



**Figure 0.1.** A groundskeeper standing in front of Sweet Briar House (the former plantation mansion). A promotional postcard for the college, circa 1906. Sweet Briar College Library Archives.



## Preface

The first time I saw this hand-colored photograph, the only thing that registered was the color pink. In most photographs, Sweet Briar House, referred to as the Administration Building on the card, is yellow. The image is undated but was likely a promotional postcard from 1906, the year Sweet Briar College opened to educate “white women.” I wondered whether the house had indeed been painted pink to honor the school colors (pink and green) or whether the artist was taking liberties.

It was only when I looked more closely that I noticed a person looking out from behind one of the boxwood hedges: a black man, wearing red pants and a bright yellow top. In front of a nearby hedge is a wheelbarrow, indicating that this man may be the groundskeeper. Was he posed as part of the original image, or—given the length of time it took to set up and expose an early twentieth-century shot—did he wander into the frame without the photographer’s knowledge? Or is this image doctored by an artist who added the man and his wheelbarrow to promote a nostalgic image of an historic plantation? Although we’ll never know the answers to these questions, the postcard struck me as a potent visual metaphor for African American heritage at Sweet Briar: hidden in plain sight, and usually ignored and uncredited.

*Invisible Founders* is the record of a history unknown not only to Americans born in the North like me, but even to the Southerners on whose land it unfolded. Although the lives of the white plantation owners and college founders are recorded in minute detail, the more than one thousand African and Native Americans who have lived and worked at Sweet Briar over the past two centuries appear only as footnotes.

The book is based on my literal and metaphorical excavations at Sweet Briar College, a historic jewel nestled within three thousand acres of Virginia pastures and forests, with the plantation house and a slave cabin still standing at the center of campus. As an archaeologist, I have surveyed large swaths of the rural campus, uncovering the ruins of everyday life from past centuries and studying the artifacts recovered from on-campus excavations. As a public historian, I have endeavored to share my archival and ethnographic research with a wide

audience through online databases, social media, and public lectures. In the process, I uncovered the untold stories of one of the only institutions of higher education that grew out of an antebellum plantation.

Over the past eighteen years, I have sought to steer the college toward, and lead it through, the difficult process of confronting Sweet Briar's racist past. In collaboration with local descendants, like-minded colleagues, and cohorts of undergraduate students, I have worked to bring to light the slavery-era roots that the college attempted to suppress for a century. The slave cemetery, long used as part of a riding path, was rededicated in 2003 with an official ceremony and a community ritual led by descendants of those who rest there. We have begun to acknowledge individual African Americans who made significant contributions to the plantation and college: the invisible founders.

It is my hope that this work will draw attention not only to those who contributed in the past but also to those who continue to make the college what it is today. After researching several dozen family lineages for this book, I estimate that about 30 percent of nonwhite hourly wage earners at Sweet Briar are descended from the local antebellum slave community. Most can trace generations of family members who have worked at Sweet Briar, either as employees or as slaves. The idyllic campus of today was built by the labor of their ancestors, and their stories follow the arc of American history. Drawing from census records, wills, photographs, archaeological evidence, oral interviews with descendants, and other documents, *Invisible Founders* collects, for the first time, the stories of these hitherto overlooked slaves, servants, and college employees. I begin each chapter with an example of an obituary, letter, or legal document—one of the countless examples I reviewed while writing this book—and proceed to contextualize each document, since no single source can tell a complete story. The narrative arc of the book follows the same process of reviewing multiple lines of evidence to tell the rest of the story.

This book illuminates the contributions of African Americans to the success of a thriving plantation while highlighting the everyday struggles of black Americans during slavery and the Jim Crow era. It reveals how African American labor enabled the plantation's transformation into a private women's college and tells the story of how a college founded by and for white women did not integrate its student body until more than a decade after *Brown v. Board of Education*. In the process, *Invisible Founders* challenges our ideas of what a college "founder" is, restoring African American narratives to their deserved and central place in the story of a single institution—one that serves as a microcosm of the American South.