

Reading 3: Everyday Life on the Sweet Briar Plantation , 1841 to 1854 . Excerpts of Elijah Fletcher and his wife's letters.

In 1810 a young man from Vermont, Elijah Fletcher, left home to seek a position as a tutor in a far distant southern state. After an arduous journey of many months on a bay mare, he arrived in New Glasgow, Virginia in May 1811. He had accepted the residency of the New Glasgow Academy (a private school for boys). He settled into the neighborhood quickly and soon met one of the leading families: the Crawfords (who lived at Tusculum). In April 1813 he married Maria Antoinette, daughter of William Sidney Crawford. They began their married life in Lynchburg, Eiljah soon left teaching and turned to land sales, politics, and eventually farming. In the 1840s Elijah tired of town life and decided to retire to one his favorite plantations, named Sweet Briar after a species of rose favored by his wife. They had four living children: Sidney (1821-1898), Lucian (1824-1895), Indiana (1828-1900, also referred to as Indie or Inda Elijah's letters), and Elizabeth (1831-1890, most commonly referred to as Bettie in Elijah's letters). Below are excerpts from letters, mostly written by Elijah himself, which shed light into the daily operations of the Sweet Briar Plantation and the construction of architectural features at the farm.

A note on the authors and recipients of the letters: Elijah Fletcher owned Sweet Briar Plantation. Maria Fletcher was his wife. Calvin Fletcher is Elijah's brother who lived in Indianapolis, Indiana (the origins of Indiana Fletcher's name).

Source: The Letters of Elijah Fletcher (edited by Martha von Briesen). University of Virginia Press, 1965.

Christmas Day 1841, Maria Fletcher (Elijah's wife) writing to her brother-in-law Calvin (who lived in Indianapolis, Indiana)

....This has been quite a busy morning with the Children and servants [slaves] claiming and receiving Xmas presents. We have had a very severe spell of cold weather and they are filling their Ice houses and everything frozen up.

March 13, 1842 Elijah Fletcher writing to his brother Calvin

...I will embrace this opportunity to converse with you awhile as I am along this Sabbath day. Maria [his wife] and Sidney [his son] and Bettie [his daughter] being at one of the Plantations in the country, Sidney returned from Richmond about ten days ago, much pleased with the knowledge he has obtained in the healing art [he was studying to be a doctor], and has already begun his practice among the servants [slaves]. Bettie's winter Session was out and she wished to spend a few days vacation in the country before she resumed her school. She is always delighted with rural scenes, with her chickens and Ducks, and a great favorite with all of the Servants. She has a Henhouse at each plantation, managed by some faithful Servant who makes a due return of Eggs and chickens that affords her quite a smart Revenue.

Note at this point Sidney is about 21 and Bettie (or, Elizabeth) is 11.

December 26, 1843 Eiljah Fletcher writing to his brother Calvin

...I spend a good deal of time here {at Sweet Briar}and my other Plantations. Maria stays most altogether in Town [Lynchburg]. Our Servants our now enjoying themselves in perfection and I do every thing to make it a merry time with them. They all started from here this morning to Tusculum Plantation to a Quilting, and as it was muddy the girls went in a four horse Wagon. They will stay all night and dance to the Banjo and be back tomorrow. We have had some cool weather, but generally an open fall - no snow - no ice to fill our ice houses - not even any Frost at night for a fortnight past. I have not had to feed my cattle much yet, as I let them graze my clover fields in the fall after they return from the mountain pasture the last of October. Our crops of last year were very good - corn has been selling this fall for \$1.50 per

Barrel - Wheat, 75 cents - Beef, \$3. p. hundred - Pork has generally commanded \$4, but now it can be had at \$3.50. I raise enough of these things and to sell.

September 1, 1844 Elijah writing to Calvin

....Since the last of June we have had a warm and very dry season. It has much affected the corn and Tobacco crops. Everything looks parched up and dry and, the weather having turned cool, resembles December after the Frosts. Bettie returned from Georgetown the 1st of August. Lucian went for her. She will not attend that school any more, but will sail with Sidney and Inda [Indiana] for Europe in the latter part of October or 1st of November. May 9, 1847 Elijah writing to Calvin Indie [Indiana] & Bettie spend much of their time with me here and seem quite well reconciled to retirement and enjoy themselves and spend their time in reading and writing and sewing and music. They have here a very fine Piano and a splendid Harp that they purchased in London. They are likewise fond of rambling about and riding with me among the mountains. Yesterday morning they rose with Sidney on Horseback to Lynchburg and so I am along here today. Maria spends more of her time in town, not liking much the country.

July 18, 1847 Elijah writing to Calvin

We have some three weeks past finished harvesting a thin but good crop of wheat and are now securing a tolerable crop of oats. The season has been somewhat remarkable, with a cool atmosphere, the Sun shining with a dim obscure light. There has not been during the season more than half a dozen brilliant, hot, sunshiny days.

May 30, 1851 Elijah writing to Calvin

As I wrote in my last [letter] that there was a process going on of adding two Towers to the Brick Building here [the plantation house] and have had for almost the first time in my life to employ White Workmen [as opposed to using enslaved African American labor] to execute the work, and cannot well leave them.

August 20, 1851 Elijah writing to Calvin

We have had what we call a dry summer that will much curtail the Tobacco & Corn crops, but for a few weeks past the weather has been quite seasonable. My buildings have not progressed as rapidly as I expected this summer. The Brick work is not yet finished but will be in a few days. It will take the balance of the year to complete them [two towers added to the plantation house]. I have never done much in the Building way, always finding it better to buy a house than to build one. My Daughters [Indiana and Bettie] remain with me this summer, wishing to stay and superintend their building in which they take much interest and about which I permit them to exercise their own taste. When they get it completed they [will] send a sketch of it.

November 10, 1851, Elijah writing to Calvin

There has yet been no drove hogs arrived in these parts. The people seem quite ignorant of what they will have to give. Old Bacon is scarce and the prices are high and have [ruled?] so all the year. It is now worth in Richmond and here \$12 the hundred pounds. I generally kill my plantation meat about the middle of this month, about 100 hogs for this plantation, give from this number Five or six to Timothy [his brother, living in Lynchburg], which serves his small Family. My daughters will remain with me this winter, contemplating their northern Trip with me next summer. They are getting quite fond of their home, particularly this Plantation. They have taken a great interest in its improvement and sometimes tell me they will soon make it so attractive that they never wish to leave it. I take great pleasure in furthering their views and helping them make their home agreeable.

Nov. 7, 1852 Elijah writing to Calvin

I have spent the time since my arrival home very pleasantly in my usual avocations. The weather has been most pleasant and agreeable, "...rarely have I seen a more pleasant Fall, "...yet no Frosts to kill the vegetation and the season has been favorable to the late crops. We have seeded our Wheat, are harvesting our Corn and in a week will be ready to begin panting for the next years Corn Crop. There is here, as with you, quite a speculating demand for cattle. Purchasers from the valley and northern part of this state have been picking up all the cattle, large and small, they can find, giving a third more for them than the customary prices heretofore. It has not been much of an object heretofore for the people here to raise cattle, but this demand and these prices will stimulate the inhabitants to turn their attention to that business.

July 28, 1854 Elijah writing to Calvin

Inda & Betty spend most of their time here with me during the hot weather and rarely go to town except for the purpose of attending church. For the last month it has been quite warm and much showery wet weather. I rarely remember a wetter Harvest, which is with the oats. It took two weeks to secure the wheat harvest and two weeks for the oat harvest, longer than usual on account of so much rain. The wheat is now hauled up ready for threshing and the oats will next week be hauled up and [secured?]. The oats serve as the principal feed for this time, till the new crop of corn comes in, for our work animals. Corn is worth about \$1.12 1/2 the Bushel an very scarce. None to sell in our neighborhood and the country people go to Lynchburg to buy it. Tennessee Rail Road has brought in so far enough to supply the market. I most always keep some [on hand?] for fear of an accident. There are so many to feed, it would be quite alarming for me to be without bread for my people [a reference to his family and the enslaved individuals who lived on his plantations.]

Reading Questions:

1. Which daughter tended eggs in a henhouse? What did she do with the eggs?
2. How many children did Elijah have living on the plantation with him?
3. What do you think a "quilting" party was? Who participated in this?
4. What types of crops did Elijah plant?