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Book Review: The Jeffersons at Shadwell by Susan Kern

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THE JEFFERSONS AT SHADWELL, by Susan Kern, 2010, Yale University Press, New Haven, 384 pages, 56 black-and-white illustrations, \$30.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Laura J. Galke

Some readers, accustomed as they may be to his typically central role in many narratives, may be struck by Thomas Jefferson's part in *The Jeffersons at Shadwell* by Susan Kern. In this engaging book, Thomas is only one of the several children of Peter and Jane Jefferson who grew to adulthood at this plantation in Albemarle County, Virginia. Kern tells stories not only of the Jefferson family, but also of the 60 enslaved people whom they owned, as well as skilled laborers whom they employed from time to time. In this way, Thomas's upbringing can be understood as one that was representative of the Virginia gentry-class into which he was born; one in which his gender, class, education, social skills, and social network would shape his opportunities and influence the degree of respect and deference with which others treated him.

Susan Kern uses the rich documentary record and outstanding archaeological evidence from Shadwell to take readers on a journey through both the physical and social landscapes of mid-18th century Virginia. This site and its associated documents have enjoyed a greater degree of preservation due to the fame of its past residents. As such, Shadwell provides a wonderful interpretive opportunity for historians and archaeologists alike, and Kern takes full advantage of resources available. Thomas Jefferson was born at Shadwell and this is where he learned the social skills and privileges of his class, as well as plantation management.

Kern demonstrates that Peter and Jane Jefferson embraced gentry culture despite their home's location on the "frontier" of colonial British society in Virginia; they raised their family and trained their enslaved servants in the skills and the tools that they would need to perpetuate British colonial culture. Peter served in various public administrative offices, connecting the Jefferson clan to a network of other prominent Virginia families that extended throughout the region.

Shadwell's location made it a convenient stopping point for travelers, including American Indians, on their way to or from Virginia's capital, Williamsburg.

Documents and the material record allow Kern to consider the emotional, spiritual, and daily work routine of the enslaved members of the Jefferson family plantation. Kern's discussion of the enslaved people at Shadwell distinguishes between the experiences of those who labored in the fields and those who worked within the intimate confines of the Jefferson home. She provides evidence that demonstrates that enslaved domestic servants and skilled slaves had better access to material goods, to comfort, and to direct contact with the Jefferson family than field slaves. This refreshing distinction, all too often glossed over by many scholars, allows Kern to contrast the different experiences that domestic servants had from the enslaved field hands, though subjugation was a daily part of life for both groups. Their fate and the fate of their enslaved spouses and children remained in the hands of another.

While the book is well footnoted, I was disappointed that it was not supplemented by a bibliography. Some of the illustrations and maps were rather small, and the plan views of the site could have been better presented. For example, Figure 7.3 displays three distribution maps, but it is not clear what distributions they are showing. A scale, while present, does not indicate whether the numbers represent raw counts, percentage data, or ratios.

Kern's narrative of the Jefferson family and their slave's experiences at Shadwell is thorough and masterful. As an archaeologist working at George Washington's boyhood home in Fredericksburg, Virginia, I found great inspiration from her skilled treatment of the historical and archaeological records, neither of which is complete on its own. When these data are used together and combined with scholarly contributions from the decorative arts and social history, more detailed interpretations and narratives emerge. This book will benefit a wide range of scholars interested in realizing the full interpretive potential of joining material culture and documents to understand past society and the motivations, challenges, and obstacles that our forebears experienced.

Laura Galke is the artifact analyst for The George Washington Foundation in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Her research interests focus upon the analysis and interpretation of small finds artifacts from a variety of historical contexts. She has previously published interpretations on the material culture of 19th-century African Americans, of contact-era Chesapeake American Indians, and on ante-bellum academic culture.

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