

ESTHER W. DOUGLASS



1824-1916

Melrose Plantation Mansion

built 1845

Originally home of Mongin family, then Stoddards

Residence of AMA Teachers Douglass & Littlefield

Stoddards returned 1866 & claimed property, but allowed school to continue

Born: 1824 in Brookville, VT

Died: 1916 in NC

Assignment(s):

American Missionary Association (AMA)
Lumber Camp – Hampton, VA
1864

Grove Hill Plantation
Ogeechee (Savannah), GA
Oct. 1865

Melrose Plantation
Daufuskie Island, SC
Mar. 1866

Union Hill Plantation – Fisk University
Nashville, TN
1869

Seays Chapel – Edgefield, TN
1870

McLeansville, NC
1871 – 1879

Liberty County, GA
Fall 1880

Oaks, NC
1885 - 1895

Esther W. Douglass was born 1824 in Brookville, Vermont. Esther had wanted to work with the Cherokee before the Civil War. Although she was forty years old, she was still living with her widowed mother who would not allow Esther to leave.¹ But by 1864, her mother had died and Esther applied to the American Missionary Association to be a teacher to freedmen in the South. She sent her application on September 1, 1864 to George Whipple in which she stated her commitment to the freedmen but also a desire to travel and see more of the country as motives.² She was first appointed by the American Missionary Association in October 1864 as a teacher to a government lumber

¹ Jones, Jacqueline. "All Educational Politics are Local: New Perspectives on Black Schooling in the Postbellum South" in *Rethinking the History of American Education*, p 57. William J. Reese and John L. Rury, ed <https://www.history.wisc.edu/publications/rethinking-the-history-of-american-education>.

² Douglass, Esther W. American Missionary Association Archives. New Orleans, LA: Tulane University, Amistad Research Center. [Letter from Brookville, VT to George Whipple of AMA, Sep 1, 1864].

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camp near Hampton, Virginia where there were few white families of the men who logged, cut and loaded timber for shipment to Baltimore's ship-building industry.³ She noted in her diary that her school was very pleasant, but that there were some white students whose parents thought they should have special privileges.⁴ When the mills closed, she went north to friends in Vermont. Then in October 1865, Esther and her co-teacher from the lumber mills, Frances Littlefield, were sent by the AMA to the Ogeechee area near Savannah, Georgia.⁵ They operated a school from the parlor in their home in the main house which they renamed 'Spinster Hall' on Grove Hill Plantation about twenty miles from Savannah. Their school attracted 120 students on the first day from seven neighbor plantations, with some children walking as far as six miles barefoot through marsh waters to school.⁶ With the help of a third teacher from Savannah, they also opened an 'industrial school' teaching freedwomen and girls to "cut patterns, baste, sew buttonholes and make collars for shirts."⁷ One day, Esther went for a ride in the countryside noting the destroyed landscape and down-trodden people, and wrote in her diary: "Words can give you no idea of the utter destitution of these ex-slaves...with the obstacles in the way of these colored people, I often wondered that so many of them had the courage to try to be anything respectable".⁸

Although the AMA had granted Esther's request for a more rural location than the busy port city of Savannah, Esther later may have regretted that decision. In a letter to Rev. S. Hunt on December 8, 1866, she complained about limited contact with other teachers and white folks, saying "although not far from Savannah, our opportunities for intercourse with the teachers there are rather limited."⁹

In "The Union Reconstructed", it is claimed that Esther believed her job was to civilize and tame the former slaves and convert them to Congregationalism and its version of moral behavior.¹⁰ In a letter to Rev. S. Hunt written from Grove Hill Plantation on February 1, 1866, Esther called the cultural practices of the ex-slaves 'savage and strange'.¹¹ In a diary entry in October 1865, Esther described their stay at Grove Hill Plantation:

³ Stanley, J. Taylor. "A History of Black Congregational Christian Churches of the South". NY: United Church Press for the AMA, 1978. Digitized NC: Eton College, Oct 9, 1994, p 36. https://archive.org/details/ahistoryofblackc00stan_djvu.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

- Douglass, Esther W. Papers, 1887-1909. "Joy in Service: My Life Story", No 1, 11. American Missionary Association. New Orleans, LA: Tulane University, Amistad Research Center.
- Smith, Janel Janiczek. From A Northern Home to a Southern School: - Cultural Imperialists or Just Stubborn Yankees. Georgia Southern University. Jack N. Averitt College of Graduate Studies. Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 58. Spring 2013. p 165. <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/58>.

⁶ Jones, Jacqueline. "All Educational Politics...", p 58.

⁷ Jacqueline Jones Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War. NY: Vintage Books, 2009, p 256.

⁸ Stanley, p 36.

⁹ Douglass, Esther W. American Missionary Association Archives. New Orleans, LA: Tulane University, Amistad Research Center. Item No 20222. [Letter from Savannah to Rev S Hunt, Dec 8, 1866].

¹⁰ The Union Reconstructed. Pearson Education, Inc. 2006, Chapter 16, p 482,520. <https://www.studyres.com/doc/15495557/16-the-union-reconstructed>.

¹¹ Stanley, p 37.

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There was with me a young woman and we had two rooms upstairs [in the ruined mansion house of the H. Plantation]. Mr. H. had had a little Church and an Episcopal minister for his slaves. Miss Littlefield taught in the church and I in the Mansion house parlor. Think of 120 black, half naked, dirty, perfectly wild children crowded together on the floor and you will have some idea of my task the first morning of my school. Finally, I made them understand that the bell meant silence and they were to repeat after me as I pointed to words on the card on the wall. Their progress was wonderful. Before we went home in June '66 they had learned to read and spell all on the cards. There were words of five syllables, and verses that they learned to sing. They had learned much of God's truth [from the Bible] and had stopped fighting." (Douglass)¹²

In June 1866, the two teachers went North for summer break and one of their students, James Grant, wrote to the AMA begging them to send the two women back to Grove Hill: "Please to send them to the Grove Hill Plantation again for they have done so much good here and have been so kind to the sick they we all feel that they are dear friends to us."¹³ While the teachers were up north, the Freedmen's Bureau Act passed in March 1865 allowed Grove Hill Plantation and Grove Point to be sold to ex-slaves in 50 acre plots by General Sherman's Field Order No 15. However, the freedmen only had title to the crops they produced and merely temporary title of the land. The plantation owner, Mr. Burroughs had returned to claim his land, but signed a contract with the ex-slaves for their labor and granting them continued use of the main house for their school. Douglass and Littlefield returned in the fall of 1866 to the plantation prepared to open the classroom. But no sooner had the owner signed the contract with the freedmen than he proceeded to evict the two teachers in the middle of the term.¹⁴ So Esther and Frances sadly packed up and prepared to leave for their next AMA assignment.

Thus, in March 1867, the pair were off to Daufuskie Island, a remote location off the coast of Hilton Head Island and accessible only by ferry or private boat.¹⁵ Esther describes their arrival in March on Daufuskie at Bloody Point:

There was a call for teachers on Donifuskie Island, and we went there, and so I soon found myself in the Palmetto State [South Carolina]. We came from Savannah 20 miles by rowboat, landing at Bloody Point, three miles from the plantation where

¹² Jones, *All Educational Politics*, p 59.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp 58-59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p 59.

¹⁵ Smith, Janel Janiczek. *From A Northern Home to a Southern School: Cultural Imperialists or Just Stubborn Yankees*. Georgia Southern University. Jack N. Averitt College of Graduate Studies. Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 58. Spring 2013. p 165. <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/58>.

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we were to live. The fine mansion house had escaped injury. The garden was a world of beauty. Mr. Stoddard, the owner, gave Mr. Pettibone leave to take from other houses and enclose the large boat house and fit it for our use.¹⁶

Two fellow AMA teachers on Hilton Head Island, Eliza Ann Summers and Elizabeth Hill, visited Esther and Frances on Daufuskie several times, including on April 11, 1867 and Eliza commented that the plantation's gardens were beautiful with unusual and fragrant flowers. She also noted that the two teachers were the only white people that she saw on the entire island.¹⁷ Esther and Frances decided to spend summer break 1867 with their friends in Ogeechee. One day they took a boat to Savannah to obtain supplies for the next school term on Daufuskie. But on the way, Miss Littlefield was seized with Billious fever and the doctor said she must go north. I went back to the Island, taking a barrel of supplies, expecting that when the schools closed in Savannah, a teacher would come to be with me. Before the boat reached the Island, I was too sick to sit up and knew I had the fever. For three weeks I was on my bed there before the teacher came. . . . Colored women came in to do my bidding there and brought oysters and chicken but I could not eat. I tried to get well after the teacher came, but in vain, so one day my bed was laid on the boat and I on it. The house was shut and to Savannah we went. From the boat I was taken to a berth in a steamer bound for New York. ...By the time we reached New York I was able to sit up and ride to a hotel. In a few days I was able to go to friends in Vermont. My sister and her husband were Missionaries in Nashville, Tennessee, and when I was stronger, I went to them.¹⁸

While Esther was living with her sister in Tennessee, she taught in Union Hill for a Methodist minister who had been turned away from the church because of his loyalty to the Union cause. So he opened his own church and school and applied to the AMA for a teacher and Miss Douglass heeded his call. He did everything he could for her comfort, even sending and paying for Frances Littlefield to come to provide her company. But Esther only taught there for two years when one of the teachers at Fisk University became sick and the AMA sent Esther there on a temporary basis¹⁹ In 1870, Esther moved again to Seays Chapel in Edgefield, Tennessee.²⁰

In 1871, the AMA transferred Esther to McLeansville, North Carolina where she remained for almost eight years, opening a school for the freedmen in an abandoned Confederate gun factory where she conducted classes for the children in the day school

¹⁶ Stanley, p 36.

Trinkley, Michael, ed. "Archaeological Investigations at Haig Point, Webb . Oak Ridge, Daufuskie Island Beaufort County, South Carolina". Research Series 15. Columbia, SC: Chicora Foundation, Inc, March 1989, p 42.

[Note: Trinkley states that evidence shows that the two teachers were stationed on Melrose Plantation, adjacent to Bloody Point].

¹⁷ Martin, Josephine W. ed. "Dear Sister": Letters Written on Hilton Head Island 1867. Beaufort, SC: Beaufort Book Co, Inc, 1977. [letters by AMA teacher, Eliza Ann Summers to her sister].

¹⁸ Stanley, p 38.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 37.

²⁰ Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. General Assembly, Committee on Freedmen. *Annual Report 1870*, pp 13,19.

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and operated an evening school for adults.²¹ She did not find a welcome there by local whites and defied a threat by the Ku Klux Klan. One white man offered to be one of a group to put her on the train, by force if necessary, and send her away. She bravely retorted, "I was sent by the American Missionary Association, and when they say 'Go,' I will, and not before." She did not go, but was careful at night so her body would not cast a shadow, making her an easy target.²²

In her first year there, a white couple, the Clapps, offered her room and board in exchange for teaching their own children in the evenings and on weekends. But when she arrived at McLeansville, no one was there to meet her. She hired a wagon to take her to the Clapp house. "Along the way, I was entertained by my driver's stories of the KKK's doings as we passed the places where there had been whippings and hangings. I ventured to ask if it would not be better to punish crime lawfully. The answer was 'No nigger ever gets more than he deserves.'²³

Esther W. Douglass taught freedmen for the American Missionary Association for 31 years in Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Tennessee. Her letters and diary of her time as a teacher in the south were bound in a leather volume for her grand-nephew, Henry Carter Adams in fulfillment of a promise to her brother to write a sketch of her life. Her journal entitled "Joy in Service: My Life Story" is also held by the American Missionary Association Archives in Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.

In 1880 the AMA sent Esther to Liberty County, Georgia, which was close to the place she worked in 1865. She was missionary at three stations—Miller's Station, Golding's Grove, and Cypress Slash. One of her pupils, the colored preacher John Rufus McLean, went on to study theology at Talladega College and graduated as a minister in 1884. Esther Douglass spent a month at each of these stations, working with the Minister, teaching Bible classes and Sunday school. Frequently, she traveled at night by horse and buggy to outstations to teach the Bible and to teach the adults to read and write. By the end of her second year in Liberty County, Esther was recalled to Savannah Mission Home to take the place of a sick teacher. She was left with just one black woman to tend the home when all others went north on summer break. When the other teachers returned, she resigned out of exhaustion.²⁴

She returned to a town near McLeansville in North Carolina and bought herself a small cottage where she hoped to remain indefinitely, teaching Dr. Welker's children. But Esther says it just was not to be.

Dr. [Joseph E.] Roy, Secretary of the A.M.A., with much pleading made me believe that duty called me elsewhere. He said I was not to teach school but to teach the minister and oversee the work of three churches that had colored teachers and an ignorant minister; and also do whatever missionary work I found time for.

²¹ Douglass, "Joy in Service".

²² Richardson, Joe M. Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986, p 228.

²³ Stanley, p 41.

²⁴ Stanley, p 39.

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So in 1885 Esther Douglass traveled about twenty-five country miles by wagon to her new home in Oaks, North Carolina, where she shared a two-room cabin with Aunt Nellie, a black woman, for the next three years while training African-American teachers.²⁵ Esther's blind sister, Emeline, arrived in 1888 and they had a house built for them at Oaks in which they lived as long as Esther was alive. The AMA later bought the house to use as a parsonage for the Oaks church pastor. Esther died in 1916 in North Carolina.

Esther W. Douglass taught freedmen and the underprivileged for the American Missionary Association for 31 years in Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Tennessee, until, according to Joe M Richardson, the onset of blindness forced her to retire.²⁶ If that is true, then both she and her sister Emeline were blind. Her letters and diary of her time as a teacher in the South were bound in a leather volume for her grand-nephew, Henry Carter Adams in fulfillment of a promise to her brother to write a sketch of her life which is now in the AMA Archives. The collection also includes her authorized autobiography "Joy in Service: My Life Story.

J. Taylor Stanley, in his memorial address about Esther Douglass, summed up the type of person who became a teacher of freedmen with the American Missionary Association:

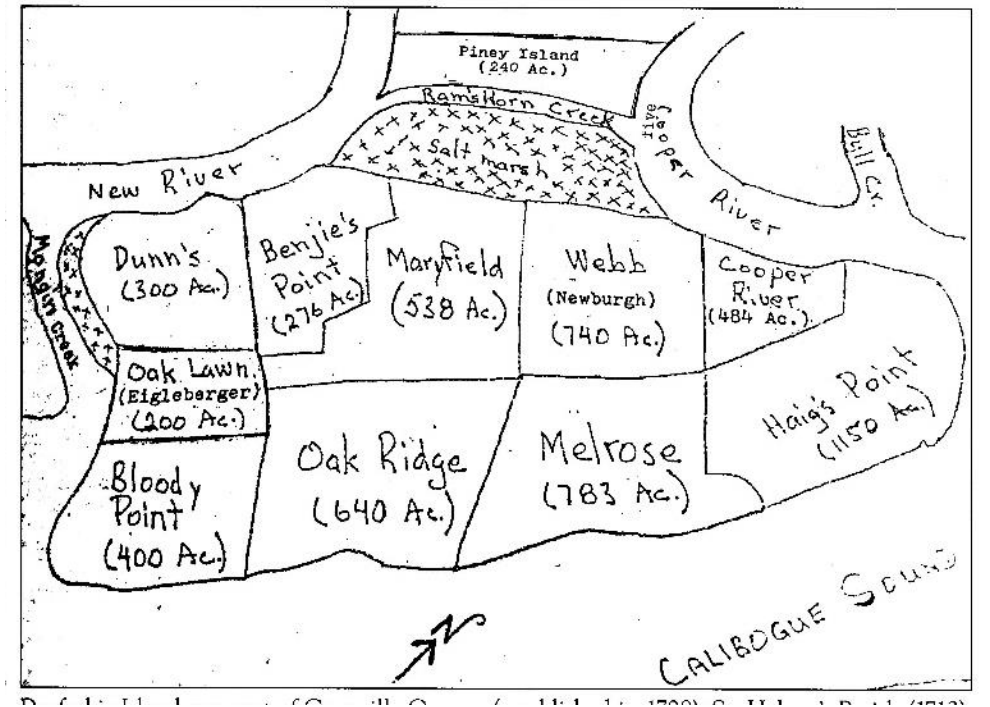
I have told her story at length and have quoted generously from her diary and letters, for she is typical of many white young women and young Congregational ministers who left the comforts and advantages of their northern homes to work among Freedmen—men, women, and children—working through their ignorance, their fears, and their superstitions to true friendship, understanding, and appreciation, teaching them the rudiments of a trained citizenship; lifting their economic and moral standards; leading them to Christ, and preparing them for participation in the work of evangelizing the whole community wherever they had opportunity.²⁷

²⁵ Stanley, p 41.

²⁶ Richardson, Joe M. Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986, p 178.

²⁷ Stanley, p 43.

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1862 map of Daufuskie Plantations

by Albert Henry Stoddard, Jr