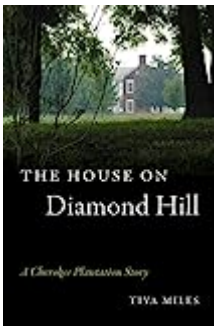
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Tiya Miles. *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xv + 315 pp. $32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3418-3.

Reviewed by Rachel Purvis (Yale University)

Published on H-AmIndian (July, 2013)

Commissioned by F. Evan Nooe (University of North Carolina-Charlotte)

The Microcosm of James Vann's Diamond Hill

Tiya Milesâs *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* begins with a question. What do the many hundreds of visitors to the Chief James Vann historic site in northwest Georgia connect with as they tour the well-preserved antebellum home of Cherokee James Vann? She first encountered Diamond Hill in 1998 while researching the Shoeboots family for her first book, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (2006). While touring the home, Miles was perplexed by the lack of information provided on the lives of the enslaved at Diamond Hill. She was also drawn to the stories of slave resistance recorded in the missionary records that she utilized in her research. Miles visited Diamond Hill once a year, for a day to a week at a time, over the next decade. As an informal participant-observer in various Vann House events, she interpreted the âmessageâ of the museum house through an analysis of the text, exhibits, brochures, and other materials produced by the site. Her interest and presence at the Vann House fostered personal relationships with the caretakers of the home, especially Interpretative Ranger Julia Autry. It was Autryâs observation that no thorough historical study existed of the Vann House that Miles credits with encouraging her to undertake her scholarly inquiry.

In researching the Diamond Hill plantation home, Miles was curious to discover what had happened on the grounds and goes to great lengths to reconstruct the lives of the Cherokees, African Americans, and whites who lived and labored at the site in the early nineteenth century. Miles found an extremely large documentary record associated with the home. Three appendices included in the text detail the authorâs research methods, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and previously unavailable source materials. In recreating the small world of James Vann, his wife Peggy, and the enslaved men and women they owned, Miles mined missionary records that consisted of letters and diaries preserved in the Moravian Archives. She also utilized Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narratives, white visitorsâ and travelersâ accounts to Cherokee country from 1809 to 1838, the records of the Brainerd Mission established by the American Board of Commissioners

for Foreign Missions, and files from the Diamond Hill restoration process of the 1950s. Miles acknowledges, however, the source material for this project must be understood within the power dynamics in which they were produced.

The documentary records, she explains, were created in a colonial context in which Cherokees were compelled to negotiate with white Americans in order to protect their national independence and personal security. Thus, Miles sees the records as a colonial archive in which most documents were produced as the result of U.S. military, political, economic, and cultural subjugation of the Cherokees. The Moravian records, for example, were produced by missionaries tasked with carrying out the work of the church and the U.S. civilization plan. The correspondence of Vann dealt largely with his business ventures and Cherokee Nation concerns, and no independent collection of personal papers of the Vann family exists for researchers.

The book is divided into three sections that address the history of James and Peggy Vann, the lives of the enslaved, and the legacy of Diamond Hill. The prologue, introduction, and conclusion examine the Vann House as a museum and offer an analysis of its memory and interpretation as a public historic site. Miles richly describes the annual Christmas candlelight celebration, the fundraising for and building of an interpretive center on site, and the creation of an exhibit on African American life at Diamond Hill by Autry and staff. Her well-crafted prose sets the scene for the reader to envision what a visit might be like.

Chapter 1 provides an extensive biographical investigation of James Vann in an effort to determine if his unpredictable personality was a product of the times or his own character flaws. Miles finds a man marked by contrasts. The son of a Cherokee woman and a Scottish trader, Vann was a heavy drinker who turned to violence against women, slaves, and others. He was also deeply involved in Cherokee politics and strived to protect Cherokee people from white frontiersmen. Miles describes theories offered by historians to explain Vannâs behavior and personality, and she concedes it may be a combination of them–alcoholism, mental instability caused by physical illness or belief in supernatural attack, stress of identity or leadership responsibility, and the character flaw of impetuous arrogance. Miles adds, by âborrowing from the recent work of Native American studies scholars like Ned Blackhawk, Philip Deloria, and Andrea Smith, we might add to these an additional, critical factor: the context and culture of U.S. colonialism and concomitant violenceâ (p. 32). Miles situates Vannâs childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood within the violent context of colonial wars and U.S. expansion in her effort to explain how Vannâs character was shaped by war, violence, and dispossession. She convincingly argues that scholars must take Vannâs sociohistorical circumstances into account in order to understand why he was so aggressive and violent.

Chapter 2 focuses on the years 1800-1805 when Vann married and expanded his plantation and businesses within the context of Cherokee cultural change. Vann built a fortune from the land and controlled between four hundred and eight hundred acres along the Conasauga River. He invited Moravian missionaries from South Carolina to establish a Christian mission and school near his home. In 1803, Vann successfully lobbied the federal government for a new federal road to pass his property, which allowed him to create several hospitality businesses along the road, including a tavern, campgrounds, a trading post, and a ferry service. He also expanded his agricultural production through the labor of seventy black men, women, and children whom he inherited from his father. Vannâs marriage to Peggy Scott closely tied him to Charles Hicks, Peggyâs maternal uncle and a well-respected Cherokee leader. The marriage also brought Vann greater wealth as he claimed control over Peggyâs property, which included slaves she had inherited from her family.

Chapter 3 describes the black community and culture of the plantation at its height under Vannâs management from 1805 to 1809. This is the heart of the book, and as Miles explains, where the project started. With a critical eye on her source material, Miles takes an interdisciplinary approach with an application of literary and historical studies theory grounded in the works of Robert Warrior and Daniel Heath Justice. This allows Miles to understand Diamond Hillâs history without having to choose between a cultural separatist or a fully assimilationist interpretation of Cherokee slaveholding society. Miles intends for this project to contribute to slavery studies with a picture of black life in an Indian nation that is closely linked to U.S. slavery. To do this, she engages two principal arguments found in the historiography of black slavery in American Indian nations. The âleniencyâ thesis put forth in the 1970s and 1980s by the scholarship of R. Halliburton and Theda Perdue offered an interpretation of Indian masters as more lenient than their white southern counterparts, which resulted in an easier life for the enslaved. Another interpretation found

in the more recent works of Celia Naylor, David Chang, Barbara Krauthamer, and Milesâs first monograph posits an âIndianizationâ thesis. This argument suggests that blacks owned by natives, and in some cases related to natives, sought and attained cultural likeness with their indigenous owners.

Milesâs findings about the traumatic and often desperate lives of the enslaved on Diamond Hill clearly challenges the leniency thesis. The enslaved were faced with an unpredictable master who committed and condoned harsh punishments and unthinkable cruelty. In her recreation of the lives of four slave women, Miles illuminates the slave community and culture of Diamond Hill that reveals the cultural persistence of African folkways. This, Miles deftly argues, means that the âIndianizationâ thesis must be balanced with a recognition of ongoing cultural practices among the enslaved in American Indian nations. âThe aspects of Cherokee culture that these slaves adopted would have therefore been balanced by or blended with African-inspired cultural habits. Unlike the generalized picture we may have of blacks in Cherokee society becoming primarily Indianized, or longing for Indian identity, blacks on the Vann plantation are better described as âcreolizedââ (pp. 24-25). Milesâs study of the Vann House revives the view of African acculturation to Cherokee lifeways. The slave community on Diamond Hill was diverse; some slaves came from Africa, some from the United States, and some were born in Cherokee country. The plantationâs large slave population of one hundred persons allowed for the maintenance of African-derived practices that sustained and comforted the black community.

In the remainder of the book, Miles explores the world of Peggy Vann and the demise of James Vann and Diamond Hill. Chapter 4 looks at Cherokee women within the plantation household and the rise in violence in the Cherokee Nation, including domestic violence. Miles chronicles the life of Peggy Vann, which is the first sustained historical portrait of Cherokee women of the slaveholding class. She illuminates the life of Peggy in an effort to show how race, class, and gender shaped the individual experience, interactions between groups, and new social patterns. With Peggyâs story, Miles also contributes a picture of the Cherokee mistress to the extensive literature on southern women in the plantation household. Chapter 5 details her husbandâs murder at the hands of an unknown assailant in 1809, which produced chaos for the slave community and signaled a new beginning for Peggy. In the midst of a Cherokee traditionalist spiritual revival of 1811-12, Peggy became the first Cherokee convert to Christianity baptized at Springplace Mission on August 13, 1810. Chapter 6 deals with the remarriage of Peggy and the redistribution of Jamesâs estate. An epilogue describes the fate of Joseph Vann, their beloved son, in the 1830s and 1840s as he rebuilt Diamond Hill in Indian Territory after the Cherokeesâ forced removal from Georgia.

For Miles, studying the Vann House reveals âthe subtleties of American colonization and Cherokee resistance to it; the experience of Cherokee women of the slaveholding upper class; and the texture of life in the slave quartersâ (p. 20). Although Miles draws broader generalizations about Cherokee society from her study, one is struck by the uniqueness of Vannâs plantation. The large number of slaves and the various enterprises he operated represent a picture of the life of elite Cherokees in the early nineteenth century. Overall, the book fulfills its ambitious goals and ties together Native American, African American, southern, and gender history quite well. Miles offers a nuanced picture of Cherokee responses to U.S. colonialism in the early history with this microhistory of Diamond Hill. She successfully connects black slavery in Indian nations to broader themes of cultural persistence found in studies of slavery in the United States. Readers might like more information on the white overseers employed at Diamond Hill. This would have been an interesting addition, especially in light of Peggyâs marriage to one after Jamesâs death. Still, Miles has produced an excellent book that enriches the historical picture of slavery in Indian nations.