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Asylum Doctor: James Woods Babcock and the Red Plague of Pellagra

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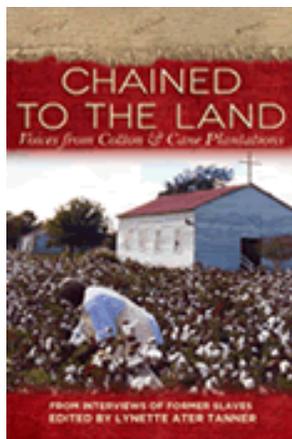
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alcohol sellers, taxi fees, eating at restaurants, alcohol purchases such as Kentucky bourbon, telephones, and groceries were less when patrons from Belle's red light area and Belle's red light area itself were permanently gone in 1917. Ovarian cancer killed Belle Brezing on August 11, 1940. Belle Watling in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* is analogous to Belle Brezing who Mitchell's husband John Marsh knew although Marsh and Mitchell disclaimed the parallelism. *Madam Belle* is a delightfully charming scholarly work of genius.

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Chained to the Land: Voices From Cotton and Cane Plantations. Edited by Lynette Ater Tanner. Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair Publishers, 2014. ISBN 978-0-89587-628-7. \$9.95 (pbk.)



My interest in this book, "Chained to the Land: Voices From Cotton and Cane Plantations", was a response to my visits to Brookgreen Plantation/Brookgreen Gardens along the South Carolina coast in summers and holidays between 1975 and 2010. A yearly trek to the Murrells Inlet and Charleston area included a visit to modern day Brookgreen Gardens, including a water tour of the rice plantation, its waterways and its sculpture gardens. Little did I know or perceive how these experiences might lead me to find plantation life fascinating and deeply troublesome.

Stories, photographs and paintings of plantation life are often glamorous with beautiful women in silk dresses and handsome men in black tailcoats and grey pants—led me to wonder if all that I was seeing in plantation life was superficial. I began by asking a simple question: what is a plantation? The Free Dictionary tells us: A plantation is defined as an estate on which crops such as coffee, sugar, tobacco, cotton or rice are cultivated by resident labor, usually in a newly established settlement (www.freeditonary.com).

The words that jumped out at me were "crops/cultivated/resident labor/newly established settlement". These words seemed to me to present a backdrop for stories I heard and read from books and news

articles about plantation owners, plantation workers, buying and selling of slaves and the historical impacts upon the plantation owner families and the slave families during and after the Civil War. Bits and pieces of impressions began to lead me to learn more about plantation life.

John F. Blair, Publisher, and Editor Lynette Alter Tanner, caught my attention with their recently authored and released book, "Chained to the Land: Voices from Cotton and Sugar Cane Plantations". Tanner relied on transcript narrations of 2200 former slaves collected between 1937-1938 by individuals who were employed by the Federal Writers' Project and the Federal Historical Records Survey. Those interviewed were in their 80s and some over 100. Recollections included food, housing, clothing, weddings, funerals, treatment and relationships (p. xii).

Tanner, co-owner of Frogmore Plantation in Louisiana, has contributed an immensely valuable group of narratives to the body of work that gives insight into the life and culture of plantations in Louisiana in the 1700s and 1800s. Her book is a must read for anyone who seeks an understanding of plantation life as seen through the eyes of those who lived and worked the plantation life.

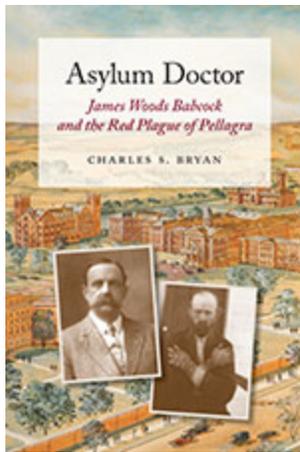
My exclamation upon reading the first narrative of this book which is conducted with Mary Reynolds, age unknown, of Concordia Parish, Louisiana, was, "Is there no limit to man's inhumanity to man?"

For more information about plantations in the State of South Carolina, go to <http://south-carolina-plantations.com/> and for Louisiana, go to <http://www.louisianatravel.com/attractions/plantations>

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Asylum Doctor: James Woods Babcock and the Red Plague of Pellagra. Charles S. Bryan. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1-61117-490-8. \$34.95.

Asylum Doctor: James Woods Babcock and the Red Plague of Pellagra chronicles the life, work, and struggles of Dr. James Woods Babcock. His work with the cause and cure of the disease which came to be known as pellagra was unceasing, and paved the way for others after him. The disease caused, among other symptoms, dementia and confusion, which would often land patients in insane asylums. Pellagra occurred mostly in southern states. Throughout his career, Dr. Babcock fought for psychiatric institutional rights, and battled racism in the state hospital. He also fought to have his findings concerning pellagra acknowledged among the medical community of his time. The focus of Bryan's work is the years between 1907 and 1914, only a year before Dr. Joseph Goldberger proved the cause of pellagra, through experimentation, which we now know is a lack of niacin in the diet.



Babcock began his career with McLean Asylum, which opened in 1818 as the Charlestown Asylum. Babcock returned to his native state, South Carolina, in 1891, against his better judgment, and spent much of his career as superintendent of the South Carolina Lunatic Asylum. In 1895, through Babcock's efforts, the institution became the South Carolina State Hospital for the Insane. He held little authority in his position, and had many encounters with those in authority, to maintain necessary, qualified staff and equipment. He answered to a nine member board of regents who were appointed by the governor. He made many important relationships during his lifetime and career, but two were extremely important to him. One was with Katherine "Kate" Guion who became his wife and the other with Governor Benjamin Tillman, who "sheltered Babcock as long as he had the power to do so" (pg. 36). He had a close working relationship with Eleanora Bennette Saunders and fought to defend her rights as a female physician.

Housing in the asylum was overcrowded and inadequate, particularly for African Americans. Tuberculosis was rampant, and in 1894, Babcock reported 298 deaths had occurred within the asylum over a 14 year period, with 165 of the deceased being black females, in spite of the fact that black females comprised the smallest portion of the institution. The numbers indicated that black women bore the brunt of the disease in South Carolina. This led to a presentation and publication by Babcock on "The Prevention of Tuberculosis in Hospitals for the Insane." He concentrated his efforts on making living conditions better for the asylum as a whole, and particularly, for African Americans. In 1907, attention turned to pellagra. Babcock believed the etiology of pellagra to be dietary, particularly associated with corn, and championed his beliefs throughout the medical community, opposing other well known doctors of the day, such as Louis Sambon of Italy, who believed it to be insect-born. Babcock, through his study of pellagra, was the founder of the movement which became known as Zeist vs. Anti-Zeist. Zeists (a word based upon the Latin word for corn, *Zea Mays*) believed the disease to be caused by diet, while Anti-Zeists purported that insects were responsible for the disease. The opposing beliefs were discussed throughout the world by physicians, including many European physicians, in papers and

conferences during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.

By 1909, conditions at the state hospital had deteriorated, and triggered an investigation by the state administrators. State Senator, Niels Christensen, Jr., chaired the committee to investigate the hospital focusing on allegations from Attorney A. Hunter Gibbes, of Babcock's mismanagement and the inadequacy of his administration. Dr. James Thompson, Babcock's First Assistant Physician, gave reluctant testimony that was unfavorable to Babcock. Christensen proposed a resolution asking that Babcock and the regents resign. Proponents and defenders of Babcock prevailed, and with a vote of twenty-seven to nine, killed the resolution. After all of the political battles, attention was once again turned to pellagra, which by 1912, had become an epidemic. Babcock and Claude Lavinder, of the U.S. Public Health and Marine Hospital Service, tracked the epidemiology, and published the first comprehensive English language treatise on pellagra.

In 1914, after his battle for Eleanora Saunders' reputation, Babcock resigned his post at the state hospital. He borrowed money, and built his own sanitarium. He and Saunders treated both races and genders as outpatients but only white women as inpatients. Bryan's perspective of Babcock as an administrator includes these reflections. "Babcock's career as asylum superintendent serves up a cautionary tale for anyone aspiring to senior management without suitable training and temperament". "Babcock was too shy, passive, and sensitive for the nigh-impossible job description...however, proved to be just right in the role as a catalyst in the American response to pellagra. His honesty, humanitarianism, generosity and courage are traits worthy of emulation". (pg. 260)

The author's research and study of Dr. James Woods Babcock is thorough. His record leaves the reader with a sense of feeling for what it might have been like to be a doctor during that time. Bryan notes that the study began and ended with students, and that six linear feet of James Woods Babcock papers in the South Caroliniana Library were cataloged during the course of the project. (pg. 279) Historical data from many libraries and government agencies went into the work. The book proves to be an education not only about Dr. Babcock, but institutions for the mentally handicapped, and diseases of the period.

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