

## Background Information on *Fontleroy Plantation* for International Fiber 2010

In 2003, on the internet, I connected with the Reverend Samuel Turner, Jr., of Memphis. Sam and I are great-great grandsons of Rittenhouse Nutt, he through Frances, Nutt's daughter by an unknown slave, I through Thomas, Nutt's son by his wife. (Born in 1810, Rittenhouse Nutt was named for his father's friend, the astronomer David Rittenhouse, for whom the Philadelphia square is also named.) Put a photo of Sam's grandfather William Bland, born at Fontleroy Plantation in 1867, beside a photo of my grandmother Mary Ellen Nutt Beal, born at Fontleroy in 1877, and they look like siblings.

Mary Ellen never mentioned her half-cousin William. Like many of her generation Mary Ellen was a racist. Nor did she ever mention her uncle, Rittenhouse, Jr., who used to sit down at table in the cabin of his half-sister Frances Nutt Bland and her husband Ishmael. "You take care of that girl," Rittenhouse, Jr., told the new husband of the Blands' daughter. "She's family." Sam's grandmother remembered that Rittenhouse, Jr., who kept a country store, used to give free candy to the black kids. None to the white kids.

I learned this oral history from Sam and his siblings and cousins. In 1986, when he was a practicing attorney, Sam discovered the inventory of Rittenhouse Nutt's possessions in the Hinds County, Mississippi, courthouse. (Fontleroy Plantation was located in nearby Utica.) Sam immediately noted his great grandmother in the inventory – Frances, 18 yrs, \$600. Since African Americans were not issued birth certificates until 1870, the inventory is the only written documentation of his family's oral tradition of descent from Nutt. It's my family, too. Sam and I call each other cousins because we share a sixteenth of our blood from Nutt.

I wanted to embroider the inventory immediately Sam sent me a copy, but I was put off by the monochromatic scheme. I considered several options for color, none satisfactory, and did some other canvases until Obama's election galvanized me. My second day of stitching on the inventory, the prayer flags came to mind. They would, I felt, bestow dignity and self-respect to Nutt's 66 slaves, frozen as they are in the inventory by social stricture and legal stipulation – the fabric of life in the South of the time. The flags' red/white/blue/gold border acknowledges the slaves' enduring contribution to the development and well-being of our country.