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## Gone with the Wedding: The Historical Evolution of Southern Plantation Weddings and Subsequent Cultural Implications

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Gone with the Wedding:  
The Historical Evolution of Southern Plantation Weddings and Subsequent Cultural Implications

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Submitted to the LSU Roger Hadfield Ogden Honors College in partial fulfillment of  
the Upper Division Honors Program.

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## **Introduction**

Grand, traditional, *white*: people have used these words throughout history to describe Southern plantations. It is no coincidence that these exact words are also used to describe a typical wedding ceremony. These characteristics compound when one looks at the historical and cultural phenomenon of the plantation wedding. The scope of a plantation wedding is as broad as the sprawling estates on which these unifying ceremonies occur. This paper seeks to understand how plantations have historically evolved to become so aligned and intertwined with the American wedding industry to become the latest installment in a series of historical attempts to reestablish the power and profit of the plantation complex. Both wedding venues of antebellum origin and estates of postbellum origin that market themselves as "plantation-style" venues for weddings and other events are a part of the creation and maintenance of the plantation wedding brand. The plantation wedding itself had evolved over the centuries, from antebellum planting-class family weddings in the nineteenth century to being a subject of mockery in the twentieth century to couples spending tens of thousands of dollars for their own plantation weddings in the twenty-first century.

This paper does not seek to offer a moral or ethical rationale on whether or not people should get married on plantations. Instead, it offers an insight into the historical and cultural evolution of the plantation wedding, both in past and present contexts, to allow the reader to form their own historically and culturally informed opinion. The first chapter seeks to establish a fundamental understanding of what plantation weddings were in the Antebellum period. It includes an overview of what plantations were at the height of the Antebellum period, as it is vital to know what they were in the past to understand what they have become today. Then, another section

offers descriptions of what a plantation wedding looked like and meant for both the white planting class and the Black enslaved population of this era.

The second chapter describes the evolution of the plantation complex from the end of the Civil War to the present day. In order to fully understand the historical significance of the modern plantation wedding, one must understand the modern plantation. The way that the plantation complex has evolved over the last few centuries laid the foundation for how the public today directly interacts with the remnants of the Antebellum era. This chapter follows the plantation complex's transition from chattel slavery to sharecropping and plantation stores in the Reconstruction era and beyond. Next is an explanation of the plantation's decline in the mid-nineteenth due to agricultural mechanization, ultimately rendering the plantation model financially nonviable. Another section briefly discusses the history and Angola Plantation and its transformation into the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Finally, the chapter ends with a presentation of the chronologies of two antebellum plantations that exist today as both historic sites and wedding venues.

The third chapter traces the emergence and evolution of the plantation wedding as a cultural brand, tracing its roots from the Jim Crow Era to the present day. It shows the transformation of the plantation wedding brand from being a subject of mockery in minstrel shows to a desirable goal for couples in the twenty-first century. This chapter also describes how plantation weddings and the “Lost Cause” ideology have informed and shaped one another. The following section explains the significant influence that *Gone with The Wind* had on the development of the plantation wedding brand and mystique. The chapter ends with a comparison and contrast of antebellum plantations and postbellum plantation-style venues and their contributions to the broader plantation wedding brand.

This paper's fourth and final chapter presents the contemporary debate and interpretation of the plantation wedding brand. The first section presents the actions of a social justice organization, Color of Change, and its attempt to expand the public's understanding of what it means to get married on a plantation in the modern era. Finally, there are interpretations of those who do and do not object to plantations that function as wedding venues.

Following the outline above, this thesis seeks to create a deeper understanding of the plantation wedding and its historical significance and complexity. It answers the questions of *how* and *why* this phenomenon emerged. The scope of this paper brings together the work of countless scholars in various fields. History offers an understanding of how sentiments from the Lost Cause persist in plantations to this day, economics provides the reasoning for why the plantation complex has fallen and risen in terms of financial viability, and communications seeks to explain the way the public interacts with and understands the implications of a contemporary plantation wedding. While these fields of study encapsulate different vital aspects of the plantation complex, there has yet to be a definitive study of their intersections coming together to paint a bigger picture. This paper brings together the work and ideas from these three fields to provide a cohesive understanding of the plantation wedding as a modern function of the cyclical resurgence of the plantation complex throughout history.

The plantation wedding is the latest iteration of the plantation complex's attempts to remain culturally relevant and, more importantly, financially afloat. Other cycles of this phenomenon include chattel slavery, sharecropping and plantation stores, prison labor profit, hunting and sporting lodges, seasonal vacation homes, and historical museums. In one way or another, the plantation system has persisted throughout history by adapting itself to whatever changes are

necessary to survive. Today, the plantation complex has taken on the identity of a wedding venue to fulfill a prophecy of producing profit and power.

## **Chapter One: Plantation Weddings in the Antebellum Period**

### Overview of Plantations

At its core, an antebellum plantation was an agricultural labor camp, most commonly run by a white planter or planting family and worked by a labor force of enslaved men, women, and children. The number of enslaved persons on an operational plantation could range between a half dozen and several hundred, depending on the size and demand of the property. Though massive plantations with enslaved labor forces numbering in the triple digits existed, they were the minority. In 1860, just a single year before the outbreak of the American Civil War, nearly twenty-four percent of the white, landowning population in the South were slaveholders, owning at least one enslaved person. Only a tenth of a percent owned more than one hundred enslaved people of this twenty-four percent.<sup>1</sup> These statistics show how powerful and dominating the presence of slavery was for the South leading up to the way, even with more than three-quarters of the population having never enslaved a person or been a member of the planting class aristocracy.

For decades, the plantation system dominated the culture and economics of the antebellum South. While the plantation system functioned to fill the economic need of agricultural production, plantations also harshly divided Southern society along class lines. They created a rigid social hierarchy that placed wealthy white people of the planting class at the untouchable top, poorer white merchants and landless laborers barely above the bottom, and Black people, whether enslaved or not (though typically enslaved), at the lowest possible point. The overt dehumanization of the Black people enslaved on plantations by their white owners reduced the enslaved to mere articles of property. Perhaps this racist view allowed the white planting class to, in some way,

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<sup>1</sup> “Statistics: Slaves and Slaveholdings,” Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2016), <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/statistics-slaves-and-slaveholdings>.



reconcile the fact that they built their fortunes and livelihoods on the backs of humans that they subjected to unfathomable depths of torment and brutality.

Without understanding the roots of the American plantation complex, it is impossible to grasp the significance of how it has evolved throughout history, both in terms of the broader plantation tradition and specifically as a function of the plantation wedding. Also key to understanding the modern development of the plantation wedding is the knowledge that it did not begin as the “brand” that exists today. Rather, it has undergone developments and transformations over time and has emerged as a symbol of the plantation’s refusal to let go of its once glorious status and power. However, we must go back to the plantation wedding’s not-so-humble beginnings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a literal wedding ceremony on a literal plantation.

#### From the Planting Class Perspective

Members of the planting class – or those who sought to enter it – often got married on the plantations they had previously resided on or would soon inherit. The daughters of wealthy Southern planters often had handsome dowries that included a promise of plantation land for the newlyweds to take over after tying the knot. Perhaps one of the most famous – or infamous – planters in Antebellum history, James Henry Hammond, got his start in planting in this very way. The South Carolina senator and cotton king “was born the son of a schoolteacher but gained his vast fortune the old-fashioned way – by marrying a planter heiress.”<sup>2</sup> Hammond’s method was not unusual for its time. At the height of the Antebellum period, plantation weddings served one principal purpose: to create new planting families and, perhaps more precisely, new plantation mistresses. Hammond and other aspiring elite Southern gentlemen were likely inspired to seek out

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited Women, War, & the Plantation Legend* (Abbeville Publishing Group, 1995), 46.

their plantation fortunes by marrying an eligible plantation heiress because it potentially presented less of a challenge than starting from square one. These men likely saw this method as the quickest path possible to what they felt was their destiny: joining the planting aristocracy as soon as possible. This sense of urgency is reflected in the early age at which planters' daughters were married. While brides from the North were typically married around age twenty-four, "the average age of plantation brides was twenty."<sup>3</sup> Young men and even younger women forged their plantation legacies, starting with exchanging vows. This idea is the root of a plantation wedding: members of the planting class (or those marrying into it) getting married on plantations.

Furthermore, while the brand of plantation weddings has evolved over the past few centuries, some things have remained constant. Plantations were and remain to be status symbols synonymous with grandeur and lavish excessiveness. In *The South Louisiana Bride's Notebook*, a wedding-planning guide from 1983, there is a blurb about how "legend has it that the most romantic wedding took place at Pine Alley Plantation, on Bayou Teche in St. Martinville."<sup>4</sup> The section in the wedding-planning guide explains how the owner of the plantation, Charles Durand, took seemingly extreme measures to ensure that his daughters would have the most spectacular wedding in history. Though the physical estate of Pine Alley Plantation no longer exists, there is still a roadside plaque that reads:

OAK AND PINE ALLEY: Charles Durand, Pre-Civil War sugar planter, credited with planting this alley. In legend a family wedding party rode down the alley canopied by giant spider webs dusted gold and silver.<sup>5</sup>

These few short sentences in this bridal guide from the 1980s describing the "most romantic wedding in history" and the description of the roadside sign serve to show that the feelings towards

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Sternberg, *The South Louisiana Bride's Notebook*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> "St. Martinville, La - Creepy Oak and Pine Alley," RoadsideAmerica.com (Doug Kirby, 2013), <https://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/25426>.

this particular wedding – whether it actually happened or not – have not changed much between 1850 and 1983. The plantation wedding fantasy from the planting class perspective has enamored people for a long time.

#### From the Enslaved Population Perspective

“Weddings” for Black people who lived and labored on antebellum plantations looked very different than their white planting-class counterparts. It is perhaps ironic to even refer to these ceremonies as “weddings,” as enslaved marriages were often not formally recognized in the eyes of the law nor by slaveholders. *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice*, which was an encyclopedia of sorts detailing the slave codes and laws of each state, published in 1853, referenced Louisiana slave codes, stating:

It is clear that slaves have no legal capacity to assent to any contract. With the consent of their master, they may marry, and their moral power to agree to such a contract or connection cannot be doubted; but while in a state of slavery it cannot produce any civil effect, because slaves are deprived of all civil rights.<sup>6</sup>

The weddings of enslaved people whom slaveholders permitted to marry looked entirely different than the weddings of the white planting aristocracy. Some historians consider the instances in which slaveholders permitted marriage for enslaved individuals to be an exercise of a quasi-paternalistic relationship between a slaveholder and the enslaved. However, the existence of paternalism in American slavery is a contentious topic among historians and is a school of thought that is neither wholly accepted nor wholly rejected. Those who agree with the existence of some form of paternalism might hold that slaveholders “sometimes used the wedding as a means of rewarding loyal slaves,” even though the law did not recognize these unions.<sup>7</sup> However, altruism was probably the least likely motivating factor for slaveholders that permitted those they enslaved

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<sup>6</sup> William Goodell, *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice: Its Distinctive Features Shown by Its Statutes, Judicial Decisions, and Illustrative Facts* (New York, NY: American and foreign anti-slavery Society, 1853), 107.

<sup>7</sup> Clinton, *Tara Revisited*, 33.

to be married; ulterior motives prompted the weddings of the enslaved that slaveholders sanctioned. In allowing these ceremonies of a union to occur, masters sought to instill an emotional tie to the plantation. The other prominent motivation for slaveholders to allow these weddings were the potential for the married enslaved couple to produce children and therefore contribute to the enslaved population for the plantation. Even despite the presence of permission and sanction, plantation marriages for enslaved Black people often held little-to-no bearing on the actions of a slaveholder. Before Emancipation, about “half of all slave marriages in which both spouses were alive in 1865 had been broken up by masters.”<sup>8</sup> It was so unfortunately common for enslaved couples to be sold away from one another that many married couples were bound by the vows “until death or distance do you part.”<sup>9</sup>

However, it is essential to understand that not all Black marriages on prewar plantations were strictly under the permission of slaveholders. Sometimes enslaved individuals held their secret wedding ceremonies, as masters often prohibited enslaved people from marrying. Frequently, “slaves celebrated their unions with or without white sanction, commonly observing the traditional African folk ceremony of jumping the broom.”<sup>10</sup> Today, this tradition of jumping the broom is still used in wedding ceremonies, often by Black couples, to celebrate their heritage and honor their ancestors. Whether enslaved couples jumped the broom or had no sort of ceremony at all, they “knew they lacked legal protection and faced the daily reality of forcible separation,” mainly when their unions were not under the approval of the slaveholder.<sup>11</sup> With or without permission from a slaveholder, the circumstances of plantation weddings from the perspective of

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Mark M. Smith, “Till Death or Distance Do Us Part,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, June 9, 2017), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/till-death-or-distance-do-us-part-1497043471#:~:text=till%20death%20do%20you%20part,could%20create%20distance%20at%20will>.

<sup>10</sup> Clinton, *Tara Revisited*, 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> Tyler D. Parry, *Jumping the Broom: The Surprising Multicultural Origins of a Black Wedding Ritual* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 39.

the enslaved population, in contrast with the planting class's perspective, demonstrates the planting wedding's complexity from its very entrance onto the historical stage. In order to deepen and further understand the historical complexity of the plantation wedding, we must now look into the evolution of the plantation complex as the very institution that provides the very framework for this phenomenon.

## **Chapter Two: The Evolution of the Plantation Complex**

### **Establishing the New Plantation Tradition**

Prior to the Civil War, the American South was an agrarian society fueled by the institution of chattel slavery. Many slaveholders in the South feared that the dissolution of slavery would surely lead to the collapse of the previously rich and thriving economic and social system that had placed them in comfortable seats of power. After Emancipation, former slaveholders “were opposed to attempts of any kind to break up the plantation” on which they had previously enjoyed unbridled control and profit.<sup>12</sup> However, when the slaveholding aristocracy was forced to deal with the changing society around them, it innovated new ways to recreate and regain what it had lost, thus beginning the long tradition of adapting the plantation model to broader economic change. As a result, the plantation tradition has been manifested throughout history and into the modern era: sharecropping, plantation stores, convict labor leasing, hunting lodges, summer homes, house museums, and now, wedding venues. Before one can fully grasp the significance of what the plantation tradition has become today, it is integral to look at where it started.

### **Sharecropping and Plantation Stores**

Immediately following Emancipation, many slaveholders tried to minimize Emancipation's impacts, binding formerly-enslaved people to plantations through a newly-emerging system known as sharecropping. Most formerly enslaved people remained on the same sites they were previously held in bondage. This new system of neo-slavery, in which Black workers were bound to the land, allowed landowners to recruit a new workforce to fill the void left by the newly-abolished institution of slavery. Sharecropping entailed workers farming and cultivating a parcel of land that did not belong to them in exchange for reaping a small portion of the harvest and its

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Stuart Wayne, *The Reshaping of Plantation Society: The Natchez District, 1860-80* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 123.

benefits. Moreover, while racial boundaries did not strictly limit sharecropping, most laborers under this system were newly freedpeople.

One of the most significant differences between sharecropping and chattel slavery systems was the interaction between landowner and labor. The Reconstruction Era plantation complex saw the collapse of the previous relationship between the slaveholder and the enslaved and made way for a much “more impersonal form of interaction between planter and Black laborer.”<sup>13</sup> The previous internal social organization of plantation law between enslaved laborers and the planting aristocracy had crumbled and left the door open for the New South to develop its own commercialism system. In the wake of the war and hostilities, the desire to produce and sustain a rapid and substantial profit was the dominating force of this new, postbellum neo-plantation society, just as it was the dominating force for the antebellum plantation complex.

The sharecropping system saw the rise of the plantation store: enterprises located within the confines of the plantation that, on the surface, intended to provide an in-house solution for laborers to purchase necessities. The greater motivation of these plantation stores was the opportunity for planters and landowners to create yet *another* stream of revenue out of the plantation complex. Though owners initially stocked these stores with simple, everyday essential items, they quickly discovered that this new population of formerly enslaved Black workers was faced with never-before-seen semi-disposable income and the autonomy to spend it as they wished. As a result, plantation stores lined their shelves with "cheap, inessential goods that the freedman was anxious to purchase almost regardless of cost."<sup>14</sup> For a while, the plantation store existed as supplementary income for landowners or lessees to enjoy in addition to reaping the benefits of the sharecropping system.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-156.

Widespread crop failures in 1866 and 1867 "made planting itself a precarious venture" and was likely the catalyst for "a small rush to merchandising by the antebellum elite" to supplement their agricultural enterprises.<sup>15</sup> For many planters in this time, a prosperous plantation store might have been the difference between the property's survival or its ultimate collapse in the face of unsuccessful crop harvests. As the next few years passed, plantation stores rose in importance and profitability. As such, "the storekeeper, once of the periphery of the plantation economy, now came center stage."<sup>16</sup> The local merchant or shopkeeper, whose notoriety previously paled in comparison to the planting class elite of the antebellum period, had become a highly influential figure in the New South, especially as Reconstruction saw the rise and expansion of the merchant class. Plantation stores were just one way that plantations and the formerly antebellum elite attempted to stay afloat.

### The Rise of Mechanization

Though the plantation store intersected with sharecropping, it did not replace it. Instead, sharecropping remained a dominant force in the American South until the mid-nineteenth century, when plantations ceased to be agriculturally profitable. Though sharecropping persisted for several decades between the 1860s and 1940s, the system's decline in profitability began as early as the 1910s. The sharecropping-dependent plantation complex in the South faced two significant obstacles to its profitability in the 1910s: the introduction of the boll weevil into the southern plantation ecosystem and the "Great Migration" of Black workers to the North in 1915. The boll weevil was a beetle that likely entered the United States from Mexico at the Texas border in 1892 and had swept through and infested nearly the entire Cotton Belt by 1922.<sup>17</sup> These insects fed

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Fabian Lange, Alan L. Olmstead, and Paul W. Rhode. "The Impact of the Boll Weevil, 1892–1932." *The Journal of Economic History* 69, no. 3 (2009): 688. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40263940>.



almost exclusively on the cotton plant and then lay eggs in the remnants of the cotton plant, sometimes destroying entire harvests. Though the scale of the boll weevil's impact on the plantation complex, many historians agree that the destruction caused by the boll weevil jolted “the agrarian South out of the routine it followed for the four post-emancipation decades” and is commonly agreed upon as being one of the primary triggers of the “Great Migration” in 1815.<sup>18</sup> Many Black sharecroppers were landless and heavily dependent on the benefits of a fruitful cotton harvest from fragmented plantations that were already overcropped, so the devastation assured by the boll weevil was enough to inspire Black laborers to flee to less rural areas in the North. Between 1910 and 1920, nearly “10.4 percent (almost 200,000) of the Black populations of Alabama and Mississippi left the region.”<sup>19</sup> However, the plantation complex’s obstacles did not all leave with those who sought a better life up north.

A new decade in the American South introduced a new set of burdens to southern plantation agriculture. In the years following the nationwide economic crash from the Great Depression in 1929, the resulting actions from President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal indicated the “beginning of the end for traditional plantations.”<sup>20</sup> The New Deal established the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) in 1933 to raise and supplement the incomes of landowning farmers with one major caveat: “landlords were to divide government payments with their tenants.”<sup>21</sup> However, this welfare program led to the mass eviction of sharecroppers – particularly on cotton plantations – by 1934 and saw the beginning of the rise of wage labor. The popularity and presence of farm wage laborers increased steadily between the mid-1930s and late 1940s until

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 686.

<sup>19</sup> Jack Temple Kirby. “The Transformation of Southern Plantations c. 1920-1960.” *Agricultural History* 57, no. 3 (1983): 259. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3742453>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

labor-intensive agriculture on southern plantations took a nosedive by the 1950s as a result of the emergence of agricultural mechanization and chemistry that essentially rendered the farm laborer – and the plantation agricultural system – useless and outdated. In the three short years between 1949 and 1952, the employment of “unskilled agricultural labor dropped by 72 percent” along the Mississippi Delta.<sup>22</sup> The 1960s sealed the fate of the agricultural plantation as landlords demolished plantation buildings and structures to make room for sophisticated farming machinery. The domineering force of “factory-style” farming employed by large corporations shamelessly reduced the once-proud agricultural plantation system to seemingly insignificant family gardens that could not be economically viable. Though the waning power of sharecropping had been entirely eclipsed by mechanization by the middle of the twentieth century, the plantation tradition had long been developing its next source of economic and cultural control. Though some sharecropping plantations stuck around until the bitter end of mechanization, countless others had already abandoned agrarianism to pursue alternate paths to success.

#### Anomaly at Angola Plantation

Angola Plantation, for example, sought the bulk of its postbellum profits through convict labor leasing. The plantation’s original owner, Isaac Franklin, established Angola as one of his three Louisiana plantations in the 1840s; the other two plantations were named Panola and Loango. Though many believe that Angola Plantation was “named for the homeland of its first slaves,” this is merely a myth, and the truth behind the property's name is far more sinister and exploitative.<sup>23</sup> By naming his plantations “Panola” – the Choctaw word for cotton – and “Angola” and “Loango” – regions in Africa from which millions of people were sold into the International Slave Trade –

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>23</sup> Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 135.

Franklin established himself as "part of the global history of the industries that have made him his fortune."<sup>24</sup> He asserted "a right to take the ancestral languages and words of those whose land he held and whose bodies he exploited, and claim them as his own."<sup>25</sup>

After Franklin died in 1846, his widow, Adelia Hayes Franklin, inherited Angola "was considered the wealthiest woman in late antebellum America."<sup>26</sup> Adelia married two more times throughout her life and consistently tried to rebuild Angola's profit margins, navigating the outlawing of slavery after the war and the limited success of sharecropping. After several unprofitable crop failures in the 1870s, Adelia and her husband sold the property in 1880 to former Confederate military officer Samuel James. James held the private lease to the Louisiana State Penitentiary and all of its convicts and was one of the early pioneers of the convict leasing system. He relocated several prisoners from the penitentiary to Angola and greatly profited from leasing convict labor for over two decades. Even though he was not the original owner of Angola who was desperately trying to recreate what had been lost, James had the powerful opportunity to mold the former plantation into something that would afford him the same satisfaction of money and power. The state of Louisiana purchased the land from James in 1901 to operate a new, state-run prison while retaining the name "Angola."<sup>27</sup>

As of 2022, Louisiana is still home to the largest maximum-security prison in the nation: The Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Perhaps more disturbing than the fact that the former plantation is now a full-scale prison infamously known for what many refer to as "modern-day slavery" is the existence of a fully operational commercial golf course located on the prison

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<sup>24</sup> Joshua D. Rothman, *The Ledger and the Chain: How Domestic Slave Traders Shaped America* (Basic Books, 2021), 303.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>26</sup> Joanne Ryan and Stephanie L. Perrault, *Angola: Plantation to Penitentiary*, vol. 5 (New Orleans, LA: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2007), <https://crt.state.la.us/cultural-development/archaeology/discover-archaeology/digital-books/index>.

<sup>27</sup> Rothman, *The Ledger and the Chain*, 361-364.

grounds.<sup>28</sup> The golf course, called Prison View, was "built by hand by inmates... although inmates are not allowed to play on it."<sup>29</sup> Members of the public are permitted to tee off from stations marked with handcuffs, following a background check. While this example of Angola Plantation-turned-Penitentiary and Prison View Golf Course does not directly fall under the umbrella of the plantation wedding, it demonstrates the broader point that the plantation complex has always been an institution that is primarily concerned with procuring profit, no matter the means.

### Chronologies of Plantation Wedding Venues

While Angola is an important example of how one plantation sought economic viability outside of agriculture, its circumstances of becoming a for-profit prison were unique. It was more common for plantations that failed to remain profitable with agrarianism after the Civil War to transition into some form of recreational venue. Some became public, commercial venues such as boarding houses or hunting lodges, and others became private venues in the form of wealthy families' seasonal homes. Occasionally the original plantation owners pioneered the evolution of their properties into recreational facilities in an attempt to rebuild capital. However, it was much more common for planters to sell their property out of financial desperation to the highest bidder who was ready to forge their own stake in the continuing plantation legacy – typically an affluent individual or family whose money and means survived both the Civil War and Reconstruction.

However, as public interest or family money faded, many of these postbellum recreational venues evolved into a different kind of tourist attraction: the plantation museum. A plantation museum is a historical plantation developed into a tourism venue that is (supposedly) focused on the historic and cultural preservation of the site. While each plantation museum certainly has its

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<sup>28</sup> Bryce Covert, "Louisiana Prisoners Demand an End to 'Modern-Day Slavery,'" *The Appeal* (The Appeal, June 8, 2018), <https://theappeal.org/louisiana-prisoners-demand-an-end-to-modern-day-slavery/>.

<sup>29</sup> Adams, *Wounds of Returning*, 155.

own unique path to how it came to be, “many of these house museums were developed by white southern women who quite often [were] descendants of the white elite planter class of the pre-Emancipation South.”<sup>30</sup> In order to better understand this process of transformation from antebellum plantation to modern wedding venue, let us take a look at the chronologies of two present-day plantation museums that function as both historical sites and wedding venues: Oatlands Plantation, which used to be a family’s summer home, and Pebble Hill Plantation, which used to be a sporting lodge.

### *I. Oatlands Plantation*

Though there may not be detailed records of the chronological evolution from a labor camp to a tourist attraction for all plantation museums, some plantations have kept diligent records of each evolutionary shift. Oatlands Plantation in Leesburg, Virginia, is one of the few able to keep track of the property's development over time. Oatlands Plantation, which now goes by the name of Oatlands Historic Home and Gardens, was a wheat plantation established initially by George Carter in 1798. He named the property "Oatlands" in 1801 and began construction on the site's mansion in 1804. In 1800, Carter owned 17 enslaved people; by the 1840s, that number had grown to 85, and finally, in 1860, there were 133 enslaved men, women, and children at Oatlands.<sup>31</sup> George Carter married his wife, Elizabeth Carter, in 1835 when he was 59 years old, presumably at Oatlands.<sup>32</sup> When George died in 1846, his widow took over the plantation's operations until the Civil War with the help of her sons and overseers:

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<sup>30</sup> Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2002), 1.

<sup>31</sup> “The Carter Era, 1798-1897,” Oatlands Historic House and Gardens (Oatlands Historic House and Gardens, December 23, 2021), <https://oatlands.org/the-carter-era/>.

<sup>32</sup> Doug Ahlert, email message to author, February 23, 2022.

In October of 1861, Elizabeth was warned of an impending battle in Leesburg, so she fled Oatlands for her own safety. During this brief period, Oatlands Plantation actually served as headquarters for the Confederate Army in the Battle of Ball's Bluff – which turned out to be a major Confederate victory in the Civil War. In 1862, after the battle, Elizabeth sent her oldest son, George Carter II, back to Oatlands to take over the property. Despite George II and his wife's best efforts, the plantation could not sustain itself agriculturally over the following decades and fell into decline. The couple turned towards several other different ventures to revive Oatlands, first opening the mansion as a boarding house in 1890 and then later opening a school on the property. Though it was not a huge money-making venture, the Mt. Gap School remained open on the plantation property until 1953. When neither venture proved to be profitable, the couple sold Oatlands in 1897 to Stilson Hutchins, the founder of the Washington Post. However, Hutchins purchased the property primarily as an investment; he never actually lived there and rarely visited. He sold the property in 1903 to a wealthy couple from Washington D.C., William and Edith Eustis.<sup>33</sup>

The Eustis family had plans to utilize Oatlands as a summer home rather than their primary residence, using the property only about two months out of the year. In the first few years of ownership, the family took it upon themselves to restore and add on to the mansion and garden, which had fallen in disrepair.<sup>34</sup> William Eustis died in 1921, but the family retained the property until Edith's death in 1964. Her daughters Margaret Finley and Anne Emmet donated the Oatlands mansion and gardens to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1965, along with an endowment of \$500,000, likely inspired by Margaret's husband being a founding member of the

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Ray, "Living History: The Evolution of the Gardens at Oatlands," Oatlands Historic House and Garden (Oatlands Historic House and Garden, September 17, 2021), <https://oatlands.org/historic-garden/>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

National Trust. Both daughters and their families lived in homes adjoining the property and maintained possession of 187 acres of land. Margaret Finley and her husband passed away in 1977, and their estate remains with their descendants. While it is not entirely clear what became of Anne Emmet and her husband, it is known that in 2015 Oatlands purchased their fifty-five acres and developed it into one of three onsite bed and breakfasts.<sup>35</sup> Since it was donated to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1966, Oatlands has been open to the public. The property began hosting weddings in the early 2000s and continues to do so today.

## *II. Pebble Hill Plantation*

Thomas Jefferson Johnson was a veteran of the War of 1812; he was originally from Virginia and moved to Georgia several years after completing his military service. After he settled in the state's southwest region, Johnson purchased the three thousand acres that he would later develop into Pebble Hill Plantation in 1825. He founded the city of Thomasville, Georgia, in the process.<sup>36</sup> He began construction on the plantation house in the mid-1820s, and construction was completed by 1827. Pebble Hill was primarily a tobacco and cotton plantation that worked by enslaved labor. In 1830, there were twenty-one enslaved persons who worked on the property; the enslaved population of Pebble Hill grew to thirty-seven by 1850.<sup>37</sup>

In 1847, Johnson's only heir, his daughter Julia Ann Johnson, inherited Pebble Hill Plantation after his death. Two years after she inherited her father's estate, she married a local planter, John William Henry Mitchell, in 1849. The couple owned and operated Pebble Hill together through the majority of the Civil War. Prior to his death in 1865, Mitchell developed an intricate irrigation system that allowed Pebble Hill to expand the variety of crops cultivated on the

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<sup>35</sup> Doug Ahlert, email message to author, February 23, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> "Our History," City of Thomasville (City of Thomasville, 2022), <https://thomasville.org/our-history>.

<sup>37</sup> "A Brief History of Pebble Hill Plantation," Pebble Hill Plantation (PHP, 2022), <https://pebblehill.com/about-us>.

grounds. As a result, Pebble Hill became one of the largest rice-producing plantations in Georgia. Julia continued to run the plantation on her own throughout the Reconstruction era and into the early Jim Crow era as a sharecropping plantation. Many of the formerly enslaved at Pebble Hill remained as sharecroppers. Pebble Hill continued to operate this way until Julia's death in the mid-1880s.<sup>38</sup>

Emancipation was extremely financially taxing on the region's plantations, and Thomasville sought a way to restart the area's economy. The region marketed itself as a pleasant escape from harsh northern winters conditions. As a result, Thomasville became very popular in the 1870s and 1880s among affluent Northerners as a resort getaway. With the abundance of plantations going under following Emancipation, Northern families bought the estates to transform them into winter homes and wild game hunting lodges, including Pebble Hill.<sup>39</sup>

The house at Pebble Hill had remained vacant after Julia's death until 1896 when Howard Melville Hanna purchased the house and all the acreage. Hanna was a businessman from Cleveland, Ohio, who founded an iron processing company with his brother and operated an oil refinery (which he later sold to John Rockefeller of Standard Oil). He had also served as the Paymaster for the Union Navy in the Civil War. The Hanna family converted Pebble Hill from a working farm into their family's winter home and hunting estate. In 1901, Hanna gifted Pebble Hill to his daughter, Kate Hanna Ireland. That same year, the Log Cabin School was built on the plantation grounds so that Kate's children could be tutored there during their winter stays. When her father died in 1921, Kate inherited one-third of his \$11 million fortune. During her ownership of Pebble Hill, she restored and added to several of the buildings on the property's grounds.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Lilly Pinkas and Joseph Pinkas, *Guide to the Gardens of Georgia* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 2000), 43.

<sup>40</sup> "Pebble Hill Plantation," House Histree (Sampo, 2022), <https://househistree.com/houses/pebble-hill-plantation>.



In 1934, a fire destroyed Pebble Hill's main mansion. Kate commissioned Abram Garfield, the son of President James Garfield, to design and oversee the building of a new main house; this is the house that stands on the grounds of Pebble Hill today. After Kate's death in 1936, Kate's daughter Elisabeth "Pansy" Ireland inherited the entire estate. Pansy established and endowed the Pebble Hill Foundation in 1950. When Pansy died in 1978, she included in her will that the property of Pebble Hill would go to the foundation and become a house museum that would be open to the public. Five years after Pansy's death, Pebble Hill became a house museum in October of 1983 and has been open to the public ever since. It is currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Pebble Hill continues to operate as a public museum and, as of at least 2011 – but possibly earlier – hosts dozens of weddings and other events annually.<sup>41</sup>

Oatlands and Pebble Hill are only two examples of the countless plantations that successfully made it to the complex's life cycle turning point. At this point, the plantation complex began to rebrand itself societally. Though these estates remained directly tied to the wealthy and elite, their cultural connotation began to change. No longer were they actively churning out crimes against humanity; they became domains of refuge for affluent populations to escape to in pursuit of recreation and relaxation. These estates retained their appeal to affluent whites who sought their own antebellum oases in a postbellum world, thus laying the framework for the plantation tradition to hold permanent residency in the fantasies of future generations.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Chapter Three: The Emergence of the “Plantation Wedding” Brand**

#### **From Blackface to Whiteface**

The thoughts associated with a plantation wedding were not always ones filled with romanticization and nostalgia for the “Old South.” In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Black weddings on plantations were often viewed by white people at the time through the lens of being an entertaining spectacle for white folks, and many American minstrel shows featured plantation weddings as a prominent comedic theme. It was not entirely uncommon for white people to attend the weddings of Black couples on plantations following Emancipation. However, these wedding guests – or perhaps a more apt title would be spectators – were more prepared to be entertained than to provide well wishes to the newlyweds. A columnist for *The Daily Inter Ocean* newspaper out of Chicago, Illinois, wrote a detailed description of the wedding of a Black couple they had attended with a group of white folks in Louisiana in 1881. The author wrote in great detail of the “most distinguished wedding of the season in a colored high life upon a Louisiana sugar plantation” and ended the column by stating that “every member of the party voted that it was better than a week of Sarah Bernhardt or a whole season of Barnum's circus.”<sup>42</sup> Even without mocking the wedding ceremony outright, the author showed how white people viewed the institution of Black marriage as being a less-than-serious novelty that reduced this bride and groom to being nothing more than circus performers.

In minstrel shows, actors would don blackface and portray their crude perceptions and mockeries of a wedding between enslaved individuals. The 1912 edition of the yearly archival magazine *To Dragma* from the Panhellenic sorority Alpha Omicron Pi details an annual Christmas party featuring a minstrel show by first-year sorority students. The magazine mentions that “the

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<sup>42</sup> O. W. N., “Graphic Description of a Wedding in High Life on a Louisiana Sugar Plantation,” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, April 2, 1881, Volume 10, Issue 8, p. 9.

minstrel was unusually good this year” and described how “nine girls put on a black face plantation wedding which was very clever and original.”<sup>43</sup> In this example, a group of white college women both participated in and were entertained by the seemingly absurd and hilarious event of a Black couple getting married on a plantation to celebrate Christmas.

This theme in minstrel shows was not reserved solely for private entertainment, either. Rotary International (colloquially known as "The Rotary Club") is a global humanitarian service organization. It has, in the past, used a plantation wedding minstrel show to further its mission to "provide service to others, promote integrity, and advance world understanding, goodwill, and peace through the fellowship of business, professional, and community leaders."<sup>44</sup> The May 1924 edition of *The Rotarian*, the organization's national magazine, celebrated the success of the Rotarians from Sturgis, Michigan, for what was "said to be the funniest and peppiest home-talent show" that "assured the local Boy Scouts of a summer camp."<sup>45</sup> The only act from the show described in the section was a plantation wedding scene in which the mayor of Sturgis participated. The mockery of a Black plantation, in this case, was used for a community fundraiser, demonstrating even further how closely the plantation wedding is linked to the pursuit of earnings.

Plantation weddings were only considered fodder for minstrel shows when the couple getting married was Black. There was a resurgence of white plantation weddings in the early-to-mid twentieth century in the early-to-mid twentieth century. These weddings were primarily young white couples marrying on plantations that existed as family homes (typically the bride's parents or grandparents) for their grand white weddings in southern ivory towers. Though this trend cannot be definitively linked to a single factor, it is likely a combination of the effects of the Great

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<sup>43</sup> “Christmas Time,” *To Dragma of Alpha Omicron Pi Fraternity*, 1912, p. 139.

<sup>44</sup> “Who We Are,” About Rotary | Rotary International (Rotary International, 2022), <https://www.rotary.org/en/about-rotary>.

<sup>45</sup> “Three Clubs Find Minstrel Shows Valuable Aid for Funds,” *The Rotarian*, April 1924, p. 42.

Depression and the rise in the number of plantation estates purchased just before the economic crash by affluent families as seasonal homes.

For those couples that married in the years during and immediately following the Great Depression, the plantation wedding was a product of an attempt to reserve financial resources while maintaining – or regaining – the social image of prosperity. By the 1930s, many plantations had found themselves back in the hands of the affluent white class; these plantation family homes were likely newer purchases rather than ancestral estates. As a result of dealing with the effects of the 1929 economic crash, many couples of the time turned to the more financially conservative home wedding rather than the traditional church wedding.<sup>46</sup> Yet, for those couples whose family owned a plantation home, these weddings did not project an image of penny-pinching. Plantation weddings at family homes, both during and following the Depression, were a way for couples to unite themselves in marriage and symbolically preserve their legacy in the new age, antebellum-inspired aristocracy.

A 1931 article from the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, Louisiana, explains every delicate detail of the wedding between Stephanie Levert and Lamartine Lamar, down to the color of the dress worn by the bride's great aunt. This particular couple's wedding "was a typical Southern plantation wedding of olden days" at the country home of the bride's parents.<sup>47</sup> This article described the charm of the oak and magnolia trees and how the entire ceremony was bathed in a beautiful Southern sunset. Had this wedding taken place a century earlier, the newlyweds would have likely inherited the plantation on which they married and several dozen slaves as a wedding

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<sup>46</sup> Mildred Adams, "Though The World Changes, The June Bride Is Eternal," *The New York Times*, June 10, 1934, <https://www.nytimes.com/1934/06/10/archives/though-the-world-changes-the-june-bride-is-eternal-her-outlook-and.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

<sup>47</sup> *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana), June 9, 1931: 15. NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1223BCE5B718A166%40WHNPX>

gift. Nowhere in the lengthy article does it allude to a circus or the hilarity of the event. Instead, it paints a beautiful and detailed picture of a traditional plantation wedding that has been brought into modernity.

That lavish 1931 Louisiana plantation wedding may exist as an anomaly, however. Despite this wedding taking place amid the Great Depression in a state whose agriculturally-based economy took a devastating toll, the ceremony and its attendants seem to be utterly unaffected by the economic crash. This particular plantation wedding serves as a shining example of how the plantation tradition sought to ensure enduring financial and cultural prosperity: a glamorous wedding fit for the belles and barons of the planting class aristocracy unaffected by the worst financial disaster in America's history.

#### Plantation Weddings and the "Lost Cause"

Plantation weddings – and plantations in general – have been intrinsically linked to the Lost Cause since the Civil War. The Lost Cause of the Confederacy (or just the "Lost Cause") is a pseudohistorical interpretation of the American Civil War that emphasized Southern valor and honor in the battle over states' rights rather than slavery. It began to take shape almost immediately after the Civil War had ended in 1866 and resulted in the Confederacy's defeat at the hands of the Union. This paper argues that while the Lost Cause was instrumental in how the plantation complex developed following the Civil War and Reconstruction, it is not necessarily still the primary driving force today concerning how people view plantations. Essentially, the Lost Cause unlocked the door to the modern plantation wedding, but it is not necessarily still holding that door open. This is not to say that there are not lingering sentiments from the Lost Cause surrounding plantation weddings, but rather that it is not the same deliberate effort of conscious rebranding and social unification.

Perhaps the most significant work of the Lost Cause movement, for the purposes of this paper and the broader development of the plantation wedding brand, is the work of Confederacy-minded women, both the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and the female descendants of antebellum slaveholders and plantation owners. Both groups of women were deeply concerned with how future generations would remember how the South was before the war. In the late nineteenth century, they acted to preserve the “true” history of the Confederacy: the honorable, idyllic, and even romantic antebellum way of life they had known before the war. Daughters of slaveholders wrote and published a large volume of books in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to chronicle their cherished memories and nostalgia of the Old South. One of the most poignant examples of this literary genre is *Old Plantation Days: Being Recollections of Southern Life Before the Civil War* by Nancy Bostick De Saussure, published in 1909. De Saussure was born in 1837 as the daughter of a prominent South Carolina plantation owner who was greatly concerned with preserving her memory of antebellum life. She wrote *Old Plantation Days* in the form of a memoir to her granddaughter Dorothy, recounting her life in the Old South. Most significantly, De Saussure fondly recounted her own plantation wedding in 1859, even including a newspaper clipping about her wedding in her book. She emphasized her father's generosity, Dorothy's great-grandfather, and how he "gave each of his children at marriage a plantation with slaves and a house" so that the family could continue with the glorious plantation tradition.<sup>48</sup> Glamorized, emotional descriptions of antebellum weddings in books like De Saussure's would later contribute to the popularization and glorification of the plantation wedding brand. Throughout her book, she recalled the details of her life on a plantation as a child, bride, mother, and eventual grandmother in romantic and nostalgic tones.

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<sup>48</sup> Nancy Bostick De Saussure, *Old Plantation Days: Being Recollections of Southern Life Before the Civil War* (Duffield & Company, 1909).

The UDC also championed the cause of preserving the history of the Old South and had become "the guardians of the tradition."<sup>49</sup> These women were responsible for the majority of the efforts to preserve Confederate memory and celebration in a postbellum world. The UDC and other Confederate groups also focused intensely on the literature of their time, particularly ensuring that the books assigned to schoolchildren gave the South's perspective of the war so that their history would be preserved adequately for the new generation. Confederate organizations established museums about their history for those who did not – or could not – read the books. However, these exhibits were more focused on the importance of maintaining respect for the Confederacy rather than a specific historical interpretation of the war.<sup>50</sup>

Each of these groups of women invoked the Lost Cause by calling upon the longing and reminiscence of the prewar days in hopes that their posterity would persist in sharing those same ideals of life before the war. However, literature and memory were not the only forces of antebellum memory that helped popularize and sustain the modern plantation wedding brand. More overt forms of Lost Cause ideology were intentionally designed to offer a direct invitation to participate in the legacy of the glorious Old South. The same wedding at Pine Alley Plantation referenced at the start of this paper, colloquially referred to as the “Gold Dust Wedding,” was reenacted to celebrate the Acadian Bicentennial Celebration in St. Martinsville, Louisiana, in 1955. The reenactment celebration was advertised with an open invitation to the public in a local newspaper with the headline “YOU ARE INVITED TO THE WEDDING – Pine and Oak Alley To Be Decorated With Gold and Silver Dust for Occasion” several months prior to the event.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 1987), 163.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.

<sup>51</sup> "Pine and Oak Alley," in Fournet Scrapbook, Item 4.1, <http://abcbstmartinsvillela.weebly.com/5.html> (April 1, 2022).

The reenactment of the Gold Dust Wedding invites guests to suspend their perceptions of reality and step back into time to live the life of the antebellum elite, even if just for a few hours. Celebrations such as this one have adopted the powerful art of nuance as they transformed from overt reenactments into the more subtle plantation wedding, inviting both the wedding party and guests to think of themselves, even unknowingly, as members of the antebellum aristocracy.

### Take Me to Tara

One of the hallmarks of the American South, both past and present, is the cultural significance of tradition. The culture of the American South is steeped in traditions for all aspects of life. And while nearly the entire culture of the South is drenched with moonlight and magnolias, there is no facet of life so profoundly intertwined with tradition as weddings and the starting of families. Many little girls in the South, both past and present, start dreaming of their fairytale weddings to a perfect southern gentleman at an extraordinarily young age, simply because it is an idea that has been continuously presented and reinforced for centuries. The culture of the South invites little girls to start imagining themselves as the perfect Southern Belle as early as they are able. This shared – or perhaps imposed – dream is likely linked to Southern brides marrying at a fairly young age. While Southern brides today no longer fear the threat of spinsterhood if they do not have marriage prospects before leaving their teenage years, brides in the South still tend to get married at a younger age. According to a survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau in 2019, women from the South tend to get married at a median age of 26.4, two years earlier than the national median age for American women of 28.4.<sup>52</sup> Yet, the allure of a lavish southern wedding does not dissipate upon reaching the Mason-Dixon line. Rather, it has become both a national and global point of interest within the last century.

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<sup>52</sup> U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table B12007; Using data.census.gov; <<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>> (April 13, 2019).



There has perhaps been no greater contribution to the creation and perpetuation of the Plantation Wedding brand than *Gone with the Wind*, the 1939 historical romance film based upon the 1936 novel by Margaret Mitchell. The story is set in antebellum Georgia against the backdrop of the American Civil War and Reconstruction and follows the life of Scarlett O'Hara, played in the film by actress Vivien Leigh, the daughter of a prosperous planter on her family's plantation called Tara. The film has enjoyed astronomical success and still holds the title of "Highest Grossing Movie of All Time," when adjusted for inflation, clocking in at a staggering \$3.7 billion. *Gone with the Wind's* success can be attributed to several factors, such as the already-present success of Mitchell's novel prior to the film adaptation and the fact that it was one of the first Hollywood films in technicolor.<sup>53</sup> As a result of the film's continued fame, the name Scarlett O'Hara became synonymous with being the perfect southern belle.

Though the film's plot is centered around the heroine's sporadic love life, Scarlett O'Hara was defined by her determination to save her family's cotton plantation after being overtaken by Union troops. O'Hara became a symbol of the amalgamation of romantic love, genteel antebellum civilization, and plantation life, thus ushering in the modern concept of the Plantation Wedding brand. Both southern and northern brides-to-be longed to be their own version of Scarlett from the film's release in 1939 to far into the 21st century. An article from 2015 entitled "How to be a True Scarlett O'Hara on your Wedding Day" breaks down the process into three simple steps: find a vintage ballgown, wear a strand of pearls, and "get married in your own Tara," i.e., on any old plantation.<sup>54</sup> *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Creative Weddings*, published in 1999, has an entire

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<sup>53</sup> Frank Pallota, "How 'Gone with the Wind' Became America's Biggest Blockbuster," CNN Money (Cable News Network, December 15, 2014), <https://money.cnn.com/2014/12/15/media/gone-with-the-wind-anniversary/index.html#:~:text=For%20John%20Wiley%20Jr.%2C%20the,%2C%20the%20music%2C%20the%20costumes.>

<sup>54</sup> Reyna Pina, "How to Be a True Scarlett O'Hara on Your Wedding Day," The Inspired Bride (The Inspired Bride, August 27, 2015), <https://www.inspiredbride.net/how-to-be-a-true-scarlett-ohara-on-your-wedding-day/>.

section dedicated to planning weddings inspired by the Antebellum South. Not surprisingly, the bulk of that section references the beauty and charm of *Gone with the Wind* as it guides readers in planning their own “lavish Southern plantation affair.”<sup>55</sup> Advice from this guide includes how to choose “a ball gown that reflects the Civil War period” and tips for finding a plantation to host the wedding reception or ceremony, stating that plantations “simply exude Southern hospitality!”<sup>56</sup> Nearly anyone familiar with American Antebellum history would likely find great irony in such a statement, as Southern plantations were characterized by the unspeakably cruel treatment of the enslaved men, women, and children who lived and worked the grounds. Seemingly harmless statements such as that one represent the nexus of how the Plantation Wedding brand thrives: the actual histories of the sites are washed away and replaced with superficial enthusiasm for the beautiful façade that hides the ugly truth.

#### Historical Plantations vs. Plantation-Style Venues

Not surprisingly, an important facet of the conversation surrounding the development of modern plantation weddings is the physical venue itself. Antebellum plantations that host weddings have to decide whether or not to be historically transparent with all that occurred on the site, and postbellum estates have the potential moral dilemma of profiting from a historical period to which they have no educational obligations. Plantations from the antebellum era and postbellum estates are equally important when considering the plantation wedding brand as a whole, as both types of venues have their own means of historical development and public perception.

Beginning with historical plantations that have evolved to become – either wholly or partially – wedding venues, it is important to note that not *all* plantation museums evolved to meet

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<sup>55</sup> Antonia Van der Meer, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Creative Weddings* (New York City, NY: Penguin Group, 1999), 154.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 155.

the same fate. Whitney Plantation, located in Wallace, Louisiana, is one of the few historical plantations still open to the public that does not hold weddings and openly speaks out against them. Whitney's executive director, Ashley Rogers, maintains that Whitney Plantation exists as an educational institution and that weddings are not part of its mission: "to provide context and education around the history of slavery and race relations in this country."<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, Whitney Plantation exists more as the exception rather than the rule when it comes to the representation of slavery at plantation museums. It is far more common for historic plantation museums, whether they permit weddings on their grounds or not, to participate in a more romanticized narrative: one of the glory days of the Grand Old South.

A vital component of the plantation wedding brand is the way in which historic plantation museums present themselves to the public, both in-person and online. Prior to the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement beginning in 2019 and 2020 – which is discussed in greater detail in a later section – the public did not pay much attention to the way plantation home museums and similar postbellum venues marketed themselves. The rise of BLM called for greater attention to the way traditions of racism and white supremacy are engrained in the everyday culture of American life. Tourists often embark on tours of plantations led by docents wearing clothing inspired by the era who regale visitors with a stylized history of the house, people, and furniture of the home and grounds. These tours tend to focus on the themes of “grandeur, hospitality, and the tragedy of the Civil War.”<sup>58</sup> Such a framing allows tour guides to easily tell the stories of great romances for those southern belles and gentlemen who had been lucky enough to live in the Big House. Visitors are subconsciously invited to escape to these bygone days and imagine themselves

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<sup>57</sup> Michael T. Luongo, “Despite Everything, People Still Have Weddings at 'Plantation' Sites,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times Company, October 17, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/style/despite-everything-people-still-have-weddings-at-plantation-sites.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 6.

as the characters in such romances of the planting class aristocracy. These tours call upon the “deep passions felt by southerners of the past” and “signal the appropriateness of plantation museums as romantic sites.”<sup>59</sup> In addition to the physical invitation into these plantation homes offered by tours, the websites and social media utilized by plantations today provide a clear image of how these places would like to be perceived.

One of the first things a person might notice upon visiting a plantation museum or venue website is the absence of the word "plantation." Many sites have dropped that word in favor of others who do not carry as much historical baggage. For example, Houma's House Historic Estate and Gardens was previously known as Houma's Plantation. It has elected to use a name that focuses on the property's physical attributes rather than the history it holds. Its website describes the property as a "historic estate" and invites guests to take tours of the mansion, stay the night at the onsite bed and breakfast, or host a "one-of-a-kind wedding."<sup>60</sup> Another example is Twelve Oaks, a former cotton plantation in Georgia that served as the inspiration for the home of Scarlett O'Hara's primary love interest in *Gone with the Wind*. Historically, the site has gone by several names: Harris Plantation, The Cedars, Whitehall, and now Twelve Oaks. Author Margaret Mitchell saw a photo of the home in 1939 (then known as Whitehall) and requested that it be used as a set in the film adaptation of her novel. The current name of the property reflects its association with *Gone with the Wind*, and the website does not refer to itself as a plantation or plantation home. Rather, it calls itself a historic mansion and primarily uses its website to promote the property's status as a luxury bed-and-breakfast, inviting guests to stay overnight in one of the several “grand

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90; 95.

<sup>60</sup> “Houmas House Historic Estate and Gardens,” Houmas House (FareHarbor, 2017), <https://houmashouse.com/>.

suites” at the “south’s crown jewel” and participate in the fantasy of being a member of a modern-day plantation aristocracy.<sup>61</sup>

Plantations such as Nottoway Plantation and Resort in White Castle, Louisiana, both allow and boast weddings – and other events and accommodations – on their grounds while maintaining their status as historical sites. Many sites such as Nottoway maintain that their participation in the wedding industry serves as the lifeblood of funding for the property, allowing them to afford the upkeep of the grounds and direct money towards educational and historical programming. While this might be the case for some locations, a visit to Nottoway's website tells another story. Like most websites dedicated to historical plantations, there is a "History" tab on the website's homepage. However, this tab does not contain any relevant historical information about Nottoway Plantation. From at least September 29, 2021, to February 7, 2022, the site’s “History” tab read, “This page is under construction...please check back soon.” At the time of this paper’s completion, the “History” tab on Nottoway’s website no longer claims to be under construction. Instead, it now gives information about the "16 majestic oak trees" located across the plantation property.<sup>62</sup> This information had been available on the website since at least September 2021 in a separate tab in a section entitled "The Oaks," but now it is the entirety of the website's history section.

In doing the research for this paper, I was able to speak with someone who had their wedding at Nottoway Plantation to gather insight as to *why* people choose to get married on plantations or plantation-style venues. Claudia\* and her husband got married at Nottoway Plantation on June 27, 1998. Both she and her husband are from and had grown up in Louisiana. In response to the question, “How and why did you choose your wedding venue?” Claudia said,

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<sup>61</sup> “Tours - Accommodations - Events,” The Twelve Oaks (The Twelve Oaks, March 8, 2022), <https://thetwelveoaks.com/>.

<sup>62</sup> “History - Nottoway Resort - Largest Antebellum Mansion,” Nottoway.com (Nottoway Resort), accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.nottoway.com/history>.

As most little girls, I always dreamed of the "fairytale wedding" I wanted. To be honest, I never gave the venue a lot of thought, as I focused mainly on flowers, the dress, and food for the reception. I attended a wedding at Nottoway Plantation and thought it was a perfect fit for me. The setting was beautiful and picturesque. The ceremony we attended was relatively short and concise, which was a major plus for my boyfriend at that time. Additional factors that led to my decision were that there was barely any need for major decorating as the home was beautiful enough, and the wedding planning staff had countless tips, pointers, and suggestions.<sup>63</sup>

She followed up her answer with the following statement, giving some more insight as to how she gave her choice of venue some more thought as she had gotten older:

Another reason that a plantation wedding venue interested me was the fact that my father was a farmer [who is now retired]. As a farmer's daughter, there will always be a connection to crops and the land. I will also shamefully admit that at the time I was selecting a Nottoway wedding, I did not give any thought to the horrors that many faced while "living" on the plantation years prior. It wasn't until I was older and "wiser" that I came to that realization. I suppose my young age and desire for the fairytale blinded me.<sup>64</sup>

It is not surprising that people like Claudia gravitate towards plantation venues for essentially harmless reasons that are not racially motivated.

Nottoway is not the only plantation that seems less than concerned with a historically accurate representation of the estate, at least in the past. Oak Alley Plantation (which presently goes by the name Oak Alley Plantation Restaurant and Inn) in Vacherie, Louisiana, was well-aware of its nonrepresentation of slavery and its violent history on the site. The current owner of the plantation, Zeb Mayhew, stated years ago that the reason for this is that "Oak Alley visitors, for the most part, are looking for a *Gone With the Wind* brand of fantasy. They come for the hoopskirts, the grandeur, and the elegance."<sup>65</sup> Oak Alley invited its visitors to "enjoy her beauty and dream of her rich past.. to experience a bygone era in the South's most beautiful setting."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Claudia Jones\* in discussion with the author, February 2022.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

\*This name had been changed to respect the privacy of the individual.

<sup>65</sup> Adams, *Wounds of Returning*, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 92.

And its visitors did just that – Oak Alley prided itself, and still does today, on being a popular wedding venue in South Louisiana. Its website is home to an extensive gallery of photos from weddings and receptions on the property. However, it is essential to note here that since Mayhew made the comments mentioned earlier, Oak Alley has made a concerted effort to increase the representation and education of the reality of slavery on the premises. As of 2014, there is a slavery database on the plantation’s website that contains information “pertaining to the enslaved community which built and sustained Oak Alley plantation.”<sup>67</sup>

The other half of the conversation that must be considered is plantation-style venues. Plantation-style venues are not historic or formerly operational plantations but rather venues constructed after the Antebellum era made to *look* like plantation homes. These venues exist in a loophole: sidestepping the historical ethics of hosting weddings on plantations while still finding a way to profit from the Plantation Wedding brand and long-enduring plantation mystique. One of these plantation-style venues is The Melady House in Alexandria, Louisiana. The Melady House describes itself as "a beautifully restored plantation-style home [that] speaks of the Old South, much like Tara from *Gone with the Wind*."<sup>68</sup> The house was named for the former owners, Thomas and Sabina Melady, who bought the home in 1905 as a one-story home and remodeled it to be a much larger Colonial Revival style home. Their heir Sabina Garvey Kelley purchased the house and approximately 2,000 acres of property in 1934 and renamed it Kelley Plantation, despite never being an operational plantation.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> “Slavery Database,” Oak Alley Plantation (Oak Alley Foundation, 2014), <http://www.oakalleyplantation.org/slavery-database>.

<sup>68</sup> “Venue,” The Melady House (Wedding and Party Network, 2021), <https://www.themeladyhouse.com/venue>.

<sup>69</sup> “Melady House Historical Marker,” Historical Marker Database (HMDB.org LLC, October 14, 2018), <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=124848>

I was able to speak with someone who had previously gotten married at The Melady House as part of the research for this paper. Alyssa\*\* and her husband were married at The Melady House on August 3, 2019. Alyssa cites her primary motivation for choosing this particular venue was its location, saying,

I needed a venue halfway between where we lived and where I grew up to accommodate our families. The style of venue wasn't important, but I fell in love with the old furniture and old-looking style of the home. I wasn't necessarily looking for a plantation home; that wasn't important. And I found it on Google!<sup>70</sup>

Since Alyssa's wedding took place at a plantation-style venue rather than a historic location, I asked her thoughts on plantation weddings in general. She responded by saying that "having it on an area that was an actual, legitimate plantation is a little morbid," and that "celebrating something on a place that has nothing to celebrate isn't right." In this case, selecting a plantation-inspired venue was a matter of convenience rather than explicitly seeking out the plantation wedding brand.

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<sup>70</sup> Alyssa Smith\*\* in discussion with the author, February 2022.

\*\*This name had been changed to respect the privacy of the individual.



## **Chapter Four: Contemporary Interpretation and Debate**

### **Taking Action**

While people have been getting married on plantations in the American South for upwards of 200 years, public debate about plantation weddings was amplified in 2019, following the actions of a social justice organization that rose in staunch opposition to the promotion of plantations as romantic wedding venues. Color of Change, the largest online racial justice organization in the nation, took a stand against the Plantation Wedding brand in 2019.<sup>71</sup> In an effort to prevent future occurrences of brides-to-be stumbling across potentially problematic plantation venues online, Color of Change launched a campaign in December of 2019 that was primarily targeted at five major companies (Pinterest, Brides, Zola, Martha Stewart Weddings, and WeddingWire/The Knot) to curb the promotion of plantation wedding venues.<sup>72</sup>

Essentially, the petition called for these wedding companies to reevaluate and change how their websites promoted content related to plantations. Each of these companies responded to the petition differently. However, the majority have taken some action towards being more mindful and intentional with the way plantations are represented on their platforms. Pinterest, for example, has not banned or removed content related to plantation weddings but has limited its functions that would proactively promote them, such as autofill suggestions for searches and email notifications for related content. Additionally, when users of the social media platform search for plantation-related content, a message will appear warning that some results may violate the website's policies and urges users to report violations. The companies Brides and Zola have taken much more drastic

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<sup>71</sup> "About Us: Color of Change Is the Nation's Largest Online Racial Justice Organization," Color Of Change (Color of Change, February 16, 2021), <https://colorofchange.org/about/>.

<sup>72</sup> Heather Murphy, "Pinterest and the Knot Pledge to Stop Promoting Plantation Weddings," The New York Times (The New York Times Company, December 5, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/style/plantation-weddings-pinterest-knot-zola.html>.

action: removing all plantation content from their websites. The Knot and Wedding Wire, both owned by the parent corporation of The Knot Worldwide, have not removed plantation wedding content from their website but have adjusted the way it is presented. The two sites have scrutinized the way plantation venues and vendors are described online, disallowing the use of adjectives such as "elegant" and "charming" to prevent vendors from "using language that romanticizes or glorifies a history that includes slavery." Such venues will also not be allowed to rebrand themselves as farms, gardens, or other similar alternatives to bypass these restrictions. Martha Stewart Weddings did not make any substantial changes following Color of Change's campaign but simply thanked the organization for bringing the issue to the company's attention.<sup>73</sup>

### I Object

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the winter of 2019 and spring of 2020 brought forth a growing opposition to many of the lasting symbols of the Confederacy in American society and a call to deromanticize modern understanding of the Old South. The movement primarily took shape in the form of toppling monuments and statues celebrating the Confederacy and included the deglamorization of plantations. While some hold steadfast to the sentiment that there is absolutely nothing wrong with getting married on a plantation or the plantation wedding brand, it seems that the overarching contemporary opinion on the matter leans in the opposite direction. A simple Google search of the phrase "plantation wedding" will instantly provide one with a plethora of articles condemning the Plantation Wedding brand altogether. Many of these articles talk about how the public should shift away from modern plantation weddings or

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<sup>73</sup> Heather Murphy, "Pinterest and the Knot Pledge to Stop Promoting Plantation Weddings," The New York Times (The New York Times Company, December 5, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/style/plantation-weddings-pinterest-knot-zola.html>.

how they should have never existed in the first place. This stance is likely due to the success and aftermath of Color of Change's campaign.

Perhaps the most popular point of discussion regarding the opposition to plantation weddings encompasses a couple who had gotten married on a plantation and have since changed their view on the matter. Actress Blake Lively and actor Ryan Reynolds were – and still are – a Hollywood power couple that decided to tie the knot at Boone Hall Plantation in South Carolina on September 9, 2012. Eight years later, in 2020, the couple publicly renounced their previous infatuation with the venue, with Reynolds even referring to their choice of wedding venue as being a “giant f\*cking mistake.”<sup>74</sup> The couple’s change of heart is not-so-coincidentally in line with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, sparked by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Lively and Reynolds posted a public apology on Instagram for their actions and donated \$200,000 to the NAACP, about ten times the average cost for a couple to get married at Boone Hall.<sup>75</sup> In their apology, the couple also offered insight into why they had selected their wedding venue in 2012. Lively (from Los Angeles, California) and Reynolds (from Vancouver, Canada) did not have the same cultural connection to a plantation-style venue that many southerners claim to have. The two Hollywood powerhouses explained that Boone Hall was merely an aesthetically beautiful wedding venue that they had come across on Pinterest and other forms of media such as the 2004 film *The Notebook*.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Ringen, “Ryan Reynolds on 'Deadpool,' Diversity, and the Secrets of Successful Marketing,” Fast Company ( Mansueto Ventures, LLC, August 4, 2020), <https://www.fastcompany.com/90525283/most-creative-people-2020-ryan-reynolds>.

<sup>75</sup> Olivia Hosken, “It Was Never Ok to Get Married at a Plantation. Here’s Why.,” Town & Country (Hearst Magazine Media, Inc., November 2, 2021), <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/the-scene/weddings/a33446093/plantation-wedding-controversy-ryan-reynolds-blake-lively/>.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

### If There Are No Objections

As with any debate, there are those who are opposed and those in favor. Naturally, some feel essentially neutral or unaffected by the idea of people today getting married on plantations, simply stating that it is a couple's own choice where to get married.

However, those who tend to be vocally in favor of the plantation wedding brand often provide reasoning reminiscent of popular Lost Cause sentiments or give points that disregard history entirely. One online article from *The Federalist* entitled “If People Can’t Get Married on Plantations, They Can’t Marry Anywhere” argues against the actions of Color of Change for several reasons. Author Casey Chalk believes that Pinterest’s potential policy violation warning conflates plantations with pornography. Chalk acknowledges the tragic history of plantations and asserts that these antebellum mansions built by slave labor – along with over buildings built by the enslaved such as the White House and U.S. Capitol – “powerfully communicate how far America has come.”<sup>77</sup> Chalk's biggest issue with the "anti-plantation movement," as he calls it, is his perception of it being an act of generational moral superiority. He believes that "the sins of our forefathers [do not] nullify their many acts or virtue or the great political and cultural gifts they bestowed upon future generations" and believes the troubled and tragic past of plantations should not negate their beauty or appeal.<sup>78</sup> He ends his article by asserting that people should follow the Christian tradition of marrying in a church and “have a hell of a good time” at their plantation wedding receptions.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Casey Chalk, “If People Can't Get Married on Plantations, They Can't Marry Anywhere,” *The Federalist* (FDRLST MEDIA, January 14, 2020), <https://thefederalist.com/2020/01/13/if-people-cant-get-married-on-plantations-they-cant-get-married-anywhere/>.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Others who are not opposed to the modern plantation wedding may not make the same grand sweeping gesture that Chalk does in his article but echo some of the same ideas. Essentially, this school of thought is staked on the fact that plantations are no longer used for slavery, so getting married there now should not be a problem. The beautiful estates and gardens should, by this logic, be repurposed as aesthetically pleasing event venues for the public to enjoy for years to come. Those who do not object typically do not do so in a conscious attempt to preserve white supremacy. A lack of a more profound knowledge of the historical and cultural significance of the plantation wedding is the true foundation for this point of view.

It is also important to consider how plantations that host weddings and plantation-style venues respond to the matter, especially in light of the actions of Color of Change. Willie McRae, who owned and operated Boone Hall Plantation and Gardens until his death in April 2020, resisted the campaign's effort and defended his property as a suitable wedding venue. McRae stated that everyone is welcome at Boone Hall and that the site has hosted “Black weddings, interracial weddings, same-sex weddings” and will continue to do so going forward. Boone Hall has historically been one of South Carolina’s most popular wedding venues, hosting an average of 180 weddings annually as of 2019. Presently, it is unclear how weddings at Boone Hall have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic or Color of Change's petition. Many historic plantations that have elected to host weddings and other events cite the need for the stream of revenue they provide, saying that this money is needed to maintain the properties and fund educational programming. A representative from Oatlands Plantation referred to the revenue from weddings and other special private events as being the property's lifeblood since there are over 35,000 historic home museums in the United States that all compete for a dwindling audience.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Doug Ahlert, email message to author, February 23, 2022.

On the other hand, plantation-style venues do not have that split purpose of attempting to provide historical and educational programming while maintaining their status as desirable wedding venues. These venues' only purpose is to be a successful and desirable location for prospective couples to host their nuptials. Yet these venues are still subject to the effects of Color of Change's campaign since they fall under the umbrella of the Plantation Wedding brand. An article from December of 2019, shortly after the release of Color of Change's campaign, wrote about a wedding venue in New Orleans named Southern Oaks Plantation that exists in a gray area with the campaign. Though the venue uses the word "plantation" in its name, it is just a Colonial Revival-style house built in the 1960s and has only ever existed as a wedding venue. The article mentions the anxiety of the venue owner Bobby Asaro and his contemplation on dropping the word "plantation" from the name of his business.<sup>81</sup> Though it is not clear exactly when the change occurred, sometime between December 2019 and December 2021, the venue's name was officially changed by the owner to Southern Oaks. The venue's website refers to itself as an elegant and romantic post-Antebellum mansion and does not refer to the property being a plantation at all, aside from a single instance that was presumably accidentally looked over amid the rebrand. Despite the name change, the venue's website still proudly boasts several recognitions awarded by The Knot and Wedding Wire.

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<sup>81</sup> Devin Bartolotta, "Louisiana Wedding Venues in Limbo after Planning Sites Stop Pushing 'Plantation Weddings'," 4WWL (WWL-TV, December 6, 2019), <https://www.wvltv.com/article/news/local/orleans/plantation-weddings-no-longer-supported-by-wedding-planning-sites/289-3b0d8997-9d9a-4d80-b86b-c0f9156988a8?fbclid=IwAR0TBUwiY7a6hxrUPcGGOGWH9qfWTqk7ZKXreR2gklhDBMEqoOgSxpBx4c>.

## Conclusion

*“There are forms of oppression and domination which become invisible - the new normal.” – Michele Foucault*

The plantation wedding is perhaps as old as the plantation itself. We have traced its historical journey from antebellum weddings of the planting aristocracy to social activism fighting against plantation weddings centuries later. The plantation wedding has undergone many transformations to get to what it is today. This thesis has sought to prove that the plantation wedding is a historically and culturally complex occurrence that functions as a part of the broader plantation tradition. The plantation complex has sought profitability and prowess from its conception, using any means necessary to reach these ends. The effects of these means are the root of this phenomenon's importance. Each installment of this plantation tradition has been rooted in some form (or combination) of violence, exploitation, and privilege. The fact that the plantation wedding appears to be so innocuous compared to its predecessors allows it to be so powerful in its pursuit of revenue and relevance.

Tracing the emergence of the plantation wedding brand in popular culture is especially important, as it answers the question that is often neglected when considering the who, what, where, when, and why of a scenario: the *how*. Following the plantation complex's chronology from its conception to the present-day brings to light the subtle intricacies of its life cycle. From antebellum labor camps to fragmented sharecropping plantations, the first transition is perhaps the most linear movement. It demonstrated the planting class's unwillingness to abandon the way of life they had grown accustomed to, attempting to resist socioeconomic change. This resistance is made abundantly clear by the sheer length of time that sharecropping clung to its existence, fighting against the growing threat of agricultural mechanization for several decades. At this point,

many people believe and accept that the plantation complex simply dissolved into the atmosphere of modernized commercial farming.

However, the discerning historical eye recognizes that the plantation only abandoned its former agrarian business model, searching for the next blueprint that would bring it a new victory. Before mechanization sealed the fate of the plantation's agricultural demise in the mid-1900s, the plantation tradition had already planted the seeds of its next power venture: tourism and recreation. The success of these estates as seasonal homes and hunting lodges invited the new, sanitized reputation of the plantation complex to engrain itself in the society and culture of the New South. They opened the door for today's plantation museums and wedding venues to entice another generation of people to keep the plantation tradition alive.

The historical depth and complexity of the plantation wedding do not exist solely in the linear development of the physical antebellum mansions. Instead, it is found in conjunction with the properties' development and the cultural emergence of the plantation wedding brand. As we have seen, a plantation wedding in the Antebellum era was certainly not a cohesive brand, as it was not yet a brand. For the privileged white planting class, it was a product of aristocratic convenience; for the enslaved Black population, it was a fleeting glimmer of humanity in an environment that offered none. The plantation wedding did exist as a comedic theme throughout the Reconstruction era and into the time of Jim Crow. Minstrel shows and similar vaudevillian spectacles headlined their performances with the promise of a hilarious mockery of the Black plantation wedding. White actors in blackface entertained white audiences with this trope for decades and perpetuated the privilege of white society profiting from the horrific enslavement of Black people.



It was not until the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth that the plantation wedding would again find itself at the antebellum estates it once called home. This period is where the evolution of the plantation complex and the emergence of the plantation wedding brand converged. Plantations had reaffirmed their status as symbols of wealth and affluence just in time for the Great Depression. Couples chose to forgo the typical – and expensive – church wedding and returned to the plantation estates that their families had purchased to recite their vows, allowing for a fiscally responsible ceremony that projected the same air of nobility as the antebellum elite from decades ago. The American love affair with the plantation’s promise of revitalized gentility had begun and would quickly progress to the modern brand of a plantation wedding in the twenty-first century.

Of course, the twenty-first century is where we saw some parts of American society remove those rose-colored glasses and look at the plantation wedding in a new light. The Black Lives Matter Movement, the Color of Change campaign, and other forms of social justice have called for the book to be closed on the fairytale plantation wedding. Opponents of the plantation wedding cite the moral dilemma it poses: the sanitization and whitewashing of history in favor of profit rather than historical accuracy. There is no ethical way to think about plantations without remembering the countless number of enslaved Black people who lost their freedom and lives. Those who do not wish to see the plantation wedding fade away typically hold onto the sentiments formed by the Lost Cause and plantation rebranding in the early twentieth century. Alternatively, some are not concerned with the issue, saying that they are nothing more than pretty old houses and that it does not matter if couples today get married there or not. This viewpoint itself is a product of the privilege that comes with the separation of plantations and their violent histories.

The antebellum plantations and postbellum estates that profit from these weddings also hope for the brand's survival, as it is directly intertwined with their own.

This thesis has presented the answer to when, why, and how the plantation wedding has evolved into its current form over the past three centuries. It has also argued the complexity and significance of the plantation wedding as an area of study. The plantation wedding exists so successfully as a contemporary function of the plantation complex tradition because it has been able to veil itself in magnolias and Spanish moss for decades. It makes one wonder what the next iteration of the plantation complex's tradition of power might look like in yet another evolutionary cycle and, more importantly, what should be done.

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