

A PLACE AT THE TABLE?

by Michael Twitty

An African American culinary historian takes an uncomfortable seat at an ancestral table—that of his fifth great grandfather—a white North Carolina slaveholder.

I found it on Flickr and it didn't look like much. It wore an ugly veneer of mid-20th century green paint and the elegant finishes of the mid-19th century that made it look like a plantation house had long been plucked away like a performer who had taken off her eyelashes and makeup. There, surrounded by cotton and tobacco fields, much as it was two centuries before the Civil War, I found my fifth great-grandfather's home, Oak Forest, in Nash County, North Carolina on the Tar River. I am his descendant through his grandson, Richard Henry Bellamy, a captain in the army of the Confederate States of America. Reverend William Bellamy, who died in October of 1846, held in bondage over 40 enslaved African Americans and died a prosperous man by virtue of their labor.

My boyfriend and I stood in front of the house looking at it in awe when an old dog and old truck came grumbling down the dirt path. Behind the wheel was the current owner of the land, a middle-aged white man, a direct descendant of the family who bought the property after the Bellamys moved on. "Can I help you," came with a confused and unsure look. His mood and tone quickly softened when I was direct about my purpose—I was here to see a part of my family history as a Bellamy descendant. To be a Black person in the South and confront slavery as a descendant of slaveholders is still a new thing. And yet, Southerners willing to have the dialogue readily say as a refrain, "We're probably related."

With a few introductory words, he pushed aside rusty barbed wire so I could pay homage to my great-great-great-great-great grandparents resting under a water oak. The Big House still stood minus a connecting hall to what was probably the dining room. We passed the remains of the kitchen, the office, and a few more out-buildings. There, surrounded by river rocks smoothed by time were my ancestors, DNA confirmed, and yet I felt very little connection to them. There was nothing bonding us but the literal chains of the past.

I got a brick out of the deal, a fallen brick that supported one of the chimneys in the Big House. That term, "Big House," was so powerful that nowhere in the African Atlantic world of slavery could you escape it. In Louisiana, Haiti and Guadeloupe, it was "Le Maison Grande," in Brazil "Caza Grande," and in the British world it was the Big House—the imposing monument to the planter's power. The Big House kitchen, usually but not always a separate ancillary building, is a familiar place to me—it is where I have reconstructed the meals enslaved people made for white slaveholders for over a decade. Between here and the dining room table is where I want to answer a big question. Is part of my inheritance the tradition of the Big House kitchen?

Reverend William Bellamy was a prosperous man. When he died 170 years ago he left quite the spread of goodies as his estate was picked apart by relatives and neighbors. He was a cotton planter in what perhaps was one of the earliest cotton belts after the spread of the Whitney gin, and apropos of the nearby river's name, his plantation produced naval stores—tar—from the vast Carolina pines on his property. If I was dreaming of discovering how all of my ancestors ate, this was my best chance at getting a portrait of how my white, patrician ancestors benefitted from slavery at the table.

Reading through the probate records made me feel incredibly ambivalent. On the one hand there was the thrill of being a culinary historian who turned the lens of investigation on himself. Here I was, digging up part of Southern food history to which I had a blood connection. On the other hand, this was no ambiguous Hemings and Jefferson courtship—this was a connection born out of clear sexual assault—something so common and so rampant that nearly every African American has European ancestry ranging from 10-50%. If this incident took place today, my third great grandfather would be in jail for rape of a minor; let's not forget that she was his father's property and that all of their wealth for generation after generation came from the labor of enslaved Africans and their descendants. Reverend Bellamy lived well. His probate records list every utensil in his kitchen, a space undoubtedly staffed by an enslaved woman and her family. Fish and livestock are coming to his table through the agency of enslaved hands, as are vegetables and herbs from the plantation kitchen garden; their over-burdened hands milked his cow and ran his dairy. His orchards, which made him extra income from distilled liquor, show yet another area where the expertise of at least one enslaved laborer was needed. Upon his death he owed "Negro Luke" for rice and onions—likely grown by Luke on the property or nearby. It was a frequent custom for slaveholders to barter and exchange money with their enslaved chattel for chickens, vegetables, even wild fruits or honey. The latter was also produced on his plantation and likely sweetened his biscuits and tea.

I imagine that from the little kitchen and its yard, domestic servants marched towards the Big House with boiled home-cured hams, rice, turnip greens, sweet potatoes, fried chicken and onion gravy, fried apples, peach cobblers, waffles, and likely red-pepper and vinegar laced barbecue and coleslaw to go with it. How do I know this? All of the raw foodstuffs appear in the documentation. On his walnut dining room table there was a silver set for his Java coffee and tea from Ceylon. He also had a cabinet of curiosities where he displayed a sawbill shark skull, which must have been a sight for the enslaved person sent in to fan the table with peacock feathers.

The word privilege is freely sprinkled these days. It feels bizarre and anachronistic to talk about silver settings and peacock feathers being used to fan a table of white

slaveholders in terms of “privilege,” but if we are interested in the subject, this is indeed where privilege began. The power of the Southern slaveocracy rested in their sense of rightness and righteousness about themselves. They believed that they deserved what they got because they were ordained by divine providence to be rulers and their enslaved to be drawers of water and hewers of wood.

Today the lines of food privilege are still clear and defined and this powerful divide still haunts us. Maybe things have improved slightly. I am not in the position of my enslaved ancestors but this is not because of my descent from their enslavers, rather it is from the struggle against them. I am the sum total of many sacrifices made in the past 170 years. And yet for many it is this paradigm—the descendants of the haves vs. the have nots—that has essentially spelled out the terms of not only meals but of long term health, education, and employment potential and the very needle on the spectrum of life and death. We cannot pretend change and empowerment have not occurred, and yet we cannot ignore the fact that our ancestral paradigms still persist—we are still living in the shadows of slavery when it comes to food.

Empowerment often comes from the same places as oppression. For communities of color to produce food would be a revolutionary act. The revolution has not been televised but it has started in earnest and bit-by-bit it is changing cities across the Northern and Southern rust belts. The slow growth of the food movement among some parts of African America is perhaps directly related to our perceptions of a rural heritage grounded in enslavement. We are burdened with associations of being taken advantage of, of performing brute labor and grunt work and being tied to the land. However we quickly forget that my slaveholding grandfather could not have survived or thrived without his enslaved. If today we directed our power towards our food systems, towards the land and its economic and environmental potential for the benefit of our communities, to create new paradigms, then the shoe might be on the other foot.

I would like to see a new food movement flourish with the full participation of African Americans, but we are still stuck with a painful legacy. Millions of us African Americans are among the disinherited. We derived no benefit from what little was given to us and we are left pondering if that is for better or for worse. Learning what my slaveholder grandfather ate and how he lived high on the hog gets me one step closer to understanding the heartbreaking truth of American chattel slavery—that it was a system that always left one half of the equation wanting food, freedom, equality, equity—and some things we know have never changed.