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A Plantation Family Wardrobe

1825-1835

By Jennifer Lyn Lappas

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

Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes
Director of Graduate Studies
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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract**A Plantation Family Wardrobe**

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Although I was born in California, I have lived in the area between Richmond and Williamsburg, Virginia most of my life. In that time, the plantations have always been a point of interest to teachers and tourists looking for historical hotspots. While I have been to the first Thanksgiving celebration at Berkley Plantation and driven down Rt. 5 on numerous occasions, the history of these places never struck me until I was considering my thesis research. Then, it was if a wave washed over me. What was the history of these places? And why did they occupy such an important position in our nation's development?

After many phone calls, I discovered that Shirley Plantation had an extensive collection of papers; my curiosity was peaked and the gears started turning. Why exactly is it a historic landmark and who were the people who occupied this place? What would I uncover in the Plantation's Collection and would it be enough to write a thesis on? When I discovered the scope of the Shirley Plantation Collection and that it included receipts from purchases that related directly to their clothing, I began thinking about narrowing my field of study to a specific time period. While the information covers literally hundreds of years, I focused in on the Antebellum Era as it emerged as the one area I had not yet researched and thought I could learn something new in the process of writing.

Once I had the time period of 1825 to 1835 decided I began a new quest. Where could I find period garments to use as examples and how could they relate to Shirley Plantation? How did these garments set themselves apart from other time periods? Would examination of these pieces create a family portrait and would the preserved documents supply enough information to learn about the family, their personality and therefore how they dressed?

The scope of this endeavor has been two-fold. The Shirley Plantation Collection contains so much information that one must sort through the extensive files in order to decide what pieces tell the best story and what is that story. There are so many possibilities that it is overwhelming. In addition, the story is not complete without pictures and real examples. The costume research tells the other half. Together the whole story has been an exciting discovery in the early part of the nineteenth century and the historic family who occupied this time and place in our nation's past.

Acknowledgements

This project has been a long time in the making. Three children and five years later, I am focused and ready to complete the hard work that I started in 2002. While it has taken years to get to this point, I still feel like being a part of Virginia Commonwealth University's Theatre Department was just yesterday: the education, people and memories are vibrant and lasting. With that said, I must thank all of those who helped me get to this point.

First and foremost, my husband of almost six years has been very supportive in this final endeavor. He has encouraged me for the last five years to take the steps to finish and put this chapter of my education in my proverbial hat. His constant reminders and support have finally made this project possible.

Of course, I owe Liz Hopper a great deal of thanks for stimulating my love for history and writing all over again. One of my favorite parts of my education at VCU included Liz's costume history classes and the papers inspired by that class. Since the drawing and painting were not my particular forte, I felt enthusiastic, comfortable and confident when it came to the subject of history and writing. It was a precursor to discovering my technical ability and a natural fit for a substantial final project. I applaud Liz for recognizing that talent and pointing me in a direction where she knew I would succeed and thrive. A demanding professor, certainly, but also a surprisingly understanding and compassionate human with a great deal of knowledge and wisdom when it came to challenging students and helping them rise to their potential.

In the same vein, I also want to thank Noreen Barnes for her ability to jumpstart the brain. Her choice of writers and reading material, while a cerebral shock at first,

force any student to think in a way that feels somehow above a natural level. This superhuman thinking dares students to reason in new ways and aspire to one's highest level of writing potential possible. Not to mention, without her understanding and patience, I would not be writing this at all but would have simply given up a long time ago. Noreen has ultimately made this possible and for that I am completely and eternally grateful.

Finally, Mr. Karl Green deserves a "Thank You" card broadcast on national television. He is a dear friend, confidant and fabulous teacher. I have learned so much useful technical skill from him and his classes that I cannot imagine what life would have been like at VCU without him: just a dark, musty, old basement with no relief in sight. He is methodical and thorough in his teaching, demanding and realistic in his expectations and fun loving and pleasurable in his company. Karl has also been a tremendous catalyst in the finalization of this Master of Fine Art. Without harassment, Karl has persuaded me to take the necessary steps to completion and has made it easy for me to jumpstart the process. I am thankful to him for so many things but mostly for his friendship.

Preface

In the theatre we look to the past to inform our present and future. Directors, designers, dramaturges and actors use historical research and real life examples to inform ideas about society, setting and character. We discover daily life, social ideology and intellectual climate which inform our present contexts with invaluable information concerning families, relationships and characters lost to antiquity. History serves as an important component in the theatrical process in that it shapes an ongoing quest for truth and alternate reality. To understand a character, one must understand the environment in which that person inhabited.

The Southern Plantation and its landscape has become a defining icon in American History. This agricultural society, sustained by slavery and central in the conflict between North and South, occupies an age all its own. The Antebellum Era looms in our American past as a time of wealth, southern hospitality and African American exploitation thereby ascertaining itself as a significant source of folklore and interest. The people who populated these large working farms are all historical figures, in their own right, who bring from the past a glimpse of a far away time and place that has succeeded in helping to shape this country and the society in which we live. Plantations established agriculture, commerce and racial inequality. They reinvented gentility and southern style and in the meantime created an oppressive, racist social order. The Southern Plantation was the home of defining culture below the Mason Dixon Line.

The James River in Virginia remains as a remnant of plantation life. Along the James one sees a rich plantation history: over fourteen estates line the river bank, including Carter's Grove, Sherwood Forest, Evelynton, Berkley and Shirley Plantation,

and they remind us that this river was once busy with commercial traffic. Of all of the James River plantations however, Shirley Plantation is the only estate which maintained a paper trail documenting this history. The Shirley Plantation Collection, completed in 1996, is a compilation of over 18,000 documents spanning the decades between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. The collection is housed in Colonial Williamsburg's John D. Rockefeller Library and includes correspondence, business papers, writings, ephemera, art work, bound volumes, photographs, music, periodicals and the plantation's library books. The expansive collection provides a window into the past ten generations who have owned and operated Shirley Plantation. Historians can journey through the property's lucrative tobacco production, its place in Colonial Virginia, events of the Revolutionary War, the hardships of the Civil War and the changes ensued by Industrialization.

Most important to the purpose of this study however, are the papers which relate directly to the daily family life. Letters written to family members and friends give a researcher an idea of personality and ethical opinion. One can glean from the financial records how successful each patriarch was at running the family farming business. And a look at receipts from any given year tell you what a particular family member might have purchased (or was purchased for them) in terms of clothing, luxury items and accessories. In stark contrast, lists of slaves, receipts for dry goods, records for medical attention and basic necessities supply a historian with an understanding of a slave's life at the plantation. Together, these documents paint a picture of over 300 years of hard working farmers, their families, the merchants and tradesmen they did business with, the employees and the slaves.

The scope of this research will include the examination of family documents from the time period between 1825 and 1835. While the Colonial and the Civil War Periods occupy prominent roles in our country's history and development, this Antebellum Era is essential in understanding the effects of the Revolution on its countrymen and the development of our nation's only Civil War. In addition, investigating this time period provides a daily life example of a traditional family living in a time period of extreme change with the progress of Westward Expansionism and Industrialization: two issues which directly impacted the daily operations at Shirley Plantation. A biographical study of important family members will inform these ancestral documents and provide insight into each family member's character and personality: thereby informing choices in wardrobe and everyday attire. Examples of this plantation family's wardrobe will be executed through photography and the study of preserved garments from the time period in question. The combination of historical documents and clothing will represent the Carter Family of the early 19th century as an American ideal: they were self sufficient and capitalistic, hard working and lucrative, traditional and genteel.