

# Life on the Plantation at Stagville

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Close your eyes. What do you picture when you hear the word plantation? Staff members at Historic Stagville State Historic Site in Durham often ask visitors this question. Staff members hear many different responses that include words such as land, farm, crops, and enslaved people. A very large farm of at least 500 acres and at least 20 enslaved African American workers often was called a plantation. However, a simple definition for a plantation proves hard to find. An antebellum plantation ran more like a small town. It reflected an economic and social system with many complex relationships between people, the land, and the environment.

Stagville—one of the largest antebellum plantations in North Carolina—included 30,000 acres of land and almost 900 enslaved individuals at its height just before the Civil War. It stretched 47 square miles, touching the modern-day Piedmont counties of Orange, Durham, Wake, and Granville. Along with thousands of acres of crops, the plantation featured mills, shops, and other common operations of the era.



(Above) *The Bennehan House was built just before the antebellum era. By the time of the Civil War, the Bennehan-Cameron family was one of the North Carolina's wealthiest.* Image courtesy of Marcia Loudon.

The story of Stagville actually began before the American Revolution. Richard Bennehan—a merchant from northern Virginia—moved to the area that is now Durham in 1768 to help manage a local store that also offered postal and banking services. His wife, Mary Amis, brought a small fortune in land and 20 enslaved people to their 1776 marriage. This partnership benefited Bennehan, because it boosted him from the merchant class to the planter class. Being in this top level of antebellum society meant more money, additional opportunities, and greater respect. Bennehan increased his holdings by buying land and enslaved workers from small yeoman farmers. Most North Carolinians at the time could be called yeoman farmers—working the land themselves and growing little more than what their families needed to survive. These farmers sometimes owned a few enslaved people. Wealthy planters like Bennehan made up less than 10 percent of the Piedmont's population in the late 1700s.

Bennehan’s plantation really grew in 1787, when he bought 66 acres of land from Judith Stagg. He built the first part of what today is called the Bennehan House on a hill; another section was added just over 10 years later. Features of the house include a large hall to welcome guests, a formal parlor, a dining room, a butler’s pantry, an office, and two upstairs bedrooms. The building does not have the grand, white columns that most visitors driving up to a plantation would expect. The Bennehans’ wealth shows, however, in details like the house’s paint and the glass windows imported from England. At one time, the house had other buildings such as a kitchen, smokehouse, milk house, and stable nearby. An earlier yeoman’s house, possibly used by an overseer during the later Stagville era, remains on the site.

The plantation truly became what we know as Stagville when Richard and Mary’s daughter, Rebecca, married Duncan Cameron in 1803, combining their families’ lands. Stagville reached its peak shortly after Paul Cameron, Rebecca and Duncan’s son, inherited it in 1853. (Richard and Mary Bennehan’s only son, Thomas, had no children.) Paul Cameron focused on agriculture and the business of running the plantation in a way that others did not. He became known as a skilled and energetic manager, as well as a North Carolina leader in pushing for improvements in farming.



*The unusual two-story, four-room slave cabins in the Horton Grove section of Historic Stagville State Historic Site were built in the 1850s. During the antebellum era, each room housed a family of enslaved laborers. Image courtesy of Marcia Loudon.*

During the antebellum period, enslaved people were legally considered property; most people viewed owning slaves and land as the way to advance in society. The Bennehan-Cameron family became one of North Carolina’s wealthiest families before the Civil War through its land and the laborers who worked that land. The enslaved people at Stagville labored six days a week. While Sunday was supposed to be a day of rest, the slaves often spent that time working in their own gardens to provide more food for their families. They received rations of cornmeal, flour, molasses, and sometimes dried pork. This diet differed greatly from that of the planter family, which regularly enjoyed a variety of meats, bread, fruits, and vegetables.

By the time they were eight years old, the majority of the enslaved residents of Stagville were involved in growing cash crops. A cash crop is harvested to sell for money rather than personal use. Cotton, tobacco, and other crops grew on the plantation, but the site’s main cash crops

included corn, wheat, and rye. Trees cover the land today and block the view from the slave quarters to the main house. But when Stagville was a working plantation, open land and fields stretched for miles and miles.

The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill now preserves thousands of Bennehan-Cameron family business and personal papers—everything from wills and tax bills to love letters. Paul Cameron kept detailed records and accounts of almost all the enslaved people that he owned: what jobs they had, when they got married, when they had children, and even when they died. Such documents help researchers piece together the story of the enslaved community. Many documents list only first names for the slaves. For years, the Stagville staff has been working to compile a genealogy and full names of the plantation’s enslaved laborers and their descendants. This project involves evidence such as the oral history and family traditions of the slaves’ descendants, as well as documents. Compared to many southern plantations, researchers have recovered much information about Stagville’s enslaved community. A great deal remains to be learned.

We do know that working the land was not the only labor performed by the enslaved residents of Stagville. Slave artisans such as Lewis, a blacksmith, designed and repaired tools. Ben, a cobbler, made shoes for the planter and enslaved families. In one 1848 letter, Cameron writes that “Ben S. our Tanner died very suddenly last week in a congested chill, poor fellow he had but a short notice and every effort was made by Dr. Hicks and myself to save him—he died perfectly himself and was as cold as clay for 3 hours before he breathed last a great loss to us and to his fine young family.” Enslaved carpenters and masons built and repaired plantation buildings. A cooper called Old Man Coxe made wooden buckets; gardeners worked in the kitchen garden; and stable hands took care of the horses and carriage houses. Peggy was a spinner who spun cotton into thread. Abner could then weave this thread into cloth. Abner made sheets, blankets, pot holders, and clothing. If anyone became ill, there was a nurse, Christiana, who took care of them. Daniel was the Cameron family’s carriage driver.

Whether they were field hands, artisans, or house workers, enslaved laborers toiled from sunup to sundown. They did not receive pay, they enjoyed no vacations, they rarely (if ever) could leave the plantation, and they faced a range of restrictions and punishments. The planter controlled almost everything about the workers’ lives. In the evenings, though, the enslaved people could spend time with family and friends. They could develop relationships within the large Stagville slave community and foster an appreciation for their heritage. None of the enslaved laborers at Stagville came directly from West Africa, but all of their ancestors did. West African traditions like communal cooking continued. Families gathered at night outside the slave quarters and cooked together, sharing what they had grown in their gardens. Music was another West African tradition that the people continued. Singing served as an outlet for sharing sadness or joy. Slave songs sung on plantations became today’s gospel music. Several popular American instruments like the banjo have roots in African culture.

Visitors to Historic Stagville often ask whether the Camerons were “kind slave owners, or whether they frequently punished their slaves?” From reading primary documents in the family papers, researchers know the Camerons did care for their slaves (probably for economic as well as personal reasons). They made sure the workers had decent food and clothes. Many of the

letters that Paul Cameron's wife, Anne, wrote to him discussed the health and physical well-being of the enslaved people. Cameron very likely saw himself as a kindly slave owner. Antebellum white people in general, though, believed they were naturally smarter and better than enslaved people were. Most documents that survive were written by the Bennehans and Camerons themselves. In fact, North Carolina passed legislation in 1830 banning anyone from teaching a slave to read or write. This law helps prevent today's historians from getting a clear view of the institution of slavery from the eyes of those who were enslaved. It is difficult to answer questions about physical punishment. Punishments differed from plantation to plantation, but there had to be some system set in place to keep people enslaved against their wills. None of the Cameron papers that are known to historians discuss punishment at Stagville. They do mention beatings that happened on other property that the family owned in Mississippi and Alabama.

School groups visiting Stagville often ask another complex question: "Why didn't the slaves just run away?" Running away was dangerous and difficult. Runaway slaves traveled by foot, rarely had money, and did not know whom they could trust. They were surrounded by white males—with weapons and horses—alert to any hint of slave rebellion or escape. Getting caught meant severe penalties like whippings; being sold away from one's family (possibly to another state); and even death. Enslaved individuals had to think about leaving others behind. A large group was easier to notice as missing and to spot. It would have been even more difficult, almost impossible, for an entire family to leave at once. Even if a runaway reached the North, freedom was not guaranteed; again, law reinforced the institution of slavery. For example, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850. This act required all runaway slaves to be returned to their owners.

While the enslaved people worked on the plantation, the planters themselves often were away tending to business. Life on a plantation would have been lonely and isolated for white women. The closest town to Stagville was Hillsborough, about 18 miles away. In the antebellum era, it would have taken about half a day to travel there. Planter women were discouraged from having relationships with the enslaved people working in and around the house. Despite their wealth, these women did not usually go away to school. Tutors were brought into the home for boys until they became older and attended schools like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Girls learned skills that were considered proper for wealthy ladies at the time, such as reading, sewing, music, and languages like French. The Bennehan and Cameron wives and daughters did carry out many jobs to make the plantation run smoothly. They often worked from sunup to sundown, too, managing the work of slaves; entertaining business and personal guests; gardening; preserving fruits and vegetables; mixing medicines; and making candles, soaps, rugs, and linens.

History books and documents offer a great deal of data about the antebellum period, but a wealth of information exists at Stagville itself. The site today includes 162 acres and several structures. Visitors can get a sense of how enslaved people lived, for example, by going into an original slave quarter built in the 1850s. Four of the original slave quarters still stand, a rarity in North Carolina. (Why do you think so many plantation houses survive, but the slave quarters do not?) These two-story structures were built to ward off sickness. Slave houses that had been constructed in 1823 had dirt floors and thatch roofs that allowed in water and rodents. Multiple

slave families lived in one building; therefore, sickness spread very quickly. Visitors can see the changes that were made in the later structures. The roofs are made with cedar, for example. Each quarter has four rooms. A family shared one room, meaning about 30 people lived in one structure. Stagville visitors can note the differences between the slaves' houses and the Bennehan House, including the design, the size, and the artifacts inside. And they can eye the work of the enslaved people that remains. A chimney bears marks from the fingers of the brickmasons. The Great Barn has ax marks visible on its wood; enslaved people designed and built it in the summer of 1860.

History has been found under the ground at Stagville, too. Archaeologists uncovered a cowry shell on a remaining domestic slave quarter foundation. This was an important find. This kind of shell cannot be found on the East Coast of the United States; in fact, the kind of shell discovered at Stagville can only be located on the western coast of Africa. One of its main uses there was as currency; however, since none of the enslaved people at Stagville came directly from West Africa, the cowry shell must have been passed down from generation to generation. Its discovery tells historians that the enslaved people had been holding onto parts of their African heritage. Today Stagville offers a wealth of information, from primary documents to structures. Descendants of the people who once lived there often visit the site, take the tour, and teach the staff. And as a result, history continues to come alive.

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