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"I Have Told You about the Cane and Garden": White Women, Cultivation, and Southern Society in Central Louisiana, 1852-1874

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“I Have Told You about the Cane and Garden”: White Women, Cultivation, and Southern
Society in Central Louisiana, 1852-1874

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

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B.A. University of New Orleans, 2004
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Abstract

This thesis examines cultivation in the lives of Sarah and Columbia Bennett between the years 1852 and 1874. The Bennett women's letters convey an intimate sense of the agro-economic preoccupations (and gardening pleasures) of these slave-owning white women, and the centrality of cultivation in mid-nineteenth-century rural Louisiana within a landscape of country stores, plantations, and people. As the lives of the Bennett women illustrate, white women's gardening knowledge and practice formed a cornerstone of central Louisiana society. The Bennett women's gardening knowledge and skill were primary components in the creation of a self-sustaining plantation household. By cultivating produce and other foodstuffs for consumption, the Bennett women made possible the family's participation in the lucrative market for cotton and other cash crops, a market that also tied their household to plantation economies elsewhere in the transatlantic world.

Keywords

Sarah Bennett, Ezra Bennett, Columbia Bennett, rural, Louisiana, Rapides Parish, Avoyelles Parish, cultivation, gardens, gardening, cash crops, sugar cane, cotton, filibustering, Cuba, slavery, women, transatlantic

While lamenting in an 1857 letter that “times are as dull as I have ever seen it on the Bayou,” rural Louisiana resident Sarah Bennett also noted with pride that “we have a fine prospect for a crop. Cotton grows fast it is almost as high as my shoulder.”¹ Sarah Bennett and her husband Ezra were planters and store owners on Bayou Boeuf in antebellum central Louisiana. Sarah’s enthusiasm for the season’s crop, however, stemmed not just from the anticipated rewards of a good year’s harvest, but also from her knowledge and skill as a cultivator in her own right: Sarah Bennett was a gardener. With the help of her children and the enslaved members of her household, she cultivated the produce and other foodstuffs that made it possible for the Bennetts to devote much of their land to cash crops such as cotton and sugar. As the lives of the Bennett women illustrate, women’s cultivation knowledge and practices formed a cornerstone of central Louisiana society. By examining the correspondence of Sarah and Columbia Bennett, this study will focus on the contribution of white women’s cultivation work to the agro-economy of central Louisiana between the years 1852 and 1874.

The surviving correspondence of Sarah Bennett and her daughter-in-law, Columbia, (the latter’s writings spanning the Civil War and postbellum years) make it clear that women’s gardening and cultivation knowledge helped to sustain the antebellum and postbellum Southern household. An 1876 publication demonstrated, albeit unintentionally, the importance of women’s work in creating what the author termed the “model” Louisiana farmer. Although this treatise was published after the Civil War, the work described would have been familiar to women who had cultivated Louisiana gardens in the antebellum years. Indeed, this ideal was the culmination of decades of agricultural, horticultural, and social practice, and described a

¹ Sarah Bennett to her son, July 26, 1857, Ezra Bennett Collection. Louisiana State University Hill Memorial Library, Baton Rouge, LA. All misspellings within quotes appear as found in the original documents.

prototypical male farmer who had a “self-sufficient” farm, yet also participated in commercial activities:

A model farmer in Louisiana . . . should make his year’s supply of grape and blackberry wine, and other kinds of wine; also cider, many kinds of preserves and jellies, and syrups of different flavors, all made of home produced fruits and sugar, . . . he should have home-made, home-dried and home-canned fruits of various kinds in abundance the year round He should have wool and cotton to send to Southern factories in exchange for Southern made cotton goods and cloth.²

The author describes the items that “he,” a “model farmer,” “should have.” This document, written by men for farmers and prospective farmers, describes work that fell largely within the domain of women. “His” syrups, preserves, and brandies would have been the culmination of many hours of the work of white women, enslaved persons (and, after the war, hired help), and children. Besides being an agricultural ideal, the compartmentalization of this work into an invisible “feminine” sphere is testimony to the gender ideals, although often times not the reality, of the era. Notice, too, that the model farmer’s areas of expertise spanned the realm of both domestic production and market commerce. In Sarah Bennett’s world, these two spheres also intertwined.

On July 26, 1857, when Sarah wrote to her son, Francis, about dull times and fine crops, she would have been about forty-two years old, with three sons living at home—Heber, age thirteen, Melville, age eight, and six-year-old George. She also had older children, eighteen-year-old Mary Ellen, nineteen-year-old Maunsel, and the eldest, Francis, sometimes known as “Frank,” who was then married and living with his wife in New York. As the only child living away from central Louisiana, Frank was the recipient of many of his mother’s letters. Sarah

² Dan’l Dennett, *Louisiana As It Is* (New Orleans: “Eureka” Press, 1876), 123-124.

wrote most of her letters from the home she shared with her husband Ezra on Bayou Boeuf, a short distance from the small town of Cheneyville, Louisiana, located in Rapides Parish.³



Image 1
Bayou Boeuf
Cheneyville, LA
Oct. 21, 2009

Sarah Bennett wrote frequently about both cash-crop and home-garden cultivation. In the month of July, when Sarah wrote the fore-mentioned letter, many gardeners in Louisiana would have been planting Irish potatoes along with “Melons for mango pickles, and Cucumbers also for pickling. Sugar Corn for late roasting ears.”⁴ Although blackberry bushes were available for purchase and planting, wild berries proliferated in central Louisiana and in July, Sarah’s children may have been able to find a few ripe blackberries still attached to their thorny brambles.⁵

At home in her garden, like many modern Southern gardeners, Sarah likely waged war with coco grass. *Cyperus hydra*’s bitter tubers have long infiltrated the Southern soil, stunting the root growth of desirable plants while lifting its blades through the soil to destroy a gardener’s dream aesthetic. One nineteenth-century source stated: “This detestable pest has completely overrun the country, and the gardener’s place is no sinecure, who endeavors to keep his grounds

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of 1860; Maunsel Bennett Gravesite Bayou Rouge Baptist Cemetery, Evergreen, Louisiana; Sarah Bennett to her son, July 26, 1857, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

⁴ Thomas Affleck, *Affleck’s Southern Rural Almanac, and Plantation and Garden Calendar, for 1860* (Brenham, Texas: New Year’s Creek Settlers Association, 1986), 86.

⁵ Affleck, *Affleck’s Southern Rural Almanac*, 14.

in order, if he has this curse of the vegetable world to contend with.”⁶ A New Orleans horticultural advisor also mentioned the curse of coco grass, along with the ever-present garden slug, and appropriate removal tactics for both.⁷

Sarah commented not only on her home garden, but she also opined on cash-crop, labor, and land rent prices. In March of 1852, when cold weather damaged the Bennett’s cane crop, the need for cash required increased cotton production. Sarah wrote of her husband: “He intends to plant a few Acres of Cotton, enough to buy Pork for the Negroes at least.”⁸ Supporting their household necessitated balancing the cultivation of garden produce and the cultivation of cotton and cane for cash.

In 1860, Sarah and Ezra Bennett’s homestead consisted of 164 acres of “improved” land.⁹ In both the 1850 and 1860 censuses, they reported that they owned fewer than ten slaves.¹⁰ Although Sarah wrote of the cash crops cultivated by the family and mentions some of plants that grew in the garden, her writings lack a detailed description of her garden. Therefore, to glean information about Sarah’s garden, we must examine the gardens of her contemporaries.

In the 1850’s, renowned landscape architect and journalist Frederick Law Olmsted visited a large plantation outside of New Orleans that had “nine hundred acres of tillage land,” far more than Sarah and Ezra Bennett’s homestead.¹¹ Describing this plantation’s garden, Olmsted wrote, “Behind this rear-yard there was a vegetable garden, of an acre or more, in the

⁶ Alexander Gordon, “Remarks on Gardens and Gardening in Louisiana,” *The Magazine of horticulture, botany, and all useful discoveries and improvements in Rural Affairs Vol XV (Vol. V New Series)* (Merchant’s Row, Boston: Hovey & Co., 1849): 248.

⁷ Jacques-Felix Lelièvre, *New Louisiana Gardner*, trans. Sally Kittredge Reeves (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 64-67.

⁸ Sarah Bennett to “My Dear Son,” March 13, 1852, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

⁹ Linda Green, transcribed and compiled by, *Louisiana Agricultural Census 1860 Vol. 2* (Westminster, Maryland: Heritage Books Inc., 2003), 61.

¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Census Slave Schedules of 1850 & 1860.

¹¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller’s Observations On Cotton And Slavery In The American Slave States Based Upon Three Former Volumes Of Journals And Investigations By The Same Author Vol. I* (New York: Mason Brothers and London Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1861), 320.

charge of a negro gardener; a line of fig-trees were planted along the fence, but all the ground inclosed was intended to be cropped with vegetables for the family, and for the supply of ‘the people.’ I was pleased to notice, however, that the negro-gardener had, of his own accord, planted some violets and other flowering plants.”¹² Since Sarah’s labor force consisted of only a few slaves, it is less likely that she could spare the manpower to assign a person to work solely in the garden, as was the case at the larger plantation. Sarah’s garden may have also shared some of the ideal characteristics of a Southern home garden outlined in *Affleck’s Southern Rural Almanac, and Plantation and Garden Calendar, for 1860*:

The shape should be an oblong square, that the plow and cultivator may be used as much as possible. One broad main walk up the center, at least eight feet wide, with a gate at each end, wide enough for a cart or wagon to pass; with borders five feet wide next the fence, all around; and a walk inside of these borders, also five feet wide. Dwarfed fruit trees may be planted alongside of all of the walks running lengthways of the garden, but not across the ends—that the plow and cultivator may have free access to the end walks, for turning. The less complication in the arrangement and laying off of the vegetable garden the better. Shade and ornamental trees, flowers, &c., are out of place there.¹³

The almanac recommended that there be a ready water source nearby, that the garden be situated, if possible, on a “gentle slope to the East,” and that it be accessible to the barnyard for the easy transport of fertilizing manure. Furthermore, Affleck’s almanac states that “the location should be one convenient to the dwelling, that the ladies of the family may have easy access; the garden being usually under their exclusive care.”¹⁴

Sarah Bennett was not the only letter writer in the family who gardened. Columbia Phelps Bennett, wife of Sarah’s son Frank, wrote to her husband while he served with the Confederacy during the Civil War. Columbia, a native of New York, was left with two young

¹² Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom Vol. 1*, 320.

¹³ Affleck, *Affleck’s Southern Rural Almanac*, 95.

¹⁴ Affleck, *Affleck’s Southern Rural Almanac*, 95.

sons, household slave Eliza (and possibly other enslaved persons), neighbors and family in Evergreen, Louisiana, a few miles from Cheneyville in Avoyelles Parish. From Evergreen, she penned many letters to her husband in the early war years. Later in the war, Columbia would flee to Texas along with many other Louisiana Civil War refugees.¹⁵

Sarah Bennett wrote the greater part of her letters in the 1850's. Columbia's correspondence was concentrated around the war years, with some letters written in the postbellum era. Recent study has begun to shed light on the previous elision of the role of women in Southern agriculture during the nineteenth century. Historian Nancy Grey Osterud writes that in terms of the market economy, women's work "appeared to be without value or became entirely invisible," as was the case in the 1876 "model farmer" treatise.¹⁶

Other scholarly works have linked the everyday lives of Southern people and households with larger political and cultural phenomena. In *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the South Carolina Low Country* (1995), historian Stephanie McCurry argues that the domestic politics of patriarchal slave-owning households contributed to the public political support of the institution of slavery and the Confederacy. T.H. Breen in *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (1985) also analyzes smaller social units in an attempt at understanding larger political and cultural issues. Breen asserts that tobacco cultivation in the United States created a distinct culture, and that the daily lives of tobacco planters within this culture gave rise to a political ideology that ultimately supported the American Revolution. Unlike McCurry and Breen, this study focuses on the women of a single family. However, this thesis shares with

¹⁵ Columbia Bennett to Frank Bennett, April 16, 1865, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

¹⁶ Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 224.

Breen's and McCurry's work the idea that the household is the origin of larger cultural forces, yet is also shaped by these cultural forces.

The impact of the transatlantic market on Southern society has been acknowledged by many, including historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988). Fox-Genovese writes that "by the time southern society came to be dominated by the master-slave relation it had become enmeshed in a transatlantic market within an unfolding and conquering world-wide capitalist mode of production."¹⁷ As demonstrated by historian Sam Bowers Hilliard, this transatlantic market speckled the rural Louisiana landscape with country stores that often handled only one or two cash crops.¹⁸

The cash-crop trade at the family's country store linked the Bennett women to the transatlantic market. The store was an element of their livelihood that maintained their socio-economic status and gave them the ability to purchase the enslaved people who worked in their home gardens and fields. In turn, women's home gardens provided the family with basic sustenance that gave them the ability to participate in the cash-crop economy. The home garden was also the setting for the formation of relationships and the maintenance of cultivation-based cultural mores.

The cash-crop culture surrounding the Bennetts fueled a political movement that supported the takeover of Cuba by Southern planters. This political idealism manifested privately within the Bennett household, and publicly at the Bennett store. Scholars have not yet shown how the gardening and agricultural knowledge and practices of white women in these slave-

¹⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 55.

¹⁸ Sam Bowers Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-860* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 3.

owning households, and their postbellum counterparts, can be connected to larger economic, political, and cultural systems. This thesis also shows that not only can meaningful connections be made between planter and yeoman households within a localized plantation society or between planter culture and national political events, but that households such as the Bennett's were integrally connected to the transatlantic world through plant cultivation.

By looking at the Bennett women's letters we get a more intimate sense of the agro-economic preoccupations (and gardening pleasures) of these slave-owning white women and an idea of the importance of cultivation in mid-nineteenth-century rural Louisiana within this matrix of country stores, plantations, and people. The Bennett women's gardening knowledge and skill were primary components in the creation of a self-sustaining plantation household. By cultivating produce and other foodstuffs for consumption, the Bennett women made possible the family's participation in the lucrative market for cotton and other cash crops, a market that also tied their household to plantation economies elsewhere in the transatlantic world.

Few explicit accounts of the nineteenth-century central Louisiana landscape exist, and as landscape architect Suzanne Louise Turner has written, because landscapes are "ever-evolving, little or no physical evidence survives as a record of the appearance of many past landscapes."¹⁹ As we will see, the evolutions of the central Louisiana landscape have left some physical remnants of the Bennett's world. In addition, testimony from *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), the autobiography of Solomon Northup, aids in imagining the Bayou Boeuf region in the mid-nineteenth-century. Northup was born a free black man in New York, but he was kidnapped and sold into slavery in central Louisiana. His depiction of the Bayou Boeuf region stems from his time spent there while enslaved in the 1840's and 50's:

¹⁹ Suzanne Louise Turner, "Plantation Papers as a Source for Landscape Documentation and Interpretation: The Thomas Butler Papers," *Bulletin of the Association for Preservation Technology* 12, no. 3 (1980): 28.

Bayou Boeuf is a sluggish, winding stream—one of those stagnant bodies of water common in that region, setting back from Red River. It stretches from a point not far from Alexandria, in a south-easterly direction, and following its tortuous course, is more than fifty miles in length. Large cotton and sugar plantations line each shore, extending back to the borders of interminable swamps. It is alive with alligators, rendering it unsafe for swine, or unthinking slave children to stroll along its banks.²⁰

In 1841, transported from New Orleans, Northup arrived at the plantation of William Prince Ford. Although Ford owned more than one tract of land in central Louisiana, his land outside of Cheneyville shared a lengthy border with the Bennett property.²¹ The “tortuous course” of Bayou Boeuf wound its way around Ford’s property and the Bennett land and store. From Sarah Bennett’s home on Bayou Boeuf, she could watch the sugar cane floating down the bayou, destined for New Orleans and other locales.

Ezra Bennett’s acquisition of this tract of land was part of a larger movement. A native of western New York, Bennett was part of the wave of immigrants from the East Coast that inundated the lower South in the antebellum period in search of opportunity. He likely purchased the country store on the banks of Bayou Boeuf in 1836, the year his store ledger books begin.²² By 1860, “American” slaveholders such as Bennett outnumbered Creoles by almost two to one in the area and dominated the production of sugar and cotton.²³ The expansion of slavery, displacement of Native people, growing opportunities for upstart merchants in the Deep South, and increased interaction of Southern agriculturalists in the transatlantic economy were centripetal forces that made the Bayou Boeuf region a stronghold for the Bennetts.²⁴

²⁰ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, eds. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 76.

²¹ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 61; See also Surveyor’s Map of Ezra Bennett property, February 8, 1876, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

²² D. Clayton James, “The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner, 1836-1857,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 4, no. 3 (Summer, 1963): 244.

²³ Joseph Karl Menn, *The Large Slaveholders of Louisiana-1860* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 1964), 83.

²⁴ Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass. and

As store owners and planters, the social position of the Bennetts was a hybrid one. For Rapides Parish, their planting operation was relatively small, possibly because of their added responsibility of store ownership. In 1860, large slaveholders dominated the parish owning an average of 126 slaves, possibly the highest number in Louisiana.²⁵ The same year, the widow A.M. Tanner, whose estate Ezra Bennett managed for a salary in the antebellum years, was the twenty-first largest planter in Rapides Parish with property valued at \$150,000 along with 81 slaves and 30 slave dwellings.²⁶

The Bennetts managed to make their way in life as planter-merchants. In the 1830's, their store ledger attests to financial struggles. However, by 1842, Ezra Bennett was able to journey back to his native New York and ship down an expensive carriage to Louisiana, demonstrating that by this time, they were middle class, at the least.²⁷ In 1850 and 1860, Sarah and Ezra owned seven and nine slaves, respectively.²⁸ From the 1820's to the 1850's, Louisiana sugar planters increased their output tenfold.²⁹ From the 1830's to the 1850's, Ezra and Sarah Bennett's farmstead exemplified this increase in sugar output. During this period, they also saw increased trade at their country store.³⁰

Comparing Ezra and Sarah Bennett's household information with the research of historian Stephanie McCurry further contextualizes the social position of the Bennetts. McCurry has defined South Carolina Low Country "self-working farmers" as those owning less than 150

London England: Harvard University Press, 2005), 166, 177; James, "The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner, 1836-1857," 243-244.

²⁵ Menn, *The Large Slaveholders of Louisiana-1860*, 31.

²⁶ Menn, *The Large Slaveholders of Louisiana-1860*, 137; James, "The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner," 251.

²⁷ James, "The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner," 249.

²⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Census Slave Schedules of 1850 & 1860.

²⁹ Rothman, *Slave Country*, 221.

³⁰ James, "The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner," 243-256.

improved acres of land and fewer than ten slaves.³¹ In 1860, Ezra Bennett owned 164 acres of improved land (along with 100 unimproved acres) and nine slaves.³² The Bennett land holdings place them just outside McCurry's definition of "self-working farmers," yet their slaveholdings did conform to her definition. In all likelihood, Sarah Bennett's household may have, in many ways, resembled that of the "self-working farmers" described by McCurry.³³ However, their merchant position (and Ezra's added income from managing Mrs. Tanner's estate) elevated them to the higher social echelons of rural Louisiana.

Louisiana Women, Gardens, and Class

The Bennett women likely did not work the cash or staple crops, but instead they directed and aided enslaved laborers in their home gardens. These gardens diversified their diet and provided a sometimes enjoyable pastime for the women. Some of Sarah's horticultural endeavors that sustained her household while supporting the ideal of the "model farmer" can be seen in a letter to her son dated March 13, 1852:

I have a good garden every kind of vegetable is up. I planted the flower seed you sent most of them are up one Blooming Bri[Illeg] The Foxgloves did not come up I have told you about the cane and garden. I will tell about the poultry I have 80 chickens hatched have 15 hens setting now.³⁴

Sarah's garden production cannot be divorced from her position as a slave owner. The "model farmer" ideal hid the labor of all household members, excepting the male head of household. Likewise, when describing her garden, Sarah also masks the labor of the enslaved

³¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the South Carolina Low Country* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 50-51.

³² Linda Green, *Louisiana Agricultural Census 1860, Vol. 2*, 61; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Census Slave Schedules of 1850 & 1860.

³³ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 50-51.

³⁴ Sarah Bennett to her son, March 13, 1852, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

persons of her household. Similarly, Grace Brown Elmore, a wealthy South Carolina woman, wrote of making jelly: “T’will be entirely the result of my labor since the sugar was bought by garden funds.”³⁵ Grace was the supervisor of the garden, but the work she claimed to be “entirely” hers was also the work of enslaved persons. They were likely the ones to plant and harvest the fruit for the jelly, and also the ones responsible for growing the other produce that funded the purchase of sugar to make the jelly. Enslaved household members may have also cooked and canned Grace’s jelly. Grace’s supervisory role in the garden is captured again in a March 13, 1865 journal entry. She wrote: “The garden is fairly under way. Had sweet potatoes planted yesterday, and as I past the back door just now I saw Caleb and Jack busy spading and planting.”³⁶ Because of the tendency of white slave-owning women to claim work done by enslaved persons as their own, it is often difficult to know from their writings what work Sarah and Columbia meted out to enslaved persons and what work they completed with their own hands.

Although their daily interactions with the enslaved people in their households can never truly be known, one of Columbia Bennett’s letters revealed that enslaved workers did perform garden work. Columbia wrote to Frank from Evergreen, Louisiana on October 12, 1862: “I have made Eliza set out two squares in the garden to onions and one to cabage, next week I shall make her spade up some more and plant it.”³⁷ This passage highlights Columbia Bennett’s role as household administrator, rather than callous-handed worker.

Historian Catherine Clinton has written on the often critical mistake of not identifying

³⁵ Grace Brown Elmore, *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Brown Elmore, 1861-1868*, ed. Weiner, Marli F. (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), 71.

³⁶ Elmore, *A Heritage of Woe*, 111.

³⁷ Columbia Phelps Bennett to Frank Bennett, October 12, 1862, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

wives and mothers as “overseers” of agricultural estates.³⁸ Although women’s labor as overseers is often overlooked, white women’s work as overseer often hid the work of enslaved household members. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese observes “their papers abound with accounts of barrels of flour opened, gardens tended, clothes washed, candles made—all as if done on their own.”³⁹ This was often the tone in the Bennett women’s antebellum letters, as though their directing the work was tantamount to completing the chores themselves. “Overseer” may capture one facet of the Bennett women’s household role. More broadly, the Bennett women, along with their children and enslaved household members, were the sinew that made up the Louisiana “model farmer.”

Solomon Northup’s autobiography serves as another example of the importance of slave labor in garden work in nineteenth-century rural Louisiana. Northup praises his owner’s wife, Mrs. Ford, for her benevolence, and he describes her garden as filled with pomegranate, orange, peach, and plum trees. Both Northup and Mrs. Ford worked in the Ford garden. Northup wrote: “And for three days I was diligent in the garden, cleaning the walks, weeding the flower beds, and pulling up the rank grass beneath the jessamine vines, which the gentle and generous hand of my protectress had taught to clamber along the walls.”⁴⁰

A less romantic view of the enslaved performing gardening work is seen in Virginia-born former slave George Jackson’s testimony: “De mistress scold and beat me when I was pullin’ weeds. Sometimes I pulled a cabbage stead of weed. She would jump me and beat me. I can remember cryin’.”⁴¹ Although we will never know how cruel or kind the Bennett women were to the enslaved while ensconced in their inherently cruel positions as slave owners, more often than

³⁸ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 30.

³⁹ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 129.

⁴⁰ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 109.

⁴¹ Interview with George Jackson. Work Projects Administration for the District of Columbia, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: The Ohio Narratives, 1936-1938*, Vol. 16, pt. 4, p. 46. www.gutenberg.net (Released August 18, 2004).

not, for women like Mrs. Ford and Sarah and Columbia Bennett, performing garden chores meant acting as an administrator who directed the enslaved rather than completing the tasks themselves.

In comparison, Ellen Morgan, a yeoman farmer's wife who lived on Indian Creek in the upland hills of Claiborne Parish in North Louisiana, likely did not have the option of leaving her garden tasks to others. Morgan corresponded with her husband Henry, a private in the Confederate Army, during the war. In April of 1863, from Vicksburg, he wrote:

Ellen you say that i ought to be at home to see you work. I wood like to be thare but thare is no chance. I am glad you are such a good hand to work. I expect that you will have to do it all when i git home. If I ever git home i will be to lazy to do anything at all. You said that you had been dropping corn. That is all rite. Go it like white lead. Ellen I want you to make all the corn and potatoes you can and slop the pigs.⁴²

Ellen wrote to Henry about cajoling bees from trees in order to collect their honey. She also gave a full account of the progress of their corn, potatoes, hogs, and wheat, writing: "Henry your wheat is find. Your oates is tolerbel. Your hogs has quit covering up regularly."⁴³ Ellen Morgan's work centered on producing the staples of their diet; no mention was made of fruits, flowers, or ornamentals. It is also apparent from these letters that Ellen had increased agricultural chores to perform alone during the war. Working under strained conditions, Ellen's farmstead had less of a chance of reaching the "model farmer" ideal than others, and she likely had fewer interactions with the cash-crop economy than Louisiana women of higher social standing like the Bennetts.

In contrast, the garden of Martha Turnbull of Rosedown Plantation in West Feliciana Parish spoke to her status as the wife of an elite planter. Her garden diary spanned sixty years

⁴² John A. Cawthon, "Letters of a North Louisiana Private to His Wife, 1862-1865," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 30, no. 4 (Mar 1944): 541.

⁴³ Cawthon, "Letters of a North Louisiana Private to His Wife," 548-549.

and catalogued a vast array of exotic plants that included ornamentals, vegetables, fruits, and roses. For her honeymoon in 1828 and again in 1851, Martha traveled to Europe, drawing inspiration from the gardens she visited.⁴⁴ In 1852, the same year that Sarah Bennett wrote to her children about her garden, Martha Turnbull also wrote in her garden diary. Her entries for that year focus primarily on her roses. For example, one entry from November fifth stated: “I have cuttings from Mrs. Mathews & Mr. Fort. I opened the roots of many Roses-& all the dark Roses such as black Tuscany-Negress etc.”⁴⁵

Slave (and in the postbellum period, tenant and servant) labor was the driving force in Martha’s massive garden project. Throughout her diary she mentions the many people who aided in creating her gardens. One entry from 1860 stated: “Jim has had 15 hands cleaning Garden for a month-but since drough it is getting clean.”⁴⁶ Hot beds, a technological innovation available only to the wealthy, allowed her to propagate pineapples and other tropicals.⁴⁷ Because of her wealth and international travel, Martha Turnbull was able to import azaleas and camellias to Rosedown at the very early dates of 1836 and 1837, respectively, allowing for their proliferation as common landscape features in Louisiana today.⁴⁸

Besides who actually tended their gardens, social status dictated the content of these women’s gardens. Martha Turnbull’s garden diary demonstrated a vast familiarity with scientific

⁴⁴ Martha Turnbull, *The Sixty Year Garden of Martha Turnbull Mistress of Rosedown Plantation 1836 to 1896: The legendary gardens of Rosedown as viewed through the words of their creator* (St. Francisville, LA: Rosedown Plantation and Historic Gardens, 1996), ii (unpaginated) and entry titled “Total of 1851-Trip to Europe.”

⁴⁵ Turnbull, *The Sixty Year Garden of Martha Turnbull*, November 5, 1852. For more information on nineteenth-century Louisiana horticulture see William Lake Douglas “On Common Ground: horticultural commerce as a unifying factor among diverse communities in nineteenth-century New Orleans.” PhD Diss., University of New Orleans, 2001.

⁴⁶ Turnbull, *The Sixty Year Garden of Martha Turnbull*, March 18, 1860.

⁴⁷ Turnbull, *The Sixty Year Garden of Martha Turnbull*, January. 1864.

⁴⁸ Turnbull, *The Sixty Year Garden of Martha Turnbull*, ii (unpaginated).

botanical terms, a documented signifier of upper-class status for women in England.⁴⁹ Martha's experience in Europe would have exposed her to new technical ideas for her garden, but may have also inspired an upper-class consciousness that drove her gardening projects. The Bennett women's letters suggests a greater variety of plantings in their home gardens than those of the lower-class Ellen Morgan, yet far less diverse and less focused on flowers and ornamentals than the wealthier Turnbull.

These sources provide examples of how garden labor differed amongst classes of white women in mid-nineteenth-century Louisiana. In her study of women in the early American Northeast, historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has written that "interdependence—and inequality" laced women's experiences together.⁵⁰ During the nineteenth century, a similar structure of inequity and interconnectedness typified white women's households in Louisiana. Women's gardens were workplaces, yet the makeup of the household hierarchy, along with the work duties attached to one's station within that household hierarchy, differed by social status. Household members depended on one another's work, although their relationships were socially unequal. As historian Thavolia Glymph writes: "The notion of private/public assumes that the household is a family and thus private. This has made it difficult to see the household as a workplace and, beyond gender relations, as a field of power relations and political practices."⁵¹ The household as a hierarchal workplace is obfuscated in the "model farmer" ideal, yet is perceptible in all of these women's lives.

⁴⁹ Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters And Botany In England 1760 To 1860* (London and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 173.

⁵⁰ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 53.

⁵¹ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sao Paulo, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

The machinations of a large household like Martha Turnbull's would have consumed the time of hundreds of people daily. It would have been anything but a private family-centered endeavor to maintain. The Turnbolls may have boasted greater wealth than other members of their community but, "eminence did not mean independence," as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has written.⁵² Most of the work of the "model farmer" within the Turnbull home depended largely on the diurnal work of the enslaved, and after the war, hired help. Martha's household, with quite visible and intricate international economic ties, surpassed the model's standard. White women on the lower rungs of rural society could not hope to complete the work required of the "model farmer," try as they might. Women with children too young to work, no slaves, and an absent husband would have had trouble sustaining themselves, much less living up to any sort of agricultural ideal.

The Bennett women had distinct advantages when judged against the "model farmer" ideal. They could rely on the enslaved, other family members, and in Sarah's case, her children, to maintain the garden if needed. Cash-crop cultivation and country-store commerce allowed the Bennett women to purchase laborers to perform garden work. This fount of labor freed the women to direct their garden chores in ways unavailable to poorer women. As we will see, the absence of slave labor may have forced Columbia Bennett to tend her own garden in the postbellum period.

Landscape

In all three examples, household garden production transformed the local landscape. These localized manipulations of the land were concealed within a larger framework of agricultural domination of the rural landscape. As the Bennett women gardened on their homesteads, large

⁵² Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 58.

swathes of the central Louisiana lowlands were being tilled for the cash-crop production of sugar and cotton. At the same time, certain areas of central Louisiana were left relatively untouched by the plow. The upland areas lacked adequate fertility for growing cash crops, and although unquestionably affected by this large-scale cultivation, the soil was not as readily exploited by agriculturalists.

Topographically, the low-lying and fertile Red River valley was a latticework of bayous punctuated by sandy, piney, wooded areas containing largely infertile soil. Solomon Northup illustrated the distinction between the plantation-rife lowlands and the upland Piney Woods in his autobiography:

The whole country about Red River is low and marshy. The Pine Woods, as they are called, is comparatively upland, with frequent small intervals, however, running through them. This upland is covered with numerous trees—the white oak, the chincopin, resembling chestnut, but principally the yellow pine. They are of great size, running up sixty feet, and perfectly straight.⁵³

In South Carolina, the fertile lowlands were controlled by the planter elites while yeomen farmers resided in the swamps or piney outcroppings. A similar system of land distribution seems to have been the case in the Red River area as well. The Piney Woods of the South Carolina Low Country, like the Red River region of Louisiana, served as a retreat from disease.⁵⁴ The bayou area was fertile but feared because of yellow fever outbreaks. Many people who had the opportunity retired to the Piney Woods to find respite from disease.⁵⁵ On more than one occasion, the Bennett family escaped from the bayou lands, journeying to the Piney Woods to fry

⁵³ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 65.

⁵⁴ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 23-28.

⁵⁵ James, "The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner," 245-246.

fish, pick mayhaws, and relax.⁵⁶

A jaunt to the Piney Woods may have been an invigorating reprieve from yellow fever, and time for idle distraction for middle- and upper-class white women and their families, but it was home for Native people and poorer whites. At times, absconding slaves also took up residency in the Piney Woods.⁵⁷ While enslaved in the area in the 1840's, Solomon Northup made the acquaintance of these Natives of the Piney Woods:

They live in simple huts, ten or twelve feet square, constructed of pine poles and covered with bark. They subsist principally on the flesh of the deer, the coon, and opossum, all of which are plenty in these woods. Sometimes they exchange venison for a little corn and whisky with the planters on the bayous.⁵⁸

Cash crops carved the central Louisiana landscape into regions delineated by the socio-economic, ethnic, and political status of their inhabitants. Accordingly, not only did a woman's home garden demonstrate her position within Louisiana society, but the specific place where a woman lived, vacationed, and worked within the landscape of central Louisiana bespoke her station. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the Piney Woods Natives differed greatly from the agricultural and merchant-class livelihood of Sarah and Columbia Bennett. Although the Native people's world was harshly shaped by the endeavors of the encroaching agriculturalists, their lives were not rooted in plant cultivation, as were those of the Bennett women.

The Garden

Larger cultural forces influenced the Bennett women's gardens, but the Bennett women's

⁵⁶ Sarah Bennett to "My Dear Son," June 28, 1857, and Columbia Bennett to "My Dear Boy," 1873. Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

⁵⁷ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 184-185.

⁵⁸ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 71.

gardens also produced culture. Historian Diane Harris has argued that “landscape is both the product of cultural forces and a powerful agent in the production of culture.”⁵⁹ The gardens were a microcosm in the production of cultural mores. As a confined space of human interaction, the garden enforced and created owner-slave relations. Unlike cooking, washing, and cleaning, generally, the work of enslaved women, the garden was a place of labor for both sexes. The accounts of Grace Brown Elmore, Solomon Northup, George Jackson, and Martha Turnbull all confirm that men were a fixture in the avowed “female sphere” of gardening. As a venue for close contact between white women and enslaved men, alongside heightened social taboos regarding white women and black male interaction, the garden may have also been a place of sexual tension.

The garden could also be a place where masters schooled enslaved persons in the coercive violence of slavery. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Douglass wrote that the abundant fruit of his master’s garden tempted many of his fellow slaves to steal. To counteract the hungry slave’s compulsion for theft, Douglass’s master tarred the fence surrounding the garden so that any slave caught with tar on his or her person would be “severely whipped.”⁶⁰ Through violent practices such as this, the garden became a place where slave owners strictly maintained the social order. Women like the Bennetts who worked in these forbidden, abundant gardens, contributed to the family coffers through their cultivation while at the same time solidifying their hegemony over their slaves.

The Bennett women’s garden was also the setting for the exchange of cultivation knowledge. Information about when to water, what to plant, how to prune, and other knowledge

⁵⁹ Diane Harris, “The Postmodernization of Landscape: A Critical Historiography,” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3, Architectural History 1999/2000, (September 1999): 435.

⁶⁰ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Westminster, Maryland: Modern Library, 2000), <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uneworleans/Doc?id=2002322&ppg=47> (accessed April 12, 2010).

passed between the enslaved and master. Although this horticultural knowledge could come from many sources, it was often regionally specific. For example, the likely “jessamine” mentioned by Northup in the sycophantic passage about his mistress is known by a variety of colloquial names (Carolina Yellow Jessamine, Yellow Jasmine, or gelsemium from its scientific name, *Gelsemium sempervirens*, to name a few). This vine produces showy, pungent, yellow flowers. It grows in warm temperatures, and its range ascends only as far north as Virginia.⁶¹ As a native plant of the Southeast, it would have been unfamiliar to many Northerners like Northup. Exchanges of gardening knowledge such as this one had the potential for both the enslaved and master to acquire further botanical expertise.

The physical gardens were not the only zones of transmission of cultivation information; the Bennett women transmitted gardening knowledge through their letters to family as well. These letters made their way to family members, sometimes accompanied by actual plant material and cultivation instructions, adding a didactic dimension to their exchanges. For example, Sarah Bennett wrote to Frank in 1852, “verbenas do not come from the seed but I will send a few roots those you sent were perfectly dried up and I expect the verbena will fare the same.”⁶²

Although the Bennett women wrote of canning, crop prices, sickness, family, labor and land in the antebellum years, they did not write about cleaning or preparing meals. The omission of this important work tacitly demonstrates where the domain of the enslaved lay within their household. Unlike rural white women in northern states who “were responsible for tending the vegetable garden, processing and preserving the year’s supply of vegetables and fruits, and

⁶¹ Wilhelmina F. Greene and Hugo L. Blomquist, *Flowers of the South: Native and Exotic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953): 49; Arlo I. Smith, *A Guide to Wildflowers of the Mid-South: West Tennessee into Central Arkansas and south through Alabama and into East Texas* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1979), 182.

⁶² Sarah and Mary Ellen Bennett to Frank Bennett, January 25, 1852, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

preparing meals,” enslaved persons within Columbia’s and Sarah’s households likely performed many of these chores.⁶³

Grace Brown Elmore, the upper-class South Carolina woman, echoed this sentiment when writing of her postbellum increase in housekeeping responsibilities. She wrote with frustration in 1867 that “one can now understand some of the exasperations of a northern housekeeper.”⁶⁴

Columbia may have felt similar changes at home after the war, particularly in light of the docile home life she seemed to have led even during the war, revealed in an October 12, 1862 letter to her husband relating a day fraught with anxiety and idleness:

I have done everything I could think of to day to make it pass pleasantly. I have read some I have talked to Bobie and played with the Baby. I popped some corn and made some candy for Bobie and now I am writing to you, but the lonesomest time is yet to come.⁶⁵

Reproduction and “Kin-Oriented” Labor

Although her children were Columbia’s pleasant distraction in this letter, a child’s labor was vitally important in an agrarian society like central Louisiana. Reproduction played a key role in the Bennett women’s relationship to the land. The mother-child bond was the basis for many of the letters in the Bennett Collection. The bulk of Sarah Bennett’s letters are to her children. Prior to Frank’s move to New York, Sarah had little impetus to write, as her children surrounded her on Bayou Boeuf.

In childbearing, Sarah, with her six children, was a typical white Southern woman. Until the end of the nineteenth century most Southern white women bore an average of six children.

⁶³ Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, 147.

⁶⁴ Elmore, *A Heritage of Woe*, 162.

⁶⁵ Columbia Phelps Bennett to Frank Bennett, October 12, 1862, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

During the war years when these letters were written, Columbia was in the early stage of her reproductive life with two young sons at home. The more children born to a farmer the greater the possibility for a self-sufficient farm. A family's ability to lay claim to land, and to cultivate that land, increased not only with the number of dependents, but with the ages of those dependents as they grew to working age.⁶⁶

Likewise, Nancy Grey Osterud writes of family farms: "The fusion of the family with the enterprise meant that farmers had distinctive goals; the long-range accumulation of property and the intergenerational transmission of the farm remained more important than short-term profits. The organization of work was shaped not solely by the labor requirements of farm operations but also by gender and generational relations among husbands and wives, parents and children."⁶⁷ The desire to accumulate property and to pass on the farm (along with the agricultural and horticultural knowledge that buttressed it) to future generations is readily seen in Sarah Bennett's letters. However, the Bennett family was linked not only through agricultural operations, but by market commerce as well. What the family may have lacked in agricultural short-term profits they may have been able to make up through their store's commerce.

Historian Scott Marler has noted that "kin-oriented" structures of economy prevailed not only on family farms, but also in rural retail establishments in the nineteenth-century South.⁶⁸ The Bennett women's letters highlight the importance of these "kin-oriented" economic structures. The labor of Sarah Bennett's children was essential to the running of the household. Sarah's son Maunsel worked in both the fields and family store. In a June 1857 letter, Sarah wrote:

⁶⁶ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 58-60.

⁶⁷ Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, 204.

⁶⁸ Scott Marler, "Merchants in the Transition to a New South: Central Louisiana, 1840-1880," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 42, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 182.

We have had several good rains lately the cane & corn have improved considerably. Maunsel and [Illeg] have a crop of corn, he says I must tell you he is leaning on the table eating the last [Illeg] of Black Berrys he expects to get this year we have Water Mellon and Figs and a plenty of the nicest. What do you think it is? (clabber)⁶⁹

By bringing children into the world of central Louisiana, Sarah and Columbia Bennett introduced them to a culture that was integrally linked to plant cultivation. Planting, directing slaves or servants, preserving food, and raising children to further these activities was doing the work of the “model farmer,” and the work that kept their family alive, prosperous, and in good social standing. The transmission of gardening and agricultural knowledge played a key part in upholding the cultural mores of the area.

The Home and Store

The 1850’s, when Ezra Bennett built the large wooden Greek Revival home at a bend in Bayou Boeuf, represented the pinnacle of a way of life deeply entrenched in slave-based cash-crop cultivation. The construction of a large new home attests to the family’s prosperity after nearly twenty years of storekeeping and cultivating the land. In 1852, Sarah wrote to Frank that his father was “still gathering lumber for a new house I expect to live here all my life.”⁷⁰ It is in this letter that she mentioned receiving verbenas from Frank, proving that Sarah had a flower garden before their newer home was completed.

Sarah and Ezra’s home and store still stand, but they have undergone a multitude of renovations over the years. Both structures have been moved from their original locations on Bayou Boeuf and are currently located outside of Alexandria, Louisiana. The house has

⁶⁹ Sarah Bennett to her son, June 1857, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

⁷⁰ Sarah and Mary Ellen Bennett to Frank Bennett, January 25, 1852, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

undergone recent restoration from its former state of disrepair, and it is again being used as a home.



Image 2

Bennett Home in Disrepair 1979

Taken from

http://www.historiccenla.com/bennett_records.htm Oct. 30, 2009

Image 3

Bennett Home Undergoing Restoration in 2007.

Taken from

<http://www.historiccenla.com/bennett.htm> on April 17, 2009





Image 4
Bennett Home
Restored
Oct. 21, 2009

A photo of the Bennett home from the 1880's documents the existence of the second floor, although the second floor may have been an addition. Currently, one can see the wainscoting underneath the stairs, suggesting that at one time the stairs were either in a different position, or did not exist at all. Undated house floor plans found in the Ezra Bennett Collection do not show a stairway or second floor.

Image 5
Ezra and Sarah
Bennett Home in
the 1880's Taken
from
<http://www.historiccnla.com/bennett.htm> on April
17, 2009.



Image 6
Bennett Home
Center Hall Stairs with
Wainscoting Visible under
Stairwell Oct. 21, 2009

In the 1880's, George Bennett, Sarah and Ezra's son, remodeled the home and store in a Renaissance Revival style, adding brackets, scroll saw ornaments, and the prominent dormer. A pediment was added to the store with an arched window in the center, along with arches in between the posts along the gallery and other ornamentation.⁷² These embellishments further point to the family's prosperity in the post-war years.



Image 7
Bennett Home
Detail of
Embellishments above
the Dormer Oct. 21,
2009

An 1876 survey of the Bennett property noted that the home was L-shaped, akin to how it exists presently. The undated house floor plan found in the Ezra Bennett Collection is not L-shaped and does not have a second story, although the configuration of the rooms in the sketch is nearly identical to the downstairs of the home as it currently exists. Without the upstairs and back section that creates the L-shape of the house, the home would have been a center hall home with two rooms on each side of the hall for living and sleeping for the family.⁷³ When stepping into the hall from the front entrance, the two rooms in the photo below are to one's left. These

⁷² Fred Daspit, *Louisiana Architecture 1840-1860* (Lafayette, Louisiana: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2006), 340-341.

⁷³ Surveyor's map of Ezra Bennett property, February 8, 1876. Ezra Bennett Collection, LSU, Baton Rouge.

two rooms, and their mirror-opposites, match the floor plan in the sketch found in the Bennett Collection. The opening between the two rooms in the photo below, however, was formerly enclosed, and it had a stove pipe outlet within the wall.



Image 8
Bennett Home
Interior Oct. 21,
2009

The same 1876 survey of the property also notes both “old” and “new” stores, further suggesting the family’s upward mobility over the years. A public road separated the home and store, providing overland trade access to the store. Bayou Boeuf rose closely to the back of the store, providing the option of water transit. In 1876, two stables and a blacksmith shop (abbreviated “B.S. Shop”) were also on the property. At the far edge of the property there stood one dwelling, one cabin, and stables, listed as an improvement by M.E. (likely Ezra and Sarah’s son, Melville) Bennett.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Surveyor’s map of Ezra Bennett property, February 8, 1876. Ezra Bennett Collection, LSU, Baton Rouge; Interview with Scott Anderson, current owner of the Bennett home and store, conducted October 21, 2009.



Image 9
Bennett Store
Front View
Oct. 21, 2009

Image 10
Bennett Store
Rear View
Oct. 21, 2009
Vessels on Bayou
Boeuf would have
Loaded and
Unloaded Goods
at the Rear of the
Store.



Image 11
Bennett Store
Faded Front Sign
"G.W. Bennett"
Oct. 21, 2009



Image 12
Bennett Home
Rear Door Opening
to Enclosed
Porch Oct. 21, 2009.

The 1876 survey of the property prior to the renovations of the 1880's imparts an idea of the geography of the property when Sarah Bennett was a resident. The property shared a long border with William Ford's farm, as the land was divided into long strips in the French arpent style. The dwellings and other structures hugged the bayou banks while the rest of the farm and woodlands extended back from the bayou. Five out-buildings surrounded the home. These may have been used for storage, livestock, or smoking meat. One of them would have been a detached kitchen. Further away were four cabins, a number consistent with the number of enslaved persons the Bennetts had owned, and a gin.⁷⁵ Somewhere within this area, likely behind the home and set back from the road, yet within proximity to the outbuildings, home, and cabins would seem the most likely place for the family's garden. If Sarah Bennett's garden was situated behind the house, she would have passed through the rear door pictured above to access it. This survey also demonstrates the store's circumscription within close range of the home, garden, and other buildings on the Bennett homestead.

⁷⁵ Surveyor's map of Ezra Bennett property, February 8, 1876. Ezra Bennett Collection, LSU, Baton Rouge.

Women's Agro-Economic Knowledge

Although the home and its surroundings were an important part of Sarah Bennett's world, she was not solely relegated to pondering "domestic" issues. As the war came to a close, concerns about acquiring labor and land began to cloud her correspondence. Sarah's assessment of the changing situation at home displayed her agro-economic knowledge. She wrote to her children in September of 1865:

I think it is going to be very hard to get labourers next year. No one knows what to do some are trying to rent land, but the owners are asking from three to five dol per acre I do not like the business you are going to follow. I think you might hire two negroes and make cotton. I know provisions are scarce and high, and land is hard to rent.⁷⁶

Sarah Bennett was abreast of the agricultural economy that permeated her life. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes: "Women do not normally experience their lives as manifestations of the laws of political economy, although they may register sharply the vicissitudes of economic fortunes. The papers of southern women are accounts of troubles with the servants and children, of struggles for faith, of friendships, and of turning hems."⁷⁷ One 1852 letter of Sarah's provides evidence of the vicissitudes of the sugar market and its impact on her family life. Although she had waited until the last of the sugar was sold, she was still forced to send her regrets to her son for not being able to pay a visit to New York due to "want of means" as the sugar "was so very low, it only brought 3 ¼."⁷⁸

Although Fox-Genovese's assessment of women's relationship to the "political economy" is correct in some instances, she downplays the role of women in shaping and changing their

⁷⁶ Sarah Bennett to her children, September 1865, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge. During the war, Frank Bennett was stationed in Texas and was employed in the production of saltpeter, although it is unclear if this was the business she was referring to. See Frank Bennett to "My Dear Little Son" Comanche Caves [Illeg], Texas August 28, 1864, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

⁷⁷ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 38.

⁷⁸ Sarah Bennett to "My Dear Son" March 13, 1852, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

fortunes. Sarah (and undoubtedly many other women of the period) tacked against shifting vicissitudes on more than one occasion. The 1865 letter to her children (quoted above) regarding the unfavorable economic conditions in the area demonstrates her attempt to sway family members with her agro-economic knowledge. Women like Sarah Bennett worked alongside household members, including their husbands and sons, to create their fortunes. While patriarchal relations may have overarchingly guided a household, the internal relations of a household were more nuanced and variable, as Sarah's 1865 letter confirms.

Within their households, the Bennett women exercised power over enslaved persons. This is especially apparent during the war years when Frank, Maunsel, and Heber were away. As Thavolia Glymph writes: "In the end, white women's agency has been profoundly underestimated By the outbreak of the Civil War, slaveholding women had become, in fact if not in law, central partners in slavery's maintenance and management, more solidly members of the ruling class in their own right despite whatever civil and social disabilities they suffered because they were not men."⁷⁹ As women's work silently upheld the "model farmer" ideal, the work of enslaved men and women in the garden silently upheld the ideal of the garden as white women's "exclusive" domain.

Another indication of Sarah Bennett's attentiveness to the agricultural market can be seen in a letter written from Grand Chenier, Louisiana, located in the southwestern part of the state, where she had traveled for the benefit of her health. Writing to her child in June of 185[Illeg], she describes her surroundings in Grand Chenier. Although she is presumably on the trip for rest, her thoughts consistently turn to the cultivation and sale of vegetables and fruits:

Plenty of vegetables, watermelons, Figs now ripe, peaches nearby ripe, plenty of corn, nearby fit to grate the Farmers have shipped their Potatoes to Gal-viston and sold them for

⁷⁹ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 31.

\$1 per Barrel George or Hellen has sweet potatoes fit to eat, Vegetations matures here quicker than any place I ever saw.⁸⁰

More importantly, familiarity with the larger agricultural economy put Sarah Bennett in touch with the world outside her household. Although we see Sarah Bennett's preoccupation with the production of food crops and their sale on the market, the family's store ledger also gives us a glimpse of goods available to Sarah that she would have been unable to produce herself. For example, silk handkerchiefs, calico, and waterproof boots were all for sale at the Bennett store.⁸¹ Salt, flour, coffee and tobacco were comestibles that could be had at the family store as well.⁸² These were all items that would have been more readily available to Sarah and her family because of her merchant-class position. Nancy Grey Osterud writes that "capitalist ideology and practice challenged traditional rural conceptions of the value of labor and habits of interdependence." Unlike rural women in other locales, as merchants, slave owners, and rural planters, it seems that the Bennetts may have been less likely to sympathize with Osterud's position.⁸³

The Bennetts lived in a capitalist agricultural environment, sustained by the purchasing of labor in order to create commodities to sell on the market. Not only did slave owners in the South purchase labor; they purchased people. The cash-crop economy fueled a decline in the variety of crops and concentrated the land into a tool for the production of cotton and cane. These developments, all key components of agrarian capitalism, made home food production even more essential when striving to provide a nutritious, varied diet for one's household

⁸⁰ Sarah Bennett to "My Dear Child," June 185[Illeg], Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

⁸¹ James, "The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner," 250.

⁸² Ezra Bennett Store Ledger, December 11, 1854. Ezra Bennett Collection. Louisiana State University at Alexandria, Archives at Bolton Library, Alexandria, LA.

⁸³ Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, 142.

members. This “reorganization of nature” was particular to central Louisiana, but it also had linkages to similar agrarian capitalist-based societies internationally.⁸⁴

Transatlantic Ties

Sarah Bennett’s livelihood depended on the intense cultivation of sugar cane and cotton. Although Sarah’s 1850’s letters are replete with references to these cash crops, there is no mention of the incipient filibustering plot brewing paces away from her front door. In the winter of 1854-55 Sarah Bennett’s son Maunsel was a seventeen-year-old clerk at the family’s Bayou Boeuf store. During a three-month period while Maunsel was employed, the store earned an astounding 600,000 dollars. Historian Clayton James points to the Bennett store’s possible involvement in William Walker’s efforts to overtake Nicaragua.⁸⁵ However, the more likely scenario seems to be that the family store was a meeting place for supporters of John Quitman’s filibustering attempts on Cuba.

John Quitman, former governor of Mississippi and filibustering aficionado, was, in fact, a customer at the store in January of 1855. His purchases included 1,300 dollars worth of tobacco, whiskey, gin, and brandy “for the boys” (suggesting the store was also a place of socialization). During this three-month period, a large quantity of ammunition, cannon, muskets, and grapeshot were listed in the store ledger purchases. The individuals who made these purchases did so anonymously, under names like “Peter Simple,” “Napoleon Bonaparte” and “Timothy Crafty”

⁸⁴ Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 57-59.

⁸⁵ James, “The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner,” 255-256.

(who purchased 500 pair of men's shoes).⁸⁶ A certain "Sir Isaac Newton" purchased an eight thousand dollar telescope from the Bennett store at this time.⁸⁷



Image 13
Bennett Store Interior
Counter
Oct 21, 2009
Evidence of the Bennett
Store's Functional
Evolution: the Former
Political Meeting Place
is Now Used as an Art
Studio.

Support for Cuban annexation was high in the 1850's. This support stemmed from several sources. Americans disapproved of Cuban domination of the sugar market. They feared the relaxation of slavery laws on the island, and Southerners desired to include more slave states in the Union. Despite Louisiana cane production, the United States still depended on Cuba for its sugar supply. In Louisiana, many blamed the Spanish for the flood of cheap Cuban sugar into the United States that threatened Louisiana cane growers.⁸⁸ Many believed that annexation would bring the Cuban sugar industry under American control, another compelling reason for Americans—especially Louisianians as inhabitants of one of the only areas in the United States to grow sugar cane— to support it (although others believed the venture would ruin Louisiana sugar growers).⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ezra Bennett Store Ledger, January 1855, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSUA, Alexandria.

⁸⁷ James, "The Tribulations of a Bayou Boeuf Store Owner," 256.

⁸⁸ Robert Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 43-44.

⁸⁹ Follett, *The Sugar Masters*, 16; Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations On Cotton And Slavery In The American Slave States Based Upon Three Former Volumes Of Journals And Investigations By The Same Author Vol. II* (New York: Mason Brothers and London Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1861), 50.

In the winter of 1854-55, John Quitman was rallying men from the countryside of Louisiana and throughout the South to accomplish previously abortive filibustering attempts on Cuba. Although the expedition ultimately failed, Quitman and his contingent had planned the invasion of Cuba for the first week of March 1855.⁹⁰ Quitman and his group were careful about whom they approached to join their effort. They characterized the Cuban annexation movement as a “Southern gentlemen’s” movement, wishing to distinguish it from other filibuster movements that had acquired reputations as bastions of the lower class.⁹¹

Further evidence to support the Bennett’s involvement in Quitman’s scheme is the fact that Peter Tanner, a Bayou Boeuf neighbor of the Bennetts, is listed as a customer of the Bennett store when Maunsel worked there. During Maunsel’s tenure as clerk, Tanner spent over five hundred dollars on cloth, buckskins, and other items.⁹² Tanner was an extensive landowner in central Louisiana, and was likely related to the widow Tanner that employed Ezra Bennett. Peter Tanner also had sugar interests in Cuba in the 1850’s.⁹³ In the case of individuals like Peter Tanner, the sugar planter elite of Cuba and central Louisiana were one and the same.

The Bennett store was a place where crops could be sold and bartered for goods, and a location where ideas about slavery, agriculture, politics and business came together. The ledger book from this period suggests that the Bennett store functioned as a space of male interaction. However, historian Scott Marler, in his study on central Louisiana merchants from 1840 to 1880, writes that “the Central Louisiana experience suggests that rural mercantile establishments may have constituted the leading edge of an emergent Southern consumer culture, one that was

⁹⁰ Robert May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire 1854-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 65.

⁹¹ Robert May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 279.

⁹² Ezra Bennett Store Ledger, December 6, 1854, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSUA, Alexandria.

⁹³ Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 93.

beginning to embrace women in a limited but important public capacity as shoppers with the capacity to disburse household income.”⁹⁴

If the Bennett store did host female shoppers during this period, it would be difficult to know, as their purchases would likely be recorded under the name of their husband or other male head-of-household. Although the Bennett women infrequently mentioned the family store in their letters, Sarah’s home’s proximity to the store meant that even if she never stepped foot inside, she would have been cognizant of the goings-on there. Thavolia Glymph writes that, “home as a political figure and space comes into focus only when a key misconception is set aside: that the household is a private space.”⁹⁵ Sarah Bennett’s household encompassed a highly politicized public space: the family store. Proximity was one factor, but “kin-oriented” labor linkages and family economics also made the store part of her domain.

Even if Sarah’s daily activities had not been altered by these store gatherings, the filibustering meetings would have been within her purview, and news of them certainly seeped across the road to her home. She may have even been privy to more detailed information of the extra-legal activities that went on at the store, especially since her teenage son was directly involved in them. And although we do not know her opinion of the filibustering expedition, we can see that through this store, her family’s interest in slave-based agrarian capitalism extended the boundaries of Sarah Bennett’s world to island nations she had never seen.

The War Years

In the spring of 1863, Union troops arrived in central Louisiana. Their presence brought the war to the Bennett’s doorstep, forcing many family members to flee, separating them from

⁹⁴ Marler, “Merchants in the Transition to a New South: Central Louisiana, 1840-1880,” 191.

⁹⁵ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 3.

their landholdings. As Federal troops left the Rapides Parish area over 3,000 enslaved persons followed, drastically altering the way of life for many in the parish.⁹⁶ Confederate and Union troops burned sugarhouses, gins, and factories, carving a path of devastation throughout the area.⁹⁷ Sarah and Ezra's homestead was directly affected by military movements during this time. Ezra wrote in December of 1863: "The Army while camped here killed a great many of our Hogs The Army burnt from five to six thousand rails for [Illeg] our fence is all gone from the Gin down below Carey's burying ground."⁹⁸

Thousands of Louisiana residents fled to Texas during the war, including Columbia Phelps Bennett and other members of the Bennett family, many of them renting or buying farms in the Eastern portion of the state.⁹⁹ Sarah Bennett wrote to her daughter from Cheneyville, Louisiana, in February of 1864:

Mr. Bennett complains of being very backward in his ploughing. I haven't planted a thing in my garden yet I have but a very few seed of any kind to plant, I do not see how people are to live on this Bayou another year, there are so few left to make anything, there is nine or ten widows in Cheneyville who depend on buying bread,¹⁰⁰

Sarah Bennett was not the only person suffering for lack of seed. The year 1864 saw a severe shortage of seed cane in Louisiana, leaving many to forgo sugar for cotton. The war years brought a variety of changes to the landscape of Louisiana. In 1863, fields around Opelousas customarily given to sugar now had corn planted. In order to nourish their armed forces, planting corn had been a priority for the Confederacy early in the war.¹⁰¹ The war also greatly disturbed

⁹⁶Charles Roland, *Louisiana Sugar Plantations During the American Civil War* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1957), 95.

⁹⁷Roland, *Louisiana Sugar Plantations During the American Civil War*, 65-66.

⁹⁸ Ezra Bennett to Frank Bennett, December 13, 1863, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

⁹⁹ Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Refugee Life in the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 36, 51, 92.

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Bennett to her daughter, February 1864, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

¹⁰¹ Charles Roland, *Louisiana Sugar Plantations During the American Civil War*, 30, 78.

seed and labor availability, and increased land rent prices. Martha Turnbull's garden suffered considerably during this time. She wrote in her diary in January of 1864 that "since the Federals landed in May neither field or Garden has been worked."¹⁰²

Central Louisiana faced severe economic setbacks during the war years and beyond. Besides the shortage in seed, planters in Rapides had an increasingly difficult time disposing of their sugar during the war. By 1862, New Orleans had fallen, and new markets would have to be opened in order for central Louisiana planters to sell their goods. Jefferson, Texas and Shreveport, Louisiana, by way of the Red River, became the two major entrepôts where planters could sell or barter their sugar.¹⁰³

Finding a market for the sugar crop was not the only serious problem facing the area during this time. The labor shortage had severely stultified the local economy. Sarah Bennett expressed her frustration with obtaining labor in a letter written in October of 1864: "I have been trying to get a little Negro but they are all so free they won't come."¹⁰⁴ William C. Thompson of Rapides also attested to the labor shortage when he wrote in November of 1865 that he hoped to hire enough contract laborers on his sugar plantation for the following year to cultivate only half of his estate.¹⁰⁵ The situation was indeed dire at the close of the war. Columbia wrote to her husband on April 16, 1865 from her exile in Cincinnati, Texas:

Oh my darling I try to be brave and get along the best I can but how hard it is. My own darling if this war should last several years longer must I stay right here by myself and not see you but perhaps once a year oh dear one how can I it seems to me impossible.

¹⁰² Turnbull, *The Sixty Year Garden of Martha Turnbull*, January. 1864.

¹⁰³ Roland, *Louisiana Sugar Plantations During the American Civil War*, 47.

¹⁰⁴ Sarah Bennett to "My Dear Daughter," October 1864. Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

¹⁰⁵ Moon-Ho Jung, "Coolies" and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar Production in Louisiana, 1852-1877" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2000), 92.

The remainder of her letter is peppered with concerns about finances, her desire to return home, and frustration regarding her husband's work situation and pay. Her anxiety was palpable. Frank, along with his younger brothers, Heber and Maunsel, fought for the Confederacy.¹⁰⁶ Heber Bennett, the youngest of the three, lost his life in the war. Sarah Bennett wrote brokenheartedly on September 29, 1865: "I never shall get over his death. it has made a reck of my mind."

Sarah Bennett did not live long after her son's death. She died in 1868, although her legacy as a horticulturalist lived on posthumously.¹⁰⁷ An 1890 publication spotlighting prominent local residents of northwest Louisiana noted in a segment on Sarah's son George: "There stands in the front yard of his old residence a mammoth pecan tree, the nut from which it grew having been planted by Mr. Bennett's mother in years past."¹⁰⁸

Management of the family store on Bayou Boeuf was taken over by George Bennett. The store prospered after the war. In 1865, Sarah had seemed less than hopeful of this possibility when she wrote that "we have two stores in Cheneyville and expect another soon. I think there will be more goods than money."¹⁰⁹

There is evidence that Columbia and Frank Bennett stayed in Texas for a time after the war.¹¹⁰ Columbia's letters from 1873-74 attest to her resettlement in central Louisiana and the resumption of her flower and vegetable gardening without the aid of slave labor, although she may have had hired help. During the post-war years, Columbia Bennett herself worked in her flower garden. On February 18, 1874 Columbia and Frank wrote to Columbia's mother and son

¹⁰⁶ Sarah P. Bennett to her children, September 29, 1865, Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

¹⁰⁷ Ezra Bennett Collection finding aid, LSU, Baton Rouge.

¹⁰⁸ The Southern Publishing Company, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northwest Louisiana* (Nashville and Chicago, 1890), 550.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Bennett to her children, September 29, 1865. Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

¹¹⁰ Sarah Bennett to her children, September 29, 1865. Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

in New York:

I have had two spells I thought I was getting well and went to work in my flower garden one day and got my feet damp and cold. I thought nothing of it at the time I was so interested with my flowers and Frank was helping me which is something rare but the next morning I was quite sick was afraid for a while I was going to have pneumonia but I am getting well now and working hard as ever. I want to work among my flowers to day but the ground is so damp.¹¹¹

From these letters we can see the transformation from her assigning the enslaved Eliza garden tasks, to her attributing her illness to her actual labor in the garden. It is also of note that her circumstances in the postbellum years were successful enough for her to engage in the luxury of flower cultivation. Although Frank is a seemingly infrequent gardener in the post-war years, we can only speculate about his antebellum penchant for gardening and how his gardening responsibilities may have changed over time. By 1880, Columbia was around forty years old and widowed. She had moved back to her native New York to reside with her mother Lavinie and she and Frank's two sons, Robert (Bobie), aged twenty-one, and Ernest, aged sixteen.¹¹²

The 1876 publication on how to become a model farmer sent the message that agricultural practices in Louisiana remained unchanged in many ways. Many things did remain the same in the Bennett family, including their trips to the Piney Woods. Columbia's account of an 1873 Piney Woods outing stated: "We gathered some Mayhaws I have put up fourteen brandy peach bottles with them and made ten cups of jelly. I was glad to get back because we had to dine so hard without any fresh meat and we have so many vegetables at home now." In the same letter she goes on to wish that her son and mother could have partaken in the day's dinner which consisted of "a nice turtle soup R[Illeg] caught a soft shell yesterday evening some young tender

¹¹¹ Columbia and Frank Bennett to Columbia's mother and son, February 18, 1874. Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU Baton Rouge.

¹¹² U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of 1880.

beets and the tips for greens radishes lettuce and onions. We have a mess of peas picked.”¹¹³

Ripened fruits and vegetables still brought many of the same chores and simple joys as before the war.

Change, however, was ubiquitous in the post-war years in central Louisiana.

Although the cultivation of sugar cane and cotton continued in the area, sharecroppers, contract laborers, and tenants replaced the enslaved persons that once toiled in Columbia’s and Sarah’s gardens, although at times, this evolution may have only been a technical change in title. White women with the means were required to hire garden laborers in postbellum central Louisiana, though the work remained, in essence, the same and was still characterized by “interdependence—and inequality.”¹¹⁴ Those who could not hire labor may have shared the annoyance that the wealthy Grace Brown Elmore felt when her household chores increased.

During the war, the enslaved Eliza had worked in the garden under Columbia’s instruction. After the war, Columbia wrote of working her flower garden by her own hand. In Sarah’s letters to her family before the war, she wrote about her vegetables, flowers, and her family’s crops, yet seldom mentioned the enslaved persons that made the cultivation of these plants possible. The model farmer ideal that had developed over decades remained intact, although the roles of the contributors to that ideal changed after the war. White women in central Louisiana still silently performed much of the work of the “model farmer” after the war, but they no longer owned those who also performed this work. While labor practices may have changed, the garden work of Columbia Bennett would still contribute to the family’s table much as it had before the war, as excerpts from her 1873 letter illustrate vividly.

¹¹³ Columbia Bennett to “My Dear Boy” Date Illeg, 1873. Ezra Bennett Collection. LSU, Baton Rouge.

¹¹⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 53.

The collapse of the slave economy tumbled the political and economic alignments that bound central Louisiana to the transatlantic world. The once robust agro-economic connection between Louisiana and Cuba faded. Filibustering, once a politically viable option for many, also reached a stalemate during the war years. Columbia's children would only have vague memories of the war, if they had any at all, and tales of thwarted adventure in Cuba would have survived only as family legend. Columbia may have passed down cultivation knowledge and practices to her children, but this information and skill would no longer support a viable agrarian slavocracy in central Louisiana. The social strata of central Louisiana would remain the same in many ways, but the dense fibers of cultivation-based slavocracy that had previously linked nations dissolved as postbellum central Louisiana halted into the Reconstruction years.

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