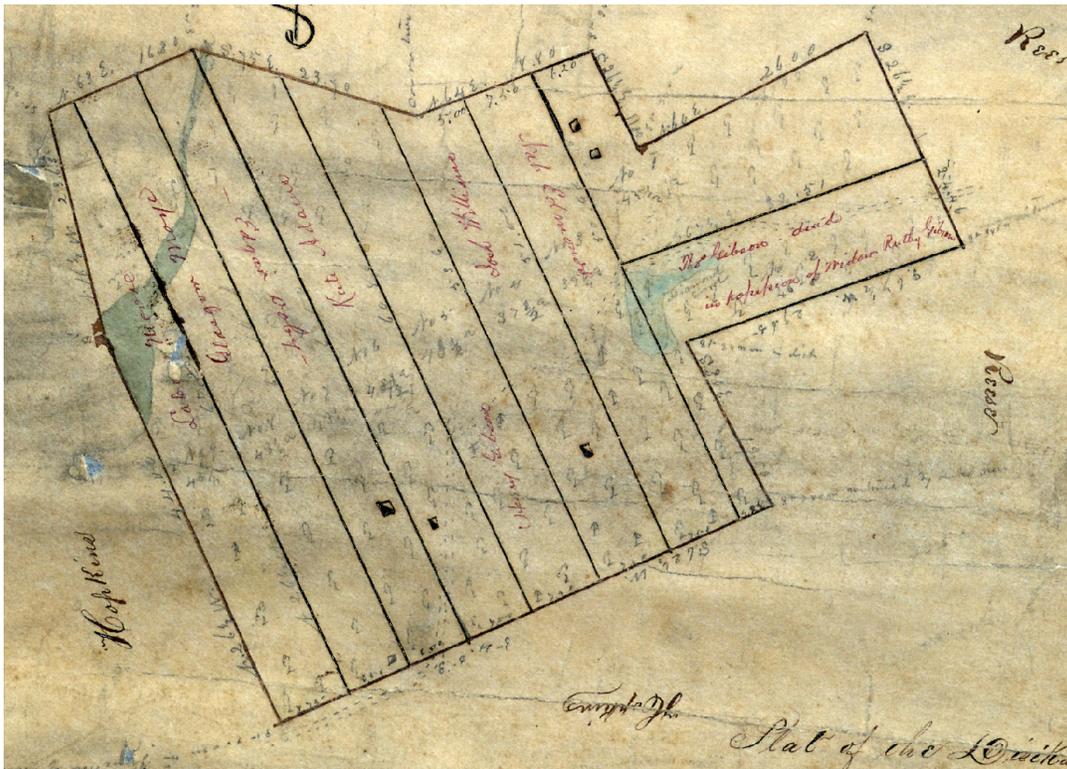


# Prized Pieces of Land:

## The Impact of Reconstruction on African-American Land Ownership in Lower Richland County, South Carolina



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September 2009

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	1
Executive Summary	3
Origins of the Project and Methodology	4
I. The Promise of Reconstruction	8
A. Overview of Reconstruction in South Carolina	9
B. Overview of the South Carolina Land Commission	16
C. The South Carolina Land Commission in Lower Richland County: The Case Study	20
1. Planter Sales: Origins of Land Commission Lands in Lower Richland County	20
2. African-American Purchases: Overview of Land Sales in Lower Richland County	24
D. A Snapshot of Lower Richland County, 1865-1890	27
II. The Seven Land Commission Tracts in Lower Richland County	30
A. The Adams Tract	31
B. The Back Swamp Tract	35
C. The Diseker Tract	38
D. The Hickory Hill Tract	41
1. Overview of the Hickory Hill Tract	43
2. The Renty Drayton Family Parcel	44
3. The Isaiah Fay Family Parcels	46
4. The William H. Hodge Family Parcel	49
5. The Hercules Smith Family Parcel	51

E. The Hopkins Tract	58
1. Overview of the Hopkins Tract	60
2. The Hagar Alston Family Parcel	61
3. The Harriet Barber Family Parcel	64
4. The Amanda Goodwin Edmonds Family Parcel	68
5. The Noah Garrick Family Parcel	71
6. The William Harris Family Parcel	75
7. The Ephraim Neal Family Parcel	76
F. The Hunt Tract	80
G. The O’Hanlon Tract	83
III. Assessing the Past and Moving Forward	86
A. Conclusions: The Impact of the South Carolina Land Commission in Lower Richland County	87
B. Preserving the Legacy: Historic Preservation Recommendations	89
C. Interpreting the Legacy: Museum and Education Recommendations	94
IV. For Further Reading	97
V. Appendices	102
A. The Mapping Methodology	103
B. Spreadsheet of Original Purchasers in Lower Richland County	104
C. Spreadsheet of African-American Deed Recipients	113
D. Tax Map Numbers of Parcels with Unbroken Provenance Currently Owned by African Americans	116
E. Compact Disc with Georectified Maps	118

## Acknowledgments

A successful community-based public history project necessarily draws upon the support of many people. This report has benefitted from the help of a number of individuals and organizations in both Lower Richland County and Columbia.

First and foremost, we thank our community partners. The three Barber sisters – Marie Adams, Mary Kirkland, and Carrie White – and their cousin Deborah Scott Brooks are a force of nature. Their enthusiasm for the project at its inception and their energetic and unflagging support throughout gave us unstoppable momentum. They cheerfully and helpfully guided us in our research, set up site visits, answered innumerable e-mails and phone calls, provided images, and generally welcomed us to Lower Richland County. John B. Barber, Jr. of Detroit, Michigan has shared the recollections of his seemingly photographic memory with us. For directing us to numerous promising research sources and generously sharing the information in his astounding genealogical database that is the basis of his many publications on Lower Richland County history, we are indebted to Reverend John Allen Middleton. We thank Marie Adams and South East Rural Community Outreach (SERCO), as well as Rickie Good and the Scarborough-Hamer Foundation, for their financial underwriting of project expenses. Reverend Sammy L. Wade kindly organized transportation in his church van on our several expeditions throughout the countryside. Billie Viola Woodard, La’Nona Garrick Rivera, Alma Garrick Macer, Carol "Carleen" Goodson-Eaddy, Susie Drayton Cureton, Ernestine Alston, and Marie Adams were kind enough to speak with us at length about family histories. Several people with deep and long-standing knowledge of Lower Richland County history read a draft version of this report: Marie Adams, Deborah Scott Brooks, Mary Kirkland, and Reverend John Middleton.

The records housed at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History were essential to telling this story of African-American heritage, and we are especially grateful to Steven Tuttle and Dr. Charles Lesser. Together they identified several collections and record groups at an early stage of the project that suggested that our research agenda would in fact be viable. Both have been keenly supportive as we have subsequently spent hours in the research room. Brian Collars of the state archives staff devoted enormous time to scanning historic maps and plats that enabled us to undertake the georectification phase of the project. We are very appreciative for the assistance we received at several libraries at the University of South Carolina. We thank Dr. Allen Stokes, Robin Copp, Brian Cuthrell, and Henry Fulmer at the South Caroliniana Library for leading the way for us through its rich collections on South Carolina history. At Thomas Cooper Library, Ross Taylor in the Map Library was invaluable in helping us identify and use relevant maps and aerial photographs. Debbie Bloom of the Walker Local History Room at the Richland County Public Library has been enormously helpful with finding historic images. We thank the staffs at the Richland County Judicial Center Register of Deeds office and the Probate Court for all of their assistance. For permission to use images in their possession, we acknowledge Billie Woodard, Alma Garrick Macer, Deborah Scott Brooks, John B. Barber, Jr., and Marie Adams, as well as the Charleston Museum, the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Richland County, the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, the South Caroliniana Library, and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Carrie Giauque of the Public History Program at the University of South Carolina served as our Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Education Consultant. When the spring semester began in January 2009, she alone among the seminar members (including the instructor) had the technical knowledge to implement the crucial georectification process. She gave a presentation on GIS and georectification to orient the whole class to the concept and then worked closely with the two-person “map team” to generate these indispensable visual databases. In addition, she prepared the corrected and revised September 2009 digital version of this report.

To assist future researchers we have deposited copies of this final report at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina, the Richland County Public Library (both the Main Library in Columbia and the Eastover Branch), Congaree National Park, Lower Richland High School, Hopkins Middle School, Kensington Mansion, Historic Columbia Foundation, and South East Rural Community Outreach.

We thank all who assisted us in this project but note that none of these individuals or organizations is responsible for the conclusions and historical interpretations in this report.

## Executive Summary

Reconstruction was a period of particular promise and influence for black South Carolinians. They held high political office, initiated sweeping reforms aimed at racial equality, and inaugurated a statewide public school system, among other achievements. Less familiar is the story told in this report of an innovative program unique to South Carolina intended to make land acquisition possible for newly freed men and women. Even though few buildings and structures survive from these early Land Commission parcels, a good portion of the African-American property ownership in Lower Richland County today can be traced to this Reconstruction-era state program.

This report is divided into five sections. The first section assesses the promise of Reconstruction for black South Carolinians in the years after the Civil War, and it situates this case study of the South Carolina Land Commission within that historical context. The second section examines in turn the seven tracts of land sold by the Land Commission in Lower Richland County. The research indicates that in two of the tracts, Hickory Hill and Hopkins, African-American families were able to purchase and retain significant acreage for well over a century. Section three offers some concluding observations, as it presents a set of recommendations for preserving the extant properties of Lower Richland County associated with the Land Commission sales and for interpreting this history to public audiences through museum exhibits and educational programming. The primary and secondary sources consulted in this study are listed in section four as a guide to further reading.

The appendices in section five contain a description of the mapping methodology of the project, a spreadsheet database listing the original purchasers of Land Commission parcels in Lower Richland County, a spreadsheet database of African Americans who were able to complete their purchases and receive title to the land, and a list of the current tax map numbers of Land Commission parcels that have remained in the same African-American families. Finally, in reference copies of this report is a compact disc with the georectified maps that provided the basis of the research.

## Origins of the Project and Methodology

The origins of this project can be traced to a hot July afternoon in 2007 when a delegation of twenty-one university and college teachers from all over the United States stepped out of the air-conditioned comfort of their chartered bus onto the grounds of the Harriet Barber House near the small town of Hopkins in rural Lower Richland County, South Carolina. They were greeted by a large painted sign that informed them:

The Harriet Barber House, the home of Reverend Samuel Barber and his wife Harriet McPherson Barber, is significant for its association with the South Carolina Land Commission during the late nineteenth century. Samuel Barber purchased a 42.5 acre parcel of land in Richland County, part of the tract known as the Hopkins Turn Out Tract, at \$5.00 per acre. The land on which the house is located has remained in the same family since May 24, 1872. It appears that it is the only existing house in Lower Richland County built on land that was purchased by former slaves who took advantage of this program. The property was officially entered in the National Register of Historic Places in April of 1986. The Harriet Barber House Restoration Project received the first \$25,000 grant from the Richland County Conservation Commission in 2006.

The stop at the Harriet Barber House was part of a one-day excursion to Lower Richland County and one of a number of similar site visits over a four-week-long summer institute funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and organized by the co-directors of the University of South Carolina's Public History Program, Constance Schulz and Robert Weyeneth. Professors Weyeneth and Schulz had designed the institute – entitled “African-American History as Public History: South Carolina as a Case Study” – as a way to promote greater racial and ethnic diversity within the public history profession. The idea was to use African-American historical resources in South Carolina, from museums and historic sites to archival repositories, to illustrate how university faculty could teach public history to their undergraduates. The hope was that a focus on African-American history would be especially appealing to African-American faculty, who would be recruited to the institute (and to the gospel of public history) in significant numbers. This indeed proved to be the case, and this delegation of college faculty is now in a position to help their undergraduate students understand what public history is, to inspire them to see public history as a potential career path, and to ask them to consider the value of graduate training in public history.

The University of South Carolina summer institute sowed some seeds of diversity within the profession – which will take time to grow – but this educational experiment had one immediate and unexpected consequence: it encouraged the university's Public History Program to contemplate future collaborations in Lower Richland County. Robert Weyeneth had long made African-American heritage preservation an emphasis of his research and teaching, and the program had a lengthy track record of undertaking community-based public history projects, both close by in Columbia's historic neighborhoods and further afield in Aiken, Chester, Florence, and Kershaw counties. Conveniently, the Harriet Barber House was only a dozen miles from the university's campus in Columbia and, intriguingly, was located in a rural area historically linked with African-American life and culture that was increasingly threatened by development pressures. The possibilities for “nearby history” projects seemed endless.

In May 2008 a group of seven potential community partners, heritage professionals, and

university faculty spent a day together brainstorming about how undergraduate and graduate history courses at the University of South Carolina could help support local historic preservation and environmental initiatives. The group included Mary Sherrer, director of the Scarborough-Hamer Foundation at Kensington Mansion in Eastover; Tracy Swartout, superintendent of Congaree National Park; Marie Adams and Mary Kirkland of the Harriet Barber House Restoration Project and South East Rural Community Outreach (SERCO); Betsy Newman of South Carolina Educational Television; and Professors Thomas Lekan and Robert Weyeneth of the USC history department. The result of this planning meeting was three senior seminars and one graduate seminar offered in the Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 semesters. In the undergraduate seminars almost fifty history majors completed senior theses in classes on “Nearby History,” “Exploring Local Public History,” and “Exploring Local Environmental History.” All the topics were focused in some way on the history of Lower Richland County specifically or the Midlands of South Carolina generally. The graduate seminar was an historic preservation practicum entitled “The Lower Richland County African-American Heritage Project.” This report is the culmination of the research in that graduate seminar.

The visit to the Harriet Barber House in July 2007 again proved an important catalyst. The sign that had greeted the visiting college faculty inspired many questions that invited further historical research. What was this little-known South Carolina Land Commission? By contrast, it is well known that the federal government had failed to follow through on promises of “forty acres and a mule” to newly freed slaves after the Civil War, but had South Carolina (ardent defender of slavery during the sectional crisis and the first state to secede after Lincoln’s election) actually attempted to provide land and thereby a means of economic livelihood for freed men and women? Could Lower Richland County be a case study of the impact of the South Carolina Land Commission? If so, how many African-American families in Lower Richland County were able to purchase land under this program? Are any of these family parcels still intact? Has any other building, besides the Harriet Barber House, survived to the present? What could Lower Richland County and the South Carolina Land Commission tell us about the largely misunderstood story of Reconstruction in the United States?

Answering these questions was the task posed to twelve graduate students in the USC Department of History who participated in the course in the Spring 2009 semester: Elizabeth Almlie, Angi Bedell, Ashley Bouknight, Amanda Bowman, Lee Durbetaki, Keri Fay, Haley Grant, Benjamin Greene, Nathan Johnson, Amanda Roddy, Sarah Scripps, and Morgen Young. The class began with some intensive library and archival research to identify relevant primary and secondary sources at local repositories. In fairly short order, specialized teams emerged to target specific research resources and push the general project forward. Plats of land purchases were located at the state archives in the records of the South Carolina Land Commission. With the guidance of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Education Consultant Carrie Giauque, the “map team” of Ben Greene and Amanda Bowman took responsibility for scanning the historical maps and then digitally matching them to their modern equivalents to create “georectified” versions with multiple layers of historical data. As important as anything, the map team was able to identify a significant number of original Land Commission purchases where the historic property lines seemed to correspond with modern tax map parcels. The next step was to establish whether the parcel, or a portion of the parcel, had continued in ownership by the same

family – and whether that family was African-American. (The Land Commission had sold real estate to both blacks and whites, but the seminar was interested in the impact of this Reconstruction agency on the freed men and women of Lower Richland County.) Lee Durbetaki coined the phrase “unbroken provenance” for the continuity we hoped to find in the lineage of African-American purchases, and the term stuck. A “chain-of-title team” consisting of Lee Durbetaki, Amanda Roddy, and Sarah Scripps, assisted at times by Liz Almlie, Angi Bedell, Keri Fay, Nate Johnson, and Morgen Young, mastered the arcane and frustrating research challenges of the Richland County Register of Deeds to discover multiple dead ends but also to unearth several nuggets of great value. Liz Almlie, Angi Bedell, Haley Grant, and Morgen Young became the “census team” that delved deeply into the family relationships of people who were strangers to them, looking for the elusive connections that we sought between the land and subsequent generations. Ashley Bouknight, Angi Bedell, and Nate Johnson established themselves as the “newspaper team,” assisted by Haley Grant, Amanda Roddy, and Morgen Young. Together they exhausted the available issues on several online databases for *The State* from 1891 to 1922 and December 1987 to the present, as well as for the *Columbia Star* from October 2004 to the present. In addition, they looked at scattered issues from thirteen different newspapers that covered African-American news in Lower Richland County from 1865 to 1965. Especially useful were *The Light* (1916-1928), *The Southern Indicator* (1903-1925), and *The Standard* (1919-1927). Haley Grant shouldered the responsibility of serving as the contact for directing specific research questions to our community partners.

Nate Johnson, Keri Fay, Morgen Young, Lee Durbetaki, and Liz Almlie wrote important analytical sections in the overview presented in the first section of this report. Amanda Bowman and Ben Greene composed the overviews for each of the seven tracts. Liz Almlie, Angi Bedell, Ashley Bouknight, Keri Fay, Haley Grant, Nate Johnson, Sarah Scripps, and Morgen Young wrote the narratives for the families that are highlighted in the Hickory Hill and Hopkins tracts. Haley Grant, Nate Johnson, and Amanda Roddy brought the story to a conclusion with the summary observations in section three. Liz Almlie and Amanda Bowman seek to carry the story into the future with their list of historic preservation recommendations, and Ashley Bouknight, Amanda Roddy, and Sarah Scripps devised a compelling set of recommendations for interpreting this history through educational programs and exhibits. Morgen Young compiled the useful bibliography and guide to further reading. In the appendix in section five, the mapping methodology is clarified by Amanda Bowman. Lee Durbetaki regularized and made sense out of the two spreadsheets in the appendix. The map team of Ben Greene and Amanda Bowman present their georectified maps on the attached compact disk, along with the current tax map numbers of family members with unbroken provenance. Morgen Young took the initiative to locate and caption the images incorporated into the report. Angi Bedell oversaw final production as our general editor. The entire class read and commented on all sections of the report. It has been a team project in the best sense.

The methodology that the class developed for identifying family parcels with unbroken provenance might be briefly summarized by way of conclusion. The records of the South Carolina Land Commission located at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History provided a manuscript list of individuals who purchased a plot of land from the commission, as well as the location of each plot in Lower Richland County. Plots that seemed to warrant further

investigation were identified by comparing the original Land Commission survey plats at the state archives with modern-day property divisions available online through the Richland County Tax Assessors office. The class discovered that the vast majority of the original Land Commission parcels had been subdivided and had little or no relation to the original parcels. However, some Land Commission parcels were wholly intact in Lower Richland County today. In addition, some parcels were identified that preserved the external boundaries of the original Land Commission purchases even though they had been internally subdivided. Finally, the class researched the history of ownership of all parcels of interest, looking to establish that they are owned today by familial descendants of original purchasers.

In summary, the report identifies the stories of ten African-American families whose members currently own land in Lower Richland County that can be traced to purchases originating with the South Carolina Land Commission in the 1870s. We fully expect that there may be other African-American families with this genealogy of land ownership in Lower Richland County. This report is a preliminary effort intended to acknowledge the importance of the South Carolina Land Commission in the history of Lower Richland County – and in Reconstruction South Carolina – and to invite further research on the role of other families that we were unable to discover and recognize in the short span of one semester.