

William G. Lewis. THE LAKE CHAPEL AT SOMERSET PLANTATION AND RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH (Under the direction of Dr. David Dennard) Department of History, June 2016.

This thesis is a study of the history and use of one of Somerset Place's most notable structures, the Lake Chapel. Although no longer standing today, it was one of the most important and widely used buildings, not only by the Collins family, but also by the plantation's slave community. Situated in North Carolina's coastal plain region along Lake Phelps, Somerset Place was one of the state's largest antebellum plantations, with its Episcopal Lake Chapel membership consisting of nearly half the state's black communicants. Although not a full history, this research focuses both sharply and broadly on the Chapel at Somerset. It describes the various methods used by the Collins family to instruct the slave congregation and discusses the impact the instructions had on their disposition and attitude toward their condition. Additionally, concern is given to how the Lake Chapel fits into the larger plantation mission activities that were taking place in the larger antebellum South.

Overall, Somerset Place offers a long and interior view of the lives of masters and slaves on a southern plantation. Unlike many other such places, managers here have taken great care to highlight and underscore the role of African Americans in all aspects of life on the Collins' estate. And owing to many years of research, public programs, and archeological digs, Somerset has become one of North Carolina's most celebrated antebellum slave plantations; and it remains highly regarded as a national model of historic reconstruction, interpretation and preservation.



The Lake Chapel at Somerset Plantation and Religious Instruction in the Antebellum South

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## INTRODUCTION

In North Carolina's coastal plain region, located in Washington County, North Carolina, stands Somerset Place. The plantation was in full operation from 1785 until the end of the Civil War and home to a diverse group of men, women, and children, both black and white, slave, and free. The land was originally developed by three investors, but early on one of them, Josiah Collins, gained full control and it was his family that resided there for almost three generations. At its height, Somerset boasted of more than one-hundred-thousand acres and over fifty buildings, and was one of North Carolina's largest antebellum estates. One of those buildings, the Lake Chapel, was one of the most widely used structures on the property. Not only was it a house of worship for the Collins family, but also a place to instruct the slave community on a regular basis.

Somerset began as the project of three enterprising men from Edenton, North Carolina. In 1784, Josiah Collins, Dr. Samuel Dickinson, and Nathaniel Allen, formed what came to be known as the Lake Company, and began purchasing large tracts of land between Lake Phelps and the Scuppernon River. As progress was made clearing the swampy terrain, legal disputes amongst the businessmen, along with the eventual passing of Dickinson and Allen, would allow Josiah Collins, the largest investor, to obtain complete ownership of all Lake Company properties. For eighty years (1785-1865), the Collins family would preside over one of the largest and most productive plantations in the state, with the land yielding a plethora of crops and sawmills dispensing countless loads of lumber.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William S. Tarlton, "Somerset Place and Its Restoration," (report, prepared for the Department of Conservation and Development Division of State Parks, 1954), 4-8.



By mid-century, Somerset had become a bustling plantation and was home to numerous individuals including over two hundred slaves, an overseer, and several white laborers. There were some fifty or more buildings on the estate including a hospital, kitchen complex, slave quarters, and even an Episcopal Chapel. Josiah Collins III was known to hire tutors for his children and also for keeping a resident clergyman on hand to conduct services for whites and the enslaved Africans. The family was very loyal to the Episcopal Church and encouraged the slave population to adhere to its doctrines and style of worship.<sup>2</sup> As the nation became plagued by civil war, Somerset entered a state of uncertainty. In 1863, Josiah III passed away suddenly, leaving his wife Mary with little to sustain the estate. As a result, she was forced to sell in 1870 and the plantation deteriorated.<sup>3</sup>

After fifty years of erratic ownership, Somerset was acquired by a Rocky Mount bank in the 1920s and eventually sold to the Federal Farm Security Administration. The Administration divvied up the land and sold most of it to various buyers, resulting in the farm community that is still there to this day.<sup>4</sup> The Main House and 221 acres of land were given to the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development which established Pettigrew State Park. In 1969, the plantation was certified as a State Historic Site and various reconstructions and renovations have been completed over the years to provide an all-encompassing look at life on a southern plantation. Much of this reclamation could not have been done without the hard work of Dorothy Spruill Redford, the former site manager who not only oversaw its restoration, but also

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<sup>2</sup> John Sykes, "The Lake Chapel at Somerset Place," (report, prepared for the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1999), 7-9.

<sup>3</sup> Tarlton, "Somerset Place and Its Restoration," 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

was able to trace her ancestry back to the plantation itself. Today, the site encompasses thirty-one of the original acres along with seven of the original 19<sup>th</sup> century structures.<sup>5</sup>

This study focuses on the role religion played in the life of those residing at Somerset Place, with special attention given to the African American experience. It will begin with a history of the plantation, noting its development from a densely wooded swamp to its height as one of North Carolina's five largest antebellum plantations, and then a State Historic Site. From there the focus will shift to the establishment of the Lake Chapel in the 1830s, and its use as an Episcopal Church for the residents and others in the community. Proceeding forward, an analysis of the religious instruction of slaves on the plantation will be given, along with an overview of other methods used by southern planters to teach their brand of "slave Christianity." Finally, an analysis of the larger plantation mission system, and the Lake Chapel's place within it, will be given. This research will document the successes and failures of the Collins family's missionary efforts among the enslaved at Somerset through an examination of church membership, Lake Chapel records, instances of slave resistance, and other evidences of adherence or non-conformity to religious instruction.

By analyzing the history and use of the Lake Chapel at Somerset Place, most notably by the enslaved residents, a clearer picture develops of religious life on a large southern plantation. It shows how religion could be used for good and for more disingenuous purposes. Somerset Place, with its extensive collection of records, and its well documented history of the Chapel, provides the perfect case study on how religion and slavery were inextricably linked in the Old South.

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth A. Cahoon, "The History and Restoration of Somerset Place Historic Site," (M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, 2004), 2-4.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE HISTORY OF SOMERSET PLACE

Thousands of years before European contact, the area around Lake Phelps in Washington and Tyrrell County, North Carolina, was inhabited by a variety of Native American populations such as the Coree, Roanoke, and Secotan. Natives called the lake “Scuppernong,” and were attracted to the area as a result of its abundant food supply. They would scour the area for plants and game, and traverse the lake fishing in their dugout canoes. Several of these canoes, in addition to pots and other fragments, have been discovered in the area, providing a small glimpse into life before Somerset.<sup>6</sup>

Despite years of English exploration and settlement, it wasn't until 1755 that the Lake was discovered by a group of local hunters. Many European adventurers regarded the area, known only on maps as the “Great Eastern Dismal,” as a “haunt of beasts,” and much too dense and dangerous to explore.<sup>7</sup> The hunting party made their way westward into the swampy terrain in pursuit of deer and as possible firm land for future farming endeavors. One morning, after all but three of the men had turned back for home, Benjamin Tarkinton climbed a tree and noticed a lake in close proximity. According to tradition, one of his companions, Joseph Phelps, rushed into the water while Tarkinton still occupied the tree, thus claiming it as Lake Phelps.<sup>8</sup>

As they hoped, the trio found a firm expanse of land along the lake shore but quickly discerned the difficulty of developing it. The absence of water channels and satisfactory land

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<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Penny, “A Historical and Archeological Overview of Somerset Plantation,” (M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, 2003), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Tarlton, “Somerset Place and Its Restoration,” 1.

<sup>8</sup> Major George P. Collins, “The Discovery of Lake Scuppernong (Phelps), North Carolina,” *Publications of the Southern History Association* 8 (1902): 21-25.

routes meant that transportation would have to be entirely on foot, so they abandoned the project. Over the next three decades, the region saw very little development. The locals lacked the resources and funds to carry out such large engineering feats, and the area went untouched. Canal construction and forest clearing would have to wait until “outside capital might be attracted.”<sup>9</sup>

That interest came in the 1780s from a group of Halifax and Edenton men, with the goal of draining the lake and farming the fertile bed. In 1784, they were granted permission by the General Assembly to carry out their intentions with the benefit of a seven year tax exemption on the land.<sup>10</sup> For unknown reasons, after surveying the tract and finding it ripe for rice cultivation, the plan was never carried out. Nevertheless, one of the group’s members, Nathaniel Allen continued to pursue developments around Lake Phelps. He joined with two fellow Edenton men, Josiah Collins and Samuel Dickinson, and hatched a new scheme for taming the swamp. The new plan involved keeping the lake intact, and digging a canal to drain the adjacent lands.<sup>11</sup> This newly formed partnership eventually became known as the Lake Company, and the men quickly acquired over 100,000 acres between Lake Phelps and the Scuppernong River.<sup>12</sup> Josiah Collins, the company’s largest investor, also held 60,000 acres east of company lands and would soon come to acquire all of the Lake Company’s assets.<sup>13</sup>

The trio of investors were some of Edenton’s most prominent citizens. Nathaniel Allen was a relative of the Declaration of Independence signer Joseph Hewes, from whom he inherited a considerable sum of money in 1778. Samuel Dickinson, who lived in Edenton’s renowned

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<sup>9</sup> Tarlton, “Somerset Place and Its Restoration,” 2.

<sup>10</sup> William L. Saunders et al., eds., *The State Records of North Carolina*, (New York: AMS Press, 1968-1972), 639-640.

<sup>11</sup> Penny, “Archeological Overview,” 14.

<sup>12</sup> Chowan County (N.C. Deeds, Vol. W, pp. 679-680.

<sup>13</sup> Tyrrell County (N.C.) Deeds, Vol. 13, pp. 132-133.

Cupola House, was a physician with an array of business interests and activities. Josiah Collins had arrived in America in 1773, living briefly in Providence, Rhode Island, before moving to North Carolina. After a short stint in Halifax, he finally settled in Edenton where he and his son succeeded in rope manufacturing and shipping. His shipping exploits connected him with many areas across the globe and put him in contact with many influential individuals. Through his friendship with merchant and future Barbary War hero Edward Preble, Collins became known amongst the nation's elite. A rumor even developed that he turned down the Secretary of the Treasury under President George Washington because he was too recent an immigrant.<sup>14</sup>

Collins, taking the lead, quickly set about a plan for acquiring African slaves to construct the canal. He made a winter trip to Boston in 1784, outfitting two ships with sundry items to trade across the Atlantic. On June 1, 1786, the *Jennett* arrived in Edenton with eighty West African slaves and ten days later another brig, the *Camden*, returned with an additional eighty. The loads were light for a slave ship and reasonable nourishment had been given only for the purpose of delivering a healthy labor force. The slaves, both men and women aged twenty to twenty-five, were described as "extremely black" with "elegant white teeth." The groups were apparently from the same location for they spoke and sang in the same language. Several of the slaves, upon arrival to the lake, immediately walked into the water in an attempt to escape back to Africa. Those who did not drown were imprisoned.<sup>15</sup> The other Africans were quickly tasked with digging and the project endured for two years. Collins rarely visited the site and Dickinson came once a month to care for those with injuries or sickness. Overseers handled daily supervision as slaves performed back-breaking labor clearing out the wooded swamp. An

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<sup>14</sup> Collins, "Lake Scuppernong," 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> Wayne K. Durrill, "Slavery, Kinship, and Dominance: The Black Community at Somerset Plantation, 1786-1860," *Slavery & Abolition* 13:2 (1992), 3.

unknown number of them died from disease and exhaustion as they toiled in the mosquito infested bog.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 1.1. Map of Northeastern North Carolina and the Lake Phelps Region (from, Penny 2003:2)

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy S. Redford, *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 70-71, 86.

By 1794, the estate had become a functioning plantation with two sawmills, a grist mill, and rice machine. It also contained a warehouse, barn, and several dwelling houses for the enslaved. The canal became the most important feature of the plantation and it served several purposes. Primarily, it was a drainage channel and transportation outlet, but it also served as an irrigation system for the rice fields. Additionally, the location where the canal converged with the lake could be used to easily harness water power for the mills. According to court records, some \$40,000 had been spent up to that point and additional plans were being made for the future. Growth was so rapid that in 1812, early North Carolina historian Hugh Williamson commented, “They have shown that lands, formerly of little value, may be the most profitable lands in the state,” and that “the rice produced on those lands is not exceeded in quality by any rice in Georgia or South Carolina.”<sup>17</sup>

Although success came to the plantation, internal squabbles had already led to Josiah Collins filing a suit of equity against his partners. When the company was formed, the three investors were supposed to share equally the expenses so that it would be easy to take out each other’s share of the money invested, but this never occurred. Collins ultimately invested more than his associates, with one member, Dickinson, becoming quite indebted to him. Disagreements continued and the company’s finances became more asymmetrical. When Collins pressured his partners for a settlement of the company’s affairs, neither Dickinson nor Allen showed an interest in addressing the situation. Collins’s suit was filed in 1790 but was held up as a result of a cross complaint entered in by the defendants. He eventually updated his suit in 1795, but no settlement was ever given by the court.

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<sup>17</sup> Hugh Williamson, *The History of North Carolina*, 2 vols. (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1973), 2: 182.

Over the next two decades, Collins and his son were able to acquire Allen and Dickinson's holdings. Dickinson gave an Edenton merchant, Francis Peyrinnaut, a mortgage on half of his Lake Company's share, a mortgage that Peyrinnaut would sell to Collins in 1801. Dickinson's other portion would make its way into the Collins family in 1810 when Josiah Jr. purchased it from Dickinson's heirs. His father continued to pursue Nathaniel Allen's holdings and in 1816 concluded his efforts by procuring them at an executor's sale.<sup>18</sup>

Collins had probably set his eyes upon owning the entire tract ever since the Lake Company's formation. After accomplishing this goal he now enjoyed complete control over the direction of the estate. One of his first orders of business was to name it "Somerset Place," after his birthplace in southwestern England. The father and son also began to spend more time at the plantation, although they continued to live in Edenton and operate it through a manager. The rest of the family occasionally came to the lake along with friends and guests. Soon preparations were underway to provide the younger generation of the family with plots at Somerset.<sup>19</sup> Collins's will designated that each of his seven grandchildren should have equal shares of the property, but it would be the eldest, Josiah III, that received Somerset proper. The family patriarch passed away in 1819 leaving all of the acreage to Josiah Jr., who would spend substantially more time there than his father.<sup>20</sup>

The son immediately had the estate inventoried along with his five Edenton properties. Included in the Somerset analysis, were nine buildings, items stored, slaves, and livestock. Records show a cooper's shop, blacksmith shop, carpenter's shop, sawmill, work house, dwelling house, barn, kitchen, and dairy. Other structures existed on the property but were not

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<sup>18</sup> Tarlton, "Somerset Place and Its Restoration," 11-13.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>20</sup> Will of Josiah Collins, Sr., 1819, Book C, 73-76, Chowan County Wills, Clerk's Office, Edenton.



included in the inventory, such as the slave quarters and the Colony House, a structure used as a school for the children. Additional facilities would be added in the coming years, most notably an Episcopal Chapel. This “Lake Chapel” would become one of the most important and widely used structures on the estate.<sup>21</sup>

Josiah Jr. and his family were observed quite closely by their neighbors, the Pettigrews. Ebenezer Pettigrew had inherited, Bonarva, a small farm from his father Charles, who was the first Bishop-elect of the Episcopal Church in North Carolina. Many of the Pettigrew letters give great insight into life at Somerset Place as well as an assessment of Josiah Jr. In regards to a visit with Collins, Ebenezer wrote:

Mr. Collins [Josiah Jr.] was with [us] last week...I went to see him the second morning after his arrival. I found him very clever and conversant. He inveighs stoutly against the present fashionable life, he says nothing can stand a party every night and then sleeping until ten in the morning. He also gave a bad account of some of our friends across the water [the Sound].<sup>22</sup>

Another letter by Mrs. Pettigrew to a Mrs. Bryan, revealed the preparations and feelings of having Josiah Jr.’s son, Josiah III, take over the plantation. Josiah III had spent the last several years studying at Harvard and roaming around the big cities of the northeast, and Mrs. Pettigrew was concerned about his ability to adjust to country living. On October 20, 1828 she wrote:

Mr. Collins has been on the Lake the greater part of this year without a visit from his family. They have not yet returned from their Northern visit. He seems to enjoy the loneliness of this place – such is the effect of age, he is very unlike his family – they are gay and fond of the world. I suppose next year his son will take possession, they have increased the number of slaves and houses and find their overseers so faithless that they must give their personal attention, the only alternative for farmers. The education of the

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<sup>21</sup> Cahoon, “The History and Restoration,” 26-28.

<sup>22</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew to Mrs. Ebenezer Pettigrew, December 5, 1826, in Sarah McCullough Lemmon, ed., *The Pettigrew Papers*, Volume II: 1819-1843 (Raleigh: North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1971), 74-75.

son will cause him to pass many a wretched hour, it will be very unlike New York, the opera and amusement of various kinds which that great city affords.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the year, Josiah Jr. had been working hard to prepare the estate for his son's arrival. Josiah III would be getting married and the homestead needed to be in order for his takeover. The marriage, which took place on August 9, 1829, was to a Newark lawyer's daughter, Mary Riggs. The couple arrived at Somerset in January, 1830, and it was not long afterward that their mansion was constructed. This is the same house that still stands on the property today and encompasses one part of the tour experience.<sup>24</sup>

The third generation of Collins' also had a topsy-turvy relationship with their Pettigrew neighbors. Ebenezer, a faithful Episcopalian and man of simple living, frequently scoffed at the ostentatious displays of wealth and the ceremonial stiffness at neighborly gatherings.<sup>25</sup> He also described Josiah III as very self-absorbed and wrote that "I shall never go one inch out of my way to serve him, and he may be as mad as he pleases."<sup>26</sup> One of his most common criticisms was that Josiah III seemed to be absent from the estate at critical times during the year. In the mid 1830s the plantation's wheat crop was damaged by a late frost and the next winter by rain that overflowed the lake. On both occasions Collins was away vacationing or handling political affairs. Overseers were left to run the estate but often failed to attend to all of the plantation's needs. Despite Pettigrew's critiques, however, Somerset continued to do very well, especially when Collins shifted his focus to planting corn. Because of environmental conditions, rice had

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<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Pettigrew to Mrs. J. H. Bryan, October 20, 1828, Bryan Collection in Tarlton, "Somerset Place and Its Restoration," 18.

<sup>24</sup> Tarlton, "Somerset and Its Restoration, 16-18.

<sup>25</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew to James C. Johnston, January 13, 1829, in Lemmon, *The Pettigrew Papers*, 112-113.

<sup>26</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew to W.S. Pettigrew, June 23, 1842, Pettigrew Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

been the estate's primary cash crop, but its human cost was high. Working long periods in the water resulted in various illnesses amongst the slaves and many passed away.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, the Collins and Pettigrew families were neighbors and were able to rely on each other during difficult times. In 1830, when Mrs. Pettigrew died during child birth, Ebenezer wrote of the warm visit he had with Mary Collins and another family member noting that "they did not receive me with a cruel unfeeling smile" but "with a countenance which bespoke that they could weep with the weeping."<sup>28</sup> Ebenezer also appreciated Josiah III's kindness at providing gifts for his daughters during the following Christmas season. Collins likewise experienced tragedy when two of his sons along with two slave boys drowned in the canal. Ebenezer lent his barouche carriage and his son William helped escort the boys' bodies to Mackey's Ferry, where they would proceed to Edenton for burial.<sup>29</sup>

It would not be the last time that the Collins family would face tragedy. In the late 1850s they lost another son, William Kent Collins, after he was thrown against an elm tree by his horse. Another son, George, almost drowned twice in the surrounding waters. Once he fell from the canal bridge and proceeded to get stuck in the mud. Although found unconscious, he managed to survive. On a second occasion, he and two slaves had traversed the lake to a territory to hunt bears. On their return, a storm caused the boat to capsize and he had to cling to the overturned boat throughout the night. He was found the next morning by searchers but there is no mention of the well-being of the two slaves.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cahoon, "The History and Restoration," 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew to Mary Shepard, November 19, 1830, Pettigrew Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

<sup>29</sup> Cahoon, "The History and Restoration," 19.

<sup>30</sup> Tarlton, "Somerset and Its Restoration," 34-35.

The Somerset mansion and estate possessed many hazards for Josiah III's six young children. The house stood just twenty feet from the canal and only fifty paces away from the lake. The canal bridge had to be crossed to get to the main lawn, and as noted above, it was the scene of many accidents on the plantation. The family usually resided by the lake from the fall until late spring, choosing to spend their summers in Virginia or New York to escape the extreme North Carolina temperatures. At Somerset, they tried to bring culture to the community by hosting dances, parties, and even a book club. On Monday night's Josiah sat on the lawn reading books to the family and other locals. One of the more interesting incidents occurred in 1845, when he attempted to make French the household language. Collins hired a tutor, Mr. Ernst, to teach the whole family the French language and to make his sons accomplished musicians on the piano.<sup>31</sup>

Of all the events at Somerset, Christmas was the largest. The Collins family and their guests would feast, sing, and dance into the night. The slaves also had their own celebrations. They were given five days off and spent the start of it acting out the "John Koonering" ceremony, a ritual common in eighteenth century Jamaica but that originated in West Africa. It involved costumes, drumming, singing, and dancing and was allowed to take place on the porch of the mansion.<sup>32</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the plantation under Josiah III sustained itself through the cultivation of corn. Although cotton was considered king, by 1849 corn dominated the acreage of most southern farms. By 1855, the value of corn in the South was \$209,000,000 compared to \$136,000,000 for cotton. Corn was usually grown for domestic purposes and was rarely shipped

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>32</sup> Redford, "Somerset Homecoming," 104., Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 68-73.

over long distances to other states or regions. Somerset, and eastern North Carolina in general, were the exception. Josiah III tried many innovative techniques to improve corn agriculture and by 19<sup>th</sup> century standards ran a mechanized operation. Collins went to great lengths to acquire various labor saving machinery such as a corn sheller and corn fanning machine, and even allowed the slaves to use them in the common field.<sup>33</sup> Edmund Ruffin, who wrote and edited the *Farmer's Register* in the 1830s and 40s described the production process:

“When it is desired to prepare a cargo of corn for the Charleston market there is no need of commencing until notice has been received of the vessel having arrived in the river below. The shelling of the corn is then commenced, by a shelling machine of immense power, then fanned, next lifted up by elevating machinery, from the first to the fourth story of the house, there measured, and then emptied through a spout into a large flat boat lying in the canal. Which, as soon as loaded in bulk, is conveyed along the canal to the vessel. Thus the risk of keeping a large bulk of corn is avoided, and, by the aid of water, all the operations necessary to load a vessel may be completed in a very short time.”<sup>34</sup>

Collins continued to spend extravagantly on various machines leading up to the Civil War. Records show purchase of a myriad of items such as a reaping machine, lime spreader, wheat cutter, and wheat harvester. Many of these items were extremely expensive for the time and show the extent to which Josiah III would go to modernize Somerset.

By the 1850s, Somerset could not avoid being affected by the growing abolitionist movement spreading throughout the North. Josiah III and the family had strong pro-slavery opinions and frequently expressed them to their Pettigrew neighbors. Ebenezer's son, Charles, became tired and “bored to death by Mr. Collins's long winded harangues.” Mrs. Pettigrew resolved to keep quiet lest she disrupt the harmony between them. She did confide to a visitor that their “way of hitting the North all the time, and allowing nothing said in contra, is...neither good manners, nor good sense.” That visitor was a northern writer, Mr. Pumpelly, who visited

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<sup>33</sup> Penny, “Archeological Overview,” 18-20.

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Ruffin, “Jottings Down in the Swamp,” *The Farmer's Register* 7 (1839): 729.

the plantation and other parts of the South to get a first-hand look at the institution. He found the Collinses “too narrow on some subjects” and troubled that he was not given a chance to express his own opinion on the issue.

Needless to say, when the Civil War came, the Collinses supported the southern cause. Josiah III along with Ebenezer Pettigrew’s other son, William, backed the war effort materially and financially. Mrs. Collins sewed underwear for the Confederate troops while her sons, Josiah IV and Arthur, joined the Edenton Company in 1862. Another son, the aforementioned George Collins, became an officer on J.J. Pettigrew’s staff. In early 1862, General Burnside’s expedition had succeeded in capturing Roanoke Island, which led to Union forces entering the Albemarle Sound region. Under threat, Collins moved his family to a modest plantation in Hillsborough, and activities at Somerset were temporarily suspended. Josiah attempted to find work on other plantations for his 328 slaves to make up for losses, but saw little success.<sup>35</sup>

That summer, a Federal gunboat visited Somerset twice. The twelve soldiers took provisions and on the second visit talked to some of the slaves about freedom. When Josiah heard of this he had the best sixty-five slaves chosen to stay on the plantation while the others were sent to one of his other inland estates, Hurry Scurry. The sixty-five that stayed behind were under the command of George Patterson, a minister and temporary overseer that struggled to manage the chaotic situation. At times the slaves worked, hid out in the woods, and helped themselves to various items on the plantation. Occasionally, the estate was ransacked by “Buffaloes,” or unsupervised troops, as well as local whites.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Tarlton, “Somerset and Its Restoration,” 40-43.

<sup>36</sup> Cahoon, “The History and Restoration,” 24.

As the Civil War reached its conclusion, Somerset faced uncertain times. Josiah III had passed away suddenly in 1863 and Mary and two of the sons returned to try to restore the property. Although most of the former sixty-five slaves still remained there, most would soon depart the estate as the labor contract offered to them was unacceptable. All of the Collins' help was now gone. Mrs. Collins and her sons now had to perform the everyday tasks around the plantation such as cleaning the house and chopping firewood. Eventually they did hire three white girls for cooking and housework, and several white laborers from town to farm some of the land. These efforts were insignificant and by 1866 the Collinses were insolvent.

In 1870, the entire estate was eventually auctioned off to a nephew William B. Sheppard, who allowed Mary to continue living on the premises until her death in 1873. That same year Sheppard had to relinquish the property into the hands of Herbert Paige of Edenton. The final Collins to occupy land near the lake was Arthur. Before his mother died, he had begun building a home at a nearby plot known as Weston Farm. He remained there for many years until it was sold in the 1890s. Somerset was now entirely out of the hands of the Collins family.<sup>37</sup>

During Herbert Paige's dominion over the estate, the plantation went through several managers. One of them, Jordan Sexton, had a daughter that resided there and her oral account provides a look at the post-war status of the estate. Her testimony asserted that "the buildings were then in fairly good condition," with some of them being occupied by white laborers, and cabin's near the lake by former slaves. She also noted being charmed by the mansion as the walls "were more beautiful than any I had ever seen."<sup>38</sup> As time passed Somerset was sold to Harvey Terry of Elizabeth City in 1889. He along with his wife's Scottish relatives, moved to

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<sup>37</sup> Tarlton, "Somerset and Its Restoration," 46-48.

<sup>38</sup> T.C. Holmes, Oral Account given to William S. Tarlton, in Tarlton, "Somerset and Its Restoration," 127.

the homestead and noted its deteriorating condition. One of the family members described the various structures as “neglected” and “run down.” The only bright spot was the inside of the mansion which was in “a wonderful state of preservation.” This was a common occurrence in the South as many farms struggled economically after the war.

With the turn of the century, ownership of the plantation continued to change from owner to owner. Terry had sold the property to a Philemon Gray of Ohio, and until 1910, he and other relatives lived on the site making some “improvements.”<sup>39</sup> From there, a Eugene Johnson and R.L.



Figure 1.2 The Collins Mansion circa 1898 (from, Redford 2005:26)

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<sup>39</sup> Cahoon, “The History and Restoration,” 44.



Burkhead, amongst others, held title to the estate. In the 1920s, Somerset was acquired by a Rocky Mount bank, which held onto the land until 1937, when it was bought out by the Federal Farm Security Administration.<sup>40</sup>

The FSA, which was under the United States Department of Agriculture, sought to aid poor southern sharecroppers, tenants, and other individual farmers, by purchasing more suitable lands and then placing those individuals into groups to farm it collectively. The plan became known as the Scuppernong Resettlement Project and the Somerset lands were divided up into sixty-acre plots with a modest house upon each. Other plans were made for restoring the mansion with the hopes of it becoming a lakeside inn for hunters and fisherman. The Works Progress Administration did much of the renovating and in 1939 gave the land over to the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development. The department set aside 221 acres to develop Pettigrew State Park which included the Somerset mansion and its surrounding lands. In 1945, the rest of the larger tract would be broken up into smaller divisions and sold to private ownership.<sup>41</sup>

Starting in 1951, the Department of Conservation and Development, conducted one of the most significant assessments of Somerset to date. After the initial analysis, the inspector stated that Pettigrew State Park was primarily notable for its “historical aspects,” and that “the recreational features are of secondary importance.” This ultimately led to numerous archeological studies, repairs, and restorations. The department hired William S. Tarlton, a Wake Forest graduate that had done work at Colonial Williamsburg in the 1930s, and who also envisioned doing the same for historic locations in North Carolina. The declared goal of the

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<sup>40</sup> Tarlton, “Somerset and Its Restoration,” 48.

<sup>41</sup> Cahoon, “The History and Restoration,” 48.

project was to create “an interpretive program depicting Somerset’s history, specifically the period from 1850-1860.”<sup>42</sup>

Tarleton began his work by appealing to the local community of Washington, giving special attention to the black populace who had already made great strides to preserve their history. He was very aware of the changing dynamics of the area, and in a speech to the newly founded Washington Historical Society, begged the community to protect their historical landmarks and customs. Tarleton pleaded that “we ought to collect old objects that symbolize the life of our forefathers, such as tools, furniture, books, and the like, and display them in a museum where they can be seen and appreciated by our people and by visitors to our county.” Tarleton also asked them to submit whatever documents, photographs, and other evidence they could locate on the history of Somerset, and he took oral histories from those with long ties to the region.<sup>43</sup>

In 1954, after three years of research, uncovering locations of bygone structures, and restoration of the remaining buildings, Tarleton submitted his report entitled, “Somerset Place and Its Restoration,” to the department. It is the most comprehensive analysis of the property to this date and is invaluable to research conducted on the plantation. One of the most important pieces of his research was a testimony he found on Renzy Sawyer, a local carpenter who lived at Somerset in the late 1880s. From this transcript, excavations, and other documentation, Tarleton was able to put together an outline portrait of what the property probably looked like in the

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<sup>42</sup> Alisa Y. Harrison, “Reconstructing Somerset Place: Slavery, Memory, and Historical Consciousness,” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2008), 166-168.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-171.

antebellum period. In previous years, the FSA had come in and laid out new roads to replace the old routes, which created difficulties at the beginning of site examinations.<sup>44</sup>

Although Tarlton's work was extensive in terms of examining the architectural aspects of Somerset, it was limited in other areas. Other than the Collins family, much of the social history of the estate was left out or not addressed. Nevertheless, his work led to Somerset being declared an historic site in 1969. It had been placed under the North Carolina Division of Archives and History four years earlier, and now it was offering guided tours, mostly focusing on the mansion and the antiques within.<sup>45</sup>

In 1988, however, new life was given to the site as Dorothy Spruill Redford came on as part of the staff. It was then that Somerset began to provide an all-encompassing look at life on a southern plantation. Equal attention began to be given not only to the Collins family, but also to the Africans who labored on the premises. Redford had been inspired by the television series, *Roots*, as well as her daughter's questions, and worked painstakingly for years tracing her descendants back to Somerset Place. Through tireless research, interviews, and other outlets, she was able to trace the history of twenty-one different slave families back to the estate.<sup>46</sup> Using her mother's maiden name, Littlejohn, she traced her own heritage back to 1826, when Josiah Collins acquired thirty slaves under that name. In this group were her great-great-grandmother, Elsy, and her first five children. They would join Elsy's husband, Peter, as he had already been purchased by the Collins family. Redford's efforts would continue and she contacted as many relatives of these families as she could, to see if they were willing to gather and share whatever they could about their family's history. On August 30, 1986, over two thousand attendees, most

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<sup>44</sup> Cahoon, "The History and Restoration," 49-53.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>46</sup> Redford, *Somerset Homecoming*, 2.

of them with plantation ancestry, made their way to Creswell, NC, for a Somerset Homecoming. The gathering was the first one of its kind on a major plantation and descendants from all corners of the country were present.<sup>47</sup>

With the addition of Redford, new projects were completed to further improve upon the tour experience and to provide a better telling of the past. Reconstructions were done that included a slave hospital, two slave houses, and an update to the overseer's house. The hospital still serves as the only reconstruction of its type in the United States. Redford would continue to develop and enhance the historic site until her retirement in 2008. Today, she still makes her home just down the road from the estate.<sup>48</sup>

Currently, Somerset Place continues to operate as one of North Carolina's finest historic sites, as well as serve as a model on how to provide a comprehensive look at antebellum plantation life. Redford and other current staff are still consulted by historic preservation groups from across the United States, on how to incorporate the slave experience into the narrative of their locations. Despite all of this meritorious work, there is still much to be uncovered about Somerset Place. There are masses of documents that still need to be assessed, archeological digs to be done, and many other stories to be told about life on the plantation. As will be shown here, even the estate's buildings have a whole history surrounding them that can enhance historians' understanding of pre-Civil War times.

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<sup>47</sup> "1,500 Slave Descendants at North Carolina Reunion," *New York Times*, August 31, 1986.

<sup>48</sup> North Carolina Office of Archives and History, "Carolina Comments," 56, no. 4 (2008), 121-122.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN NORTH CAROLINA AND SOMERSET'S LAKE

#### CHAPEL

Among the many buildings and structures that once stood at Somerset Place, few were as important as its Lake Chapel. It was built around 1837 for the specific purpose of providing religious instruction to the slave community, and by 1858 its communicants made up almost half the black population of North Carolina's Episcopal Diocese. Chaplains were frequently hired by the family to teach and preach there most mornings and evenings, and occasionally other locals would attend services. The Chapel would become a means by which the Collinses could attempt to erode traditional African customs and any Methodist influence, by teaching an Anglican brand of slave Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Before assessing the Chapel, it is important to note the development of the Anglican Church in North Carolina. Some of the earliest settlers of the colony were communicants of the Church, and with the influence of John Locke's "Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina," the institution gained a firm foothold in the region. Despite this early influence, however, the Church would not be recognized as the official Church until 1715. The institution faced many obstacles early on, primarily those of geography. The North Carolina terrain proved difficult to cover, even for the Church's mission organization, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Additional hardships came as more people moved into the colony, bringing with them a variety of Christian denominations and Anglican opposition. There were also problems within the organization itself, as resident clergy were often difficult to obtain. Nevertheless, the Church

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<sup>1</sup> John Sykes, "The Lake Chapel at Somerset Place," (report, prepared for the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1999), 1, 53.

continued to hold significant influence as many of its members were from the small but powerful planter class.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately following the Revolution, the Anglican Church in North Carolina, and the country, faced additional obstacles. Lack of structure, a scattered membership, and confiscated land, forced the institution to reorganize at the national and state levels. In North Carolina, this began in 1794 with a convention in Tarboro, where the surviving parishes were arranged into a Diocese within the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States. The delegates adopted a constitution while also choosing Charles Pettigrew to preside as the state's first bishop. Pettigrew had grown up in Pennsylvania but now lived in Tyrrell County, occupying lands just beside what would become Somerset Place. Although he continued to preach in two local chapels, he never sought consecration as bishop, and the institution remained dysfunctional and without a leader.

In 1817, a second attempt was made at reorganizing the Church. On April 24, in New Bern, the state's three lone clergymen, along with six lay delegates, held a convention to form the Protestant Episcopal Church of North Carolina. As before, a state constitution was written, along with a request for recognition by the national committee. The convention also spent several years trying to install a bishop, culminating with the election and consecration of John Ravenscroft in 1823. This finally brought stability and organization to a diocese in limbo, and allowed the Church to maintain its influence in the state.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Hope Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians in Ante-Bellum North Carolina," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 13, no. 3 (1944): 216.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence F. London and Sarah M. Lemmon, eds., *The Episcopal Church in North Carolina, 1701-1959*. (Raleigh: The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, 1987), 96-97, 116.

This power and influence was significant considering that by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Episcopal Church had now become a minority faith in the region. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Quakers, all outnumbered the small band of Anglicans, who in 1830 reported only twenty-one functioning congregations, and a scant eight-hundred active members. These congregations were located in towns such as Edenton, New Bern, and Wilmington in the east, and Raleigh, Hillsborough, and Rowan in the central and western parts of the state.<sup>4</sup> The members, however, consisted of many of North Carolina's most prosperous citizens. The Pettigrews, Collinses, Burgwyns, and Eatons, were all fiercely loyal to the Church, and supported it greatly through their financial contributions.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these elites within the Episcopal Church were also slave owners, and used their plantations as an outlet to missionize to the slave community. This was not done out of any particular care for the spiritual well-being of the slave, but as a means to inculcate discipline to their labor force. The Anglican Church had long benefitted from slavery and those pro-slavery views continued within the Episcopal Church. Being keenly aware of Christ's Great Commission, the Church wrestled with how best to instruct the enslaved so that "it would have no deleterious effect on the master-slave relationship." There were also concerns that church services and other religious meetings could be used to foment rebellion or other conspiracies.<sup>6</sup> The Church finally decided to take the position, espoused by John Locke many years before in his "Fundamental Constitutions,":

Since charity obliges us to wish well the souls of all men, and religion ought to alter nothing in man's civil estate or right, it shall be lawful for slaves, as well as others, to enter themselves, and be of what church or profession any of them shall think best, and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians," 217.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 217-218.

thereof be as fully members as any freeman. But yet no slave shall hereby be exempted from the civil dominion his master hath over him, but be in all things in the same state and condition he was in before.<sup>7</sup>

In regards to the few Episcopalians that struggled with the issue of slavery, some emancipated their slaves, while others supported the American Colonization Society, which sought to return freedmen and women back to Africa.<sup>8</sup>

In the decades following separation from England, the Church saw some success in evangelizing to the slave community. St. James Church in Wilmington reported eight black communicants in 1817, and in just over twenty years could report around fifty African members.<sup>9</sup> In 1827, St. Mary's Chapel in Orange County reported baptizing twenty-five slave children. During this time, Christ Church of New Bern also observed that Sunday evenings had been set aside "for the benefit of coloured people," and that they hoped it was "not without profit."<sup>10</sup> Other churches reported similar inroads throughout the twenties and thirties with the largest concentrations of black communicants being found in urban areas. Furthermore, there were also a select few of the African membership that were free blacks.<sup>11</sup>

Extending these efforts, the Church also began to support the establishment of chapels on plantations to better minister to the enslaved community. The first such example was in 1827, when Bishop Ravenscroft dedicated Salem Chapel, in Orange County for a Duncan Cameron, his

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<sup>7</sup> John Locke, "The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina," 1669 (From the Yale Avalon Project) [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th\\_century/nc05.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc05.asp).

<sup>8</sup> John Sykes, "The Lake Chapel at Somerset Place," (report, prepared for the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources Division of Archives and History, 1999), 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Journal of the of the First and Second Conventions of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Carney and Ward, 1821), 12., *Journal of the Proceedings of the Eight Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1830), 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Eight Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (New Bern: Pasteur and Watson, 1824), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians," 220.



family, and their slaves.<sup>12</sup> Others would follow, receiving intense support from the Church's second Bishop, Levi Ives, who took over in 1830 for Ravenscroft after his untimely passing. Ives, a New Yorker, brought a new fervor to the Church and its plans to reach the enslaved communities of North Carolina. He traveled throughout the state each year preaching and conducting services to "coloured congregations," and performing numerous baptisms. In 1832, Ives oversaw the establishment of the first black Episcopal congregation in the state with the founding of a chapel in Fayetteville, and another in Washington.<sup>13</sup> His work amongst the enslaved was so energetic that a few whites even began to worry he was too meddlesome. Old fears that Christianity would give hope to the slaves about freedom began to ruminate again and Ives even had to make a statement at the state convention to ease fears:

Lest any should misapprehend the character and tendency of our efforts in this direction, I wish it distinctly understood, that everything is conducted with a strict regard to the legal enactments on the subject, and under the constant supervision, exertions hitherto, so far as we can discern it, we feel warranted in affirming it to be decidedly favorable to due subordination. Cases are not uncommon, in which slaves, who under a system of mere excitement, had become puffed up with a vain conceit of their spiritual attainments, have immediately upon a distinct and sober exhibition of the Gospel truth being made to their minds, manifested an humbling sense of their ignorance, and a grateful desire to be taught more fully "the principles of the doctrine of Christ." To the Christian master, however alive to his privileges and duties, no doubt can exist on this point. To him it is clear, that a knowledge of Christ crucified, in its fullness, is a blessing which, by command of Almighty God, he is bound to communicate to every immortal being entrusted to his care.<sup>14</sup>

Ives would continue to insist that religious instruction to the slave community would be nothing but beneficial, and most Episcopalian masters supported this view. Until his resignation

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<sup>12</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1828), 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians," 221-223.

<sup>14</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1841), 19.

in 1852, as a result of a conversion to Catholicism, Ives oversaw additional growth in the Church's black membership.<sup>15</sup>

With Ives departure, Thomas Atkinson of Baltimore, Maryland was installed as new bishop of the North Carolina Diocese. One of his main concerns was that the Church membership was mostly that of landed elites. He wanted to bring in more working class and poor whites, along with continued efforts at reaching the free black and slave communities of the state. Each year Atkinson took great pride in informing the convention of his work among the enslaved, noting each of his successes one by one.<sup>16</sup> During his tenure leading up to the Civil War, many additional plantation chapels were established, and the Church overall saw a steady increase in membership.<sup>17</sup>

Name of Mission and date of establishment	Location	Layman
Salem Chapel (1827)	Orange County (now Durham County)	Duncan Cameron
Lake Chapel (1836)	Washington County	Josiah Collins III
St. Mark's (1838)	Chatham County	John Hooker Haughton
St. Timothy's (1847)	Chowan County	Joshua Skinner Joseph B. Skinner
Chapel (1851)	Halifax County	William R. Smith Richard H. Smith James N. Smith
Thornbury Plantation (1854)	Northampton County	Henry K. Burgwyn
Gonaconara Plantation (1856)	Halifax County	Thomas P. Devereux
Runiroi Plantation (ca. 1856)	Bertie County	John Devereux

Source: *North Carolina Diocesan Journal*, 1827-1860

Figure 2.1 List of Episcopal Plantation Chapels prior to the Civil War (from, Sykes 1999: 27)

<sup>15</sup> London and Lemmon, *Episcopal Church in North Carolina*, 216-217.

<sup>16</sup> Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians," 225.

<sup>17</sup> London and Lemmon, "Episcopal Church in North Carolina," 243.

This is the backdrop in which Somerset's Lake Chapel was founded. All three generations of the Collins family had been loyal members of the Episcopal Church, evidenced by Josiah Collins's drive to restore St. Paul's Church in Edenton in the years following independence. His son, Josiah Jr., was also faithful, and was one of the six laymen at the 1817 reorganization convention. The third and final Collins to preside over Somerset, Josiah III, followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, and it is he who established the plantation chapel by the lake.<sup>18</sup>

As the third Collins took the helm at Somerset, he arrived to a community all unto itself. Although a profitable plantation with a docile labor force was his primary goal, Josiah III did put forth great effort into mission work on the plantation. Numerous individuals, mostly slaves, resided on the estate, and he no doubt wanted to instruct them in the tenets of the Episcopal Church. As will be noted later, the religious instruction was largely an attempt to satisfy Collins's first objective of controlling his slaves for plantation efficiency. In 1834, four years after his arrival, he began to employ a full-time Episcopal missionary named Edward Forbes. He seems to have served his position well, as Bishop Ives was greatly satisfied after a visit to Somerset in the following years. It wouldn't be long though before Collins had other ideas for bringing his faith to the plantation's populace.<sup>19</sup>

The Lake Chapel at Somerset Place seems to have been erected in early 1837. In the previous year, Forbes, while serving the area, reported that "no regular plan of instructing these people in the Christian religion has been formed," but that it would occur in the near future. The very next year, state convention reports, along with the first list of communicants, verify the

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<sup>18</sup> Sykes, "The Lake Chapel Report," 35.

<sup>19</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1838), 12-14.

Chapel's construction.<sup>20</sup> A visitor, Edmund Ruffin, in 1839 described the Chapel as "rude and rustic, but neat," and "white-washed without and within, and provided for comfortably."

Although half full that day, he noted that the Chapel could accommodate two-hundred people, a significant size for a plantation church.<sup>21</sup>

The Chapel's interior contained all of the typical features of an Episcopal church. At one of its center sides was the altar, containing a lectern and pulpit. It is here that the minister would consecrate the bread and wine for communion, and lead the parishioners in the catechism or liturgy. Directly across was the font, a large ornate receptacle for baptismal water. The Episcopal Church felt total immersion was unnecessary and preferred to sprinkle during its baptismal ritual. To the left and right of these objects, were pews arranged into two rows, with both sides being provided the warmth of a fireplace. It cannot be determined what the walls looked like although other chapels close by had grained woodwork, colored texts, or just plain white interiors. The door to enter the Chapel was just opposite the altar near the font and was the only entrance.

Other items would have been needed to accommodate the Chapel and its services. The Church would have required its own communion silver, which typically consisted of a chalice, a flagon, and a paten. There would have also been an alms basin to take up whatever offerings the attendees might present. Sometimes poor congregations used small mite bags so that no one could visually see the amounts given by each individual member. Most importantly, there would

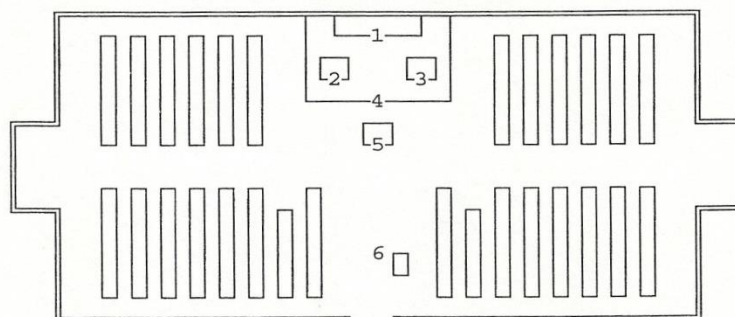
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<sup>20</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Twenty-First Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1837), 8.

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Ruffin, "The Negroes' Chapel and Religious Services," *The Farmer's Register* 8 (1839): 729.

have been an Episcopal prayer book and large lectern Bible, of which the Collinses had many.

All of these garnishments would have been required and Josiah III usually spared no expense.<sup>22</sup>



- 1 Altar
- 2 Lectern
- 3 Pulpit
- 4 Altar rail
- 5 Litany desk
- 6 Font

Figure 2.2 Layout of the Lake Chapel interior. (from, Sykes 1999: 108)

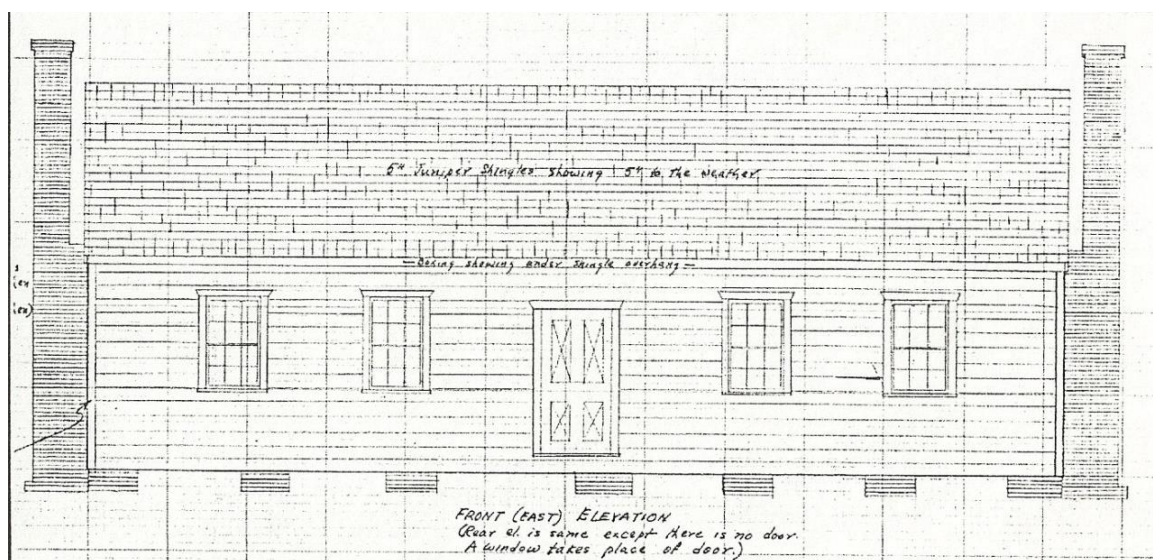


Figure 2.3 Tarlton's reconstruction of the Lake Chapel. (from, Sykes 1999: 94)

<sup>22</sup> Sykes, "The Lake Chapel Report," 109-113.

The Chapel was built specifically for the slave community, although Collins, his family, and other guests often frequented the services. During the week the church served as sort of a parochial school for the slave children, as focusing on the enslaved youth was seen as the best way to build church membership. One former slave, Uriah Bennett, many years later only remembered it as a school house.<sup>23</sup> The aforementioned Forbes was the first resident instructor at the Chapel and he provided lessons in the Catechism, the Litany, and parts of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>24</sup>

Somerset's original slaves and their descendants had received little religious instruction before the arrival of Josiah III. The Methodists may have visited the estate as they were active in the coastal area, but little evidence exists to show any attempts to missionize the enslaved of Somerset before 1834. Many of the enslaved seem to have held onto their African traditions as evidenced by the yearly "John Koonering" festival. This Christmas celebration was common in the Caribbean but in North America can only be traced to eastern North Carolina. Upper class whites were also involved usually tossing coins to the slaves as they danced and sang around the main house. All parties involved had different agendas for the gathering as whites saw it as a time to ease tensions on the estate while slaves would surreptitiously mock their owners. The festival continued throughout the 1800s but died off at the turn of the century. It was revived in the latter half of the twentieth century and celebrations are now remembered in New Bern.<sup>25</sup> Those slaves that were purchased in later years may have had a more distant recollection of their

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<sup>23</sup> Sykes, "The Lake Chapel Report," 122.

<sup>24</sup> *Twenty-Second Annual Journal*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth A. Fenn, "A Perfect Equality Seemed to Reign: Slave Society and Jonkonnu," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (1988), 127, 130-133.

African traditions, as a result of time passing as well as receiving more religious instruction from their previous owners.<sup>26</sup>

Services at the Lake Chapel usually followed the *Book of Common Prayer*, a work originally published in 1549 that became the central text of the Anglican Church. In America, an Episcopal version had been produced by the General Convention in 1789, and it is this edition that would have been used at Somerset. This work contained the various services of the church from baptisms to marriages to burials. It also contained the liturgies which were the main staple of morning and evening worship. Additionally, the Chapel followed the Episcopal calendar of Sunday readings as each week the Scripture was selected to fit the appropriate season, feast day, or another event in the life of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the duration of the Chapel, at least on the surface, Collins was successful in instructing his slaves in the Episcopal tenets. At any given time during his reign at Somerset, there were over 280 slaves, and communicant numbers grew continuously up to the Civil War. In 1837, the Chapel's first year, there were only eleven communicants listed on the register, but in just ten years there were ninety-three. Ten years after that, there were over one-hundred communicants, and by the onset of the Civil War, there were 180 communicants out of the 302 slaves on the property. If only those slaves thirteen years old and above are counted, this is an astounding ninety-seven percent. Although disputed, there were two observers that claimed attendance was voluntary. This will be addressed in the next chapter, but for now this is an impressive sum.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dr. Edward Warren, *A Doctor's Experience in Three Continents* (Baltimore: Cushings and Bailey, 1885), 202.

<sup>27</sup> Sykes, "The Lake Chapel, 88-89.

<sup>28</sup> The Lake Chapel Register, 1., <sup>28</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1847), 19., *Journal of the*

In 1839, Edmund Ruffin noted that “there was about the customary proportion of female to the males present, of about thrice as many of the former as of the latter,” and that this was similar to attendance in white country churches.<sup>29</sup> The parish register, however, reveals that women only slightly attended more than men. There were 253 communicants listed during the Chapel’s antebellum period with 149 female, and 104 male participants.<sup>30</sup>

Both bishops during the Lake Chapel’s years of operation, Ives and Atkinson, took a keen interest in the Church and frequented the estate. They visited almost every year of their tenure before the war and were always pleased by the progress they observed. Ives noted that “the examination was minute and thorough; and we had the most unexpected satisfaction of witnessing a promptness and correctness and apparent intelligence of answer of the numerous questions.”<sup>31</sup> He was so enthusiastic about the Chapel’s missionary efforts that he even wrote a catechism for it and the other slave churches of North Carolina. It contained twenty lessons on various biblical themes such as the fall, original sin, the trinity, and the atonement.<sup>32</sup> After Thomas Atkinson visited in 1854 he exclaimed:

“Such cares and labors for their souls' good, accompanied, as in his case, by correspondent solicitude for their temporal welfare, seemed to me the best answer to those who revile the entire population of the South, and who know so well how to do that, which Burke felt to be so far beyond his powers, to draw up an indictment against a whole people. Perhaps the philanthropy which thus rails and is puffed up, may be less precious in the sight of God, than that more obscure benevolence which only works and makes sacrifices.”<sup>33</sup>

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*Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale & Son, 1857), 19. Sykes, “Lake Chapel Report,” 123.

<sup>29</sup> Ruffin, “The Negroes Chapel,” 729.

<sup>30</sup> Lake Chapel Register, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Twenty-Second Annual Journal*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> William Bowditch, *Slavery and the Constitution* (Boston: John Wilson, 1849), 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Thirty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale & Son, 1854), 18.



Other visitors also frequented the estate noting their satisfaction at how the Lake Chapel was the center of life at Somerset. Armand DeRosset of Wilmington described Josiah III and his wife Mary as “the most devoted Church people I ever met with and the whole arrangement of family, servants, and plantation are better conducted than any I have seen and everything with reference to the Church.”<sup>34</sup> The aforementioned Edmund Ruffin agreed saying, “never have I elsewhere been so strongly impressed by any religious service, or by any pulpit eloquence, as by the unostentatious ceremonial of this humble house of worship.”<sup>35</sup>

The religious structure of the plantation also had a significant effect on whites and free blacks that resided or interacted with the estate. Of the eleven men hired to tutor the Collins children, six became Episcopal ministers and another a deacon. Josiah III’s wife, Mary, also converted to the Episcopal faith after many years as a Presbyterian, and her three sisters and brother were baptized and confirmed after several visits to the plantation. Two governesses were also converted with one of them marrying an overseer, Joseph Newberry, in an Episcopal ceremony. Among free blacks, primary housekeeper Charlotte Cabarrus was an active communicant and upon her passing received an Episcopal service and burial.<sup>36</sup>

Josiah III, along with the support of the Episcopal Church, would keep a resident minister on hand throughout the antebellum period. Seven diverse men would hold the pastoral position at various times until the war disrupted Somerset’s activities. The first was the aforesaid Edward Forbes, a New Bern native who began working with the enslaved for two years before being ordained in 1836. North Carolina Episcopal Leadership was impressed by his work, especially given that he was the first to introduce the Episcopal doctrines to the slave community. Upon his

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<sup>34</sup> Sykes, “The Lake Chapel Report,” 53.

<sup>35</sup> Ruffin, “The Negroes’ Chapel,” 731.

<sup>36</sup> Sykes, “The Lake Chapel,” 49-53.

resignation in 1840, Charles Aldis was placed in charge of the Lake Chapel as well as conducting efforts to reorganize the Pettigrew congregation. He came from New York and served the Chapel for three years before returning home to become the rector of St. Ann's Church in Westchester County.

Somerset's third priest was John Kidney from New Jersey. Kidney had served as a deacon in New York before becoming ordained and commissioned to North Carolina. He managed the Lake Chapel and other local parishes until heading back north in 1845. Kidney would later return to South Carolina to lead Trinity Church in Society Hill. The shortest tenure of Lake Chapel priests was Alfred Watson who served in 1846. Watson, another New Yorker, began as a tutor for the Collins children four years earlier, and it was during this time that he converted from Presbyterianism. Watson was ordained in 1845 and sent to Fayetteville before returning briefly to Somerset upon Kidney's departure.

From 1846 to 1853, Jonathan Shepherd oversaw religious instruction at Somerset. Although originally from Vermont, Shepherd was ordained in Louisville, Kentucky and it is he who served the longest tenure at the Chapel. He would later serve in Mississippi and Alabama before retiring to California. Upon his departure, a young Irishman named Joseph Murphy took the helm. He conducted services at the Chapel for three years before being asked to lead nearby St. David's Church. Murphy served St. David's throughout the Civil War before taking the reins at Christ Church in Elizabeth City.<sup>37</sup>

The Lake Chapel's final and most interesting leader was George Patterson. Patterson described himself as "the devil of a combination" as his father was Greek Orthodox, and his

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 142-159.

mother a New England Unitarian. He had an endearing personality that served him well as an Episcopal priest with some acquaintances describing him as the “most unforgettable character they ever met.” Patterson was ordained by Bishop Ives in 1852 and would serve Somerset from 1856 to 1862. As was most Episcopal leadership during the antebellum period, Patterson was a staunch supporter of slavery. He anonymously wrote and published two works supporting the Episcopal Church and the peculiar institution, and upon the start of the Civil War, became a chaplain with the Third North Carolina Regiment. After the conflict, Patterson served in Tyler, Texas and Memphis Tennessee.<sup>38</sup>

Josiah Collins III did not confine his religious efforts only to Somerset and its Lake Chapel. He was also actively involved at the state and national levels of the Episcopal Church serving as a delegate as well as supporting various activities financially. Collins also spent time locally to help restore churches and establish new ones. Washington County lacked an organized parish in the 1830s, and he and others helped establish St. Luke’s Chapel there. Collins also led projects to restore the old Pettigrew Chapel, as well as undertook new endeavors in Plymouth and Columbia. He even helped found the Albemarle Church Building Society in the 1850s which sought to aid in the construction of chapels for the Protestant Episcopal Church.<sup>39</sup>

With Collins often absent from the plantation, an overseer was hired to provide oversight and manage the daily affairs at Somerset. This individual would be required to carry out the farming decisions made by Josiah III, tend to the livestock, protect and maintain tools, and most importantly, closely supervise the slave population. The overseer would have also been directed to keep detailed records of the daily happenings on the estate and sometimes provide oral reports

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<sup>38</sup> J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, “George Patterson, North Carolinian by Adoption,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 30, no. 2 (1953), 191-199.

<sup>39</sup> Sykes, “The Lake Chapel Report,” 56-58.

to the master. The position was very difficult to handle and did not attract the most desirable workers. In general, most southern slaves owners were less than thrilled about the performance of their hired help.<sup>40</sup>

Somerset's patriarch was also drawn to a movement within the denomination known as "high churchmanship." This view sought to champion the Anglican Church's Catholic traditions and organization. The Episcopal members that embraced this position placed "emphasis on the centrality of the sacraments, rejection of Enlightenment liberalism or rationalism, a rejection of emotionalism and revivalism, a defense of Episcopal claims to authority based on Apostolic succession, a reluctance to cooperate with other Protestant denominations, and an insistence on obedience to Episcopal traditions and the *Book of Common Prayer*." Those who adhered to high churchmanship scoffed at the developments of the Second Great Awakening as they felt faith was a lifetime process rather than an "instantaneous moment in time." This religious revival beginning in the 1790s and continuing into the early to mid 1800's, was a response to the skepticism of the Enlightenment, and the rigid Calvinism that pervaded the early United States. It was enthusiastic, emotional, and produced an evangelical attitude among many Americans concerning the Christian message. Many of these individuals, operating under many new denominations, came to believe Christ return was imminent and therefore felt compelled to hastily spread the Gospel, even to slaves. This religious movement played an important role in inspiring plantation mission efforts.<sup>41</sup>

Returning back to Collins, all of the High Church literature could be found around the mansion. Journals such as *The Churchman*, *Banner of the Cross*, and *The True Catholic*, all

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<sup>40</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 39.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Rankin, *Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen: The Religion of the Episcopal Elite in North Carolina, 1800-1860*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 79.

were subscribed to and contained essays on theology, mission activities, and architecture. Collins was captivated by medieval gothic architecture and many of the churches that Collins helped restore or build were laid out in cruciform style. Ebenezer Pettigrew's son even accused him of trying to model St. David's Chapel to the one in Rome. Interestingly, the Lake Chapel was not built in this fashion, at least in regards to the framework. It was a simple rectangular building that could not be identified from its exterior.<sup>42</sup>

The Lake Chapel services were also not bereft of these elaborate ceremonies and formal procedures of worship. Josiah's sister, Althea, once wrote of being enamored with the priests in their "surplices" and the Bishop in his "robes," as they conducted a service. The Church would have also contained a number of crosses and candles in true high church fashion. The movement had a profound effect on Mary Collins who procured an expensive rosary as well as hung a painting of the Virgin Mary in the mansion's main parlor. Around Christmas time the Church was perhaps in its most ornamented state. Although the Episcopal Church never used flowers, congregants would place numerous evergreens in the chapels during the holiday season. In true gothic fashion, the Collinses would also adorn the windows with festoons, along with the rear of the priest's seat.<sup>43</sup>

As the Civil War came to the door step of Somerset, daily activities at the Lake Chapel came to a halt and the building was seldom occupied. Just over sixty slaves were left at the plantation while the others were moved further inland to Collins's Hurry Scurry safe-haven in Louisburg. Hurry Scurry was a small farm lacking the extensive resources of Somerset, and many of the slaves went without work. As a result, Josiah had to hire them out to undertake

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<sup>42</sup> Sykes, "The Lake Chapel Report," 61-63, 113.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

work on a nearby railroad, or at the local Confederate hospital. In terms of religious instruction, Collins was able to get the rector of St. Paul's Church to come twice a month in order to continue providing services for the displaced group. Bishop Atkinson and George Patterson both made visits to Louisburg, holding services beneath the pines as the struggling estate had no large meeting house.

After Josiah III passed away in 1863, and the war concluded, his son tried to hold services, but they were lightly attended. Most of the former slaves had moved on after obtaining freedom while those that remained were largely angry towards the Church for its support of human bondage. A few of the former members even formed their own church, which was connected to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. There were others that did remain loyal to the Episcopal Church with several joining up with St. Paul's Chapel in Edenton. At the Lake Chapel, however, services continued sporadically but with minimal participation. Reverend William Stickney held services there in 1866, but noted its drastic decline from "200 in former times" to half a dozen. George Patterson also briefly stayed around the region and conducted worship in 1869.<sup>44</sup>

In the 1870s, the nearby Pettigrew Chapel register reported just a few visits to the Lake Chapel and an occasional baptism. A Mrs. T.C. Holmes would comment later that in those decades following the War that the Chapel was "even then looked upon as a sacred memorial to the past." Despite this she also noted that services did proceed into the 1880s with a Reverend Luther Eborn preaching on Sunday afternoons.<sup>45</sup> By 1890, however, activities had ceased with a new resident, Jane Davis, reporting that there "was a long, low white building and we were told

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 128-133.

<sup>45</sup> Mrs. T.C. Holmes, "Somerset Plantation Sixty-Five Years Ago (1885)," in *Tarleton*, "Somerset and Its Restoration," (report, prepared for the Department of Conservation and Development Division of State Parks, 1954), 128.

that was where they held services for the slaves.”<sup>46</sup> With the turn of the century, the Chapel was probably used as a tenant house, before it supposedly burned down. All that is known is that by the late twenties, the Chapel was no longer standing. Interestingly, a small group of worshippers, mostly white, did begin to meet in the former slave hospital; they called their institution, Galilee, after the biblical body of water.<sup>47</sup>

As the estate was neglected in the early portion of the twentieth century, the foundation became covered and unnoticeable as nature took its toll. In 1952, however, William Tarlton came upon it as he surveyed land along what was known as Slave Street. Earlier maps from the late 1920s, drawn with the help of a former Somerset carpenter, failed to show the Chapel. In Tarlton’s report, he noted excavating the entire site, and that foundation can still be seen today. Additionally, using the knowledge gained through his work as well as documentary evidence, he developed drawings of what the Chapel most likely resembled.<sup>48</sup>

The Lake Chapel at Somerset Place was by far one of the most important structures on the plantation. The church provided a means for the Collins family to administer daily religious instruction to their slaves in an environment that could be tightly controlled. It also allowed Josiah III to perform the desired mission work of the Episcopal Church while attempting to create a more obedient slave community. The Chapel held services for over twenty-five years in the high church fashion and was the most notable slave congregation of the Episcopal Church. Many leaders at the state and national level championed its accomplishments and lauded it as a model for the Church’s mission work among the enslaved. On the surface, Josiah III was

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<sup>46</sup> Mrs. S.C. Davis, “Memories of Lake Phelps – 47 Years Ago,” in *Tarlton*, “Somerset and Its Restoration,” (report, prepared for the Department of Conservation and Development Division of State Parks, 1954), 136.

<sup>47</sup> Sykes, “The Lake Chapel Report,” 134.

<sup>48</sup> Robert A. Penny, “A Historical and Archeological Overview of Somerset Plantation,” (M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, 2003), 53.

successful as the Chapel was home to half the black communicants in the state.<sup>49</sup> However, upon further analysis, things might not have been as fruitful as they seemed.



Figure 2.4 The Lake Chapel's foundation today. (from, [nchistoricsites.org/somerset](http://nchistoricsites.org/somerset))

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<sup>49</sup> Sykes, "The Lake Chapel Report," 1.



## CHAPTER 3

### SLAVE INSTRUCTION AND WORSHIP ON THE PLANTATION

In the antebellum South, there was much debate over the matter of providing religious instruction to the slave community. Most denominations held discussions at the national and state levels concerning this topic and the Episcopal Church was no different. Those groups choosing to direct the enslaved in the doctrines of the Christian faith also had to work within the boundaries of state and local law regarding any dissemination of information to those in bondage.<sup>1</sup> At Somerset, Josiah Collins III operated within these confines to bring the Episcopal faith to his labor force, by providing daily instruction in his plantation chapel. He would keep resident ministers on hand to carry out the mission goals of the Episcopal Church, along with teaching the slaves personally. In many respects, the patriarch was successful in his efforts, as attendance was high and communicants increased right up to the Civil War.

The notion of providing religious instruction to African slaves arose in the colonial era. The Anglican Church was one of the first denominations to attempt the endeavor through their missionary group, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Because of organizational issues, however, the Church of England's efforts saw little fruit as other problems took priority. After the Revolution, the issue of slavery brought schisms to various denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists. Those branches that continued to support the peculiar institution wrestled with how to best approach slave evangelism without disrupting the status quo.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 152-158.

<sup>2</sup> John Hope Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians in Ante-Bellum North Carolina," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 13, no. 3 (1944): 216-218.

Advocates and critics spent much time debating the issue throughout the 1820s and 1830s, with neither position gaining widespread support.<sup>3</sup>

Involved in the process were three distinct groups: the planters, missionaries, and the slaves themselves. The first group, the planters, were a mixed body during the antebellum period, with some supporting conversion efforts among the slave communities while others fought against it. There were also some aristocrats that were apathetic to the idea and simply took no action. The second group, the missionaries, usually supported the cause but found work difficult, especially among African born slaves. Missionaries also tended to feel overburdened as they were frequently asked to cover large territories to reach multiple communities. The third and final group was the slaves. Those in bondage rarely had a choice in the matter of their instruction, but many were able to find hope among the distorted Christianity of their masters. Furthermore, they were able to take African traditions and customs and blend them into a new hybrid form of Christianity where they could express themselves by harkening back to their roots.<sup>4</sup>

The arguments against evangelization were diverse. Many slaveholders felt that tending to the spiritual well-being of the enslaved would cause disorder and ultimately lead to the African feeling equal with the white man.<sup>5</sup> It would also leave the master with an ungovernable labor force that may even rebel. Others suggested that it was a waste of time and would economically detract from the plantations priorities. Additional arguments were made that

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Bennett, "Black Episcopalians: A History From the Colonial Period to the Present," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 43, no. 3 (1974), 233-234.

<sup>4</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 98-103.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

slaves were incapable of instruction on cultural and racial grounds, while a select few were even concerned theologically that baptism meant freedom for those in bondage.<sup>6</sup>

Preachers and missionaries who championed slave instruction contended that it would create a more docile slave, which in turn would benefit the slave masters economically. One minister claimed that spiritually enlightened slaves “do better for their master’s profit than formerly, for they are taught to serve out of Christian love and duty.”<sup>7</sup> In regards to legal concerns, supporters asserted that “the Scripture, far from making any alteration in civil rights, expressly directs, that every man abide in the condition wherein he is called, with great indifference of mind concerning outward circumstances.”<sup>8</sup> The Book of Philemon, with the Apostle Paul writing of returning a slave to his master, was often cited by these missionaries to assure owners that mission work would not lead to a change in the status of a slave. Additionally, other supporters simply claimed it to be a Christian duty and saw no incongruity between their faith and the institution of slavery.<sup>9</sup>

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina put forth another reason for the evangelization of the slave community. He claimed that it “would give us the advantage in argument over our Northern Brethren, whose objection to our system is partly grounded on the deficiency of religious instruction. Were this more generally diffused, our national character would be relieved of its only opprobrium.”<sup>10</sup> Underlying Pinckney’s assertion is the common antebellum retort that slavery was a positive good, that the slave actually was better off being taken from his family and culture in Africa and brought to the prosperous United States, where

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 98-103.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>8</sup> Frank J. Klingberg, *Anglican Humanitarianism in Colonial New York* (Philadelphia: The Church Historical Society, 1940), 223.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>10</sup> Hayden, “Conversion and Control,” 143-144.

he could be guided by kind masters. This reasoning was common among the planter class and was also used as another justification for providing religious instruction to the slave community.<sup>11</sup>

The methods used by religious organizations to encourage plantation mission work were adopted from many other reform movements of the antebellum period. The circulation of printed sermons, essays, committee reports, and resolutions of clerical bodies, throughout the South, led to increased efforts by masters to deliver spiritual enlightenment to their slaves. Some of the most famous tracts were journals such as *The Gospel Messenger*, *The Christian Index*, and the *Southern Christian Advocate*. In addition to these publications, various pamphlets were written and published under titles like the “Detail of a Plan for the Moral Improvement on Plantations,” and “The Colored Man’s Help, or the “Planter’s Catechism.” The goal of these essays were two-fold: justify slavery using Old and New Testament Scriptures, and show the necessity of providing religious instruction to the slave community.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most famous of these tracts was Presbyterian minister Charles Colcock Jones’s, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*. The lengthy tome was published in 1842 after concerns that rural slaves were not receiving adequate spiritual instruction, and that those masters in urban areas were faring poorly in their efforts to evangelize their enslaved. Jones was addressing a real concern among members of the clergy that ministers were incapable of serving the scattered and distant populations of the South, and that to remedy this a more aggressive program was necessary. He also knew that many masters needed to be convinced that evangelization would not have harmful effects. The abolitionist movement was

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>12</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 154.

underway in the North and southern planters were becoming increasingly more protective of the institution. He exhorted masters that:

You are commanded of God "to give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a master in heaven--neither is there respect of persons with him." The religious instruction of your people will promote your own interests for time and eternity, and will confer on them blessings infinitely valuable, even the redemption of the soul, which is precious. Your responsibilities in the word and providence of God are very great. If you neglect them, a fearful account awaits you at the judgement seat of Christ! Contribute, therefore, according to your ability, of your property, your influence and personal efforts, to this good work; and do it speedily.<sup>13</sup>

A notable pamphlet in North Carolina was that of George Freeman, rector of Christ's Church in Raleigh. His 1837 essay entitled, *The Rights and Duties of Slave-Holders*, was the Episcopal Church's preeminent statement on slave instruction in the South. In it he exclaimed that:

I drew the conclusion that the existence of slavery among us, does not necessarily involve us in guilt; that there is nothing inconsistent with either the precepts or the spirit of the Gospel in maintaining it in practice, and consequently, for uninspired men to charge them, whose lot it is to be owner of slaves, with being guilty of a moral wrong, or destitute of a proper Christian spirit, is nothing less than arrogant presumption.

The tract was adapted from two sermons given by Freeman where he first developed a Biblical argument in support of slavery, and secondly, described how Christian masters should treat those in bondage. His main argument was that since the slave was not free to attend worship on his or her own, the church should make every effort to reach their spiritual needs. Freeman also added that masters holding large populations of slaves have a duty to hire chaplains, if they cannot instruct them personally.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842), 176, 275.

<sup>14</sup> George Freeman, *The Rights and Duties of Slave-Holders* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1837), 5, 23.

These writings were one of the means for encouraging plantation mission work throughout the South. The literature could be widely distributed and expounded upon in urban and rural parts of the region. Contests were even held to see who could extoll the best argument for slave evangelism. In 1850, the Baptist State Convention of Alabama awarded \$200 to three individuals for winning one of these essay competitions. The tracts were eventually published under the title, *Duties of Masters to Servants*, becoming very popular across several denominations in the territory.<sup>15</sup>

Along with these publications, various denominational mission societies were also formed to get the word out. Groups such as the Missionary Society of the South Carolina Conference, and the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, were just a few of the plantation mission associations that advocated for slave instruction. These groups would frequently circulate reports noting their successes in order to ease fears about the effect the teaching may have on the slave.<sup>16</sup> Not all of these fears abated, however, especially after the discovery of *David Walker's Appeal*, an incendiary pamphlet that called for slaves to rise up against their masters and throw off the chains of bondage. This radical booklet sparked fear amongst many planters in the South and for a while created some skepticism against the motives of some of these mission workers.<sup>17</sup>

Radical abolitionist literature was not the only cause for concern among southern planters. As news occasionally broke out regarding slave insurrections, masters proceeded to tighten their grip on the institution, by influencing the passage of harsher slave codes to more

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<sup>15</sup> H. N. Mctyeire and C. F. Sturgis et al., *Duties of Masters to Servants* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 155.

<sup>17</sup> David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America* (Boston: David Walker, 1830), 1-4.

carefully control slave behavior and interaction. This had negative effects on church and plantation mission organizations as these codes made the instruction process considerably more difficult. The problem was that several of these slave revolts had been carried out by spiritually minded slaves, making religious teaching more suspect among the aristocracy.<sup>18</sup>

Two of the more prominent slave insurrections planned were those led by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Vesey and his conspirators had strong connections to the African Methodist Church in Charleston, with a few of them even holding clerical positions. He also appealed to his followers by providing scriptural references to support his intended goal of overthrowing white rule and leading the city's slaves to freedom. Nat Turner's rebellion was the bloodiest and most alarming slave revolt in the antebellum period. Turner, along with his band of followers, went on a forty-eight hour rampage killing nearly sixty whites in Southampton County, Virginia. Turner was considered a pious and docile slave, before supposedly receiving a divine calling to lead his people from bondage. Although both Vesey and Turner's efforts ultimately failed, they sparked fear among the planter class, resulting in new slave regulations across the southern states.<sup>19</sup>

In North Carolina, these codes would affect the way Josiah Collins III and the Episcopal Church instructed slaves in their plantation chapels. The most notable of these acts were those that forebode the teaching of slaves to read and write, along with banning the sale or distribution of any religious or incendiary literature to those in bondage. Passed around the time of the Turner revolt, these laws sought to prevent slaves from acquiring any skills that might help them learn and disseminate information. They also forbade freedmen to preach to any congregation

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<sup>18</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 136-138.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-135.

where slaves were gathered. Those whites found guilty of breaking these measures could face a fine of up to \$200, or even receive time in jail. Free blacks found in violation of these statutes faced fines, imprisonment, or a possible thirty-nine lashes.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the legislature also commissioned each county court to set up a local patrol committee with as many members as needed to protect against insurrections and to monitor for runaways.<sup>21</sup>

As a planter and politician, Josiah III well understood the legislation concerning slave ownership, especially in regards to the religious instruction occurring at Somerset. To please the Church and the state government, teaching at the Chapel would have to incorporate a six step process. To begin, slaves must be an audience to regular Sunday sermons that have been adapted to fit their level of understanding. This would have needed to be followed up by a lecture given at least once a week in the evening for additional training in church precepts. The next step would be to provide parochial schooling on the plantation to slave children. This would allow the mission process to begin earlier with younger minds capable of being molded.

Most importantly, to be within the boundaries of the law, religious instruction had to be done orally. The teacher or priest would have to recite questions and answer them repetitively, so that the slave could commit the information to memory. Subsequently, the slaves would be individually asked to recite a piece of church doctrine, or answer a question. The final actions that must be taken for appropriate religious instruction on the plantation, would be that gatherings should have a stated goal, and that they must not be conducted without the knowledge of the master, or the presence of a white leader. It was also encouraged by the Church that the

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<sup>20</sup> “An Act to Prevent All Persons From Teaching Slaves to Read or Write, The Use of Figures Excepted,” *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina at the Session of 1830-31* (Raleigh: Lawrence & Lemay, 1831), 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Freddie L. Parker, *Running for Freedom: Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1775-1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 41.



owner should attend every possible service, for oversight, and to create a sense of Christian community.<sup>22</sup>

The next most obvious question was whether church attendance would be mandatory, or at the prerogative of the slave. Various owners throughout the South had different points of view on this matter. Some were inclined to give the slave a choice while more pious planters demanded attendance. Others were less thrilled with the idea of giving slaves even a little instruction and prohibited their slaves from attending any services.<sup>23</sup> It is not quite certain what Josiah Collins required at Somerset. There are a few accounts by white attendees that indicated that what they witnessed was not an organized show, but an authentic service for those seeking God. When Edmund Ruffin visited, he felt that given the demographic make-up of the congregants, “this alone would have told, if I had not been so informed otherwise, that the attendance of the slaves is altogether voluntary,” and “that everything is done to invite and persuade, but nothing to compel their attendance.”<sup>24</sup> Bishop Ives also felt worship to be a bona fide display noting that “the services here were of the most gratifying character, fully justifying all that has been said and anticipated of the system of religious training heretofore pursued on these plantations.”<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain the true details concerning a church attendance policy at Somerset. Although Ruffin and others believed and were told that presence at Lake Chapel services was not compulsory, this may not have been the case. The size of the structure was quite large for a plantation chapel and white congregants usually noted that the Chapel was

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<sup>22</sup> Jones, *Religious Instruction*, 228-232.

<sup>23</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 167-173.

<sup>24</sup> Edmund Ruffin, “The Negroes’ Chapel and Religious Services,” *The Farmer’s Register* 8 (1839): 729.

<sup>25</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Thirtieth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1846), 13-14.

completely full on Sundays. There are some observers that noted their disdain for what was occurring at Somerset. Northern Episcopal abolitionist, William Jay, wrote to Bishop Ives ridiculing the account he gave of the Lake Chapel's services, stating that "Whatever may have been the piety of the "multitude," they were most unquestionably ordered to go to church, and a sound flogging would have been the fate of every truant." Jay was unmoved by the emotional tone of the report arguing that "it was far easier to see a large gang of slaves standing in the church, than to see the motive that brought them there." He felt the whole display was orchestrated to please and charm the leader of North Carolina's Episcopal Diocese.<sup>26</sup>

Whether mandatory or optional, it was not out of the ordinary for slaves to take an interest in Christian religion. Historian John Blassingame notes that "religious services and recreational activities provided the slave with welcome respites from incessant labor," and that "by engaging in religious activities, the slave could, for a while, shift his mind from his hopeless immediate condition to the bright future awaiting him." Slaves' expressions of Christianity would adapt and mold the master's version to produce a distinctive new style of the faith. This reshaping allowed the slave community to apply traditional African forms of expression to worship and create a stronger sense of group solidarity.<sup>27</sup> It also became a key point of resistance, not only against the institution, but pro-slavery ideology itself, putting forth "disguised critiques of power outside the purview of the master class."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> William Jay, *A Letter to the Right Rev. L. Silliman Ives, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina, Occasioned by his late Address to the Convention of his Diocese. By a Protestant Episcopalian* (New York: William Harned, 1848), 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 147.

<sup>28</sup> Jason Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 11-12.

The African spirituality and culture that was transplanted to America had a profound influence on plantation life and Christian worship. African traditions such as healing of the sick, controlling evil powers, visions, and dreams blended quite easily with Christian concepts. Ideas about the afterlife, personal salvation, and the importance of family continued to thrive amongst the slave community. African religion addressed many of the same questions of the Christian faith such as the creation of the universe and the human condition. These beliefs and traditions ultimately manifested themselves in rituals and ceremonies intending to link “the creative powers of the gods and ancestors with the present needs of the people.”<sup>29</sup>

There were many diverse elements of these ceremonies that were blended with the Christian faith. Traditional rituals of singing, dancing, praying, and clapping all became a part of slave worship. A carefully documented form of exaltation by African American scholars was the ring shout, which involved a dozen slaves or so, slowly dancing and shouting as they moved around a circle counterclockwise. They would be joined by others who sat or stood clapping as the ceremony proceeded, increasing in intensity as time went on. At Somerset, these rituals did take place, but not inside the Lake Chapel.<sup>30</sup> They would occur outdoors at Christmas, or during other Christian holidays, when Josiah III was more at ease.<sup>31</sup>

One of the most fascinating examples of these African traditions being carried on at Somerset was the aforementioned John Kunering celebration. Although practiced widely in Jamaica, its origins can be traced back to the West African cultures of the Igbo and Yoruba, in modern day Nigeria. This folk play involved elaborate masks, costumes, singing, dancing, and

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<sup>29</sup> Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 17, 199.

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Edward Warren, *A Doctor's Experience in Three Continents* (Baltimore: Cushings and Bailey, 1885), 200-202.

<sup>31</sup> Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 12, 63.

drumming, all for the purpose of honoring their ancestors. A local doctor, Edward Warren, gave an account of this ceremony one Christmas while visiting the Collinses. His description, albeit disparaging, gives a clear characterization of this African tribal custom. Warren noted that “the leading character is the “rag-man,” whose get-up consists in a costume of rags, so arranged that one end of each hangs loose and dangles; two great ox horns, attached to the skin of a raccoon, which is drawn over the head and face, leaving apertures only for the eyes and mouth...and a short stick of seasoned wood, carried in his hands.” A second man would dress up in his “Sunday-go-to-meeting suit,” and carry a small bowl or cup in his hand. The other slaves, some carrying gumba boxes (drums), would follow these two individuals as they danced and sang upon the mansion’s front porch. Collins would come out and put a coin in the cup, and then the procession would continue to other locations on the plantation until the group became exhausted.<sup>32</sup>



Figure 3.1 The John Kunering Celebration. (from, Ladies Home Journal, 1891)

<sup>32</sup> Warren, *A Doctor's Experience in Three Continents*, 200-202.



Figure 3.2 Drawing of the ring shout ritual. (from, Stearns: 371)

These forms of expression were not to be seen inside the Lake Chapel. The Episcopal form of worship, not to mention Josiah III's attraction to the high church movement, resulted in a very formal style of worship, singing, and instruction on the estate. Daily teaching was given to slave children along with some adults in the catechism, liturgy, and Bible. Most other slaves would attend on Sunday to hear the chaplain or itinerant minister preach and lead services. Although Collins always had a resident priest, he was ever present at services, frequently reading the Bible to his slaves.<sup>33</sup>

Slave instruction at Somerset, and elsewhere, needed to be very narrow in scope and easy for the slave to understand. This was a result of the denial of education to slaves by masters, and then by most southern legislatures in the 1830s. The Lake Chapel used a catechism produced by the Episcopal Church specifically for its slave communicants. The instructor would read through the catechism, which posed questions regarding the faith. After each question was called, the slave would respond with an answer. For example:

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<sup>33</sup> Ruffin, "The Negroes' Chapel and Religious Services," 729.

Quest. Who made the world?

Ans. God.

Q. Who?

A. God.

Q. What did God make?

A. The world.

Q. Yes, God made the world. Did He make anything else?

A. He made all things *in* the world.

Q. What are some of the things in the world?

A. Water, trees, cattle, and men.

Q. What?

A. Water, trees, cattle, and men.

Q. Yes, God made the world, and all things in the world:--Who then made you?

A. God.

These questions and their responses were in the typical fashion of the Episcopal Church, but reduced to simpler forms for the slave congregation. Many of the rejoinders were one or two words often times with a “yes” or “no” response.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the catechism, the Lake Chapel taught various other relevant material. Lessons were given in Old and New Testament scripture and doctrine, along with prayers and the liturgy. The Episcopal Church also had other catechisms regarding history, geography, health, and science, but slaves would only receive teaching in the portions that were deemed harmless to the institution. On top of these oral responses, the slave congregations were also instructed in the non-linguistic elements of the Episcopal Church. They were taught how to walk, kneel, and sit in the formal fashion of the denomination.

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<sup>34</sup> *Catechism to be Taught Orally to Those Who Cannot Read; Designed Especially for the Instruction of Slaves in the Prot. Episcopal Church* (Raleigh: Office of the Church Intelligencer, 1862.), 3.

Most of the instruction was done in a call and response manner and repeated continuously for memorization. This was not unique to African congregations as many whites were also taught in the same fashion. The first chaplain Edward Forbes struggled in his first efforts to reach the community but by the time the newly elected Bishop Ives visited in 1838, he was starting to make progress. Ives exclaimed that “I shall never forget the impressions of that night, they will continue to be among the most pleasing of my ministry.”<sup>35</sup> He did not and two years later he wrote his own catechism for the plantation churches in North Carolina. Forbes would also go on to use these early experiences to write his own catechism for children and illiterate adults after the Civil War. In it he explained that the “Catechist must first read to the scholars, the chapter or chapters of the Holy Bible, from which the Lesson in the Catechism is taken: or else, relate the substance of each lesson in language as plain and simple as possible.”<sup>36</sup>

With Forbes leaving in 1841, Charles Aldis took over instruction duties, adding Anglican chants to the lessons at the wishes of Josiah Collins. Yet again taken from the high church movement, the children would be taught the proper tones and words of the liturgical canticles, and the appropriate time to sing them. Ives again noted that “One thing struck me on this occasion of special interest to all who are engaged in promoting the spiritual welfare of this portion of our population, which was the spirit in which they entered into the Chanting. Seldom have I heard Gloria in Excelsis chanted with more affect than it was by these children.” Ives

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<sup>35</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1838), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Edward M. Forbes, *An Oral Catechism For Young Children and For Those Who Cannot Read* (New York: H.B. Durand, 1865), n.p.

description of Lake Chapel instruction, also informs that by 1843, the number of slave children receiving daily education was nearly eighty.<sup>37</sup>

The most important point of instruction would be the rituals and liturgies for Holy Days. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, would be the most highly attended services and were usually times when Episcopal leadership was present. Collins wanted to be sure that these days were carefully planned and that all proper procedures were followed. Other important days on the calendar were those when the Chapel held communion services. The ceremony was performed once a month and slaves needed to be taught to understand the meaning and process of the ritual.

Josiah III also made time to teach the slaves personally. By the mid 1850s he was holding Sunday morning classes for adult slaves on the plantation. As the slave children spent time daily with the chaplain, adult slaves had very little time to learn the appropriate responses and procedures of worship. It also allowed Collins to provide his own spin upon the material he presented, by “interspersing remarks appropriate to their circumstances and grade of intellectual and spiritual culture.” The class was well attended with 126 adults being reported as present in 1857.<sup>38</sup>

Although morning and evening prayer meetings took place daily at the Chapel, the main services were held on Sundays. The Sabbath was usually an off day for slaves and if not compelled, they were surely encouraged to attend the services. Collins even urged his Pettigrew

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<sup>37</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1843), 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Thirty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale & Son, 1854), 18.  
*Journal of the Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale & Son, 1857), 50.



neighbors to allow their slaves to be a part of the assembly, an idea that Ebenezer Pettigrew thought senseless. He did not believe that instruction was beneficial to the slave nor did he believe it should be placed in front of plantation work. Nevertheless, after Ebenezer's passing in 1848, many of the Pettigrew slaves began to attend the services at Somerset.<sup>39</sup>

White visitors always commented on how pleased they were with the services. Edmund Ruffin observed that "The service was according to Episcopal form; and never on any other occasion has it appeared to me more impressive."<sup>40</sup> Dr. Edward Warren added that "Indeed it was a constant source of interest to see the negroes flocking to church on Sundays, participating in the services – for they knew every word of the "prayer-book" – and partaking of the holy communion at the same table with their master and the members of his family."<sup>41</sup> Both Bishops, Ives and later Atkinson, also always spoke highly of the services during their reports to the annual state convention.

As in other churches with slave attendees, the sermons preached at Somerset were very limited in scope. Efforts had been made by the Episcopal Church and other denominations to alert owners and pastors of the proper books and verses to use in their sermons. Some groups even took it upon themselves to publish sermons that could be read aloud to slave congregations. The most notable of these from the Episcopal Church was South Carolina minister Alexander Glennie's, *Sermons Preached on Plantations to Congregations of Negroes*. The work contained twenty-six discourses with three of the sermons specifically dedicated to Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. Glennie's hope was that the talks would be followed by questions from the slave congregation, as he felt "this practice, and the frequent use of our Church Catechism, is, I

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<sup>39</sup> Sykes, "The Lake Chapel Report," 90-92

<sup>40</sup> Ruffin, "The Negroes' Chapel," 729.

<sup>41</sup> Warren, *A Doctor's Experience*, 200.

need scarcely say, the most important part of the duty of those engaged in the instruction of the Negroes.”<sup>42</sup>

Many of Glennie’s sermons, along with other suggestions from Episcopal leadership, focused on key Bible verses that were seen by pro-slavery individuals as supporting the institution. One of the most widely used chapters was Ephesians 6, imploring slaves to “obey your earthly masters,” and that “cheerful obedience is the will of God.” Luke 12 was also cited frequently as it warned that “that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating.” Furthermore, Titus 2 received common exposition as it instructed that “Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.”<sup>43</sup>

Lunsford Lane, an enslaved Raleigh man that received instruction under George Freeman at Christ’s Church, described the typical plantation sermon. He affirmed that “the first commandment impressed upon our minds was to obey our masters, and the second was like unto it, namely, to do as much work when they or the overseers were not watching us as when they were.” Lane did concede that some of the sermon content was of good value, but it was hard to disconnect the precepts from the speaker. He even recalled a “very kind hearted Episcopal minister whom I often used to hear; he was very popular with the colored people. But after he had preached a sermon to us in which he argued from the Bible that it was the will of heaven from all eternity we should be slaves, and our masters be our owners, most of us left him.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Alexander Glennie, *Sermons Preached on Plantations to Congregations of Negroes* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1844), Preface.

<sup>43</sup> Ephesians 6. 5-8, Luke 12. 47, Titus 2. 9-10 English Standard Version.

<sup>44</sup> Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane* (Boston: J. G. Torrey, 1842), 21.

Harriett Jacobs, a slave that grew up near Edenton and later wrote about her life as a free woman described hearing one of her first sermons:

Pious Mr. Pike brushed up his hair till it stood upright, and, in deep, solemn tones, began: "Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. 'Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don't forsake your wicked ways. You that live in town are eye-servants behind your master's back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere, feasting on your master's substance; tossing coffee-grounds with some wicked fortuneteller, or cutting cards with another old hag. Your masters may not find you out, but God sees you, and will punish you. O, the depravity of your hearts! When your master's work is done, are you quietly together, thinking of the goodness of God to such sinful creatures? No; you are quarrelling, and tying up little bags of roots to bury under the door-steps to poison each other with. God sees you. You men steal away to every grog shop to sell your master's corn, that you may buy rum to drink. God sees you. You sneak into the back streets, or among the bushes, to pitch coppers. Although your masters may not find you out, God sees you; and he will punish you. You must forsake your sinful ways, and be faithful servants. Obey your old master and your young master—your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God's commandments. When you go from here, don't stop at the corners of the streets to talk, but go directly home, and let your master and mistress see that you have come."

This scolding sermon addressed many of the concerns among the white population such as laziness, stealing, debauchery, and consultation with fortunetellers and other undesirable individuals. After hearing this instruction Jacobs said she now understood the popular slave ditty that "Ole Satan's church is here below; Up to God's free church I hope to go."<sup>45</sup>

Several other slave narratives comment on slave worship and instruction across North Carolina. Moses Grandy of Camden County described how slaves in the early 1800s could conduct their own meetings, but after the Turner rebellion the practice was outlawed. He says the slave is often "flogged if they are found singing or praying at home." Grandy also describes

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<sup>45</sup> Harriett Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Harriett Jacobs, 1861), 106-107.

one case where his wife's brother was found to be preaching to slaves in the woods and two of the attendees were shot dead.<sup>46</sup> Thomas H. Jones of New Hanover County was born to a master that disapproved of his slaves learning to read and write and the ways of religion. Nevertheless, Jones found instruction and became a devout Christian. He was eventually sold to a Wilmington lawyer that allowed him to preach to other slaves around Wilmington.<sup>47</sup>

Congregations like those at Somerset would continue to grow leading up to the Civil War. The Episcopal Church's new Bishop, Thomas Atkinson, made it a top priority upon his election to the office in 1854. He was just as attentive as his predecessor in this regard and constantly encouraged the members of the Diocese to provide religious instruction to their slaves. Additionally, just like Bishop Ives, he made the rounds yearly to Somerset, always citing it as a model for plantation missions. It is important to note that this growth occurred at a time when tensions between the North and South were escalating. The reports of the North Carolina Episcopal State Convention attest to this growing interest and many mission groups could cite tangible results.<sup>48</sup>

The religious instruction and worship provided for slaves on the plantation was similar in content but different in delivery as it flowed from the particular denominational leanings of the master. Josiah Collins III's Lake Chapel established a very controlled, formal environment, in which he could instruct the slave populace of Somerset in the ways of the Episcopal Church without disrupting the stability of the estate. His efforts are one of the strongest incidences of a master making every attempt to lead and guide his slaves in the ways of Christian religion in the antebellum South. In turn, the slaves also used religion as an escape from the horrors of daily

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<sup>46</sup> William L. Andrews, ed., *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, & Thomas H. Jones*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 177.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>48</sup> Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians," 226.

life. They saw religion as not only providing hope, but also as a means to assert that the master had no control over their soul. Although not allowed at the Chapel, the slaves at Somerset still found ways to blend their new faith with traditional African customs, producing a more unique form of Christianity.<sup>49</sup> The only question now is how devout were the slaves at Somerset, and did they carry on their faith after obtaining their freedom?

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<sup>49</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 318.

## CHAPTER 4

### SUCSESSES AND FAILURES OF PLANTATION CHAPEL MISSION WORK

Plantation mission work towards the slave community was a significant development during the antebellum period. It simultaneously sought to carry out Christian ideals while continuing to entrench itself in the defense of the “peculiar institution.” Some masters embraced the movement feeling it would create a more docile labor force, with others decrying the efforts as meddlesome and dangerous. At Somerset Place Plantation, Josiah Collins III, became one of the most ardent supporters of the enterprise, constructing a chapel and supplying it with resident ministers to conduct services on a daily basis. Although economic interests came first, life on the plantation was greatly consumed by religious instruction and worship, as Collins was a strong supporter of the Episcopal Church and high church principles. The slaves at Somerset, whether forced or not, attended these services right up to the Civil War in high numbers, with many of them becoming communicants in the Church. With the conclusion of hostilities, however, many former slaves abandoned the Chapel and the denomination, exposing the weak attachment they had towards their master’s brand of faith.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the mainline southern denominations all engaged in plantation mission work with varying degrees of success. The Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and other groups, began in earnest in the 1830s, and continued their program of slave evangelism throughout the next thirty years. In the cases where slaves were given a choice, they “overwhelmingly preferred” the Methodists and Baptists.<sup>2</sup> These groups were also the most

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<sup>1</sup> John Sykes, “The Lake Chapel at Somerset Place,” (report, prepared for the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1999), 134-136.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 232-233.

vigorous in their efforts among the enslaved, and therefore bore the most fruit. The loose church structure of these groups also made it possible to “accommodate slaves more easily.”<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, they attracted large numbers of black adherents with a more fiery and emotional brand of worship. One former slave noted that the Methodists “preached in a manner so plain that the way-faring man, though a fool, could not err therein.” Another Methodist described how the Presbyterian minister would spend an inordinate amount of time preparing his sermon, while the Methodist preacher “traveled forty miles giving hell and damnation to his unrepentant hearers.”<sup>4</sup>

The Methodists had begun work among the slave populations of North America since the 1750s. John Wesley had baptized two Negro servants in 1758 and by 1816 the number of slave adherents was around 30,000. Most of these converts were from the house servant class and the Church sought new efforts to reach the much larger numbers of field hands by increasing plantation mission work. The leading advocate among the Methodist clergy was William Capers, who went on to spearhead the movement in the South. He and the Methodist Church had the most success in his home state of South Carolina, where in 1839 there were over 6,000 slave members, and over 20,000 children receiving religious instruction.

In 1840, Capers became the head of the Church’s newly formed Southern Department of Missionary Work, and plantation mission efforts began to spread to other states through his labors. Black membership continued to grow as he created an enthusiasm for slave evangelism in the Methodist Church. Capers used the Church newspaper, the *Southern Christian Advocate*, to publicize and promote mission reports and to encourage religious instruction in those areas

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 372-373.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 372-373.

that were out of the purview of the Church's circuit. Through his work the organization grew, raising considerable funds and establishing posts as far away as Texas.<sup>5</sup> In just four years there were 68 stations, 22,963 black adults, and 80 missionaries under the direction of the Church.<sup>6</sup> That same year the Methodists of the North and South could no longer find a way to compromise over the slavery issue and officially split. The southern branch became known as the Methodist Episcopal Church South and in that year there were sixty-eight plantation missions in nine of the states, with around 150,000 total black members. Over the next seventeen years the Church would continue to support plantation missions devoting over \$1,700,000 to the cause. These efforts continued to produce additional membership and by 1861 the Church could boast of almost 210,000 African American congregants.<sup>7</sup>

Just as the Methodists did, the Baptists split into a northern and southern branch in the mid 1840s. Southern members saw slavery as a secular issue and not a spiritual matter, as did most other denominations of the South. According to the Southern Baptists, the salvation of the slave was not incumbent upon whether he was slave or free, and that no argument could persuade them otherwise. Unlike other Christian groups, the Baptists tended to just ignore the issue with only a small group of vocal leaders publicly defending it. Even leading up to the Civil War church literature continued to be dismissive of the controversy. The *Arkansas Baptist* proclaimed "As Baptists, both ministry and private membership-we object to the uniting of

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<sup>5</sup> Donald G. Matthews, "The Methodist Mission to Slaves, 1829-1844," *The Journal of American History* 51, no. 4 (1965): 618-619.

<sup>6</sup> Charles M. Black, *Religion and American Evangelism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1785-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 55.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph C. Hartzell, "Methodism and the Negro in the United States," *The Journal of Negro History* 8, no. 3 (1923), 301-307.



religion and politics... We would not deprive a Baptist of his freedom as a citizen; but when he preaches the gospel of the Son of God, let him not poison it by lugging in a batch of politics.”<sup>8</sup>

TABLE II--SHOWING GROWTH OF PLANTATION MISSIONS IN  
METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SOUTH, IN SLAVE  
STATES, FROM 1845 TO 1864.

Year	Missions	Members	Missionaries	Amount apportioned
1845	83	25,380	95	\$33,399.96
1846	100	29,482	120	39,901.66
1847	103	30,835	120	35,815.13
1848	130	36,708	149	42,180.44
1849	108	29,817	122	43,995.72
1850	90	26,845	103	46,765.68
1851	96	27,515	108	63,455.50
1852	120	35,721	136	83,104.80
1853	149	43,222	164	82,132.04
1854	160	49,907	172	72,216.56
1855	174	49,983	190	83,103.20
1856	184	53,094	173	97,688.06
1857	208	55,032	206	107,362.74
1858	221	51,778	220	121,111.76
1859	287	56,468	288	130,076.88
1860	329	65,887	335	139,545.22
1861	329	66,559	327	98,510.06
1862	304	63,649	301	94,799.87
1863	270	49,494	267	153,320.48
1864	217	51,553	224	140,121.96
				<u>\$1,708,698.72</u>

Figure 4.1 Methodist plantation mission data, 1845-1864. (from, Sernett: 1972)

The Baptists were very similar to the Methodists in their preaching and attitude towards the slave population; however, they did not establish any formal mission societies to serve the purpose. The organization's structure operated in a congregational style which allowed each individual church to maintain its independence. Pastors would attend regional meetings and discuss issues of slave evangelism but any decisions towards action had to be made by each local church. Nevertheless, many publications at the state levels offered encouragement to masters to teach their slaves in the ways of the Christian faith. The *Baptist Messenger* admonished that

<sup>8</sup> Glen Jeansonne, "Southern Baptist Attitudes Towards Slavery, 1845-1861," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1971), 510-514.

“We alone are our brethren’s keepers, and if their souls die, against us will their blood call to God out of the ground?”<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the freedom within the Baptist Church structure for each body to conduct its own affairs, there was more flexibility in slave church life than in any other denomination. Some blacks were given advisory roles on committees even though they could not take part in voting, while others were allowed to lead choirs and other groups. A few apathetic masters skirted the law and allowed their slaves to meet without any whites present. There were also a small number of slaves that even became ordained ministers and who would go on to lead their own churches after the “War Between the States.” Furthermore, some slaves were allowed to run and organize charitable fundraisers with a group in Charleston once raising an astounding \$15,000.<sup>10</sup>

Despite organizational limitations, southern Baptists would ultimately have the largest black membership by the start of the Civil War. Although antebellum church records are limited in their accuracy, it is estimated that nearly 400,000 slaves were members of the organization by 1860. This membership typically came from masters that owned smaller groups of slaves, and therefore were easier to monitor. The Baptists were able to make large inroads among the slave community as a result of the revival atmosphere of the Second Great Awakening, the style of worship, along with the Church’s already large presence in the South. This allowed the denomination to be the most successful despite not having any formal plantation mission objective or organization.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 516.

<sup>10</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 176-178.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 132.

Presbyterian mission efforts were not quite as large or fruitful as the Methodists and Baptists. In 1834, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, all agreed to form an interstate organization for providing missionaries to the enslaved of the South. After looking into this matter, however, the Church eventually decided to scrap the plans and leave mission work up to the individual states. The Presbyterian Church just did not have the manpower to reach all of the rural areas of the region, and thought it best that each state focus on their own territory. The Church had also been dealing with divisions between New School revivalists and Old School conservatives, as ideas concerning slave mission work began to take place. These early controversies were not the result of the slavery issue, but it would ultimately be the topic that officially split the Church in 1858.<sup>12</sup>

The most influential figure in the Presbyterian mission movement was Charles Colcock Jones, a pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Savannah. From his early days at seminary, he had been interested in bringing Christianity to those slaves in the countryside, and he accepted his position in Georgia with the agreement that he could spend Sunday afternoons working among the enslaved. Before accepting the position he had already founded The Liberty County Association for the Religious Instruction, Orally, of the Colored Population in his home town. After eighteen months of serving Savannah he returned back there to work as a full time missionary to the slave populations of Georgia.

Jones would go on to publish the key literature to encourage and direct Presbyterians in slave mission work. In 1842, he circulated *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, a work that told the history of slave instruction since the founding of the nation

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<sup>12</sup> Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 372-373.

along with describing why the Church had an obligation to take the Gospel to those in bondage.<sup>13</sup> Six years later, he published *Suggestions on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the Southern States* to aid those who took up the endeavor. In the book, Jones offered various tips for slave instructors such as how to develop a lesson, the proper method for teaching the material, and also a warning not to do anything without the master's consent. Both of these works were significant among slave evangelical writings with several other denominations taking note of their advice.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 4.2 Charles Colcock Jones, Leading advocate of slave missions. (from Myers: 1972)

There is not any hard data on the number of Presbyterian slave adherents, but accounts suggest modest success. The Church did not have the presence nor the clerical size to undertake large plantation mission efforts at the time. The Presbyterian form of worship was also not as

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<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842), v-ix.

<sup>14</sup> Charles C. Jones, *Suggestions on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the Southern States* (New York: G. & C. Carvill, 1848), 26-30.

appealing to many slaves as were the Baptist and Methodist styles, with services operating in a more formal manner and sermons being delivered in a professorial fashion. Presbyterian ministers were advised to carefully plan and construct their sermons with minimal emotion so as not to excite the slave congregant. An additional sign of the weak presence of the Presbyterian Church among the Negro communities of the South was the fact that it had only one free black congregation; Charleston's Zion Presbyterian Church. Although the organization had many influential leaders in slave missions, the overall effect of the Church in plantation mission work was limited.<sup>15</sup>

Even less successful was Josiah Collins's Episcopal Church which was much smaller in membership than the other three mainline organizations. The Church had declined significantly during the days of the Revolution but was able to stabilize and reform itself afterwards. Although small in size, many members of the Episcopal Church were some of the largest slave holders in the South, but most did not see the value in slave mission work. The Church in the early 1800s was often described as "non-missionary, non-evangelical, and unfriendly to other religious bodies."<sup>16</sup> This all changed in the mid 1830s as councils in several different states began to encourage religious instruction towards the slave communities of the region.

It might seem surprising that the Episcopal Church and other southern denominations began to take such a strong interest in mission work after the Nat Turner rebellion, but its intensity no doubt was the response of the planter class towards the rising tide of abolitionism. As one Methodist put it:

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<sup>15</sup> Darius L. Swann and James F. Reese, "Perspectives on the Development of the Black Presbyterian Church in the South," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 85, no. 1 (2007), 48.

<sup>16</sup> Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Instruction of Negroes, 1830-1860, with Special Reference to South Carolina," *The Journal of Negro History* 15, no. 1 (1930), 75.

As the abolition movement waxed fiercer, the zeal for Negro missions waxed warmer. As abolition societies multiplied at the North, missions among the slaves multiplied at the South; as plans and measures for the final extirpation of slavery were growing into gradual proportions at the North, plans and measures for the salvation of the slaves were rapidly enlarging at the South.

In some strange way, many southern church organizations felt that this increased concern for the Negro soul would reduce the ever growing anger of northern public opinion.<sup>17</sup>

Three of the most important figures within the Episcopal Church plantation mission movement were Theodore Dehon, Levi Ives, and William Meade. All would rise to the rank of bishop in their respective states of South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, and use their platform to promote religious instruction to those in bondage. Dehon was the first southern Episcopal minister to seriously undertake missionary action in the 1800s for both races, as he hoped to revive the Church from its depressed state since the Revolutionary War. He developed the Society for the Advancement of Christianity in South Carolina, but it took many years for the organization to make inroads among the stubborn slave holding class.

Levi Ives promoted slave missions in Josiah Collins's home state of North Carolina during his tenure as bishop. He constantly traveled the state encouraging, observing, and performing services for the slave communities, with Somerset as his largest black congregation. He reported every year on his work at the state convention and even wrote a catechism for use on plantations. Ives was undoubtedly the strongest Episcopal supporter of this work in any southern state.<sup>18</sup> Around the same time, William Meade became the primary leader of the movement in Virginia. In 1833 he gave a passionate speech to the Episcopal convention in Richmond and described the efforts he had already made among the enslaved. He also publicly prayed that

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>18</sup> John Hope Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians in Ante-Bellum North Carolina," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 13, no. 3 (1944): 221.

“May he who made of one blood all nations upon earth, grant his blessing to every effort in behalf of the poor and ignorant that they may become rich in faith and wise unto salvation, for Jesus Christ’s sake.” By the next year, over two-thirds of the parishes represented at the state-wide meeting had initiated plantation mission work.<sup>19</sup>

Despite such enthused leadership, the Episcopal Church could not draw in many slaves or free blacks. Even masters that required slave attendance at services knew they could not demand membership within the Church. Couple this with the ritualistic and formal nature of the Episcopal service and progress was sure to be minimal.<sup>20</sup> Including slaves and free blacks, the southern Episcopal Church could not have had more than a few thousand members by the eve of the Civil War. In 1858, North Carolina had only 342 black communicants while Virginia reported a paltry 114. Other states acknowledged similar membership numbers but still took pride in their achievements among the slave communities.<sup>21</sup>

There were other notable groups making similar efforts in the South such as the Catholics and Moravians. Both of these groups, however, operated on a smaller scale than the other mainline churches. The Catholic Church had deep roots in Maryland and Louisiana and was able to attract many slave and free blacks into their congregations. Some estimates have the total membership as high as 100,000 by the time peace was concluded at Appomattox Courthouse. Most of the slave membership had little instruction in Catholic teachings with many being baptized into an organization which meant little to them. One former slave noted that “We was all supposed to be Catholics on our place, but lots didn’t like that ‘ligion. We use to hide behind some bricks and hold church ourselves. You see, the Catholic preachers from France wouldn’t

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<sup>19</sup> Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 161-162.

<sup>20</sup> Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 372-373.

<sup>21</sup> Sykes, “The Lake Chapel,” 1., Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 203.

let us shout, and the Law done said you gotta shout if you want to be saved.”<sup>22</sup> The Church would ultimately have most of its success in converting free blacks among the creole population whose culture was distinctly influenced by Catholic traditions.

Very much like the Episcopal Church, the Catholic faith was much too formal and ceremonial to appeal to Negro spirituality. Shouting and dancing, along with other elements of African culture, were not to be found or allowed as part of Catholic worship. Surprisingly, there were a number of churches in the faith that did not segregate services. A visitor to New Orleans reported witnessing an integrated service and it was not uncommon for the master’s wife to sponsor a slave child for baptism, or a servant to be godmother to the master’s child. There were even two religious orders of nuns from the black community. In 1829, the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore was founded, and thirteen years later the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans was established.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike in many Protestant congregations, however, the occasional slave or free black pastor was not to be found in the Catholic Church. As a result, the Church neglected a key means for bringing the Negro into the faith. It would not be until after the Civil War that the Church ordained its first black priest, with Charles Randolph Uncles being inducted in 1891. In spite of the minimal appeal of the organization, its small presence in the South, and the hostility from the planter class, the Catholic mission efforts were much more fruitful than those of the Episcopal Church.

On a much smaller level the Moravians, located mainly in North Carolina’s Wachovia district, also made some efforts to engage in mission work among the enslaved. Their three

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<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Ross Hite, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, 106, Quoted in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 272.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-274.



towns, Bethabara, Bethania, and Salem, established in the mid 1700s, became the key economic and religious centers in the central part of state. By the 1820s these communities contained around 300 slaves and some had already been admitted as members of the Church. It was also around this time that the Moravians began to put more thought into the idea of providing religious instruction for the slaves and free blacks of the area. Adjoined alongside this was the growing sentiment to segregate blacks from worshipping with whites in services. The goal, as with all the other Christian sects, would be to share the Gospel but also with the hopes of creating a more docile slave in the process.

The Church was very careful to discuss the reasons for the separation of services but slaves understood the situation. Many slaves became bitter at the idea and their concerns continued when given the news that their pastor would be white. Some of the members of the Moravian black community, however, were happy to be able to organize a Negro congregation and had petitioned for one in the past. Despite not having a say in the instruction or worship of the new church body, Africans saw the value of attending services. Historian Jon Sensbach eloquently describes the feelings of black antebellum congregants in the South:

For black worshippers, the chance to pray apart from whites was an experiment in self-definition. In one sense they remained a “missioned” people under the control of a white pastor, without the freedom to choose or direct preaching and worship as they wanted. But for the first time they laid claim to a place of their own where they might seek to create an alternative moral space, an environment in which-albeit under formidable constraints-they could mold the Christian message to fit their spiritual needs.<sup>24</sup>

Moravian slaves began their separate meetings in 1822 and constructed a church in Salem the very next year. Services were conducted by white minister Abraham Steiner, a former missionary to the Cherokee. Many of the local slaves had become quite skilled at speaking

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<sup>24</sup> Jon F. Sensbach, “Culture and Conflict in the Early Black Church: A Moravian Mission Congregation in Antebellum North Carolina,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 71, no. 4 (1994), 407.

German as their owners did, but the services were still carried out in the English language. The worship time also followed the Moravian rules with no opportunities for slaves to shout, sing spirituals, or clap their hands. Despite these limitations, the Moravians were able to make some small progress among the enslaved with just over one-hundred attending regularly up to the mid-1800s.<sup>25</sup>

Continuing at the state level, in North Carolina, just as in the South as a whole, the Methodists and Baptists had the greatest success among the slave and free black populations. Historian John Bassett notes that these two groups made significant efforts in the state to convert blacks and that the churches simple doctrines and emotional tone of worship were agreeable to the Negro. While some denominations mainly focused on household slaves, these two branches took great strides to take the Gospel to the large plantations of the state. While antebellum church records are limited, the Methodists, based on estimates from convention minutes, had over 9,000 black members by 1839. Baptist membership is more difficult as reports were not very detailed and when membership was reported race was not specified. The only area that did was in the east with the Chowan Association reporting over 3,000 black congregants in 1860.<sup>26</sup>

Both of these groups also had a few black ministers that operated quite freely until the General Assembly passed more restrictive measures in the 1830s. Perhaps the most notable example is that of Henry Evans, a free negro traveling from Virginia to South Carolina who singlehandedly brought Methodism to Fayetteville. Evans, a shoemaker and licensed minister, decided to stay in the city rather than continue to Charleston, as he felt it was his duty to preach among the black population. When local whites became concerned and the Town Council

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 401-411.

<sup>26</sup> John Bassett, *Slavery in the State of North Carolina* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1899), 52-62.

ordered him to cease activities, Evans continued to hold meetings at secret locations and out of the jurisdiction of the Council. Eventually, whites noticed a change in the slave's attitudes noting them to be more docile, and even began to support Evans. Ultimately a church was erected, given recognition by the state convention, and a white preacher was sent to takeover the now largely white congregation. Evans continued to live in Fayetteville in a room in the church until his death in 1810.<sup>27</sup>

As at the national level, other denominations in North Carolina made small gains among the enslaved and free black populace. The Presbyterians, who kept very few records at that time, allowed blacks to attend services and also take communion. As has been discussed, the Episcopal Church was small and although it made some efforts to encourage slave instruction, the Church had only a few hundred members by the Civil War. Quakers worked actively to teach and emancipate slaves in the state, and constantly fought against the harsher slave measures that developed in the antebellum years. John Bassett again notes that "in proportion to their strength, the Quakers did more for the negroes than any other religious body in North Carolina."<sup>28</sup>

When the Civil War arrived most mission work from these organizations came to a halt as time and resources were devoted elsewhere. The 1860 census recorded 4,097,111 African Americans residing in southern states. Of that number, it is estimated that around 500,000, or one out of every eight slaves, was a member of a particular church denomination.<sup>29</sup> On one level this number can be seen as significant as only thirty years of serious effort in a difficult terrain had been given to the plantation mission cause. The missionaries were also up against some

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 64-70.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1785-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 80.

inflexible masters and the constraints of state and local law. An additional positive was that many more slaves attended services and most slaves could be said to have had some contact with Christian teachings.

On another level, the various accounts of former slaves towards their masters and the antebellum church demonstrate the painful truth about the religious instruction of slaves. The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass summed up the mixed emotions that slaves had towards Christianity quite fiercely in his *Narrative*:

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in. I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which everywhere surround me.<sup>30</sup>

As Douglass' writings show, the slave was able to distinguish between the "hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity."<sup>31</sup> Many slaves showed their disdain for the slave brand of Christianity by refusing to adhere to the tenets taught to them in services. One of the more common rules to be ignored was the constant refrain from the minister not to steal. One slave, Josephine Howard, remarked at this that "Dey allus done tell us it am wrong to lie and steal, but why did de white foks steal my mammy and her mammy?" A Virginia slave Charles Brown, once remarked to his master's face that "You white folks set the bad example of stealing-

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<sup>30</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 117.

<sup>31</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 294.

you stole us from Africa, and not content with that, if any got free here, you stole them afterward, and so we are made slaves.”<sup>32</sup>

Other teachings such as those against lying and deceit were also ignored. This usually took the form of what became known as “putting on ol’ massa,” where the slaves would outwardly act one way toward the master while keep their true feelings hidden.<sup>33</sup> Faking injury and sickness, along with other forms of pretense, were just some of the ways of resisting the institution. The whole slave community ultimately took on a unique ethical system whereby normally unacceptable behavior was permitted as a means to surreptitiously strike back against the deplorable institution.<sup>34</sup>

Slave religion, a faith molded by slaves to fit their condition, became much more than a means to provide hope for those in bondage; it also became a way for slaves to spiritually and outwardly rebel against their master. They “adapted Christianity to their needs of communal interaction, personal solace, and emotional release.”<sup>35</sup> Faith was an area that the owner could try to influence but ultimately not control. Albert Raboteau says that “the religious meetings in the quarters, groves, and hush harbors were themselves frequently acts of rebellion against the prescriptions of the master.” Additionally, he says that “in the context of divine authority, the limited authority of the human (master), was placed in perspective.”<sup>36</sup>

So how does Josiah Collins III’s individual Lake Chapel operation fit into the larger story of plantation missions? In a broader context, Somerset was one of the most unique plantation

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 293-297.

<sup>35</sup> John B. Boles, *Masters & Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 126.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 317-318.

missions as the master, unlike on most southern estates, was fully devoted to the cause of providing religious instruction and services to his servants. He hired resident priests to conduct classes and services along with fulfilling some of these duties himself on occasion. Collins' slaves attended in high numbers and church membership at the Lake Chapel alone rivaled and even surpassed total black Episcopal membership in other states.

There are several ways of judging the true successes and failures at Somerset. First an analysis should be done of the number of attendees, baptisms, confirmations, and communicants during the Church's tenure. Second, it must be noted how individuals that visited the plantation described the slaves in terms of their religious devotion and attitude towards services. Third, and finally, the records after the Civil War are significant for they show the allegiance or disloyalty of the former slaves when they were finally given a real choice in the matter.

On the surface, Josiah Collins was successful at Somerset in bringing the Episcopal faith to his enslaved population. As stated, slave attendance at services was presented to visitors as optional, but there were signs that this possibly may not have been the case. The numbers they cited were always close to the total population of slaves on the plantation. Even in the years prior to the building of the Chapel, a missionary named David Griffith described how over 200 slaves from Somerset attended the Pettigrew Chapel services on Sunday evenings.<sup>37</sup> Bishop Ives commented in 1838 after visiting the Lake Chapel that "the number assembled could not have been less, I think, than 250."<sup>38</sup> These are phenomenal numbers given that the Episcopal Church's mission efforts had only just begun to become more serious in the 1830s. Other visitors such as Edmund Ruffin and Dr. Edward Warren would comment in later years regarding

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<sup>37</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1835), 22.

<sup>38</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1838), 13.

the large turnouts, leading even some contemporaries to question the slave attendance policy at Somerset.

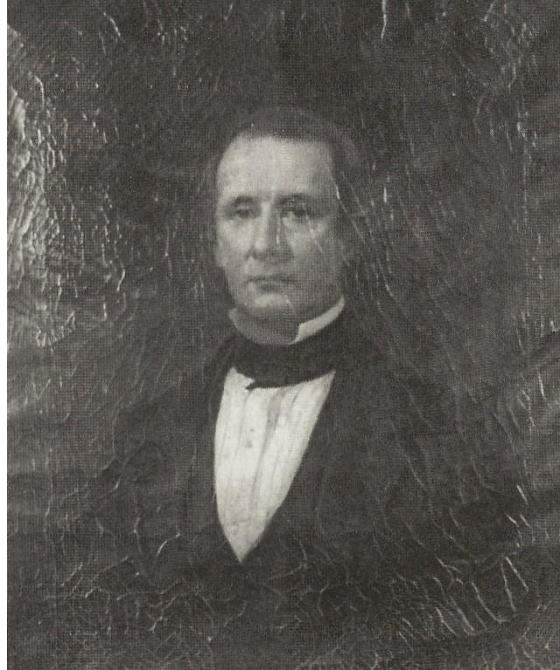


Figure 4.3 Josiah Collins III (from, Redford: 2005)

In terms of actual membership, the Lake Chapel register provides details of how many Somerset slaves officially joined the Episcopal Church. From 1837 to 1862, before Chapel operations were halted, there were 253 communicants listed, with 104 male and 149 female confirmations. The numbers grew each year with the average age becoming younger as slave children often joined in their late teens after going through the daily classes taught by the chaplain. The register also notes that 695 adults and children were baptized in those years, with 91 of them coming from the Pettigrew estate. Although baptism did not signal membership, it does reveal that many slaves took some interest in the Church despite their condition. In terms of comparison with other North Carolina plantations, Somerset boasted of almost half the state's black communicants in 1858. This number is hardly surprising, however, as Somerset was one

of the five largest plantations in North Carolina and thus would contain a greater portion. What can be drawn from this is that Collins did have modest success in getting his slaves to adopt the Episcopal faith.<sup>39</sup>

As evidence of their taking to the Episcopal teachings, there are several accounts describing the attitude of slaves towards the instruction they were given, along with how they carried themselves during services. Ives again reported “the expression of interest and pleasure which animated their countenances, notwithstanding the exhausted services of the day, showed at once that no compulsion had been called for to bring them together.” He also added that “no sooner had the examination commenced than it was easy to perceive, that a better spirit than that of curiosity had prompted such large an attendance.” Ives would go on to comment how well the evening prayer and call and response segment was performed. He even said that it would put even the most enlightened congregations to shame if they were to witness the skill at which the slaves conducted themselves during services.<sup>40</sup>

Edward Warren noted how stunned he was during his visit to see the slaves “flocking to church” and how they knew every word of the “prayer-book.”<sup>41</sup> Edmund Ruffin was impressed enough with the display that he scolded those masters that did not provide religious instruction in the *Farmer's Register*. The article seemed quite out of place amongst the essays concerning soil, water power, and new farming technologies. He questioned:

Why is it that, by the many who have undertaken the sacred duties of preaching the gospel, and laboring for the salvation of souls, so few and such feeble efforts have been made to give religious instruction to our slaves? The excuse which I have heard made, in answer to this question, is, that the owners of slaves might probably view any

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<sup>39</sup> The Lake Chapel Parish Register, Somerset Place, Washington County, NC, n.p.

<sup>40</sup> *Twenty-Second Annual Journal*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Dr. Edward Warren, *A Doctor's Experience in Three Continents* (Baltimore: Cushings and Bailey, 1885), 200-202.



such efforts with suspicion, or perhaps meet them with hostility. As a slave-holder, and one professing to know something of my other fellow slave-holders, I pronounce that there is no ground for such an opinion or excuse.<sup>42</sup>

Bishop Ives successor, Thomas Atkinson, was also satisfied in the 1850s as he felt that the more he witnessed the efforts of plantation mission work, the more he became pleased by it.<sup>43</sup>

Obviously, all of the visitors that commented on the services were supporters of slavery, and two of them were leaders of North Carolina's Episcopal Church. The two bishops may have embellished their remarks for the state convention but when placed alongside the other accounts, there is no reason to suspect they were inaccurate. The men were all delighted to see the progress Collins and his chaplains had made among the slave community in terms of spiritual enlightenment. This satisfaction highlights another key point about the institution of slavery, as most owners tended to view their slaves as children that needed to be guided in the ways of religion and the world, and they were greatly pleased when things seemed to be going according to established plans.

Although attendance figures, communicant numbers, and positive visitor reports seem to signal great success at Somerset's Lake Chapel, the attitude of the plantation's former slaves after the Civil War held towards the Episcopal faith reveals that most of these black adherents had a weak connection with the Church, only attending by force or because it was their only option. In 1866, Reverend William Stickney performed services at the Chapel lamenting in his diary that only six former slaves were present. Most had departed the area and the Church, no doubt associating it with the horrors of their previous condition. Historian Stiles Lines stated

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<sup>42</sup> Edmund Ruffin, "The Negroes' Chapel and Religious Services," *The Farmer's Register* 8 (1839): 729.

<sup>43</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (Fayetteville: Edward J. Hale, 1857), 24.

that former slaves “remembered the Church more as a master than mother,” and wanted to put any associations with servitude out of mind.<sup>44</sup> With freedom came the opportunity to start anew by choosing their own faith, with several former Somerset slaves forming their own congregation in connection with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Most others cannot be accounted for and it is most likely they broke ties with the Episcopal faith, as the rigid, formal structures of worship did not blend with African spirituality and tradition.<sup>45</sup>

Although small, there were some former Lake Chapel members that did remain loyal to the Episcopal Church. Former Somerset slave, Susan Drew Hawkins made her way to Edenton, joining St. John’s Church, and later moved to Belhaven where she established an Episcopal Sunday school for black children. Mary Carraway, another former slave, lived in Elizabeth City and maintained her connection with the Episcopal faith. Around sixteen other freedmen and women from Somerset moved to Edenton and became congregants of St. Paul’s Church. These few loyal adherents highlight the fact that mission efforts among the enslaved could only have minimal success. The slave understood his condition, and knew that the master could have control over him physically, but the realm of the spiritual was out of his authority.<sup>46</sup>

The Episcopal Church, overall, had minimal success with plantation mission work among the enslaved. Although limited, the organization began work during the colonial period and was later able to reform and increase its efforts after the Revolution. Its goals were often hindered by planter suspicions, apathy, absentee landlordism, along with current events. In North Carolina, Josiah Collins III’s Lake Chapel was celebrated by Episcopal leadership as a model for what a plantation mission should look like. Collins centered life at Somerset around the Lake Chapel by

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<sup>44</sup> Sykes, “The Lake Chapel at Somerset Place,” 136.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-136.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

holding prayer meetings morning and night, giving daily parochial schooling to slave children, and holding Sunday school and worship services on the Sabbath. Resident ministers spent countless hours teaching all of the proper catechisms, prayers, and formalities of Episcopal worship. Most slaves would attend the services with many of them becoming communicants at the Chapel.<sup>47</sup>

This process would continue for almost twenty-five years until the Civil War disrupted activities on the plantation and from which the family would never recover. After the War, many former slaves abandoned the Chapel and the plantation as well. Most could not continue serving the denomination of their master, although many still embraced Christianity. The Chapel would fade into obscurity until the 1950s when William Tarlton was commissioned to survey and restore the property. His excavations and research unveiled another story to be told as the foundation to the Church was uncovered. In 1994, the Lake Chapel Register was discovered by Somerset employee Joe Silva, who brought it to the attention of Collins family descendent John Sykes. It was then that the story of one of Somerset's most important structures could be told.<sup>48</sup>

As in the Episcopal Church, most former slaves in other denominations also disassociated themselves from their antebellum congregations or began to hold separate services. Sometimes this would be done in the local church basement, an abandoned building, or barns. By 1867, former slaves began organizing their own churches with the guidance of the Freedman's Bureau or northern denominations. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion, and the African Methodist Church gained most of the former Methodist slaves, while emancipated Baptists also

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<sup>47</sup> Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians," 221-228.

<sup>48</sup> Sykes, "The Lake Chapel," i.

formed their own organizations within each southern state.<sup>49</sup> Most emancipated Presbyterians also left their congregations and by 1884 only thirty-three black Presbyterian congregations had been established in the South. Efforts made by northern Presbyterian Church leadership to form black congregations in the South were marginal but they did have some small success in Atlanta that can still be seen today with Rice Memorial Presbyterian Church and Central Presbyterian Church.<sup>50</sup>

The Lake Chapel at Somerset Plantation serves an important place in the history of antebellum plantation mission efforts. It is an example of a master that took significant steps to bring Christianity to his slave populace while continuing to preserve, protect, and defend the institution of slavery. The Chapel's history provides a clear picture of the methods and procedures masters used to educate their slaves in the tenets of the faith and the care taken to work within the boundaries of the law. On a larger scale, the mission efforts taken by the denominations discussed above were successful in making the Christian message known but the bonds between slaves and the churches they were allowed to attend were not strong. Once freedom came, most former slaves broke away and formed their own congregations as they could not support an institution that had defended their previous condition. This separation would continue into the twentieth century.

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<sup>49</sup> Glenn N. Sisk, "Negro Churches in the Alabama Blackbelt, 1875-1917," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society (1943-1961)*, Vol. 33 (June, 1955), 87-89.

<sup>50</sup> Ernest T. Thompson, "Black Presbyterians, Education and Evangelism after the Civil War," *The Journal of Presbyterian History (1997-)*, Vol. 76 (Spring, 1998), 55, 70.

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