

HOPE'S REVIVAL

Historians reinterpret the interior of Hope Mansion for a more accurate depiction of daily plantation life in the Federal era of Bertie County

WINDSOR, NC – Gregory Tyler, curator at Historic Hope Plantation and museum, has been piecing together a gigantic and often perplexing puzzle. She and a small team of experts have taken on the daunting task of trying to recreate how Hope's interior might have looked like shortly after North Carolina governor and statesman David Stone (1770-1818) had the house built around 1802.

“We don't have a lot of personal items of Stone's to help us along,” Tyler says. “No letters from his wife naming the cook, saying that she cooked a great roast today--nothing that would tell us very much about the daily happenings at Hope or the layout of the house.”

Even if they don't have any of the personal effects of the people who lived there, curators at house museums can use written and visual records to develop an interpretation of how the place was furnished and used. The task becomes more difficult, though, when documentary evidence is limited.

To guide their restoration efforts, researchers at places like Somerset Plantation in Creswell County are able to look at photos from the Civil War period and actually see what the plantation looked like during that time. “The problem is that we don't have any snapshots,” says Tyler.

After being inhabited by early twentieth century tenant farming families, Hope was abandoned until restoration efforts began in the 1960s. By that time, when the first available photographs were made, the house was in ruins. There were few remaining signs of the estate's former grandeur.

It was then that Tyler's parents, John E. “Jack” and Margaret Tyler, began their effort to preserve and restore the house. Along with other members of the Historic Hope Foundation, they painstakingly acquired furniture from the period, matching the pieces to items listed in the estate sale ledgers recorded after Stone's death in 1818. They then placed the furnishings in the mansion based on how the furniture was grouped in those ledgers.

Looking at the inventory some forty years after her parents had begun consulting it, Tyler, a bookkeeper by trade, noticed something odd. “The person who bought an item and how much they paid for it were listed on the estate sale record. When you start seeing names like Gillam, Outlaw, or Pugh, you know you're in Bertie County.”

Tyler double-checked the names on the ledger with the 1820 census, and the mystery was solved. “Four pages of the ledger were out of order,” she says. “My mother was a librarian by profession. I guess she and my father assumed that when you receive a

document from the Wake County Courthouse, which is where the ledgers were when they first requested a copy, it would be in order.”

Jack and Margaret Tyler also didn't know that they were looking at the inventory for three different plantations. Besides his plantation at Hope, David Stone owned property on the Roanoke River at Coniotte Landing, which he had inherited from his father in 1796. He also had a plantation in Wake County called Restdale. The records for all three were mixed together in a fifty-page document.

“About two-thirds of the way down on the document, there is a bookkeeper's mark, a line drawn under the subtotal column of numbers in the middle of the page. Its purpose was to mark where the sale at Restdale ended and the items at Hope began to be auctioned. It's stated in an 1818 advertisement for Stone's estate sale that the order of sale would follow Restdale, Hope, then Coniotte, and that the sale for Restdale was to start with Stone's library, and that is exactly what they did,” Tyler says.

The sale at Hope also began in the library, which is located on the second floor of the mansion. “By looking at this section of the document, we can follow the auction from room to room and know what pieces belonged where.”

Tyler explains that with the pages now in the right order, the document is like a guided tour of the house in 1818. “If I can understand the estate inventory, I've got a snapshot.”

To make certain her “snapshot” is accurate, Tyler recruited the help of Jerome Bias and David Serxner. Bias is an expert in traditional cabinet making and vernacular furniture from different areas, particularly North Carolina. He is assisting with the meticulous reassembly of Hope's many beds, which used webs of rope to hold featherbeds.

Bias says, “I'm mainly here helping with interpreting the role of different household members--how they would have participated in the household, and how they used the furniture. That influences the placement of the furniture.”

Tyler knows information such as this can change things in a big way. “As it turns out, we had at least two rooms completely wrong. The way it was before you would think that the children of the household stayed in their rooms until they were eighteen and the slaves were never in the house at all, except for an enslaved nursemaid.”

In the new interpretation, Tyler has followed the same methodology her parents used but with a crucial difference--now the ledger pages are in the right order. Knowing where the furniture and other pieces actually belonged has helped her to figure out which rooms in the house were used by the family, which were used by servants, and in which rooms the lives of household slaves and the Stone family intersected.

Art and public history historian David Serxner knows this more accurate snapshot makes a world of difference. “A plantation was a self-contained economy that needed a huge

support network. They had to have cattle, pigs, crops for consumption, and crops for sale, and they needed a lot of people to help them maintain all of these things.”

Making these changes to the rooms will give the public a clearer idea of how life on a plantation worked, Serxner says. “We have this unfortunate tendency to ignore parts of our past. What we’re doing here is going to help people remember that there wasn’t just one family here. The family up at the big house was two families, the Stone family and the family--the network--of servants that supported them.”

“It’s an exciting time,” Tyler adds. “This major transition at the mansion will lead to a broader, more accurate, and more inclusive history of the mansion and plantation life during the home’s occupation during Stone’s lifetime.”

The Grand Re-Opening of Hope Plantation will be held on April 2. Displays documenting its transition are housed in the adjacent Roanoke Chowan Heritage Center. Visitors can tour the house and museum throughout Hope’s regular season, during special events such as its annual Harvest Fest, or by reservation. Obtain information or make a reservation to visit Historic Hope Plantation by calling (252) 794-3140 or by visiting www.hopeplantation.org.