

19TH CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN PICTOGRAPHIC PLANTATION DESK/SECRETARY circa 1870s

Overview

This magnificent piece of African-American vernacular furniture is truly an outstanding example of Southern American folk art and of superb craftsmanship. Clearly it depicts life on the plantation during slavery times in the Deep South. It is attributed to a favored slave of Mississippi's pre-Civil War Governor McWillie and his wife, Catherine, of the famous Kirkwood Plantation. This longtime family slave hand, William "Willie" Howard, was a skilled craftsman and farm laborer who remained on the plantation at Kirkwood as a freedman after The War Between the States.

The desk/secretary (c. 1870s), constructed of native yellow pine and "found" wood, is from the McWillie Kirkwood plantation in Madison County, Mississippi. Built during the Reconstruction era, it is decorated with over 50 carved and applied objects symbolic of the life and times of its maker. A number of these carvings are symmetrically arranged on the drop leaf of the desk. A more detailed description follows. See also the enclosed photographs, archival documents, and other references.

Background

The McWillie Plantation desk has retained its structural integrity and remained in Madison County for over 125 years. Although it was clearly used as a writing desk (there are a few ink stains on the inside of the drop leaf), it has obviously been well taken care of. It is in its original state and in excellent condition. It seems to have served as both a practical piece of furniture and a decorative work of art through the years. It appears to be a retrospective piece commemorating life on Gov. McWillie's Kirkwood Plantation before, during, and after the Civil War. It is also a stunning visual catalog of articles which were part of the daily lives of plantation slaves.

Governor William McWillie

William McWillie (1795-1869), attorney, banker, and state legislator, left Camden, South Carolina, in 1845 and moved to Mississippi to live the life of a planter. Accompanied by his wife, Catherine Anderson McWillie, and a number of slave hands, he acquired numerous acres of land and built a plantation with an elaborate mansion in the northeast corner of Madison County. He called his home "Kirkwood," a name that stands for "church in the woods," and, in fact, soon after the mansion was completed he built a church where his family and many of his slaves as well worshipped and received consolation and baptism.

McWillie served as Governor of Mississippi from 1857-1859 and was known for exercising his power to pardon slaves, often to the outrage of his fellow statesmen, and

for occasionally providing labor for the freedmen at his plantation. The McWillies had a reputation for their humane treatment and protection of their slaves. A man of vision and leadership, Gov. McWillie retired from public life at age 65 but remained active in his support of the Confederacy. He died at Kirkwood on March 3, 1869.

Kirkwood Plantation

Kirkwood, one of the great antebellum plantations of Mississippi, was located just a few miles off the Natchez Trace, the famed pioneer road that ran from Nashville to Natchez. The community of Kirkwood was surrounded by thousands of acres of pine and boasted four mansions, a church and rectory, rows of slave quarters, and the usual shops that supplied the everyday needs on big plantations—carpentry and blacksmith's shops, a shoemaker's shop, a carriage house, a wash house, a smoke house, an ice house, weaving and sewing houses, a winery, and more. Gov. McWillie's mansion, the "Big House," was a social center where many famous politicians gathered. Among the more prominent guests were U. S. Senator Toombs from Georgia and president of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis, a friend of the McWillies who visited on several occasions. All the meals served at Kirkwood consisted of food that was grown on the plantation, "nothing purchased but the spices and peppers." The wine, too, came from McWillie's own vineyard. After-meal smoking pipes were often passed around, filled with the plantation's homegrown tobacco.

The settlement of Kirkwood, surrounded by acres of native pine trees, comprised less than a dozen families who were (with one or two exceptions) connected by marriage if not actually blood-kin. The four mansions that graced the community were particularly beautiful, with plantations consisting of thousands of acres extending four or five miles beyond them. The McWillie mansion was especially outstanding with its great towering pillars and deep verandas. The plantation's overseers dwelt in comfortable cottages, and there were generally two rows of cabins that faced each other on both sides of the long road that ran through the village. The slaves who lived here called it "being on the street."

The Kirkwood settlement was several miles from the nearest store and twenty-six miles from the courthouse in Canton. The people of Kirkwood formed a tight, affectionate community. They were famous for their love of entertainment, and people came from all around to share in their watermelon cuttings, dances, swimming parties, fox hunts, tournaments, church gatherings, suppers, and guild meetings. Today, the Kirkwood Plantation property is owned by a lumber company and is surrounded by a wilderness of pine trees and oaks. Only a magnolia tree and a cemetery mark the site where Gov. McWillie's mansion once stood.

Catherine Anderson McWillie

After Governor McWillie's death in March 1869, his wife, Catherine Anderson McWillie, managed the plantation. It is documented in a letter written to her son James on October 25th, 1869, that McWillie's widow wanted her well-loved former slave "Willie"

Howard "to make a comfortable home for his family and clear and cultivate his land that I gave him...I hope Willie may conclude to live ever here and give his precious wife and children as well as his beloved self a chance for a long and useful life." At this point life was just beginning for William Howard. Mississippi Archive census records show that this first-generation African-born slave, now a freedman and 65 years of age, continued dwelling on the Kirkwood property with his wife Sally (listed as age 60 and a housekeeper) and a boy, Henry (listed as age 16 and a farm laborer). The census record indicates that their household was located just six plots away from Catherine and the McWillie mansion. In her letter, Catherine states: "I have employed some of my old negroes to secure them at one dollar a hand to be put into their pockets for the getting. I shall give to each place a grant of land for a church and a school house and to every hand that will build his own house the nails required and the hauling of his logs. Our contract seems to be a bait after the enormous crop of the year. Our negroes have made more than any I can hear of." Under Catherine McWillie's benevolent supervision, and with the carpentry skills and other abilities of the many freed slaves who chose to remain on the plantation, the Kirkwood community held together even after Gov. McWillie's death. The descendants of some of these slaves are still numerous in the northern portion of Madison County, Mississippi. Catherine McWillie died on January 8, 1873.

The McWillie Plantation Desk (c. 1870s)

It appears that Catherine McWillie's favorite slave, William "Willie" Howard, created his wonderful African-American iconographic masterpiece as a retrospective of his life as a slave on the Kirkwood Plantation. It is obvious that this work grew out of an older, wiser mind that had lived through and experienced plantation life in its entirety. Meticulously decorated from top to bottom with beautiful symbolic carvings evocative of the era, it stands tall and proud like a monument, a tribute to slave life in the Deep South. There is a language spoken through this magnificent piece that only a soul who has actually lived this kind of life could express. And, while this American vernacular artifact depicts simple everyday concerns, its ingenious creator clearly had amazing aesthetic judgment.

This rare and exotic piece of primitive African-American sculpture is a great example of Southern decorative art.

Brief description of the Mississippi plantation desk/secretary

The piece is in overall excellent condition (with normal wear) and is in its original state.

Its rich chocolate-colored stain has mellowed with age into a lovely patina.

Built by a slave at Gov. McWillie's Kirkwood plantation in Madison County, Mississippi, it is attributed to William "Willie" Howard, a freedman who continued to reside on the property after the Civil War and during Reconstruction.



Photo of drawing or painting of Kirkwood Plantation
Mississippi Department of Archives and History