



REDCLIFFE

The Double Life of a Plantation Population

Life on a 19th-Century plantation was good and not so good. You get a sobering sense of that at Redcliffe Plantation State Historic Site in Aiken County. The two-story Greek Revival home, now on the National Register of Historic Places, remains grandiose with its Doric columns, its 53-foot central hall and its sycamore woodwork. Motorists can see it far in the distance, perched atop a hill surrounded by 369 acres of lovely rolling lawns and woodlands. While the Civil War raged in distant states, owner James Henry Hammond and his family resided there in comfort.

A stone's throw from the main house, you see how the plantation majority lived. Slave cabins were small, sparse, and crowded. Work days were long. For them, there were few comforts.

Redcliffe staff have been observing the plantation's 150th anniversary throughout 2009 with special events, many of them concentrating on slave life. The house was completed two years before the outbreak of the war. Hammond withdrew there with his family after retiring from a tumultuous political career. John Shaw Billings, a *Time* magazine editor and the last Hammond descendant to occupy Redcliffe,

began restoring the property in 1935 and donated it to the state in 1973. The South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism opened it as a house museum two years later.

James Henry Hammond (1807-64) is perhaps best remembered for his thundering ante-bellum pronouncement in the U.S. Senate: "Cotton is king!" Born in Newberry District, he began honing his political training early in life. At South Carolina College, he was president of the Euphradian Society, noted for his debating skill. He became a lawyer at 21, the fiery editor of the *Southern Times* in Columbia a year later, and a U.S.

congressman at 26. He also became a wealthy slave owner by virtue of his marriage to Catherine Fitzsimons, daughter of a prosperous Charleston merchant. Redcliffe would be the last of half a dozen cotton plantations he acquired.

Hammond's political career was only beginning at the time of his marriage. He won the governorship in 1842 and a U.S. Senate seat in 1857. His was not a charmed life, though. Sickness had ended his congressional career, and personal scandal removed him from politics for 10 years following his term as governor. A slave on his plantation had become his mistress, and Hammond's licentious behavior extended toward his wife's teenage nieces, who often visited the Hammonds at their Silverton plantation. This estranged him publicly from Catherine for two years and permanently from some of his in-laws. Most prominent among them was Wade Hampton II, a formidable political power broker who thwarted Hammond's Senate ambitions in 1846.



Redcliffe Plantation slave cabin

Complex political developments finally resulted in his Senate election during the ominous prewar years. In Washington, Hammond was stridently pro-slavery although opposed to secession. After Abraham Lincoln's presidential victory in 1860, Hammond left Washington to devote himself to the Confederate cause. His health declined drastically; he died five months before Appomattox.

The quaint little engraved stone on the lawn marks the resting place of two beloved dogs. Runzy was a Jack Russell terrier owned by the last Hammond descendant to occupy Redcliffe, John Shaw Billings. "After Runzy died (1945), the Billings purchased Lucky, a Cocker Spaniel who died in 1960, explains Joy Raintree, site manager."



Winter can be an especially interesting time to visit Redcliffe Plantation State Historic Site. In December, the home is decorated for an early 20th-Century Christmas. Candlelight tours are scheduled

December 4-6 in conjunction with historic home tours in Augusta. "Christmas in the Quarters," a program about how Redcliffe's enslaved inhabitants observed the holidays, is December 19, 1-4 pm. Guides will lead visitors through the cabins and discuss 19th Century rituals, food, free time, gifts, religion, and visiting. Cost is \$6 for adults, \$3 for South Carolina seniors, \$4 for students 6-16. Children 5 and younger are admitted free.

Located near Beech Island, Redcliffe's grounds are open Thursday-Monday, 9 am-5 pm (extended to 6 pm during DST), at no charge. House museum tours are available Thursday-Monday at 1, 2 and 3 pm; tours cost \$4 for visitors age 16 and older, \$2.50 for South Carolina seniors, \$3 for children 6-15.

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Redcliffe today presents insightful studies of the lives of plantation owners and plantation slaves. (Redcliffe had about 50; in all, slaves at Hammond’s plantations numbered more than 300.) It illustrates the intricate relationship between the elite and the downtrodden laborers on whom they depended.

“Redcliffe is intriguing as a historic site for the sheer volume of documentation, both written and photographic, as well as a nearly complete collection of artifacts and historic structures that provide insights on what life was like for the inhabitants,” says Joy Raintree, site manager. Raintree, who holds degrees in anthropology and public history, has worked here since 2002. For a historical researcher, she says, Redcliffe is special. “Because of the rich documentation and the multigenerational, multifamily perspectives, Redcliffe is a lens through which significant time periods in our nation’s history—Civil War, Reconstruction, Great Depression, Civil Rights, etc.—can be viewed. I appreciate most the breadth and depth of the history at Redcliffe.

“A significant portion of the documentation is information left behind regarding the enslaved population at Redcliffe and the other plantations owned by James Henry Hammond. This information is critical in conveying to visitors a sense of how the enslaved lived, worked and died. Our daily tours intertwine the four-generation history of the Hammond family as well as the enslaved (and later paid) African Americans of Redcliffe.”

The Redcliffe staff offer a regular schedule of programs focusing on African American history and strive to “give a holistic view of plantation life,” Raintree notes. “We typically have preservation projects going on, too. Right now we are working on repainting some of the brick in the basement that have deteriorated because of moisture.”

Aiken Master Gardeners maintain an heirloom vegetable and herb garden and vineyard at Redcliffe. Among the assorted yields are such quaint items as Bloody Butcher Corn and Jenny Lind Muskmelon. Each July, Redcliffe presents a “Growing History” project; in 2009, the event was based on the Depression-era garden of Julia Hammond Richards, granddaughter of James Henry Hammond.

Still visible, much as it appeared generations ago, is Magnolia Lane, the original entrance avenue lined by Southern magnolia trees 150 years old. Massive growths of prickly pear cactus and broad old oaks dominate the sloping lawn around the house. From ground level, the valley below appears idyllic; from Redcliffe’s upper floor, it’s stunning. James Henry Hammond, they say, used to gaze from there across the river to Augusta’s clock tower, 12 miles off.

Kathy Cook, a Redcliffe volunteer, observes with a hint of pride that “some” of the vast acreage is maintained by the staff, “but not very much. Most of that is maintained by nature.”

Some 2,500 to 3,000 visitors annually register for Redcliffe tours. Countless others are seen picnicking and strolling the grounds. Many are from the Augusta area. Internationals who work at the nearby Savannah River Site are engrossed by the scenic property and its profound history.

Raintree finds her work here fascinating from the standpoint of a researcher and gratifying from that of a tourism site manager. “We get a lot of repeat visitors.” ●



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