I. Two Weddings

This is a tale of North Carolina before the Civil War, a story of plantation life and the families that shaped two of North Carolina's most important agricultural counties: Hertford and Bertie. This is also the tale of a slave who came into the orbit of these communities and who recorded her experiences in a novel now considered to be the first novel by an African American woman and an escaped slave. Finally, this is a story about the first African American novel written by a woman, based not primarily on the abolition literature of the 1850s or other slave narratives, but rather on the literary traditions of the Gothic and Sentimental novels, especially as these traditions are blended in the novel of social protest. Most surprisingly, the literary work that influences the author most is Charles Dickens's best-selling novel *Bleak House* (1852-53).

Let me begin by describing two weddings. The first wedding is recorded by John Wheeler Moore, the celebrated nineteenth-century historian and famous descendant of the Wheelers of Hertford County and of the Moores of Bertie County. In his influential *History of North Carolina* (1880), to illustrate the manners of antebellum North Carolina, Moore writes of the wedding of his uncle, Isaac Moore to his aunt, Mary "Polly" Jones in 1803:

Isaac Moore of St. Johns, the son of James Moore, and grandson of Captain Arthur Cotten, was to wed Miss Polly Jones, the oldest child of James Jones, magnate of the Pitch Landing neighborhood. It was a grand affair in the estimation of the participants. Edenton and Norfolk assisted Murfreesboro in furnishing the viands and finery seen on the occasion. At nightfall of a beautiful October day, cavalcades of visiting friends poured in from every side. Most of the company came in their double gigs; General Wynns with his coach and four. The house swarmed with visitors from Hertford and Bertie. The negroes from Mr. Jones' different farms were well-nigh all on hand, showing the utmost alacrity in disposing of vehicles and horses. The great fire-places in the house blazed with warmth and welcome to the incoming guests. The gracious mistress of the mansion took charge of the ladies in one wing of the building, while her courtly husband presided in another. Huge tubs of apple toddy were there, and so enticing was the beverage, that even Parson Wright did not disdain to test its qualities.

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