

A LOOK AT RACIAL RELATIONS AT SWEET BRIAR FROM 1880-1883
THROUGH THE EYES OF A SIXTEEN YEAR OLD GIRL

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~~*~~ "Servitude and Slavery: A
View Through Daisy's Eyes"

Ann P. Martin

"I Pledge..." Ann P. Martin

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History of Sweet Briar

G. Berg

The late nineteenth century was a time for innovative change and Sweet Briar plantation was not surpassed during this time. The emancipation Act of 1862 and the Civil War that followed redirected the path of racial relations in the United States. On Sweet Briar plantation in the late nineteenth century Daisy Williams wrote about her daily life in three separate journals dating from 1880-1883. From these journals, personal letters and notes I have obtained a notion of the relations between the Williams' black servants and Daisy. This perception is obtained through the eyes of a teenage girl living in the late nineteenth century.

Daisy Williams' original diaries of 1880, 1881, and 1882 are her personal account of daily life at Sweet Briar plantation. Her letters are also excellent primary sources. These documents include accounts of her relation to and treatment of the Williams' family servants, i.e.; Logan, their plantation manager, Martha, Daisy's black nurse, and Helen and Mary, the Williams' domestic servants. These primary documents provide great insight into how the plantation was run, the responsibilities of the "colored people" on the plantation, as well as Daisy's affectionate relationship to the Williams' servants.

In Daisy's first diary of 1880 she enters her account of returning home to Sweet Briar plantation after spending several weeks in New York City with her parents. On Saturday April 3, 1880 Daisy writes

"We reached Amherst at half past two, the carriage and Flora were there. Martha and Mary were at the house. I am so glad to get home."¹

This entrance reflects not only Daisy's love of Sweet Briar but her

affectionate ties to the Williams' family servants. On Tuesday, April 5, 1880 Daisy speaks of going to visit her black nurse Martha.

"Martha is not so well. I went to see her yesterday, she gave me a pretty little basket."²

The next day Wednesday, April 7, 1880, Martha is still feeling poorly and Daisy writes

"After dinner I went up to Martha's and I took her some pictures I painted her a wooden plate and a china one."³

On Thursday Daisy enters

"Martha came down in the afternoon for the first time, she is much better."⁴

These successive entrances show Daisy's genuine concern for her black nurse Martha. Martha was an important figure in the Williams' household. Her duties entailed sharing the responsibility for the cooking, cleaning, and ironing. When Daisy was a young child Martha served as her nurse and nannie. Daisy often wrote about Martha's daily chores in her diaries. On Thursday, July 1, 1880 Daisy writes

"Martha is ironing today."⁵

and on Thursday, July 15, 1880 Daisy writes

"Martha is here, she is washing today."⁶

These entrances show Daisy's interest in the daily happenings at Sweet Briar as well as the responsibilities of her dear black nurse, Martha. In another entrance on Tuesday July 20, 1880 Daisy writes about Logan's various responsibilities as the plantation manager.

"The old kitchen is nearly done...the men are cleaning the brick. Logan went for three loads

of lumber yesterday and got the windows and doors today."⁷

In a later entrance dating Friday, September 3, 1880 Daisy writes

"the two timmers slept in the yellow room, they had breakfast at our table, I had mine afterwards...Mr. Stevens came this morning and is fixing the old chimney. Logan is helping tin the roof. Helen is not well, she is gone to Martha's. Ella and Martha are here washing and ironing. They washed yesterday."⁸

Daisy keeps abreast of the daily happenings at Sweet Briar, as her diary of 1880 indicates. She enjoyed getting involved in the daily chores and she often assisted in the making of preserves, cooking, and sewing. When it was possible Daisy would accompany Logan on the wagon while he tended to the various jobs on the plantation. On Thursday, February 24, 1881 Daisy writes

"I drove the wagon while Logan took out feed for the cattle."⁹

Another account of Daisy's affectionate relationship to "Uncle Logan" reads

"She (Daisy) loved to be with Logan, and enjoyed playing with his children and helping his daughter to milk the cows."¹⁰

Another entrance is an account of Mr. Williams scolding Logan.

"Mr. Williams scolded Logan sharply for making the ice pond so shallow. He thought it should be at least six feet deep, but when he found that Daisy had ordered it three feet deep no more words were said about it."¹¹

This account from "The Briar Patch of 1917" enabled me to better understand the Williams and particularly Daisy's relationship to Logan. It is apparent that Daisy's relationship to Logan is one of affection and mutual concern. However Mr. Williams treats Logan as a subordinate as evidenced by his chastisement of Logan.

In a personal letter from Martha to Daisy, written on January 24, 1882, during the small pox epidemic in Amherst, Martha writes of her desire to return to Sweet Briar plantation to be with Daisy so that they can

"bake and plant seeds."¹²

The letter shows the friendly, adoring relationship that Martha and Daisy shared.

"I have not been anywhere before today for some time. I hope winter soon will be over and you will come home and you and I will be together at Sweet Briar cooking and eating."¹³

This letter reflects the friendly, loving relationship that Daisy and Martha shared.

On Monday May 22, 1882 Daisy's diary includes an account of an epidemic of small pox in Amherst and the surrounding community. The small pox epidemic forced the Williams family to leave Sweet Briar and to travel to New York City where they resided for close to a month. On Monday May 22, 1882 Daisy writes

"We will have to go to New York, there are three new cases of small pox at the McLoors and the man at the Court House is dead. I am very sorry we are going."¹⁵

On Wednesday May 24, 1882 Daisy writes

"Martha came this morning but Mamma would not let her come in on account of the small pox."¹⁶

These entrances cover Daisy's account of the small pox epidemic and her desire to remain at home with her friends and family.

However Daisy's father, Reverend James Henry Williams, treated the family servants in a much less congenial fashion than Daisy. Mr. Williams' treatment of Logan as a subordinate is evidenced in his scolding of Logan. In a letter Daisy wrote to her mother on July 24, 1883 she writes of her father's visit to Aunt Lillybell's.

"Papa went to Aunt Lillybell's yesterday afternoon, she had the colored man to take his horse, the boy to open the gate, and the women to open the door (quite eloquent)."¹⁴

This particular account is quite revealing because according to Daisy's entrance the treatment of black people by white people on a southern plantation, even as late as 1883, resembles something out of pre-Civil War times. Evidently Blacks were still subservient to Whites. Mr. Williams enjoyed and expected his black servants to treat him as a superior. However Daisy, in her treatment of the Williams' family servants, is never less than kind and friendly. Daisy enjoyed spending her time with the Williams' family servants. When she was not practicing the piano, rehearsing her lessons, or studying French and Italian, Daisy liked to go fishing with Helen and Logan. She also spent her free time with her pony Bounce, and playing her harp. Daisy enjoyed sharing the cooking with Martha, planting seeds and weeding in her flower garden.

Daisy had a great love for Sweet Briar plantation. Her diaries,

letters, and notes all recount her love of her home and the people who lived and worked there. Logan and Martha were Daisy's friends and loyal servants.

Daisy Williams, daughter of Indiana Fletcher Williams and Reverend James Henry Williams was born on September 10, 1868. She was an only child and died at the early age of sixteen years old. Daisy's diaries and personal documents give insight into how Daisy lived and her relationships to her friends and family. These historical documents are her account of the daily life on the Williams' estate. The documents cover what Daisy Williams felt was important and poignant to her. Her accounts of the Williams' servants describe the affectionate and caring relationship that Daisy shared with Logan, Martha, Helen and Mary. According to Daisy's account the Williams' family servants were well treated and cared for. However, since these documents are personal, they are biased. They reflect Daisy's personal taste, her likes and dislikes, and her individuality. Daisy discusses matters which are of interest to a teenage girl living on a southern plantation in the late nineteenth century. The limitations of the documents can be attributed to the fact that they are a selection of personal experiences and observations and not an account of worldly affairs. Thus these subjective documents have enabled me to gain some understanding of Daisy's life, her observations, and her experiences. This understanding includes Daisy's perception of the Williams' servants as loyal friends as well as employees on Sweet Briar plantation. Daisy enjoyed their company and spent a great deal of time with them meandering around the plantation, picking flowers, apples and berries, cooking, and riding about the plantation on

her pony, Bounce. Racial relations during the late nineteenth century were tenuous at best, however Daisy Williams' perspective reflected an accepting attitude of her fellow human beings.

NOTES:

- ¹Daisy Williams' Diary of 1880. Saturday, April 3, 1880.
- ²Ibid. Tuesday, April 6, 1880.
- ³Ibid. Wednesday, April 7, 1880.
- ⁴Ibid. Thursday, April 8, 1880.
- ⁵Ibid. Thursday, July 1, 1880.
- ⁶Ibid. Thursday, July 15, 1880.
- ⁷Ibid. Tuesday, July 20, 1880.
- ⁸Ibid. Friday, September 3, 1880.
- ⁹Briarpatch of 1917. Thursday, February 24, 1881.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Personal Letter received by Daisy Williams from Martha. January 24, 1882.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Personal Letter received by Indiana Fletcher Williams from Daisy Williams. July 24, 1883.
- ¹⁵Daisy Williams' Diary of 1882. Monday, May 22, 1882.
- ¹⁶Ibid. Wednesday, May 24, 1882.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Daisy Williams' original diaries of 1880, 1881, and 1882.

Found in room number two. On the fifth shelf of the grey metal bookcases on the right side as you are entering the room. The original diaries are located in a green Sweet Briar file. The file is labeled as "Diary and Notebook 1880-1882, Daisy Williams." The green file is located next to two other empty, unlabeled, green files. The diaries are an excellent primary source. The diaries are Daisy's personal account of the daily life at Sweet Briar plantation. Her account includes her relation to and treatment of the Williams' family servants, i.e.; Logan, their plantation manager, and Martha, the Williams' domestic servant. These primary documents provide great insight into how the plantation was run and the responsibilities of the "colored people" on the plantation.

2. Original Letters received by Indiana Fletcher Williams and written by Daisy Williams, 1875-1883.

Found in room number two, on the sixth shelf of the grey metal bookcases on the right side of the room. The letters are located in a grey file box. The grey file box is labeled "Fletcher-Williams papers." The letters dating from 1875-1883 are a good primary source. They are Daisy's personal account of life on Sweet Briar plantation during her parents' absence. The letters are an account of Logan and Martha's daily chores, of Daisy's lessons, and the seasonal harvest. One letter includes Daisy's account of her father's visit to Aunt Lillybell's. The entrance addresses the treatment of the servants at Aunt Lillybell's. I found the letters very revealing because they enabled me to understand the treatment of black people by whites, on a southern plantation, in the late nineteenth century. It is evident that blacks were still subservient to whites.

3. "The Briar Patch of 1917"

Found in room number two on the bottom shelf of the grey metal bookcases, on the left side of the room. An excellent source because

references to Daisy's diaries and her affectionate relationship to "Uncle Logan." There is also an account of Mr. Williams' scolding Logan. This account from "The Briar Patch of 1917" enabled me to better understand the Williams and particularly Daisy's relationship to Logan.

4.The Sweet Briar Magazine of 1917, "a sketch of Mrs. Indiana Fletcher Williams."

Found in room number two, on the bottom shelf, on the left side of the room. This is a descriptive account of Mrs. Williams' life before and after her marriage to the Reverend James Henry Williams. It tells of her experiences during the Civil War and her various travels abroad. This particular source is not primary however it describes the lifestyle the Williams had and it speaks of "the ideal life here at Sweet Briar." This source spoke mostly on Indiana Fletcher Williams, Daisy's mother, but the descriptions of the Williams' lifestyle at Sweet Briar plantation were helpful.

5.Original letter received by Daisy Williams and written by Martha, January 24, 1883.

Found in room number two. On the sixth shelf on the right side of the room. The original letter is located in a grey file box. The grey file box is labeled "Fletcher-Williams papers." The letter dates from 1883 and is an excellent primary source. I found the letter helpful because it shows the friendly, adoring relationship that Martha and Daisy shared. The letter indicates that Daisy's nannie was educated. Martha addressed Daisy with great respect and admiration and she spoke of her desire to return to Sweet Briar plantation as soon as possible.