
*The Big House After Slavery: Virginia Plantation Families and Their Postbellum Domestic Experience*, by Amy Feely, continues the long tradition of historical research on changes caused by the Civil War in the American South. However, Morsman creates her own niche by looking at the way family, marriage, and gender changed after the economic shift away from slavery began effecting wealthy Virginia planters. The author argues that the negative impact of the Civil War on the economy in postbellum Virginia altered the relationship between husbands and wives by taking away the hyper patriarchy found in antebellum society. As a result, women and men began adopting different roles in the home, in the fields, and within social circles. Ultimately, the story of Virginia planters in the postwar period is one of struggle, not just with a new labor system or with poor finances, but with their own class and gender identity.

*The Big House After Slavery* uses letters, plantation journals, organization records, periodicals, and newspapers from pre and postwar Virginia as a basis for the book’s argument. The first chapter outlines the social and economic conditions for planters in Virginia before and during the war. The author outlines how labor was delegated and builds up the relaxing lifestyle of elite planters and their families. The following three chapters analyze how males and females adjusted to the problem of labor shortage and the resulting decline in income and social status. They look at the public and private adjustments made by the upper-class to attempt to sustain their pre-war lifestyles, and they support the critical elements in Morsman’s thesis. Chapters five and six begin to look at the legacy of the problems in postwar years. They argue that mutual household and plantation responsibilities developed during the time period. The book concludes with a solid summation of the authors’ main points and ends with an accurate assessment of the economic direction of the New South.

Morsman argues that roles in domescity are directly related to the socio-economic experience of antebellum and postbellum elite society. The study operates under the premise that elite planters suffered the harshest financial loss of any Southerners because of property destruction and loss of slaves. The first part of the book is highly comparative and demonstrates the relative luxury and comfort that plantation owners enjoyed before the war, in contrast to their loss of income and property in postbellum society. The crux of the argument is the loss of status in society. Without slaves, men and women were pressed into manual labor to maintain their large farms. They combatted the new workload by trying to present a lifestyle of leisure and comfort to their peers and friends. Morsman credits the increased use of technology on the farm and in the home as one way that planters proved their elite status to the community. They purchased cook stoves, sewing machines, gas chandeliers, and Hall’s Improved Cleaning Cream attempted to prove their financial success and to maintain their prominence in society.

With this work, Morsman broaches a new issue in the heavily studied field of the postbellum South. The author’s argument adds a new piece to the field because she looks specifically at how the Confederate defeat affected gender roles and economics in Virginia. Morsman brings new life to the sources, which were mainly written by males, by looking at them through a different lens and interpreting what white elites thought about gender. However she does make a mistake by downplaying the sharecropping system put in place by plantation owners that continued the exploitation of black labor. The book, at times, is sympathetic to the economic...
troubles of Virginia planters and infers that the elite were left to fend for themselves after the abolishment of slavery. Morsman also uses a small sample of sources, mostly originating from the Piedmont region, to extrapolate her thesis to all Virginia planters. She does not address whether or not the tidewater or mountain plantation owners faced any of the same issues regarding gender, labor, or business. The suppositions made in the text are supported, but at times, the author applies her theories too broadly. Despite some overreaching by the author, *The Big House After Slavery* is useful for graduate and undergraduate students focusing on the economic and social change in the South after the Civil War.

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