Marie Tyler-McGraw

Arlington House, Slavery, and the Plantation Mistress

"Dear Madam," the letter begins, "According to my promise I take this opportunity to write you a few lines . . . ." Mrs. Rosabella Burke was writing to Mrs. Mary Custis Lee from Clay-Ashland. "During my stay of two months at Monrovia I was very much pleased, except that the people were too gay and fashionable for me. I being not able to rank with them."* These sentences may well have caused a brief, satisfied smile to cross the face of Mrs. Lee. Rosabella Burke's response to the faux high society of Monrovia, Liberia, in 1854, mirrored precisely the disdain with which the socially secure—but financially pressed—women of Arlington House viewed all strivers and boasters. While the American world was changing rapidly outside their doors, the Custis/Lee family held to values of inherited status, republican manners, and evangelical Protestantism.

The Custis/Lee women sought to embody both their civic and Christian virtues in their devotion to the African Colonization Society, and its colony of Liberia. This organization, founded in Washington, DC, in 1816 to encourage and to fund free black migration to West Africa, merged the dominant social ideals of their national generations. Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, the wife of George Washington Parke Custis, grew up in a post-revolutionary era which emphasized the "Republican Mother"—a woman educated and knowledgeable who could transmit appropriate civic virtues to her children. For her daughter, who became the wife of Robert E. Lee, the cultural ideal from the 1830s on was the home-as-a-haven from an increasingly commercialized world with the mother as its moral guardian. The republican mother and the moral exemplar united in opposition to slavery in a way disruptive to neither the nation nor the domestic circle. It did involve personal sacrifice.

One of the few pleasures the Custis women permitted themselves was a subtle and ironic ridicule of those who sought the attention and approbation of the public. For Rosabella Burke, a former Custis family slave raised with the expectation of her eventual freedom, to say that she lacked rank served as both an expression of her piety and an acidic reflection on the pretensions of Monrovian society. It was a comment worthy of the plantation mistresses with whom she and her family had lived in close connection. The majority of African Americans, free and slave, rejected the notion of migration to Africa. But pride of place, pride of kin, piety, and ambition caused some slave mulatto families, such as the Burkes, to believe that they might found another republic in Liberia.

Perhaps it is not quite fair to call the women of Arlington House plantation mistresses. Certainly the large house, with its imposing hilltop site and grand ceremonial approach and entrance, met the standards for planter residences; and its occupants were related to most of Virginia's planter families. They were also slaveholders and drew much of their livelihood from the toil of slaves. Their commercial crops were not planted at Arlington House, but on farms deeper into Virginia, where most of their slaves lived. Nor did the women suffer from the isolation often the lot of the planter's wife. Arlington House, near both Alexandria and Washington, had residents who suffered more from too frequent visitors than from isolation.

Despite their privileged position near the center of society in the new nation's capital, the Custis/Lee women suggest in their letters that they experienced most of the same satisfactions and difficulties as their gentry cousins scattered throughout the Chesapeake region. Not long ago the historiography of American women portrayed antebellum southern women as generally pale shadows of their northern sisters. The experiences of northern women with industrialization, public schools, and political advocacy, such as the abolition movement, clearly put them in the midst of vast and rapid changes while southern women seemed to change little between the American Revolution and the Civil War. This perspective shifted in the 1970s as scholars of the early Chesapeake region learned much more about colonial women, as social historians studied domestic slavery, as women's historians debated how women acquired both public and private space. More recently, the voices of black men and women have entered the dialogue. How to "hear" all these voices and what meanings to give their words is part of the current historical debate.

The women of Arlington House, white and black, offer an important example of the complexity of antebellum southern social relationships. Mary Randolph Custis, Mary Anna Custis Lee, and Rosabella Burke are neither unique nor entirely representative of southern women's experience in this era. Like their northern counterparts, these women used the cultural options available to them to expand their own areas of autonomy. Rosabella Burke was naive in choosing to go to Liberia for liberty. The Custis/Lee women were frustrated in their roles because they could not escape the patriarchal model. That does not mean they were not active participants and shapers of their own worlds.

The scholarship on southern women has expanded rapidly in the last decade. The work of Ann Firor Scott, Catherine Clinton, Suzanne Lebsock, Deborah Gray White, and others in the 1970s and 1980s led to further research into the ways white and black women interacted and how issues of race and social relations were constructed. Among those books which have particularly altered our thinking about the women of Arlington House and southern women in general are Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Patricia Morton, ed. *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens, GA., 1996); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996); Margaret Ripley Wolfe, *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women* (Lexington, Ky., 1995); and Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1992).

These writers and others have emphasized domestic settings and the material culture of everyday life. The work is far from complete and interpreters of southern sites within the National Park Service have much to offer in interpreting southern women whose stories were as layered and nuanced as their lives really were.

Note

* Bell Wiley, ed., *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia 1833-1869* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press), p. 192.

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Maria Israel and the Old Point Loma Lighthouse

Women's contributions to the workplace have changed dramatically in the last 100 years. Career opportunities during the 1800s were typically of a maternal nature, such as nursing, teaching, or domestic service. Although today's women have climbed high on the corporate ladder, there are still only a handful of women who have held some very unusual jobs. One such woman was Maria Arcadia Alipas Israel, daughter of a prominent Spanish family in San Diego. For nearly 20 years, she helped the U.S. Lighthouse Service safely guide ships into San Diego's harbor.

The Old Point Loma Lighthouse at Cabrillo National Monument, constructed in 1855, functioned for 36 years, until it was permanently shut down and abandoned in 1891. Built at the harbor entrance high atop Point Loma, the lighthouse was usually shrouded in early morning low clouds and fog and was eventually replaced by another lighthouse built closer to the water's edge. During its life span, 11 keepers were stationed at the lighthouse. The last keeper was Robert Decatur Israel, who lived there with his family for 18 years. For three of those years, his wife Maria officially served as the assistant lighthouse keeper.

Keeping the immense Fresnel lens lit throughout the night was the principal job of the keeper. But the most difficult part of the work was maintaining the equipment and grounds to exacting government standards. Detailed manuals issued by the U.S. Lighthouse Service outlined every acceptable, and unacceptable, activity around a lighthouse, from the correct procedure for trimming the wicks and polishing the glass,to being "courteous and polite to all visitors who conform to the regulations."

Maria Israel shared lighthouse duties with her husband and often kept the nightwatch. She