THE SLAVE COMMUNITY AT SOMERSET PLACE

By Dorothy Spruill Redford

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The beginning of the African American community at Somerset Place is closely entangled in both the land and early labor needs of three business partners. In 1785 these men purchased more than one hundred thousand acres of densely vegetated swampland "surrounding and bordering upon" Lake Phelps (mostly in present-day Washington County) with the plan of developing a profitable plantation. The partners soon found that turning their swampland into fields that could be farmed had some obstacles.

First, the land had to be cleared: thousands of huge trees that were hundreds of years old had to be cut down and uprooted.

Second, since the land was too waterlogged for passable roadways, a six-mile-long, twenty-foot-wide, six-to-twelve-foot-deep canal had to be dug. This large canal was primarily to allow boats to reach the plantation site from the Scuppernong River, which connected to Albemarle Sound and the ocean. But the canal also provided drainage and irrigation to some areas. Much of the dirt from the canal was piled alongside it to provide higher ground for improved roadways.

Third, to help drain hundreds of acres of stagnant water, miles upon miles of smaller cross-ditches had to be dug.

All this work had to be done before crops could be planted and harvested—before the plantation could make a profit. And it all had to be done by hand. Workers had to be found quickly. At the time, the ready solution to cheap labor was slavery. All plantations relied on enslaved individuals to build and run them. Somerset Place would be no different.

THEY WERE WORKERS WITH SKILLS

Labor needs dictated the number, age, gender, and skills of the first workers: 167 enslaved men, women, and children. Mainly, they were young, strong men in their late teens to early twenties. Some young women worked beside these men in planting and harvesting the fields, but uprooting tree stumps and hauling mud away from the ditches were seen as "men's work."

This initial labor force came from three basic sources. Almost half, including a man named Guinea Jack and his wife named Fanny, a man named Quammy, and 77 others, were brought to the plantation site directly from their homeland in West Africa. Others included 49 people from neighboring counties and states, women like Suckey and Rose who cooked and washed. The remaining men and women were artisans who were already in Edenton: a carpenter named

Lewis, a brickmason named Joe Welcome, and others who were joiners, cobblers, millers, and weavers.

Only 113 of those 167 survived to be counted in the 1790 census, but within those few years, the swampland was transformed into a prosperous plantation.

THEY WERE INDIVIDUALS WITH TRADITIONS

Each man, woman, and child who was brought to the plantation had a special identity and traditions that could be passed to future generations.

Guinea Jack, Quammy, and the other native Africans brought special "day names" indicating the day they were born: Quammy meant "born on Saturday" and Kofi, or Cuff, meant "born on Friday." Each person also carried a special family last name chosen by the father and bestowed on the child during a special naming ceremony that was attended by the whole village eight days after birth. These special African last names were lost as the native Africans were forced to adopt the last name of their first owner—Guinea Jack and Quammy became Collinses.

Fanny brought her love of African foods like rice, black-eyed peas, watermelon, okra, yams, and cucumbers. Fortunately these foods had been brought to America on slave ships long before she arrived.

Quammy made musical instruments, bowls, and dippers from gourds that grew from seeds brought from Africa. He also adapted and used gourds that were native to America.

Guinea Jack likely brought spiritual beliefs that worshiped elements of the universe that humankind could not have created—elements like the sun. He also may have had "healing hands," or skills that could heal the sick. In addition he used the practice of "May Rain," or collecting the first rain that falls in May to wash eyes and prevent allergies.

In time these traditions mixed, and what had been purely African became a part of African American traditions. For example, some slave descendants still use May Rain. Carpenters, joiners, and masons who had built the fourteen-room house where Josiah III lived, thirty-seven houses in the enslaved community, and the plantation's barns and mills passed their skills on to their sons. Cooks, spinners, weavers, laundresses, and housemaids passed all they knew to their daughters. Plowmen and field hands passed on their knowledge about working the land.

THEY WERE PEOPLE WITH FEARS BUT HOPES

Although none in the slave community at Somerset Place were there voluntarily or for pay, most did not try to leave. Laws before 1808 allowed Americans to import Africans and hold them as slaves on plantations like Somerset Place. Overseers supervised the enslaved and deterred them from running away. In addition, each county had teams of "patrollers" to catch any slaves who attempted to escape. If slaves tried to escape, the law required that "finders" return that property to its owner. Owners could give out punishments that ranged from flogging to stocking to selling the runaways.

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Knowing what could happen, most slaves, especially mothers afraid of being sold away from their children, decided to remain. Besides, most who tried to escape seemed to get caught.

One slave named Smart ran and was caught, taken to the West Indies, and sold. Becky Drew ran, too. When captured, she was put in the stocks overnight. The weather turned bitterly cold and her feet froze. Both legs had to be amputated.

Some slaves did not run but committed other acts of defiance and were severely punished, too. In 1853, field-workers led by Peter and Elsy Littlejohn tried to poison the overseer at Somerset Place. Sixteen were taken to the Deep South by a slave trader and sold. Most slaves simply stayed and focused on preparing their children for the freedom they prayed would come.

When the Civil War finally ended slavery in 1865, these African American men and women had to leave behind every tangible thing they had created. But they took into freedom their families and the knowledge their family elders had passed on. For them freedom did not just mean starting over, it meant starting afresh.

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Antebellum Life in North Carolina
Somerset Place

Historical Overview
The story of Somerset Place as a plantation began while North Carolina was a royal colony and lasted for roughly 80 years, concluding soon after the Civil War ended in 1865. Somerset Place was very large—it originally included more than 100,000 acres—and was located near Lake Phelps, in the northeastern Coastal Plain. By 1790, about 200 people—enslaved, free people of color, and white—were assembled there as workers. Over the following decades, the plantation hosted three generations of owners, dozens of white employees, a couple of free black workers, and some 850 enslaved people.

Barns, gristmills, stables, smoke houses, salting houses, a kitchen, a laundry, a dairy, a medical facility, a chapel, and homes for enslaved people, owners, overseers, and others created a complex of about 50 buildings on the site. The wooded, swampy land was manually converted to farm acreage where rice, oats, corn, and other crops were produced along with vast amounts of lumber.

Lesson Objectives
- Students will read for knowledge and understanding, demonstrating their insights by completing a worksheet.

Time
One 45-minute session

Materials
- Copies of "The Women of Somerset Place," by John Sykes (*Tar Heel Junior Historian Magazine*, Spring 1994)
- Copies of the Discussion/Question Worksheet, as needed
- Paper, pencils

Procedure
- Have students read the article from *Tar Heel Junior Historian*. If reading their own copies, students may highlight pertinent facts as they read.
- Hand out copies of the worksheet.
- Ask students to complete the worksheet and then discuss their responses.

Extension
Have students imagine they can talk to people who lived at Somerset Plantation during the antebellum period and use the impressions and knowledge they gain to write an interview or news article. Research on other people who lived at Somerset Place is available at nchistoricsites.org/somerset/people1785-1819.htm and links from that page.

Antebellum Life in North Carolina
Somerset Place
Discussion/Question Worksheet

1. Describe where Somerset Place is located, its size, and the number of people who lived there.

2. What was the workday like for enslaved people at Somerset Place? How long was a workday? When did enslaved people have time off from their work?

3. Describe some of the work performed by enslaved people at Somerset Place. Does the work sound difficult? Does it sound time consuming? What would be necessary to perform some of the tasks? Does the work done by women and/or children surprise you? Why, or why not?

4. What work was done by the owners? How did they spend their time?

5. How did the status of Charlotte Cabarrus differ from the status of enslaved people at the plantation? Did her role surprise you? Why, or why not?

6. Why would the Collins family want to keep the plantation's enslaved people away from Federal forces during the Civil War? What happened to these people after the war ended?

Antebellum Life in North Carolina
Somerset Place
Discussion/Question Worksheet, Answer Sheet

1. Describe where Somerset Place is located, its size, and the number of people who lived there.

Somerset Place is located in Washington County, in northeastern North Carolina, on the edge of Lake Phelps near the Dismal Swamp. The plantation was more than 100,000 acres in size, including roughly 2,000 acres of farmland and another 125,000 acres of forests. Eventually about 300 enslaved people plus the Collins family and other white overseers and workers lived there.

2. What was the workday like for enslaved people at Somerset Place? How long was a workday? When did enslaved people have time off from their work?

Workdays were long—from sunrise to sunset on weekdays and until noon on Saturdays. For whites, Sundays were set aside as a day of rest and church; enslaved people still cooked for the family, but they otherwise were allowed a day of rest and could attend church in the chapel built for them at the plantation. Blacks also used Sundays for their own household chores and to work in their own gardens.

3. Describe some of the work performed by enslaved people at Somerset Place. Does the work sound difficult? Does it sound time consuming? What would be necessary to perform some of the tasks? Does the work done by women and/or children surprise you? Why, or why not?

Every enslaved person—except for the very, very young—had work to do on the plantation. In general, they were divided into "gangs" that were assigned to different tasks. At Somerset Place, farming and lumbering were central to the plantation, so fieldwork and cutting and handling lumber were main tasks for all. Cleaning ditches, weeding, cleaning roads, building and repairing fences, chopping wood, and making charcoal were additional chores for men, women, and older children. Younger children were used to fish for herring, to plant fields, and to deal with livestock. Other duties revolved around daily chores, like laundering, milking, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. Without modern, electric tools, most work was very time consuming, and people had to be physically strong to do such demanding work. Women were called upon to do as much hard labor as men.

4. What work was done by the owners? How did they spend their time?

The article focuses on Josiah Collins III and his wife, Mary. They were the third generation of the Collins family to run Somerset Place. Josiah Collins worked on managing the lumber and crops and on buying and selling property (including his enslaved people). Mary managed the plantation, doling out daily shares of food and supervising the enslaved people assigned to do chores (see the list in the above answer). In addition, she still had time to grow exotic flowers in a greenhouse and to serve as mother to many children. The couple probably had the means to travel some and to enjoy some leisure time. The article also talks about their son, Josiah IV, and his wife, Sally, who ran the plantation after Mary had a stroke in 1860—they would have been the fourth generation, but their roles as slave owners was ended by Emancipation and the Civil War's conclusion.

5. How did the status of Charlotte Cabarrus differ from the status of enslaved people at the plantation? Did her role surprise you? Why, or why not?

Charlotte Cabarrus was a free woman of color who was hired as an employee and paid wages. No one owned her, and she would have been free to leave for another position whenever she might have chosen to do so. Charlotte guided Mary Collins in managing the plantation, as she was familiar with the duties and work involved in running what was basically a small town. She also had great influence in the family because of her position as the Collins children's nurse. Probably she received great respect from the family and from the enslaved people there. While her role is surprising in some ways—a woman of color helping run a plantation—in other ways it is not. She obviously was intelligent, capable, and trusted, and the family could not ignore her gifts.

6. Why would the Collins family want to keep the plantation's enslaved people away from Federal forces during the Civil War? What happened to these people after the war ended?

Federal forces were Union, or Northern, forces and the Collinses were Confederates. Enslaved people who reached Union forces were eventually freed; in fact, many enslaved people in the eastern part of the state reached the Union Army, and freedom, during the war. When the Civil War ended, some of Somerset's former slaves stayed while others moved back and worked for the Collins family. Others, however, left to look for lost family members and to make their own ways as freed people. The Collinses eventually sold Somerset Place.