Not Even Past: Six Acres and a Mule or Searching for Vicey Skipwith

It was the first of June in that year of 1888, early dawn and still cool here in Mecklenburg County, Virginia. Vicey Skipwith and her little group of family started out from near the crossroads of Cabin Point for the town of Boydton, our County Seat. That was where those documents of important public and sometimes scandalous private goings-on that involved the law were kept, in the Courthouse. She certainly didn't want to go to Boydton alone. She had to miss a day's work—it wasn't good to miss work at Prestwould on Friday— but she wanted to make sure the claim was filed correctly and in her name.

Yes ma'am, that was a most important day. *She hitched up the mule (Vicey was a farmer), and along with Brother Parker (who was what they call our fictive kin), her sister and three of her blood brothers, she left the plantation. By the way, Richard, Solomon, and Esau had to find three other farm hands that were willing to fill in for them at the plantation or they wouldn't be paid for the entire week. In some ways, our people were still working like before emancipation. Anyhow, they were all dressed up like they were going to church.*

Vicey Skipwith was about thirty-four years old and she was like any other first time home owner in today's world, thinking about her success in buying land and a little house—and feeling good. Riding behind her in the wagon, Celia, Richard, Solomon, and Esau were as noisy as ever. Brother Parker Sydnor, he was an able-bodied and handsome mulatto with his long, naturally curly hair tied back into a pony tail, he sat beside her and took it all in stride—like he owned a town. I can see him now sitting straight, reining the old mule along the eleven miles on the Old Plank Road to Boydton. Also born at slavery time, Parker Sydnor was two years older than Vicey and he was in charge because he was the man driving the mule.

And because of her past, Vicey certainly must've felt humbled and in praise of her blessing. So this is what freedom finally means, the thought must've entered her mind … to have my own home place. Thank you, Jesus. Praise God. I'm sure she sighed deeply with all the weight of the past coming out. With that sigh of a prayer to God, her feelings must've bowed down to the higher power, right there in the wagon.

And so, they got there. Now quieter among themselves, they headed for the back door of the Boydton Courthouse, the entrance for colored people. Vicey couldn't read or write. But there were people in the family who could. Her sister Celia Skipwith, the nanny for Miss Annie L's children at Prestwould, had some schooling and even wrote letters. And Brother Parker being from just across the river in Halifax County in "The Forks" went to school soon after emancipation. He was very good at those kinds of things. That Freedmen's Bureau sent him. After freedom came, a lot of his people got schooling. Some of his people lived right here in Bluestone. They already legally married with some of Vicey's people following freedom, when colored people could both get married in the church and make their marriages legal with a license from the Courthouse. It was nice for colored women and men to be married both with a license and in church. No more jumping the broom like they did before (fig 1).

Mr. J. J. Crowder, the white man who sold Vicey the parcel—he bought forty acres from Mr. Fulwar and he started reselling parcels to the colored people at a nice profit for himself—of course, he could read and write. And he sold her the mule. But I know that Vicey wanted to be among her own people who could cipher and spell. She wanted to be with one of her own who could read at that fine and precious moment when she finally claimed a little piece of land that would make a farm so that Bentley, her already knee-baby son, and maybe with a good husband, they would have something. She knew that she needed to see the proof of her name on the land, even if she couldn't read the proof. There had been no time out for schooling for Vicey when bondage was over and those people from the North came and told us that we could go to school. Some of us did. Not enough. Vicey kept on working at the big house with Aunt Lucinda. Life for her was almost just as before at Prestwould.

They say that Mr. Fulwar liked *Aunt Lucinda and* gave*her one of Prestwould's cabins before emancipation. Light-skinned, with long wavy hair, blue-gray eyes and really pretty, Aunt Lucinda was also a colored Skipwith born with a twin sister at Prestwould during bondage. But she didn't take the Skipwith last name. They said that she … well, I won't talk about that. Some things we must keep behind closed doors. I'll tell you another time.*

Her mother told Vicey that she was born on a Saturday. A Saturday child: that meant that Vicey Skipwith had to work for everything she would ever get. Nobody would give her anything. She knew that these land papers would remain in the Courthouse forever—for everyone to know that she now owned Mr. Fulwar's old slave cabin along with six and one fifth acres of farm land that used to be his. That funny sounding piece of one fifth meant that the cabin was not on Mr.

Hardy's property line or maybe that strange sounding little cut of land was how the trees, they lined the boundaries, and when that happened there was no even-numbered piece for ciphering.

So Vicey already paid out the sixty-two dollars to Mr. Crowder a few weeks earlier. And now, at that Courthouse, she made her X mark on that deed in front of Brother Parker, the Courthouse clerk and those other witnesses. And the piece of paper became what they call, a legal contract. At the Courthouse, as her brothers must've silently watched with hats in hand, Brother Parker read to her that the title was clear. Celia could read it too and nodded in her direction. They understood these things. The court clerk wrote the words "fee simple" next to her name and Brother Parker said that meant that she paid in full. She signed her name with that X and that land at the old slave quarters was hers.

Fig. 1. Wedding photograph of Paul Shields and Cora Irene Sydnor, February 24, 1918. Mecklenburg County, Virginia. Courtesy of the author. Image digitalized by Glenn E. Reyes.

Am I making this story up? No, ma'am. *I know that it was a great day for Vicey, because another of our people who was born in bondage could own a piece of land, land that was really ours because we worked so hard on it without getting paid, and with that cabin of hers, a real home place to live in.*

As a researcher documenting an event that happened in the past, I can't really know what happened on the "closing day" in 1888 when Vicey Skipwith (1856-1936)

processed her real estate transaction in Mecklenburg County, Virginia. Much of the documented evidence that I accumulated about Vicey Skipwith and the provenance of her cabin property was prompted by snippets of information from oral history stories, or what oral historians refer to as memory-telling. In crafting a memory-telling scenario, I chose to use the present-day voice of a witness to memory-telling, from someone who in turn could have heard a story about a group of former slaves traveling on a mule wagon from Cabin Point to Boydton, Virginia, to complete a land transaction.

Through oral history stories combined with resources of literature, history, vernacular architecture, archaeology, material culture, legal studies, anthropology, public records, and U.S. Census databases, I was able to craft and fit together some pieces of a biographical puzzle about Vicey Skipwith and her significance in Mecklenburg County and in the larger historical context of women and property ownership. I incorporated facts—such as the existence of the Old Plank Road, the distance of eleven miles, the Boydton Courthouse, birth dates and names from the Mecklenburg County 1860 Slave Schedules and the 1870 U.S. Census, and the documented literacy of Parker Sydnor and Celia Skipwith—with greater truths. These truths emanate from gender roles, emancipation, the rights of citizenship, and land ownership—all of which fill in the spaces between documented history and collective memory. Listening to memory-telling stories about the past connected with the other side of my research, located in conventional archives and libraries.

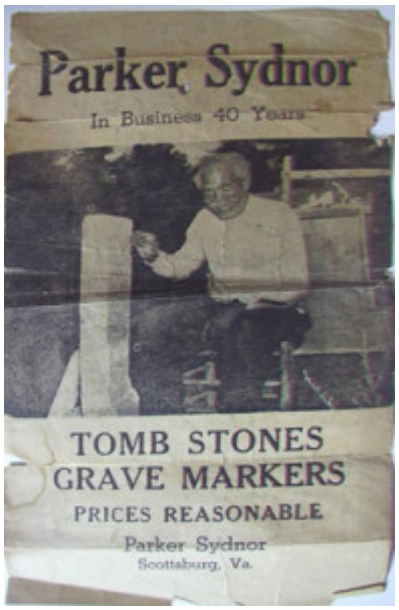

Fig. 2. Newspaper publicity of the Parker Sydnor tombstone business, circa 1940. Parker Sydnor's tombstones are still standing in Mecklenburg and Halifax counties' church cemeteries that include the old cemetery of White Oak Fork Baptist, St. Matthew Baptist, and Spanish Grove Baptist. Courtesy of the author. Image digitalized by Glenn E. Reyes.

My curiosity about Vicey Skipwith began when her persona became intimately connected to research aimed at qualifying a newly identified pre-Civil War log cabin site for the honor of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register. The site was successfully listed on both registers in 2007. The historic log cabin site is named after my great-grandfather, Patrick Robert “Parker” Sydnor (1854-1950), a successful tombstone carver, who intermittently lived in the cabin during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (fig. 2). Vicey Skipwith and Patrick Robert Sydnor were contemporaries of the “First Generation”—formerly enslaved women and men who experienced freedom through the Emancipation Proclamation. As newly freedpeople regardless of their age, those African Americans were the first generation to experience citizenship ratified in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Ninety-six percent of formerly enslaved women and men were non-literate, and very few of the mere four percent who could read and write left behind autobiographical documents that revealed their inner lives and great ambitions. The search for the voice of Vicey Skipwith, whose life spanned the last nine years of slavery, the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, the beginnings of the Jim Crow South, and the 1930s Depression in New York City, was daunting because of her non-literacy. She left no personal papers or letters from her life. Yet, eleven years following the military end of Reconstruction, Vicey Skipwith was among the thousands of newly freed enslaved who amazingly established themselves and purchased land throughout Virginia. Regardless of the quantity of acres, each purchase was a truly remarkable achievement. In this way, the Patrick Robert Sydnor pre-Civil War log cabin site functions as a material artifact of slavery and as an unconventional text for autobiographical truths beyond slavery.

While I have not met anyone who has a living memory of Vicey Skipwith, I met several octogenarians who remembered Patrick Robert “Parker” Sydnor. In the mid-twentieth century, they knew someone who had been an enslaved American and thus, they touched living history. They were children at that time, and out of intergenerational respect, they called him “Uncle Parker.” Although he was a child at the time of Emancipation, Parker Sydnor was still a member of that First Generation. The cabin is historically associated with Parker Sydnor, who was one of its many inhabitants spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

My project has engaged different kinds of challenges, interpretations, and research decisions because many of Vicey Skipwith’s contemporaries were technicians of the spoken word and they passed that skill to the next generation, and the next … They emphasized the texts of speech—collective memories and memory-telling. One of many challenges involved finding written evidence in support of what they told me—about people in the historic past, the landscape or material objects. For example, I’d been told by African American

elders in the community that Aunt Lucinda had owned the cabin property. She had not. Her name was not on any of the deeds that I title searched. At some point during countless real and mental journeys to Virginia, I had an “aha” moment that cleared up the confusion of ownership and gift. True to the fluidity of memory-telling, Aunt Lucinda had owned the cabin because it had been given to her, purportedly by one of the white Skipwiths of Prestwould *after* emancipation, but she didn’t own the *land.* Undoubtedly, the log cabin could have been a gift. The valuable real estate, however, was not included with the less valuable personal property. Local oral historians had appropriately merged ownership of the log cabin with ownership of the land.

I’m reminded of the skillfully crafted book, *The Sea Captain’s Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century* (2006) by historian Martha Hodes. Eunice Richardson Stone Connolly (1831-1877) was an impoverished white woman from New England, who in 1869 daringly married a wealthy sea captain, a man of color from the Cayman Islands. Alongside the intriguing narrative of the “sea captain’s wife,” Hodes has written a captivating account of her own journey of discovery into the ordinary and then extraordinary life of Connolly, as she went from rags to riches through an interracial marriage. Because Connolly was literate, Hodes could effectively conjure her up from the past, engage us with discovery and craft images of a nineteenth-century love story, constructed from the autobiography of letters and biographical actions provided by public records.

In her search, Hodes became a history detective and was able to resurrect a gendered autobiographical voice through the cache of Connolly’s letters. The raw skills of literacy are paramount in these kinds of exciting new discoveries and forensic investigations. Literate subjects leave private and public paper trails for contemporary historians to enjoy through discovery, interpretation, and placement. On the other hand, those of us who research enslaved nineteenth-century women and men seldom have the convenience of discovery that comes with the paper trails of literate people. Hodes was fortunate to research the sea captain’s lady who could read and write—who unintentionally left a wonderful and intriguing cache of letters for our historical fascination.

My Skipwith lady was non-literate throughout her life. She left no such cache. No epistolary paper trails. The central challenge for me was how to create a text for Vicey Skipwith. Given the facts, fiction, and truths, what kind of autobiographical voice could I craft for the larger text that would establish the narrative provenance of a surviving pre-Civil War log cabin? I needed more than routine biographical actions provided by public records. Out of this need, an organic process began to take shape. I sought out local people who were the cultural descendants of Vicey Skipwith’s world. Mecklenburg people liked the fact that there was national merit to their local history. So they talked to me and I listened. I didn’t conduct any formal interviews.

As historical narratives unfold, collective memories often carry the role of filling in the gaps and traces left by written history. During the early stages

of the research, there was a potent interaction between written evidence (the facts) and oral witnessing (the collective truths). Fact and Truth: neither is mutually exclusive of the other. More importantly, I wanted to meet the research challenge by enabling material artifacts, such as a standing nineteenth-century log cabin, to act as a conveyer of truths. I could get the facts from written evidence, but how would I access personal truths from among people who didn't *write* about themselves?

I place Vicey Skipwith's story alongside my own journey of discovery—behind-the-scenes research encounters, humorous moments, challenges and expectations that helped me to produce a narrative of this elusive once-enslaved woman. Documentation is one of the prerequisites for a narrative of biographical facts. On the other hand, autobiographical perspectives are based on perceived truths of the subject. Autobiographical truths demonstrate that Vicey Skipwith's decision to buy farm land in the aftermath of slavery and Reconstruction, gender restraints and the onset of legal segregation, shed light on her ambitions, character and diligence. These characteristics endow on a historic site the kind of meaning that the National Register seeks to honor with its signature recognition. I became a different kind of history detective.

How did I become involved in a project linking vernacular architecture, slavery, the Civil War and the search for Vicey Skipwith? My unexpected journey of discovery began when I had to return on family business to the South of my childhood summers.

After negotiating the hectic airport traffic streaming out of Raleigh-Durham, I settled into the driver's seat and enjoyed the late morning—sunny, balmy, and quiet except for the hushed sound of the rental car's engine as I sped north along Highway Fifteen from North Carolina to southern Virginia's rural Mecklenburg County. *Welcome to Virginia. Radar Detectors Illegal. Virginia is for Lovers*. I crossed the state line, but I felt that I was crossing over to something more than signs could tell. At intervals there were the battered pick-up trucks and older model American cars going south on the other side of the two-lane highway. I slowed down when an occasional farmer or farm-hand driving his tractor turned onto the highway from a gravel road and travelled a short distance only to turn into the next gravel road. With only that kind of local traffic, I drove for almost two hours, alone on the north side of the highway. Townships and their white painted double-wides trimmed with foundation plants interrupted the forest on both sides of the highway; and intermittent field crops that I couldn't name signaled small and middle-sized farms as the countryside became more agricultural.

Going back to Mecklenburg County after being away for more than twenty years, I was both uneasy and sad. My grandmother was no longer here to welcome and shelter me from the past. During the intermittent, but wonderful, summer vacations of my childhood and youth, I'd always been with family members in the old southern town of Clarksville: my grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings. I had never been alone. The older relatives took care of everything.

They spoiled us well. After all, being there was supposed to be like summer camp. We only had to play hard, eat well, remember our manners, take our baths on Saturday nights and go to church every Sunday until it was time to leave again at the end of the summer.

My empowering, well-known, feisty, tall and beautiful grandmother confidently did the driving, farming, cooking, shopping, helping the less fortunate, taking care of family property matters and sheltering us from the realities of Jim Crow in the South. As "summer" children, we only knew about southern white people and segregation from a far and emotionally safe distance. Now, my grandmother and the rest of the elders had all passed on. Because of my flexible summer schedule from university teaching in the Midwest, the siblings designated me to come back to Clarksville. Somebody in the family had to deal with the old uninhabited log cabin at the home place. I was anxious because the historical distances were shorter—not even past—and I had not come back to play.

I'd never been in Clarksville by myself, without my immediate family to cushion me from the historical remnants of a rural southern town steeped in antebellum history. One hundred miles south of Richmond and sixty-five miles north of Raleigh-Durham, Clarksville in 1818 became the first incorporated town in Mecklenburg County. It was named after Clarke Royster, a planter and tavern keeper, who also owned—among his extensive estates that included an elegant house, cattle, sheep and hogs—eleven slaves. Clarksville became a home front of Confederate operations during the Civil War. The closest major city in the next county of Pittsylvania is Danville, which is known as the last capital of the Confederate States of America. If you drive through Clarksville and continue north on Highway Fifteen, you arrive at the famous or infamous town of Farmville in Prince Edward County. As a result of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Board of Supervisors for Prince Edward County closed the public schools in defiance rather than integrate. In 2003 Prince Edward County apologized to the African Americans who as students had lost five years—an academic generation—of their education. But on that day of my return, I didn't remember those epic junctures in Southside Virginia history.

Memories of those summers with my grandmother continued to swirl within and surround me as Highway Fifteen finally brought me to Clarksville (fig. 3). For a few days, I drove about the county conducting family business. I renewed my acquaintance with an elderly cousin who would come with me, and I appreciated her company. Not only did I have a "foreign" sounding name (because of my mother's marriage to my Honduran, Spanish-speaking father) that many local people couldn't pronounce, a name that was certainly not "from these parts," I also "talked different." I had to gain the confidence of the new people that I met. But during the early trips back for research I would watch their eyes glaze over until they could understand what I was saying.

Not long after my arrival, I went back to the log cabin site with a local

history enthusiast—an elderly Mecklenburg County Anglo American with a keen enthusiasm for Virginia history. I'd been introduced to David Arnold in Boydton—the same county seat that Vicey Skipwith had gone to in 1888—and he wanted to see the cabin. We met at the intersection of the old Cabin Point—a name that had been given to the crossroads as long ago as 1798. I stood on the side of the paved county road and David walked through the underbrush up to the cabin (fig. 4). I didn't want to venture that far because of possible snakes and unambiguous chiggers. After about fifteen minutes, he came back to the road, flushed with excitement. "That there log cabin has a lot of stories to tell, I imagine some from before the Civil War … you can get it on that Register …" I blinked. Was he referring to the National Register of Historic Places?

The U.S. National Park Service (NPS) sponsors the National Register of Historic Places. The NPS requires that a targeted site be researched with documentation that serves as proof of its historical value and national recognition. According to the NPS, the historic integrity of a building or site is "the authenticity of a property's historic identity … Not only must a property resemble its historic appearance, but it must also retain physical materials, design features, and aspects of construction dating from the period when it attained significance." While I researched and documented the integrity of the dwelling as a standing pre-Civil War structure, I also wanted to draw attention to how the site displays the cabin's resonance and association with individual women and men—white and black—of the historic era surrounding the Civil War. The NPS defines association as "the direct link between an important historic event or person and a historic property … Like feeling, association requires the presence of physical features that convey a property's historic character."

In the process of establishing the historic integrity and provenance of the nineteenth-century log structure, I also pursued putting together the puzzle pieces of one of the cabin's early inhabitants and first African American owner, Vicey Skipwith. David's suggestion initiated six years of journeys that would take me back and forth through the historic past, to Virginia, to the Library of Congress, to many other private and public libraries and historical societies, and to the porches and churches of both African American and white American residents in Mecklenburg County. The log cabin property had once been part of the vast southern Virginia plantation, Prestwould, built by Sir Peyton Skipwith (1740-1805) with his second wife, Lady Jean Skipwith (1748-1826) (fig. 5).

Sir Skipwith made Prestwould into one of the antebellum "big houses," in the tradition of Berkeley, Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Montpelier. Those elegant Georgian and neo-classical plantation houses embody the history of the elite planter families who created the foundations of the early republic. Similarly, Prestwould epitomized the wealth, character and emblematic ideals of that era in Southside Virginia. Prestwould was built by enslaved carpenters and stonemasons who brought stone for its construction from the plantation's own quarry. An architectural historian from the Virginia Department of Historical

Resources confirmed that the same quarry supplied stone for the chimney of the Sydnor log cabin (fig. 6).

I was fascinated by the fact that Vicey Skipwith was spirited enough to buy a parcel of the same land that her parents had labored on as enslaved workers. From tax records, I established that Vicey Skipwith was the tax payer for her six acres. But I had to do a title search to document the provenance of the property and its connection to Prestwould plantation. David volunteered to come with me and he invited the president of Prestwould Foundation, Dr. Julian Hudson, to meet us at the courthouse. Because my research encompassed historic Prestwould and its original ownership of the Sydnor log cabin, he wanted me to meet Julian.

David and I had no idea how to conduct a title search. Heavy leather-bound deed books were stacked imposingly on the shelves of the public records room at the Boydton Courthouse. Many of the books had beautiful handwritten entries that seemed to date from the formation of the county in 1765; but the cursive penmanship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was difficult to read. I was sitting on the floor reading one of the heavy ledgers from the bottom shelf, when I noticed a pair of khaki-trousered legs standing beside me. Julian Hudson. I hadn't heard him come in. And so, he had sized me up first. I stood up and introduced myself as David came over. We had been getting nowhere with the title search. Julian looked around the modest room filled with shelves of public records, old bound ledgers, maps and directories. He saw someone that he knew—a lawyer who specializes in estate and probate law. I found out later that Walter Beales is a highly respected Southside "lawyer's lawyer" who also has an amazing knowledge of Virginia history.

Confidently, Julian walked over to the lawyer, greeted him and posed a statement rather than a question: "Walter, can you help us out here. We're looking for … " The lawyer looked at Julian, at me, and at David. I tried to look as helpless as possible. Walter Beales quietly and patiently stopped the work that he was doing for a client and showed us the correct sequence of bound volumes to search. With David and Julian taking command, in less than forty-five minutes we were able to complete the title search that covered more than 200 years of the property's Euro-American ownership. The title search proved definitively that the Sydnor cabin property had been a part of Prestwould plantation, located in the area that had been the outlying slave quarters, called Cabin Point. The search additionally confirmed the dollar amount that Vicey Skipwith paid for her six and one fifth acres of land: sixty-two dollars. She also paid fifty cents in taxes the following year. Sixty-two dollars in 1888 is the approximate equivalent of $1500 in today's economy—still a substantial amount of money. I could begin to connect the property "with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history," as required for the National Register nomination.

After the triumph of that day's research in the Boydton Courthouse, I thought about how social transformation in our American society enabled me to have

ready access to public records that Vicey Skipwith would not have been permitted to access (even if she had been literate). With David, I entered the courthouse through the front door. His associates were white southern men who generously helped me with the title search. When Vicey Skipwith bought her property, she entered the courthouse through the segregated entrance. Nevertheless, she left the courthouse as a property-owning woman-citizen (fig. 7).

When I was not in Virginia doing field work, I immersed myself in reading about women and slavery, Virginia history, vernacular architecture, navigable waterways, material culture, and the Civil War. And every time I went back, I introduced myself to new people, especially the elderly. They were also "libraries." As an African proverb tells us, *when the elders die, libraries are gone*. And so, I often went to the elders—black and white—in order to hear them talk through memory-telling. Because the church continues to be an important African American social institution, I attended different churches on the Sundays of my field trips in order to connect to the elders and their informational stories. I needed to know about the generations of people who had their home places where Vicey Skipwith had lived. I talked with local people, trying to get access to the cultural past through the voices of the present.

The elders who spoke with me seemed to prefer to use the less brutal sounding word, bondage. I observed that among them, slavery is still a word that causes emotional memories to collide. Bondage is associated with Biblical stories of injustice, impermanence and ultimate deliverance. "Slavery" as a distinct historical signifier evokes less of the deliverance and more of the atrocities. When the elders started remembering stories about the historic past and slavery, they would often begin with the signifying "we" of collective memory-telling, "When we were in bondage … " Therefore, calling slavery by another name seems to serve as a shock absorber—bondage is a word that absorbs the distress of knowing about the abject poverty of the enslaved, about the violence and oppression inflicted, and knowing that the system did not make their people ignoble.

Many Mecklenburg County families—African American and Anglo American—are rooted in the antebellum and early republic history of Virginia. For example, J.J. Crowder was the former slaveholder who sold Vicey Skipwith the cabin property. He had bought it from Fulwar Skipwith (1836-1900), the last antebellum owner of Prestwould. Present-day families with the surname of Crowder still live in the county and are direct descendants of that nineteenth-century J.J. Crowder and his wife, Margaret R. Crowder. I was encouraged to telephone one of the Crowders still living in Clarksville. In his late nineties at the time, the contemporary J.J. Crowder was one of the town's two oldest residents. He was good-natured as I told him about my project. He told me that his forefathers had bought Virginia land in the eighteenth century through charters issued by the king of England as land grants to private investors.

Referring to the log cabin property that had been sold to Vicey Skipwith by one

of his ancestors and hoping to prompt any relevant information, I asked him if he knew about the older Crowder properties on the other side of the river, near a church named St. Matthew. He asked, “Do you mean near that white church over there on [highway] 49?” I thought, *I’d made it clear that I was referring to African Americans in my research and no, I am not talking about any white church.* Somewhat piqued, I replied with authority, “No sir, I’m talking about the black church at 49, after you turn off from the old Lee West store.” There was a slight pause through the telephone, and then he said to me with a bit of annoyance in *his* voice: “Well, I’m talking about the color of that church building. It’s painted white!”

As I kept going back to Mecklenburg County, I realized that I was not really alone. My grandmother was with me in a new way. She was still prominent in a community where people remembered her through memory-telling. Mentioning her name opened doors for me. The local people were not familiar with my surname because it was not among the names that had created rugged settlements, middling farms, plantations during the formation of Virginia as a Crown Colony of England, or home front operations during the Civil War. African Americans and Anglo Americans alike share those surnames such as Arnold, Burwell, Carter, Coleman, Crutchfield, Goode, Love, McCargo, Skipwith, Sizemore, Sydnor, Yancy.

Fig. 3. Virginia Avenue Mall in Clarksville, Virginia. Photograph courtesy of Eva Cassada.

I learned that an important entrée for my research was establishing who “my people” were. I learned to introduce myself through my grandmother’s name, which was a part of the cultural memory at the extended home place. The people—black and white—had long memories. Middle-aged men and women would say

to me, “Yes, ma’am. I knew your grandmother. I was real young then, but I still remember her.” Or the women elders would say, “Oh, come on in the house! Lord, have mercy Jesus! I sure did know your grandmother. Yes, indeed! I remember her.” And they would begin a litany of praise about my grandmother. And there was Edith Davis Marks (1929-2010), an administrator with the Prestwould Foundation who kindly assisted me whenever I went to Prestwould, now a house museum. She said in a pronounced Southern accent, “I knew your grandmother when I was in my twenties. I use to go to the restaurant that she owned in town … Irene’s Tea House, she called it.” Edith was white, and I wondered if my grandmother’s restaurant abided by the segregation laws of the 1950s, but I didn’t ask. I met a surveyor whose family name (well-established white landowners) is listed on the 1864 Civil War Gilmer map of Mecklenburg County (fig. 8). He asked me, “Who are your people here in Mecklenburg?” Having a “people” regardless of color is paramount at the home place.

The ethos of home place that has an identity through memory-telling is what Toni Morrison refers to as a “site of memory.” Like the slaveholding white American “first families” of Mecklenburg County, African American “first families” eventually formed collateral relationships connected to marriage and land ownership that enabled them to carve out new home places. In particular, African American women like Vicey Skipwith struggled for the *rights* of citizenship, established through the integrity of free labor (not slave labor or sharecropping), the integrity of being able to have a legal marriage and the integrity of property ownership—as opposed to the *privilege* of citizenship based on the antebellum foundation of who could own property.

Fig. 4. Patrick Robert “Parker” Sydnor pre-Civil War log cabin, circa 1860. National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register. Photograph courtesy of the author, Reyes and Reyes copyright 2008.

Biographical facts gleaned from the public record combined with the voices of memory-telling are revealing. As a kind of history detective, I have to fill in the spaces in order to arrive at certain truths even when I don’t have all the facts. But Toni Morrison tells us that truths are more human than facts.

Historians may consider Reconstruction a failure for many reasons. Vicey Skipwith's story demonstrates a certain truth: members of the First Generation continued to reconstruct and shape their new freedoms and ambitions long after 1877. And we know that their struggles continued.

Fig. 5. "Prestwould Plantation, Clarksville, Virginia," circa 1935, by Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952). Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

As contemporary readers of the past, our guidelines, beliefs, and standards demand that we document the discoveries. We are trained to rip the veils away: how did Vicey Skipwith manage to get the equivalent of $1500 to pay for her parcel of farm land? With the birth name of Virginia listed on the Prestwould Slave Schedules, why and when did she change her name? Why does her final public document, the 1936 death certificate, list her first name as Virginia? Who were her husbands? What happened to her children? What did she look like? Are there any extant photos of Vicey Skipwith? Why do we need to know what happened behind the veils? Do we need to know because the past is not even past? I won't have definitive answers, but I would like to craft informed speculations out of my ongoing forensic work and with the memory-telling that continues to surround the home place of Vicey Skipwith—and my childhood summers.

Fig. 6. Enslaved stonemasons brought stone from Prestwould's quarry to

construct the chimney of the log cabin. Photograph courtesy of Alexandria J. Reyes.

At this critical juncture in the United States, we're in a tremendous economic downturn based on the ever-present imperative for home ownership that continues to define the American Dream, our work ethics, and the essence of responsible citizenship. We're constantly being reminded about these economic hard times. Vicey Skipwith also lived in hard times. I thought about the six acres of farm land and the enslaved's cabin, and a mule that Vicey Skipwith may have purchased from her former slaveholders. As a farmer, she needed at least a good mule for farm work. I became inspired by William Faulkner's famous pronouncement in *Requiem for a Nun*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The past constantly informs the present and the past imposes intergenerational rippling effects on the present. Collective memories from the past add to the story of an African American woman's quiet, but public, performance of owning land—a "first-time home buyer." From all of these approaches, we learn about Vicey Skipwith's efforts to create a home place identity out of the residue of slavery.

Fig. 7. "Mecklenburg County/Boydton Courthouse, in Boydton, Virginia," photograph ca. 1913 and in 2011. Photograph courtesy of Historic Boydton's Renaissance, Inc., Boydton, Virginia.

You might think, *but this is a typical American story*. *Many formerly enslaved women and men in Virginia bought land after the Civil War.* Yes, but stories still need to unfold about those First Generation people, because many of them could not leave behind their voices in letters, diaries or books for us to read

and retell. Many Americans, ironically, can identify with Vicey Skipwith after we hear about her story. We continue to trust in home ownership that constructs the American Dream and our own home place identities.

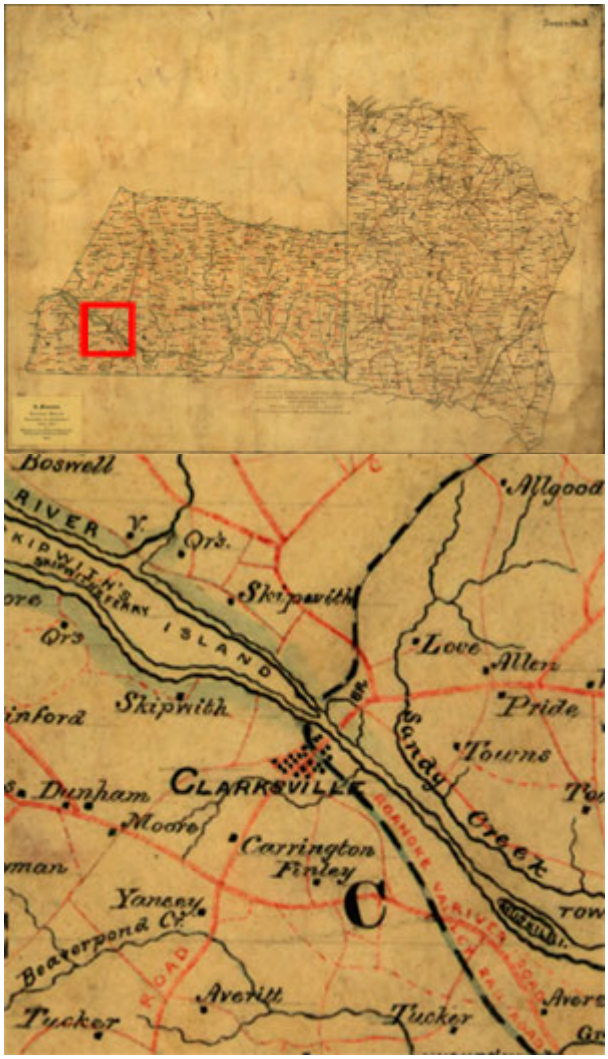

Fig. 8. A relief map showing towns, waterways, roads, geographic features and land owners. “Map of Mecklenburg, Brunswick and Greensville counties, Va.,” ca. 1864 map from the Confederate Engineer Bureau in Richmond, Virginia (Sheet No. 3). General J. F. Gilmer, Chief Engineer. Presented to the Virginia Historical Society by his only daughter, Mrs. J.F. Minis, Savannah, Georgia. Courtesy of the Geography and Map Division, the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., and the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. To the right is an enlargement of the area around Clarksville; click on map to enlarge full map in a new window. The ethos of home place that has an identity through

Inc., efforts are underway to rehabilitate and preserve the Patrick Robert Sydnor historic site. These objectives include the construction of a public history and visitors' center. The mission of Literacy InterActives, Inc. focuses on bridging communities through interactive approaches that reach all individuals in Mecklenburg and Halifax counties and beyond—wherever they are, using their talents, skills and resources. Read More

Further Reading

I was fascinated with Martha Hodes' account, "A House in Vermont, a Caribbean Beach: Beckoned by Landscapes Beyond the Archive" (*Common-place*, 2007), of her travels to conventional archives and natural landscapes in the United States and the Caribbean for the writing of her book, *The Sea Captain's Wife*: *A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2006). More than being outside of the archives, natural landscapes are different kinds of archives that can serve as depositories for historical, material, and cultural discoveries. Toni Morrison's seminal essay, "The Site of Memory" (New York, 1995) brings together literary ideas and tested observations about antebellum landscapes, collective memory, and unconventional texts of autobiography. Morrison discusses the complexity of truth juxtaposed with the simplicity of facts. *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation Bulletin* by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (Washington, D.C., 2002) is a valuable resource that enables preparation for rugged and detailed field and archival investigation for documenting historic sites that are significant for national recognition. Dianne Swann-Wright's *A Way Out of No Way: Claiming Family and Freedom in the New South* (Virginia, 2002) and Laurie A. Wilkie's *Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana 1840-1950* (Louisiana, 2000) provide in-depth and innovative research methods. The authors craft microhistorical narratives that align with researched facts and analyses in capturing anthropological and historical case studies. John Michael Vlach's *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Society* examines the intersections of vernacular architecture, archaeology, and cultural history that created the slaves' quarters on antebellum plantations (North Carolina, 1993). The culture of the quarters was not an ignominious blight on the plantation landscape. As Vlach tells us, "Beyond the white masters' residence, back of and beyond the Big House, was a world of work dominated by black people. The inhabitants of this world knew it intimately, and they gave to it, by thought and deed, their own definition of place" (1). Vlach documents the architecture of the slaves' quarters as material objects (and as artifacts) in the context of plantation relations and spatial landscapes.

Acknowledgments

I thank Leigh Lambert, executive director of the Southside Regional Library, and other Mecklenburg County residents for their enthusiastic assistance with obtaining historic and contemporary photographs of Clarksville and Boydton used here.

This article originally appeared in issue 12.3 (April, 2012).

Angelita Reyes is a professor in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University, where she teaches courses on women and gender in African and African American diasporas; and material culture and cross-cultural studies in the Department of English. She has published and is active in areas of public history, including bringing the Patrick Robert Sydnor pre-Civil War historic site project to the attention and involvement of community audiences in Virginia. Her related book project focuses on symbolic watersheds and African American oral narratives in Mecklenburg County.