

Ancestors of Worthy Life: Plantation Slavery and Black Heritage at Mount Clare.
Teresa S. Moyer. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. 240 pp.*

Reviewed by Michael O. Hartley

In this well researched and pointedly critical book, Teresa S. Moyer has brought into view a failure that affects many museums, particularly those of the Southern United States, but also anywhere that slavery was part of America's economic base. The issue is the unmet obligation of museums to acknowledge the presence of black Americans as participants in the history of the place the museum presents. And when the museum being presented is a mansion house that is the focal point of several plantations, as well as industrial activities, there is the certainty that a large black population was participant. The historical presence of these people places a requirement on the museum to acknowledge them, and even more, to accurately present their substantial involvement through the museum interpretation of the place.

This book illustrates the requirement and its failure through a careful examination of the Mount Clare House Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, which has been owned and operated by the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America since 1917. At the center of Moyer's critical analysis of this museum is the emphasis chosen in the presentation of the house, an emphasis on the elegance and elite position of the Carroll family of Maryland who established Mount Clare and its related activities.

The failure of the Mount Clare House Museum, the author states, lies in its emphasis on the prestige of the Carrolls, their house, and its elegant furnishings, without any meaningful treatment of the large enslaved population on whom this elegance rested. She points out that the meaning of objects extends beyond the aesthetic to the contextual, which allows and also demands recognition of the multiple meanings that objects have. This recognition moves museum interpretation from a singular focus on the powerful and dominant few, to the invisible many who were also participants in the creation and functioning of place and its contents. Moyer reports an absence of awareness and acknowledgement of this enslaved group in the Mount Clare House Museum from its initial establishment by the Colonial Dames into the present. She develops the weight of this failure in scholarly chapters, treating her research into records of the ongoing acquisition of the slaves who then collectively provided the Carroll's resultant wealth and position. This black population, Moyer writes, is invisible in the museum house and grounds, but contributed directly to the creation of the Mount Clare House.

The museum and related Baltimore city park now lie in a largely black neighborhood. However, at the site of the Mount Clare House, physical evidences of the broader plantation land and many

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of the area's black activities or residences have been lost through the effects of time and neglect. Archaeology has been conducted on the grounds, but Moyer, an archaeologist, writes that her access to the archaeological materials was restricted by the operators of the museum during her preparation of this book. The restrictions placed on the author's use of relevant artifacts to illustrate the presence of enslaved people at the Mount Clare House and related grounds is a telling denial.

Moyer has addressed the absence of physical information by her attentive examination of documentation relating to the Carroll's slaveholding and the uses to which those enslaved were put. This examination is augmented by comparative data from similar contexts, also accomplished in a scholarly way. Moyer develops the reader's awareness of the presence of the black population, an understanding of their numbers, ages and genders, and of their function in creating and sustaining the wealth of the white occupants. She also makes the point that ownership of these enslaved people was maintained, or not, depending on whether that ownership was convenient, or not. She concludes her discussion by pointing out members of that black population who attained their own level of historical greatness in the course of their lives. She describes a specific example, Henry Harden, who had been enslaved by the Carroll family and who became a significant participant in the creation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church movement. He is part of the story too.

Mount Clare House Museum, Moyer tells us, is a monument to the colonial and post-colonial splendor of a white elite family, a presentation of a history that ignores the enslaved black participation. The need for truthful presentation of the tensions and inequities of our historic past in a plantation house in Baltimore, Maryland, was forcefully thrust upon us as I wrote this review, when Baltimore exploded in severe and intense racial conflict in the spring of 2015. Mount Clare, in this excellent book, begs the question: What are the implications of an elite plantation house museum celebrating itself in a park in a black neighborhood, while ignoring the history of those black citizens?

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