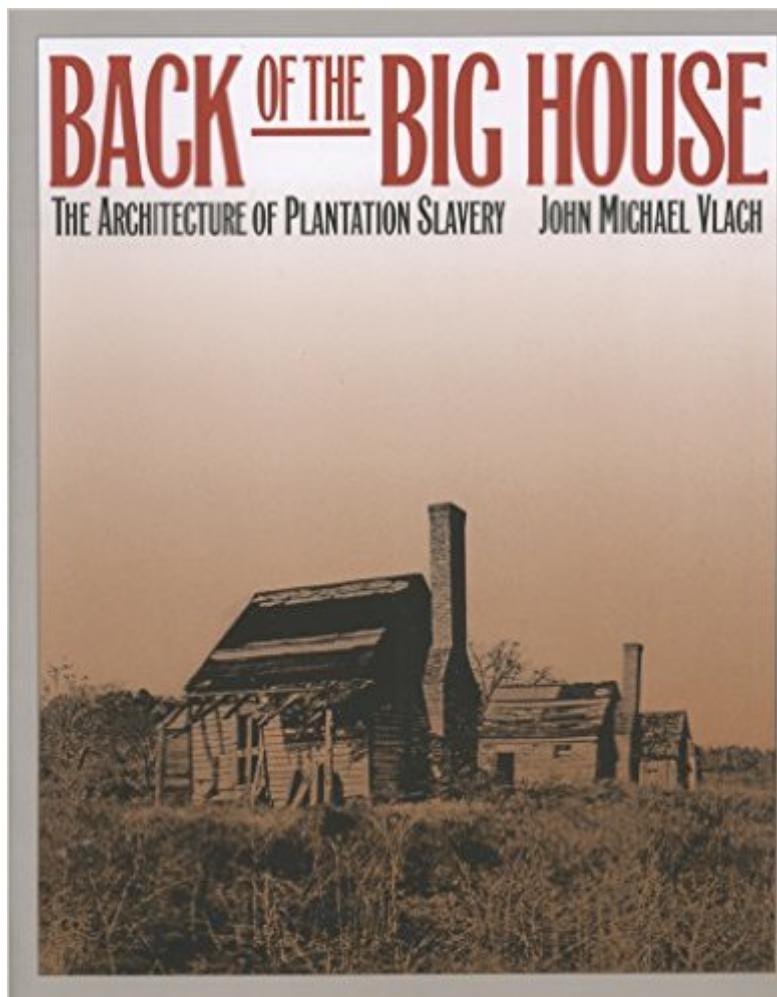


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Back Of The Big House: The Architecture Of Plantation Slavery (Fred W Morrison Series In Southern Studies)



Synopsis

Behind the "Big Houses" of the antebellum South existed a different world, socially and architecturally, where slaves lived and worked. John Michael Vlach explores the structures and spaces that formed the slaves' environment. Through photographs and the words of former slaves, he portrays the plantation landscape from the slaves' own point of view. The plantation landscape was chiefly the creation of slaveholders, but Vlach argues convincingly that slaves imbued this landscape with their own meanings. Their subtle acts of appropriation constituted one of the more effective strategies of slave resistance and one that provided a locus for the formation of a distinctive African American culture in the South. Vlach has chosen more than 200 photographs and drawings from the Historic American Buildings Survey--an archive that has been mined many times for its images of the planters' residences but rarely for those of slave dwellings. In a dramatic photographic tour, Vlach leads readers through kitchens, smokehouses, dairies, barns and stables, and overseers' houses, finally reaching the slave quarters. To evoke a firsthand sense of what it was like to live and work in these spaces, he includes excerpts from the moving testimonies of former slaves drawn from the Federal Writers' Project collections.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Half of this book I really liked. That part described the numerous buildings that helped make up a plantation - apart from the manor house itself. It gave me a good feeling for how they were built and

what happened in them, and included lots of excellent pictures and diagrams (mostly from WPA work from the 1930s and 1940s). The part of the book I didn't like was simply very thin on information. A large part of the book, for example, has Vlach simply describing the buildings pictured. These descriptions are often of the most rudimentary kind - this one has one story, this one has two, this one is made of wood, this one is made of brick. Very little is added, really, that you couldn't get yourself simply from seeing the photos. What's really annoying, though, is all the filler that comes from his trying to impute meaning to so many things that are simply lacking in any real primary evidence. It sounds like he's read his Eugene Genovese (*Roll Jordan Roll*), and is trying - desperately - to fit his rather niche topic into that overall academic paradigm. Here he is, for example, trying to show how slaves' occupying the shacks and workhouses provided them is somehow some kind of revolutionary act of appropriation: "Acts of territorial appropriation were exceedingly clever because they were carried out, in the main, by the slaves' occupying the spaces to which they were assigned. Slaves gradually identified these spaces as theirs through a routine of innumerable domestic acts.... Thus, by steady increments, the official order set out by the planter on maps, documents, calendars and schedules and expressed in the forms and locations of buildings, fields, fences, and roads was subtly but certainly turned aside." I don't mind interpretation like this (in fact, well done, it can be some of the best history there is), but there simply isn't enough there to allow the author to do so with any authority whatsoever.

John Vlach's book is a thorough study of the architecture of plantation slavery in the South. He primarily used resource materials from the 1930s Historic American Building Survey and WPA interviews with former slaves to develop a social history. The research is solid and comprehensive. Vlach demonstrates ways to interpret the buildings for information about the life of the people who worked and dwelled in them, and he backs up his conclusions with interview materials. It's a terrific way of studying architecture that merges folklife studies with architectural history. The conclusions expanded my understanding about history, and this book is an essential contribution to learning about black history.

This study of vernacular architecture is a great contribution to the social history of slavery. By looking at facets of design such as settlement patterns and the formal qualities of buildings, Vlach shows how patterns in material culture provide clues for understanding the patterns of history that one can read by examining the buildings. This remarkable book not only documents plantation architecture as an important contribution to the historical record, but it also provides a fascinating

interpretation of the subject. It is an especially important study because of the dearth of written documents left by slaves.

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