



The American Archivist Reviews

Date posted: September 15, 2015

<http://www.archivists.org/american-archivist-reviews>

A Tale of Two Plantations

<http://twoplantations.com/>, accessed March 9, 2015

Reviewed by April P Akins, Lander University

A Tale of Two Plantations (ATTP) is based on research tying *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* by Dr. Richard S. Dunn, together with his more recent publication, *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia*. ATTP takes a comparative glimpse into the lives of enslaved people in two vastly different parts of the world, Mount Airy plantation in Virginia and Mesopotamia plantation in Jamaica. Suffering developed among the enslaved people as the result of different circumstances on the two plantations.

In the 1970s, Dunn began tracking over 2,000 slaves from these two plantations and reconstructed the lineages of slave families from both plantations for four or five generations. Dunn gathered the information from annual inventories of the slaves. ATTP is based on Dunn's research and was produced by History Designs Studio (HDS). HDS provided digital representation of the reconstruction of the slave families' lineages allowing the user to delve into the data and begin to understand that death and overpopulation were the cause of suffering within the families. Within ATTP, the user is exposed to family diagrams, family trees, and family lists that allow the researcher to trace each family's history. These tools provide very detailed information about individuals and their connections to the larger family, the plantation, and the geographic area. The information presented provides a starting point for researchers to further explore the lives of slaves during this time period in these these geographic locations. A Tale of Two Plantations provides a visually appealing digital look into enslaved families of two plantations from the same time period in two different parts of the world. The information and layout of the ATTP gives historical researchers and archivists a great example of how to synthesize and organize information for their own projects. It also provides a footprint for archivists to learn from when creating simple yet sophisticated user experiences for collection materials online. Having the information in an interactive presentation on the ATTP website is an excellent way for researchers to delve into the experiences of multiple generations of enslaved people at these two plantations without having to access the printed materials.

With the vast amount of information neatly displayed in charts and lists on the website, the one area I feel that could be expanded to help the user grasp the further comparison of the two enslaved groups is the expansion of the analysis section. The section currently gives a quick overview with probing questions to make the researcher want to dive into further investigation, but it does not give the reader a more conclusive summary of the author's findings. For further investigation the researcher would need to review Dunn's written works. Although a [link](#) is provided to Dunn's Harvard University Press works, the need to review these books takes away

from the quick answers that some online researchers like. I feel that for some researchers using this website and having that additional information available would aid in their understanding of the lists and diagrams currently available.

To provide context of how ATTP fits in with some of the [other projects](#) created by the History Design Studio that have a historical research focus, I looked at the [Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761](#) (SRJ) by Vincent Brown which centers on slaves in Jamaica during a different time period and angle. This website provides excellent details of the slave revolt using visual images of maps and details textual explanation of the images. SRJ does probe the researcher with several questions to begin the investigation of the topic and later answers the questions within the website. The SRJ website provides a better reference for the online researcher looking for the quick answers compared to the ATTP website. I like the fact that SRJ provides a final summary and conclusion of events based on the research and map images used on the website. Along with the same visual appeal that can be found on the ATTP website, SRJ provides the necessary details to provide quick easy to find answers about the content.

A Tale of Two Plantations has a visually appealing website design. It packs a lot of details into the family diagrams, family trees, and family lists, which are great for genealogy focused research that are used to that style of data, but may not be as useful to the common online researcher wanting to get a taste of the information. ATTP would benefit from a conclusive summary to the information presented on the website. When beginning digital collection projects, archival institutions should consider the audience and content at hand to decide how much detail they include or even link to within their website and how they display the information. A Tale of Two Plantations has the visual appeal but lacks conclusive content for the online researcher. The ATTP website would benefit from including a summary of the content and answers to the questions posed on the site similar to SRJ.

