In December 2017, the Savannah River Archaeological Research Program (SRARP) completed its third in-house documentary production entitled Mart to Art: A Repurposed Life. This 26-minute film introduces the audience to the community of Leigh, South Carolina. Leigh was a small rural town developed in 1925 to support the Leigh Banana Case Company (LBCC) and displaced in 1950 by the Atomic Energy Company (AEC) for the construction of the Savannah River Project (SRP).

The LBCC was the brainchild of Charles Leigh who, in 1905, patented a basket to aid in shipping fruits and vegetables more securely. Mr. Leigh built several of his factories around the country in established areas, but it wasn’t until he focused on Barnwell County, South Carolina where he would also develop a community to support his largest endeavor. Along with his saw mill, he also built a railroad system to haul the lumber out of the swamps of the Savannah River, cottages for his workers, a church, and a commissary. His commissary, better known as the “company store” is the real focus of the film that also discusses the building’s amazing journey.

With the announcement by the AEC that portions of Aiken, Barnwell, and Allendale counties would be acquired by the federal government for the building of the SRP, over 6,000 inhabitants of the area would be displaced. In the 300-square mile area, there also stood nearly 15,000 structures—houses, stores, schools, churches, chicken coops, privies—all of which had to be razed or relocated for the construction of the massive facility. The Leigh Commissary was fortunately moved nearly 20 miles to its present day location where it has had a long and eventful life.

After its relocation, the little building quickly found a new life—one of many. Early on it was an antique store, followed by a furniture re-finishing business. Next it was a feed and grain store and was then known as a “party barn” by the locals. For much of the 1980s and 1990s, it was a dance studio and baton twirling academy, and finally, today it is known as the Little Red Barn Pottery and Art Gallery and is owned by Paul and Elizabeth Ringus (Figure 1).

The Ringus Family graciously opened the business’s doors to myself, SRARP Program Coordinator and the film’s director, for much of the filming. During the course of shooting, several former Leigh residents, now in their 80s, were interviewed inside the building, which brought back many childhood memories (Figure 2). The film also discusses the Cold War factors leading to the building of the SRP, historic preservation, and the theme of adaptive re-use pertaining to the building’s longevity.

Myself and USC Broadcast Journalism student Sabrina Shutters, the film’s editor, premiered the film at the Barnwell County Library in March 2018 for many of the film’s informants and the community. The film has also screened at the Ogeechee International History Film Festival held in Statesboro, Georgia. Finally, the film has also been accepted by South Carolina Educational Television and will air on Thursday, September 6, 2018 at 8 PM. For more information on the film, visit Facebook at Mart to Art: A Repurposed Life.

The SRARP’s previous films—Discovering Dave: Spirit Captured in Clay and Reconstructing Hawthorne—have found success at many film festivals around the country and were written about in previous editions of Legacy.