

Sotterley in Six Parts

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Introduction

When writing about the life and times of John Hanson Briscoe, sooner or later the material is going to touch upon Sotterley Plantation. There are a number of reasons this is going to happen; and for a number of reasons I ended up writing six separate chapters, not just one.

The project on Sotterley started with an idea that I would write about the relationship between John Hanson Briscoe and Agnes Kane Callum. I was going to use Agnes Kane Callum's research as a set of literary bookends. One bookend would involve her research wherein she traced her ancestry back to the enslaved at Sotterley in the time just before the Civil War. The other bookend would be the time period in which Agnes Kane Callum and John Hanson Briscoe served together on the Board of Trustees at Sotterley. The material in between these bookends would concern the slow walk from slavery through emancipation to equality and from segregation to desegregation.

In order to fully put Agnes Kane Callum's story in perspective, I compiled the first chapter which concerns the period during which the Briscoes owned Sotterley. That ended up being chapter one. The relevance of this chapter to John Hanson Briscoe is obvious- among other connections, his father, John Henry Thomas Briscoe was the last child born inside Sotterley's plantation house.

I knew that the chapter on Agnes Kane Callum was going to be a standalone chapter; I felt as if her story was too important to be combined with any other story. And of course the chapter on the Briscoe period of ownership would similarly be a standalone chapter. But I had envisioned another chapter which would summarize the overall importance of Sotterley today. That chapter became "This Place Matters", which is the fourth chapter in this Sotterley story.

In doing all of the research for this book, I became aware of a treasure trove of documentary materials in the Sotterley Archives. I honestly did not even think to ask if Sotterley had archives previously. However, once I found the archives and once I started going through dozens, if not hundreds of folders, boxes, albums, videos, and audio files I determined that there was yet another story that had to be told. That is the story of the Satterlee-Ingalls period of ownership. The short story is this- the Satterlees became aware of Sotterley in the late 1800s and determined that they would own it. But they also determined at the very beginning of their ownership that the property deserved to be accessible to, and eventually owned by the public. This is documented in three generations of letters spanning almost seventy years. Consistently, the family wanted the public to eventually own and love Sotterley. Fortunately for Sotterley, and fortunately for the people of St. Mary's County, the Satterlee and Ingalls families had the financial means to purchase and restore Sotterley and deliver it free of charge to the Sotterley Foundation. This generous act by this family was simply too important to not be told. While telling the story of the Satterlee and Ingalls families, owners and occasional visitors to Sotterley, it also became relevant to tell the story of the tenant farmers and workers who lived on the Sotterley property and worked for the Satterlee-Ingalls families.

Then there is the story of myths, legends, and lore. I titled this "Sites Unseen". True historians who have read the draft of this chapter cringed because much of what is written are likely stories created by Hebert Satterlee in the early 1900s. Nonetheless, there are some

historical facts that support the possibility that these myths, legends, and lore may be somewhat true. Read this chapter and enjoy it, just don't take these stories to the bank.

Finally, there is a chapter on Arthur Fenner Lee Briscoe. Most inhabitants of St. Mary's County in the period between 1950 and 1980 knew him otherwise as "Buck" or "Mr. St. Mary's County". His father owned Sotterley at the turn of the last century. Buck actually lived at Sotterley for a brief period in his childhood. His connection with Sotterley continued through the end of his life. During the second half of his life, he was a one man developmental committee for St. Mary's County. As John Hanson Briscoe once told me, "He's the one who should have a book written about him".

What you will find in these six chapters is a collection of interviews that I have conducted combined with interviews conducted by Historic Sotterley Plantation, interviews conducted by students at St. Mary's College of Maryland, and oral historians associated with the Unified Committee of African American contributions. There are newspaper articles, photographs from Sotterley's Archives, and research material previously gathered by Agnes Kane Callum, David Brown, Jeanne Pirtle, and father-grandson team, Richard and Shawn Knott. Audio clips of various interviews are available, but you will have to download the latest version of Adobe Flash Player to listen to them. In addition, I received a great amount of input from members of the Sotterley family. This would have been a greatly different set of writing had I not been given unlimited access to Sotterley's archives. However, this is not an official Sotterley publication and it does not represent the Sotterley Foundation's position. The views and opinions are mine alone.

There is a lot of material here. Take your time and enjoy. Then pay another visit to Sotterley Plantation to relive the experiences.

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