

Lost Plantations of the South

Clifton Ellis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Ellis, Clifton (2010) "Lost Plantations of the South," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 .
Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss2/14>

Review

Ellis, Clifton

Spring 2010

Matrana, Marc R. *Lost Plantations of the South*. University of Mississippi Press, \$40.00 ISBN 978-1-57806-942-2

Studying the Old Plantations

Marc Matrana's book brings together, in one handy volume, short histories of many well-known and lesser-known antebellum plantations that, as the title suggests, have been lost due to natural disasters including fire and flood, but most often to "demolition by neglect." The book is sufficiently illustrated with both historic and contemporary photographs, plans of the mansion houses, and where evidence exists, site plans of entire plantations, although these are understandably few. Each of the eleven Confederate states is represented, along with Maryland and Kentucky, and each of the eight chapters opens with a brief history of the region or state.

Matrana is also the author of *Lost Plantation: The Rise and Fall of Seven Oaks*, a plantation that was located across the river from New Orleans. A long-time activist in local preservation efforts, with these two books, Matrana has firmly established a more national reputation as a preservationist.

In his promising introduction, Matrana claims no attempt to write an academic history of these lost plantations, but rather "to showcase the variety and richness of these unique properties along with the stories of the people who lived and worked there, while noting their diverse demises – all in an effort to collectively compare and contrast their rise and fall for the general reader and historian alike" (xiv). Yet, Matrana's introduction does not reflect the content of the rest of the book. The stories of the "people who lived and worked there" are necessarily restricted to existing accounts of the elite white slaveholder, with no attempt to access a large body of secondary literature that could balance this side of the story with the stories of enslaved peoples who worked the lands. In addition, the comparisons of these plantations demise is notably lacking.

Matrana gives accounts of each demise, but the comparisons he offers in his conclusion are not edifying to either preservationists or historians.

Matrana's main purpose for writing these books is to renew interest among the public in the South's antebellum architectural history, and it is the stories of once-grand plantations falling to the wrecker's ball or to the vicissitudes of time that are the most compelling. Matrana's evocative stories of loss are, however, often tinged by his romanticized treatment of the plantations. Although he acknowledges the brutality that is at the heart of enslavement, he does so in passing. In the six pages of text describing Belle Grove plantation in Louisiana, Matrana notes briefly, that "John Andrews lived a privileged life with his family at Belle Grove, garnering handsome profits off the backs of his slaves" (189). Similarly, in his treatment of another Louisiana plantation, Petit Versailles, the hugely profitable sugar plantation of Valcour Aime, Matrana does not even mention how many enslaved men, women, and children Aime owned. He does tell us, that "it is said that over 120 slaves were employed in the creation of the botanical wonder at Petit Versailles" (180). The tentative phrase "it is said" tells the reader that the research relies many times on hearsay accounts from secondary sources.

Matrana is neither careful nor accurate in his assessment of these secondary sources. In the same essay on Petit Versailles, Matrana recounts two different versions of a legend about the fate of some solid gold place settings that Valcour Aime used at a fete for the future king of France, Louis Phillipe. One legend has it that: after the dinner, Aime threw the place settings into the Mississippi River, declaring that no one was worthy enough to use them after his royal guest. Another version of the story alleges that Aime threw the place settings into the river to keep them from the hands of Union soldiers. Matrana's conclusion is that, regardless of the accuracy of the stories, "they illustrate Aime's vivacious, often flamboyant personality." (183). I disagree with Matrana's conclusion here, and in many other places in his book where he offers similar analysis of his sources. Stories such as these were fabricated and perpetuated by generations of southerners who sought to deny an ugly past by inviting their readers into a fantasy of voyeuristic envy and lost worlds of gracious hospitality.

Such legends fascinate me and other historians, not for what they say about their subjects, like Valcour Aime, but for what they say about the attitudes and intentions of those who fabricate and perpetuate such legends. This aspect of careful historical analysis eludes Matrana in his work and weakens considerably

his argument for preservation, begging the question, why should we seek to preserve such monuments to a past that is so painful, so shameful? There are excellent reasons to preserve what remains of the landscape of the antebellum South because those remains hold precious clues to helping us understand, come to terms with, and move beyond those inglorious aspects of our past.

Matrana acknowledges in his introduction that the plantations under study “collectively represent the South – the good and the bad – and ultimately the reflect upon us and how we as a society deal with our own intricate, complicated past.” (xv). But in order to achieve this goal of emotional and psychological reconciliation, we need more careful studies of those remains; studies rooted not in hearsay accounts but in objective consideration of the documentary and architectural sources left to us.

Matrana undertook an enormous amount of work in compiling this volume. The book has its greatest merit in allowing the reader to realize how much our cultural memory relies on the visual cues of architecture and landscapes. The loss of these cues should disturb any citizen, not only historians, but readers of Matrana’s work will not understand the true significance of that loss.

Clifton Ellis is Associate Dean for Academics and Associate Professor of Architectural History in the College of Architecture at Texas Tech University. He is co-editor with Rebecca Ginsburg of Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery (Yale, 2010).