

The Secret Life Of Bacon Tait A White Slave Trader Married To A Free Woman Of Color

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Review

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Trent, Hank *The Secret Life of Bacon Tait a White Slave Trader Married to a Free Woman of Color*. LSU Press, \$38.00 ISBN 807165212

Bacon Tait's Secret Life Revealed

Archival sources are at the core of almost everything historians do. Private correspondence, business records, autobiographical musings, family oral tradition—we count on these sorts of materials as we attempt to reconstruct the past. So what do we do when someone who fascinates us has left almost none of the above? Such is the case with the subject of this biography, Bacon C. Tait, a major Richmond, Virginia, slave trader whose life is certainly worth studying. Hank Trent has come close to pulling off a scholarly miracle in reconstructing Tait's life and his long-term relationship with Courtney Fountain, a free woman of color. Although there are many questions left unanswered in Trent's account, the surprising thing is how much we can learn about this man and the dismal business in which he was engaged.

“The largest known set of Tait's personal papers—a couple dozen letters—is mixed in with the correspondence that Rice C. Ballard saved from his slave-trading colleagues,” the author tells us (p. 94). So that's it—“a couple dozen letters.” Most historians would give up at this point, but Hank Trent forged ahead. Birth, death, and marriage records, tax rolls, manuscript state and federal census returns, and as many other public sources as he can get his hands on was his starting point. He combed through decades of newspapers seeking information on Tait and his business and family affairs, principally in the two cities where he spent most of his adult life, Richmond and Salem, Massachusetts. He also reconstructed as best he could the life of Courtney Fountain and her fascinating, abolitionist family. The result is a portrait of a ruthless slave trader who gives every indication of being a devoted family man, one who treated the African American woman with whom he shared his life with years of loyalty and support. His considerable personal fortune he left to their four children when he

died in 1871.

Here are the basics. Bacon C. Tait was born near Lynchburg in 1796 to a reasonably well-to-do Virginia family. Using funds he inherited from his father in 1814, he, like many young Virginians of his era, found his way to Richmond. Through real estate deals in the growing city and through small-scale slave trading, he gradually built a thriving business in both of these areas, eventually erecting a substantial slave jail in Richmond and expanding his slave trading operations into the Deep South, New Orleans in particular.

His relationship with Courtney Fountain, a free Negro woman living near him in Richmond, began in the 1840s. Trent speculates that Tait wanted very much to marry a well-bred white woman but could not find a bride willing to have him, maybe because of his profession as a trafficker in human flesh. Perhaps, but one wonders about this when we learn that Tait served for years in the late antebellum era on the Richmond City Council. Possibly he, like a number of other Richmond slave traders (Hector Davis, Robert Lumpkin, and Silas Omohundro come immediately to mind) was attracted to a woman of color for reasons centering around his business activities. The frequency with which this happened is clearly one of the issues we would like to know more about. Tait never formally married Courtney Fountain, but they were, to all intents and purposes, husband and wife for decades.

In 1852, as their four children—three girls and a boy—reached school age, Tait purchased a home in Salem, where members of Courtney’s extended family lived. In the pre-war years that followed, Tait divided his time between his family in Salem, where he was known simply as a Richmond businessman, and his thriving slave-trading activities in Virginia. In the Civil War that followed, Tait’s trading business suffered, but his real estate holdings gave him a financial cushion that enabled him to survive the war years with a considerable amount of his wealth intact. But he and Courtney lived mostly apart as his mental and physical health deteriorated in the late 1860s; he died in Richmond in 1871 (as did she in Salem that same year), and his cause of death was reported as “old age & softening of the brain” (p. 163). On his demise, he left his large and very valuable estate to his four children.

Hank Trent’s slender volume is valuable on a number of grounds, but probably none is more important than this: we know very little about the men who ran the critically important slave-trading enterprises in one of the

antebellum South's premier slave-trading cities. Whether because of the fire that swept Richmond at the time of Federal occupation in 1865 or because of willful destruction of correspondence and business records traders did not want to fall into unfriendly hands or simply because of an accident of fate, the surviving records of slave dealers in this supremely important Upper South trading center are exceedingly thin. *The Secret Life of Bacon Tait* opens a rare window into that dank and depressing world, and we are indebted to the author for the light he has shed on this dark corner of southern history.

Charles B. Dew's most recent book is The Making of a Racist: A Southerner Reflects on Family, History, and the Slave Trade (Virginia, 2016). The University of Virginia Press has also recently brought out a 15th anniversary edition of his Apostles of Disunion with a new "Afterword" by the author.