An Antebellum Plantation in Virginia: Everyday Life and the Built Environment at the Sweet Briar Plantation

Constructing the Lesson

While the windows of Sweet Briar's plantation house look out on a college campus today, they once surveyed a central Virginian plantation. This antebellum farmhouse is still surrounded by the boxwood hedges that the owners planted to ensure privacy and create a manicured landscape. Today, some of these bushes stand over 15 feet high (Fig. 1). The farmhouse was originally much smaller and surrounded by a wooden fence (Fig. 3). In the 1830s, the plantation house and thousands of acres of farmland were bought by Elijah Fletcher, a politician and landowner from Lynchburg. Mr. Fletcher had decided to retire to Amherst, Virginia (Fig. 6) and try his luck at farming. He planted a wide variety of crops (for example, corn, wheat, rye, and some tobacco) and fruits (such as peaches, apples, and cherries). He also raised animals, including cows, pigs, and sheep. The Sweet Briar Plantation remained a functioning farm until the 20th century when it was donated to found a college for women. Named in honor of the plantation, Sweet Briar College remains a premiere educational institution for women. Although the college no longer farms the land, it does contain horse stables, many acres of hay fields, and an old dairy.

Mr. Fletcher did not work on the farm alone. He was assisted by dozens of enslaved individuals who lived and labored on the Sweet Briar Plantation. Many of these individuals worked on the plantation their entire lives and were buried in the Slave Cemetery (Map 2). Others lived past 1865 and after their freedom they settled in nearby communities, such as Amherst and Coolwell. The descendants of some of these individuals continue to work for the College today. Thus, some African-American families have over 170 years of experience making the plantation, and now the college, a successful enterprise.

By studying the architectural form of the Sweet Briar Plantation and an attendant Slave Cabin (Fig. 8), students can learn about everyday life on an antebellum farm. With advance reservations, school groups can visit the inside of the plantation house and view portraits of Elijah Fletcher and his family and study the antique furniture that they purchased during their world travels.
Teaching Activities

Getting Started

Figure 2: Sweet Briar House: "Then" (2003) and "Now" (2005)

Inquiry Questions
Question 1: How does the landscape differ in the two photographs?
Question 2: Why do you think the College changed the landscape?
Question 3: What function do the boxwood hedges serve?

Setting the Stage

The Sweet Briar Plantation was originally called Locust Ridge (Figure 3). Locust Ridge was built in the 1790s as a Virginian Farmhouse. The early watercolor illustrates the original building: a central rectangle, with a chimney at each end, an ornate staircase, a handful of trees (but no hedges), and a wooden picket fence.

After Elijah Fletcher bought the plantation in 1830, he began improving the agricultural amenities. First, he built grist and saw mills for processing wheat into flour and trees into boards. Second, he planted crops, which he tended to several times a week until the 1840s when he moved permanently to Sweet Briar from Lynchburg. Third, he built structures in and around the main plantation house: an ice house (used to store ice from winter ponds by packing them in straw), a henhouse, a barn, and even a cocoonery (for silk worms). In 1852 he added two towers to the plantation house, hence the difference between Fig. 3 and Fig. 1. Can you identify the towers? They were built in an Italianate style.

Sometime after Mr. Fletcher bought the farm he changed the name from Locust Ridge to "Sweetbrier" (and later to "Sweet Briar"). The story goes that his wife, Maria, loved the profusion of roses that grew at the plantation. The species of rose was the Rosa eglanteria, translated as "Sweet Briar." Today the rose serves as the emblem of the college. Try
your hand at drawing the flower in Figure 4. The college tried and came up with the icon, also pictured in Figure 4. An "icon" is a symbol that represents an idea or a theme. Here, the icon of a rose symbolizes the college.

During the 1830s and 1840s, Mr. Fletcher's two sons, Sidney and Lucian went to college (to Yale and William & Mary, respectively) and his daughters, Indiana and Elizabeth were sent to a convent in Washington D.C. for their education. Elijah's wife, Maria Antoinette Crawford Fletcher, divided her time among their houses in Lynchburg, Sweet Briar, and her mother's home in Kentucky. As early as the 1830s, Mr. Fletcher began bringing African Americans to Sweet Briar to make the farm successful. These individuals were born into slavery and had no choice in the matter. They served as farmhands, stone masons, carpenters, cooks, maids, laundresses, and caregivers for the Fletcher children. To the left is a photograph of Martha Penn Taylor (Figure 5). We know from a letter that she wrote in 1854 that Mr. Fletcher owned her sister Mary. Martha asked Mr. Fletcher to purchase her so that the sisters would not be separated. After emancipation Martha moved to Coolwell, Virginia and worked as a nanny for Indiana's daughter Daisy.

Mr. Fletcher lived out the end of his days at Sweet Briar, dying in 1858, on the eve of the outbreak of the American Civil War. By then his eldest son, Sidney, had moved to a nearby plantation called Tusculum (inherited from his mother's family, the Crawfords). In Mr. Fletcher's Will, Indiana inherited Sweet Briar (Figure 12), while her sister, Elizabeth, was given land to build a new plantation, named Mt. San Angelo (Figure 13). The fourth son, Lucian, was in bad graces with his family and inherited nothing. Mr. Fletcher's wife, Maria Antoinette Crawford, pre-deceased him, dying in 1853. After the Civil War, Indiana married a reverend from New York, James Henry Williams. Their only child, Maria Georgiana (who went by the nickname "Daisy") died at age 16 in 1884. When Indiana died, at age 62 in 1900, she left the plantation land and funds to found a college for women: Sweet Briar College.
Locating the Site

Map 1. Amherst, Virginia and the Sweet Briar Plantation (Figure 6)

Why is Amherst located near the railroad tracks?
What feature is represented by the blue blobs? The blue lines leading into them?
What is another name for "Route 29" on the map?

Map 2. Sweet Briar Plantation Landscape (Figure 7)

1. Sweet Briar House.
2. Slave Cabin (there is no dot, but it lies north of #3).
3. Garden Cottage, c. mid-19th century. Sidney Fletcher used it as a farm office.
4. Main College Campus (Ralph Cram Buildings, designed in the 1900s).
5. Fletcher Family Cemetery (used by the plantation owners). Here it is labeled "Williams Cem." (after Indiana's married name).
6. Slave Cemetery (used by the enslaved African Americans).
7. Route 29 (the main highway access)

What does the green represent on this map? The white?
Can you find the lakes from Map 1 on this version of a map?
What does the abbreviation "cem" stand for? Can you find it on the map?
Determine the Facts

- Reading 1: Excerpt from the nomination to the National Historic Register, 1970.
- Reading 2: Advertisement to Sell the Sweet Briar Plantation, 1860.
- Reading 3: Excerpts from Elijah Fletcher's letters, circa 1830-1850s.
- Reading 4: A letter written by an enslaved woman, Martha Penn Taylor, to Elijah Fletcher, 1853.
Visual Evidence

Figure 8: Slave Cabin behind Sweet Briar House
How many rooms do you think there are in this house? Why?
Who lived in this house?
What were the jobs of the people who lived in this house?

Figure 9: Architectural Plan of the First Floor of Sweet Briar House
Source: Matt Tyree, Craddock & Cunningham Architects.
Review the drawing of Sweet Briar House in Fig. 3 and see if you can find the stairs that are drawn on this plan.
Why do you think the walls on the plan are shaded in different colors?
What are the two large rooms labeled (a) and (b)? Can you find them in Fig. 2?
Figure 10: Millstone on the grounds of Sweet Briar House

Note: this circular object was one half of an apparatus used to grind wheat or corn. What do you think the grooves were used for? Why do you think this 100+ year old artifact was left behind? What is it being used for today?

Figure 11: Interior of Sweet Briar House, circa 1920s

Can you find the stairs in this photograph on the plan of the first floor (Fig. 9)? What stands to the right of the stairs on the first floor? How does this staircase compare to stairwells in your school?
Figure 12: Sweet Briar House, the home of Indiana Fletcher Williams

How many shapes can you identify on the front of the house?
What function did the covered porch serve?
Are the hedges symmetrical? Is the house?

Figure 13: Mt. San Angelo, the home of Elizabeth Fletcher Mosby (Indiana's sister)

How many columns are present on the front of this building?
Compare this photograph to Sweet Briar House. What is similar? Different?
How do the landscapes in Fig. 12 and 13 compare?
Activity 1: Everyday Life, Then and Now

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Our Way of Life</th>
<th>Sweet Briar Plantation Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Activity 2: Homes, Then and Now

A Virginian Farmhouse, about 1900. Anchorage Plantation, Albemarle County. Note the structure just visible behind the plantation house and the hedges.

Activity 3: Writing Exercises

Grades 9-11

- Write an expository paper describing life on Sweet Briar plantation.
- Write a television newscast informing your audience about Sweet Briar.
- Write a news article reporting a day in the life at Sweet Briar.
- Write a poem focusing upon a major point.
- Write a letter to relatives while posing as a member of the Fletcher family, or a member of the slave family, to inform them about events in your life.
- Write a diary entry representing a week in your life as a family member.
- Create a script for a play demonstrating a day in your life.
- Create a power point that teaches students about plantation life at Sweet Briar.
- Write an interview for Mr. Fletcher or a slave.
Grades 4-5

- Write a television newscast informing your audience about Sweet Briar.
- Write a news article reporting a day in the life at Sweet Briar.
- Write a poem focusing upon a major point.
- Write a letter to relatives while posing as a member of the Fletcher family, or a member of the slave family, to inform them about events in your life.
- Write a diary entry representing a week in your life as a family member.
- Create a script for a play demonstrating a day in your life.
- Create a power point that teaches students about plantation life at Sweet Briar.
- Write an interview for Mr. Fletcher or a slave.
- Illustrate a poster depicting life on the Sweet Briar Plantation
- Cartoons/comic strips

Grades 1-2

- Draw a picture to place on the chart in Activity 1
- Sketch a map of your school. Is it square? Circular? Rectangular?
- Write a poem about living on a farm.
- Write a diary entry representing a day/week in your life as a family member
Supplementary Resources

A worksheet to help students analyze the photographs, provided by the National Park Service:
http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/photoana.htm

Photographs of the Sweet Briar Plantation.
http://www.tusculum.sbc.edu/SweetBriarPlantation/history_photos.shtml

African American Heritage at Sweet Briar
http://www.tusculum.sbc.edu/AfricanAmericans.shtml

Historic Postcards from Sweet Briar's campus
http://briarpatchpostcards.pbworks.com/Postcard-Collection

Article about enslaved families
http://www.tusculum.sbc.edu/SweetBriarPlantation/enslavedfamilies.shtml

For Comparison:
View information about Thomas Jefferson's Monticello (Albemarle County)
http://classroom.monticello.org/kids/home/

Learn about Thomas Jefferson's Retreat at Poplar Forest (Bedford County)
www.poplarforest.org/

Compare George Washington's Mt. Vernon to the Sweet Briar Plantation
http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/index.cfm/

Visit the newly restored Montpelier, home to James and Dolley Madison (Orange Co.)
http://www.montpelier.org/

This lesson plan was modified from the National Park Service's Teaching With Historic Places on-line guide. For more lesson plans that use historic places, visit: www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/. For a list of lesson plans that use sites in Virginia, visit: www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/state.htm#va.

Please send feedback on this lesson to: Dr Lynn Rainville (lrainville@sbc.edu).
For the high resolution photographs and on-line readings visit: www.tusculum.sbc.edu