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# ANCESTORS OF WORTHY LIFE

PLANTATION SLAVERY AND BLACK HERITAGE  
AT MOUNT CLARE

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TERESA S. MOYER

Foreword by Paul A. Shackel

PROOF

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## INTRODUCTION

Black history at historic plantations concerns more than slavery and freedom; it also tells the story of why blacks in the past are omitted at places with so much of their history to tell. Historic plantations offer rich laboratories in which to examine the ways that racism changes and stays the same through the circumstances that enable black history to be revealed or hidden. Mount Clare in Baltimore, Maryland, offers a case study of what this looks like. During its management from 1917 to 2012 by the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Maryland, black history and slavery were ignored in favor of white ancestry and the material evidence of whites' ancestors' societal prominence. In the process, the interpretation of Mount Clare failed to address the significance of slavery and blacks to white plantation owners, the plantation itself, and the region. The valuable meanings of these stories—such as that racism created struggle and inequality or that people living on the same property experienced and perceived life in different, but interlinked, ways—was consequently lost. As a result, the rich, multicultural heritage that belongs to us all became inaccessible, making Mount Clare less relevant or important to people today as it could be. By studying the interpretation—or lack thereof—of black history at places like Mount Clare, we can learn from the past and apply the lessons learned in order to effect change for a more equal and just society.

Today, Mount Clare is located within Carroll Park in southwestern Baltimore (fig. 1.1). It is one of the industrial and agricultural plantations established by Dr. Charles Carroll.<sup>1</sup> His son, Charles Carroll the Barrister, inherited the land and through slavery transformed it into a showpiece property that he named Mount Clare. In 1917, the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Maryland (Maryland Society)



Figure 1.1. Mount Clare Museum House, Carroll Park, Baltimore. Photo by author.

assumed management of the Carroll mansion for a historic house museum. The members' personal interests included their ancestors' histories, as well as architecture, decorative arts, and gardening. House tours and special events focused on these topics. Archaeological investigations beginning in the 1970s, however, uncovered evidence of enslaved blacks living and working in the vicinity of the plantation. It, in combination with archival material from the Carrolls' papers, demonstrates without a doubt that blacks and whites interacted constantly at the mansion complex. Despite this evidence, the Maryland Society continued to ignore black history and blacks' roles at the plantation and in the Carrolls' lives. As a result, the interpretation of Mount Clare became one-sided and untruthful in a way that was an injustice not only to African Americans but to all people looking to understand the shared heritage of the site.

My purpose in this book is to show a way to think about slavery and black history at Mount Clare. It aims to recover a place for blacks at Mount Clare, as well as to shine a light on the processes that made them invisible in the past and present. One path forward for Mount Clare is to integrate enslaved blacks, who traditionally have been underrepresented, as fully as

possible into the site's interpretation. A second path is to recognize that black history is meaningful or relevant not just to African American audiences but to all visitors. Black history is white history, and vice versa; indeed, the Carrolls' history cannot be fully understood without knowledge about the people they enslaved or the Carrolls' attitudes and actions concerning slavery and freedom. A third path is to confront the fact that the relative lack of emphasis on black history is part of the history of historic preservation. These three paths lay the groundwork for historic preservation to support equal access to heritage for all members of society; in other words, historic preservation and archaeology, through the interpretation of historic plantations, can support the cause of social justice.

### Social Justice, Racism, and Equal Access to Heritage

Social justice through historic preservation and archaeology emphasizes that equal access to heritage is a social right. A single view of history, such as from the white perspective, privileges one perspective over others. It enables one view to dominate the social narrative and the lessons learned from it. By making multiple perspectives in history accessible, such as those of enslaved blacks, society and all its members have fair access to information that dispels the myths, prejudices, and mistruths of history that carry into the present day and affect its attitudes. Thus, a view of the past that includes multiple perspectives is central to the social services that are at the core of social justice.

Getting at historical truths and creating heritage is a contested and controversial process. Called "insurgent preservation"<sup>2</sup> or "dissonant heritage," the work of promoting diversity in heritage narratives brings attention to the evocative and difficult histories of oppressed or underrepresented peoples. The larger goal of "'restorative social justice' through civic engagement" requires professionals to acknowledge the existence of and do something about the ideological schemes that keep the "other," such as enslaved blacks, in a marginalized and subordinate place.<sup>3</sup> Bringing the heritage of contemporary black communities into public spaces provides opportunities to examine the power of race over things and rights, as well as the ways that race can simultaneously impact the landscape and seem invisible on

it.<sup>4</sup> Equal access to heritage through the interpretation of all peoples who lived and worked at historic sites thus furthers the cause of social justice.

Without supporting equal access to black heritage, historic plantations like Mount Clare cannot explore race from different perspectives with their visitors or fulfill the goals of social justice for their constituents. For example, looking at Mount Clare from the black perspective shows that, while the Carrolls had the acumen to create conditions for slavery at Mount Clare, enslaved blacks were the foundation upon which the Carroll empire rested and depended. Blacks are the missing link in the Carrolls' story; their knowledge and skills fueled the plantation, enabled the Carrolls to be social elites, and influenced developments in American labor and social interactions. Visitors to Mount Clare have been unable to learn that blacks on the Carrolls' properties both practiced their own cultural beliefs and values and learned about those of elite whites in order to carry out their daily tasks. The Carrolls and the people they enslaved were not equal in society, because their race and status conferred different rights upon them. Nevertheless, enslaved blacks played an essential role in sustaining the plantations as the Carrolls. In this way, the people enslaved at Mount Clare were part of a larger process in which blacks became culturally American by negotiating the fallout of a race-based system for ordering society.

The fact that whites did not raise questions about blacks when interpreting Mount Clare is a form of racism. It signifies that the Maryland Society felt that neither blacks nor the foundation of society upon slavery were important to history. In the process, the Maryland Society prevented visitors from finding meaning in the past that could bring new perspectives to their own understanding of the world.

Racism has played a central role in the inequality of interpretation at historic plantations, just as the institutions of historic preservation and archaeology have a history of marginalization and subordination on the basis of race. One lesson from the study of structural or institutional racism, however, is that racism can be invisible to those whom others might label racist. From the perspective of academia, my anthropological training showed me how to recognize and question structural or institutional racism at cultural institutions. Even though I see racist practices at Carroll Park, I know that the Maryland Society and Carroll Park Foundation, two of the key preservation organizations sharing stewardship of Mount Clare,

do not share my view.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Maryland Society is interested primarily in preserving the history of its colonial ancestors, who happen to be white. To me, this is a myopic approach to the past that exemplifies structural racism; however, to the Maryland Society, there is nothing wrong or insidious in choosing to focus on the part of history that is of the most interest to them. Making black history difficult to access physically or financially, or erasing it entirely, may not have been intentional or overt to the people preserving Mount Clare. But racism can be a habit of thought whereby whites habitually ignore or forget blacks in their pursuit of promoting their white ancestors, an act that may seem natural and unremarkable to them but is insidious to others.

In my view, structural and institutionalized racism limits the potential of historic plantations when carried out by those who do not recognize racist practices. The preservation, management, and interpretation of historic plantations has been a historically white project that uses interpretation to support structural racism by ignoring the contributions of people of African descent whose work sustained the plantations. Ignoring as central a factor as slavery in the life of a place equates to erasing that history from a place if it is not interpreted. Black life tends not to be interpreted to visitors with depth and breadth, because to do so would threaten whites' ability to argue that past actions justify present ones, including the decision to interpret a place from a white elite perspective. Visitors traditionally have received the most exposure to elite whites' most estimable or admirable accomplishments, social mores, and contributions, and considerably less exposure to the resilience, hard work, and creativity of enslaved blacks. It casts elite whites in a favorable light without providing visitors all of the information they need to form their own opinions. The fantasy of a harmonic landscape peopled by groups of different stations in society teaches people today that inequality is natural—when, in fact, it is anything but. Historic plantations and their landscapes, however, offer rich environments in which to leverage the legacy of slavery for social justice through providing equity and fair access to an interpreted past. The history of Mount Clare, and the history of interpreting Mount Clare, provides a case study on the impact of institutionalized racism on equal access to the past, as well as opportunities for change.