



Janice Sumler-Edmond. *The Secret Trust of Aspasia Cruvellier Mirault: The Life and Trials of a Free Woman of Color in Antebellum Georgia*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008. xiii + 171 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55728-880-6.

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Recovering a Free Black Woman from History

Janice Sumler-Edmond has written an interesting account of a remarkable woman of color who, along with her offspring, managed to carve out self-supporting businesses in Georgia from the antebellum era through Reconstruction. Sumler-Edmond aims to show that despite the many obstacles of race prejudice and legal barriers black women faced in the antebellum South, Aspasia Cruvellier Mirault nevertheless was able to create a successful life for herself by forging interracial business relationships, drawing on her own entrepreneurship, and cultivating strong familial ties. Despite the fact that Mirault's legacy was lost to her heirs due to a white supremacist-based court system in the post-Reconstruction South, her life story contains valuable lessons of perseverance, imagination, and determination.

Sumler-Edmond makes this case throughout her book, emphasizing the strength of character of her protagonists, Mirault and her family. Sumler-Edmond's approach is admirable and largely supported by the sheer extent of personal strength Mirault must have had to maneuver so successfully in a deeply racially divided world where she, as a free black woman, occupied an often perilously marginalized status. Sumler-Edmond, however, might have given her readers a more balanced account of the woman at the center of her book by exploring more deeply the controversial fact that Mirault held, at one time or another, black slaves. Sumler-Edmond states that this was not unusual for émigrés from the Caribbean, such as Mirault, but it would have been of significant interest to readers had she developed the ethical and moral dilemma such practice must have posed to a person of color. Addressing this issue would have given Sumler-Edmond's tale of Mirault's life more texture and her argument on behalf of Mirault more complexity.

Sumler-Edmond bases her book exclusively on her

extensive archival research into Savannah court and church records, tax rolls, and newspaper announcements. From these, Sumler-Edmond outlines the lives of Mirault and her family and sketches the most likely scenario of the events surrounding them in nineteenth-century Savannah. Often, Sumler-Edmond has to speculate about motives and outcomes since Mirault did not leave any personal journals or letters that would help explain her motivations more clearly. Sumler-Edmond acknowledges this difficulty in her prologue, but her effort to create a biographical narrative history by relying exclusively on official archival records leaves readers, at times, questioning the assumptions that she makes. It also makes the reading of the narrative somewhat dry as Sumler-Edmond has to cite records of all kinds to back up her claims, leaving little room in the narrative for the characters' personal development. In essence, the text often reads as an account of Sumler-Edmond's detailed research in the archival records.

The book uses a chronological narrative of events in the life of its protagonist. It begins with Mirault as a young woman in the 1820s and follows the family's story to the ultimately unsuccessful court case on behalf of her descendants in 1878. The story follows Mirault from her position as a seamstress with other members of her family to her development into a pastry cook and eventually proprietor of her own bakery shop. Sumler-Edmond documents romantic involvements, births of children, and deaths, including Mirault's in 1857. The book then follows her offspring through the Civil War and during Reconstruction. At the center of the story is the secret trust agreement into which Mirault entered with George Cally, a young white man known to her family and most likely romantically involved with her sister (at one point, he lived in Mirault's home with her sister).

Mirault was a successful businesswoman who was

able to save enough money to purchase her own property. Yet an 1818 statute of Georgia law prohibited free blacks from owning real estate in the state. As a matter of fact, free blacks needed a guardian to assist in any legal matters. Thus, when Mirault was ready to buy plot 22 on Whitaker Street in a section of Savannah that was home to many businesses and shops, she entered into an illegal and risky trust agreement with Cally. The two agreed that Mirault would give Cally the necessary funds to purchase the property and that she would be responsible for paying all of the required taxes, while he functioned as the front man. The secret trust agreement spelled out in detail the rights and responsibilities of each signee. Officially, however, the title was in Cally's name, although he maintained for decades that Mirault and later her heirs were the true owners of the property. Such an arrangement, while not uncommon, was nevertheless to be kept secret. On the few occasions Cally discussed it with a confidante, he made clear that it was Mirault who was financially responsible and who made all of the decisions regarding the property.

Sumler-Edmond asks why Mirault took such a risk and why Cally was inclined to do so; he stood to be fined one thousand dollars if found out, while Mirault would lose everything for which she had worked since such a purchase would be declared null and void under the 1818 statute. Sumler-Edmond offers no clear answer to this question, most likely because there is no personal account of Mirault's that sets forth her motives. So the author and her readers are left to speculate as to why this black woman aligned her fortune with a white man, in effect trusting her whole livelihood to a spoken, secret agreement. It is at points such as this where Sumler-Edmond's exclusive reliance on official records leaves readers unsatisfied. As we cannot know the motives of

the woman who left no personal records of any kind, we are left with the author's speculations and her evaluation of the historical context.

The same point applies to Cally's rather inexplicable actions after the Civil War, when he claimed that the property had always been his and that he was entitled to its proceeds. The ensuing court battle between Cally, Mirault's heirs, and a third party are documented in great detail through Sumler-Edmond's meticulous research into the records of the trial court and the Georgia Supreme Court. Yet again, while detailing the events and case developments with great accuracy, Sumler-Edmond does not present an understanding as to why Cally betrayed the confidence of his longtime ally and friend. This result only underlines the inherent difficulty historians face when writing about long-silenced groups who either did not leave any personal records or whose words were not deemed important enough to be preserved.

Sumler-Edmond has engaged in exhaustive archival research and written an easily accessible biography of an exceptional woman. Certainly, Mirault cannot be seen as a representative for her gender, race, or class, and Sumler-Edmond does not try to make such a claim of representativeness. Her aim is to offer interested readers a glimpse into what life was like for some free black women in the antebellum South and, perhaps more importantly, to emphasize what little we actually do know about such women in our nation's history. Sumler-Edmond succeeds in achieving these goals. She has offered readers a well-structured and thoroughly argued presentation of a part of history still overlooked and long forgotten. For that alone the book is to be commended. *The Secret Trust of Aspasia Cruvellier Mirault* is recommended for both undergraduates and graduate students.

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