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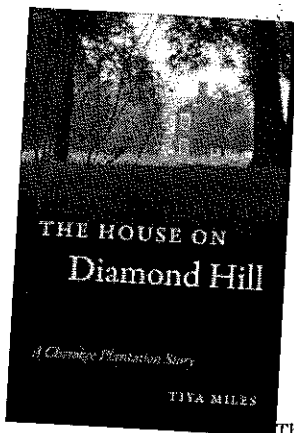
BOOK REVIEW: The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story refreshing and touching

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REVIEW By *KATHY S. de CANO*

ONE FEATHER REVIEWER

The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story by Tiya Miles takes readers on a fascinating journey that begins in what is now the modern day Vann House in Georgia. Miles recounts the restoration efforts to bring the old home into our era and the strangeness of her initial visits to a former plantation house owned by a Cherokee family with hardly any mention of the slaves that lived there on the part of its curators and the guides who show tourists around. Over time, an exhibit that includes the stories of some of the slaves is included, and the history of the place is displayed a little more accurately from there. In pondering why the stories of slaves were not given a more prominent role from the restoration's inception, Miles explores the motivations behind the passions of white Georgians, who initially took on the restoration project. Sandwiched between her initial visits and then later explorations of the Vann House restoration project is the story of the house itself, when it was part of the Cherokee Nation in Georgia.



Through splendid characterizations and well documented anecdotes, the reader is given a glimpse into many events of Cherokee history, but with the author's expertly crafted writing and through the personalized telling, the history, which can often be dry in other formats, comes to life vividly. There should be a movie about the Vann house, with Miles as a consultant.

We are made privy to the personal foibles and triumphs of James Vann, a man both hated and admired by many for his ruthless and often unscrupulous climb to wealth, coupled ironically with his staunch patriotism to the Cherokee Nation. We come to know of his mother, Wali Vann, and more in depth, we get acquainted with his wife, Peggy Scott Vann, and his son, Joseph Vann. Through these people, we are witness to the changes that occurred among many of the mixed blood Cherokee families over the generations. The effects of white incursion are portrayed dramatically, in terms of the changing roles and treatment of women over time, changes in how slaves are viewed and treated, and the varying degrees of acceptance of Euro-American customs by the more acculturated citizens of the nation. We also see how many whites in north Georgia perceived the wealthy Cherokee planters, and the myth of their total assimilation is shattered, both in terms of how they continued to persist as Cherokees and how they were never really accepted by whites for the same reason. The elements of Euro-American culture that were taken in are exposed for what they usually represented: an attempt by Cherokees of the area to take what was beneficial to them without losing their sense of a Cherokee cultural identity. This often caused tensions between Cherokees and whites, particularly in the case of Cherokees dealing with missionaries. The story of the Moravians among the Cherokees, who tried to establish their mission on the Vann plantation, is told in quite a lot of detail. The missionaries were allowed on the property because Vann saw it as a way to bring schooling that he wanted for the area's children, and he also saw it as a way to prosper more financially since the missionaries would be dependent on him for many needed items, given that he controlled much of the trade in the area.

After Vann's murder, his wife Peggy takes center stage in the story for a time, and we see the once tenaciously non-Christian woman have a change of heart and behavior after her eventual conversion to the new religion. We also subsequently are introduced to Joseph Vann, who would treat his slaves more in the manner of whites than previous of his Cherokee ancestors would have found palatable. To be sure, James Vann was sometimes cruel to his slaves, but he had no qualms about socializing with them or Cherokees of much lesser wealth, particularly when he was drunk on whiskey, which apparently was quite often. His home possessed open doors. Joseph did not continue with these traditions of his father, but like his father, he suffered a violent death on the Ohio River, when the steamboat he was on exploded. Much of the information about his death is known from the account of one of his slaves, who survived the accident.

Miles makes certain that many of their stories are told as well, since they are often the forgotten stories of U.S. history. We learn of Candace, who had a close relationship to Peggy Vann Crutchfield (Mrs. Vann remarried after her first husband's death), her daughter, Virginia, and Grace and Isaac. We also learn of Katy, who knew little of the cultures outside the Cherokee nation, endearing her more to Peggy as she was among the slaves who looked for and acquired a more indigenous cultural likeness, and also Michael, the son of the Moravians' slave Pleasant, who ran away upon reaching early manhood and understanding what his life would be like as an adult slave. Though Peggy Vann had close relationships with some of her slaves, she was nonetheless their exploiter, and Miles does not whitewash the fact of her being a slaveholder. Among the appendices that Miles includes with her book is the second one, in which we find the details of the research done by Vann House staff members on the various slaves that lived on the plantation. The easy to read charts include names, family members, place of origin when known,

where they actually worked on the plantation when known, and interesting anecdotes about their individual lives and deaths.

The third appendix to the book is a Moravian memoir that details the conversion of Peggy Scott Vann Crutchfield. It is enlightening in its revelation of the mindset and biases of the Moravian, Anna Rosina Gambold, who recorded the information.

The first appendix to the book details the workings of the author's research, and towards the end, on page 218, she makes a statement that aptly summarizes the importance of her work:

"Attention to the biographies of James Vann in particular, of Peggy Scott, Joseph Vann, Anna Rosina Gambold, Pleasant, Grace, Isaac, and others in this study of Diamond Hill reveals the layered and contingent nature of individual existences, the force of personality that drives historical events, and the impact of political, economic, and cultural change on the formation of personalities. We learn through prolonged concentration on the intertwined biographies of a small set of Diamond Hillians that external challenges, internal struggles, incredible strengths, and heartbreaking failures shaped the people who made our history."

I cannot think of a better way to summarize this historical treasure, and fortunately, Miles shares her attention to the biographies with us in a style that is refreshing for historical research findings in its readability and touching in its display of the humanity of the players involved.

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