

Miss Mary's Money: Fortune and Misfortune in a North Carolina Plantation Family, 1760-1924

H.G. Jones, David Southern

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"Miss Smith, the wealthy old lady who died recently near Chapel Hill, and who bequeathed a large sum of money to the State University, did not fail to remember her old slaves, of whom six are now living," read the New York Times December 6, 1885. But the Times got it wrong: land, not money, was left to the University of North Carolina and five of Mary Ruffin Smith's former slaves. And the reporter could not have known that four of the heirs were also her nieces--sired by her two bachelor brothers--or that all five had the same mother, the Smiths' maid, Harriet. Smith, a spinster, raised the four girls, baptized them into the Episcopal Church, married them to respectable biracial men and left each 100 acres in her will. The Smith fortune was made by Mary's grandfather, Revolutionary War veteran Francis Jones, and survived the profligacy of his son-in-law, Dr. James Smith, before being willed to the university and the North Carolina Episcopal diocese. Every "legitimate" member of the Jones-Smith family lies in a small cemetery near the former estate. Harriet, who was struck by lightning, lies in an unmarked grave somewhere in Orange County. Her greatgranddaughter, Pauli Murray, was the first African-American woman admitted to the Episcopalian clergy and was made a saint in 2012. Her book, Proud Shoes, is based on her grandmother's memories. The hundreds of descendants of Harriet's daughters have been virtually ignored; as has the son she had by her common law husband. This book, the result of eight years of research, is for them.

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