

Cove's Black Community

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If we moderns could go back in time 150 years or so, to the sanctuary of Cove Presbyterian Church of 1839, we might not realize where we were right away. The interior of the church looked a lot different then. If you look closely at the floor plan of Cove before it was remodeled after the storm of 1880, you can perceive in the seating arrangements the visible manifestations of a far different social reality. The members of Cove Presbyterian Church were physically organized, or segregated if you prefer, by race, sex and age. The pews on the south side of the church were reserved for white women, while the pews on the north side of the church were reserved for white men.

Towards the very back of the sanctuary there was a pen for young white children, who were supervised by Black female slaves. They may have intended to cover up the sounds of children when they placed the organ right up against the front wall of the pen. The space in front of the pen and the organ was taken up by the communion table, which was only used twice a year. In the back and along the sides there was an U-shaped gallery occupied by Black slaves. The values represented in this seating plan were undoubtedly hierarchical and patriarchal, racist and sexist.

What would it have been like to be a slave in such a place? First off, slaves were allowed to join Cove Church. They applied to the Session like everybody else. For example, the Cove Presbyterian Church Session records for October 30, 1842, state that "Taylor, servant of Richard Littleford, Daniel, servant of Addison Gentry, and Sophia Nelson, servant of H. T. Harris, and Beverley, a servant of William B. Harris, came forward and after having been examined in experimental religion were received into church membership." Black slaves were baptized into this church and, we think, took communion, though most likely they received the sacrament last.

As members, the slaves were subject to church discipline like the white members. In 1846, after citing him the second time for adultery, the Session suspended Jim, the servant of Mrs. Gentry, from the church. We can hope, but we cannot be certain, that this act by the Session represented a respect for slave marriages that was not present in the laws of the land. For slave marriages in the state of Virginia had no status at law, as Eugene Genovese, the author of Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made reminds us. This meant that slaves had no legal recourse if the master decided to sell a member of a slave family. Mathew Jarret, an ex-slave from Virginia, remarked on the usual practice of leaving out certain words in slave wedding ceremonies:

We slaves knowed that them words wasn't bindin'. Don't mean nuthin' lessen you say, "what God has joined, can't **no** man pull assunder.' But they would never say that. Just say, 'Now you married.'

We can also hope, and probably not prove, that slaves at Cove were spared the horribly patronizing sermons that white preachers directed to slaves everywhere else in the South. For example, the Right Reverend William Mead, Episcopal Bishop of Virginia, preached this sermon on whipping to an assembly of slaves:

Now when correction is given to you, you either deserve it, or you do not deserve it. But whether you deserve it or not, it is your duty and the Almighty God requires that you bear it patiently . . . Suppose you do not, or at least you do not deserve so much or so severe a correction for the fault you have committed; you perhaps have escaped a great many more and are at last paid for all.

So slaves were usually reminded of their lowly status, even in church. I wish I could say that the position of slaves and free Blacks appears to have improved in the nineteenth century, until slavery was abolished after the Civil War. But the fact is that from 1831 to 1865, the situation of Virginia Blacks deteriorated. The appearance of an organized abolition movement in the North and the Nat Turner Rebellion in Virginia terrified most Southern whites, who responded by embracing a reactionary pro-slavery ideology that restricted the lives of slaves and free Blacks even more.

Nonetheless, the slaves endured and somehow managed to preserve a sense of individual dignity and purpose under harsh and frequently degrading circumstances. There is an old slave song, recorded in John Blassingame's The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South that expresses in a gentle, humorous way their legitimate aspirations towards freedom. It is called "My Old Mistress Promised Me":

My old Missus promise me
Shoo a la a day
When she die she set me free
Shoo a la a day
She live so long her head git bald
Shoo a la a day
She give up de idea of dyin' a-tall
Shoo a la a day.