

CHANGING PLACES, TRADING FACES:  
CHARTING SARAH HICKS WILLIAMS JOURNEY FROM NORTHERN WOMANHOOD  
TO SOUTHERN PLANTATION MISTRESS

A CREATIVE PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

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MASTER OF ARTS

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This project is currently available at [historyweb.aws.bsu.edu/ampurvis/placesfaces](http://historyweb.aws.bsu.edu/ampurvis/placesfaces)

This project, which started in the spring term of 2017, united my ongoing interest in digital forms of collecting and disseminating research and my relatively recent interest in southern women. Before coming to Ball State's M.A. program in History, I completed an M.S. in Information Science where I cultivated many digital skills. In fall 2015 I began researching Southern women and their relationship with domestic slaves. While I knew that Scarlett O'Hara was a fictional creation, I wondered what reality looked like for elite white women in the Civil War era South. After spending two semesters studying Southern women, I turned my attention to Northern women, a subject I am more familiar with. I soon learned of Northern women becoming governesses to plantation children, which is how I landed on a creative project on a Northern woman who married a plantation owner. The letters of Sarah Hicks Williams set the project in motion. Although a New York native who exemplified nineteenth-century notions of middle-class womanhood, she married Benjamin Williams and moved to the slave South. The combination of her critical mass of letters and her shifting location at a critical time in our nation's past, created the right opportunity for this creative project.

I am a dyslexic student who has processing issues, and I wanted to create something geared toward people who are non-traditional or non-book learners. I am an incredibly slow reader and proofreading is not my forte, so the idea of writing a traditional thesis seemed nearly impossible. Therefore, my project had to focus on a way to sift through large amounts of reading material. I find that digital history offers researchers a way to study the past by using tools that assist in processing large amounts of data and communicate scholarship in an interactive manner.

As I looked for sources for this project I came across an article written by Rebecca Fraser about the letters of Sarah Hicks Williams in the academic journal *Slavery & Abolition*. I chose to use Sarah Hicks Williams and the 100 letters she authored because she captured the themes of

coming of age, courtship and marriage, and domesticity, which included management of slaves, all while moving from New York to North Carolina. I downloaded the individual letters from the collection held by the University of North Carolina Southern Historical Collection, some of which came with a typescript transcription; I also transcribed the remaining letters and proof-read them. The complex facts, or “data,” from these letters can be studied using digital humanities text analysis tools to reveal patterns and emphases that are not always immediately evident with a close reading methodology alone. I began by creating a spreadsheet breaking down each letter. I tracked the file name, assigned an individual identifier, who the letter was written to and others mentioned, where the letter was written or postmarked and other places mentioned, a brief summary of the letter, key terms and facts, and lastly areas of focus such as consumerism, domesticity, and slavery. She had clearly written many more letters, but these surviving letters, were written most frequently to her parents between 1838-1867. The collection resides at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill’s Southern Historical Collection.

I then saved the letters again without the unique identifier to be able to analyze them without the identifier information playing a role. I started to input data into Voyant, a web-based text reading and analysis environment, by typing in terms I wanted to visualize to help me interpret meaning from the data output. I chose to use Voyant because it offers an intuitive and user-friendly design. These terms related to subject that recurred in her letters, such as domesticity, politics, slaves, and children. From here I used the spreadsheet I created in Excel to place each letter into a corresponding category, allowing for overlap. From these smaller categories, three overarching themes emerged: slavery, domesticity, and consumerism. I selected terms associated with each category and those I had noticed when sifting through letters.

I used a variety of tools on the Voyant website, including the Cirrus (word cloud) tool, Terms, Contexts, Streamgraph, and the Mandala (<http://voyant-tools.org/docs/#!/guide/tools>). I used two to three tools to analyze each selection of letters within the subset. For example, I used the Mandala feature to visualize the relationship between political terms such as Whig and Republican and the letters. Voyant allows me to analyze the text as a whole or separately without having to read through the texts over and over again. I find using Voyant visualizations most useful in attempting to read and process large amounts of data, rather than focusing on one or two examples and only a handful of associated quotes, I can look at the larger corpus of letters and see connections I may have missed. The output allows me to see connections that I missed the first time around. For example, when looking at Williams's views on motherhood, I originally believed she enjoyed every aspect of motherhood. After using Voyant to re-examine motherhood, my impression was proven false. Rather, the data showed that Williams's found motherhood to be a trying experience that often tested her patience.

The Cirrus tool worked well in my assessments of her consumer habits because the tool represents words in various sizes (the larger the font size being most important) to see which ones appear more often than others. The terms allowed me to see the frequency of a term used within the letters, such as domesticity, home, and housekeeping. The Streamgraph shows the frequency of selected terms within the letters. This tool makes each word appear as a different color in the graph and the terms overlap with each other, to show how they relate to one another. The Mandala tool looks at terms within the letters and connects them like a magnet to dates inside the circle and allows me to see when she wrote about various aspects of life. The Terms tool looks at an individual term in a group of letters. I liked this tool the most, despite not being able to output more terms because the tool ties together the other ones used. The Context tool

takes a term within a selection of letters and shows the first five to six terms leading up to the term, and five to six words after the term. From here we can look specifically at how and what Williams wrote about, using specific terms in a variety of contexts. Using the context tool helped to reinforce Williams's views on slavery and the change over time.

Originally, I wanted to create a timeline that focused on national events that occur during Williams letter-writing periods using Timeglider. However, I thought it would be better to focus on her life because she moves around quite a bit both for travel and for permanent residence throughout her life. Timeglider is a free tool that creates panning interactive timelines. I also created a family tree in Google Docs, using the draw tool. I added a family tree because the Williams family is large and at times can be difficult to keep track of everyone. I selected a HTML5 and CSS template for the website at this time. After spending time changing the formatting of the website I added each page. Finally, I compiled all of my bibliographic sources into one area and added them to the website as well.

After completing this project, the benefit of this digital project lies in the interactive nature of the tools. Using these tools can shape analysis in a new way and brings value by allowing the user to analyze both the macro and the miniscule to test theories regarding historical interpretation. I feel strongly that scholarship should increase access to information and having an analytical digital history project allows this to occur. There is a large amount of disinformation on the Internet and this project allows everyone to access authentic primary sources to chart the change of a woman's life over time. I hope that this project encourages someone to use the letters (compiled in their own section) to complete their own analysis using Voyant or other digital tools.