



## The House on Diamond Hill

A Cherokee Plantation Story

By Tiya Miles

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Reviewed by **Drew A. Swanson**, Assistant Professor, Wright State University. He is author of *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*.

The Chief Vann House is one of Georgia's more popular State Historic Sites, drawing thousands of guests to a restored house and estate that interprets antebellum Cherokee and plantation culture. Tiya Miles's new book, *The House on Diamond Hill*, delves into the Chief Vann House's formative years, bringing to life the complex world of a multiracial and multicultural frontier South. Along the way the book also searches for the roots of historic meaning, or as Miles asks: "What is it we are connecting with when we walk the oak halls of this exquisite plantation home . . . What *really* took place on these well-worn grounds? What does this house *stand for*?" (xv).

At its heart, *The House on Diamond Hill* is a study of Scottish-Cherokee planter James Vann; James's Cherokee wife Peggy; their son Joseph; the plantation's African American slaves; the Vanns' Cherokee and white neighbors; and Moravian missionaries during the first decades of the nineteenth century. As this description implies, Miles's book is focused on the borders of race and culture in the South, with a family and plantation that were at once typical and exceptional. Both James and Joseph Vann were entrepreneurial masters; in addition to producing cotton and corn, their slaves ran a tavern, operated a ferry, distilled spirits, wrangled cattle and hogs, and hauled deerskins to market. James even worked as a professional slave trader for a time. Few if any Cherokee were as wealthy as the Vanns; few slaves in Cherokee country lived in such concentrations; few early-nineteenth-century structures survived in northern Georgia; and fewer still became iconized as state historic sites (surviving caches of records for such sites are rarer still). For all their exceptionalism, much of the Vanns' lives would have been familiar to many southeastern people; they lived in a fusion society that combined native, Euro-American, and African American cultures, and despite their wealth, the Vanns were forced off their land in the 1830s as part of Georgia's Cherokee re-

moval. Miles concludes that Cherokee lore and white accounts of the early plantation dominate current Vann House interpretation; drawing on the hegemony of past narratives the historic site is a place where white tourists can play both "planter" and "Indian," a nostalgic double whammy. But Miles holds out hope for a future that includes room for histories of the plantation's African Americans and their contributions to regional culture.

*The House on Diamond Hill* is beautifully written on the whole, and Miles displays a novelist's sensibility. In particular, the introduction and conclusion are exquisitely crafted. Miles also includes three brief appendices that draw the reader into her historical process. The first lays out how she came to the project and her subsequent research methods; the second furnishes a list of plantation slaves' names and brief histories; and the third is a short memoir of Peggy Vann. Rather than distract from the book, these appendices add to the richness of *The House on Diamond Hill*, making the reader feel a part of the discovery.

If Miles's book has a shortcoming, it resides in the work's relatively shallow treatment of the plantation landscape. The north Georgia environment played an important role in shaping everyday life on the plantation, and part of the cultural resonance of the Chief Vann House is due to the survival of land and estate into the twentieth century. The related themes of the importance of landscape and environment in historical action and contemporary preservationist interpretations of that landscape make brief appearances—in the prologue, epilogue, and a chapter on slave quarters and the big house—but the house itself is always in the center of the frame in these sections. The woods, soil, waters, fields, and gardens of Diamond Hill remain largely background, a place where slaves expressed their agency in some amorphous way by gardening, fishing, and hunting, but not one that comes to life through a new or dynamic interpretive approach. To be fair, Miles does so many things so well in *The House on Diamond Hill* that this criticism is a bit superfluous. Miles is clearly more interested in the relationships between the plantation's people than between the people and the land, and in this history she has succeeded admirably.

Readers familiar with the work of historians Claudio Saunt and Theda Perdue on liminal spaces and cultures in the South will find much to appreciate in Miles's new study, which has the added benefit of exploring these topics through an intimate and fascinating case study. *The House on Diamond Hill* deserves a prominent place on the bookshelves of anyone interested in Native Americans, slavery, plantation labor, or the antebellum South, as well as anyone who appreciates a beautiful, poignant read.