

“I Could Feel the Spirits of My Ancestors”

Rebecca Campbell and Catherine Braxton

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Interviewed by George McDaniel, 2015

*Editor's Note:*

*Rebecca Johnson Campbell and Catherine Johnson Braxton are sisters, who grew up in Charleston in the house their grandfather, Willis Johnson, purchased after he moved from Drayton Hall to the city to work in the late 1800s. His mother, Catherine Bowens Johnson, had been born enslaved at Drayton Hall and lived there after freedom. Catherine Braxton carries her name forward. They have been frequent participants in Drayton Hall's school and public programs and have joined with Drayton descendants in descendants' programs at the local, state, and national levels. Today Catherine serves on the board of trustees of the Drayton Hall Preservation Trust.*

*How are you connected to Drayton Hall?*

Catherine Braxton: We have a long line of ancestors at Drayton Hall. I am the granddaughter of Willis Johnson, Senior, who was born here as a free man, the son of freed slaves. His mother, who was enslaved here, was Catherine Bowens, whose name I carry, and her two brothers, Caesar and John, were enslaved here. Though a plantation, Drayton Hall is important because we cannot leave our ancestors out of our lives. My great grandparents were here as slaves, and slavery's not a good thing. No way! However, there were things that took place here that were passed on to us. So we have an appreciation for Drayton Hall. It does matter to us.

Rebecca Campbell: My great grandmother, Catherine Bowens, and her son Willis were born at Drayton Hall. As children, we were never brought out here. However, when we were adults in the 1970s, our cousin Richmond Bowens, Caesar Bowens' grandson, had returned from Chicago, began working at the entrance ticket office, and invited me to come. He said, “This is where your grandfather and your great grandmother came from.” It was overgrown. I was not impressed. But as I walked the grounds, I could feel the spirits of my ancestors. It still lives with me when I come here. I can always feel them. I am a

part of this place and that they are too, You get that feeling about the spirits of your ancestors. We've not seen them, but we know them spiritually.

*When freedom came to your family at Drayton Hall, what did you hear happened?*

Catherine Braxton: Catherine Bowens and her husband Friday Johnson did not leave the plantation. They died here. Their son Willis left, and when he left, he left with the idea that he was going to own property since landownership was very important to him and my mother. My family kept all the records and photographs. They were organizers, just like we are today. When we left to go to New York, my mother didn't pack them. She said, "My brother Frank is here, so we'll leave them and later come back." When we came back, it was all gone. His wife wanted to clear the house and didn't want the old stuff, so we lost all that.

*Why do you think your great grandparents stayed at Drayton Hall after emancipation?*

Rebecca Campbell: After freedom came, they did not leave. It could have been that they were in love with the place, but not necessarily. When freedom came, they didn't have funds because they weren't paid as slaves. They were provided with food, clothing, and necessities, but no money. If you are going to leave here, you could do it. You could stretch out on faith and leave without anything. But they didn't do that. They had children. They stayed because they were provided for. What was the best thing for them to do? Wandering around with no place to stay? Living from place to place? It's not easy.

Catherine Braxton: After freedom came, they stayed because they had to have their needs met, and that makes sense. Catherine and Friday Johnson had children. You don't want your children to suffer. Maybe at some other point, I can leave, but they stayed because of their children and the need to provide for them.

*When your grandfather left Drayton Hall, what did he do? What were his values?*

Catherine Braxton: When he became an adult, my grandfather, Willis Johnson, Senior, left Drayton Hall because he was born a free person and probably thought, "I want to be on my own. I want to control

myself and what I have.” He was determined to purchase his own home. A document shows he paid \$3,000 for property, which was a lot of money at that time, but my grandfather taught us not to spend every dime that you have. We were to set it aside for a rainy day and then we may be able to buy a house and then another. Not everybody did. But he did. I think that exemplifies values he got from his parents at Drayton Hall and that were instilled in my generation.

Rebecca Campbell: My grandfather Willis Johnson walked from Drayton Hall to Charleston, worked, and eventually bought the house at 35 Calhoun Street, which is still standing. Although my grandfather bought the first house in 1937, the second house on the property, which is known as 35 ½ Calhoun Street, was built by his two sons, Frank and Andrew Johnson, as a final test in their carpentry apprenticeship in the early to mid-1940s. We're trying to maintain them because they're the only houses that represent the area known as “the Borough,” although the official name for that section was Anson Borough. To African Americans, we had our own name, and that was the “Borough.”

If you saw a picture of Uncle Frank Johnson, a son of our Drayton Hall grandfather, you could see why we called him “Dapper Dan.” He was always well dressed, took pride in his work, and married a school teacher, but they never had children. Like his brothers, he was an excellent uncle and helped raise us since our father was sick when we were young. Particular about his foods, he did not eat many fats and sugar and drank milk only from Coburg Dairy Company. He was the last person to reside at 35 Calhoun Street, the front house, dying in 1998 at perhaps 83.

*What role did the church play in your family when you were growing up?*

Rebecca Campbell: Willis Johnson was a strong believer and regular church-goer at Mt. Zion A.M.E. As Willis Johnson was taught, you must train up a child. You must be in Sunday school to learn the Word of God. You must be a part of the youth program. You must pay up to 10% for God. He taught spiritual lessons. For example, since his parents had been enslaved at Drayton Hall and then tenants, there was a lot to be bitter about, but he did not give in to anger. He always had the value of love. He was a steady man. He was organized. It had to be right. He sent his sons off to get training to be craftsmen. That's the way he looked at his family. You must be educated. You must be ready. You must be clean. He was a community person. If a person needed anything, they called our house “the house of

refuge.” That’s how we were taught. My grandfather left Drayton Hall, knowing how to read and write. Whether or not there was some type of school or training there, I don’t know, but he taught his wife how to read and write as her family had worked in rice fields near Jacksonboro.

*If you could go back in time and ask questions of your ancestors who were enslaved at Drayton Hall, what would you ask?*

Rebecca Campbell: I see them now in the spirit. I’d ask, “Were you happy on the plantation? How did you feel when you were shipped to America? How did you survive coming across the Atlantic? Were you afraid when you were on the block? How did you survive the market, waiting for someone to buy you like cattle?” I just can’t continue because it is a hardship for me to go into depth.

*If that large live oak at Drayton Hall could talk, what questions would you ask it?*

Rebecca Campbell: They would tell me that some of my people had been hung there. Somebody could have done something accidentally, or not listened to the master, or done something wrong, like stealing food, stealing money, and was being punished. There are so many different things that could have happened. I know so many things have happened.

I froze just now.

So many things happened with that tree and many other places here. I could go to more depth and into my feelings, but I know if that tree could talk, it would have stories to tell.

Catherine Braxton: Those live oak trees were here, I suppose, when my ancestors came to this plantation. I would ask them to tell me stories of things they have witnessed. One of the stories may be about someone having been hung from the tree. Did our ancestors, if they were able to, have a meal under this tree? Were they able to gather under this tree for prayer meeting? Did they care for the tree and groom it? Did Caesar Bowens (her great grandmother’s brother, born enslaved at Drayton Hall) sit under this tree at any time?

*Speaking of spirits, if the Ashley River could talk, what questions would you ask? \*

Rebecca Campbell: I would ask the Ashley River, “How many bodies of African slaves are lying down at the bottom?” Also, “How many Africans did you feed” because there are shrimp and other fish in it.

Catherine Braxton: Did anyone attempt to swim across this river to escape? And if so, good. Did they make it? Were they caught and brought back? Were these people who attempted to escape directly related to me? The waters can get sometimes very rough. Did anyone accidentally die, attempting to get across these waters?

*Let's imagine that the Ashley River Road could talk. What questions would you ask of it?*

Rebecca Campbell: How many sang songs as they passed through here? Were they barefooted? What kind of clothing did they have, and were they cold? Did they hide in the woods, trying to escape the plantation?

After freedom, did my ancestors travel this road to go to church? When my grandfather, Willis Johnson, Senior, walked this road to get to Charleston, was he alone? Were there other ancestors of mine who walked this road, leaving Drayton Hall?

Catherine Braxton: When you're a slave on a plantation, that's like being in a prison. You can't leave unless you got permission, and if you leave without permission, you're “running away.” If you're caught, you could be sold, whipped, or have all kinds of punishments meted out to you. Well, I love traveling the Ashley River Road and wonder whether they tried to escape by way of the roadway. The enslaved had no freedom to just walk the road, as we would today, and if that did happen, were there law enforcement officers or such around to bring them back? If they did get back, there was almost certainly some type of punishment for traveling Ashley River Road. Were any of those who attempted to escape successful?

*If the main house could talk, what questions would you like to hear?*

Catherine Braxton: It is my understanding that my ancestors were “house slaves,” which means they were living somewhere close to the big house. It is my understanding that my great grandmother Catherine Bowens managed the kitchen, laundry room, etc. Where would her family’s house be located in relationship to the big house? Where was the food prepared for the big house? Where did they do the laundry? Did they actually serve the family? Or, did they just bring the food over and then the family served themselves? Were they required to work after “normal” work hours?

Rebecca Campbell: Did my ancestors help with the brick masonry? Did they help build those beautiful staircases? What did my great grandmother do? Did she cook? Clean? Help raise the children? What did my great grandfather Friday Johnson do? Did he bring wood for the fire to keep them warm or to start the breakfast in the morning? Who helped raise the vegetables to put on the table? And make the bread? How did they operate the big house? Who did the work?

*Here’s a picture of Richmond Bowens, Sr., Richmond Bowens’ father. (See photo at the end of this interview.) What does this picture tell you of him, since he’d died before you were born?*

Catherine Braxton: When I observe this picture, I see a person deep in thought. He’s well dressed, so that means that he has pride in himself and whatever he did. He seems capable of doing whatever he needed to do and to be a go-getter.

Rebecca Campbell: He looks like a preacher — like he can just go ahead and occupy a pulpit and start preaching. He has a comfortable, pleasing face, and, like Uncle Frank Johnson, he seems like “Dapper Dan.” He has clothing of quality and is completely dressed, wearing his Derby, so he apparently had sufficient funds. He has an intelligent look. Not that you could tell the book by its cover, but he looks like he's standing solid.

*Could you tell us your recollections about Richmond Bowens?*

Rebecca Campbell: Richmond meant so much to me. He regularly visited my grandfather, mother, and uncles on Calhoun St. After he had gotten a job as a chauffeur in Chicago, we went up there. He drove us all around Chicago. We were like celebrities and just felt so happy and so rich. We just sat back. We

had a beautiful dinner at his house with his wife Velma, who was a superb cook. He had a real sense of family and was a loving person. Although he was actually my grandfather's first cousin, I took him as an uncle.

*Could you describe the relationship between Charles Drayton, the last owner of Drayton Hall, and Richmond Bowens?*

Catherine Braxton: Before I met Charlie, I'd heard a lot about him. When I did meet him, he was the person I expected because Richmond had talked about him so much. They grew up and played together. They had these little favorite songs and favorite foods. They were of different colors, but they've been like brothers.

Rebecca Campbell: I think Richmond was a little older than Charlie, but they played together. They loved each other. When he came for the memorial for Richmond, Charlie cried and cried and cried. His daughter had to take control of him because he felt like he missed a friend and a brother. He appeared to be the type of person that Richmond always said.

*Could you tell us about the blacksmith Philip Simmons, whose memorial arch visitors see at the African American cemetery at Drayton Hall?*

Catherine Braxton: I've known Philip Simmons since I was little because his blacksmithing shop was near our home at 35 Calhoun St. Now his work is in the Smithsonian, and his gazebo at the Charleston Airport. In spite of all his fame, you never heard him say, "I'm this. I'm that. I don't like this person." A kind and loving person, he and Uncle Frank used to work together, with my uncle doing the carpentry and he, the blacksmithing. When Uncle Frank died, he made the remarks at Frank's funeral. We called him Uncle. That's the kind of relationship we had.

Rebecca Campbell: Catherine and I were on the committee to design a memorial for the African American cemetery, and we commissioned Philip Simmons to design it. Our committee had first wanted a gate, which is what Philip has made all over Charleston, but then we decided on an arch because it was open all the time. We thought our ancestors had been through hell and back, and we

didn't want them to be closed in by any gate! We wanted their spirits to flow in, flow out, fly all over Drayton Hall, and be a part of this site.

Philip designed the arch with birds in flight. Unfortunately, he was unable to make it because of his infirmities due to aging, so he passed the blacksmithing to his nephew Ron. I believe he spiritually transferred something to Ron, because it was carried out so well. We're proud of it. We are happy that Philip had something to do with the making of the arch. His hand is on that. His design is in that. The dedication event for the arch was one of the best.

*What would you say to African Americans about preserving their history?*

Rebecca Campbell: I would tell others who have migrated to other places to consider coming back to their roots at some point. You do need to stay in touch with relatives who stayed behind, to do research, especially oral history, and preserve family heirlooms and pass them on. A family reunion is a good starting point.

*When you think about racism, slavery, and then segregation, bitterness can easily rise to the surface. How did your family with connections to Drayton Hall respond to such situations?*

Rebecca Campbell: When those occasions came up, you saw how your grandparents responded, and that guided you. In some families, the hostility is still there, but for our family, we were told, "You need to put it down." We were brought here against our wishes, and many slaves were killed, so what do we do? Dr. Martin Luther King says that's tough. We have to have a retreat and come to the table. We need to communicate and stop this foolishness. You can't go on because if we pass this burden on to the next generation, it may become even worse. We want to be better. Slavery and the harsh treatments, that's a burden. I personally don't want to carry a load. You should consider forgiveness. That's what I have done. We have to continue to work on it. It's an ongoing struggle. We are all God's children. While our skin color is different, we all have red blood. Now if you see any other color, do let me know! Alright! So it's a struggle. I'm not going to show any meanness. That's ignorant! I want to show some intelligence. So these are some of the ways that I've handled it.



*What do you hope that people learn from this conversation?*

Rebecca Campbell: There is no gain in being ignorant, which is what I always say to people who act in a prejudiced manner. It's a matter of being ignorant. You need to show love. Sometimes people make me upset, angry, but I am not going to stoop to those levels. I can't tell you the verse in the scriptures, but it says, "Come now, let us reason together." If we could just have some reasoning, we can turn the page on hate. I'm not talking only about the whites, but many blacks too. I try to say, "Let's come to the table and reason together." Let us talk about what has happened in the past, but we don't need this to continue. It has got to end at some point! It's going to be a slow process. I may not live to see it, but it will happen. God has given us space and time to think about it and get our lives together. America is too beautiful a place to go on like this. We need to do better and love and share and treat our neighbor as we would treat ourselves.

*What are your final thoughts about coming to Drayton Hall, a plantation where your ancestors were enslaved?*

Rebecca Campbell: I believe in education. For example, when Richmond was working as a guide at the gift shop's front porch, visitors were all around him. He had this book of family photographs and other old photographs about African American life, which he was explaining to them and educating them about our history. He stopped and told the group who Catherine and I were. That made me feel even better about Drayton Hall since that's the spirit he had about the place. He sought to educate.

Whenever I come now, I get that same feeling as when I first came out and as Richmond had. The spirits of my ancestors were always with Richmond and me. I feel them with every footstep and in every place. I go in the house or on the grounds, and they are there. Whenever I approach this property, I still feel that way. I feel my ancestors, and I feel good that they are here.

*What is your perception of Drayton Hall, the place where your ancestors were enslaved?*

Catherine Braxton:

People ask me: "Why do you folks keep going back to Drayton Hall? Wasn't it a plantation?"

“Yes.”

“Weren’t your ancestors enslaved there?”

“Yes.”

But one must know where you came from in order to know where you're going. How do you get that? You have to go back into your history to your ancestors. Now we have more people who are willing to do what we're doing. Again, slavery, no glory! But if you take this out of one's life, with the ancestors, where are you going to go? We can't say, “I don't want anything ever to do with it.” No, we don't want it to happen again. But we can't leave our ancestors behind! I know that my ancestors — the Bowens, the Johnsons — left a legacy at Drayton Hall. And I intend to see that go on and to pass it on to the next generation.

**End of Interview**

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