

High School Student Narrative for Behind the Big House

*vocabulary terms in bold

Welcome to the Behind the Big House Tour. This tour program began in April 2012 to call attention to the daily lives of enslaved people in the pre—Civil War South. It seeks to expand, balance and counter the mainstream story of slavery, which often leaves their experiences out. This program is run by Preserve Marshall County and Holly Springs (PMCHS), a local organization that helps to preserve historic buildings. It does that work with the support of our primary sponsor the Mississippi Humanities Council (MHC). It is because of their consistent support that this program is free and open to the public.

You are now at the Hugh Craft House, which is the first stop on the “Behind the Big House” Tour. Please feel free to raise your hand and ask any questions you may have as we go along.

The first inhabitants of this area were the members of the Chickasaw Nation whose homelands included neighboring portions of Tennessee and Alabama. The Chickasaw **Cession** of 1832 opened up vast amounts of land here in north Mississippi, though the removal and relocation of Chickasaw people began in 1837 and continued for decades. This area was extremely fertile land for growing cotton – the cash crop of the day.

The Hugh Craft House is named for its original owner, who came to Holly Springs from Milledgeville, Georgia in 1839. Craft was a land **speculator** and **purveyor** of many things. In fact, in one 1820s Milledgeville advertisement, he offered “Pickled York River Oysters”! He also sold decorative iron work like the fence that surrounds this property. The man tried everything, but land speculation was his main enterprise. Mr. Craft lost everything in the economic Panic of 1837, which was a great recession. . Over speculation in land prices caused banks, landowners, and land agents like Hugh Craft to lose all they owned. Lots of good land was now available at cheap prices, after the U.S. government forced Chickasaw people from this homeland to Oklahoma, This gave many men like Hugh Craft, who built this house, an opportunity to remake themselves. He came Holly Springs in 1839. Mr. Craft still owed a lot of money to people, so his wife remained behind in Milledgeville, Georgia, to sell their houses, furniture, tools, land and their enslaved people, to satisfy the debt. He used his inside knowledge of land deals to buy the best land for himself.

Craft started out as a U.S. Government contract **surveyor** working for the American Land Company, whose office was located just diagonally from us in what is called “The Yellow Fever House.” The American Land Company soon went bankrupt and closed down due to

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mismanagement and corruption. He then opened his own private practice of land surveying and did quite well for himself. His business office still stands behind the present City Hall, just one block north of here. Craft profited enough to build the house in which you are standing in 1851.

The make-up of a construction crew in the early 19th century would have been a mix of men led by someone called an “undertaker”...today we would say “contractor.” The undertaker would advertise that he “undertook” various construction jobs such as: framing, masonry, plaster-work, paint-mixing, glazing, sheet-metal work, finish carpentry. As you might imagine, a good finish carpenter could also build coffins as a side job and somewhere along the line, the term “undertaker” took on the meaning of someone who buries the dead.

The general contractor did whatever it took to build a structure in the 19th century and it took a lot of men to accomplish this task. He would have his white job bosses oversee portions of the work, as well as a few skilled craftsmen who might have been white or free blacks, to assist them. Much of the labor force that did the toughest work such as digging footings, **fabricating** the lumber for the structure’s frame, and brick-making would have been done by gangs of enslaved people. The enslaved workers were rented from local slave-owners, who would charge for them a rate according to the workers’ skill-set. So remember that these early 19th century structures are completely hand-made. Everything that you touch or see was hand-- crafted without the use of modern machines and took a lot of manual and craftsman labor to create . Much of it was done by enslaved people and these fine structures stand as witness to their skills.

Though the walls are finished with **stucco**, recent rehab work on the house has helped determine that the structure is a “heavy-timber frame.” In heavy timber framing, the **members** are held together by large wooden pegs instead of nails. The heavy logs were filled with brick...a building method called “noggin.” The bricks were then stuccoed to give the house a clean, modern appearance. People built houses like this for centuries, but given that there were newer methods available in the early 19th century, it’s a little surprising that they used such an archaic type of construction. Even at the ripe age of more than a 160 years, this grand house demonstrates how well it has been maintained and that upkeep just like its construction took labor, enslaved labor.

The house was completed in 1851 and the 1860 slave census schedule shows that nine persons were enslaved here on this property including children. Their living quarters would have been

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housed in the adjacent three story building, which also served as the kitchen for decades. Enslaved persons were legally considered property, like a horse or a wagon, so the Census lists them by gender, race, and age, not name. We do know that one of the unnamed children was “Tom.” We only know this because he came with his wife to the house for a visit in 1924 and had their picture taken on the porch by Mrs. Chesley Smith, a Craft descendant.

While the story of slavery in the Antebellum South is often told from the perspective of the Craft family and their peers, the points of view of Tom and other enslaved persons are often overlooked or devalued. Even though enslaved persons built and maintained this house, they were not allowed to come and go as they pleased while serving the Craft family. Do also keep in mind that these enslaved persons would have gone about their work without the modern innovations and machines that simplify our lives. There was no modern electricity or plumbing, no microwave or refrigerator.

How would taking care of the nutritional needs of the owner Craft family look from the perspective of the enslaved? First, they lived in the kitchen and would have only entered the dining room to serve meals to the Craft family and their guests, or to bring firewood to keep the room warm. If they were in there, they were not to speak unless spoken to. Serving the Craft family also meant that they were on call 24 hours a day, every day. If a Craft family member wanted some warm milk or tea in the night to help them sleep, they did not get it themselves. Here, in the mid-19th century, there was usually a young enslaved child sleeping on a pallet in the hallway outside a Craft family member’s bedroom door. That enslaved child would be in charge of getting whatever the Craft family member wanted. In the cooler months, the fireplaces were kept going 24 hours a day and an enslaved person was made sure that there were live embers going at all times. What if one of the family members needed to use the restroom during the night? Though there was an outhouse, the Craft family is not likely to use that at night; they used indoor chamber pots instead. It fell to the young enslaved housemaid to dump the chamber pot’s contents into the outhouse and then clean it for use the next night. That is one example how the main house functioned in the antebellum years. You will learn more about the lives of those enslaved by Mr. Craft when you visit their former home, the outside kitchen.

After slavery is abolished, many of those plantation homes way out in the county were simply abandoned. Many families moved to town to consolidate resources with their in-town relatives by living in houses such as these, to share the work that enslaved people once did for them. Some

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enslaved persons stayed on to work in these houses for low wages or for food and housing, as there would have been few available opportunities for them, especially with the restrictions of statewide black codes.

The preservation of these antebellum mansions, or “Big Houses” as they are often called, is important. These are significant examples of architecture and deserve to be studied and appreciated for their beauty and the craftsmanship of a bygone era. But if you are going to tell the story of these fine homes and the people who lived here, you must tell the story of those who built and served here as well. Few talk about the actual contributions of enslaved people to a house or to the local economy. You can take tours of these antebellum homes, but the roles of enslaved people are rarely mentioned, or if mentioned, rarely complicated. Often they are referred to as “servants” – which hardly begins to tell the full truth of their existence at these sites.

These main houses simply didn’t operate without the support of the enslaved people who toiled endlessly in silence and lived in the humble structures out of public view, behind the Big House. What we hope to do through “Behind the Big House” is to give you a broader view of this shared story that is more accurate, more complete and certainly more inclusive.

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Vocabulary Terms:

Cession: something that is ceded, yielded or formally surrendered to another person or entity, such as a territory

Fabricate: to make by art or skill and labor; construct

Member: A basic part or component of any structural whole, such as a standardized architectural feature off a building

Speculator: a person who engages in business transactions involving considerable risk but offering the chance of large monetary gains in the hope of profit from changes in the market. For example, a land speculator would purchase large parcels of land, in anticipation of their rising value, and then sell them in smaller pieces. Events like Chickasaw Removal, and the Panic of 1837, would cause the federal government to reduce the cost of land, making it more affordable to buyers like Hugh Craft

Stucco: a plaster finish for exterior or interior masonry or frame walls usually composed of cement, sand, and lime mixed with water and put on wet

Surveyor: a person who determines the exact form, boundaries, position, extent and other characteristics of a tract of land or section of country

Purveyor: a person who provides or supplies something

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