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"*To Preserve, Protect, and Pass On:*" Shirley Plantation as a Historic House Museum, 1894–2013

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

"TO PRESERVE, PROTECT, AND PASS ON:" SHIRLEY PLANTATION AS A HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUM, 1894–2013

By Kerry Anne Dahm, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013.

Major Director: Dr. John T. Kneebone
Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University Department of History

This thesis provides an analysis of Shirley Plantation's operation as a historic house museum from 1894 to the present period, and the Carter family's dedication to keeping the estate within the family. The first chapter examines Shirley Plantation's beginnings as a historic house museum as operated by two Carter women, Alice Carter Bransford and Marion Carter Oliver, who inherited the property in the late nineteenth century. The second chapter explores Shirley Plantation's development as a popular historic site during the mid-twentieth century to the early part of the twenty-first century, and compares the site's development to the interpretative changes that had been occurring at Colonial Williamsburg. The third chapter analyzes and critiques Shirley Plantation's present interpretative focus as a historic site, with the fourth chapter offering suggestions for developing an exhibition that interprets the history of slavery at the plantation.

Introduction

It was a hot July day and I was driving home from my interview with Janet Appel, director of the Shirley Plantation Foundation in Charles City County, Virginia. As I drove along the winding, tree-lined Route 5 headed back to Richmond, I had an uncomfortable feeling about my interview with Ms. Appel. I had emailed Ms. Appel a few weeks before requesting to learn more about what it's like to operate a historic house museum like Shirley. The plantation has been in the Hill-Carter family for eleven generations and has been open to the visiting public since 1952. The eleventh-generation Carter, Charles Hill Carter III, inherited the estate when his father, Charles Hill Carter Jr., passed in 2009. I met with Ms. Appel hoping to learn about the day-to-day operations of the historic site and the challenges it faces as a privately owned historic house museum.

The interview began well with Ms. Appel gradually becoming comfortable in talking with me about their conservation and financial challenges. She shared how the guides are trained in giving house tours and how they are encouraged to perform independent historical research using primary sources. She described an environment where each staff member contributes research findings and recommends historical works that are not "too politically biased" to the rest of the staff.[1] They all have passion for learning about what life was like at Shirley during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Ms. Appel stated, "people don't learn history

[1] Janet Appel, interview by author, July 11, 2012.

in high school or college. You learn history by being passionate about the subject and continuing to learn about it."

I thought our conversation would help me learn about Shirley Plantation's history as a historic site. What motivated Charles Hill Carter Jr. to open the first floor of his home to the public in 1952? Ms. Appel briefly stated that after World War II, visitors were interested in connecting to American history driving up to the home. She then described at length the unfairness of inheritance tax laws, which were a huge part of the financial challenges that Charles Hill Carter III faced in preserving the estate. After talking awhile and feeling that Ms. Appel was open to discussing Shirley's operations as a historic house museum, I asked her, "as a plantation and with slavery being a sensitive topic to interpret for the public, what challenges has Shirley faced about this topic and how have you all overcome these challenges?" Ms. Appel's demeanor changed instantly, her body stiffened and she leaned closer to me as she gave her response, "First, people need to stop saying that slavery is a sensitive topic because it's not. We tell people the truth here. Slavery did not cause the Civil War, the issue of states' rights did." She asked me if I had seen their new slavery exhibit in the kitchen outbuilding, I replied that I had, and she explained, "we have been collecting people's questions about slavery and providing answers to some of them." She stated that some of the questions were too ridiculous to answer, but she said that they have put binders in the kitchen with the questions and answers so that people could look through them to learn about slavery at Shirley. Ms. Appel described how people think slavery was bad in America but they do not think about how slavery happens everyday around the world today and asked, "why don't they care about that?" Also, "the indentured servants had it worse than the slaves." I became uncomfortable with the conversation because I obviously poked a raw nerve. I decided to change the subject, and we talked instead

about planning educational programming and the challenges of correlating them to the Virginia Standards of Learning. Ms. Appel invited me to join a tour of the mansion and said to meet her in the gift shop when I was finished. When I returned to the shop, Ms. Appel was nowhere to be found and the gift shop attendant asked me if I was a student then told me I owed ten dollars for the tour. After a few minutes, Ms. Appel came down and I thanked her for her time. The goodbyes were brief and she ended the conversation by saying, "make sure you talk about the inheritance taxes in your paper."[2]

Shirley Plantation is Virginia's oldest plantation, dating from 1613. On its most recently published rack card, visitors are invited to see the "original furnishings and portraits" and to "connect with American history."[3] Another feature highlighted is that the "home is still lived in by descendants of the same family since 1738." [4] Charles Hill Carter III lives on the two upper floors of the mansion while the first floor is open to the public. Preserving the estate and keeping it within the family is expensive, and the Shirley Plantation Foundation states that it receives "no regular local, state, or federal support and sustains itself with membership and admission revenue."[5] In a 1995 *Style Weekly* article titled, "Historic Route 5 Inc.," John W. Maloney discussed the entrepreneurial endeavors of the James River plantation owners. Charles Hill Carter III, preparing to inherit the estate from his father, stated, "every generation has an opportunity to make money at Shirley Plantation, whether it's in farming, mining, tourism, or

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2 Janet Appel, interview by author, July 11, 2012.

3 Shirley Plantation Foundation, *Shirley Plantation: Connect to American History* (Charles City County, Virginia, 2012).

4 Ibid.

5 Shirley Plantation Foundation, *Become a Member* (Charles City County, Virginia, 2012).

river port management."[6] *Forbes* magazine reported in 1999 that Shirley Plantation earned up to four hundred and fifty thousand dollars in admission revenue annually, and farming, mining, leasing a river port for waste management, and furniture royalties provided an additional eight hundred thousand dollars.[7] While discussing the waste management arrangement, Charles Hill Carter III said in reference to the inheritance taxes, "if the port doesn't make money, I can't afford to pay. My mission in life is to preserve and protect the past of this plantation. The federal government could care less."[8]

Charles Hill Carter, Jr. officially opened Shirley Plantation for public tours in 1952, after inheriting the property from his cousin, Marion Carter Oliver. However, Shirley has been receiving visits from tourists since the late nineteenth-century and has been featured in a number of magazine articles, periodicals, and travel books from the 1890s through the twentieth-century. It was also the site for D.W. Griffith's film, *America*, in 1923. While Shirley Plantation can certainly be placed within the context of the preservation movement during the nineteenth-century, its development as a historic site differs from other historic house museums. Shirley did not need to organize itself as a historic house museum; the allure of the plantation was already drawing visitors. In addition, the Virginia Historical Marker Program, established in 1926, and the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg also brought an increase of visitors to Shirley Plantation. With the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg and with Shirley being located on a highway between Richmond and Williamsburg, Charles Hill Carter Jr. may have seen a business opportunity in turning Shirley Plantation into a tourist destination.

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6 John W. Maloney, "Historic Route 5 Inc.," *Style Weekly (Richmond)*, cover story, November 28, 1995.

7 Doug Donovan, "All in the Family," *Forbes*, December 27, 1999, 274–275.

8 Ibid.

The purpose of this thesis is to trace the history of Shirley Plantation as a family business operating as a historic house museum. My examination of Shirley Plantation will begin in 1894 and move into its present day operations as a historic site.[9] In a discussion about Shirley Plantation's beginnings as a historic house museum, I will largely focus on how the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg prompted Charles Hill Carter, Jr. to establish Shirley Plantation as an official tourist destination. I will also conduct a critical analysis of Shirley Plantation's current interpretative focus and explore how the involvement of the Hill-Carter family has influenced the interpretation presented to the public. Many historic sites and house museums are moving towards a more inclusionary historical interpretation, however, it seems Shirley Plantation has been unwilling to adapt with the changing times. In 2004, Shirley Plantation advertised archaeological programs titled, "The Silent Ones Speak" and "Archaeology and Architecture of Slave Housing at Shirley Plantation," and created by the site's Director of Archaeology, Dennis B. Blanton.[10] These programs offered the public an opportunity to learn about the lives of Virginia Indians, indentured servants, and enslaved Africans on the site of Shirley, but Blanton and these programs are no longer a part of the organization. Shirley does continue to have one program about slave life at Shirley, but the other programs have changed their interpretative focus. One program, for example, is "From Civil War to Civil Rights," which teaches that Robert E. Lee and Martin Luther King, Jr. "had more in common than you realize!"[11] With visitor attendance in decline for many historic house museums, what can Shirley Plantation do to attract the twenty-first century-visitor? It seems Shirley Plantation is more concerned with being a

[9] Visitor's Book, 1894–1962, Shirley Plantation Collection, 1650–1989, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, Virginia.

[10] Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, "Shirley Plantation," web.archive.org/web/20041204130527/ http://www.shirleyplantation.com/archaeology.html (accessed November 17, 2012).

[11] Shirley Plantation, "Student Groups: Educational Student Programs," http://www.shirleyplantation.com/ student_groups.html (accessed November 17, 2012).

tourist destination than an educational organization that interprets the past for the public. While there are visitors who expressed disappointment with the family-focused house tour and the silence on slavery, many walked away feeling they learned a history of the South.[12] In the 2001 *Human Events* article, "Save Shirley Plantation," Charles Hill Carter III stated that his primary reason for being at Shirley was "to possess, protect, and pass on…that is what my father brought me up to do."[13] The mission for the Shirley Plantation Foundation is similarly stated: "to preserve, protect, and pass on."[14]

Most of the literature on historic house museums takes the form of practical guides for museum professionals. *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, a collection of essays edited by Jessica Foy Donnelly, discusses how historic house museums can revamp their interpretive and educational programs to meet the needs of the audience. Some of the suggestions include focusing on the landscape, interpreting gender roles within the domestic sphere, and using creativity to inspire characters and activities in the interpretation. The overall theme of the essays is to encourage historic house museums to engage in careful planning and thorough scholarship in order to establish a well-thought-out interpretive program. Donnelly states, "the wise and effective house museum will realize that its research will never be done and will pursue it relentlessly and use it judiciously."[15] In *History Museums in the United States*, John A. Herbst's essay, "Historic Houses," recognizes that there are many historic house museums that continue to follow the great man, great events approach to history, but offers examples of historic houses

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[12] "Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia" Trip Advisor, accessed October 15, 2012, http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g57590-d107154-Reviews-Shirley_Plantation-Charles_City_Virginia.html.

[13] Terrence P. Jeffrey, "Save Shirley Plantation: Death Tax Could Destroy America's Oldest Family Business," *Human Events*, April 2, 2001.

[14] Shirley Plantation Foundation, *Become a Member* (Charles City County, Virginia), 2012.

[15] Jessica Foy Donnelly ed., *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2002), 8.

that have transitioned into interpreting a broader, social history. One example is the Mission Houses Museum in Honolulu, Hawaii, which was created by the descendants of New England Calvinist missionaries during the nineteenth-century. Until the 1970s, the museum operated as a memorial to the early mission families and did not address the controversial role missionaries played in destroying Hawaiian culture. The museum underwent a reinterpretation and "has moved to broaden aspects of its region's history and, as a hereditary membership society, to validate other historical experiences in its locality."[16]

It is important for a historic house museum to have an interpretive focus that does not center only on the great man or great family stories, especially if the museum desires to be relevant to the public. Cary Carson's article points out that in order for historic house museums to combat declining attendance, destination sites need to adapt to the changing audience. Carson states, "as someone explained, many, maybe most house museum offerings are "tired and antiquated–disconnected both from current issues and from their own communities."[17] The narrative presented to the public regarding Shirley Plantation's significance is dominated by the successes and "tidbits" of the Carter family, with almost no connection made to the larger socio-historical context, especially with its interpretation of slavery. Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small's work, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, identified four representational strategies of slavery practiced by plantations in Georgia, Virginia, and Louisiana: symbolic annihilation and erasure, trivialization and deflection of the experience of the enslaved, segregated knowledge, or toward relative incorporation. Shirley Plantation practices three of these strategies: the house tour symbolically annihilates and erases

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[16] John A. Herbst, "Historic Houses." In *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenweig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 107–108.

[17] Cary Carson, "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?" *The Public Historian* vol. 30, no. 4 (November 2008): 13.

slavery, while the slavery exhibit in the kitchen outbuilding is an example of segregated knowledge. The exhibit is in a "separate site within the site" which visitors have the option of visiting.[18]

The slavery exhibit also demonstrates Shirley Plantation's trivialization and deflection of the experience of the enslaved. The history of slavery on the Shirley Plantation is outlined in a chronological order with stories describing various Carter family members as either good masters or against the institution of slavery. For example, Hill Carter is described as having practiced "more humane ownership and bore witness to the emancipation of the slaves after the Civil War."[19] There have been many historic sites that have successfully incorporated the stories of the enslaved. James Madison's Montpelier has done an excellent interpretation of the house tour where the presence of the enslaved cannot be ignored, having frames of the slave quarters next to the house as well as cut outs of the enslaved people who would have worked in the home. Another example is the early nineteenth-century Wickham House in Richmond, Virginia, which included scrims of the enslaved to make visitors aware of all of the people who would have been present in the home.[20]

The historiography of historic house museums has shown that there has been a movement towards making the history at the sites more inclusive and relatable for the larger public since the 1960s. However, most of the sites discussed in the literature receive state or federal funding and have trained museum professionals on staff. Shirley Plantation does not collaborate with

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[18] Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002),170.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Meghan Theresa Naile, "Like Nixon Going to China: The Exhibition of Slavery in the Valentine Museum and the Museum of the Confederacy" (master's thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009), 16.

historians, other historic sites, or museum professionals for their interpretive planning. As Janet Appel's interview reveals, the folks at Shirley rely on their own historical research. What makes Shirley Plantation different and intriguing in comparison to other historic house museums is that it is still maintained by the original family, which is closely involved in the business of Shirley Plantation as a tourist destination. In historical studies about the preservation movement, sites like Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Colonial Williamsburg are the focus, but Shirley's origins as a museum cannot be defined in the same way.

However, Shirley Plantation benefitted from the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, since large numbers of well-to-do travelers were flocking to Virginia to learn more about America's heritage and the numbers increased after World War II, during the Cold War.[21] Shirley Plantation had the eighteenth-century architecture, furniture, and personal stories about the gloried past that drew white audiences hoping to reconnect with American traditions. During the early 1940s, Shirley was charging fifty cents admission to visitors wishing to tour their gardens.[22] In 1933, Laurence Vail Coleman, who was Director of the American Association of Museums, advised historic house museums on what was considered a reasonable admission charge. Coleman wrote, "Twenty-five cents is most usual and seems to be right; ten cents is less than a visit should be worth; fifty cents is exorbitant."[23] The road from Richmond to Williamsburg, State Route 5, is a hotbed of historic landmarks and famous plantations situated in a rural area. Travelers would have been stopping at each site and reading each historical marker as they made their way to and from Colonial Williamsburg. Shirley Plantation did not list a tour

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[21] Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 41–76.

[22] Elizabeth Valentine Huntley, *Peninsula Pilgrimage* (Richmond: The Press of Whittet and Shepperson, 1941). General Collection, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

[23] Laurence Vail Coleman, *Historic House Museums* (Washington, D.C: The American Association of Museums, 1933), 46.

of the house as an attraction; the admission was only for visitors to see the gardens. In 1952, Charles Hill Carter, Jr., confronted with having to pay taxes after inheriting the property, found a way to keep the estate within the Hill-Carter line by charging admission for people to tour the interior of his home.

There is a large amount of material available on Shirley Plantation in archives in Richmond and Williamsburg. To piece together the story of Shirley Plantation's origins as a historic house museum, a collection of manuscripts, photographs, letters, and journals at the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. library have been examined. The Rockefeller library's collection includes a visitor's book dated from 1894 to 1962, correspondence between Marion Carter Oliver and William A.R. Goodwin and John D. Rockefeller (the founders of Colonial Williamsburg) during the 1920s to the 1940s, the will of Marion Carter Oliver, early pamphlets on Shirley, as well as photographs of D.W. Griffith's filming of *America*. The Virginia Historical Society holds an extensive collection of Shirley Plantation post cards dating from the 1900s to the 1970s. In addition, the Virginia Historical Society has a number of travel books and magazine articles written about Shirley Plantation throughout the twentieth-century. The Virginia Department of Historic Resources also has Shirley's easement file that includes its application for registration as a historic site during the 1960s and newspaper clippings tracing its history as a historic house museum. The Library of Virginia holds the records of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Development, which helped in exploring the establishment of historic markers along Route 5 and determining if the Hill-Carter family requested a marker be placed near their home. The Library of Virginia also has a collection of pamphlets published by Shirley as well as other postcards to supplement what is found at the Virginia Historical Society. For an analysis of Shirley Plantation's present operational mission as well as its interpretive focus, social media

outlets such as Facebook, blogs, travel reviews, and Shirley Plantation's website make up a large portion of the primary source materials. Participant observation also plays a role in this analysis.

The thesis will begin with Marion Carter Oliver's inheritance of Shirley Plantation and the financial difficulties she faced from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The story of Shirley Plantation from 1894 to 1952 is the focus of the first chapter, which includes Marion Carter Oliver's correspondence with Rockefeller and Goodwin, the establishment of the Virginia Historical Marker program, and the status of Shirley as a site of historical pilgrimage. The second chapter will open with Charles Hill Carter Jr.'s inheritance of Shirley Plantation. The official opening of Shirley Plantation as a tourist destination is related to the increasing number of travelers driving to Williamsburg and the chapter will analyze how Shirley Plantation reacted to the changing focus of public history during the mid to late-twentieth century. The second chapter follows Shirley's history as a historic house museum until Charles Hill Carter III took responsibility for the property in the early 2000s. The third chapter focuses on the current interpretive focus of Shirley Plantation and examines the motivations as well as the influence of the Hill-Carter family in presenting a certain kind of history, in which discussion of race and gender is limited. In the last chapter, Shirley's interpretation will be placed within the present context of the changing interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg, as well as other historic Virginia sites. It addresses whether the reinterpretation of Colonial Williamsburg changes visitor expectations of Shirley Plantation, and if these expectations put pressure on Shirley to update its interpretation. The last chapter closes with an interpretive plan and programming suggestions that could attract the twenty-first century visitor to Shirley Plantation.

Shirley Plantation has a great opportunity to make the most of the site educationally for the public. It is necessary for privately owned historic sites to practice responsible public history

and the failure to do so means visitors leave the site with misconceived notions about what life was like in Virginia's past. Public historic sites and museums are supposed to be cultural institutions that promote the dissemination of valid information that is as objective as possible. Shirley Plantation is not like any other museum. Its trials and tribulations as a historic house museum are important to explore because these factors have influenced the way the Hill-Carter family present their history. In order for Shirley Plantation to stay relevant in the coming years, it is necessary for the site to adapt its methods of operation. After my interview with Janet Appel, I felt perplexed by Shirley Plantation's mission as a historic house museum. Does Shirley Plantation have an interest in educating the public? What is the motivation behind their mission? What happens if the next Hill-Carter in line decides to sell the estate?

Chapter 1

Shirley Plantation: A Visit to the Colonial Past

A tribute in song I here dedicate
To the fairest home in any state
or country under the sun
Its beauty and charm I do adore
I'll sing its praises for evermore
For it my heart has won.

—Henry Watkins Ellerson,
Visitor to Shirley plantation, 1909.[24]

Henry Watkins Ellerson was one of hundreds of people who visited Shirley plantation during the first decade of the twentieth century. This home of the Carters, like other sites connected to distinguished Virginians, was a famous site of pilgrimage for those wishing to reconnect with the colonial American past. As the oldest and the best preserved colonial estate in Virginia, Shirley plantation was and continues to be a place for visitors to experience a remnant of the nation's earliest days. Shirley plantation's beginnings as a historic house museum differs from the typical openings of other historic colonial homes in that Shirley was not saved or preserved by an organization or a memorial association. Instead, Shirley has been maintained and lived in by the Carter family since 1723. The Carters have been dedicated to keeping Shirley

[24] Shirley Plantation Visitor's Book, March 27, 1909, Shirley Plantation Collection, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

within their family, while also continuing to operate the estate as a farm. Visitors' interest in experiencing Shirley as a historic site began in the late nineteenth century, the period when Alice Carter Bransford managed the estate. When Alice died and her sister Marion took up full-time residence at Shirley during the 1920s, the prominence of Shirley as a historic site increased thanks to the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, the popularity of automobile touring, and the establishment of the Virginia Historic Marker program. This chapter will cover the history of Shirley from the 1880s to 1952, the year in which Charles Hill Carter Jr. inherited the estate from his cousin, Marion Carter Oliver.

The late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were a time of uncertainty and anxiety for many native born Americans: large waves of immigrants were arriving onto the shores, the dismantling of slavery gave some social, political, and economic power to the formerly enslaved, and everything became more fast-paced as the country modernized. These changes were perceived as a threat to the American way of life, so for many elite white men and women, looking back to the past was the way to shape the future. In nineteenth-century America, especially Virginia, women of the elite class put out a call to turn back to their heritage and to the traditions of their founding fathers to bring order to the perceived chaotic world. During the 1880s and 1890s, historical associations such as the National Society of the Colonial Dames, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, were preserving and memorializing America's past. These organizations gave upper class white women a chance to exercise some political power and to educate American society. After the Civil War, women were not only responsible for teaching civic duties within their home, they were now seen as "mothers of the nation."[25] The traditional hierarchical order had

[25] W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 24–25.

been shaken up in the post-Civil War period, thus "elite white women, fearful of social chaos, committed themselves to reestablishing antebellum class and racial division" by emphasizing Anglo-Saxon heritage.[26] The kingdoms of elite Virginians were crumbling, but it was important during this time to save these historical relics to inform the present and future. The women of the memorial and historical associations concentrated much of their effort in acquiring historic homes. The domestic sphere of the colonial home was the perfect way to showcase the traditions of family, duty, and hierarchy. As James M. Lindgren stated in his article on the preservation movement during the progressive period, "historic buildings became symbols of revered and ancient ways."[27]

Shirley plantation, home of the Carters since 1723, continues to be a symbol of bygone days and ancient ways. First settled in 1613, Shirley has been a part of Virginia's history since its earliest days and home to one of Virginia's elite "First Families." Shirley plantation has never left the hands of the Carters and it has been an operating farm for four hundred years. White Americans in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century did not have to be convinced that Shirley plantation was a historic shrine. Authors of travel guides, journalists, and history enthusiasts placed Shirley on a pedestal within American history, and the Carter family welcomed the crowds of visitors who wished to see a relic of colonial days.

When Henry Watkins Ellerson paid a visit to Shirley, Alice Carter Bransford most likely would have been the person that greeted him. In 1888, Alice and her sister Marion inherited Shirley from their father, Robert Randolph Carter, sharing the ownership of the property with their mother Louise. In his will, Robert stated that the three women would inherit the estate as

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[26] Ibid., 32.

[27] James M. Lindgren, "'Virginia Needs Living Heroes:' Historic Preservation in the Progressive Era," *The Public Historian* 13 (Winter 1991): 10.

joint property, equally shared and "not subject to the debts, or control of their husbands, if either of should marry."[28] Robert Randolph Carter had a successful career in the United States Navy before the Civil War, resigning to join the Confederate Navy when Virginia seceded from the union. After the war, Hill Carter, then master of Shirley and Robert's father, requested that Robert and his family return to the plantation to help with management. They returned in 1866, and Robert took on the responsibility of managing Shirley. In *Shirley Plantation: A Personal Adventure for Ten Generations*, Joanne Young wrote that Robert's ability "to cope with the entirely new problems faced by the South," including no longer having enslaved laborers, "is a tribute to his own dedication to the task at hand."[29] Because he managed Shirley, it was understood at this time that he would inherit the plantation and pass it on to his daughters. However, in the summer of 1870, Hill Carter discussed altering his will so that an heir with a son would inherit the estate, thus preserving it within the Carter name. In a letter to his son, Hill wrote,

> "If it could be so managed as to secure to your daughters a just, and fair portion with my granddaughters generally, in the event of your not leaving a son to inherit Shirley I should then like to hand the old place down to one more generation after you, but I am determined not to do anything contrary to your wishes."[30]

Hill Carter wanted to make sure that the estate stayed within the Carter name, perhaps after witnessing other colonial estates falling out of old family hands, so he felt a need for a male heir

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[28] Will of Robert Randolph Carter, 1888, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 35, Folder 1, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

[29] Joanne Young, *Shirley Plantation: A Personal Adventure for Ten Generations* (Charles City County, VA: Shirley Plantation, 1981), 59.

[30] Hill Carter to Robert Randolph Carter, July 4, 1870, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 21, Folder 4, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

to ensure the estate's survival. Other family members seemed to be surprised and upset by Hill's decision. William Fitzhugh Carter wrote to his brother Robert:

> "I am much grieved that papa should still cling so tenaciously to the things of this life. What difference can it make should Shirley be left to some male descendant of this generation. It can only, thereby, be retained a few years longer and might pass out of the family under more painful circumstances to the survivors should the heir happen to be unworthy the inheritance. That papa should maintain his integrity by keeping his promise and doing you justice is vastly more important to me and mine that any other consideration. As I have no son here and hope if it please God to have no more children I can only add to that of the other Brothers my earnest protest against any disposition of Shirley that does not secure it to you and your heirs be they male or female."[31]

Because Robert passed the estate onto his wife and daughters, Hill Carter obviously decided not to alter his will. Robert's decision to leave the estate to the three women was not particularly unusual. In the early eighteenth-century, Shirley's male heir, Edward Hill III, died leaving sister, Elizabeth, to inherit the estate. When she married John Carter, son of "King" Carter, in 1723, the estate passed into the Carter line. Additionally, the roles of southern women after the Civil War were changing, because of the significant casualties of young men during the Civil War. In the *Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865–1895*, Jane Turner Censer described how many women of the planter class delayed marriage or did not marry at all, and they were acquiring more economic power from their fathers and husbands.[32] In the post-Civil War period, it was not unheard of for men to leave their estates to their wives or daughters since more men were passing control of their estates to their widows.

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[31] William Fitzhugh Carter to Robert Randolph Carter, July 20, 1870, Container 21, Folder 4, Shirley Plantation Collection, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

[32] Jane Turner Cesner, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865–1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 98–106.

Louise Humphreys Carter shared the inheritance of Shirley with her two daughters, but Robert made his eldest daughter Alice, the administrator of the estate. Alice had been married to H.W. Bransford, but took up permanent residence at Shirley Plantation after her husband's death in 1880. Immediately after her father's death, Alice took over the financial and operational responsibilities of Shirley plantation. In her diary and in letters to Marion, who spent most of her time traveling during this period, Alice discussed the prices of wheat, the weather's impact on the crops, planting vegetables, building fences, and caring for the animals. Alice was remembered for riding about "overseeing duties on horseback" and for having "suffered no loss of authority because of her sex."[33] Shortly after Alice's death in 1925, Marion described her sister as

> "a remarkable woman, having more or less ill health from girlhood, the nervous affection most of her life and arthritis with constant pains for the last ten or twelve years. But her spirit was indomitable, and she never complained, and never spared herself physically, carrying on the farm and after mother's death the house, for thirty five years."[34]

In her diary entries, Alice did not mention tourists or a desire to make Shirley into a historic attraction, however, as demonstrated by Shirley's visitor's book, Alice did not deter visitors from visiting the estate. Instead the Carter women seemed to have welcomed hospitably many strangers who were interested to see their colonial homestead.

Alice Carter Bransford understood the appeal and the importance of visiting Virginia's historical relics, and her 1886 pilgrimage to the ancestral sites of the Carters may have influenced her willingness to allow visitors to wander onto Shirley. In the fall of 1886, Alice accompanied her father on a historical tour of the Northern Neck of Virginia, and Robert wrote

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[33] Emily Blayton Major, "Old Farm, New Methods: Soil of Shirley Still Yields," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, February 11, 1951.

[34] Marion Carter Oliver, diary, April 1925, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 76, Folder 2, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

about this trip in his diary. Stopping first at Christ Church, where the tomb of "King" Carter is located, Robert expressed his disappointment to find the tomb demolished with an axe and sledge, and he assumed that someone was looking for gold and jewels. An African American family "lived in a cabin near the church for free," Robert stated, and they were allowed to accept gratuities from visitors. In return, this family was responsible for preventing further desecration to the site. When Alice and Robert visited the nearby Corotoman, which had been a grand estate of the Carter family, he wrote, "the present air of desolation is distressing. Little is left to show that Corotoman was once a home for luxury."[35] Robert's distress about seeing the destruction of the home to his ancestors, is understandable. Charles Carter, son of John Carter and Elizabeth Hill, was born at Corotoman in 1732 and inherited the estate from his father. Charles became the largest slaveholder in Virginia, holding 786 people in bondage, and he owned about 70,000 acres of land.[36] In the 1770s, Charles inherited Shirley after the death of his mother and took over the management of the plantation. It was during Charles Carter's reign at Shirley that the plantation became the seat of the Carter family.

Shirley plantation's visitor's book, which contains hundreds of names, serves as a documentary record of people who visited the site between 1894 and 1962. People wrote their names, the date of their visit, where they were from, as well as a few comments about their visit. Alice Carter Bransford may have decided to set up the visitor's book as a way to record the increased number of visitors coming to Shirley Plantation during the late nineteenth-century. It is unclear whether visitors were allowed inside the house from the 1890s to the 1920s, but it seems they were welcome to wander the estate. It is evident in the visitor's book that Shirley was not

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[35] Notebook of Robert Randolph Carter 1866–1887, November 1886, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 95, Folder 2, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

[36] Charles Hill Carter, "Shirley Plantation–Built on a Tradition of Heritage and Hierarchy," *Colonial Williamsburg* 13 (Spring 1991), 30.

intentionally operating as a historic house museum during this time because a couple of the visitors mention in their comments how appreciative they were of the hospitality shown even though they "intruded" on the hostess. For example, Mary C. Froude, who visited Shirley in April 1898 wrote, "Dear Miss Carter. I am indeed delighted to hear that my name is to be put into the Shirley visitor book. I think everyday of my life of our intrusive but much enjoyed visit to that lovely old place."[37] In 1928, Robert P. Bellows wrote Marion thanking her for her "kindness in welcoming an architectural wayfarer" and her "attempt to make me feel less like an intruder."[38] In an account of her 1909 travel around Virginia, Mary Lloyd Craighill described her party's arrival to Shirley plantation from the banks of the James River. After visiting Brandon, the home of the Harrisons, Mary and her party went to call at Shirley, "one of the famous old James River Plantations." She wrote that it was dark when they went, thus preventing them from seeing much of the estate. A Mrs. Shirley Carter, a relative of Alice, asked them to "come back tomorrow to see the flowers."[39]

People would have learned about Shirley plantation through newspaper articles and books highlighting historic homes in Virginia. For example, Shirley was featured in a Sunday issue of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in the spring of 1908. In the article, "Famous Colonial Estates," Shirley is claimed to be "one of the most interesting and best preserved among the Colonial homes of Virginia" and that it is in these surviving buildings that "one appreciates keenly the true idea of home and family succession."[40] *American Home and Garden* published a

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37 Shirley Plantation Visitor's Book, 1898, Shirley Plantation Collection, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

38 Ibid., November 30, 1928.

39 Mary Lloyd Craighill, 1845–1924, Travel Account, 1909 October 4–13, Manuscripts, Mss2 C8448 a 1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.

40 Edith Dabney, "Famous Colonial Estates," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 31, 1908.

spread on Shirley in October 1907 stating that it "stands as a noble monument to its builder and founders, and the hospitality which was extended in the good old Colonial days of the Old Dominion is still maintained by the present owners."[41] The author also wrote that Shirley symbolizes "a new idea of home, or rather the old idea, exemplified, magnified and illustrated in the finest possible way."[42] In *Historic Shrines of America*, published in 1918, author John T. Faris sought to show through his book the significant number of historic sites throughout America, which included Shirley among four other "old houses of Tidewater Virginia." Faris describes that his purpose was,

> "to tell just enough about each of one hundred and twenty of these buildings of historic interest to create a hunger for more; to present pictures sufficiently attractive to make those who turn the pages of the book determine to visit the places described." [43]

Perhaps seeing the Carter landmarks withered away during her visit to the Northern Neck instilled in Alice the importance of maintaining Shirley Plantation's and the Carters' historical prominence. Her father certainly expressed his support for the memorialization of Confederate shrines when describing the condition of Westmoreland county. He wrote,

> "And indeed, alas for the whole county, as we saw it, called in days of old the Athens of Virginia, little remains to show how much worth talents and patriotism once adorned it. Though the spirit is still there, for the Ladies societies have erected here and also at Lancaster C.H. monuments to the Confederate soldiers from their counties who fell in the Civil War, tasteful marble shafts, some 30ft high, with names inscribed at the bases."[44]

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[41] Francis Durando Nichols, "'Shirley,' the Ancestral Home of the Carters," *American Home and Garden*, October 1907.

[42] Ibid.

[43] John T. Faris, *Historic Shrines of America; being the story of one hundred and twenty historic buildings and the pioneers who made them notable* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), p. VI.

[44] Notebook of Robert Randolph Carter 1866–1887, November 1886, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 95, Folder 2, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

Robert Randolph Carter's account of their pilgrimage to these sites demonstrates that the Carters of Shirley plantation believed in the importance of preserving their history. The Carters of Shirley Plantation welcomed visitors because the estate would remain within the minds of white Virginians as an important and sacred place within the collective history. When Robert's widow, Louise Humphreys Carter, died in 1906, her obituary, written by an E.C. Minor, described a plantation mistress who took on the difficult era of Reconstruction, while also never forgetting the importance of tradition. The obituary states,

> Her enthusiastic adherence to the past was as conspicuous as was her prompt and complete acceptance of its present. May we not take comfort in the thought and hope that the memory of this beautiful life may inspire to higher aims those who were privileged to know it and thus maintain the prestige of the dear old days that are no more.[45]

The *Lost Cause* philosophy of the Civil War was also prevalent throughout Louise's obituary. She was described as being

> "ever the staunchest of Southerners, the most uncompromising of Secessionists while also being the first to have calmly handled facing life with a plantation whose very existence depended on negro labor, with helpless slaves, who in their freedom only appreciated that they were free to idle, and equally free to turn as they had ever done to their former owner for every need with such conditions to face, adjustment meant philosophy of the highest order, as well as courage most sublime."

Shirley plantation and the Carters were important symbols that represented white Virginia's past. Louise's death was described in her obituary as "an end to an era," an era in which the elite First Families' position in society had supposedly reigned supreme. As Brundage argues in *The Southern Past*, whites and blacks have been engaged in a struggle over the historical narrative of the south since the Civil War. He states that after

[45] Obituary of Louise Humphreys Carter, Newspaper Clipping, Marion Carter Oliver diary, 1878–1885 (1942), Shirley Plantation Records 1815–1906, microfilm, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

emancipation, the commemorative practices of southern blacks challenged the white southerners' understanding of southern history. Thus, "for a century after the Civil War, whites ensured that public spaces conspicuously excluded any recognition of the recalled past of blacks."[46]

Shirley Plantation's visitor's book shows that the site has been receiving visitors from all over the country since the late nineteenth-century, and during Alice and Marion's time the number of visitors from outside of the Commonwealth was about equal to the number of Virginian visitors. Most of the out-of-state visitors came from the northeastern region of the United States, while there were also a few from Texas, Louisiana, Missouri, and Georgia.[47] The plantation also welcomed famous visitors during this time, which speaks to how prominent the site was for a patriotic pilgrimage. During the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition in 1907, Theodore Roosevelt and a few members of his administrative staff paid a visit to the James River plantations, including Shirley. Marion was there for President Roosevelt's visit and wrote to a friend that they "were delighted with the President, he was just as nice as he could be and honestly enjoyed himself."[48] Other visitors to Shirley during the first decade of the twentieth century include U.S. Attorney General George W. Wilkersham, Virginian novelist Ellen Glasgow, President Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and composer John Powell.[49]

In addition to the well-known people mentioned, there were many visitors who had the Virginian "First Family" surnames of Randolph, Eppes, Carter, Braxton, and

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46 Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 10.

47 Shirley Plantation Visitor's Book, February–April 1907.

48 Marion Carter Oliver to Boggs, 1907, Shirley Plantation Visitor's Book.

49 Shirley Plantation Visitor's Book, August 9, 1907.

Nelson who came from as far as Arkansas to visit Shirley. Perhaps the popularity of genealogical research during this period drew them to Shirley as a way to re-discover and celebrate their Virginian and colonial roots.

While there is not sufficient evidence to prove that Alice worked to make Shirley into a popular historical site, she certainly embraced it. In April of 1907, Alice paid Alice D. Royall $33.50 for sixty-seven calendars that were made up of photographs of the James River plantations mostly in Charles City County.[50] Since she purchased these calendars in April, she most likely would have been preparing a stock of souvenirs to sell to visitors during the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition. There are also early postcards of Shirley plantation, which were published by the Detroit Publishing Company around 1903.[51]

Alice also welcomed Hollywood to Shirley in 1923 by allowing famed director D.W. Griffith to shoot a few scenes at the plantation for his film *America*. Alice was excited about the creator of *Birth of a Nation* filming at her home, and wrote that it was "such a time!" while he was there "taking pictures of various arrivals and departures of ladies and gentlemen with this house for a background."[52] Although the film was not as successful as *Birth of a Nation*, Griffith's *America* was meant to "spread Americanism in an era of unsettling change."[53] In the article, "America: The Movie: D.W. Griffith Films the Revolution," W. Barksdale Maynard

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[50] Receipt from Alice D. Royall, April 1907, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 57, Folder 2, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

[51] Postcard, "Shirley on the James River," Museum and Photograph Collection, 2005.26.11, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.

[52] Alice Carter Bransford diary, November 8, 1923, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 104, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

[53] W. Barksdale Maynard, "America: The Movie: D.W. Griffith Films the Revolution," *Colonial Williamsburg* 33 (Summer 2011): 51.

writes that the idea for the film came from the Daughters of the American Revolution, who wished to commemorate the 150th anniversary of 1776. Will Hays, who was head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, embraced their suggestion, "thinking that, after a series of messy motion picture scandals, a patriotic production would help salvage his industry's reputation."[54] Griffith's decision to film *America* in coastal Virginia was described by Maynard as "natural" since Griffith had played a role in the Pocahontas pageant during the Jamestown Tercentennial and because Griffith's mother had "spun exaggerated stories" of his great-grandfather's contributions to the Revolutionary War. Griffith's mother also "claimed descent, perhaps fancifully, from the Carters of Shirley Plantation on the James."[55] Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin, who worked with John D. Rockefeller in the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, helped Griffith select locations for filming. Maynard argues that "there are parallels between what Griffith was doing in film and what Goodwin envisioned for Williamsburg's restoration…these fiftyish dreamers aimed to turn back time, creating a picture of colonial life and its surroundings to educate the public."[56]

On January 2, 1925, Henry T. Wickham, a lawyer and a relative of the Carters, wrote to Alice addressing her concerns on whether her sister Marion would have to pay an inheritance tax to possess Shirley. Since Marion inherited the estate directly from Robert, as did Alice and Louise, it was concluded that Marion would not be responsible for paying the estate taxes. The correspondence that Alice received in the months leading up to her death reveals her concern for passing on the estate to her sister without any financial complications. Alice inquired into the value of the Charles Wilson Peale portrait of George Washington owned by the Carters, finding

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54 Ibid., 46.

55 Ibid., 47–48.

56 Ibid., 51.

that "a dealer would not pay more than $15–$20,000" citing the reasons as "Peale is less popular than Gilbert Stuart," and because "smaller canvases are preferred since people no longer have room for large paintings."[57] After suffering with a stomach tumor for months, Alice died on April 20, 1925. In memory of Alice, the James River Garden Club wrote,

> with her gaiety and charm she possessed courage of the noblest kind, and unfaltering resolution, undaunted in the extreme of adverse fortune. She was successful in her life, but she wrested her success from a reluctant fate. These great qualities she inherited from the pioneer women and men who preceded her at Shirley, but she was 'The heroine' who added new and greater lustre to her famous home, identified as it is with the very foundation of Virginia.[58]

Her obituary in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* was short, and summed up her life as having died at Shirley, "well-known old Virginia estate which her family had occupied for more than 200 years."[59]

Marion Carter Oliver and her husband, Rear Admiral James H. Oliver, had traveled the world but began permanently residing at Shirley when the Admiral retired in 1921, a few years before Alice passed away. Marion seems to have taken more of an interest in the Carter family line and the history of the plantation than Alice. At least she left a paper trail regarding those matters. Marion wrote down the Civil War reminisces of her father, completed a published Carter genealogy chart, became a member of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of Virginia, and wrote down the history of the Carter portraits to pass onto the next generation.

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[57] Rumsey and Morgan to Alice Carter Bransford, January 25, 1925, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 76, Folder 1, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

[58] Resolution of the James River Garden Club, 1925, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 76, Folder 2, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

[59] Obituary of Alice Carter Bransford, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 22, 1925.

In May 1928, a month after Admiral Oliver passed away, Marion received a letter from Henry T. Wickham, the lawyer, regarding her income and with advice for improving it. Marion's total annual income at this time was $2600 and her expenses such as the salaries of two servants, laundry, coal, wood, clothing, and groceries, totaled $2550. Marion could not have covered any health expenses or repairs to the house. Wickham suggested to Marion that she needed to raise some funds and that "the most available source is from the sale of the Washington portrait by Peale."[60] In the same month, Marion received a letter from an appraiser stating that the time was good for selling the portrait, estimating that it would sell for $60,000–$75,000, a large jump from the appraisal Alice received in 1925. There was a buyer in New York who was interested in purchasing the portrait, but the dealers said she could not know the identity of this person until the negotiations were complete. Marion stipulated that she would be willing to take a lower price on the portrait if the buyer promised to keep it in Virginia, the home of Washington. In July 1928, the *New York Times* ran an article about the purchase of the Peale portrait by John D. Rockefeller, who bought it on behalf of Williamsburg. The *New York Times* estimated that Rockefeller purchased the portrait for $100,000–$250,000.[61] But Katherine Teiken, the current Assistant Curator of Prints, Photographs, and Maps with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, stated that Rockefeller purchased the portrait for $75,000 in 1928.[62]

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin had a significant interest in the Washington portrait because of their restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. Williamsburg was run-down, and Goodwin and Rockefeller wanted to recreate the 18th century capital as an

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60 Henry T. Wickham to Marion Carter Oliver, May 4, 1928, Shirley Plantation Collection, Container 76, Folder 5, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

61 "Peale's Washington Bought in Behalf of Williamsburg," *New York Times*, July 22, 1928.

62 Katherine Teiken, email correspondence, October 10, 2013.

educational passage to colonial Virginia and colonial America.[63] American society was becoming more heterogeneous and Goodwin thought that by re-creating the site from which American democracy was born, it would inspire a nationalistic common ground among all Americans. The purpose of the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg was for the American public to learn of the trials and tribulations of the 18th century as a way to deal with the challenges of the modern day. The idea of turning back to the past in order to make sense of the present was especially popular during this period for many white Americans. Rockefeller's Williamsburg did not intend on capturing the life of the lower classes or of African-Americans, instead, as Michael Wallace argues, the 18th-century town "commemorated the planter elite, presented as the progenitors of timeless ideals and values."[64]

As the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg progressed, people flocked to the old colonial town in ever larger numbers. In the early years of Williamsburg's restoration, the demographic that the site attracted was white, upper class Americans who could afford to take a trip for more than a day. In *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, Anders Greenspan explains that these well-to-do visitors were interested in learning about the furniture, architecture, and gardens, because these visitors' idea of the past was primarily focused on "the lives and living quarters of the great white men."[65]

As these visitors headed to Williamsburg, they would have taken Route 5 from Richmond to Williamsburg. While driving, they would have noticed the several historic markers indicating the points of interest along the road. Auto-tourists, in the 1920s to the 1940s, would have been

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[63] Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 8.

[64] Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," *Radical History Review* 25 (1981): 77.

[65] Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 40–42.

more interested in the "picturesque and interesting sites during the journey itself" rather than focusing on the destination, and the markers would have enticed them to see the old 18th-century manors sitting along the James River, where the great men of Virginia once lived.[66] Shirley as a historic site grew in popularity between the 1920s to the beginning of World War II because automobile travel had become more prevalent, as historic markers were being placed along Virginian highways. Additionally, the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg promoted Virginia as a historic tourist's dream.

During the 1920s, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Development worked to establish Virginia as a tourist destination. With Virginia's distinguished and significant place in American history, promoting the Commonwealth's historical assets would draw more tourists into the area. The Division of History reported that the historical sites attracted large numbers of tourists to the Tidewater region and estimated that the projected revenue from tourists in 1929 was "to exceed fifty million dollars."[67] William E. Carson, chair of the commission of Conservation and Development, initiated the placement of historic markers along Virginia highways to "elevate Virginia's reputation and spur interest in preservation programs."[68] A historic marker indicating the location of Shirley plantation was placed on Route 5 in 1928, indicating that it was established in 1613 and that it was the birthplace of Anne Hill Carter, "mother of Robert E. Lee, who often visited Shirley."[69] In his master's thesis about the historic

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66 Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 195.

67 Report of the History Division, Virginia Department of Conservation and Development, Division of History, Virginia Historic Marker Program, Box 95, Folder 7, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

68 Joseph D. Bayliss, "An Iron Catalyst: Virginia's Roadside Historical Markers and the Shaping of a Historical Consciousness," (master's thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011), 19.

69 Virginia Department of Historic Resources, "Virginia Historical Highway Markers, http:www.dhr.virginia.gov/hiway_markers/hwmarker_info.htm (accessed June 15, 2013).

marker program, Joseph Bayliss explained that many owners of historic homes fought against the markers because they did not want strangers coming onto their property. Having a historic marker was not a choice for the property owners. For example, when the owner of Carter Hall protested against the placement of a marker because he didn't want tourists coming onto his property, Dr. Hamilton James Eckenrode, the director of the program, stated that these owners "better get used to it."[70] Bayliss explains that the Department of Conservation and Development determined which sites were of historical significance, thus assigning a historic marker to be placed where they deemed fit.

Marion Carter did not mind the groups of tourists visiting Shirley plantation, in fact she embraced the visitors as much as her sister had. A postcard of Shirley from 1930 shows how the estate was promoted as a historical point of interest to attract visitors, with a description that is similar to its historical marker. The earliest postcards of Shirley plantation focused on the architectural elements of the house and the Carters's portrait collection. In 1930, the postcard was a black and white photo of the house with a description that highlights the historical significance of the home, stating, "Home of the Carters since 1723. Here was born and married Anne Hill Carter, Mother of General Lee."[71] What is also interesting about Shirley plantation's operation as a historic site during the 1920s to the 1940s is that Marion set a schedule for when the plantation would be officially open for visitors. In the visitor's book of Shirley, it seems that the occasional unexpected visitor did wander onto the estate, such as the architectural student who thanked Marion for being so hospitable in 1928, but she appears to have taken more control over the estate as a historic site. For example, Marion hosted events at Shirley, such as a lecture

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[70] Bayliss, "An Iron Catalyst," 56.

[71] Postcard, "Shirley, Virginia," 1930, Museum and Photograph Collection, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.

about the "Origins of Mother Goose Rhymes" and a fundraiser for Westover church.[72] The Division of History also noted the operation hours of various historic sites throughout the state, indicating that Shirley was only open during Garden Week.[73]

Garden Week in Virginia brought hundreds of visitors to Shirley in a span of seven days. Marion wrote in her diary that "about 300 people" were at Shirley on April 24, 1935, and on the 29th, there were "quite a few tourists wandering about." She allowed one party into the house "as the leader said her husband was an officer and knew the admiral."[74] On May 11th, Marion estimated that there were over a hundred people at Shirley, making her $54.00; "what a delightful day." During Garden Week in 1936, Marion recorded on a scrap of paper that Shirley brought in $387.50, from 1018 visitors. Marion spent the days leading up to Garden Week preparing the house for the visitors, "so busy getting the carpets up, house cleaned and the garden in comparative order, I am pretty well worn out…quite a large number of tourists anticipating garden week."[75]

During World War II, Shirley did not see as many visitors as it once had, since there were fewer people touring on the roads. Garden Week in Virginia was halted in 1941 and not celebrated again until 1947, when over two hundred estates and buildings opened to visitors. The patriotic fervor of Americanism grew after World War II, and with more disposable income and more families with transportation, visits to historic sites increased in popularity. Although

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[72] Corbin Old, "The Garden at Shirley to be Open," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 8, 1939 and "Make Final Pilgrimage," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 26, 1924.

[73] Historic Places (Days and Hours Open to Public), Records, Virginia Department of Conservation and Development, Division of History, Virginia Historic Marker Program, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

[74] Marion Carter Oliver, diary, April 29, 1935, Shirley Plantation Collection, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

[75] Marion Carter Oliver, diary, April 26, 1936, Shirley Plantation Collection, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

Shirley's visitor's book does not show many visitors from the beginning of World War II into the early 1960s, Shirley was still a popular site to visit. Scholars and academics always visited Shirley, whether it was for architectural or historical interest. Additionally, the 1951 Antiques Forum Series in Williamsburg listed Shirley on its program as offering tours to the forum's nearly four hundred participants, highlighting the 18th-century estate's distinction for still having its original paint.[76]

As the years wore on, Marion began writing down information about the Carters' history to pass onto Hill Carter, Jr. After her husband passed away, Charles Hill Carter, Sr., a cousin of Marion's who lived at nearby "High Hills" in Charles City County, came to Shirley with his family to help with its management. In 1937, Marion recorded in her diary a variety of historical information about Shirley. She wrote where the old slave quarters were located before they were burned after the cholera epidemic during the mid nineteenth-century and that Charles Carter was the first Carter to make Shirley home. She also wrote her recollections of Shirley and the Carter family because she wanted "Hill Carter Jr. to know what I can tell him as he will be the next owner of Shirley."[77] Since Marion and Alice had no children, Charles Hill Carter, Sr. was the next in line to inherit the estate, however, Hill asked Marion to alter her will so that the estate would pass onto his son, Charles Hill Carter, Jr. Since Charles Hill Carter, Sr. and Marion were close in age, their deaths likely would not be very far apart, which would bring double the inheritance taxes to pay. Marion stated that the taxes would be difficult to pay, as Marion stated,

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[76] Nancy Cox, "Registration for Forum Series in Williamsburg Nears 400," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, January 19, 1951.

[77] Marion Carter Oliver, Recollections, 1937, Shirley Plantation Collection, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, Virginia.

"This branch of the Carters having never been well off since the time of Charles Carter who died in 1806."[78]

Charles Hill Carter, Jr. had been managing Shirley plantation since he graduated from Virginia Polytechnic Institute with a degree in Agriculture in 1943. On Sunday, February 11, 1951, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published the article, "Old Farm, New Methods: Soil of Shirley Still Yields," which discussed Charles Hill Carter, Jr.'s coming receipt of the "mantle" that "bears great responsibility."[79] The article highlights that he came from a long line of successful farmers. Under the section, "Shirley Legends," the author explained the story of Robert Carter, who sought to rehabilitate the entire plantation from its "run-down condition" after he returned from the War of 1812. While working to fix the plantation, he was heard to have remarked that he would shoot any slave who did not work. The legend goes on that he did not have the opportunity to carry out his threat, because every enslaved person "was attending to his job in a most vigorous manner. It is doubtful, indeed, that one of them even saw the smile which hovered about the master's lips."[80]

Alice Carter Bransford devotedly operated Shirley plantation after the death of her father, and welcomed the many visitors who were interested in seeing the old estate, wishing to have a nostalgic taste of the antebellum days. When Alice died, Marion carried on that tradition and continued to open the gates for tourists of history. Shirley plantation did not need to be saved by an organization or a memorial association, as the Carter family continued to preserve their old home while also protecting its prominent place within Virginia's history. Marion Carter Oliver

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78 Marion Carter Oliver, Recollections, 1937, Shirley Plantation Collection, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

79 Emily Blayton Major, "Old Farm, New Methods: Soil of Shirley Still Yields," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, February 11, 1951.

80 Ibid. The newspaper article is referring to a Robert Carter from Hill Carter's generation.

died at the age of 95 on February 29, 1952, at Shirley, as the newspaper obituary noted, "she was a descendant of Robert 'King' Carter, of Lancaster County, wealthy Virginia landowner of colonial days."[81] With her death, Charles Hill Carter, Jr. began his tenure at Shirley, working as a plantation farmer while simultaneously continuing the tradition of welcoming thousands of visitors into his family's home.

[81] Obituary of Marion Carter Oliver, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 1, 1952.

Chapter 2

The Unchanged Plantation

On August 30, 1954, an article published in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* described the "schizophrenic-like existence" of Charles Hill Carter, Jr., as the new owner of Shirley Plantation.[82] Having inherited the estate from his cousin Marion Carter Oliver in 1952, and armed with the knowledge of modern farming methods, Charles Hill Carter performed the dual roles of hardworking farmer and the entertainer of guests to Shirley Plantation. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Shirley Plantation attracted visitors who wished to see an authentic eighteenth-century estate. Charles Hill Carter, Jr. continued that tradition, but he widened the doors of Shirley Plantation by officially opening his home to the public for daily tours. Julian Charity, historian of Shirley Plantation, stated on a recent tour that when Charles Hill Carter, Jr. guided visitors through his home, the tour might sometimes last three to four hours.[83] Carter showed visitors the antique furniture, introduced his ancestors painted in the

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[82] Fred Frechette, "Life is a Dual Role for Hill Carter, Jr. at Old 'Shirley'," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 30, 1954, 8.

[83] House tour by visitor services manager and historian of Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia, October 2013.

original eighteenth-century portraits, and shared the Carter family legends that had been passed down through generations. He entertained guests and tried "to keep the clock turned back in the manor house" while simultaneously modernizing the agricultural operations of Shirley Plantation.[84] Carter stated that the soil at Shirley Plantation was too thin for good crops, so he adapted the plantation into a cattle-producing farm, selling the meat at market in Richmond, with the help of his father and a crew of six men.

Carter's parents also lived at and helped with the operations of Shirley Plantation. The day before the 1954 "Autumn Pilgrimage" of Westover Church, which included tours of the James River estates, an interview with Carter's mother, Mrs. Charles Hill Carter, was featured in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the article highlighted that the family heirlooms have been at Shirley Plantation since the seventeenth-century. In the article, "Nothing Discarded at Shirley…Fine Heirlooms Date Back to 1660," items such as the family hatchments, which are a funerary coat of arms, "the only known pair in the country," and the Brittania standard silver, "so pure one could bend it with a twist of a hand" were advertised.[85] Mrs. Carter also talked about the cradle that Robert E. Lee had slept in as a baby and told of one female visitor who placed her child into the cradle while no one was looking. Mrs. Carter saw this incident and she told the reporter, "I suppose she just wanted to be able to tell her child someday he had rested in Robert E. Lee's cradle."[86] Mrs. Carter said that, "things just stayed the same decade after decade" at

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[84] Frechette, "Dual Role for Hill Carter at Old 'Shirley'," Richmond-Times Dispatch, August 30, 1954, 8.

[85] Valerie Edlinger, "Nothing Discarded at Shirley…Fine Heirlooms Date Back to 1660," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, October 14, 1954, 18.

[86] Ibid.

Shirley Plantation, and that it wasn't until Marion Carter Oliver died that the family decided to "shift things around" a bit.[87]

Historian Stuart D. Hobbs explored the institutional and cultural factors that shaped the past presented at historic sites, such as Shirley Plantation, by focusing on the restoration project of the Thomas Worthington Home in Adena, Ohio. The restoration took place during the late 1940s to the early 1950s, and Hobbs found that although this occurred during the early Cold War, when many historical institutions interpreted their sites to fit with ideas of American patriotism and freedom, the staff at the Worthington Home continued to focus their tours on the decorative arts. Hobbs explained that since museums of art were at the top of the museum hierarchy during this period, the staff of historic sites looked to art historians for expertise. The popularity of preservation efforts during the early part of the twentieth-century enhanced the curatorial influence of architectural historians.[88] The focus of historic sites on the antiques also fit into the popularity of Colonial Revivalism in which people felt "a discomfort, if not a dislike, for the modernity of industrial, urban society."[89] By focusing on the artistry and craftsmanship of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, colonial revivalists created "a mythologized past characterized by honest artisan labor and graceful living among beautiful objects."[90]

Visitors to Shirley Plantation during this period also placed a high value on the eighteenth-century objects and the eighteenth-century setting for connecting to American history. It is not clear if the Carter family consulted with art and architectural historians to help develop their tours showing the family heirlooms during the early to the mid twentieth century. It is likely

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87 Ibid.

88 Stuart D. Hobbs, "Exhibiting Antimodernism: History, Memory, and the Aestheticized Past in Mid-Twentieth century America," *The Public Historian* 23, no. 3 (Summer 2001), 49.

89 Ibid., 54.

90 Ibid., 54.

that the family relied on what the past generations had told them about the provenance of the family's collection of antiques. Being the tenth generation of the Hill-Carter line to own and operate Shirley Plantation, Charles Hill Carter, Jr. could also be considered a relic of the nostalgic past. Since he continued the family tradition of farming and because he was personally connected to the home and its objects, visitors could have felt that they were getting a more authentic experience of old Virginia just by visiting Shirley Plantation and having a descendent of the original family guide them around the estate.

The authenticity of Shirley Plantation has been attracting visitors since the tenures of Alice Carter Bransford and Marion Carter Oliver. During Charles Hill Carter, Jr.'s time as master of Shirley Plantation, the focus on the eighteenth-century architecture, furniture, silver, portraits, and china continued consistently into the twenty-first century. However, from Charles Hill Carter, Jr's inheritance of Shirley Plantation in 1952 until his death in 2009, the historical interpretive focus of other historical sites, mainly nearby Colonial Williamsburg, went through a series of changes that reflected the social and political climate of the times. On the eve of America's involvement in World War II, the Rockefellers and the staff at Colonial Williamsburg began to steer the site's mission towards a more educational goal of creating a more informed citizenry. The audience of Colonial Williamsburg also changed during the mid-twentieth century and the site geared its goal of educating the public to fit with the transitions of its audience and of American society.

At the beginning of and throughout World War II, the teaching of American history focused on promoting a sense of unity among American citizens and to promote patriotism and democracy in the struggle against fascism. Colonial Williamsburg subscribed to these ideals and molded the site's educational focus so that the restored capital "beamed a beacon light of

freedom to the world" thus becoming by the 1950s, "a shrine of American democracy."[91] During World War II, Colonial Williamsburg planned radio programs that would "enlighten Americans about their history" and arranged daily tours for thousands of sailors and soldiers who were stationed at nearby military bases. In *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital*, Anders Greenspan stated that "many Americans found comfort in Colonial Williamsburg" during the war because it "forced people to envision the struggles of the past" to help them get through present-day struggles.[92] Visitors found Colonial Williamsburg comforting for this reason. During the war, these educational objectives of set the stage for Colonial Williamsburg to become "the flagship of the fifties fleet" by developing into a "massive cold war enterprise."[93] In "Visiting the Past: History Museums of the United States," Michael Wallace states that Colonial Williamsburg sought to teach the visiting public that the eighteenth-century capital embodied the American heritage concepts of opportunity, individual liberties, self-government, the integrity of the individual, and responsible leadership.[94] During the 1950s, Colonial Williamsburg organized a Revolutionary-era marching band, the Fifes and Drums, and created an orientation film, "Williamsburg–The Story of a Patriot," which is still played in Colonial Williamsburg's visitors center. The orientation film and other programming planned by Colonial Williamsburg, such as "Prelude to Independence," focused on the choices made by Williamsburg patriots in man's struggle for individual liberty. The program, "Prelude to Independence," was a series of commemorative events that ran from mid-May to the fourth of

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91 Richard M. Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 99.

92 Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 60-61.

93 Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States" in *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 18-19.

94 Ibid., 19.

July leading up to the Declaration of Independence. At the conclusion of the program, Colonial Williamsburg staged the "Williamsburg Declaration," in which fifty exiled leaders of central European countries pledged the "restoration of human rights and political liberties when the communist governments of these lands are overthrown."[95]

Shirley Plantation's revolutionary history and its position as being the oldest plantation in Virginia made the site attractive to visitors during the Cold War era as a place to reconnect with patriotic American ideals. In the advertisement about the "Autumn Pilgrimage" of Westover Church, the short blurb about Shirley Plantation stated that the site was "home to general Lee's mother, unchanged since 1770, with a superb collection of portraits, silver, china, furniture."[96] Shirley Plantation's description covered all of the qualities that audiences of historic sites were looking for during this period. The site claimed to have been unchanged since the revolutionary period, thus promising visitors a chance to step back into the days of the triumphant struggle for democracy. It was also once home to Robert E. Lee's mother, which made the site appealing for its connections to the Civil War and to a famous American. The last description about the antiques contained within the house calls attention to the aesthetics of colonial domesticity desired by many Americans during this period.

The postcards of Shirley Plantation during the 1950s also advertise the unchanging nature of the plantation, with all of its original furnishings, and its unique architectural elements. A 1953 postcard of Shirley Plantation features a color photograph of the house and highlights the home's significance of being lived in by the same family since 1723, while also mentioning that all of the original furnishings, china, silver, and portraits have descended through the generations

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[95] Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 64.

[96] Advertisement, "Westover Church 'Autumn Pilgrimage," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, October 10, 1954.

as well.[97] A Shirley Plantation postcard from 1958 differs from earlier postcards, in that the previous postcards always featured the house as its focal point. The 1958 postcard is a color photograph of two women, inside the house and standing on the floating staircase within the front hall. The two women seem to be speaking to one another, with the older woman standing higher up the steps while the younger woman is on the first flight of the staircase, wearing a white dress and holding a basket of flowers. The postcard shows Shirley Plantation's domestic tranquility, as well as the Colonial Revivalist ideas described by Hobbs of "graceful living among beautiful objects" and highlights the interior architectural design of the home.[98]

After World War II, prosperity led to increased ownership of automobiles, which prompted American families to venture on road trips around the country. These families were interested in using the environment as a classroom, frequently stopping at Civil War battlefields and presidential homes, to help educate the children about American democratic ideals. In *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations*, Susan Sessions Rugh described these trips as "civic pilgrimages" which allowed the families to "partake of the national legacy, praise its heroes, and internalize its democratic values."[99] Before World War II, Colonial Williamsburg had attracted mainly an upper class, wealthy audience, but in the postwar period, Colonial Williamsburg saw an increased number of middle class families visiting the site. Many of the return visitors were the soldiers who had visited during the war, but now bringing their wives and children for a visit. The families visiting Colonial Williamsburg during this period

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97 Postcard, "Shirley Plantation," Museum and Photograph Collection, 2005.26.7, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.

98 Postcard, "Shirley Plantation," Museum and Photograph Collection, 2005.26.19, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.

99 Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 54.

were not only interested in the eighteenth-century furniture, draperies, and gardens, they also "wished to get a sense of their national heritage and to bask in the glory of the colonial era."[100] As Greenspan also states in *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, "For them, a trip to Colonial Williamsburg was a good family outing, combing fun and relaxation with an educational experience."[101]

The American Revolution as presented by Colonial Williamsburg during the 1950s did not include interpretations of slavery or the economic and social hierarchy of the eighteenth-century. Michael Wallace points out that while the concepts of individual liberty, opportunity, and self-government were used to instill visitors with the meaning of American democracy, the concepts of equality, the right of revolution, and anti-colonialism were not a part of the narrative presented by Colonial Williamsburg.[102] In 1954, the landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, ruled that racial segregation in public schools violated the equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment. The Civil Rights Movement was operating in full swing by the mid 1960s, and as Richard Handler and Eric Gable discussed, the "cold war message began to wear thin."[103] The celebratory nature of American history presented at Colonial Williamsburg became less acceptable and less believable. African-Americans, Native Americans, anti-war and anti-establishment protests, and the Feminist movements prompted questions of the selectivity and the exclusivity of American history as it was taught at Colonial Williamsburg. During the 1960s and the 1970s, Colonial Williamsburg changed its educational objectives to shift the focus

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100 Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 80.

101 Ibid.

102 Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States" in *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, 19.

103 Handler and Gable, *New History in an Old Museum*, 65.

from "silk-pant patriots with their refined tastes" to include the "other half and the middling sort."[104] By incorporating social history to reframe the interpretation of the Revolutionary period at Colonial Williamsburg, the narrative went beyond political history to include the social and the economic context of the eighteenth-century. Cary Carson, then vice-president for research at Colonial Williamsburg, stated that his objective was to have "the public go away disturbed" because he saw the museum as "a device to make Americans look at aspects of both the past and the present that they may not want to see."[105]

The Civil War Centennial also occurred from 1961 to 1965, which occurred in the midst of segregationists evoking the states rights issue versus Civil Rights advocates claiming the heritage of Lincoln and Emancipation. The planned commemoration and the narrative of the Civil War Centennial was to be one of reconciliation between the north and the south. Dwight D. Eisenhower established the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission in 1957, and it "labored to make the planned commemoration a weapon of the Cold War."[106] Virginia was the first southern state to create its own centennial commission, and the Richmond Civil War Centennial Commission struggled with heritage groups, who wanted to commemorate the bravery and valor of their Southern ancestors, and Civil War enthusiasts and historians on how to negotiate the politics of remembering the Civil War.[107] The enthusiasm for the anniversary did not have much fervor by 1965. As Robert J. Cook discusses in *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil*

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104 Handler and Gable, *New History in an Old Museum*, 67.

105 Ibid.

106 Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 15.

107 Brandon Butterworth, "Interpreting the War Anew: An Appraisal of Richmond's Civil War Centennial Commemoration" (master's thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012), 9.

War Centennial, 1961–1965, Americans were preoccupied by the black freedom struggle and the growing evidence that America was going to be deeply involved in the Vietnam War.

As Colonial Williamsburg restructured its presented past in the framework of social history, and the country became embroiled in protest movements and the Vietnam war, Shirley Plantation during the 1960s continued to focus its narrative on the distinguished Carter family and the family's fine antiques. However, perhaps to draw in visitors during the Civil War Centennial, Shirley Plantation did highlight its Civil War history more than previously. In a Shirley Plantation brochure published in 1960, the tagline of Shirley Plantation's significance was "Home of General Lee's Mother, Anne Hill Carter."[108] While Shirley Plantation certainly emphasized this historical significance to the public before the 1960s, the site highlighted its place within Civil War history more than within America's revolutionary history. The brochure included a story titled, "A Dangerous Escape" which told the family legend of Beverly Carter, son of Hill Carter and Mary Braxton Randolph, who returned from fighting in the Civil War in 1863 after he heard that his mother was sick. By then the Union army was stationed nearby, and the brochure states, "The next day a slave reported a 'spy' in the Shirley house to union headquarters across the river."[109] Beverly Carter hid in the attic of the house and when the Union soldiers arrived to search the house, "he escaped by climbing down a lightening rod which broke before he reached the ground."[110]

The brochure shares briefly the colonial history of Shirley Plantation, but remains focused on its connections to Robert E. Lee by advertising the ownership of his crib and some

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[108] Brochure, "Welcome to Shirley Plantation: Virginia's Oldest (1613)," Charles City County, Virginia, 1960, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

letters written by him to Hill Carter during the nineteenth-century. It also notes that Charles Carter, "grandfather of Robert E. Lee was the largest slaveholder and cattle raiser in the state."[111] Interestingly, the brochure includes the selling point that at Shirley Plantation, "the visitor may have a guided tour of the house without the feeling of being herded through a museum."[112] This idea that Shirley Plantation is different from other museums has continued into the twenty-first century as marked by its very limited collaboration with other sites outside of Route 5, or its not reframing the history presented with the changing times.

The story of Beverly Carter's escape was a popular family legend at Shirley Plantation during the 1950s and 1960s. The story was featured in the 1956 Ford Motor Company publication, *Virginia and America's Homecoming*. The piece, "Shirley–The Unchanged Plantation," reported that when Charles Hill Carter, Jr. told the story to a group of visitors in his home, one of the tourists said, "I'll finish it for you. My grandfather was the lieutenant who searched that attic. He knew the boy was there–he saw it in the father's face. He even glimpsed the boy's shadow. But he let him go because he'd have done the same thing himself. Besides, they'd have burned this lovely house."[113] Five years before, in an article published by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in 1951, the story of Beverly Carter and the visitor who claimed relation to the Union soldier who searched the attic for Beverly Carter was said to have happened in 1927. Except instead of the visitor saying it was his grandfather who let Beverly Carter go, the visitor, after asking to see the attic, stated, "my father always told me that he had one time up

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111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Anne Zimmer, "Shirley–The Unchanged Plantation" in *Virginia and America's Homecoming* (Detroit: Ford Motor Company, 1956), 42–43.

[been up] there trying not to see a Rebel."[114] Regardless of the details, the way that the story of Beverly Carter has been told at Shirley Plantation reflects the reconciliation narrative revived in the Civil War Centennial, where a Union soldier saved the Confederate soldier, both trying to keep a sense of humanity and brotherhood amidst a war. In all three versions of the story from 1951 to 1960, the slave informant was the troublemaker by almost getting Carter caught, which could have led to the destruction of Shirley Plantation.

The story of Beverly Carter and his close capture by Union forces is no longer shared on the current tours of Shirley Plantation. It seems to have disappeared from the site's narrative from the 1970s to the twenty-first century. Perhaps the American bicentennial of the 1970s inspired Shirley Plantation to return to its colonial and revolutionary ties. However, the ways in which American history was presented to the public continued to change in fundamental ways at Colonial Williamsburg. The growing interest in teaching an inclusive history was also increasing in popularity at historic sites around the country. Shirley Plantation hung onto the emphasis on the family's antiques and the Carters's history, and as there was more of a push to include the interpretation of slavery and the diversity of the American experience at Colonial Williamsburg, Shirley Plantation showed resistance to this interpretation.

Colonial Williamsburg organized a Curriculum Committee in 1977 to change its interpretation of the revolutionary period. The committee focused on the economic reasons that pushed the colonists to revolt, and emphasized the importance of analyzing rather than celebrating decisions made in the past so that the museum can help visitors become "better citizens of the world."[115] The new curriculum presented the narrative of a working community

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[114] Emily Blayton Major, "Old Farm, New Methods: Soil of Shirley Still Yields," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, February 11, 1951, A-3.

[115] Handler and Gable, *New History in an Old Museum*, 67.

highlighting the diversity inherent in the American experience. The structural inequality between blacks and whites during the eighteenth-century was emphasized and a "positive interpretation of the Black experience" that acknowledged the "contribution that all slaves made by their labor" also acquired a significant place within Colonial Willliamsburg's interpretation.[116] Instead of only displaying the eighteenth-century furnishings and decorative arts, the staff at Colonial Williamsburg desired to use these objects to teach about consumerism during the eighteenth-century, with the hopes that visitors would relate it to the consumer capitalism of the twentieth-century. Cary Carson was inspired to incorporate social history into reframing the interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg because social history seemed to address the exact questions raised by the social and political issues going on in the United States from the 1960s to the 1970s. The Civil Rights movement and the Feminist movement, raised questions regarding the lasting effects of slavery and the status of women that could be addressed within a historical perspective. Carson stated in 1988 that he viewed Colonial Williamsburg as a tool for examining the human diversity within Colonial society and that it was particularly useful for exploring how people exercised their freedom "within the web of economic, social, and human relationships" which are "the primary stuff of history."[117]

In their exploration of the shifting form and content of African American public history, Jeffrey C. Stewart and Faith Davis Ruffins wrote that during the 1970s African American public history gained access to a white mass audience through national museums, television and film,

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116 Ibid., 69-70.

117 Fergus M. Bordewich, "Revising Colonial America: Harsh historical truths transform a historical landmark," *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 1988), 28.

and the local school systems.[118] Black History week had become Black History Month in 1976, thus institutionalizing the teaching of African American history throughout the public school system. Additionally, the television mini-series "Roots," based on Alex Haley's 1976 book, offered "a disturbing education in the history of slavery" to a massive audience.[119] The television series not only created a craze for genealogical research, but it also presented to Americans, both white and black, that slavery was not a concept that could be compartmentalized in the past, but that it continued to be an issue of the present. Will Manley described the impact of Haley's narrative best by stating that it "took slavery out of the dry dust of the history textbook and thrust it into powerful emotions generated by million of beating human hearts."[120]

Shirley Plantation carried on with its narrative throughout the 1970s, but it seems that the struggle to maintain ownership of the estate was at the forefront of Charles Hill Carter, Jr.'s mind. Shirley Plantation was included on the National Register of Historic Places in 1969, protecting the site in its original state for future generations. In July of 1975, Carter favored obtaining byway status for Route 5 that would preserve the rural character of Charles City County.[121] This historic designation benefitted Carter as well as other owners of historic plantations in the county because it would maintain the historic character of the area to continue attracting tourists, on their way to Williamsburg, while also preventing development of the area. Two years prior to the easement of Route 5, the Charles City County Board of Supervisors, of which Charles Hill Carter, Jr. was a long-time member, voted to give tax-exempt status to non-

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118 Jeffrey C. Stewart and Faith Davis Ruffins, "A Faithful Witness: Afro-American Public History in Historical Perspective, 1828–1984" in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 332.

119 Ibid., 333.

120 Will Manley, "Roots," *Booklist* 106, 11 (February 1, 2010), 9.

121 Ron Sauder, "Status of Route 5 Debated," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 28, 1975, B-1 and B-4.

profit and religious organizations. Carter, in discussing this measure, stated that he chose not to vote because he felt it would have appeared self-serving, and then discussed that "several county plantation owners were considering methods, including the establishment of non-profit foundations, for operating the James River Plantations in future years."[122] He also stated that the inheritance taxes were so high that "some measure must be taken in the future to enable families to maintain the large plantations."[123] The financial struggle to preserve an old estate while also keeping it within the Carter family is a topic that comes up frequently from the 1970s to the present. During the 1920s Alice Carter Bransford and then Marion Carter Oliver, both worked to prevent their heirs from having to pay large inheritance taxes, and worked to have an income source to maintain the property. The threat of losing Shirley Plantation has been a primary concern for the Carter family.

People who visited Shirley Plantation since the 1970s continued to receive a historical narration similar to that presented during the 1950s. What started changing in the mid to late twentieth century was that the public began questioning the accuracy of the history being presented at Shirley Plantation, and as the interpretation of slavery began to be included at several other historic sites, visitors were curious also about the enslaved population who also once lived and worked on the Carter family's estate. The *Daily Press* newspaper in Hampton Roads, Virginia published an article about the absence of slavery at the James River Plantations on July 24, 1989.[124] The article begins with some questions asked by a fifth grader who was at Shirley Plantation for a school field trip. The student asked, "Where are the slave quarters? What

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122 Times-Dispatch State Staff, "Charles City Accepts Bid for New Center," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, September 25, 1973, B-3.

123 Ibid.

124 Charles Clary, "Slavery Not Evident at James River Plantations," *Daily Press*, July 24, 1989.

did the slaves do?" This student not only noticed the absence of an interpretation on slavery at Shirley Plantation but also felt that more information was given about family bloodlines and household inventories. When asked about the absence of the interpretation of slavery, Helle Carter, wife of Charles Hill Carter, Jr., stated, "we are a little skittish about that" and said that she hoped that people in the Charles City County area would feel a sense of pride about and closeness to the plantations. She said that slavery is a "touchy subject" and they "tend to let tourists ask the questions in order to not step on anybody's toes." This article brought up the difficulties in interpreting slavery at plantation sites by pointing out that there were some African Americans in the area who did not want to discuss the subject because it was too painful while others felt that it should be included in the presentation of the plantation's history, especially if the site was going to discuss the day-to-day living. The article included the thoughts of Henry Crump, who was born in 1890 and raised at Shirley Plantation. He spoke fondly of his time at the plantation and said that the Carters treated his family well. He also stated, "I enjoyed those days better than I do now, in a way, I felt good then but I don't feel so good today."

On March 22, 1992, the *New York Times* ran an article titled, "Their Old Virginia Homes" which highlighted the "bastions of America's first aristocracy" along the James River.[125] The article's section about Shirley Plantation focused on the unique architectural features of the floating staircase and its rich colonial history. On May 31, 1992, the *New York Times* published a reader's letter about a visit that she and her daughter had made to Shirley Plantation and Berkeley Plantation, and to their "great surprise, neither the guided tours nor the brochures mentioned an extremely significant element in the life and history of the plantations – the

[125] Susan Spano, "Their Old Virginia Homes," *The New York Times*, March 22, 1992, 15.

slaves."[126] She went on to state that she received maps and descriptions of the outbuildings but she didn't read or see anything that provided information about the daily lives of the enslaved, how they were treated, where were their quarters, and about their emancipation, which "is of great historical interest." She ended her letter wondering if Shirley and Berkeley Plantations decided not to include this information for fear that it would "diminish visitors' appreciation of the elegance and beauty of these plantations."[127]

Interestingly, Charles Hill Carter, Jr. responded to this letter and stated that the educational objective of Shirley Plantation was to tell "the history of one family over time not as interpreting the broad spectrum of society over time." He also explained that information about the enslaved at Shirley Plantation was poor and limited to shoe and meal lists. With that, and because there are no surviving slave quarters or related structures, "this makes the cost of accurately interpreting black life very high. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation replicated the slave quarters at Carter's Grove with a huge grant and a large research staff."[128]

The responses of Helle Carter and Charles Hill Carter, Jr. illustrate that they felt they could be excused from including information about a large and important aspect of American history. To be fair, not having the resources and slavery being a sensitive topic are legitimate reasons for considering carefully how to interpret the lives of the enslaved. Yet a plantation that advertises an education in American history cannot ignore one of the most significant chapters that made up that plantation's story. Colonial Williamsburg recognized the deep importance of teaching the public about slavery as it existed in the eighteenth-century capital, and the site has acknowledged and interpreted this history since the 1960s. However, Shirley Plantation has

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126 Diane Berkeley, "Slavery's Traces," *The New York Times*, May 31, 1992, XX12.

127 Ibid.

128 Charles Hill Carter, Jr., "Slavery's Traces," *The New York Times*, May 31, 1992, XX12.

continued to respond to slavery-related questions raised by the public in much the same manner as the Carters did in the 1980s and early 1990s, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Charles Hill Carter, Jr. spent the rest of the 1990s and the early 2000s concerned about the inheritance taxes that would have to be paid by his son, Charles Hill Carter, III, and trying to keep a steady income flowing into the estate. In 1995, Richmond's *Style Weekly* featured the plantations along historic Route 5 and discussed what their owners were willing to do to keep their estates.[129] They were "reinventing the plantations into viable businesses past generations would have never dreamed of" by "swapping privacy, family time and exclusivity for location fees, tourist dollars and wedding deals."[130] The Carters at Shirley Plantation decided to allow cargos of garbage from New York to use their port for unloading the waste on its way to the Charles City landfill. They considered it the generation's "best opportunity to make money off of the farm," even though their neighbors were not too thrilled with the idea.[131] Charles Hill Carter, Jr. stated in the *New York Times* article, "Yankee Trash May Preserve Rebel Shrine," that the family needed the income from this deal to preserve the buildings, portraits, and the overall estate, while also providing for the inheritance taxes, which would keep Shirley Plantation within the family.[132] The admission revenues have not been enough to sustain Shirley Plantation, but the Carters have been creative in coming up with other sources of income to continue operating the estate. For example, Charles Hill Carter, Jr. began running a sand and gravel mine on his

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129 John W. Maloney, "Historic Route 5 Inc.," *Style Weekly*, November 28, 1995.

130 Ibid., 20.

131 Ibid.

132 John Tierney, "Yankee Trash May Preserve Rebel Shrine," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1999, B1.

property while his son worked to bring in mud dredged from the Potomac to create more fertile farm land. Even though the Carters have various sources of income, the threat of the inheritances taxes hung heavily over their heads as Charles Hill Carter, Jr. aged. *Human Events*, a conservative newspaper, published the article, "Save Shirley Plantation" with the headline that the "Death Tax could destroy America's oldest family business."[133] By loaning their family archival and object collections, the Carters received a tax deduction, but they declared they would never sell the items from the family's collection, believing that the artifacts should not be separated from the family house. Abolishing the "death tax," is the only hope the Carters have to be able to keep their estate within the family.[134]

Charles Hill Carter, Jr. died on November 20, 2009, and Shirley Plantation successfully passed to one of his sons, Charles Hill Carter, III. Shirley Plantation has stayed within the family and the plantation continues to generate income from its port, from renting out farmland to neighboring farmers, and by opening the grounds to tourists for daily tours. Shirley Plantation's operations as a historic house museum have stayed essentially the same, with some minor differences. That persistence illustrates how Shirley Plantation feels about its historical significance. As the new world of the twenty-first century began and the ways in which the public understood history changed, Shirley Plantation remains the same.

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133 Terrence P. Jeffrey, "Save Shirley Plantation," *Human Events*, April 2, 2001.

134 Ibid.

Chapter 3

"It was about Aristocracy, not Cruelty"

I first visited Shirley Plantation two years ago in 2011. Since then I have visited the site five times. I wanted to see if the historical narrative presented to the public would be different with each docent and I wanted to see if the interpretation of slavery had expanded or changed. After my first visit to Shirley Plantation, I left disappointed that the docent failed to mention slavery once throughout the house tour. The only time he spoke of slavery was when I asked about a tumbledown building located about a mile from the house. It looked as though it had been one of the old slave quarters, and this docent confirmed that it was a surviving slave cabin from the nineteenth-century, but then quickly stated, "slavery back then was about aristocracy, not cruelty. It was in the Deep South that slavery was cruel."[135] The docent then explained that the building now stands on the private property of a different owner and he has turned down Shirley Plantation's request to purchase it. Two years later, the cabin still stands next to a small white house, amid overgrown bushes and trees.

The issue of interpreting slavery has haunted Shirley Plantation for quite some time. There have been many visitors who have complained that the site does not mention slavery, but

[135] House Tour, by a docent of Shirley Plantation, Charles City, County, Virginia, summer 2011.

the staff of Shirley Plantation have either ignored these comments or responded that they do interpret it. For example, a posting on Facebook of a photograph of archaeological work being done in one of the outbuildings, provoked an argument in the photo's comments section about whether or not Shirley Plantation interprets slavery. The photo was captioned, "Laundry building east room first floor renovations! What is behind those slats under the windows? Stay tuned! Answer revealed tomorrow!"[136] The comments exchanged between a Facebook user named Bob and Shirley Plantation reveal the defensive and deflective stance Shirley Plantation takes when confronted with the question of slavery.

Bob: Slaves? I'm sorry when you go there and are in the house tour they don't mention slaves at all. It's as if it was run by white people for whit [sic] people with no help at all. Oh well this is Virginia.

Shirley Plantation: Tour guides at Shirley do include slave history at Shirley. Have you seen the new slavery and servitude exhibit in the kitchen outbuilding? We have two phases left under design stage right now.

Shirley Plantation: Architectural historians tell us the bottom window sill was usually well below the bottom of the glassed windows and used as a shelf or seating area.

Bob: My guide said nothing. He went on and on about the fact that the house is still occupied by the original white family. The kitchen outbuilding has no guide. How about an African American guide or video presentation in there that tells the horrible conditions that slaves lived under.

Bob: How about some African American guides and people in the gift shop. That might help. The whole operation is white.

Facebook user #1: Why do things like this always have to become about race?

Shirley Plantation: "The whole operation is white." Where are you getting your information? You obviously do NOT know about our operations or who is on our staff—could it be you have your own prejudice?[137]

As a previous visitor to Shirley Plantation, Bob presented some feedback of the tour and he raised an important question as to why slavery was not mentioned while he was on the house tour. A Shirley Plantation staff member argued that "tour guides do include slave history," but on

[136] Facebook, "The Shirley Plantation," under Wall Photos, http://www.facebook.com/ShirleyPlantation (accessed March 16, 2012).

[137] Ibid.

four of five of my visits to the plantation with a different docent each time, slavery was not mentioned once in the house tours. In fact, the docents seemed to have been following the same script during all of the tours. In the fifth house tour I followed, Julian Charity, visitor services manager and historian of Shirley Plantation, mentioned the word "slaves" three times during the thirty-minute tour. The first was to explain that Robert "King" Carter received the nickname, "King" because of the significant number of cattle, plantations, and slaves he owned.[138] The enslaved were mentioned twice more in the parlor, once in the narrative by stating that the house was built by indentured servants and slaves and again when a visitor asked why there was a water faucet in the parlor. Charity answered that the faucet was installed in the late 18th century so that the dishes could be washed in the house during large dinners as a way to prevent the china from breaking during the slaves' walk back to the kitchen outbuilding.[139] Charity's mention of slaves is better than no mention at all, but it still does not provide an adequate discussion or interpretation of the Carter family as slaveholders. Shirley Plantation responds that the way the site interprets slavery is enough. However, the miniscule interpretation that Shirley Plantation does engage in continues to be dismissive of the enslaved people who once lived and worked on this plantation. The way in which Shirley Plantation decided to respond to Bob's feedback on Facebook is surprising for a public historic site that claims to have a mission of educating the public. Other Facebook users attacked Bob's criticism of Shirley Plantation by stating, "Not only that [sic] the tour completely discussed all the issues with slavery and the fact that the Carters were the first give freedom to their slaves and promote them in society. Thanks be to God the tour tells the truth," or by calling him a "left wing extremist" and that it was the "Democrats who

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138 House Tour, by visitor services manager and historian of Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia, October 2013.

139 Ibid.

brought slavery, segregation, and socialism."[140] Instead of attempting to assuage the heated debate or put in a bit of sound historical perspective, Julian Charity made an interesting response to Bob's comments: "This conversation has become amazing to me. If I travel to the White House and do not see the President, does that mean he does not exist? If I go to Arlington National Cemetery and see no corpses or coffins, does that mean no one is buried there?[141]

Shirley Plantation is one of many James River estates located along Historic Route 5 and travelers driving down the road from Richmond to Willliamsburg encounter a series of grand Virginia plantations each with its own claim to historical significance. The official tourism website for the Commonwealth of Virginia markets the Berkeley plantation as "Virginia's most historic plantation" and "the site of the first thanksgiving in 1619."[142] Westover Plantation is the "most elegant plantation" which offers "commanding views of the James River and eagles soaring overhead."[143] On a rack card published by the Shirley Plantation Foundation in 2009, Shirley's claim to fame is being "Virginia's First Plantation."[144] As shown in Figure 1, a potential visitor sees a beautiful aerial view of the well-manicured Georgian estate with several outbuildings lining the gravel avenue leading to the great house. Headlining the top of the 2009 card in big bold letters is Shirley's marketing pitch, "Now, *this* is a PLANTATION!"[145] The most recent rack card published by Shirley Plantation has a different caption, but features the

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140 Facebook, "The Shirley Plantation," under Wall Photos, http://www.facebook.com/ShirleyPlantation (accessed March 16, 2012).

141 Ibid.

142 Virginia Tourism Corporation, "Berkeley Plantation," Official Tourism Website of the Commonwealth of Virginia, http://www.virginia.org/Listings/HistoricSites/BerkeleyPlantation (accessed May 2, 2012).

143 Virginia Tourism Corporation, "Westover Plantation," Official Tourism Website of the Commonwealth of Virginia, http://www.virginia.org/Listings/HistoricSites/WestoverPlantation (accessed May 2, 2012).

144 Shirley Plantation Foundation, *Shirley Plantation: Since 1613* (Charles City County, Virginia), 2009.

145 Ibid.

same photograph of the site. Published in 2012, the promotional rack card markets Shirley Plantation as a place to "Connect with American History."[146] It is unknown why Shirley Plantation decided to change the caption on the site's promotional materials. Perhaps stating that Shirley Plantation was a place for visitors to connect with American history would better convince the public of the site's historical relevance, whereas the proud touting of the site as a plantation did not. The 2009 rack card spurs curiosity about how Shirley Plantation interprets its history with slavery, especially because of its tone of pride for being a plantation.

The 2012 rack card raises questions on how Shirley Plantation interprets its site to demonstrate its connection with American history. More important, what does Shirley Plantation define as being American history? Studies have analyzed how several historic plantation sites incorporate or exclude the history of slavery, but this chapter will focus on Shirley's interpretation. The majority of the publications about Shirley Plantation have been celebratory of the Hill-Carter family, or about the eighteenth-century architecture, or telling the ghost story of the family's dear Aunt Pratt. The only focused analysis of Shirley Plantation's interpretation of slavery is Jennifer Page Ley's master's thesis, "The Slave's Story: Interpreting Nineteenth-Century Slave History at the Shirley Plantation." However, Ley's thesis, which will be discussed in this chapter, provides inadequate suggestions for incorporating the story of the enslaved.[147] The relevance of Shirley's heritage raises these questions: What kind of heritage does Shirley present to the public and how does this include the site's relationship with slavery? How is the presence of slavery visible to its visitors? What does Shirley Plantation's exhibit on slavery

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146 Shirley Plantation Foundation, *Shirley Plantation: Connect with American History* (Charles City County, Virginia, 2012).

147 Jennifer Page Ley, "The Slave's Story: Interpreting Nineteenth-Century Slave History at the Shirley Plantation" (master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1995), 7.

reveal about reluctance to discuss the subject and how does its representation compare to the other plantations in the area? After addressing these questions in this chapter, suggestions for how Shirley Plantation can incorporate the story of the enslaved will follow in the next chapter.

Figure 1. Promotional rack card published by Shirley Plantation in 2009. Taken from the personal collection of Kerry Dahm.

In order to analyze how Shirley Plantation interprets slavery for the public, it was important to experience the plantation as an everyday visitor. By using the method of participant observation, I was able to witness the historical narrative presented by Shirley Plantation without my presence influencing the interpretation. The description of the house tour that follows summarizes how I experienced the tour during the five times I visited the site, except for a few

small changes in my most recent visit as discussed earlier. The four docents and Julian Charity followed the same narrative for the house tour, which highlighted the architectural elements of the house, the eighteenth-century furniture, and the personal stories of the Hill-Carter family.

As I drove up the tree-lined road, a glimpse of the great house revealed itself in the middle of two neatly trimmed large hedges at the edge of the gravel parking lot. I walked up the narrow pathway and headed for the laundry building to purchase an admission ticket. After browsing the shop, full of Shirley Plantation souvenirs and Confederate memorabilia, I walked around outside to wait for the house tour to begin. At the half-hour, a docent met the visitors on the porch of the mansion for our scheduled tour and she called any stragglers by ringing a large bell. After collecting our admission tickets, resembling the "calling cards" that visitors would have used in the past to call on the family, the docent pulled out a large key and invited us inside. During the house tour, the docent shared the stories and legacy of the Hill-Carter family by introducing each family member as we walked by their portraits. One of the first family members introduced was Robert "King" Carter who was called such because he was "richer than the king of England." Failing to mention that his wealth included the enslavement of a thousand people, Robert "King" Carter was described as hardworking, frugal, and annoyed with his son John Carter for being too extravagant and irresponsible while he attended school in England. The docent also highlighted the delicate eighteenth-century furniture and unique architectural elements such as the floating staircase. In the parlor, we learned of General Robert E. Lee's connection to the family through his mother, Anne Hill Carter. Lee's parents married in the parlor "right at this fireplace" and the docent stated "General Lee always had a fondness for Shirley" while pointing to his photograph.[148] On the tour guided by Julian Charity, he made the

[148] House tour, by a docent of Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia, February 25, 2012.

joke that although Robert E. Lee was not conceived at Shirley Plantation, the space in front of the fireplace is "where the magic began."[149]

In the dining room, the docent showed us the large silver punchbowl that belonged to Nestor, Charles Carter's horse, who was served champagne when he won a race. A windowpane in the dining room is etched with several Carter women's initials. Elizabeth Carter started the tradition in 1748 when she suspected that her engagement ring was crystal, not diamond. During a dinner reception, she used her ring to write her initials into the glass and found that it was indeed a diamond. There are twenty-six initials etched by Hill-Carter brides who were testing their rings, the most recent being from Harriet Carter, daughter of Charles Hill Carter, Jr., in 1995.

We moved from room to room listening to stories about the Carters and how their unbreakable spirit helped them survive Indian attacks, Bacon's Rebellion, the Civil War, and the Depression. In the first floor bedroom, the docent told the heroic story of two Carter women who saved Shirley from destruction during the Civil War by showing kindness and hospitality to Union soldiers camped on their front lawn. The bedroom was also where the mistress took charge of the household by planning menus and delegating chores to the "servants."[150] On the tour with Julian Charity, he pointed out the photographs of Alice Carter Bransford and Marion Carter Oliver, stating that they operated the plantation for sixty-four years and by saving it for future generations, they were the "greatest owners of the plantation in the family's history."[151] The tour ended with the portrait of Charles Hill Carter Jr., who officially opened Shirley

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149 House Tour, by visitor services manager and historian of Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia, October 2013.

150 House tour, by a docent of Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia, February 25, 2012.

151 House Tour, by visitor services manager and historian of Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia, October 2013.

Plantation to the public in 1952. His son, Charles Hill Carter III, lives on the second floor of the mansion with his new wife, and he along with his brother, Robert "Randy" Carter, continue the tradition of sharing their family's history every day of the year except on Thanksgiving and Christmas day. Julian Charity noted at the end of the tour that the estate is held within the Carter family trust to protect the property's survival as it passes on to the future generations of Carters. Randy Carter and Charles Hill Carter III do not have children, but the property will pass onto descendants of Charles Hill Carter, Jr. who carry the surname Carter. However, Charles Hill Carter III, aged 51 recently married a 31 year old woman, so perhaps the inheritance of the estate to direct descendants of the current generation will be possible.

On four of the five house tours that I followed, there was no mention of slavery and as visitors walked through the house, it was easy to think there was never an enslaved presence within the household. Indeed, the wealth displayed throughout the home and elaborated upon by the docents, such as Nestor's silver punch bowl, must have been procured by the labor of enslaved African-Americans. As stated in a 1960 article from *Life Magazine*, Charles Carter "was the largest slaveholder and cattle raiser in the state."[152] If visitors wished to learn about slavery at Shirley Plantation, they could visit the kitchen outbuilding located to the side of the great house. There were no signs for the exhibit, however, nor did the docent share any information about it to the tour group. Since visitors would not have known about it unless they chose to walk inside the outbuilding, it is possible that many visitors simply walked by the exhibit without knowing it was there.

I found the slavery exhibit, during my first visit, as I was wandering around the estate waiting for the house tour to begin. The exhibit consisted of two rooms on the first floor with a total of seven exhibition panels and a case displaying a few objects found during archaeological

[152] "Welcome to Shirley Plantation, Virginia's Oldest (1613)," *Life Magazine* (April 4, 1960).

excavations. As seen in figure 3, one room portrayed how the kitchen would have looked during the eighteenth to the nineteenth century with plastic foods on ceramic dishes covering the wooden tables. Three panels described how food was prepared during the eighteenth and nineteenth century with a brief mention that enslaved people performed this task. The panels largely focused, however, on what the Carters would have eaten. In the other room, as seen in figure 4, there are four exhibition panels on the wall with a display case in the center of the room. These panels outlined the chronology of slavery at Shirley Plantation that included the switch from indentured servitude to slavery, a cholera epidemic in 1849 that killed thirty enslaved people, and stories of Carter family members who did not agree with slavery yet continued to hold people in bondage. One of the panels described the surviving nineteenth-century slave cabin that I noticed on the way to Shirley Plantation.

Figure 2. Photograph of the surviving nineteenth-century slave cabin that was once a part of Shirley Plantation. Photograph taken by Kerry Dahm, 2012

Figure 3. Photograph of one of the exhibit rooms in Shirley Plantation's kitchen outbuilding. Photograph by Kerry Dahm, 2012.

Figure 4. Photograph from Shirley Plantation's Facebook page of the Slavery and Servitude Exhibit. Photograph taken by Shirley Plantation, 2011.

The narrative presented to the public regarding Shirley Plantation's significance is dominated by the successes and trivia of the Carter family. Shirley Plantation desires to maintain this narrative in order to prevent the tarnishing of their family's image. Shirley Plantation has been open to the public since 1952, but the Carter family has been opening their home to visitors since the late nineteenth-century. In a series of postcards ranging from the early 1900s to the 1970s, Shirley Plantation has been consistently represented in a nostalgic manner. The great house is always the focal point of the photograph surrounded by the beautiful landscape.[153] Each postcard highlights a specific significance of the plantation whether it is the architecture, the continued residence of the Carters, the genealogical link to Robert E. Lee, or the tranquility of the beautiful landscape. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Shirley Plantation published books for purchase in their gift shop that share the story of the Carter family dynasty. Each family member is described lovingly and the books emphasize the family's strength in

[153] Postcard, "Shirley on the James River," *Detroit Photographic Company*, 1903. Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. Accession number 2005.26.11.

Postcard, "Shirley Plantation: Home of the Carters since 1723," Taylor Lewis and Associates (Norfolk, Virginia), 1977. Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. Accession number 2005.26.18.

preserving America's heritage.[154] Shirley Plantation holds programs and events celebrating the family such as "Five Courageous Women" or draws similarities between the philosophies of Robert E. Lee and Martin Luther King, Jr. during their celebration of MLK Day and Lee-Jackson day.[155] The lesson about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert E. Lee is marketed as a public school program with a few Virginia Standards of Learning Correlations listed.[156] In January 2013, Shirley Plantation advertised this program on Facebook by stating,

> "Come learn how the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Confederate General Robert E. Lee shared similar guiding principles, and why the 10th generation plantation owner, C. Hill Carter Jr. was influenced by them, while serving on the Charles City County Board of Supervisors, during a particularly divided time."[157]

In response to this program, one person commented, "As a committed Shirley supporter and a historian, I very much want to know how a place about which I care is making such a seemingly preposterous leap."[158] By the next day, this comment questioning the historical validity of the lesson was no longer on Shirley Plantation's page, instead a representative of Shirley Plantation wrote, "Our research astounded even our historians!"[159] Judging by the way Shirley Plantation has engaged with the public on its Facebook page about the interpretation of slavery, it would not be surprising if a representative of Shirley Plantation erased the comment that questioned

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154 Joanne Young, *Shirley Plantation: A Personal Adventure for 10 Generations* (Charles City County, Virginia: Shirley Plantation, 1981).

155 Shirley Plantation, "Calendar of Events. "http://www.shirleyplantation.com/calendarofevents.html (accessed March 30, 2012).

156 Shirley Plantation, "Educational Programs."http://www.shirleyplantation.com/educational_programs.html (accessed March 30, 2012).

157 Facebook, "The Shirley Plantation," http://www.facebook.com/ShirleyPlantation (accessed January 16, 2013).

158 Ibid.

159 Ibid.,(Accessed January 17, 2013).

their interpretation, while adding a comment meant to justify the legitimacy of the program. Shirley Plantation deflects and becomes defensive about the historical interpretation presented at its site. As Janet Appel stated during my interview with her in 2012, Shirley Plantation does not collaborate with outside historians or other public history sites. The docents and the staff at Shirley Plantation prefer to conduct their own historical research.[160] Plantation sites throughout the American South are confronted with the challenge of interpreting slavery for the visiting public. Many nationally known plantations such as Montpelier and Monticello, homes to former presidents James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, have actively incorporated the stories of the enslaved, but many smaller plantation sites, like Shirley Plantation, have not.

As defined by Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small's work, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, three of the identified strategies used by historic plantation sites are used by Shirley Plantation in their guided and self-guided tours: they symbolically annihilate and erase slavery in the house tour, while the slavery exhibit in the kitchen outbuilding is an example of segregated knowledge. The slavery exhibit demonstrates Shirley's trivialization and deflection of the experience of the enslaved. Eichstedt and Small defined the strategy, toward relative incorporation, as a site that attempts "to incorporate the discussion of enslavement throughout their tours,"[161] which Shirley does not practice. The three strategies employed by the Shirley Plantation will be examined in the following discussion.

In the house tour, the docent practiced the strategy of symbolic annihilation and erasure because "the mention of slavery or the enslaved are completely absent" or "mention of them is

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160 Janet Appel, interview by author, July 11, 2012.

161 Eichstedt and Small, Representations of Slavery, 203.

negligible, formalistic, fleeting, or perfunctory."[162] The dining room's set-up presents how the room would have looked if the Carter family were sitting down for dinner. The table is covered with a variety of plastic foods and decorated with the family's silver collection. The docent made no mention of how the food would have been prepared nor of the enslaved domestics who would have served the family as they ate. By failing to mention the reliance of the Carter family on the enslaved, the Shirley Plantation is protecting the nostalgic and idealized version of what times were like in the "good ole days." In an article describing the narratives shared by docents at North Carolina plantations, E. Arnold Modlin Jr. states that visitors flock to plantations to experience the "simpler times" and to soak in the beauty of the landscape. [163]

If Shirley were to make an accurate history of slavery more visible, it could taint the profitable mythic representation of the southern plantation. Shirley Plantation, like other privately owned plantations throughout the South, relies on the sale of admission tickets as a large part of their income. A 1995 article in Richmond's *Style Weekly* states that "while the 53,000 tourists a year are the primary source of the Carters' income, each generation has its opportunity to make additional money which solidifies the family's stand at Shirley."[164] The plantations along Historic Route 5 earn revenue by hosting wedding ceremonies and receptions, and Eichstedt and Small found that many other southern plantations have turned themselves into Bed and Breakfasts.[165] Edgewood Plantation, located on Route 5, charges $150 to $250 a night

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[162] Ibid., 105–106.

[163] E. Arnold Modlin Jr., "Tales Told on the Tour: Mythic Representations of Slavery by Docents at North Carolina Plantation Museums," *Southeastern Geographer* vol.48 no.3 (November 2008): 265-287.

[164] John W. Maloney, "Historic Route 5 Inc.," *Style Weekly*, November 28, 1995, p. 22.

[165] Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, p. 62–63.

for visitors to stay in one of their eight "luxurious and charming rooms" that would be "the envy of Scarlett O'Hara," two of which are in the former slaves' quarters.[166]

That the narrative of Shirley Plantation's house tour fails to incorporate slavery but places a slavery exhibit outside of the house is an example of the segregation of knowledge strategy discussed by Eichstedt and Small. The exhibit is in a "separate site within the site," which visitors have the option of visiting.[167] Placing the slavery exhibit separately from the main attraction fails adequately to inform visitors of the large enslaved population who were once present at the plantation, and also provides Shirley Plantation with the response that they do, in fact, present slavery at its site.

In her thesis, "The Slave's Story: Interpreting Nineteenth-Century Slave History at the Shirley Plantation," Jennifer Page Ley argues that Shirley should only use artifacts directly linked to the enslaved from the plantation to interpret slavery, so that the history of the enslaved people could be told accurately. Ley also argues that a general history of slavery in Virginia should not be a part of the interpretation because there is no evidence that what may have happened at other plantations occurred at Shirley.[168] While it is true that generalized statements without evidence should not be communicated in Shirley's interpretation of slavery, historic house museums like Montpelier and the Wickham House in Richmond have demonstrated that objects directly related to the enslaved are not needed to interpret their history. Also, what types of objects would the enslaved have used that were different from the slaveholders? Does this

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166 Mannix Marketing Inc., "A Bed and Breakfast: Edgewood, Circa 1849," www.edgewoodplantation.com (accessed May 2, 2012).

167 Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 170.

168 Jennifer Page Ley, "The Slave's Story: Interpreting Nineteenth-Century Slave History at the Shirley Plantation" (master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1995), microfilm, p. 7.

excuse Shirley Plantation's silence about slavery throughout the house tour or the separation of slavery from the main interpretive focus? Shirley Plantation's physical landscape is an artifact that has a direct link to the enslaved once resident on the property. The enslaved would have worked in the fields, the great house, and the various outbuildings. The great house itself has a back door and stairway that the enslaved would have used to deliver meals to the house from the kitchen.[169] Ley acknowledges that obtaining objects that once belonged to or were used by the enslaved is difficult and suggests this difficulty as a teaching point about the nature of slavery. But, her suggestions on how Shirley Plantation should interpret slavery, by placing a plaque on the kitchen outbuilding or by incorporating it only in the nineteenth-century portion of the house tour, are insufficient because it treats the story of the enslaved as irrelevant to or separate from the history of the Carter family.[170]

The slavery exhibit was likely Shirley Plantation's response to the interpretative suggestions made by Ley who focused her research on Hill Carter's records from the nineteenth century. Hill Carter was responsible for reviving Shirley's fortune when he took charge in 1816. Tobacco had exhausted the soil and Hill Carter diversified the crops by adding the production of wheat and corn. At this time, the Carters owned about two hundred slaves with over one hundred living at Shirley. Ley cites an article that Carter wrote for the *Farmer's Register* in 1834 to demonstrate how benevolent he was in comparison to other slaveholders. Ley states that Carter gave the enslaved garden plots and "whatever the slaves at Shirley chose to do with their cash,

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169 Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, District of Columbia: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 112 and 157. At several plantation sites, Eichstedt and Small heard the story of the "Whistling Walkway" recounted by docents. The docents described how the enslaved had to whistle as they brought food from the kitchen to the great house to reassure the slaveholders that they were not tasting the food.

170 Ley, "The Slave's Story," 53.

they were given more by their owner than were many of their contemporaries."[171] The article Carter wrote was titled, "On the Management of Negroes" which gave advice to farmers and overseers on how to make the enslaved "valuable as a class of laborers."[172] Carter recommends flattery and states that "they are generally grateful for favors, have the strongest attachments, endure fatigue and hardships with great patience, are very contented and cheerful—and in fact, are the happiest people in the world, unless tampered with by fanatics."[173] Carter's advice on the management of the enslaved expresses his paternalistic notions, but unfortunately, Ley does not interpret it as such. She argues that "the details serve to demonstrate how Hill and his slaves communicated and related to each other within a peculiar system that neither enjoyed, but within which both were forced to live."[174] In Ley's conclusion, about how Shirley Plantation should incorporate slavery into the interpretation, she suggested only using the information available in the manuscripts of Hill Carter, which includes many farming journals, inventory lists, and letters, since information from previous generations of Carters is scant.

The information on the exhibition panels fit into Eichstedt and Small's identified strategy of trivializing and deflecting the experience of the enslaved. The panels belittled slavery by "representing slavery as a possibly benevolent institution" and by "valorizing whiteness through references to good owner or owners' good intentions."[175] The panels reeked of paternalistic language and they seemed to justify the Carter's reliance upon enslaved labor. The history of slavery on Shirley Plantation is outlined in a chronological order dominated with stories

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171 Ley, "The Slaves Story," pp. 32–33.

172 Hill Carter, "On the Management of Negroes," *Farmer's Register* vol. 1 (1834), 564.

173 Ibid., pp. 564–565.

174 Ley, "The Slaves Story," 51.

175 Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 147.

describing various Carter family members as either good masters or opposed to the institution of slavery. For example, Shirley Plantation wrote that Mary Braxton Randolph Carter, wife of Hill Carter and mistress of Shirley Plantation during the mid-nineteenth century, taught the enslaved how to read and write and baptized a group of enslaved children in the James River. Mary Braxton Randolph Carter's thoughts about slavery did not seem to be in line with her husband's. For example, in a letter to Mildred Campbell in 1849, she wrote, "and freely would I labour for my daily bread in preference to being the partner of one who owns 130 immortal beings. O, the responsibility weighs me down to the earth." She also wrote that when a Mr. Quincy came down to see the "old Virginia plantations," she hoped that "he will not think as badly of them as I do."[176] Mary Braxton Randolph Carter, as stated on the exhibition panel, "died during the Civil War of pneumonia before she was able to see her slaves gain their freedom."[177] Hill Carter is described as having practiced "more humane ownership and bore witness to the emancipation of the slaves after the Civil War."[178] The panels also trivialized the experience of the enslaved by just listing them in numbers owned by the Carters since the seventeenth century. By 2013, two of the exhibition panels that were displayed on the walls in the previous year had been taken down. As shown in figures 5 and 6, the Slavery and Servitude exhibit now consists of three binders that are titled "Did We Answer Your Questions?" and that sit on two windowsills, two exhibition panels and the archaeological case. The binders are filled with general questions about slavery at Shirley Plantation that the site has received from visitors. Janet Appel mentioned these binders during my interview with her, stating that Shirley Plantation has received so many questions

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176 Letter, Mary Braxton Randolph Carter to Mildred Campbell, March, 10, 1849, Charles Campbell Papers, Manuscripts and Rare Books department, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

177 The Shirley Plantation, exhibition panel on slavery in the kitchen outbuilding, Charles City County, Virginia, date created unknown, viewed February 25, 2012.

178 Ibid.

about slavery, that this was the site's response to the public's curiosity.[179] With the incorporation of the binders and the removal of the two exhibition panels, visitors who walk into this room are now less aware that there is an exhibit about slavery at Shirley Plantation. The binders, although full of questions about slavery, have no labels indicating the type of information that is contained within. The numbers of questions that are contained in these binders indicate the significant interest visitors have had on learning about the enslaved at Shirley Plantation. And Shirley Plantation's response to the public's interest appears to be more an attempt at appeasing people, rather than engaging and educating the public.

Figure 5. Photograph of the binders in the Slavery and Servitude exhibit, photograph taken by Kerry Dahm, 2013.

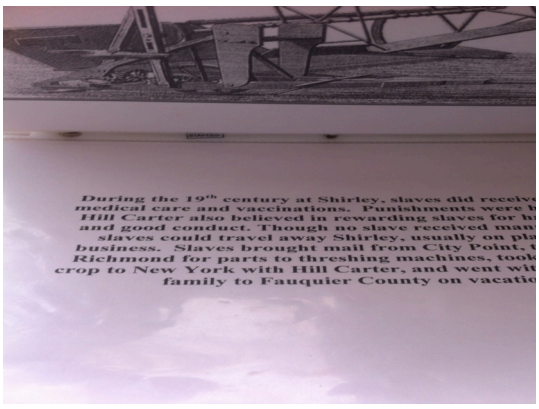

Figure 6. Photograph of a page from one of the binders, photograph taken by Kerry Dahm, 2013.

In the case of objects from the archaeological excavations at Shirley, items such as glass beads, tortoise shells, a sundial, and pieces of colonoware are displayed. Each item has a label asking visitors if they know what these objects are or how these items might have been used. For example, figure 7 shows pieces of porcelain found at the slave quarters labeled with the question, "why would high-status china be found at a slave quarters?" and figure 8 is a photograph of a label for a lead shot and fishing weights from the seventeenth-century asking, "were slaves using

179 Janet Appel, interview by author, July 11, 2012.

these as weapons?" [180] It is unclear whether Shirley Plantation is encouraging visitor participation or hoping to find the answer since the plantation may not have the staff to study the items. In 1979 and 1980, Theodore R. Reinhart and a group of students from William and Mary's archaeological field school spent two summers at Shirley Plantation investigating the origins of the mansion as well as slave life on the plantation. Genevieve Levitt wrote a report on her archaeological findings concerning "Slave and Tenant Farmers at Shirley" and concluded that the majority of the items found at the site of the slave quarters were from the nineteenth century, although many items were difficult to accurately date from being crushed or frequently handed down by the Carters. The archaeological research conducted by Reinhart and his team focused largely on accurately dating the great house, while the materials used by the enslaved were summarized as support that the Carters were good masters. One exhibition panel states that the Carters are committed to continuing archaeological research of the plantation: "four generations removed from slavery, 11th generation managers Charles Hill Carter III and Robert Randolph Carter have been instrumental in the research and archaeology at Shirley Plantation. Charles H. Carter III continues to fund the research, transcription, and cataloguing of his family's documents and artifacts to be used in interpretations and exhibits."[181]

[180] The Shirley Plantation, exhibit display case in the kitchen outbuilding, Charles, City County, Virginia. Viewed on February 25, 2012.

[181] The Shirley Plantation, exhibition panel in the kitchen outbuilding, Charles City County, Virginia, viewed on February 25, 2012.

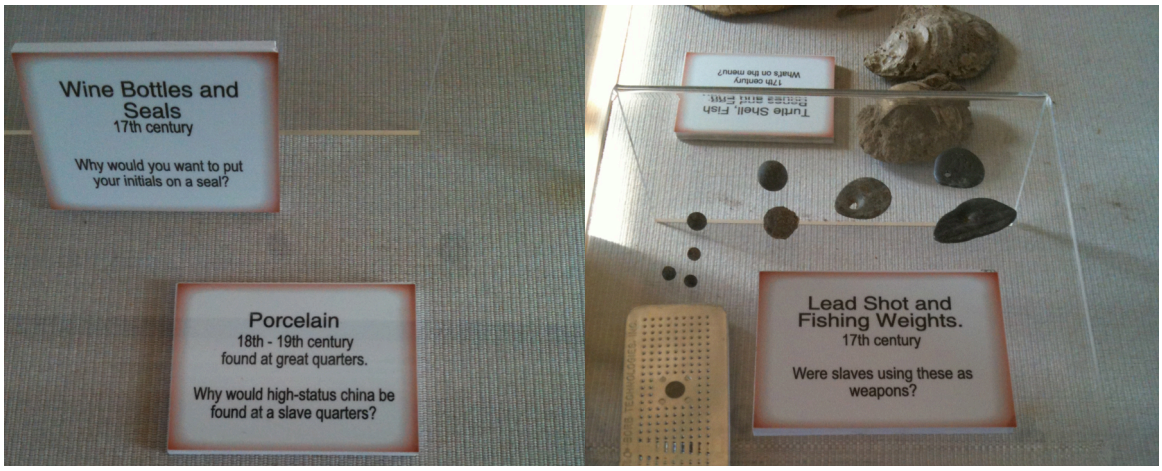

Figure 7 and 8. Items in the display case in the Slavery and Servitude exhibit at Shirley Plantation. Photograph taken by Kerry Dahm, 2012.

The narrative in Shirley's slavery exhibit needs significant improvement, but Shirley's representation of slavery is similar to the ways the other plantations on Route 5 interpret slavery. At least Shirley has attempted to interpret slavery with an exhibit. The docent at Berkeley Plantation stated that the Harrisons were slave owners in two brief sentences at the end of the house tour. Berkeley Plantation's house tour was similar to Shirley's in that the docent highlighted the architecture, furniture, and family silver. The tour group "oohed" and "aahed" about the cross-stitching and the "Pompeii Red" walls, but when the docent said, "the Harrisons were slave owners," the group became very quiet, and there was a sense of discomfort from both the docent and the visitors. The docent informed us that we could view the Harrison's lists of slaves in the basement.[182] The tour group separated and went off to explore the grounds while I went down into the basement to see the lists. As presented in figure 9, three framed "list of slaves" stood on a bench with a small slip of paper that functioned as the documents' label.

[182] House tour, by a docent of Berkeley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia, April 29, 2012.

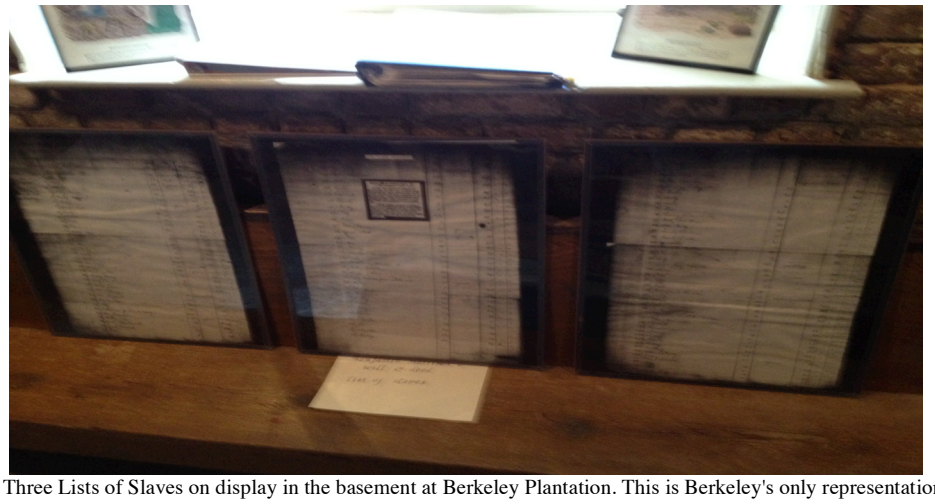

Figure 9. Three Lists of Slaves on display in the basement at Berkeley Plantation. This is Berkeley's only representation of slavery. Photograph taken by Kerry Dahm, 2012.

Historic house museums operate on very little funding, and thus having the necessary staff to interpret the items may not be possible for the Shirley Plantation at the moment. Maintaining eight hundred acres as well as several eighteenth-century buildings is not cheap, and the Carters have been relying on admission sales as a primary source of their income. In 2003, Shirley Plantation's revenue was $500,000, and the Carters stated that the cost of preserving the estate outweighed the revenue.[183] Charles Hill Carter III was criticized for negotiating with Waste Management Incorporated to build a garbage port on the property for out-of-state trash and he responded that he was "constantly thinking of new ways to use his family's land" to bring in revenue.[184] Since the 1970s, the Carters have voiced concern on their financial ability to

[183] Annie Gowen Washington, "A Plantation's New Cash Crops: Heir Angers Neighbors with Funding Ventures," *Washington Post* (July 27, 2003). Easement File-Charles City County, Virginia, "Shirley Plantation," Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 18-022.

[184] Ibid.

preserve their family heirloom.[185] In addition to using limited financial resources, revising the interpretation of small, privately owned sites contains several levels of difficulty and finding a way to discuss slavery further complicates the issue. Joanne Melish's essay, "Recovering (from) Slavery: Four Struggles to Tell the Truth," highlights the complications in re-interpreting the narrative of a house museum with a history of slavery. The complications include "persuading administrative, curatorial, and educational staffs to recast their interpretations" as well as getting the donors and trustees to accept the new interpretations that "challenge the celebratory narratives of 'their' founders and patriots."[186] In addition, the entire docent staff at Shirley Plantation, who are mostly retired white men and women, would need re-training to discuss slavery and the subject of race.[187]

In 1998, the organization *Hope in the Cities* held a reconciliation program at the Shirley Plantation. Joe Carter traveled across the country to Charles City County because his family's oral history shared that his "great-great grandfather was born in 1830 to a slave master in the Richmond area."[188] The mission of *Hope in the Cities* is to promote "honest conversations on race, reconciliation, and responsibility" by having "the descendants of slaves chatting amicably with the descendant of slave masters about the possibility that they share common blood."[189] Charles Hill Carter Jr. participated in the program, and the plantation's interpreter Robert Teagle

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185 Gail Bronson, "Keeping Their Home in the Family Isn't Easy for the Carters: The 251 Year-Old Mansion Provides Feeling of Roots But Dominates Their Lives," *Wall Street Journal* (May 1974). Easement File-Charles City County, "Shirley Plantation," Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 18-022.

186 Joanne Melish, "Recovering (from) Slavery: Four Struggles to Tell the Truth," *Slavery and Public History* eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: The New Press, 2006), p. 103.

187 Ibid., p. 104.

188 Michael Paul Williams, "Carters May Share More than History: Plantation Healing Rite Explores Owner-Slave Ties," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 21, 1998. Vertical File-Slaves: Virginia, Slaves at the Shirley Plantation, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

189 Ibid.

"gave a trial run of a new program planned for launch in February."[190] Some participants felt that the interpretation did not share enough in its depiction of the lives of the enslaved and there were some participants who felt the discussion on slavery was "too painful or disturbing."[191]

Hope is not lost for Shirley Plantation's ability to interpret slavery. In order to provide a balanced representation of the history of Shirley Plantation, the staff should consider consulting with public and academic historians as well as engage the community in a conversation about the best strategies to present slavery. In addition, with the amount of time the docents spend on talking about each member of the Carter family, the script can afford to include some information about Shirley's role in Virginia as a slave society. The physical landscape is an artifact that Shirley could use to interpret slavery: the enslaved lived and worked in the outbuildings and John Carter imported and exported slaves from his dock on the James River,[192] Shirley Plantation was a familiar site for slave auctions during the eighteenth-century. Shirley could incorporate a grounds tour demonstrating the movement of the enslaved and discuss the types of labor they would have performed or discuss how the landscape of the plantation reveals much about the importance of maintaining power and an hierarchical order for the slaveholder.[193] Suggestions for interpreting and presenting the stories of the enslaved at Shirley Plantation will be discussed in the next chapter.

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190 Ibid.

191 Ibid.

192 Charles Hill Carter III, "Shirley Plantation–Built on a Tradition of Heritage and Hierarchy," *Colonial Williamsburg Foundation* vol. 13 no. 3 (Spring 1991): p. 29. General Collection, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

193 John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 3–5. See also: Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) for a discussion on the slave holder's "geography of containment" in which their transition to Georgian architecture symbolized the domination of the master over the enslaved.

Shirley Plantation, with its rich history, has a great opportunity to make the most of their site educationally for the public. It is necessary for privately owned historic sites to practice responsible public history. The failure to do so means visitors leave the plantation with misconceived notions about what life was like in Virginia's past. Misleading visitors into thinking that slavery did not play a large role in the wealth of the Carter family continues to dishonor the experiences of those whose freedom was denied, but who nonetheless helped to create Shirley.

Chapter Four

Shirley Plantation and the Twenty-First Century Visitor

On September 25, 2012, Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell announced that 2013 would be the "Year of the Virginia Historic Home," for the bicentennial of the Governor's Mansion.[194] In the Certificate of Recognition, Governor McDonnell states that by commemorating the anniversary of the Governor's Mansion, it would be "appropriate that we also recognize the importance of the many historic homes across Virginia." Promoting tourism to these sites, he continues, will "enhance their value as Virginia cultural assets, and help in turn to ensure their vitality and ability to continue to tell important aspects of Virginia's story."[195] I agree with the governor about the valuable role historic house museums play as sites for learning about our community.

My first experience visiting a historic house museum was while living in Hawaii. In the late-1990s, I went on a school field trip to Hawaii's Plantation Village located in Waipahu. The Plantation Village interprets life on a sugar plantation between 1850 and 1950 and uses a number of restored buildings and recreated structures to tell the stories of how the Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, Filipino, Portuguese, Korean, and Puerto Rican indentured laborers experienced life working on Hawaii's sugar plantations. There are a total of twenty-five structures at the Plantation Village with each structure representing the living conditions of specific ethnic

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194 Office of the Governor Robert F. McDonnell, "Governor McDonnell Recognizes the Year 2013 as the Year of the Virginia Historic Home," Commonwealth of Virginia, http://firstlady.governor.virginia.gov/News/viewRelease.cfm?id=1435 [accessed April 10, 2013].

195 Ibid.

groups. Each house was set up as if it was still lived in, and it felt like we had paid a visit while the inhabitants were out working. There was plastic food representing the dishes of each culture, as well as framed photographs, furniture, and religious pieces that highlighted what each group brought to the islands from their former lives. The scent of the wood, the sounds of the creaking screen doors, and the family photographs that hung on the walls made me feel as though I had stepped back in time, seeing first-hand how these laborers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries lived. I recalled the experience of touring these homes and hearing the stories of the people who lived in them each time burned sugar cane flakes fell from the sky during harvest time or during visits to my classmates' homes, wondering how many of my friends descended from these sugar plantation laborers. Even today, when I pick up a packet of "Sugar in the Raw," I think of those houses and the people who labored and lived on the plantations. Hawaii's Plantation Village helped me learn about my community and make connections between the past and present.

Historic house museums give the public a view into the past, by immersing them into the times gone by as they walk through the rooms in which people once lived. This is an experience that visitors are less likely to have while touring a museum gallery. Visitors can't smell the furniture or hear the creaks of the wood floor in a museum gallery but in a historic house they are able to use all their senses to feel closer to experiencing the past as it was. Historic house museums are an educational asset and have the potential more actively to engage the public in learning the history of their national and local communities. By encountering the multiplicity of stories available in a historic home, visitors have a more fruitful time relating to the former inhabitants of the home. Domestic relationships between husbands and wives, parents and their children, and, in the South, the complexity of slavery can all be addressed in a historic house

museum, allowing visitors to feel as if they were "traveling back in time" and almost hearing what the walls of the old house have to say.

Visitors to Shirley Plantation have described how being in the home and hearing the stories of the Carter family made them feel as though they had stepped back in time. On the review website "Yelp," visitors expressed that visiting Shirley was like time traveling to the eighteenth century.[196] Additionally on "Trip Advisor," a visitor wrote that, "you can actually feel the echoes of the people who walked through these floors and grounds. This is far different from a disassociated museum experience or a reconstruction."[197] Other visitors wrote how they felt they had gotten "a real flavor of what it is like to be in such a place in the past" and that it was a "nice drive from the city and to look back to the early days of this country."[198] Another visitor shared how he felt "lucky to have places like this to help us all understand the history of the south."[199] Many reviewers felt they had walked away from their visit at Shirley Plantation with a greater understanding of what it was like to live on a Virginia plantation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They found the fact that the Carter family still lived in the home made the site appealing, they admired the beauty of the estate, and many of them highlighted the carved initials by Carter women in the dining room window as their favorite part of the tour.

However, there were a couple of reviewers who felt that the guides at Shirley could have spent some time discussing the lives of the enslaved in order to get a more complete picture of a

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196 Yelp, "Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia," http://www.yelp.com/biz/shirley-plantation-charles-city-2 [accessed April 10, 2013].

197 Trip Advisor, "Shirley Plantation, Charles City County, Virginia," http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g57590-Reviews-or50-Shirley_Plantation-Charles_City_Virginia.html#REVIEWS [Accessed April 10, 2013].

198 Ibid.

199 Ibid.

southern plantation. A few reviewers felt that the price of the admission ticket was not worth the history that was taught in the outbuildings and on the house tour. One reviewer, who gave Shirley Plantation a poor rating, wrote, "This place has so much potential for offering a great tour and meaningful historical information. Instead, a hurried tour guide will tell you about the people who owned the plantation."[200] The poor ratings largely consisted of reviewers feeling bored about the time spent on the plantation's family history. For example, a review states that "the tour consisted of an hour long rambling on about family history (ho hum)" and goes on to say that it might be fun for someone interested in that kind of thing.[201] A woman who brought her children expressed disappointment with Shirley's historical interpretation, explaining that she had hoped her "children could learn history while there other than the history of the rich that had lived in the house."[202]

Shirley Plantation is indeed a beautifully maintained estate, and with its vast collection of manuscripts housed in Williamsburg, Richmond, and Charlottesville, it provides excellent opportunities for the site to interpret the many facets of life during the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The difficulty lies in deciding what to interpret, since there are so many choices and stories waiting in the archives all over Virginia. Shirley Plantation's interpretation focuses on the story of the Carters, who married whom, who lived in the house when, and what significant events occurred during each family member's lifetime. While it can be interesting and engaging to hear the stories of the family themselves, what is the significance of Shirley Plantation and the Carter family stories to the broader American public? What do the

200 Ibid.

201 Ibid.

202 Ibid.

stories mean to the increasingly diverse American audience? What can their stories tell us about the American past and most importantly, why is it significant?

The majority of the reviews written about Shirley Plantation are favorable, almost describing the site as a magical place. If there is a large number of visitors who enjoy the way Shirley Plantation interprets its history, why should it change? In a *Washington Post* article published in December 2012, J. Freedom du Lac painted a gloomy picture of the current state of historic house museums. Berkeley Plantation, located near Shirley Plantation along Route 5, reported that its attendance has been "down by twenty percent over the past five years."[203] While many historic house museums face the same struggles as Berkeley Plantation, the article reported that the reason for the declining attendance cannot be entirely attributed to "historical illiteracy or apathy" because attendance at the Smithsonian Institution's museums has been rising and the then recently released film about Abraham Lincoln "is among the year's top-25-grossing movies."[204] The struggles historic house museums face has been a topic of conversation, among historic house museum professionals, from the late-twentieth century to the present day. There are questions about historic houses' relevancy and economic sustainability, and the declining attendance raises concerns on how historic houses can continue operating in the twenty-first century world.

In the 2008 article, "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?" Cary Carson discussed what he came away with from a 2002 summit meeting of museum professionals at Kykuit, where they took a "big-picture view" of historic house museums in the twenty-first century. Based on participant comments made at this meeting, Carson shared that "they worried

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203 J. Freedom du Lac, "Struggling to Attract Visitors, Historic Houses May Face Day of Reckoning," *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2012.

204 Ibid.

that many house museums' period rooms, guided tours, and interpretive programs are–not to mince words–'boring'" and he argued that the declining attendance at house museums over the last twenty years does not mean that the public is less interested in learning history.[205] In fact, Carson notes "certain kinds of cultural institutions are doing well," including the Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., the National Museum of the Marine Corps, and the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville. The successful attendance record of this "brand-new breed of history museum" leads Carson to argue that museum historians need to realize that the new generation of learners "acquire and process information very differently than older generations did" and that "modern visitors are not content to be passive spectators."[206] At the 2013 Virginia Association of Museums Conference in Hot Springs, Virginia, this same discussion about how to revamp historic house museums for the twenty-first century took place. Max van Balgooy, President and Founder of Engaging Places, LLC, led a forum in which he outlined ways historic house museums could cultivate a wider and younger audience. In terms of interpretation and programming, van Balgooy suggested that sites get visitors familiar with "doing history."[207] For example, Colonial Williamsburg places visitors into "the uncertainty of the time" with its *Order in the Court* program. It gets visitors to "participate in a local court session where lives, liberties, and property are contested" and "experience how the rights of Virginians were maintained in open court."[208] Van Balgooy noted that in addition to having visitors experience "doing history,"

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[205] Cary Carson, "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?" *Public Historian* vol. 30, No. 4 (Fall 2008), p.13-17.

[206] Ibid.,17.

[207] Max van Balgooy, "Historic House Museum Forum: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities" (session at the annual conference of Virginia Association of Museums, Hot Springs, VA, March 11, 2013).

[208] Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Calendar: Order in the Court," Colonial Williamsburg, http://www.Colonialwilliamsburg.com/plan/calendar/order-court/ (accessed April 29, 2013).

whether it is by acting as historical detectives or by participating in archaeological digs, historic house museums should focus on making history meaningful, by having visitors feel like they want to "turn the page."[209]

Colonial Williamsburg, as well as a number of historic sites in Virginia, has been working on "making history meaningful" for the public since the 1970s. Richard Handler and Eric Gable discussed the transition Colonial Williamsburg made into interpreting a more educational history in *The New History in an Old Museum*. Handler and Gable discussed the changes implemented at Colonial Williamsburg's 1977 Curriculum Committee meeting in which decisions were made to engage the public in a more historical laboratory like setting.[210] The themes set by this meeting include having visitors learn about how the American Revolution was not just a patriotic fight against tyranny, but a revolution that had economic motives. The second theme was titled *Becoming Americans*, with which visitors encounter a multiplicity of perspectives that make up Williamsburg's past. Social and economic hierarchies became an important part of this new interpretive focus. Additionally, Colonial Williamsburg began offering "The Other Half" tours in which the stories of enslaved African Americans were told in order to relate how, they too, played a significant role in the formation of Williamsburg as the capital of colonial America.

While there has been criticism of this tour, Colonial Williamsburg continues to expand interpretation of women, the lower classes, and African Americans. For example on October 10, 1994, the African American Interpretation and Preservation Department (AAIP) of Colonial Williamsburg re-enacted a slave auction that took place during the historic market commonly

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209 Max van Balgooy, "Historic House Museum Forum," March 11, 2013.

210 Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 66–68.

referred to as the Public Times.[211] Christy Coleman, director of the AAIP, and fellow interpreters were confronted with protestors as they prepared to put on the program. The protestors were concerned that Colonial Williamsburg would "trivialize" and "sensationalize" the auctioning of the enslaved by presenting the program as a form of entertainment. Coleman spoke with the protestors before the program began and asked them to have "open hearts and open minds" to what the AAIP were trying to do educationally. AAIP re-enacted the sale of four individuals: a woman who was bought by her free husband, a man who was highly-valued as a carpenter, and a pregnant wife and husband who were bought by different masters. The scenes of the auction were taken from an issue of the *Virginia Gazette* in 1771 and Coleman answered questions from the audience after the program concluded. The audience's reactions were mixed but one of the protestors, the Virginia chapter president of the NAACP, felt that the program was educational and honored the history of the enslaved.

In 2011, Rachel Manteuffel published an article in the *Washington Post* describing how she experienced a "revolutionary moment" during her visit to Colonial Williamsburg. While touring Revolutionary City, Manteuffel encountered a character named Wil, a slave owned by a tavern keeper. She met him while he was talking to a family about how the revolutionaries' declaration for freedom was not meant for everyone. Manteuffel writes, "As I walked by, Wil straightened up, advised the family that you never know who is listening, and bowed to me, a white woman in jeans, telling me he 'didn't mean no trouble,' and acting worried about what my response would be. I was startled to suddenly be cast in the role of oppressor. Wil was afraid of me."[212] Manteuffel spent some time conversing with Wil who talked about his family that had

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211 *Public Times: October 1994*, DVD (Colonial Williamsburg, 2003).

212 Rachel Manteuffel, "Colonial in: The complicated history of Colonial Williamsburg," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2011.

been sold to North Carolina and asked if Manteuffel would buy him and take him up North. The experience of meeting Wil and talking with him about his life made Manteuffel feel that "the best theater, the best art, will grow a compassion and perspective in you that you didn't know you lacked. It will show you that you were incomplete and that you have more to learn."[213]

Shirley Plantation certainly does not have the labor power and the financial resources to perform the level of living history interpretation done at Colonial Williamsburg. However, there are other historic sites that are smaller and have more in common with Shirley Plantation that have implemented ways to make history more meaningful to their visitors. An example of a meaningful house tour, which inspires visitors to consider the complex relationships between all members of the household, is James Madison's Montpelier in Orange County, Virginia. The house tour at Montpelier presents an interpretation in which the multiple perspectives of the household are interwoven into a flowing narrative. The tour is forty-five minutes long and beautifully shares the personalities, triumphs, tragedies, and daily lives of those who were in the household, including the house slaves. The tour begins in one of the front rooms with two mannequins portraying two young boys, one is white and the other is black. The two mannequins are holding up a table, as if they were in the action of moving furniture into or around the house. The guide points to these two mannequins and states that these two boys represent James Madison and an enslaved boy named Paul Jennings, who would remain enslaved to Madison until Madison's death. The guide highlights the complexity and tension that may have existed in the boys' relationship, starting out as playmates and gradually moving into the relationship of master and slave.[214] The inclusion of this complex relationship was not one of reciting facts to a passive audience; this was a way to get the visitors to think about an aspect of slavery and a

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213 Ibid.

214 House tour, by a docent of Montpelier, Orange, Virginia, May 2012.

complicated relationship for many slaveholders and enslaved. It highlights that slavery involved real people who had relationships and grew up together, while learning the social position they must enter as they became older. In the dining room, the guide sways the group's attention to the cutouts representing the enslaved men and women who would have been in charge of serving the meals. Jennings was depicted as standing off to the side, ready to serve, while Jefferson, Lafayette, and the Madisons were also portrayed in cutout form sitting around the table. As the guide began talking about what might have occurred in this room, the sounds of glasses clinking and muffled voices came through a pair of speakers. The guide discussed how Lafayette was an abolitionist and asks the visitors to imagine the conversation that could have taken place as these folks were sitting around the table. The hot political and social topic of their day, especially with Lafayette sitting at the table, would have most likely involved the abolition of slavery. The guide points out that while this conversation took place, the enslaved men and women standing nearby would have heard the entire conversation. The guide asked us to imagine what they must have thought as they heard their masters and political officials discuss whether or not they should or should not be emancipated.

In addition to highlighting the complex relationships between white masters and enslaved African Americans, the relationships within the Madison family were discussed as the group walked from room to room. The personalities of Dolly and James Madison were made clear while the guide pointed out the artwork, furniture, books, and pieces of entertainment that were a part of their daily lives. The guide talked about what sorts of activities Dolly and James Madison enjoyed and what influenced their choice of artwork and their decorating tastes. While pointing out a table with playing cards, the guide explained that Dolly loved to gamble and that she always carried a set of dice in her pockets, frequently playing with them as she wandered the

house. Montpelier's house tour successfully engaged visitors with another time, having them consider the emotions, thoughts, and relationships that played out in the home. The tour exemplified history's complications and tensions that we continue to experience in our twenty-first century lives. The tour made a story of Montpelier meaningful to every visitor on the tour.

Montpelier is nationally funded and has access to more resources than Shirley Plantation. As the former home to one of the United States' former presidents, the estate will always be able to attract larger audiences than Shirley Plantation, and is better able to present fresh and innovative interpretations. But nationally prominent historic sites are not the only places that have been working to present new and engaging interpretations for the public.

Located in Richmond, Virginia, the Valentine Richmond History Center allows visitors to explore the lives of one of Richmond's most prominent families during the early nineteenth century on a tour of the museum's Wickham House. From November 2012 to April 2013, the Wickham House hosted an art exhibition that was done in collaboration with Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts. The exhibition, "Wickham House 200: Inspiring New Art Two Centuries Later," allowed the visitors "to investigate new interpretive approaches for historic houses" by viewing art pieces inspired by the house and its contents.[215] One of the pieces, "Reflecting the Past," was exhibited in the ladies' parlor and consisted of a headless, female mannequin in period clothing standing opposite of a mirror. The mirror reflected the "ghostly images of nineteenth-century Richmond, an arresting portrait of Mrs. Wickham…and the visitor, who becomes an essential part of the scene, giving it a timeline and

[215] Richmond History Center, "Wickham House 200: Inspiring New Art Two Centuries Later," Valentine Richmond History Center Changing Exhibitions, http://www.richmondhistorycenter.com/exhibitions/changing (accessed April 14, 2013).

symbolizing both a separation and connection."[216] The piece is meant to highlight memory and history and our relationship with both today. In the basement, where the lives of the enslaved are examined, a mannequin stands dressed in clothing that would have been worn by an enslaved woman during the 1800s. The interpretation "emphasizes the darker value of society at that time" by showing "the values the rich women of the house placed on textiles over their disregard for the treatment of the enslaved people."[217]

The historical interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg, the fresh and engaging narrative of Montpelier, and the art pieces created for the Wickham House demonstrate changing interpretations and methods for engagement occurring at historic sites throughout the Commonwealth. Shirley Plantation is rich with historical significance and it has great potential to provide a history that can be meaningful to visitors of all age groups and backgrounds. The beautifully maintained Georgian mansion and its surrounding outbuildings are ripe for a new historical interpretation that can instill visitors with a feeling that they learned something new about themselves and their society. With the changing demographics of the United States and the ever-increasing access to knowledge available at our fingertips, Shirley Plantation will need to meet the expectations of that public for a relevant history. Since Shirley Plantation relies on admission revenues to keep the estate within the family, the site will need to update itself in order to meet the needs of its customers. The focus of its interpretation on the Hill-Carters' prominence and the emphasis placed on the portraits, architecture, and furniture, may not be enough to grab the attention of the new generation of museum-goers.

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216 Lili Un, "Reflecting the Past," 2012, Wickham House, Valentine Richmond History Center.

217 Bethany Gingrich, "Signs of Wealth," 2012, Wickham House, Valentine Richmond History Center.

So, what are the possible interpretative changes Shirley Plantation can make to attract a wider audience, to make their interpretation more inclusive, and demonstrate why its site is historically significant to the larger public? Here follows some suggestions.

The House Tour

The house tour at Shirley Plantation takes visitors through each room as the guide talks about Hill-Carter family members from the 1600s to the present day. Herein lies the difficulty for deciding what to interpret at Shirley Plantation. The estate and the family have four hundred years of history; how does the site decide which period to interpret? There is no easy way to answer this question, and it seems Shirley may benefit from continuing its interpretation of its four hundred year history, since many visitors enjoyed the family legacy aspect of the site. However, what is glaringly missing from the house tour, while the guide talks about the Hill-Carters, are the enslaved people who would have worked within the house daily through much of that history. The enslaved domestics would have been cleaning, serving meals, helping the family dress, and minding the Carter children. During the late 1980s, the Wickham House placed a number of scrims representing the enslaved people who would have worked in the house.[218] The scrims would also follow the example of Montpelier's method for interpreting slavery within the household. These scrims can be easily incorporated into the rooms thereby having visitors be aware of the presence of these individuals, as well as the reliance of the Carter family upon these individuals for running their household. Since the house tour is chronologically organized, each room representing a generation of the Hill-Carters, one or two of the enslaved

[218] Meghan Theresa Naile, "Like Nixon Going to China: The Exhibition of Slavery in the Valentine Museum and the Museum of the Confederacy" (master's thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009), 16.

domestics from that generation could be represented. Records of Shirley Plantation could be researched to determine the main enslaved domestics working the home throughout its history. The decision of which domestics to include could depend on what stories are known about each individual and which historical character would more likely grab the attention of visitors. For example, William Bates was listed as a house slave who escaped to the Union gunboats in 1863, at the age of twenty-two. The story of Bates's life, what he was responsible for, and whether he had a family, could be extracted and reconstructed from the Carter's plantation records.[219]

The Landscape

Shirley Plantation is located along the banks of the James River, so the Hill-Carter family would have engaged in trade with the boats that passed through. During the eighteenth-century, John Carter wrote a letter that describes a shipment of slaves he received from Barbados in 1738.[220] He described selling slaves from Shirley and said that "the sort of slaves did not please" those who came "with enough to purchase more than he had to sell."[221] Carter complained of the poor health of the slaves and stated, "all but some of the children were in such a miserable state that It was impossible to conceal it."[222] He goes on to request "Gambia, or Gold Coast Negroes" and states that he "will not accept of a Consignment from any other part."[223] This letter could be on a free standing panel near the banks of the river and visitors could either read or listen to an

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219 Francis W. Ware, Charles City Commissioner of Revenue, Auditor of Public Accounts: Runaway Slaves, Receipts and Reports, 1863, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

220 John Carter to Richard Gildart, August 1, 1738, John, Charles, Landon Carter Letterbook, 1732-1782, Special Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

221 Ibid.

222 Ibid.

223 Ibid.

audio feature to learn about the economic activities that would have occurred at Shirley Plantation. By having visitors encounter the primary source, they will engage in "doing history" by interpreting the significance and the meaning of the letter. From the document, they will have learned about the commercial networks of the Atlantic Slave Trade, question why John Carter would have preferred Africans from Gambia or the Gold Coast, what the conditions were for the Africans on these ships, and what was Carter's standing in the community by operating these sales from his property.

Kitchen Outbuilding

The kitchen outbuilding currently houses an exhibit about slavery at Shirley Plantation. However, the exhibition panels and the binders full of "frequently asked questions" and answers about slavery at Shirley are impersonal, dry, and require visitors to be passive recipients. There is no room for interpretation in this exhibition, and it lacks historically significant information about the enslaved people who lived and worked at Shirley. There is also no sign on the outside of the building to indicate that the exhibit is within the building.

In 1834, Hill Carter wrote an article for the *Farmer's Register* titled, "On the Management of Negroes, Addressed to the Farmers and Overseers of Virginia," which advised other farmers and overseers on how to make the enslaved "valuable as a class of laborers" by using flattery and giving gifts to keep them happy and contented with their situation.[224] Excerpts from this article could be displayed on an exhibition panel and visitors could engage in reading the subtext, by discovering the paternalistic notions slaveholders had during this time period. A set of questions could accompany this panel, asking visitors why they think Hill Carter wrote this

[224] Hill Carter, "On the Management of Negroes," *Farmer's Register* vol. 1 (1834), 564. Rare Book Collection, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. Accession number S1.F24.

article and why slaveholders would be concerned with managing the enslaved. The panel would be placed near the entrance of the outbuilding, so that after reading the article, visitors will be presented with a counter narrative that challenges the Hill Carter's belief that the enslaved were happy, thus highlighting the tension between Hill Carter's need to manage and the enslaved people's desire for freedom. On the wall would hang a blown-up copy of a run-away advertisement placed in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1775 by an overseer of Shirley Plantation. The advertisement describes an enslaved woman named Nanny who "is of yellowish complexion, slender made and is fond of dress."[225] The advertisement describes what she was wearing and that she went off with a free black man "who pretends being a doctor."[226] Reading the advertisement will have visitors attempt to reconstruct who Nanny was and why she ran away. A label will accompany the advertisement that will ask questions as well as provide information to help visitors interpret this primary source. Figures 10 and 11 are examples of the interpretive labels that would accompany the runaway slave advertisement. There will be a blank board with post-its or a whiteboard with markers available, so that visitors could share their interpretations of the advertisement.

Glossary of Terms:
Calico: Cotton cloth usually imported from India and the Far East.
Waistcoat: Vest
Petticoat: outer skirt part of a dress.
Sundry: small articles
Wench: black female slave

Figure 10. Label of the Glossary of Terms.

- In what year did Nanny run away? What was going on historically in Virginia during this time?
- What did Nanny look like?
- What did Nanny take with her?
- What was the relationship between Nanny and the man she ran away with?
- Why did Nanny run away?

Figure 11. Label of Interpretive Questions.

225 John Currell, Runaway Slave Advertisement, July 21, 1775, *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie, July 21, 1775.

226 Ibid.

Since the house tour mainly tells the stories of the Hill-Carter family, the main purpose of the kitchen outbuilding is to tell the stories of some of the enslaved people at Shirley Plantation. Instead of listing the number of slaves owned at any given time, the names of the enslaved will be displayed on a hanging panel with genealogical charts showing the lineage of the enslaved families who lived at Shirley. This will be a good juxtaposition to the genealogical focus of the Hill-Carter family and demonstrate that there were several people who raised families at Shirley.

One of the families is the Hulett family. Siah Hulett, also known as Siah Carter, escaped from Shirley in 1863 while the Union ship, *Monitor,* was sailing down the James River. At the age of twenty-two, Hulett rowed a small boat out to the ship and took work as a cook aboard the *Monitor* and had a naval career throughout the rest of the Civil War. He was the first of the eighteen enslaved men to escape with the Union army that year. His wife Eliza Tarrer Hulett, was at Fort Monroe by 1865. The couple became legally married in Hampton in 1870 then moved to Philadelphia shortly after.

The couple grew up at Shirley with their parents and siblings. Siah's parents were John and Molly and his siblings were Martin and Sarah (Figure 12). Sarah Hulett married Edward "Ned" Christian, who escaped with the Union gunboats in 1863. Sarah also went to Fort Monroe in 1865. Eliza's parents and siblings were also enslaved at Shirley. There are a number of other surnames common among the enslaved: Christian, Morris, Tarrer, Jackson, Buck, and Howard. The Charles City County Historical Society has online research databases that contain records of the enslaved from the area. The people who escaped as well as who they were related to can be found through the "Slave Ancestor File" database.[227] These records of the enslaved families at Shirley Plantation suggest that they were able to stay together for generations, which raises

[227] Charles City County, "Slave Ancestor File," Charles City County Historical Society, http://www.charlescity.org/saf/index.shtml (accessed November 13 2012).

questions about how the Hill-Carter family differed in their management of the enslaved compared to other Virginia plantations.

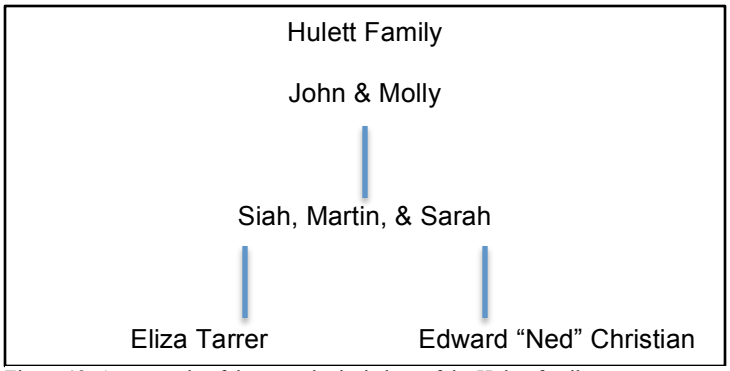

Figure 12. An example of the genealogical chart of the Hulett family.

1862 McClellan's Retreat	1863 Union Gunboats	1865 Fort Monroe
		Annie Christian
Joe Tarrer, age 25	William Bates, age 22, House Servant	Joseph Christian
Robert Dixon, age 5	Jim Buck, age 37	Virginia Howard
George Washington, age 25	Jack Buck, age 1	Behannob Howard
John Buck, age 23, Cook	William Buck, age 35	Sarah Christian
Charles Buck, age 27	Harry Tin, age 28	Almina Jackson
Jim Green, age 25	Phil Pride, age 18	Amosan Jackson
	Daniel Sampson, age 30, Carpenter	Hill Jackson
	Tom Jefferson, age 27, Blacksmith	Jenny Jackson
	Joe Burwell, age 28	William Jackson
	Edward "Ned" Christian, age 30	Charles Lewis
		Betsy Morris
		Elijah Morris
		Lillie Morris
		Phillis Morris
		Eliza Tarrer Hulett
		Jane Washington

Figure 13. Chart of the enslaved people who escaped Shirley Plantation during the Civil War.

1. What do you notice about the people who left?
2. Why did some people leave and others stay?
3. What would you do?

Figure 14. Questions to accompany the chart.

One of the main exhibition panels in the kitchen outbuilding could be a chart listing the names of the enslaved that left Shirley Plantation during the Civil War. These names, gathered from the "Slave Ancestor File" database, will present visitors with information about the individuals who decided to leave. This organized chart of data gives visitors a chance to interpret the mass exodus of enslaved people during the Civil War (Figure 13). A set of questions would accompany this panel in order to help visitors interpret the information before them (Figure 14) and a blank board with post-its available would encourage visitors to share their answers. There are also descendants of the people who were enslaved at Shirley Plantation who currently reside in Charles City County. On July 18, 2013, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published an article telling the story of Edward "Ned" Christian's daring swim to the Union gunboats. Albert Ghee, a great-great-great-grandson of Christian, shared the story and stated he didn't know this story about Christian until recently.[228] Ghee expressed an appreciation for learning his family's history saying, "Knowing that gives you a greater appreciation for your own history, to know what your forefathers went through."[229] Albert Ghee's grandmother, Maria Ghee, also polished silver at Shirley Plantation during the early 1900s.[230] Pieces of the family stories could be recorded from the descendants living in Charles City County and displayed with the genealogical charts.

There are extensive records pertaining to the lives of the enslaved at Shirley Plantation. Incorporating these primary source documents will enable visitors to learn about the enslaved population who worked, lived, raised families, and died at Shirley. These records also make it possible to reconstruct what life was like at Shirley, for all who lived there, in relation to the rest of Virginia. By encountering stories about individuals outside of the Hill-Carter family, visitors

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228 Laura Kebede, "Charles City Descendant, Historians Tell of Slaves' Swim," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 18, 2013, A-1 and A-5.

229 Ibid.

230 Ibid.

will be able to engage in some historical empathy on what life was like for the enslaved, by seeing their desire for freedom and their love for their families. The records could also help visitors learn what kind of work the enslaved did at Shirley Plantation, what their relationships were to the Hill-Carter family, as well as how they resisted the institution of slavery. Their desire for freedom also informs the problem of plantation management that Hill Carter addressed in his article for the *Farmer's Register*. By including their narratives, the site will be better able to express historical significance while also demonstrating a connection between the past and present.

Historic house museums are important sites for learning history because they inspire visitors to "step back in time" and have a better connection to the past. Historic house museums get the public to think about residents and the triumphs and tragedies they experienced within those walls. It gives a sense of immediacy to the public that may or may not be experienced in a museum gallery full of cases, perhaps unintentionally distancing the visitor from relating to the stories. While walking through the sugar plantation houses as a middle-school student, I imagined the people coming home after work, tired and putting meals together for their families. I imagined their children running in and out of the house, with the constant sound of the screen door slapping against the frame. I imagined the conversations of these families: did they miss their former home? What were their hopes and dreams? Did they ground their children like my parents did? Shirley Plantation has great potential for giving visitors a clear, full view of the complicated nature of the history of the American south. The site has many characters that experienced love, happiness, sadness, and distress with many storylines just waiting patiently to be told, existing only as faint echoes from the people who once lived.

Conclusion

Shirley Plantation is a significant historic site that has the great capability of connecting public audiences to various chapters of American history. Because of the dedication of the Hill-Carter family to preserve their history, Shirley Plantation contains valuable historic artifacts and manuscripts that can provide a wide range of historical knowledge. Although the site's history has been well maintained, the history presented at the site barely reaches its interpretative potential. The current interpretation at Shirley Plantation raises questions about the inclusiveness of the history presented and whether that kind of history will continue to attract visitors in the future. Shirley Plantation has been a popular historic site since the late nineteenth-century, attracting visitors from all over the nation wishing to connect with American history. However as audiences changed their perceptions of history with the changing tides of American society and politics, Shirley Plantation remained the same, continuing to focus its significance on the Carter family, while neglecting to incorporate a more complete history.

As the United States increases in its diversity of cultures and ethnic backgrounds, the meaning of American history for public audiences will continue to change. Citizens coming from a range of economic and cultural backgrounds will want to see how they too fit into the story of America's past. With more and more historic sites thinking of innovative ways to attract public audiences, Shirley Plantation has held onto its traditions of pointing out the family portraits and antique silver while telling a proud narrative of their own distinguished Virginian family. This sort of history is at risk of being irrelevant to a large majority of Americans.

Visitors to Shirley Plantation have questioned the interpretive decisions, illustrating the public's expectation of a complete educational experience when visiting a historic site. The reactions of staff at Shirley to these questions and expectations, by either becoming defensive or deflecting, show that they are resistant to changing their idea of the site's significance. If they continue to neglect to tell the stories of the enslaved people who also once lived, worked, and raised families at the site, visitors will increasingly question them about the missing piece to the plantation's history, and the binders of "Frequently Asked Questions" may not be enough to satisfy these inquiries. It is important to note that it is not suggested that the discussion of slavery should focus on painting the Carters as a bunch of cruel slaveholders. Instead, the historical people of Shirley Plantation should be presented as real human beings. As discussed in Chapter 4, the story of slavery at Shirley Plantation demonstrates a more complex story. The Carter family had members who were against the institution, like Mary Braxton Randolph Carter, who penned her frustrations of the institution to her cousin. The staff at Shirley Plantation could delve into this story and figure out why Mary felt frustrated, what impact did this have on her relationship with her husband, and what place did Mary's opinions play within the context of this period? Also, there were generations of the same enslaved families living at Shirley Plantation, presenting the opportunity to study many social and cultural aspects of life in bondage, while also providing an opportunity to analyze the complications Hill Carter had in managing the plantation: were the families kept together as a way to reduce the desire for running away?

It is impossible to know what the future holds for Shirley Plantation. The Carter family has been very successful in keeping the estate for four hundred years, so it is highly unlikely that the site will fall out of family hands. However, the questions of if and how Shirley Plantation will update the site's interpretative focus raises concerns about its status as a historic site. Shirley

Plantation has many historically significant stories to tell, but it may not be able to continue attracting visitors if the site refuses to change, especially because they are competing with many comparable historic sites that are reframing their focus in order to retain their historical significance. Shirley Plantation has been able to tell the same history since the early twentieth century. But will visitors continue to be content with this story as we move through the twenty-first century?

Public audiences in America learn most of their history through the media and by visiting historic sites and museums. Historic sites and museums are believed to be the most trusted places for learning history, and organizations like Colonial Williamsburg have demonstrated dedication for presenting the past as accurately and as inclusively as possible. As an educational historic site, Shirley Plantation has a responsibility to present a history that is full and complete. The survival of Shirley Plantation for the last four hundred years and the Carter family's dedication to preserving its history, gives the site amazing potential to be a rich, historical site. If the interpretation of Shirley Plantation were to be updated and become inclusive, visitors to the site would walk away with a deeper knowledge of human relationships, the antebellum culture and politics of Virginia society, the connections between the past and the present, and a better understanding of their own world and their place within it.

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