The two women highlighted in Colonial Virginia’s Cooking Dynasty are examples of how, over 125 years of Virginia history, manuscript recipe books were passed down, added to, and revised from generation to generation. Katharine Harbury argues persuasively that two manuscript cookery books, Unidentified cookbook, c. 1700—Anonymous and Jane Randolph her Cookery Book, 1743, show the connections elite colonial women had with their European roots and with other printed cookery sources they owned or read. They also reveal the evolution of cooking styles in colonial America as new foods were introduced to the diets of the wealthy. Harbury demonstrates the family ties between these two authors and Mary Randolph, a descendant of both women, known for setting an elegant table. In 1826 Mary Randolph’s cookbook, The Virginia House-Wife, was published; culinary historian Karen Hess has called it the most influential American cookbook of the nineteenth century.

Colonial Virginia’s Cooking Dynasty is divided into three parts. Part one describes the social milieu in which elite white women lived, emphasizing the relationships with their husbands and the roles Virginia society expected them to play as wives, housekeepers, and mothers. Tidewater society, men’s public spheres, and women’s private spheres are discussed alongside chapters on the domestic architecture of the period, kitchens as women’s sphere, dining rooms as stage, and manners at the dinner table.

Part two uses various foods as the chapter headings to examine ingredients in the recipes, changes over time in available ingredients, and evolving styles of presentation. Overall, the layout of the information is clear, and the index and footnotes are helpful. Part three consists of Harbury’s transcriptions of the original manuscripts by Anonymous (1700) and Jane (Bolling) Randolph. The transcribed material is well annotated, making this a volume of interest to those who collect historical cookbooks.

But the question remains, “Do we need another well-transcribed eighteenth-century cookbook?” The answer is no, especially if the author has not been willing to delve deeply into one of the most important parts of the story of the people involved: slavery. Once my initial interest in the transcriptions faded, I found myself disappointed that Harbury failed to include a chapter on slavery, enslaved cooks, and the role of the slave mistress in the lives of her human chattel. There are only brief hints implying the complex work lives of blacks in the kitchens and dining rooms, the sculleries, the gardens, and the farmyards—the very people and places that provided the labor and many of the expected outcome of enslaved cooks’ labors and also were able to instruct her daughters in the culinary arts. (p.42)

How dismaying that a paragraph that begins with black cooks ends with the mistresses’ skill sets. Jane Randolph owned at least thirty-one slaves when she died in 1766. Fifteen of the people she generously bequeathed to members of her family were women or girls. Surely several of
these individuals worked in Jane’s kitchen over the years. Harbury makes no attempt to explain how white women could justify passing on these recipes as their own to their daughters and heirs with so little regard for the skill and contribution of the black women each of them supervised and ruled with total authority.

For in their position as mistress, white women did have total authority. Two quotes from the diaries of William Byrd mention his having punished one of his slave women with “stripes” for having badly cooked the bacon, but these glimpses of casual brutality are offered by Harbury almost as asides rather than being evidence from which to examine possible rewards and inevitable punishment between elite women and their servants (pp. 21, 41). In 1826 the North Carolina supreme court ruled that “the power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect.” This was no abstract theory but the living reality for the enslaved; it had already been the reality for well over one hundred years. What remains unstated in Harbury’s interpretation is that mistresses were as capable of beating their servant women as William Byrd and were equally sanctioned by law.

Harbury also missed two excellent opportunities to include black cooks, dining room servants, and kitchen staff when she failed to read between the lines of her own epigrams: “We were about a hundred in company…After dinner we danced…till ten o’clock….After supper, which was as elegant as the dinner—it’s vain to attempt describing it—we continued dancing until twelve” (p.xiii). To have explored the work of the resident kitchen staff, likely augmented by additional slaves commandeered from other farm work or hired from other plantations, would have given the event more depth. Preparations for two elaborate meals in one day to be followed by a bridal breakfast the next morning must have begun many days in advance. In addition, there would have been the hours of labor involved in supplying enough stove wood, water, chamber pots, beds, and linens for so many houseguests.

Another of Harbury’s epigrams details the successes of one particular plantation owner in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1648 Captain Matthews owned “forty negro servants.” The servants grew, processed, and spun hemp and flax. They wove, tanned hides, and dressed leather, and eight workers made shoes. They grew wheat and barley and butchered a “store of beeves” to be sold to passing ships. They raised “kine,” worked in the dairy, and tended hogs and poultry. One of the Captain’s contemporaries particularly noted that Matthews “keeps a good house” (p.7). This list of complex skills, examined closely, would provide insight into the ways in which enslaved laborers contributed to the immediate financial success of the plantation. In addition, it was the Captain’s “servants” who kept his house, helping thereby to bolster their master’s name in the esteem of his
peers. Unfortunately, in Colonial Virginia’s Cooking Dynasty, slave laborers and the work they did are all but invisible.

Skilled slave cooks owned by wealthy colonial families were experienced at their work, which consisted of directing many helpers on a daily basis and consulting with mistresses over the availability of ingredients, menu variations, and the needs of sick or infirm family members. The Randolph women appear to have been exceptionally competent housekeepers, but many a mistress incapacitated by childbirth, illness, or outside family obligations, or who were new young brides, would necessarily have had to rely on their enslaved cooks for the daily routine of running the kitchen and the timely presentation of meals. Harbury gives no hint of these intricate managerial interactions. Any reader seeking details of plantation management and the work lives of enslaved women cannot but be critical of the omission. It is my understanding that this book began as a master’s thesis; Harbury’s thesis advisor and her current editor surely failed her in not insisting on the addition of a lengthy and specifically dedicated chapter on slavery.

As written, Colonial Virginia’s Cooking Dynasty perpetuates the publication of cookbook transcriptions in which the gentility and housekeeping skills of the elite mistress far outweigh—indeed eclipse—her role as a slave owner. Instead, the women become “founding mothers” in the sense that they are above critical assessment—and in any case, since they had no legal or political rights, they couldn’t affect social policy. Thus they were in no way responsible for the world in which they lived. Historic house museum gift shop cookbooks tend to ignore the ugly side of colonial life—namely slavery. It is a style of historical telling that serves to confirm an unconscious urge to casually assume that the “servants” must have gotten the same feelings of accomplishment from their labors as the mistress did from hers.

It has been my experience that visitors to historic house museums often find it disturbing to think of the elite wives as active slaveholders and slave mistresses. It is as if in their minds the men were the real slaveholders but their wives were something more benign. Thus, when I, as a culinary historian and scholar of black women’s lives during slavery, insist on describing the realities of the plantation regime, I’m seen as an insistent and irritating crank, a spoiler attempting to tarnish the luster of elite white womanhood.

It is true, as Harbury says, that “Anonymous (1700), Jane (Bolling) Randolph, and Mary Randolph participated in a colonial cooking dynasty in the best Virginia tradition” (p.xviii). It was a Virginia tradition in which elite women used, created, and handed down cookery manuscripts and other housekeeping advice with the intention of schooling their daughters in the art of keeping a fine establishment. But it was equally a tradition in which those same elite women ruled over the lives, daily work, and destiny of scores of enslaved black women, men, and children. It was a tradition in which the culinary creativity of black cooks was usurped—black cooks working in plantation kitchens to create and prepare the very dishes that would come to represent fine Virginia cooking. This is the part of the story that Harbury does not tell.