

Edges, Ledges, and the Limits of Craft

Imagining Historical Work beyond the Boundaries

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ABSTRACT: As public historians, we grapple not only with the “what” of history making (subject and argument) but also with the “how” (process and relationships). We strive to develop projects that are dialogic and collaborative in nature, and to widely share the results of our work with the public. In doing so, we often chart new academic territory, making our way by trial and error and taking risks. By focusing on a Native American and African American historic site as case study, this essay explores how the aim to illuminate ways in which history matters in the present often drives us to create “history on the edge.”

KEY WORDS: Native American history, African American history, public engagement, historical fiction

This essay is the written rendition of my National Council on Public History keynote address in Nashville, Tennessee, in which I tussled with the conference theme: “History on the Edge.”

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As scholars, practitioners, and students in the field of public history, we grapple not only with the “what” of history making—the selection of our subject matter—but also with the “how”—the particulars of our process. We consider, perhaps more closely than colleagues in other historical fields, questions of action and translation. We strive to develop projects that are dialogic and collaborative in nature and to share the results of our work through multiple platforms, from monographs to articles in popular history periodicals, from museum exhibitions and site brochures to websites and digital databases. In doing this work, we often chart new or unproven territory, making our way by trial and error and taking risks that are difficult to calculate. The aim to bring out the potent, relevant meanings of history and to illuminate the ways in which history matters in the present often drives us to create “history on the edge.” Our innovative projects then take us places we had not necessarily expected to go—pushing us as scholars and interpreters, challenging the

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expectations of traditional historical scholarship, testing as well as energizing communities on the ground, and straining professional evaluative processes in the academy.

As a case study for the exploration of these issues, this talk will describe a multilayered, long-term public history project focused on the Chief Vann House State Historic Site, a former Cherokee plantation in present-day Chatsworth, Georgia. (The interpretive ranger who operates the site and a longtime conversation partner and collaborator, Julia Autry, is here this morning.) The Vann House project, which I began in 2005, has taken shape over a decade as a self-published informational booklet, an onsite exhibition, a historical monograph, an article in *The Public Historian*, and most recently, a novel.¹ The project will serve as an example in my presentation of the pleasures, pains, and possibilities of doing history on the edge. I hold the view that the costs of taking an edgy approach to our work—the strains, pains, and outright risks—are worth it, for ourselves and our audiences, as well as for the histories that we seek to unearth and enliven.

My scholarship focuses on intersections of African American and Native American history, with particular attention to questions of race, gender, nationalism, and colonialism. The major location for these intersections has been slavery in the Indian South among a small number of southeastern nations: Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles (and to a lesser extent, Catawbas). Beginning in the late 1700s and continuing until the American Civil War, these groups accepted and sanctioned—to differing degrees—the ownership of black slaves. A minority of native people within each tribe owned black slaves in relatively small numbers. Native slaveholders tended to be economic elites of mixed-race parentage (born of indigenous mothers and European fathers) who owned dozens of slaves and claimed sizeable farms and plantations. However, indigenous masters did not always or necessarily fall into this category. Some southern Indians of unmixed racial ancestry owned slaves, as did some “middle-class” small-scale native farmers. Taken as a whole, members of the Cherokee Nation owned the largest number of slaves historically, with approximately 2–7 percent of Cherokees owning slaves over time, and with enslaved people making up nearly 10 percent of the Cherokee Nation in the mid-1830s (a 16,542 to 1,592 ratio).²

1 Tiya Miles, Alexandria Cadotte, and Merwin Moss, eds., *African American History at the Chief Vann House*, a public history booklet donated to the Chief Vann House State Historic Site (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006), <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~tiya/images/VannFinal.pdf>; Miles, consultant, 2007–08, *Patchwork in the Quilt*, exhibit at the Chief Van House State Historic Site; Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Miles, “‘Showplace of the Cherokee Nation’: Race and the Making of a Southern House Museum,” *The Public Historian* 33, no. 4 (November 2011): 11–34; Miles, *The Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair Publisher, 2015).

2 Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 2nd ed. (2005; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 124; William G. McLoughlin and Walter Conser, “The Cherokee Censuses of 1809, 1825, and 1835,” in *The Cherokee Ghost Dance: Essays on the Southeastern Indians, 1789–1861* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 240, 228.

Chief James Vann (son of a Cherokee mother and Scottish father) was one of the wealthiest men in the Cherokee Nation in the early 1800s. His son, Joe Vann (nicknamed “Rich Joe”), inherited the family plantation after James Vann’s death, along with over one hundred enslaved blacks. The records about this plantation derive in the main from the diary and letters of Moravian missionaries as well as records of the Cherokee Indian Agency. James Vann had invited these Protestant missionaries onto his land to help Cherokees prepare for white encroachment through education. Vann was a progressive political leader, postmaster, and entrepreneur. He was richer than most Cherokees and most white Georgians in the northern part of the state. He was also a violently unpredictable man who abused his slaves as well as the Cherokee women in his family. In 1809, Vann was murdered by an unknown assailant. The perpetrator was never positively identified or apprehended. Unearthing and interpreting the tumultuous history of the Vann plantation for a public audience became the focus of my work over the last decade, resulting in a series of linked projects.

The most traditional and “safest” link in this chain of intellectual production around the Chief Vann House site was my historical monograph, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story*, but that book came about only midway through the process, and almost by accident. The project as a whole began when I experienced what to me was a painful gap in the interpretation of the Vann House site back in the late 1990s, and when I felt compelled to make a public history intervention before I knew that my work could be defined as “public history.” In 1998, I was in the thick of researching my dissertation on a Cherokee man named Shoe Boots and the black woman he enslaved and had a family with, Doll. I learned that the state of Georgia had a preserved Cherokee plantation among its historic sites. Even though Shoe Boots was a middle-class farmer, I was keen on visiting the Vann plantation to gain a visual, material, and tactile sense of the practice of slavery in a Cherokee context. What I encountered is by now a familiar tale to people who conduct or read about plantation site research, but at the time, I was utterly aghast. I followed a young guide through a lengthy tour of the stately brick home “built” by Chief James Vann and listened to lively narration about James Vann’s trading business and tavern, the Vann family’s wealth, the valuable antiques throughout the house, the unusual “floating” staircase, Cherokee games Vann’s children would have played, and James Vann’s drinking and gambling (the latter meant to remind visitors that even though the Vanns lived much like a white plantation family according to this tour, they were still “exotically” Indian and hence untamed). There was no mention of slaves, slavery, African Americans, or any other key word having to do with the peculiar institution on this tour. At the end, when the tour guide was showing us the cellar, I asked about the location of the slave quarters. The guide was so flummoxed by my query that she took her radio off of her hip and called down to the site office to seek guidance on how to answer it. (I was later told by a Vann House staff member that this guide was probably a college student volunteering or temporarily employed for the summer.

I can imagine my own students being in a tense situation like this. It is only fair to note that the guide's lack of preparation for a question about slavery at a plantation built on slave labor stemmed from the official interpretation and management of the site itself, which I historicized and analyzed several years later in *The Public Historian*.³

This unsatisfying tour stuck with me for years as I completed the dissertation, which became my first book, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*. I knew that I had to act in some way in order to enter the public conversation about this site, but I was not sure how to proceed. My feeling of urgency was exacerbated when, on a visit to the site years after that first encounter, I viewed a film at the new interpretive center, a museum on the grounds funded by donors. This film was of the usual sort meant to orient visitors to the site and its history. It concluded by flashing a scene of a yellow public school bus pulling up before the white columns of the Vann House. Running from the bus were a bevy of children eager to start their field trip. Many of those children were African American, likely from an Atlanta-area school. At this moment, the voice-over of the film stressed that if you do not know your past, you cannot know where you are headed. Hearing that line about the relevance of historical knowledge while watching black children run into a plantation house was, to say the least, distressing. I had taken that tour more than once, and I knew what those children would learn about their history: nothing. Instead, they would come away with a hazy picture of the grandeur of an antebellum South in which Native Americans could be plantation owners too.

I applied for a grant from my university to create an accessible alternative history of the Vann House that would focus on the African American population and the phenomenon of slavery. My proposal was not funded the first time around, but the second time proved the charm. In 2006, I received an Arts of Citizenship Program grant geared toward public scholarship. As a grantee, I was required to attend regular breakfasts with other recipients and with the project director, David Scobey. These breakfast conversations proved invaluable, as they helped us think about format and communication, which led me to consider the form of my intervention for maximum impact at the site. Rather than launching a website, which was my first idea, I realized that in this relatively rural location where Internet connections were not ubiquitous, I should mirror the format of local histories that I had seen in the museum at the site: the booklet.

I then organized the final paper assigned in my 300-level undergraduate class, "Blacks, Indians, and the Making of America," around primary research on African Americans at the Vann House. Students watched the Vann House tour on video, read primary sources (mainly missionary diaries—two different translations of the original German text—and slave narratives), read secondary sources (especially the scholarship of Theda Perdue), and wrote individual essays that would later be

³ Miles, "Showplace of the Cherokee Nation."

compiled into an edited collection.⁴ Knowing that their work would be used to inform and engage readers in the public (and not just read by me for a grade) inspired many of the students to do their best. I hired two student editors from the class with grant funds. (I had planned to hire one editor, but when a black man and an Ojibwe woman both applied for the position, I could not resist making the funding stretch to hire them both.) Students Alexandria Cadotte, Merwin Moss, and I spent the summer of 2006 editing, combining and arranging the papers of all twenty-five or so of the students in the class. It was important that every student's voice be included. In the case of weaker papers, we pulled out paragraphs to create co-authored essays or selected single quotations to highlight in the booklet. We selected one of my snapshots of a Vann House outbuilding (used as an office at the site) for the cover. Then I hired a freelance layout designer and had three hundred copies printed at Kinko's. (Yes, Kinko's. Those were the days.) I shipped a box of our booklets, titled *African American History at the Chief Vann House*, to Vann House site manager Jeff Stancil just in time for their annual Christmas by Candlelight celebration. I asked that he give the booklets away or, if he liked, charge a small fee and retain the proceeds to interpret black history and Cherokee women's history at the site.

Not long after the Christmas celebration, I received an e-mail from Jeff Stancil. The Vann House had sold out of our booklet. He was requesting the PDF file so that they could print more copies on demand. Meanwhile, Julia Autry, interpretive ranger at the site, was moved to reread the missionary diaries and create an exhibit on black life. She applied for and received a modest amount of money from the state and masterfully pulled together human resources: Vann House volunteers past and present as well as myself and historian Rowena McClinton, translator of the Moravian missionary diaries.⁵ Julia Autry named the exhibit *Patchwork in the Quilt*, inspired by a quilt in the Vann House museum material culture collections sewn by an unknown enslaved woman from the area. Vann House staff housed the new exhibit in the very outbuilding pictured on the cover of our booklet, which is now dedicated to the interpretation of black experience on the Vann plantation. It was gratifying to see that the little publication produced by my class helped to renew and broaden interpretations at the site, leading to a fuller representation of the past. It was around this time that Julia Autry gave me the idea to write a full-length monograph. I was on site when she casually nudged me and said, "You know, there never has been a book written about the Vann House."

4 Rowena McClinton, ed., *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Moravian Springplace Mission Diary, excerpts, Carl Maelshagen, trans., Chief Vann House State Historic Site Library, Chatsworth, GA; Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540–1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979). The essays were published as Miles, Cadotte, and Moss, *African American History at the Chief Vann House*.

5 McClinton, *Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees*.

And so I wrote a book born of collaboration between scholars and site staff members as well as the input of local residents who were kind enough to take me on county tours and walk me through their own historic plantation homes. During the writing process, I e-mailed drafts to the Vann House staff. Julia Autry sent back questions, clarifications, and challenges to my interpretations, funneling her own thoughts as well as the thoughts of the site manager. I revised at least two sections in the manuscript and deleted one epigraph in response to her feedback; at times, though, I kept my original interpretation intact but included her oppositional view in footnotes. As an academic, I was nervous about colleagues' potential reactions to the book because of this dialogic writing process and other features I had adopted to make it more accessible for the public, namely a first-person point of view that describes a visit to the house, contemporary anecdotes that serve as bookends, a short introduction to the text, and multiple appendices intended for use by genealogists and local historians. I attempted to cushion the risk by writing a long explanatory appendix about methods and sources that I knew academics could find. Still, I felt like I stood at a disciplinary edge before this book came out.

When I won the NCPH book prize for this work in 2011, I felt a sudden sense of recognition. My work and process had a disciplinary home and a precedent. I was doing public history, and I could now identify as a public historian. I could become a self-aware member of a whole clan of people doing history at the edges. Although there is no way for me to measure impact directly, *The House on Diamond Hill* seems to have increased and diversified visitation at the Vann House. Colleagues at Emory University and Western Carolina University have taken students to the site, and on numerous occasions people have walked in saying they were there because they had read my book. The most fun of those walk-in moments was when a women's book club from Tennessee happened to come to the Vann House on my birthday. Julia Autry texted to tell me they were there, and I was able to send them greetings in real time. Currently, the Friends of the Vann House support group is working with Jennifer Dickey, director of the public history program at Kennesaw State University, to apply for National Historic Landmark status for the site. When I offered to help with the application, Dickey generously replied that having written the book was the biggest contribution I could have made to this effort.

And so I felt compelled to push this work further, by writing a novel based on my Vann plantation research. The novel, titled *The Cherokee Rose*, the fictional name I gave to the Vann plantation, was released in April of 2015. My main purpose for writing it was to tell an emotionally compelling, historically revealing, and inspiring story focused not on the slaveholding men about whom and by whom most of the records were written, but instead focused on African American women and Cherokee women, enslaved and free, as well as on a white woman missionary. And I wanted to tell this story in a way that explored tensions among women in the past (as well as their heirs in the present) due to differences of race, class, culture, and sexuality—and that emphasized women's friendship across multiple kinds of

difference. Ultimately, I hoped to show the strength and sense of purpose that can derive from recovering and confronting buried histories.

This beyond-the-boundaries fiction project frightened me so much that I kept it secret for years—from friends, colleagues, and even my parents. I felt that I was on a ledge about to jump off. I could jeopardize my standing among academic colleagues and forever lose my footing in my field. I could anger people who cared deeply about the Vann House but would not imagine it the way I did and might object to my sharp portrayals of the characters based on James Vann and the Moravian missionary. Some of these fears have been realized since the novel's release. I was recently introduced to the chair of a history department in North Carolina who said to me: "You're that historian who makes things up," and then immediately tried to soften the words by clarifying, "I mean, who writes into the gaps." I also learned through my publisher that the Vann House museum will not be carrying *The Cherokee Rose* although it stocks my histories. The official reason given—"because it is fiction"—struck me as a dodge. I have heard indirectly that some individuals who support the Vann House do not like my portrayal of white southerners. I was disappointed to hear this, especially second hand, but perhaps I should not have been surprised. I had forewarning that stakeholders who support the site, both with time and financial contributions, might dislike my representation of modern-day race and class relations in portions of the novel that follow contemporary characters. Apparently, my portrait of a small southern town, which I imagined based on stories of my own elder family members' memories of and visits to the South of their youth, was off-putting to a subset of readers. Such, I realize now, is the power of fiction's intimate storytelling mode, which resists the emotional walls that readers can erect between themselves and more distant historical monographs. I do take solace in the fact that although some people who love the Vann House will never embrace this book, others are reading it. A descendant of James Vann wrote me to say that he appreciated the fictional narrative and was especially affected by descriptions of experiences of black women owned by his ancestor.

While choosing to write fiction has lost for me the on-site audience that peruses the shelves at the Vann House museum, it has gained readers across a range of niches that seek out fiction and are willing to engage the rawer, explicitly emotional storytelling that I employ in this work. Although it is still rather early to gain a sense of reach, the novel seems to have opened the world of Vann plantation history, as well as slavery in the native South and the contemporary quest for genealogical heritage, to many kinds of readers. I have heard from members of African American women's book clubs; scholars of Cherokee, Creek, and native studies; descendants of freedmen and women in Oklahoma; white Christian women's book clubs; and members of LGBT organizations, as well as unaffiliated individuals out there who somehow found the book, that the story was meaningful to them. One of these correspondents shared an intriguing idea for a sequel, which I never would have considered if it were not for this informal public dialogue about the work. Within

its first six months of publication, the novel sold as many books as my academic monographs each sold in their first years.

And something else has happened too, since the novel's release. I have been hearing from colleagues in the fields of American studies and US history that they are writing or wish to write fiction. Many of us feel that we have to keep these creative desires hush-hush, forgetting that all of the work we do as researchers, writers, archivists, museum directors, site interpreters, and so on, is creative. Doing history on the edge can mean, among many other things, harnessing that creative impulse for public projects. A perceptive e-mail I received from a senior colleague sums up our collective anxieties, internal obstacles, and potential pay-offs in taking up creative work. (He has given me permission to quote him anonymously. He is now dusting off and revising a historical fiction manuscript for young adults.) "It's humbling, ain't it?" he wrote. "So many things that we so painfully learned through a long professionalization have to be unlearned. But it is wonderful to cut loose from the footnotes and say the things we intuit and believe, whether or not we can prove them." Indeed. His words echoed those of one of our veteran historian-novelists in the field of US history, Richard Slotkin, who has argued: "It follows that historians often *understand* more about the stories they tell than can be *proved* according to the rules of the discipline. There comes a moment, therefore, when the historian must choose between knowledge and understanding."⁶

To borrow Slotkin's language, my choice to write in a new genre reflected a drive to communicate to wider audiences what I had come to understand about the past. But the act of writing fiction after seven years of academic professional training and fifteen years of writing history was for me the most challenging part of this final installment of the Vann House public history project. I had always enjoyed fiction and even studied African American women's literature in college and a master's program. When I moved into an American studies doctoral program and became a history scholar, I learned to find and analyze evidence that would support balanced and rational interpretations of the past. Now that I was trying to write fiction set in a real place where historical lives had unfolded in ways I had already documented, I had a hard time letting go of what I knew to be "true." I stuck so closely to actual dates and events that I gave myself no room to develop a plot at first. I finally found my way out of a fact-bound tunnel when I reread the diary of Moravian missionary Anna Rosina Gambold.⁷ Although I had probed pages of her diary many times before when mining them for historical information, now I read her diary straight through, while sitting outside in the sunshine. Gambold's observations were so detailed, her turns of phrase so captivating, that I became absorbed by her world.

Although deeply flawed by prejudice and the habits of her culture, Anna Rosina Gambold, a writer of diaries, letters, and botanical papers, opened a door to fiction

6 Richard Slotkin, "Fiction for the Purposes of History," *Rethinking History* 9, no. 2/3 (June/September 2005): 221-36, 223.

7 McClinton, *Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees*.

writing for me. I began by free-writing nonexistent entries of her diary in my best estimation of her voice. At first these diary pages adhered to the originals, nearly duplicating the missionary's reports. But before I knew it, the diary entries that I was writing for Anna Rosina Gambold took on a life of their own. The pages began appearing on the computer screen without my full knowledge of how they had gotten there. Later, I would face the task of uncoupling my fictional entries from the real ones and of setting my fictionalized Anna Rosina off on her narrative trajectory. Shaping the lives of the main contemporary characters in the novel, Jinx, Ruth, Cheyenne, Adam, and Sally, took me quite a while longer to get a handle on. I struggled with making these characters real as people, with giving them things to do and words to say that were not mere reenactments and recitations of the historical information that I wanted to share with readers. In the end, with the patient feedback of editors who helped this manuscript along, I was able to temper my instinct to turn the characters into mere embodied mouthpieces giving lectures about the past.

Writing *The Cherokee Rose* was difficult—both in terms of trying to learn a craft and in terms of feeling vulnerable about the dynamics of reception. But the results, so far, have been incredibly rewarding. My family is reading this book when they did not even pretend to try to read my scholarship (though they were proud of the first two books and kept them on their shelves). There has been a groundswell of expressive enthusiasm for my novel that never existed for my histories—from e-mails and tweets by readers to local newspaper stories and to colleagues telling me how the book made them feel. It seems to me that even as a novice fiction writer who has quite a lot to learn, retelling a Vann plantation story in an affective vein has been well worth the risks. It has allowed me to connect with my existing readership in a deeper way and to bring more people into this conversation about the history of slavery in Native American nations and the legacies of this history for personal and group identities and for political commitments today.

During a visit to the University of Oregon in 2014, I gave a lecture in honor of Professor Peggy Pascoe, a historian and mentor in whose memory the book is dedicated (along with a close graduate school friend and writing partner, Josie Fowler, and a college friend with whom I worked on a feminist journal, Helen Hill). A professor of Native American literature in the audience at Oregon, Kirby Brown, asked what the difference was for me between writing history and writing fiction, and why I had ultimately chosen to take up fiction. His question helped me to form an answer that I had not fully articulated before he asked it. I told him that I had been unhappy with how the real story ended for enslaved women and Cherokee women on the Vann plantation, and that in fiction, I get to write my own endings to stories of the past, endings that may be hopeful for women and other marginalized groups today. I explained that in *The Cherokee Rose*, the weak are strong, and the ne'er-do-wells get their comeuppance. Making the leap from history to fiction has given me the chance to achieve a kind of poetic justice for women who saw little or no social justice in their lifetimes, and, I hope, to inspire

readers and visitors to historic sites to envision greater possibilities for social justice in our own time.

Working on a public history project with a series of incarnations over the course of a decade has been the richest chapter of my career thus far. This is the case largely because I did not work in isolation, and the collaborative process created space for new ideas and creativity to emerge. I would like to conclude by sharing some takeaways from my bumpy, imperfect, unsettled, but nevertheless rewarding experience with the Vann House project.

1. Take risks with public history projects—but not alone. Build a strong support network.
2. Collaborate with diverse partners; this can produce unexpected, positive outcomes.
3. Express findings and interpretations in various genres; you might just inspire reactions in your audience that can be channeled toward greater interpersonal connection and historical understanding.
4. History that pushes edges and risks leaps might just be the kind of work that keeps the past most alive. If this approach appeals to you as a scholar-practitioner, embrace it!

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