing the terms of the debate so that structures that represented poverty or oppression to some could become more widely attractive by serving the demands of heritage tourism.131 A goal of heritage tourism was to allow travelers to view a variety of historical episodes in a fun and dispassionate manner, without challenging their worldviews.132 As one writer put it, “North Carolina’s history has its milestones of cruelty and despair, but even amid the horrors of slavery and war there were examples of endurance and triumph. As a heritage tourist, you can


132 For instance, At Somerset, the comfort of all visitors was accommodated in careful rewording of the tour script: instead of saying “master,” which Christian visitors took issue with, interpreters say “slave holder.” Standard Operating Procedure, New Employee Introduction, January 2006. SPSHS.
connect with all of that.”

Using reconstructions, sites like Somerset could present physical evidence of slavery in ways that did not arouse anxiety in those concerned about maintaining North Carolina’s physical beauty, and advertising the state as a fun “Variety Vacationland.” At the end of the twentieth century, heritage tourism was continuing to grow in importance as an industry, and it became a way to promote aspects of southern history that might once have been distasteful, provoked controversy or brought shame.

In particular, after watching the overwhelmingly positive response to the homecomings and subsequent developments at Somerset, a new generation of tourism boosters realized that instead of keeping North Carolina’s difficult history of slavery at arm’s length, they could use it in creative ways to draw visitors to the region. Somerset Place demonstrated that talking and thinking about slavery did not necessarily require African Americans to relive collective trauma or whites to self-flagellate. African Americans had developed narratives that emphasized their ultimate empowerment and prosperity. White southerners began to consider the notion that acknowledging injustice


134 N&O, September 8, 1996.

135 N&O, February 24, 2002. Somerset also had an impact outside the state’s borders. Sites including Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg followed in Somerset’s footsteps and organized their own reunions of descendants of their respective slave communities. See Gordon: 33, and Ruffins, “Revisiting”: 419. When Mount Vernon created a “Slavery Tour,” Redford commented, “The stated reason was an attempt to stem the tide of decreased visitation by tapping into the rather profitable African American tourism market. For years they had included black history by erecting a monument to dead slaves and sponsoring an annual candlelight pilgrimage to the monument. I am certain that was easier than integrating the story of slavery at Mt. Vernon into their regular interpretation program. Like many sites, they had chosen to ignore a defining aspect of our nation’s history and contemporary character until inclusion was determined to be profitable.” Letter, Redford to Jeffrey Crow, April 15, 2000. SPSHS, File: 2000/01 CI Projects.
in the region’s past could help to build the state’s present-day image as progressive, current, and attractive to visitors from the North and beyond.

For both white and black southerners, an “honest look” at their history enabled them to present evidence of slavery as a story about the way the South, and especially North Carolina, had “evolved.”

One of the South’s major draws was its image as an “historical” place: as one author puts it, “Today’s tourist guidebooks continue to suggest that going among southerners means going into the past.” Encouraging the growth of historic attractions and sites such as Somerset seemed to offer the state’s tourism industry an effective marketing strategy and new ways for present-day North Carolinians to understand their relationship to the antebellum period.

Narratives that foregrounded African American history and attractions like the reconstructed slave quarters invited discussion of slavery, but the embedded assumption in the discussion was that such injustice was a hallmark of a bygone era. Somerset put evidence of past injustice on show for all to see, packaged as a mainstream story about progress. Many residents of the area around the site were eager to declare their approval of the developments there, and some talk about the homecomings and the changes at

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136 N&O, September 8, 1996.

137 Ownby, in Starnes, 242. See also Goldfield; Silber; Woodward, Burden of Southern History.

138 Haire interview. See Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past, 83. According to Michael Wallace, “Ours is, I believe, a historicidal culture. A host of forces tend to undermine our ability to locate ourselves in time, to disconnect present from past, to promote a 24-hour attention span” (38). He continues, “It is difficult…for Americans to believe…that history is a powerfully subversive and liberatory form of knowledge. Historicizing the present robs it of its sense of inevitability and restores a sense of human agency” (40). See Wallace, “The Politics of Public History,” in Past Meets Present, edited by Jo Blatti, et al. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).
Somerset that followed as if they were natural and always welcome.\textsuperscript{139} When Bob Francis, a descendant of the planter who once owned nearby Hope Plantation, attended the first homecoming at Somerset, it was for confirmation “of how we’ve changed and progressed in this country.”\textsuperscript{140} A white business owner from Creswell claimed that any animosity between whites and blacks in the area “comes from outside. The original residents and those who have ancestral roots here, black and white, are not the promoters of prejudice. Dorothy Redford is doing a fantastic job here, and everybody is behind her.”\textsuperscript{141} Support for changes at Somerset may have been genuine, and people were sincere in their insistence that virtually no one in the present would support something as egregiously racist as slavery. Yet it remains problematic that they used these contemporary attitudes to erase significant chunks of southern history in general, and to relinquish responsibility for Somerset’s particular historical exclusions.

Beginning with the homecomings, Somerset enabled contemporary African Americans to move away from a position as victim in the history of slavery, and allowed whites to distance themselves from their connection with the perpetrators. The message of the homecomings was for everyone “to move forward. The fact that the descendants of former slaves and the descendants of former slave owners greeted and mingled with

\textsuperscript{139} Many people would probably not have expressed opposition publicly, even if they felt it, for fear of being labeled racist. For instance, when a white woman from Creswell was asked what she thought of the homecomings, she claimed she simply had not given it any thought and declined to comment. \textit{CO}, August 31, 1986. See also the following interviews: Haire, Spruill, Pledger, Collins.

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{CO}, August 31, 1986. He was not alone in this sense. See also Mintz interview.

\textsuperscript{141} Gordon: 33.
each other is proof that attitudes have changed with time.”¹⁴² But while attitudes had undoubtedly changed, it was far less clear whether or not that had translated into politics.

Nevertheless, the message of black and white together, of past injustice dissolved by present-day reconciliation was the one most southerners—perhaps most Americans—wanted to hear. Frances Inglis, the great-great-granddaughter of Josiah III, approached the 1986 homecoming with some trepidation, hoping no one would blame her for “that horrible institution.” But she took comfort in the idea that slavery happened “a long time ago,” and in the spirit of the event itself: “This is a happy gathering, a healing experience.”¹⁴³ Inglis was not alone: Ernestine Liverman, the granddaughter of the overseer during the Civil War, as well as Josiah Collins VI, who traveled to Creswell from his home in Seattle, expressed similar concerns.¹⁴⁴ But their fears were assuaged by people such as Henry Norman, a retired police chief from New York and slave descendant, who explained that he was not angry at the whites with whom he mingled at the homecoming: “It’s their great-grandfathers I’m upset with.”¹⁴⁵ According to Ludie Bennett, the son of Darius Bennett, a Somerset slave, “We don’t look back in hatred, we look forward in freedom.”¹⁴⁶ The message that took hold at Somerset, which white and

¹⁴² Gordon: 33.
¹⁴³ *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 31, 1986. For more on Inglis’ first meeting with Redford, see *Somerset Homecoming*, 218-19.
¹⁴⁵ CO, August 31, 1986.
black descendants both welcomed with relief, and which tourism proponents projected to the masses, was that all southerners had put the difficulties of slavery behind them and the site was now an inclusive space that all could embrace and at which all were welcome.

Inclusivity was an important concept for everyone who encountered Somerset Place in the 1980s and 90s, particularly those committed to its improvement. Everyone seemed to agree that the site’s main problem was that it had, for so long, excluded black people. The most obvious solution appeared to be to add them back in. While this may have worked to some degree by diversifying the people represented in its exhibits and to whom the site attempted to speak, from a wider perspective the success of such an additive approach was limited. Adding black faces to a previously all-white environment may have helped Somerset to conform to contemporary political mores and the site appear more historically accurate, but it only partially addressed the basic problem that plagued it, which was not simply exclusion but more seriously white supremacy. If the only problem were the absence of African Americans, inclusion would be a straightforward solution: if all other things were equal, simply making a 180-degree turn from exclusion to inclusion would be a satisfying remedy. But equality was in short

147 Lea, “Introduction,” in Stipe, 19; Lee, “Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Historic Preservation,” in Stipe, 386-92. Lea argues that the popularity of diversity stemmed in part from the adoption by the National Trust of the Charleston Principles in 1990, which “emphasized historic preservation as a major element of every community’s success…” (18). Lee argues that a more diverse political landscape—with legislators drawn from a wider variety of cultural groups—led to a more diverse preservation world (389). In the 1990s, African American established their own preservation societies and groups including the National Trust and National Park Service developed policies to diversify their programs and change the demographics of the preservation field (398).
supply at Somerset in the days of slavery and for most of its history as a state historic site.

The white supremacy that underwrote slavery and then made the site all-white for more than a century after Emancipation could not be diversified because it had never been merely a problem of unequal participation by representatives of various racial groups.\textsuperscript{148} White supremacy, whether at Somerset or elsewhere, has never been a cosmetic problem easily solved. Rather, it is the historically-based foundation of American society and politics. It describes an entrenched, centuries-old political, social and economic system based on the notion that to achieve social order and maximize profit some people should dominate others, and that the most legitimate division determining relationships of domination and subordination should be race. For most of American history, people defined as white maintained overt power and control over those defined as black in an effort to create and control an efficient work force. Diversifying Somerset’s environment spoke to one symptom of race-based exclusion—the apparent

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\textsuperscript{148} Evidence of the depth of this problem is conveyed by the National Park Service’s 1996 question, “How much of [a] site’s story should be devoted to [slaves]? How can their stories be interwoven with those of their white owners?” NPS, “Scholarship on Southern Farms and Plantations,” http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/slave.htm, accessed July 16, 2002. What the NPS and most others were unable to ask, because of white supremacy’s pervasive and entrenched influence on American historical master narratives, was the alternative question: how can the enslaved not be discussed at historic sites? White supremacy made it beneficial to ignore the enslaved; but doing so required a highly selective reading of existing evidence. The problem was not discussing the enslaved as part of history, it was fitting them into narratives in which they were never meant to be.
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color of the people at the forefront of the site’s representations—but not to the entire underlying political illness that caused it.\textsuperscript{149}

Insisting that black and white tolerate and share space with one another is an important yet insufficient response to the complicated problems of white supremacy. On their own, the prized ideals of integration, diversification and tolerance are not enough: they make daily life easier, but do little to alter systemic inequity.\textsuperscript{150} The only way to actually eliminate white supremacy in the United States is to demolish the system at its foundation and restructure society in its entirety.\textsuperscript{151} But the concept of destroying a fundamentally unjust system does not make for pleasant discussion, and is anathema at an historic site where the basic purpose is to bolster Americans’ sense of pride in their nation and its history, and to provide recreational opportunities to visitors and tourists.\textsuperscript{152}


\textsuperscript{150} Alice Ely-Jones, active in the development of African American history programming at the Stagville site in Durham County, stated, “Closure isn’t really what I’m looking for in this. What I’m looking for is tolerance.” \textit{N&O}, September 8, 1996.

\textsuperscript{151} Marable writes, “Today’s elitist discourse of liberal multiculturalism speaks the safe language of symbolic representation, but rarely of resistance” (58).

\textsuperscript{152} Ruffins interview; Ownby in Starnes, \textit{passim}. A staff training document at Somerset declared, “Historic site employees have the privilege and responsibility of preserving significant parts of our American heritage. They have the privilege and responsibility of helping Americans to take a renewed pride in that heritage.” “What all interpreters (tour guides) need to know,” SPSHS. For statements on the nationalist intentions of state-sponsored historic preservation, see, for example, “Introduction to Historic Preservation.” NCSA, Department of Archives and History, Director’s Office, General Correspondence
Besides the state departments that have a vested interest in presenting historic sites in order to inculcate patriotism, there is also the problem of playing to a mass audience: Ruffins notes, “You can’t really enrage segments of the public,” who go to sites to have an enjoyable experience.\textsuperscript{153} Even audiences that want to see diverse faces tend not to be looking for a radical historical critique.\textsuperscript{154} The changes at Somerset in the 1980s and 90s therefore perhaps could not be radical, but rather only a corrective to the worst exclusions of the past and an effort to create opportunities for all Americans—black and white—to claim a place firmly within the existing system.

The fact that inclusion looked radical as the new millennium drew near should tell us something about the so-called evolution of American ideas about liberty and equality and Americans’ engagement with their history. Many people remarked on how amazing it was that Dorothy Redford, a black woman and slave descendant, had become the site’s director, and just by foregrounding black history Somerset drew accolades from a vast array of observers; the specifics of what the site was saying were less important than the fact that it was one of a precious few plantation sites in the country that did not either

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\textsuperscript{153} Ruffins interview.  \\
\textsuperscript{154} GNR, September 5, 1999; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 29.
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denigrate, trivialize or erase African Americans and their history. In their 2002 study of plantation sites in eight states, Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small concluded that almost 83 percent of the sites used a strategy they called “symbolic annihilation” to deal with the history of slavery. The small number of sites that did consider slavery did so in ways that were “racially marked” as “black history” or “slave life” tours, such as Colonial Williamsburg’s “Other Half” tour; only 10-20 percent of visitors chose to see these kinds of tours. For all its shortcomings and insufficiency, inclusion was perhaps the best that Americans then could hope for.

In some public history sectors, resistance to inclusion remained strong through the 1990s. Consider the case of Averasboro Battlefield in 1996: in order to help this Civil War site in Harnett County appeal to a broader audience, the Department of Cultural Resources contributed $10,000 toward reconstructing a slave cabin there. But one of the directors of the project insisted, “We aren’t calling it a slave cabin… We’re calling it a Civil War-era cabin, although we know it was used as a dwelling, and the people who lived in it were servants, technically slaves, if you will.” Despite growing popular interest and rhetoric about diversity and inclusivity, when it came to nineteenth-century history, there was still significant resistance to even calling slavery by its name.

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155 See Payne, passim, but esp. 2-5 and 437-8; for congratulatory remarks, see, for example, Cahoon, 69 and 77; interviews with Collins, Haire, Mintz, Pledger, Samford, Spruill.

156 Eichstedt and Small: 108; 179; 199. Colonial Williamsburg opened the Slave Quarter at Carter’s Grove in 1989, almost a decade before the reconstructions at Somerset, but largely because of the influence of Redford of the Homecomings on public history in the Albemarle region.

157 N&O, September 8, 1996.
Programmers at Somerset therefore walked on thin ice as they tried to shape a site that appealed to mass belief in American progress in the area of race relations. They understood that making African American history mainstream was a potentially dangerous business—dangerous for the ways it could spark resistance among some whites who believed that any discussion of blacks was an unnecessary move by a special interest group to politicize history, and also for the fact that it made comfortable a story that might have been even more valuable for its dissonance. Examining the history of African Americans could lay bare the contradictions at the heart of American society; such a frank look at the nation’s past could lead to true “justice for all” in the present. But in the 1990s, “color-blindness” was the order of the day, and emphasizing the politics of race was decidedly un-American. The work of integration had yielded to the belief among many whites and blacks—at least those in the middle class and higher—that race was no longer a primary issue. Now that African Americans had the right to be everywhere and significant numbers were moving into visible positions of power and influence the problems of racial injustice had been solved. Whites who continued to express racist sentiments were written off as uninformed, misguided and aberrant, and

158 Conservative critics of diversification frequently trotted out the accusation of politicizing sites and attractions when they made shifts to address the history of anyone other than powerful white men. Some commentators argue that ‘adding’ African American history and the history of slavery to the narratives at historic sites and attractions is a way of politicizing history. In fact, history is always political, and sites such as Somerset already bear evidence of stories about power relations; the question is only what, if anything, programmers will do with that evidence. Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 313-14. See also Novick.
anyone who insisted that Americans should acknowledge the persistence of white supremacy was labeled as a bleeding heart and a trouble maker.159

Within this tricky context, Somerset Place set a precedent for ways of incorporating African American history into an existing historic site, ‘diversifying’ the issues it covered and the audiences to whom it might appeal while upholding important cultural norms and thus claiming political neutrality. Programmers wanted to alter the site’s interpretations, to be sure, but they also wanted to maintain its place in North Carolina’s public historical canon. They seem to have wanted to make Somerset an exemplary site rather than an enfant terrible, to attract attention rather than notoriety. Dorothy Redford noted that a marker of the site’s success was how well it avoided political critiques and confrontation by steering people away from “talking about black issues or slave issues or non-slave issues,” and instead toward “talking about family feelings—feelings of being connected.”160 Focusing on positive stories of connection and family was important in order to attract visitors, especially people in the area around the site who—white and black—continued to resist discussing a history of slavery outside the


160 Gordon: 33.
framework of a success narrative. The new stories Somerset offered to the public thus had the potential to break both historical and political convention and offer a radical critique of American ideals, but programmers eschewed such an analysis, and favored instead a mainstream perspective that they, the general public, and interpreters at other sites could more easily digest.

Somerset’s precedent reverberated at sites around the state, perhaps most obviously at Historic Hope plantation in Bertie County, where the “racial issue” came to a “boil” in 2001. After years of supporting the site’s programming, the Bertie Board of Commissioners withheld its annual financial contribution because Hope failed to include African Americans in its interpretations. Bertie was 62 percent black, and local citizens formed a group to lobby the board on this issue, stating “the story of the slaves

161 Cahoon interview; Samford interview. Samford points out that reluctance to discuss slavey is not a problem limited to Somerset; this is “a general American problem.” As it is, even with its positive focus, according to Cahoon, when most people in the area hear the word “Somerset” they “automatically turn off.” Overall, Samford questions the degree of connection between the site and surrounding communities. Besides the annual Christmas Open House, which draws large numbers to decorate the mansion and enjoy seasonal festivities, most people in the region pay it little attention. Charles Wilson suggests that even for African American descendants, after all that has happened, there is less connection with the site now than he believes there should be. See Wilson interview.

162 Other sites in North Carolina developed significant African American history programs around the same time as Somerset. It appears that Somerset was influential in important ways, but further research is required in order to arrive at a definitive cause-and-effect analysis. At present, Somerset Place seems to have set an important precedent even while African-American history programming at sites like Stagville and the Palmer Memorial Institute grew from specific local impulses and networks of influential African American citizens and policymakers. See interviews: Crow, Knapp, Misenheimer. See also Carolina Comments (November 1986): 158; Carolina Comments (January 1987): 12; Carolina Comments (January 1988); Carolina Comments (January 1989): 16; Carolina Comments (January 2002); Carolina Comments (May 2002): 59.

had not been told there like it has at Somerset Place in nearby Washington County.”

Instead of handing over the usual $22,000 to Hope Plantation, the Board used half the money to hire a fundraising consultant to examine Hope’s market and develop a strategic plan, and a diversity training firm to begin “mending” relationships between whites and blacks in the surrounding area; it promised the other half to the site if and when it developed more balanced exhibits. Following a series of workshops and meetings that focused on brokering “acceptance and understanding” among the members of Hope’s community, Hope staged its own homecoming for slave descendants, and programmers began to work with more sensitivity toward the “feelings and experiences of blacks in the area.” Programmers added some discussion of black history to the tour of the plantation, but overall, the solution at Hope was not a frank discussion of historical methodology or politics, but attention to present-day emotions and targeted marketing.

Hope and Somerset both skirted the most difficult methodological and political challenges posed by plantation sites, and turned instead toward a focus on contemporary visitors’ experiences. It is not unusual for African Americans to claim a visceral connection with slavery when they go to plantation sites or confront artifacts that recall that period in their group’s history. This sense of being able to “feel” the past became

166 Ruffins writes, “These people talk about feeling ‘as if they were there’ and ‘knowing in their bones what the slaves went through.’ Historians are apt to feel that such experiences reflect present-day involvements, not actual information about the past” (“Revisiting,” 414-15); see also “Revisiting,” 419; Ruffins interview. Lovie Fenner, a Somerset descendant who visited slave trading forts in West Africa, explained, “You could really feel yourself in their [the slaves’] situation, when you saw the chains and the quarters.” N&O.
institutionalized at the site in the 1990s. It became embedded in programming that aimed to link generations of descendants and to provide those without kinship ties a sense of what it was like to be enslaved, such that all visitors might identify with people in the past and understand on a personal level the implications of living on an antebellum plantation. The homecomings were one obvious place where these feelings were encouraged, and in addition, the site developed comprehensive “hands-on,” experiential learning programs for students and other visiting groups.

The hands-on programs were designed to offer all visitors a rich emotional experience. Programmers believed that hands-on programs could help “to bridge the gap” between “different racial and ethnic groups” “by emphasizing the aspects of history and daily life common to everybody living during the 1840s.” Participants were guided through a structure and environment intended to collapse present and past, and encouraged to understand themselves not as mere visitors to the site but as participants in

September 1, 1991; William Gordon, a descendant of slaves in Alabama and Mississippi, also felt a feeling of connection when he visited Somerset: “As I continued to walk across the grounds, I began to feel that I was hearing voices whispering softly from the past, causing me to have a feeling of kinship with the people who worked and died there.” Gordon: 28-9; Redford, Somerset Homecoming, 209-10; Wilson interview. Governor Martin employed the notion of ancestors speaking to descendants in the present when he spoke to the crowd at the homecoming in 1986. He told the descendants that their bond with their enslaved ancestors that day “reverberated across the centuries and pulsed through their hearts to yours.” He asked them, “Did you hear it? Did you hear the sound in your head calling you home?” RBWCN, September 3, 1986.

Landsberg suggests that people’s ability to develop an emotional connection with a given historical representation may have “democratizing potential” (34), as it allows diverse groups of people—for instance, whites and African Americans—to see through each other’s eyes and understand each other’s traumatic experiences in a collective way (113).

Somerset News (Fall 1999). SPSHS.

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168 Somerset News (Fall 1999). SPSHS.
the daily activities of an antebellum plantation.\textsuperscript{169} The emphasis was not on imagining a connection with the past, but on “bringing history to life” in an actual experience.\textsuperscript{170} A typical hands-on program began with an orientation to and tour of the site. Student groups who visited from elementary and high schools might be told they had “just traveled back in time,” and then directed to take on one of the typical roles on the plantation—for instance, an overseer or one of the enslaved in the kitchen or field—and to do the work someone in that role might have done, such as hauling water, printing Adinkra cloth, grinding corn, or making gourd bowls, baskets, brooms and candles. Which job they did was assigned to them by drawing a slip of colored paper, thus demonstrating the lack of choice a worker on a plantation might have had.\textsuperscript{171}

There is no reason to doubt that participants in a hands-on program—or, in fact, in any kind of tour of Somerset Place—had a “real experience,” complete with genuine emotions and deep insights. But they did not “experience the real.”\textsuperscript{172} Feeling is, fundamentally, personal and present, not universal and historical. Perhaps an audience might generate empathy, but feeling is about that audience in that time: it is a product of their perceptions and experiences, not those of actors in the past. While it may motivate


\textsuperscript{170} Carnes-McNaughton and Redford, in Steen, Restoration Excavations at Somerset Place Plantation State Historic Site, 246.

\textsuperscript{171} Hands-on programs for students bring approximately 5,000 visitors to Somerset per year. See, Jones and Phelps, 614; Cahoon: 85; Human Relations Seminar, June 4-6, 1993. SPSHS, Somerset Place Foundation Binder 1992; Somerset News (v. 2, no. 1, Summer 1993). SPSHS.

\textsuperscript{172} Landsberg, 33.
progressive action in the present it does not necessarily deepen historical understanding. Participants in hands-on programs at Somerset experienced the act of narrating or identifying with ideas about the past, but the past as events which happened and are now over is not repeatable, and it is impossible for anyone to ‘step back’ and unite with an earlier time and place, or even to feel what it would have been like to be a person living at that time.  

Experiential history is particularly problematic at sites like Somerset where a reconstructed and refurbished environment engages visitors’ five senses and suggests that they are experiencing history in a total way. One of Dorothy Redford’s goals at Somerset was to provide visitors with tangible evidence that would imply a complete and authentic experience. A visitor to Somerset in 2000 could stand in the actual kitchen where the enslaved cooked, and climb the same stairs that the planter and his house slaves climbed.

173 For more on issues of the public’s and historians’ effort to reconstruct and experience history all the while it is un-repeatable, see Benjamin, *Illuminations*, esp. 257-9. As Howard Green put it: “I do not know if there are realities to the past. Probably there are, or were. However, it is difficult to ‘know’ them now. It was hard enough then” (“The Social Construction of Historical Significance,” in Tomlan, 89). He continues, “So here’s the rub. If meaning in the past is found in the present, what’s to prevent somebody from deciding that what we once thought was unimportant is now extremely significant. My answer is nothing; and ultimately that’s the beauty of studying history. However, selling this to the many constituencies of the historic preservation movement is a challenge” (90). See also W. Brown Morton, III, “Managing the Impact on Cultural Resources of Changing Concepts of Significance,” in Tomlan, esp. 145-7.

174 *RBWCN*, July 23, 1986. Hosmer notes that preservationists have long operated with the sense that “the mere act of stepping inside a historic house would thus produce a mystical change in the visitor… Just how this was to happen no one ever outlined, though it was generally expected that visitors would be purified by gaining a sense of appreciation for the beauties of colonial life along with a feeling of gratitude for the sacrifices of those who first lived in these early homes” (266). According to Michael Ettema, “time travel” approaches to interpretation that encourage stepping back into the past sever the past from the present so that participants cannot question life after the date interpreted. He writes, “The complete and seductive nature of the recreated material environment leads the visitor only to explore what can be seen and touched” (“History Museums and the Culture of Materialism,” in Blatti, 73).
in the mansion. The scholar Alison Landsberg suggests that in museums and exhibits people can “take on” the “memories” of objects: they can “become their prostheses.” Simply being in the environment of a former plantation, for instance, implies some kind of transference of feeling between the environment and the person experiencing it, and that emotional connection is the production of knowledge.  

Somerset’s hands-on programs were premised on the idea that there is knowledge inherent in both bodies and objects. At least one experiential workshop in 1993 was based on the British educator Dorothy Heathcoate’s method of “creative dramatics,” which aims to “evolve” rather than direct drama. Heathcoate teaches that people have knowledge within them that allows them to connect with all humanity if they commit to placing themselves within and embodying a situation, whether that is a nineteenth-century plantation, a ship setting sail in 1610, or something else entirely. Her work endeavors “to bring out” in people what they “already know but don’t yet know they know.” The “end point is the discovery of universal human experience,” or as she puts it, “dropping to the universal.” “She uses what is happening in the drama as an occasion to

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175 Landsberg, 131 and 136.

176 Michael Kammen argues artifacts are “all the more deceptive because they seemed to be so empirically sound. Photographs and elderly relations surely don’t lie. They are real windows on the past, albeit dim and dangerously opaque, at times, in their revelations” (In the Past Lane, 204). He also states that proclaiming an unparalleled authenticity in material artifacts “involves an explicit element of anti-intellectualism—the presumption, for example, that history experienced through sites and material culture must be more memorable than history presented on the printed page” (219). Landsberg argues that “transferential spaces” allow people “to enter into experiential relationships to events through which they themselves did not live. Through such spaces people may gain access to a range of processual, sensually immersed knowledge that would be difficult to acquire by purely cognitive means” (113).
remind the group that all through time people have found themselves in the position they are in at that moment…“177

Perhaps placing bodies and objects in particular configurations will result in useful knowledge: there is no doubt that placing oneself in the proximity of a slave cabin or a master’s whip will impel some kind of reaction that has an important effect on the person having the experience. In certain situations and for certain purposes, experiential methods are undoubtedly beneficial. Yet Somerset is not one of those places if the goal is to understand history. Without discounting the possibility of a shared human experience, “dropping to the universal” sidesteps historical analysis. Even if people share feelings across time and space, recognizing those shared feelings does little to explain the specificity of a particular context or cause-and-effect. Acknowledging the limits of experiential forms of knowledge production does not denigrate them overall; it only identifies them as inappropriate strategies for historical study.

Yet the suggestion of “traveling back in time” in order to understand history is compelling, particularly with respect to slavery. At Somerset, the emotional power of the story and the sensory engagement with objects and structures recalling enslavement might be strong enough to convince a person standing in the kitchen or mansion, or in a reconstructed cabin or beside a canal dug by the enslaved—despite any intellectual

177 Human Relations Seminar, June 4-6, 1993. SPSHS, Somerset Place Foundation Binder 1992; Betty Jane Wagner, Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 59 and 76. See also 13-19 for general discussion of Heathcote’s methods.
knowledge to the contrary—that she is personally connecting with the past.\textsuperscript{178} The tautological point that the past is past is masked by the persuasiveness of remaining evidence. A contemporary visitor who occupied these spots could not have had the same experience as an historical actor 150, 50, or even five years prior, but concrete structures encourage people to understand themselves as “there,” where “history” happened, part of the historical landscape. Contemporary observers imagine themselves in stories about the past, and the act of imagining becomes more compelling and more vivid when it takes place literally inside historical evidence. But it is still imagining, not being. Material artifacts encourage engagement with the past, yet there remains a wall that observers in the present can never surmount.\textsuperscript{179}

Telling a person that she or he can ‘step back’ into the antebellum past and providing the kind of persuasive, emotionally charged context that is Somerset Place erases the work it took to get her or him to the site in the first place and the politics of the

\textsuperscript{178} Several prominent scholars of memory note the general public sense that historians act to skew history toward an agenda that—whether its political cast is right or left of center—is inauthentic. Public distrust and rejection of academic history in favor of vernacular historical forms is often based on senses of personal experience and memory, which seem to them to be more ‘real.’ The residents of Washington County who put together their local history, Washington County: A Tapestry, pointed out, “Many stories about the plantation can be found in the North Carolina Collection [at East Carolina University’s Joyner library], but perhaps none is so heartwarming as Dorothy Spruill Redford’s Somerset Homecoming, the true story of her search for her heritage” (Jones and Phelps, 628-9). See also Michael Frisch, “American History and the Structure of Collective Memory: A Modern Exercise in Empirical Iconography” Journal of American History 75, 4 (March 1989): 1130-1155; David Thelen, “Memory and American History,” Journal of American History 75, 4 (March 1989): 1117-1129; Linenthal, “Struggling with History and Memory,” Journal of American History 82, 3 (December 1995): 1094-1101; Hayden White, Metahistory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 13.

\textsuperscript{179} According to Joyce Appleby, “Historical knowledge comes not from remembering the past, but from taking questions to it.” Historians “engage with the past rather than try to reconstruct what actually happened” (A Restless Past, 3 and 13).
history being presented. Ironically, it silences the conversation between present and past by limiting engagement with the construction of history. As we have seen, Somerset’s twentieth-century history was a major struggle over who could see what evidence at a given time; who had the power to decide what counted as evidence; and how evidence could be spun into stories that were more or less easy for a variety of audiences to digest.

There is nothing to be taken for granted in any of Somerset’s narratives, no message guaranteed to be read by all audiences throughout time, no fixed story waiting for visitors to access.¹⁸⁰

There is a potentially knowable past; history is a discipline that relies upon one or another kind of documentary evidence in order to tell stories about the past. It is neither arbitrary nor random. But it is cumulative; it is not created in one moment of action, nor in one person or object. There is a past that once was, but it looked different to a variety of people at the time. And in the present, in its re-telling, it looks different yet again if its traces have survived in a way that allows it to be known at all.¹⁸¹ Experiential programs

¹⁸⁰ Brett describes the Strokestown Famine Museum in Ireland as an alternative to the usual experiential historic site. He writes, “…the museum has the directed one-way narrative of a rather old-fashioned didactic exhibition; but that narrative is continually undercut by visual and auditory commentaries that emphasise the lack of knowledge, the obscurity of the historical material, and the one-sidedness of any possible story that can draw no evidence from the dead and gone. Almost all the available material on the Famine is provided by those who did not go hungry” (141). He continues, “…the strategy of the Famine Museum seems to be genuinely emancipatory in that it invites us to participate in the creation of its meanings; we become our own story-tellers, reassembling the fragments we are offered... And in doing so we become aware of our own position of security and privilege, and become responsible for our own response.” (150). The museum encourages this kind of reception by “confronting the visitor with alternative possibilities. In this way we, the visitors, create the integration and integrity of the experience; we are not given an ‘interpretation’” (164).

¹⁸¹ According to Appleby, “A part of the public evidently looks upon historical knowledge as already known and hence fixed for all time. Yet fresh inquiries in history constantly expand what is known as they do in any other scholarly pursuit. This is difficult to accept if one thinks that the past itself exercises some
mask the complexity of history as a dialectical relationship between traces of past action that is over and ongoing, repeated, ever-changing processes of fact-creation and narration not only in the present but in every moment between the present and the action that is past. They thus present an epistemological problem that should trouble historians.

For those unconcerned with issues of narrative and fact creation, the programs pose significant empirical problems as well, as they transmit messages about slavery that are anything but accurate. A document describing a weekend hands-on workshop for scholars held in June 1993 states, “For all participants realism will be the hallmark of the…activities.” But how could any workshop offer participants a “realistic” experience of slavery more than a century after the fact? What could “realistic” even have meant? Even if participants in a workshop were to take on the same tasks that the enslaved did or adopt their identities for a period of time, the physical experience and meaning of the work itself would be entirely different because the context was so vastly altered. Hauling water for one or two days after volunteering to participate in an

power over historical investigators. In actuality, the past totally disappears with each passing minute, leaving behind only traces that will need to be reconstructed and interpreted later, if at all. Neither professional historians nor anyone else possesses a retrospective camera to capture what actually happened” (13). For a critique of poststructuralist methods that she believes claim history “has no reality” and criticize those who aim to move away from experience as an analytical category, see Joan Hoff, “Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis,” Women’s History Review (3, 2: June 1994): 149-68.

182 Lowenthal notes that while historians generally understand that objectivity is impossible, the public does not. Moreover, the public rarely understands the difference between history as that which happened, and that which is chronicled. A site like Somerset, therefore, would do well to make this distinction explicit by foregrounding the process of chronicling. Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past, 106.


184 Somerset only occasionally asks visitors to adopt an actual historical actor’s identity; the scholars’ workshop in 1993 is the only documented instance I found. However, this kind of strategy is common
educational program is not the same job—not even remotely similar—as hauling water
day in and day out for years and years, with no foreseeable end except death or sale.

Slavery's hallmark was its permanence: Emancipation was the victory it was
because it put an end to what had been, for more than two centuries, a hereditary state of
being, a condition meant to last forever. Participants in any hands-on ‘experience’ of
antebellum plantation life know, the entire time, that their condition—whether as slaves,
masters or otherwise—is temporary; they are there at the plantation site by choice rather
than force. Overlooking this distinction, downplaying its significance, ignores the central
facts in the history being studied. There is a fundamental difference between those role-
playing slave society in the present versus living it in the past, and no amount of
imagination, knowledge, empathy or will to understand can or should bridge that gap.\textsuperscript{185}

In some ways, attempting to recreate the feeling of being enslaved could be an
try to avoid the most incisive critiques that could come from understanding
America’s history as a slave society. Perhaps focusing on individual feeling in the
present distracts from a frank discussion of systemic injustice in the past. The historian
Peter Wood argues that Americans generally are in denial about their traumatic history of
slavery. Slavery, Wood suggests, was more “harrowing than all but a few have dared to
portray it,” and such a harrowing history is not one that can be faced with any ease as it

\textsuperscript{185} Wood, \textit{Blind Memory}, passim.
casts doubt on America’s self-image as a land of freedom and opportunity and the vanguard of democracy.\textsuperscript{186}

It may seem at first glance that the most “harrowing” thing about slavery was the coercion and violence involved. Perhaps Somerset skirted that issue by providing so little evidence—either in its artifacts or its tour scripts—of the fundamentally abusive nature of slavery.\textsuperscript{187} The site was intended to “affirm” African American life rather than condemn those who forced African Americans to be at the plantation, and to bolster contemporary Americans’ sense of themselves as good and progressive.\textsuperscript{188} Although the site never denied that slavery was harsh and that African Americans suffered within it, audiences were likely to leave Somerset thinking mainly of positive things—of the growth of communities, of generations, of strength—based largely on their sense of progress at the end of the twentieth century. Somerset’s interpretations allowed them to overlook

\textsuperscript{186} Wood, “Slave Labor Camps”: 230; 227.

\textsuperscript{187} There was no concrete evidence of physical discipline in Somerset’s interpretive structure until after 2002 when programmers placed a stockade at the entrance. The stockade that greets visitors references the story of Becky Drew, a slave who contracted frostbite while confined there as punishment for running away and had to have her feet and legs amputated as a result. Scholars invited to comment on the state of the exhibits in 2002 concurred with Redford’s sense that putting the stocks up front was important in order to meet potential criticism of how well-constructed the slave buildings were, and the appearance, at Somerset, that slaves fared relatively well in their day-to-day lives. See “Abbreviated Orientation for General Audiences,” January 2003. SPSHS, Training Reports and Scripts; Proposed Interpretive Tour Historical Context, \textit{A Question of Scope}, File: Scholars’ Meeting—Interpreting New Buildings in the Slave Community, 2002. SPSHS: Materials for Staff Training, with memo from Redford to Richard Knapp, June 1995. NCHSS. Sure enough, Christopher Collins did use the beauty of the site as evidence of the fact that his great-great-grandfather treated his slaves well and thus to guard against a critique of slavery. See Collins interview.

\textsuperscript{188} \textit{N&O}, February 7, 2001.
slavery’s brutality if they chose, with the justification that there was no use in dwelling on the negative.\(^{189}\)

There is something to be said for avoiding interpretations with cruelty and violence at their core. It is likely that a significant audience would embrace a narrative of violence at a plantation site, whether out of voyeuristic fascination, a desire for cathartic experience or a deep contemporary need to condemn people in the past for the true harm they did inflict. But the urge to focus on violence is as reductive as focusing only on resilience.

A focus on violence is itself an historically conditioned response. In the final decades of the twentieth century, some Americans began to view slavery through a new lens: the lens of Nazi genocide. Remembering the Holocaust became the dominant paradigm for discussing any collective historical trauma.\(^{190}\) In her autobiography, Redford describes a confrontation with a journalist at the first homecoming who could only compare Somerset Place with the ruins of the Nazi concentration camps in Europe: “He couldn’t grasp that we were finding our roots here, connecting with family, celebrating strength and survival. The German concentration camps were about horror and death. He saw slavery only in that light.”\(^{191}\) But despite the prevalence of comparisons between the two, as traumas, the Holocaust and slavery had important,

\(^{189}\) Gordon: 31.

\(^{190}\) Sundquist, 283.

historically specific differences. Among other things, slavery was a centuries-long political, social and economic system, which, even accepting the violence involved with maintaining it, had the central goal of producing profit not of killing a people. Slavery was horrifically cruel and it had the tragic consequence of destroying a range of peoples in Africa. Yet killing—while rampant—was not the system’s primary purpose. The Holocaust, by contrast, was genocide; it was short-term and it was directed explicitly toward destruction. Whereas during slavery killing was too often a means to an end, in the Holocaust killing was the end in itself.  

“Slavery was horrible, and it was about death,” Redford explains, “But at Somerset it was also about life. This wasn’t a place for killing. We died here, but we also gave birth here. And we grew beyond this place.”

Somerset’s programmers emphasized the vibrancy of the slave community instead of the violence of slavery—placed the enslaved’s history outside of the Holocaust paradigm—

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192 In “Revisiting,” Ruffins points out that “the success of [the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C.] has become a symbolic archetype, architectural and exhibitionary, for expressing the sacrifices and tragedies of a people’s collective identity. Before the Holocaust Museum opened, African American museum professionals began to talk among themselves about the possible impact this could have on previously silent areas of American history, such as slavery” (399). She discusses the ways in which some groups in the U.S.—in particular African Americans—have tried to adopt the word holocaust to refer to their own traumatic histories because the word has such power, a power which seemed to expand after the opening of the D.C. museum (400-01). Mostly, it is what she calls “cultural activists” who adopt the term; at Howard University, they established a Black Holocaust conference in 1994, which subsequently became an annual event (410). But this move began long before 1994, with diverse figures including W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke and Booker T. Washington discussing the oppression of African Americans in comparison with the oppression of Jews. See Sundquist, 24. Sundquist views the Jewish Holocaust as “the benchmark of genocide against which at least one other case, African American slavery and its aftermath has been judged.” (6) and his book provides an excellent discussion of the historical relationship between blacks, Jews and slavery, holocaust and genocide. See passim, and esp. 208-16. As Marcus Wood puts it in Blind Memory, there is no “easy comparison” between slavery and the Holocaust because “Plantation slavery was rooted in oppression but allowed space for, indeed encouraged, so much happiness and success…” (280).

and thus seem to have downplayed what some might say was slavery’s “harrowing” history.

Violence was, in fact, only one piece of a much more complicated puzzle. The trauma of slavery was much deeper than violence or even death. Looking back on the narratives the site presented, it appears that Somerset both suggested and silenced a particularly chilling analysis of the trauma of slavery. In the 1980s and 90s, Somerset emphasized the subjects of conventional social history—lifeways, family structure, cultural practice, and hard work—in order to show how the enslaved lived, day to day, and how they built lives of their own within the confines of slavery. Somerset showed visitors that for centuries, for hundreds of people, the institution of slavery was realized not in big, dramatic events but in the most mundane of tasks. Presentist methodologies and progressivist motivations limited the conclusions programmers could draw from this story: their primary goals were to emphasize the slaves’ skillful adaptation and important contributions to American life, and to celebrate their inclusion in a unified nation. Moreover, programming at Somerset presented this information in ways that could be almost quaint; asking students to tie brooms and dip candles might have been meant to recall the daily tasks of the enslaved, but for the average school child who took on those tasks, it probably amounted to little more than a fun afternoon making a souvenir.194

194 Cahoon interview; Greg Barnes, telephone interview with author, February 1, 2006.
Too often, perhaps, programmers used evidence at Somerset to build feel-good narratives of celebration and healing, but in the course of building these narratives they also, probably inadvertently, created a different one, which was deeply unsettling. Viewed from an angle separate from gimmicks and kitsch, evidence of mundanity may suggest that what was truly “harrowing” about slavery at Somerset and beyond was that it was normal. The exhibits told audiences that people lived their lives in slavery: not only their lifetimes, but the worlds they made for themselves in relationships and households. Slavery was not merely a moment of violent whipping or backbreaking canal-digging or audacious running away. These moments happened, of course. But for most people, most of the time, slavery was not remarkable cruelty or dramatic resistance, but the dull repetition of working for someone else’s best interests, on someone else’s watch, and knowing that whatever life one was living could change on a dime, at someone else’s whim. As Ruffins puts it, “there are dramatic, terrible violent events that take place, there are sales,” but the real horror is less those dramatic moments and more the perpetual compulsion, “the years of planting and harvesting rice.” This kind of life was the fate of the nation’s most important workforce at Somerset and beyond: countless numbers of people of African descent lived for centuries in suspended animation, going about their lives always waiting for the other shoe to drop, while the rest of America—the masters, middlemen and other beneficiaries, North and South—profited from their insecurity.

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195 Ruffins interview.
Slavery was, for everyone, for most of the nation’s history, a central fact of daily life, and it would be hard to tell a story about America that did not refer to it in some way, however toned down, disguised or euphemistic the references might be.\textsuperscript{196} But over a century after its abolition, the range of stories acceptable to tell—perhaps even possible for most to envision—was still extremely narrow.\textsuperscript{197} The public was quick to embrace the celebratory narrative of resilience, reconciliation and progress that Somerset developed in the 80s and 90s, and which helped to enhance regional and national pride. In the future, the public might be as quick to embrace a story of violence and brutality should the site ever opt to move in that direction, partly because those themes are so familiar in contemporary culture.\textsuperscript{198}

What the American public is probably much less apt to accept is a story about dispassionate economic calculation, and the master-slave relationship as the nation’s

\textsuperscript{196} Elkins, 1.

\textsuperscript{197} Brundage, \textit{The Southern Past}, 306. Redford has considered the possibility of examining the legacy of slavery. Redford was considering “the extent to which [interpretations] should include the impact of slavery’s varied legacies on current generations.” But when she asked their opinion on whether Somerset was obliged to do this, given the sense among visitors that the site was transmitting “real history,” the response, primarily from James McPherson, was that the resources really were not sufficient, and she should stick to interpreting the middle years of the nineteenth century. See Proposed Interpretive Tour Historical Context, \textit{A Question of Scope}, File: Scholars’ Meeting—Interpreting New Buildings in the Slave Community, 2002. SPSHS; Transcript, Somerset Place Scholars’ Meeting, June 21, 2002. SPSHS. also wrote of the homecoming in 2001, “Please note that this is the last event at Somerset to be termed a Homecoming and the last event to focus on the descendants of the plantation and their ancestors.” It is possible that this signaled the beginning of a planned interpretive shift. There is not enough evidence to know conclusively, but it appears that after 2001 Redford began to move, however tentatively, away from a commemorative approach and toward one that was more scholarly. See Letter, Redford to Paul Bock, September 12, 2000. SPSHS, File: 2000/01 CI Projects. This is supported at least in part by the fact that she continued to cultivate relationships with academics around the state, including Peter Wood and Syd Nathans in the Department of History at Duke, and she organized and held a scholars’ meeting in 2002 that brought an interdisciplinary team from universities across the country to the site.

\textsuperscript{198} Lowenthal, \textit{Possessed by the Past}, 155-6; Urry, 130-31.
defining structure, shaping interactions at the plantation and beyond, in the North and the South, from the most deeply personal to the highest political realms. America’s social, political and economic development depended upon singling out black people as a slave labor force; even after slavery was abolished, that characterization remained widely significant and terribly oppressive. But an interpretation that takes this history into account might never be woven into Somerset’s exhibits because there is no way to heal from it, and no way to isolate it in the past. While slavery as a system no longer exists, all Americans still reap its benefits. At the very same time as African Americans suffer from the long term effects of slavery and the entire nation remains gripped by the destructive power of white supremacy, Americans as a group enjoy unrivaled privilege in large part because of the centuries of slavery that enabled the formation of their particular brand of freedom and democracy. This is a legacy that may be impossible to represent at state historic sites without indicting an entire nation in the present. Indictment is not the purpose of historical narratives presented at state sites. It has no place at sites dedicated to fostering patriotism, and specifically no place at Somerset, where descendants of the

199 For a fascinating discussion of the significance of the master-slave relationship in early American history, see Christopher Tomlins, Law, Labor and Ideology in the Early American Republic (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also Wood, “Slave Labor Camps.”

200 Haire interview. Ruffins suggests that Americans are able to accept stories about the trauma of the Middle Passage precisely because it was a much more limited scenario, both in scope and duration, which did not take place on American soil (interview).
enslaved committed themselves to a positive view of the past, to examining history in ways that build their sense of group and individual identity.\textsuperscript{201}

The history of slavery—the history of America—is composed of many often contradictory constituent parts. Slavery was many things, things that are not always easy to reconcile; that are often taxing to acknowledge; and that do not make for a smooth telling of the past. At the very least, it was an economic system that has left remainders of where people worked and the products of their labor. It was a system that enabled the formation of America’s free market and underwrote global trade. It was an expression of man’s inhumanity to man, which both required and enabled a structured and systematic cruelty manifest in pictures of scarred bodies, and in technologies of discipline: whips and lashes, cuffs and fetters. It was an institution in which the targeted group built an adaptive culture of perseverance, evident in the remains of the quarters as well as less tangible traces such as kinship structures, music, folklore and spirituality; and where significant numbers within that group also faltered, unable to rise above deep and persistent inequity and disadvantage. It was all of this and more, but it was none of these things alone. Each story—alone or in combination with another—bears an important message, and in Ruffins’ words, the question remains, “which stories are emerging as the

\textsuperscript{201} For a range of excellent critiques of the difficulty of talking frankly about slavery in public venues, see the recent collection edited by James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, \textit{Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory} (New York: The New Press, 2006).
most meaningful to which groups of people?" A complex and holistic story lies deep within the evidence at Somerset Place; eventually, when the timing is right, someone will tell it.

Epilogue

“Broomsticks and Orange Blossoms”

On a late June afternoon in 2003, Charles Lorenzo Wilson and his family made their way out of the large slave cabin, followed a path that would once have passed a row of more than twenty other quarters, and joined Leslie Renee Bell and her family in the field behind the enslaved community complex. They stood before assembled guests to exchange wedding vows in a ceremony that blended Igbo and Christian traditions, and to ask for blessings not only from those who witnessed their union there in the field, but also Wilson’s distant enslaved ancestors, Kofi and Sally, and the many descendants in between who connected him with that first couple imported to Somerset Place in 1786.¹

When Bell donned her wedding clothes in the small slave cabin earlier that day she had nowhere to check her appearance: the cabin where she dressed was as rough as always, with no additional amenities as she prepared for the event. Bell had to take Wilson on faith that the African garb they had chosen looked good, and that she made the right decision when she shelved the white dress she had bought months before, prior to Dorothy Redford’s urging that they marry at Somerset, prior to visiting the site and confirming that holding her wedding there was something she wanted to do.²

¹ Wilson interview; The Wedding Ceremony and Rundown, SPSHS, wedding folder, cabinet 2, drawer 3; A Wedding Story, SPSHS, wedding folder, cabinet 2, drawer 3.

² Wilson interview; Cast of Volunteers for June 21st, SPSHS, wedding folder, cabinet 2, drawer 3; A Wedding Story, SPSHS, wedding folder, cabinet 2, drawer 3.
Hours after the ceremony, back in the hotel where she had spent the previous night, Bell finally saw herself reflected in the full-length mirror in the elevator. Wilson recalls his new wife’s exclamation: “Oh my God! I look beautiful! I’m a princess!”

“And that was her whole thing,” he explains, “this nice wedding dress that she had purchased…she had all that planned out, and then she put all that on hold…. To hear her say…, “Okay, now I understand.”

The whole time [we were planning the wedding] I was telling her, “It’s going to be okay, it’s actually going to be better.” And she was like, “Okay, whatever,” but still trusting that it was going to work out…and we were doing it for the right reasons. So for her, that was like total confirmation that “Yes, you’re right, it did turn out better. I wanted to just be a princess on my wedding day, looking princess-y, and this is even better than that, I’m a queen. And the dress I had had nothing on this.” It was just amazing.

Many of their friends never really understood why the couple—one of them from California, the other from New York—chose to hold their wedding at a former slave plantation in northeastern North Carolina. But as the day wound to a close Wilson and Bell were both convinced that their wedding had been perfect because of where it was held, because it wove their relationship into a rich cultural and historical fabric emphasizing both continuity and change.3

Wilson remembers his wedding day with a genuine and infectious sense of wonder. He describes it as “beautiful” and “ideal.” He remembers feeling the love of centuries of family wrapping around him and his wife, carrying them on to an exciting new phase of their lives. He felt as though his ancestors were watching out for them; stopping the rain that had poured down in sheets on the site the day before; helping

3 Wilson interview.
friends and loved ones find their way to Somerset’s remote location; enabling all the complicated logistics involved with executing the ceremony and reception to come together; and, most of all, allowing him to be alive—not just to exist, but to be clear and present, generating a new branch of family on what he considered to be sacred ground. As he said to Diane Sawyer in an interview for an ABC Television special on weddings that aired on his and Bell’s first anniversary, “Where best to create family than at the location where your family was created here on this continent?”

Wilson’s story tells us that Somerset Place, in its most recent iteration, is a gift to its descendants. It is a gift also to people such as Leslie Bell, who cannot trace their ancestry back very far at all, who know their forebears were enslaved but do not know many of their names or who fits where on their family tree. Bell did not know who her original ancestors were in America, when they arrived or from where they came. But on June 21, 2003, near Creswell, North Carolina, she wedded a family that did, which welcomed her into a lineage that was concrete, composed of real individuals with real histories and lives of their own.

The Wilson-Bell wedding was prefaced at Somerset by such events as “Broomsticks and Orange Blossoms,” a ceremony at the first homecoming in 1986, which depicted the marriage of an enslaved couple who jumped the broom “to see which

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5 Wilson interview.
one gwine be boss of [the] household.”6 In 1991, at the third homecoming, Michelle Jones, a descendant of the enslaved community, jumped the broom with her fiancé, William Hudson, dressed in the simple cotton clothing Redford and others deduced enslaved people would have worn to celebrate their marriages in the antebellum era.7 Wedding ceremonies that drew on black people’s traditions—African and African American—overtook the old Gone with the Wind-style affairs that had long dominated at the site, and demonstrated that while immense struggles remained to be waged, in fundamental ways descendants of Somerset slaves had broken social and political barriers and claimed a place in American society that their ancestors had been bitterly denied.

Under slavery, African Americans could not legally wed. Enslaved couples on plantations all over the South took vows and they took them seriously, yet masters allowed the ceremonies mostly as a tactic to maintain control and were not compelled to respect the relationships as legally binding unions.8 Because of the master’s overwhelming control, families were tenuous when African Americans lived as slaves for the Josiah Collins clan. Now, they could be strong, not only in and of themselves, but on behalf of all those who had come before, who had jumped brooms and promised to love and cherish and yet still been torn apart by a system that saw them as property before they were human beings.

6 Pamphlet, DUSCL, Coming Home, Somerset Homecoming, August 30, 1986.

7 Greensboro News and Record, September 1, 1991.

8 Coming Home, Somerset Homecoming, August 30, 1986. Pamphlet, DUSCL.
The Wilson-Bell wedding was not intended as a history lesson about slavery. But it drew on and thus brought attention to that past by providing an alternative in the present, which emphasized that the oppression of slavery—perhaps at its most wrenching when it tried to negate relationships between partners, parents and children, sisters and brothers—was never total, and asserted the persistent centrality and ultimate autonomy of African American actors at Somerset Place.

By getting married at Somerset, Wilson and Bell joined an ongoing, complicated effort to deepen historical narratives of slavery by redefining the plantation. Indeed, judging by their wedding and the decades of work that enabled it, Somerset Place has proven to be remarkably adaptable. From the end of the Civil War through most of the twentieth century its narrative was exclusive and dedicated to making and upholding myths that began with the Lost Cause. By the turn of the new millennium, descendants of some of its oldest residents—the people who literally built the site—were making themselves fixtures there, 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.

Charles Wilson’s relationship with Somerset and slavery reminds those willing to listen about the paradoxes and contradictions, challenges and triumphs in America’s past. Although most descendants seem to speak primarily about going back to Somerset in celebration, he considers involvement with the site bittersweet. Slavery frames the story of Wilson’s origins, and he contends that it was not paralyzing: enslavement and all its negative effects did not stop him or his ancestors from moving on in their lives, from
creating families and households and from being an important constituency in every realm of society. Yet slavery meant his ancestors suffered the worst kind of exploitation, and its legacies remain “a big injury,” nagging and persistent, which requires constant nursing. No progress—individual or group—can change the fact of oppression in the past, and progress has yet to alter—indeed, may never alter—the grossly inequitable system that was born out of America’s foundation as a slave society. For Wilson, making memories of slavery a part of his contemporary world view emphasizes the multitude of challenges that expand the pursuit of the American Dream far beyond apple pie, Chevrolet, picket fence, two and a half kids, a nice house. It has us striving—it has me striving to understand democracy in a way that it had never been talked about in any of my grade school courses. And to be honest, I still don’t know the true definition of democracy because I don’t think I’ve experienced it to date. I’m still striving to fully experience that so-called American Dream, and that’s kind of my daily pursuit.

Remembering slavery in the context of his family’s history at Somerset Place pushes his striving to a level beyond simple accomplishment and toward a collective experience, as yet unrealized, of democracy and justice.9

As a state historic site representing antebellum slavery, Somerset Place is problematic and it is a gift. Its faults—inevitable, as no historical interpretation can ever be perfect, least of all one with stakes so high for so many people—and victories hang in a tense balance. Political and practical limitations continue to loom as programmers constantly rework the site, aiming to present more compelling exhibits based on audience

9 Wilson interview.
demand, social and cultural conventions, new research and changing modes of thought. The site offers its most valuable lesson when we look at it as a whole, recognizing the things it does uniquely well alongside the problems it has yet to confront or overcome. Somerset throws into relief the immense challenges involved with remembering, representing and redefining American history, and fuels a vital, if still relatively quiet, dialogue about how the nation formed, for and by whom, and the debts its present owes its past.

Charles Wilson considers Somerset Place a “tool” that can enable a nuanced and empathetic view of life for African Americans in the twenty-first century. It can illustrate—not in the abstract, but specifically, through stories about traceable generations of actual families—a complex historical trajectory of simultaneous suffering and success, of independent movement in the context of a deeply flawed system. He has the sense that at present this happens less often than it could, but the potential is definitely there. Oppression and overcoming can both have real faces at Somerset Place, and the site is rich with possibility: what it needs is for “people now”—more people, from varied backgrounds and contexts—to come and make use of it.”

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10 Brundage argues, “Almost certainly too much has been asked of the new African American history museums in the South. They are expected to revise misconceptions about the past, teach inspirational lessons, attract tourists, revive troubled neighborhoods, and spur political activism” (Southern Past, 306).

11 Somerset is best viewed through a both/and lens—rather than an either/or—that Patricia Hill Collins suggests is fundamental to black feminist thought (Collins, 16).

12 Wilson interview.
Appendix

Fig. 1: Map of northeastern North Carolina noting Somerset’s location. [http://www.nchistoricsites.org/somerset/somerset.htm](http://www.nchistoricsites.org/somerset/somerset.htm), accessed June 7, 2008
Fig. 2: Rag doll at Somerset
Photo by Alisa Harrison
Fig. 3: Rag doll on bed
Photo by Alisa Harrison
Fig. 4: Nurse’s room in the mansion.
Photo by Alisa Harrison
Fig. 5: Stocks at the entrance to Somerset Place State Historic Site. Note the brick walkway, excavated foundations, and reconstructed buildings from the enslaved community in the background.
Photo by Alisa Harrison
Fig. 6: Side view of Collins mansion and formal garden
Photo by Alisa Harrison

Figures 7-12 are reproduced from

Fig. 7: The parlor in the mansion
Fig. 8: Bedroom in the mansion

Fig. 9: Dining room in the mansion

Fig. 10: Kitchen hearth
Fig. 11: Stairwell in the mansion

Fig. 12: Collins mansion, side view

For more photos of Somerset Place State Historic Site, see the official website, http://www.nchistoricsites.org/somerset/somerset.htm.
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Biography

Alisa Yael Harrison was born on February 18, 1973, in Vancouver, British Columbia. She attended post-secondary professional dance programs in Toronto and Vancouver and worked as an independent dancer and choreographer before earning her B.A. (1999) and M.A. (2001) in History from the University of British Columbia. In 2008 she received a Graduate Certificate in African and African American Studies (AAAS) and a Ph.D. in History from Duke University with specializations in U.S., southern, African American, comparative colonial, women’s and gender, social and cultural history. Alisa has presented papers at numerous professional and graduate student conferences. She has published book reviews in the North Carolina Historical Review, on H-South, and at www.thirdspace.ca, a peer-reviewed e-journal of feminist scholarship that she co-founded in 2000. Her article, “Women’s and Girls’ Activism in 1960s Southwest Georgia: Rethinking History and Historiography,” appears in Women Shaping the South: Creating and Confronting Change, edited by Angela Boswell and Judith McArthur (University of Missouri Press, 2006). Alisa’s honors include doctoral fellowships from Duke University and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; a Guion Griffis Johnson Southern Studies Research Stipend from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; a graduate student teaching award from AAAS at Duke; a Jacquelyn Dowd Hall Prize from the Southern Association for Women Historians; and a University Graduate Fellowship and Knigge Millennium Scholarship from the University of British Columbia.