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INVENTORY OF A PLANTER'S ESTATE

CAMILLUS J. DISMUKES *

Inventories of pioneer estates furnish a revealing insight into economic and sociological history. The limited possessions of early Americans contrast starkly with those of our modern affluence.

The inventory of Robert Ellison's estate, made in Fairfield County, South Carolina, in 1806,¹ seems representative of early planters. He was fairly wealthy by the standards of his day, and apparently a man of some importance. He served as a Major in the American Revolution under General Moultrie,² and as Washington's official escort during the President's visit to South Carolina.³ As First Warden of the Mt. Zion Society,⁴ he was instrumental in establishing higher education.

The equipment used to tend his plantation⁵ and the household goods used by his large family seem meager to us.

A ready cash asset of \$57.85 was a tidy enough sum in a strictly agrarian economy, but \$41.75 in plantation tools and \$605.00 in livestock seem very little. The sum of \$207.00 in household goods did not provide many conveniences for a family of seven living children and several grandchildren. The bulk of the estate, \$4050.25, was in slaves.

It is noted that neither mules nor fertilizer had come into use at this date. Robert Ellison's plantation had six horses, valued at \$20.00 to \$100.00 each. Some of these were certainly riding and carriage horses, but others may have helped the single pair of oxen (value \$50.00) pull the nine plows (\$15.00). The seven stock cattle (\$5.00 a head) were the source for beef, and the five cows and calves (\$5.00 each) furnished milk for the family-slave "community." At least they ate "high on the hog," for there were fifty head valued at \$130.00.

* Dr. Dismukes died Feb. 1, 1971. He was a resident of Dahlonga, Ga.

¹ Estate appraised June 7, 1806 by Samuel Weldon, William Robertson, and John Robinson. Sworn to before James Beaty, "one of the Justices assigned to keep peace in and for Fairfield," June 7, 1806.

² William Moultrie, *Memoirs of the American Revolution* (New York, Privately Printed, 1802), I, 447; Sara Sullivan Ervin, *South Carolinians in the Revolution* (Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Co., 1965), p. 69.

³ David Duncan Wallace, *History of South Carolina* (New York, American Historical Society, 1934), IV, 897.

⁴ George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina* (Columbia, Duffie and Chapman, 1870), I, 449.

⁵ Robert Ellison received royal grants for 1550 acres during the period 1771-1775, according to records at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Presumably additional lands were acquired by purchase.

Some of the tools were five axes (\$6.00), two mattocks (\$3.00), eight hoes (\$4.00), one spade (.75¢) and one pitchfork (.75¢). There were a grinding stone to sharpen the tools and nine large cotton baskets to gather their produce.

For transportation to the Presbyterian church at Winnsboro two miles away, there was a riding chair and harness (\$100.00). An ox cart (\$25.00) served for hauling supplies.

Among the household items were ten chairs at .50¢ each (one for each person, but he had to carry it from room to room with him); two bedsteads of pine (\$1.50 each) and one of mahogany (\$15.00) besides a "Cott and Mattress" (\$4.00). The family had four pine tables (\$5.50) and one of mahogany (\$10.00). Milady^e had one looking glass to inspect her hair-do, a luxurious \$5.00 worth. Among the odds and ends of house-keeping were eight knives and eight forks at .25¢ each (what happened to their spoons?), one candlestick (\$1.00), and one pair of smoothing irons (\$1.50). For an unknown reason, a piece of "negro cloth" was valued at 1s 8d rather than in American currency.

The value placed on sixteen slaves exposes the materialism of the plantation economic system. Those slaves in their physical prime, ages 23-30, were valued at sums ranging from \$300.00 to \$450.00 each. Values of children jumped from \$50.00 at age 1 to \$150.00 at age 6. It is significant that only two Negroes were over age 30. Newry, a male slave who had protected the family Tories during Ellison's absence at war, was still worth \$250.00 despite his 55 years. The 70-year-old woman named Venus had outlived her usefulness, for there was placed on this human being the value of—.25¢.

Addendum

Robert Ellison and some of his family are buried on the old plantation site two miles from Winnsboro, off the Newberry highway.

^e Robert Ellison's first wife and mother of his children, Elizabeth Potts, died in 1795. His second wife was Jennie Seawright.—John B. Adger, *My Life and Times* (Richmond, Presbyterian Committee on Publications, 1899), p. 28. Adger records that the stepmother's relations with the children were not good, and that the children had left home on her account. Maybe they took the missing spoons with them.