

Dueling Visions of the Old South



Chris Bickford for The New York Times

Drayton Hall is devoid of restored furniture and other period decorative touches.

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DRAYTON HALL, on the outskirts of Charleston, is a proudly spartan specimen of historic preservation.

The house, built in 1738 and now considered the oldest preserved plantation mansion still open to the public in the United States, has not been stuffed with restored furniture, rugs or wall coverings; it sits as it is, eerily devoid of furnishings, with peeled, original paint and the discolored ghosts of mantels, shutters and other ornaments stripped away by the ravages of thievery, weather and time.

As guides take visitors through the house, past walls marked with the growth charts of children now elderly or dead, past a treacherously narrow staircase hidden in the inner frame of the house — so slaves would remain out of sight as they passed from floor to floor — they speak about the place lovingly.



Drayton Hall

Yet even as they describe the glamour of its occupants, they frequently note the striking contrast between the lives of the Draytons and those of their slaves, whose labor afforded them and their compatriots the luxury to live so well. (“Twenty percent of the Africans died just on the trip here,” you are told.)

But, mention the Magnolia plantation just a mile down the Ashley River Road, and a decided condescension seems to enter the conversation. “They have a petting zoo and all kinds of strange things there,” a guide said, shaking his head in wonderment. “They’re for profit,” a gift shop cashier gently chided when we asked whether a membership to the National Trust for Historic Preservation that she was selling would provide free admission to Magnolia the same way it would to Drayton. Was there something they were trying to tell us about their next-door neighbor? “That’s not for me to say,” another guide answered.

A visit to Magnolia began to explain what I took for arched eyebrows at Drayton Hall.

Magnolia offers a romanticized, theme-park homage to the way things were for Charleston’s gloriously wealthy families before the Civil War, with some added goodies for the historically disinclined. If the Epcot Center had a Plantation Pavilion, this would be it.

But it would be a more quirky, homespun version. The petting zoo has an adorable pig, pygmy goats and peacocks, but no obvious link to the plantation’s past. A tour through the property’s lush and swampy gardens aboard a motorized cart focuses on the alligators hiding in the fallow but dramatic rice fields — not on the slaves who sowed the original seeds and dug the original ditches (there’s a like-minded boat tour, too). The tour of the house itself is all “Gone With the Wind” — no “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”; during one visit the guide mentioned the plantation’s slaves just once, to say they had been happy there.

In fact, the fully restored house is not the original homestead but, rather, a hunting lodge that the family brought downriver from the town of Summerville immediately after the war, to replace the one Union soldiers torched. The place has been stuffed with antique furniture, paintings from the period and, inexplicably, a 1950s porcelain collection.

The gap between how the two plantations present themselves to the world represents a clash between two predominant approaches to historic-site tourism: There are the earnest PBS-documentarian-style preservationists, who want the visitor to absorb the echoes of the past in the empty hallways and faded, original wallpapers; then there are the restorers, who want to more directly and aggressively try to transport their visitors back in time, so they can ooh and aah at the antiques, artwork and silver.

But, at these two mansions, we also found a divergence in how the Southern plantation tourism industry has come to grips with an increasingly integrated world. And I would come to learn that beneath the surface of Magnolia's Disney-style approach was a hard-fought effort by a new generation finally to break with a singular glamorous version of life there that did not apply to all of its residents.



Magnolia Gardens

My wife, Ondine, and I were in Charleston in late May for the opening weekend of the Spoleto Festival USA — the city's annual, two-week whirlwind of theater and music — and we initially had no intention of going to the plantations. Our travel companions Marty and Rick implored us to join them on some tours to kill some time before that night's revelries.

Having been planning a lazy day about Charleston's charm-smothered streets, we grudgingly obliged. If anything, Ondine, an interior designer and furniture connoisseur, figured she would see real, vintage, pre-Civil War pieces. She was disappointed when we got to Drayton and she learned that, uh, there was no furniture.

Yet to our surprise, Drayton Hall really left an impression. If anything, its emptiness only intensified the experience, giving extra life to the creaky, original floorboards and plaster moldings. The place seemed to be crawling with spirits.

Magnolia, which we visited afterward, was less powerful but loads of fun anyway. It has rides! The pig was really cute! And the furniture collection was plentiful but a little on the post-Civil War Yankee side; the family that still owns Magnolia, the Drayton-Hastie clan, brought a good portion of it down after the war from a Philadelphia abode.

The Romantic Gardens are said to be among the last of their kind in the United States, and their magnolias and live oaks laze beside the alligator-infested water as if to tell you they were here before you and they will be here after you. It all really does bring to mind Scarlett O'Hara, before it all went so sour.

When the tour guides there seemed just as dismissive toward Drayton as their counterparts at Drayton seemed to be toward Magnolia ("That's more of a museum," a guide said dryly), we thought we had stumbled onto an intriguing rivalry between plantation tour operations.

Maybe it was the revelation that the two plantations belonged to the same extended family — Magnolia having been constructed by Thomas Drayton in 1676, and Drayton Hall roughly 60 years later by John Drayton, Thomas's youngest son.

It got us thinking.

Had we stumbled on a 275-year-old family feud resembling that of the Dell'Orto brothers in New York, who split their century-old family restaurant business in half to compete bitterly as Manganaro Grosseria Italiana and Manganaro's Hero Boy?

Just how had these two plantations, owned by the same extended family, taken such starkly different paths as tourist sites? I had to be back in the state in late June, and I decided to take the opportunity to get to the bottom of this with another trip to Charleston.

With a little digging I unearthed a more complicated picture than I expected, particularly at Magnolia, which, it turns out, is now coming to square the splendor of its grounds with its dark past — more than 130 years after it first opened its doors to tourists, and decades after Drayton began doing so.

But for starters, a lot of the differences have to do with when the plantations opened to tourism. From its inception as a tourist destination in the early 1970s — post Civil Rights Act — Drayton set out to portray the full picture, with equal parts warts and fabulousness (though it offers far more about the African-Americans today).

The last matriarch to control the house, Charlotta Drayton, was an eccentric spinster who chose not to update the place with the explosion of modern conveniences that came along between the time she was born in 1884 and the time she died in 1969. She never had it wired for electricity and never installed a modern kitchen or running water. She lived in town, but enjoyed prolonged stretches at the house “camping.”

“She was born in the 1880s, so she was familiar with life without running water and a lot of modern amenities,” said the Drayton executive director, George W. McDaniel.

After her death, the house was turned over to her nephews Frank and Charles Drayton, with the request that it be preserved in its bare-bones state. Faced with the huge expenses and taxes associated with the property, they turned it over to the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The trust's academics and historians jumped at the chance to preserve the rare, intact plantation house. Being part of the trust “brought with it a scholarly approach that other sites may not have had the benefits of,” Mr. McDaniel said.

Magnolia, which opened its gardens to tourists in the 1870s, seems to lack that approach at first glance. My second visit there in June initially seemed to confirm my assumptions. The house tour, while worthwhile, was again all but devoid of mention of the slaves, save for a guide telling us of “a wonderful relationship between the Drayton family and the slave families for, really, 200 years.” The nature tram wound up being something of an alligator hunt — and we saw a ton of them. We didn't hear much about African-American life.



Magnolia Gardens

But as we passed a collection of old cabins, and the tram operator said there was a “From Slavery to Freedom” tour on offer, my ears pricked up. I signed up.

When I was directed to yet another tram, I had visions of a cabin tour modeled after the old Orient Express ride in Atlantic City, a mini-roller coaster that took its ticket holders on a delightfully lame spin through a haunted house stuffed with “frightening” mannequins.

But I had stumbled upon something entirely unexpected: a collection of slave cabins built in the 1850s and restored to reflect African-American life on the plantation at different periods between 1850 and 1969. Their ramshackle construction and original brick chimneys were no less powerful a reminder of the brutal condition of the slaves than the hidden staircase at Drayton was.

Preston Cooley and D. J. Tucker, historians who lead the tours offered vivid, sugar-free descriptions of slave life.

A bonus: Supervising the grounds that day was Isaac Leach, 52, whose family has worked at the plantation for four generations, starting after the Civil War as freedmen. He even lived in one of the cabins as a child.

I was embarrassed that I had missed the tour during my last visit, and told Mr. Cooley I had been under the impression that the place seemed to be a bit in denial. But I was startled when he told me I was on to something. Magnolia had begun this tour only a few months earlier, marking its first real attempt to address the lives of its slaves. How could this be?

For answers, he directed me to the 13th generation of the Hastie family, who started envisioning the slavery portion of the tour only after their grandfather John Drayton Hastie died in late 2002.

A beloved Charleston figure famous for his love of animals, “He was sort of the P. T. Barnum of the property,” said his grandson Winslow W. Hastie, 36, the director of preservation at the Historic Charleston Foundation. “He was very much into generating revenue, getting more people through the gates, and he would sometimes do that at the expense of authenticity: the petting zoo, the nature tram.”

When he decided to open the house to tourists in the 1970s, John Drayton Hastie left it to his wife, Fernanda, who tried her best to hew to history but was not exactly known as a stickler.

John Drayton Hastie's death coincided with a visit to the property by a history buff who told another grandson, Taylor Drayton Nelson that the slave cabins were a rare historical gift worthy of restoration. The slavery project — including an expensive archaeological dig and extensive research — “grew out of that,” Mr. Hastie said. “To be honest, I don't think my grandfather would have been very interested in it,” he said. “It's just so pregnant with controversy and bitterness and racism inherited from generation to generation. My generation, we're kind of over that, we've risen above it; we're in a different time.”

Mr. Hastie acknowledged that many of the tour employees at the plantation still follow his grandfather's model. And, he said, work still needs to be done to make the other tours consistent with the cabin tour, in terms of incorporating the real lives of the African-Americans on the property.

And so fell another conceit: there is no rivalry, and no family feud. If anything, there is a reconciliation of sorts.

Mr. Hastie said he was becoming friendly with one of the cousins from the Drayton Hall side. And Mr. McDaniel said the two attractions began offering access to both for a single price of \$24 — a joint ticket.

A TALE OF TWO PLANTATIONS

GETTING THERE

US Airways and Delta each offers daily nonstop flights to Charleston from New York daily; the lowest round-trip fare was \$194 according to a recent online search. Under normal circumstances, car rentals are not necessary; Charleston is one of the great walking cities, and there are plenty of cabs and pedicabs. However, a car is definitely recommended for the plantation tours along Ashley River Road. Drayton Hall, the first of the plantations along the road, is roughly 25 minutes from Charleston's central shopping district, where most of the hotels are located.

WHERE TO STAY

The Renaissance Charleston Hotel (68 Wentworth Street; 843-534-0300; www.marriott.com) is surprisingly chic for one of the big chain hotels, and it has the benefit of being in the middle of Charleston's central historic district. The hotel offers weekend rates of \$239 a night in late October.

The Charleston Place Hotel (205 Meeting Street; 888-635-2350; www.charlestonplace.com) is part of the Orient-Express company's high-end chain of international hotels, and its rooms are plush and cozy. There is a first-rate spa alongside a rooftop pool and small gym. Rooms can be as low as \$265 a night, but rates vary and it can get more expensive depending on when you go.

The Battery Carriage House Inn (20 South Battery; 800-775-5575; www.batterycarriagehouse.com) is for the boutique-hotel, bed-and-breakfast lover with a taste for history. The inn has been lovingly restored by the Hastie family, owners of Magnolia Plantation and Gardens. Rooms are on the frilly side: there are four-poster beds with canopies. Rooms start at \$229 but the inn occasionally offers deals of under \$200.

WHERE TO GO

Drayton Hall (3380 Ashley River Road; 843-769-2600; www.draytonhall.org) is the first of the big three plantations on the Ashley River Road, if you're driving from Charleston. Tickets are \$14. The whole experience can take several hours, so it is best to spread the visits to the plantations across at least a couple of days. Open daily, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Magnolia Plantation and Gardens is next along the road (3550 Ashley River Road; 800-367-3517; www.magnoliaplantation.com). Admission is \$15, with an add-on of \$7 for each of the tours: house, the nature tram, the nature boat and "From Slavery to Freedom." There is no additional charge for the petting zoo, and there is a full-service snack bar. Open daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., March through October, with varying hours the rest of the year, when it is advised that visitors call ahead.

Middleton Place is several miles farther down the road (4300 Ashley River Road; 843-556-6020; www.middletonplace.org) and is definitely worth a visit for its spectacular gardens alone. Admission is \$25, with add-ons for the house tour (\$10) and carriage tour (\$15). Open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

WHERE TO EAT

Bessinger's (1602 Savannah Highway, Charleston; 843-556-1354; www.bessingersbbq.com) is a family barbecue joint some 20 minutes from Drayton Hall that's ideal for lunch. Big pork platters are less than \$10 each.

Fig (232 Meeting Street; 843-805-5900; www.eatatfig.com) provided one of the best meals I've had all year, a great pancetta-wrapped grouper that I will not soon forget. I ate there alone and spent \$70, and I did not go crazy on the wine. But the joy of the meal made up for the sticker shock.

I really wanted to avoid recommending Hominy Grill (207 Rutledge Avenue; 843-937-0930; www.hominygrill.com), because it is so often flagged as a requisite stop in Charleston. But its down-home dishes are still so lovingly prepared, and its servers are so enamored with its cooking that it simply remains a must. A meal for two, with dessert and wine, can be had in the \$100 range, if not for less.

