



Catherine Braxton, Rebecca Campbell:

"I feel the spirits of my ancestors ..."

2015 – Drayton Hall

Catherine Brown Braxton and Rebecca Brown Campbell are sisters who grew up in Charleston in the house their grandfather, Willis Johnson, purchased after he left Drayton Hall in the late 1800s to work in the city. His mother, Catherine Bowens Johnson, was born enslaved at Drayton Hall, and now her namesake, Catherine Braxton, serves on the governing board of the Drayton Hall Preservation Trust.

George: How are you connected to Drayton Hall?

Catherine: We have a long line of ancestors from Drayton Hall. I am the granddaughter of Willis Johnson Sr., who was born here as a free man, the son of former slaves. My great-grandmother was Catherine Bowens Johnson, whose name I carry. Her two brothers, Caesar and John Bowens, were enslaved here. Though a plantation, Drayton Hall is important because we cannot leave our ancestors out of our lives. Slavery was 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.

Rebecca: My great-grandmother, Catherine Bowens, and her son Willis were born at Drayton Hall. As children, we didn't come out here. However, when we were adults in the 1970s, our cousin Richmond Bowens, Caesar Bowens' grandson, returned from Chicago and initially worked at the entrance ticket office. He invited me to come. He said, "This is where your grandfather and your great-grandmother came from."

The place was overgrown. I was not impressed. But as I walked the grounds, I felt the spirits of my ancestors. I still do whenever I come. I'm a part of this place, and they are too. We may not have seen our ancestors, but we know them

spiritually.

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

Catherine: Catherine Bowens and her husband, Friday Johnson, did not leave the plantation. They died here. Their son Willis left with the idea of owning property since land ownership was very important to him. My family kept all the records and photographs. They were organizers, like we are today. When we left for 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 did, it was all gone. His wife cleared 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: It could have been that they loved the place. But when freedom came, they didn't have funds because slaves weren't paid. They were provided with food, clothing, and necessities but no money. They could stretch out on faith and leave without anything. But they didn't. They had children. They stayed because they were provided for. What was best? Wandering around with no place to stay? That's not easy.

Catherine: After freedom came, Catherine and Friday Johnson stayed because they had to have their needs met and had children, one being my grandfather. They were free to leave, but they stayed because of their children. That makes sense.

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

Catherine: When he became an adult, Willis Johnson Sr. 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. My grandfather taught us not to spend every dime we had. If we were to set it aside for a rainy day, we might be able to buy a house and then another. Not everybody did. But he did. I think this exemplifies values he got from his parents at Drayton Hall and that were instilled in my generation.

Rebecca: 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 35½ Calhoun Street, was built by his sons, Frank and Andrew Johnson, as a final test in their carpentry apprenticeship in the 1940s. We're trying to maintain those houses because they are representative of the historic Ansonborough section of Charleston. African Americans call it the "Borough."

If you saw a picture of Uncle Frank Johnson, a son of our Drayton Hall grandfather, you'd know why we called him "Dapper Dan." He was always well dressed, took pride in his work, and married a schoolteacher, 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. 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: Willis Johnson was a strong believer and regular church-goer at Mount Zion AME. He was taught that you had to train up a child. You must attend Sunday school to learn the Word of God and be a part of the youth program. You must pay at least 10 percent to God. He taught spiritual lessons. Since his parents had been enslaved at Drayton Hall and later were tenants, they had a lot to be bitter about, but he did not give in to anger. He knew 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 after his family. His children must be educated and ready. He was also a community person. His home was called "the house of refuge." When my grandfather left Drayton Hall, he could 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 since 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: I can see them now in their spirit. I'll ask, "Were you happy at 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, waiting for someone to buy you like cattle?" I just can't continue because it's 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: It would tell me that some of my people were hanged there. They could have done something accidentally, or not listened to the master, or stolen food or money and were punished. Many things could have happened. (She stops talking momentarily.)

I froze just now. So many things happened with that tree and at many other places here. If that tree could talk, it would have stories to tell.

Catherine: Since those live oak trees were here with my ancestors, I'd ask them to tell stories of things they witnessed. One might be about someone having been hanged. Or, I might ask, "Did our ancestors have a meal under

this tree? Were they able to gather there for a prayer meeting? Did they care for the tree and groom it? Did my great grandmother Catherine Bowens or her brother Caesar ever sit under this tree?"

If the Ashley River could talk, what questions would you ask?

Rebecca: I'd ask, "How many bodies of African slaves are lying at the bottom?" Also, "How many Africans did you feed?" — because there are shrimp and fish in it.

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

If the Ashley River Road could talk, what would you ask it?

Rebecca: "How many sang songs as they passed through here? Were they barefooted? What kind of clothing did they have? 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 walked this road to get to Charleston, was he alone? Were there other ancestors who walked this road, leaving Drayton Hall?"

Catherine: When you're a slave on a plantation, it's like being in a prison. You couldn't leave unless you got permission, and if you left without permission, you were "running away" If you were caught, you could be sold, whipped, or have other punishments. I love traveling the Ashley River Road, and I wonder if they tried to escape by way of the roadway. The enslaved had no freedom to just walk the road as we do today. 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. Were any of those who attempted to escape successful?

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

Catherine: It's my understanding that my ancestors were house slaves, which means they were living somewhere close to the big house. It's 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, then the family served themselves? Were they required to work after "normal" work hours?

Rebecca: 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 for the table? Who made the bread? How did they operate the big house? Who did the work?

Here's a picture of Richmond Bowens Sr., Richmond Bowens' father, who died before you were born. What does this picture tell you about him? (See photo section.)

Catherine: I see a person deep in thought. He's well dressed, which means 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: He looks like a preacher — ready to 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 wearing his Derby, so he apparently had sufficient funds. He has an intelligent look. Not that you could tell a book by its cover, but he looks like he's standing solid.

Could you tell us your recollections about Richmond Bowens?

Rebecca: Richmond meant so much to me. He regularly visited my grandfather, mother, and uncles on Calhoun Street. After he had gotten a job as a chauffeur in Chicago, we went up there, and he drove us all around Chicago. We were like celebrities and felt 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 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: Before I met Charlie, I'd heard a lot about him. He was the person I expected because Richmond had talked about him so much. They grew up and played together and had little favorite songs and favorite foods. They were of different colors but like brothers.

Rebecca: I think Richmond was older than Charlie. When he came for the memorial for Richmond, Charlie cried and cried and cried. His daughter had to take control because Charlie had lost a friend and brother. He was the type of person that Richmond always said he was.

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

Catherine: I've known Philip Simmons since I was little because his black-smithing shop was near our home at 35 Calhoun Street. Now his work is in the Smithsonian, and his gazebo is 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 gave the eulogy. We called him Uncle. That's the kind of relationship we had.

Rebecca: Catherine and I were on the committee to design a memorial for the African American cemetery, and we commissioned Philip Simmons and the Philip Simmons Foundation. Our committee had first wanted a gate, which is what Philip has made all over Charleston, but we decided on an arch because it was open all the time. 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, but was unable to actually make the arch because of his infirmities due to aging, so he passed the blacksmithing to his nephew Ron Pringle. I believe he spiritually transferred something to Ron because it was carried out so well. We're proud of it. We are happy. Philip's hand is on that. His design is in that. The dedication of the arch was one of the best moments.

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

Rebecca: I would say to consider coming back to their roots. They need to keep in touch with relatives who stayed behind, to do research, especially oral history, 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: When those occasions came up, we saw how our grandparents responded, and that guided us. In some families the hostility is still there, but in 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 a tough thing. We have to come to the table and communicate and stop this foolishness. If we pass this burden on to the next generation, it might 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. 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. These are some of the ways that I've handled it.

What do you hope people will learn from this conversation?

Rebecca: There is no gain in being ignorant, which is what I say to people who act in a prejudiced manner. It's a matter of ignorance. We 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 say, "Let's come to the table and reason together." Let's talk about what has happened in the past. We don't need this to continue. It has got to end at some point! It's 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 to get our lives together. America is too beautiful 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: I believe in education. For example, Catherine and I were there when Richmond was working as a guide on the gift shop's front porch. Visitors were all around him. He had a book of family photographs and other old photos about African American life, which he explained to them and educated them about our history. He told the group who Catherine and I were. That made me feel even better about Drayton Hall. 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. I feel good that they are here.

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

Catherine: People ask me: "Why do you folks keep going back to Drayton Hall? Wasn't it a plantation? Weren't your ancestors enslaved there?" I agree and explain that you must know where you come 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. Slavery, no glory! But if you take that and one's ancestors out of one's life, where are you going to go? We can't say, "I don't want anything 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 legacy go on and to pass it to the next generation.