

Section III.

Assessing the Past and Moving Forward

A. Conclusions: The Impact of the South Carolina Land Commission in Lower Richland County

Reconstruction was a time of rebirth and new freedoms for formerly enslaved African Americans. They were freed from bondage, granted citizenship, and given political rights. They formed strong communities, established churches, and educated themselves. Despite these successes, however, the disappointments of the era have been most often remembered. The expectation that the federal government would provide former slaves with “forty acres and a mule” went unfulfilled. Landless, most African Americans lived in poverty and had no choice but to labor under contracts with white planters. The federal government’s failure to create an effective land ownership program ranked among the most notorious failures of Reconstruction.

As this report has shown, the South Carolina Land Commission assumed the task of making land available to former slaves when the federal government proved unable or unwilling to do so. South Carolina’s attempt to make land ownership feasible for former slaves—an attempt spearheaded by black legislators—has become a forgotten aspect of Reconstruction. Though the South Carolina Land Commission did not give away “forty acres and a mule,” it succeeded in creating a program that truly benefited newly freed men and women.

Land purchases gave African Americans an opportunity to support themselves and gain an economic foothold where they had once toiled for another’s economic prosperity. In Lower Richland County, 39 African Americans received clear title to 1,399 acres of land from the South Carolina Land Commission. These individuals – women as well as men – purchased land and used it to achieve a level of economic stability. They started small farms on the land, raised families, and formed communities. As they aged and died, they passed the title to their surviving family members, who usually continued the farm. Remarkably, ten families continue to own largely intact parcels of land that date to these Land Commission sales.

African Americans who purchased land on the Hopkins or Hickory Hill tracts were most likely to hold onto their lots and pass them onto successive generations. These tracts contained the best quality soil, in contrast to tracts such as Back Swamp or O’Hanlon. The land’s suitability for farming was a major reason these families were successful.

Their success in holding onto land might also be explained by the fact that two towns—Hopkins and Eastover, respectively—were nearby. Because both towns were already established before freed men and women began purchasing land in the area, the Land Commission cannot be credited with their origins. It can be claimed, however, that the ability of individuals and families to maintain land depended on their proximity to these towns. They economically benefited from being closer to the towns, which served as their nearest point of commerce. Railroad depots in the town centers provided places to export produce from their crops.

The towns of Hopkins and Eastover grew as more freed men and women settled in the area. If African Americans lived in or near the towns, they were sure to have frequent opportunities to interact with each other and participate in social events and local politics. The multi-layered social structures of both towns certainly created a deeper sense of community, accompanied by a

commitment to heritage. This deeper sense of community may also explain why the families highlighted by this report have held onto land the longest. As the research shows, many descendants of these families emerged as community leaders, ministers, politicians, and educators. Even as they moved away to larger communities, such as Columbia, they continued to maintain their family land and remained involved in Hopkins and Eastover.

It is also important to acknowledge that many African-American families in Lower Richland County retained Land Commission parcels for as long as one hundred years. These families fell beyond the scope of this report, which has focused on unbroken provenance from Reconstruction to the present day, but their cases should not be forgotten. They offer additional evidence of families who were able to carve out viable farms and successful lives in Lower Richland County because of the Land Commission.

The Isaac Harris and Cain Green families are just two examples of families that held onto land for nearly one hundred years before selling it. Isaac Harris purchased Lots 13 and 17 from the Hopkins tract in 1872 and the lands remained in the Harris family for fifty years. A 1926 court order sold Lot 13 and divided up Lot 17. As late as 1968, Harris family members still owned part of Lots 13 and 17 before selling it outside of the family. Similarly, Cain Green purchased Lot 21 of the Hickory Hill tract in 1877. His descendants owned subdivisions of the original parcel and were able to pass the land down until the 1970s, when all subdivisions were sold outside the family.

The South Carolina Land Commission gave African Americans in Lower Richland County a means to rise up out of the bonds of landlessness. They were able to farm and build homes on their *own* land. Despite the internal problems and charges of corruption faced by the Land Commission, the experiment worked to an impressive and significant degree.

This report is the culmination of a semester of research, but the project of documenting African-American land ownership in Lower Richland County should not be considered complete. With the Civil War sesquicentennial approaching in 2011, there are multiple opportunities to preserve and present this history. The sesquicentennial will witness a resurgence of public interest not just in the Civil War but in the Reconstruction era. Various programs therefore should be made available to the public telling the history of the South Carolina Land Commission. These programs can set the commission's story within the larger context of Reconstruction, focusing on how the war brought freedom to four million slaves who otherwise would not have possessed the ability to purchase land.

B. Preserving the Legacy: Historic Preservation Recommendations

Historic Properties

- **Research, document, and evaluate historic properties.** Historic properties can include buildings, outbuildings, archeological sites, landscapes, and traditional cultural sites. On agricultural properties that are included in this report, more investigation can be done to find buildings or historic landscapes—such as fences, tree lines, and field boundaries—that date to the original South Carolina Land Commission families. If surviving sites have integrity to convey their historic character, they should be evaluated for the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register recognizes historic properties that are significant on a local, state, or national scale. Besides nominating properties to the National Register, writing a multiple property submission as a context document for properties associated with the Land Commission will be helpful for those writing nominations in the future. Even if properties are not eligible for the National Register, documenting them before they are gone is still very important. The Harriet Barber House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a good example for other sites seeking to represent the history of the area because of its restoration and interpretive work.

Archeology

- **Investigate history below the ground.** The historical record of life as a newly freed slave with the chance to own land can be further investigated through an archeological excavation of an early home site. It can reveal more about the common objects available for consumption, home-use, or farm work. Archeologists might look for remnants of house and barn foundations, fence posts, outbuildings, wells, and scattered materials left and buried. The study of this material culture can show links between families and communities, as well as how freed men and women used resources from the old plantations or from new markets in their villages and in Columbia.

Cemetery Preservation

- **Preserve existing cemeteries.** Cemeteries are valuable sources of historic information about the beliefs and values of the community. Documentation of known gravesites, existing gravestones, funerary objects and other memorials, and the landscape of the cemetery can be done through photographs, drawings, Geographic Information Systems mapping technology, and gravestone transcription. If gravestone repair is necessary, it should be done with great attention to the historic material and its compatibility with modern repairs. For more information on repairing gravestones consult a qualified archeologist or preservationist. See contacts listed below.
- **Research ruined, hidden, or grown-over cemeteries.** Non-invasive archaeology can be done to discover locations of unmarked graves and study in-depth the visible grave markings on the surface. Trained archaeologists can use remote-sensing to determine

grave locations by using technology to send sonar through the ground and then read the feedback. They also can use work done on other cemeteries to make historical comparisons about life in the cemetery's community.

South Carolina State Historical Markers Program

- **Erect official state markers.** Few existing state historical markers in Lower Richland County commemorate African-American history. Text for future markers can be submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office for editing and approval, and approved markers are included in the online database and future published guidebooks. The cost of producing and erecting the markers is, however, left to private endeavor. Here are suggestions for future markers as a starting point:
 - Harriet Barber House
 - South Carolina Land Commission
 - African-American Reconstruction legislators

Preservation Education

- **Develop, print, and make available a brochure of resources for community members on preservation.** The brochure could include a statement on the importance of historic preservation and community history and resources for future work. The brochure could include the following organizational contacts with expertise in certain areas of archaeology and preservation that can provide guidance and advice for community preservation projects.
- **Preliminary contacts:**

South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism
Al Hester, Historic Sites Coordinator
Phone: (803) 734-0154
Fax: (803) 734-1017
E-Mail: ahester@scprt.com

David Jones, Archaeologist
Phone: (803) 734-1521
Fax: (803) 734-1017
E-Mail: djones@scprt.com

South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office
Technical Architectural Assistance, Historical Markers, National Register of Historic
Places, Archeology, Outreach Programs
8301 Parklane Road
Columbia, SC 29223
Phone: (803) 896-6178
Fax: (803) 896-6167
Email: <http://shpo.sc.gov/contactus.htm>

South Carolina Institute for Anthropology and Archaeology
1321 Pendleton Street
Columbia, SC 29208
Phone: (803) 777-8170
Fax: (803) 254-1338

Palmetto Trust for Historic Preservation
8301 Parklane Road
Columbia, SC 29223
Phone: (803) 896-6234
Fax: (803) 896-6167
Website: <http://palmettotrust.org>

Congaree National Park
100 National Park Road
Hopkins, SC 29061-9118
Phone: (803)776-4396
Fax: (803) 783-4241
Website: <http://www.nps.gov/cong/index.htm>

South East Rural Community Outreach
Post Office Box 332
Hopkins, SC 29061
Email: info@serco-sc.org
Website: <http://www.serco-sc.org>

Congaree Land Trust
Post Office Box 232
Columbia, SC 29202
Phone: (803) 988-0000
Fax: (803) 988-0202
Email: info@congaelt.org

- **Encourage archival preservation of family and local histories.** There are very few archival resources available to historians about life as freed men and women in Lower Richland County. Depositing family documents and photographs in a repository such as

the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina would benefit future researchers. Some libraries and archives accept digital scans of historic documents and images which would make the information available to researchers without taking the materials from family descendants.

- **Involve the community.** Unless the nature or location of the historic property is sensitive information, involve the community in the preservation work. The value of preservation and archaeology should especially be included in work with school-age children.

Funding and Resources

- **Seek money and assistance to restore, rehabilitate, and protect historic properties.**
 - The *South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office* website has excellent information on many grant and tax incentive programs, as well as being a source of advice and technical assistance for preservation projects. See the website for more details: <http://shpo.sc.gov/grants/>.
 - The *National Trust for Historic Preservation* has a website to help people involved with preservation projects. They break down their suggestions into the categories of: For Commercial Buildings, For Historic Homes, and For Non-Profits and Public Agencies. Most of these programs have eligibility requirements for determining “historic” buildings. See their website for more information: <http://www.preservationnation.org/resources/find-funding/>.
 - The *U.S. Department of Agriculture-Housing and Urban Development-Rural Development* office has various loans and grants available for housing and low-income housing rehabilitation. Many of these programs require working through sponsoring governmental or non-profit organizations and/or having matching funds. See this website for more information: <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rhs/>.
 - The *South Carolina Conservation Bank* provides some grant money to qualified entities for rehabilitation projects of historic properties. The Merchants Bank building in Eastover, which is listed on the National Register, has received one of these grants for its restoration. See these websites for more details on the Conservation Bank and which qualified entities operate in Lower Richland County: <http://sccbanc.sc.gov/>, <http://sccbanc.sc.gov/entitlandtrust.html>.
- **Seek out help and resources for historic and natural landscapes.** The *Congaree Land Trust*, also one of the Conservation Bank’s qualified entities, advocates for conservation and can hold conservation easements, which are legal documents that lay out certain protections for the land and are tied to the property’s deed. From their website, “Conservation easements protect land from inappropriate development while maintaining traditional uses such as agriculture, forestry, wildlife management, and recreational

pursuits like hunting and fishing. By limiting uses of their land, landowners may be eligible for income and estate tax benefits.” The Congaree Land Trust and many other organizations and state offices also work together on the *Cowasee Basin Focus Area* that similarly encourages conservation easements and provides technical assistance to property owners. <http://www.congareelt.org/>.

C. Interpreting the Legacy: Museum and Education Recommendations

Exhibitions Opportunities

- **Strengthen community partnerships.** The research generated by this report would be an excellent supplement to exhibits and programs already in place at local museums and libraries. Potential opportunities include:
 - Work with sites in Lower Richland County to expand interpretive materials. With its focus on the history of continuous land ownership within the same family, the Harriet Barber House is an ideal starting point for this type of expansion.
 - Partner with local museums that treat South Carolina history to create a temporary exhibit on the impact of the Land Commission. Potential partners include, but are not limited to, the South Carolina State Museum and McKissick Museum.
 - Collaborate with Congaree National Park to develop a visitors center exhibition related to the Land Commission. Now located within the boundaries of the park, historic Hunt tract would be an excellent area of further research for such an exhibit.
 - Work with the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, a primary partner in developing plans for statewide remembrance of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, to develop temporary web-based or physical exhibitions and programming. This will shed new light on the story of the Civil War in South Carolina by expanding the narrative of the war to Reconstruction and the impact of the unique Land Commission program.
- **Create a traveling exhibit.** Due to the relative lack of artifacts currently associated with this research, a text panel and/or photographic exhibition would be the most feasible medium. Such an exhibit would be ideal for traveling to local institutions, such as schools, libraries, churches, museums, and community centers. Centered on the impact of the South Carolina Land Commission in Lower Richland County, the exhibit would inform viewers of the lasting impact of Reconstruction in their own area.
- **Develop an interactive website.** Design a website that would allow people greater access to the history of Lower Richland County. The website could include a virtual tour of historic sites, an overview of the Land Commission as well as Lower Richland County, and links to other websites for additional information.

Educational Outreach

- **Produce a driving tour.** Because the focus of this project deals with the landscape of Lower Richland County and the areas studied are not necessarily in close proximity to each other, a driving tour would offer the best way for the public to discover and engage in the history of the South Carolina Land Commission. A pamphlet including a map, highlighting historical sites of interest, would be the primary resource for this tour. Such a pamphlet could be distributed to state and local visitor centers and museums. At select

sites, or available online for download, an audio version via mp3 player, cellular phone, or CD could be provided to interested visitors. At some sites, like the Harriet Barber House, visitors would be encouraged to leave their cars and walk around, allowing them to engage more fully with the sites.

- **Design lesson plans.** Lesson plans could be developed that combine this research with the South Carolina statewide curriculum standards for social studies and history. This will help students connect broad historical concepts, such as Reconstruction, with their own lives through the study of relevant local history. This approach would be particularly effective for seventh grade students as they study South Carolina state history. To further disseminate this information to teachers, a copy of this report could be submitted to the South Carolina branch of Teaching American History, a national educational initiative which helps teachers gain access to information and skills to make history more engaging for their students.
- **Organize a lecture series.** Lecture series would offer another avenue for disseminating research to both the general and academic public. Collaborations with university departments, such as African-American Studies, Archeology, or History, as well as with local libraries and other community partners could generate increased awareness of this topic via forums of discussion. The University of South Carolina, local historically black colleges, the Richland County Public Library system, and the City of Columbia Parks and Recreation department are just some of the partners who may facilitate such programming.
- **Solicit outside funding.** Seek out funding opportunities from statewide or federally funded grants, philanthropist organizations, and area businesses to fund further outreach programs that highlight the Land Commission's impact in Lower Richland County. Starting points might include South Carolina Humanities Council grants, which fund community collaboration with humanities professionals or grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which has grants for museums and libraries engaging in community partnerships and outreach.

Academic Research and Collaboration

- **Conduct oral history interviews.** The initial interviews conducted for this report uncovered the wealth of community connections and memories among residents of Lower Richland County. These interviews emphasized that this medium of research is exceptionally viable for the area, and could fill additional gaps left by the written record. Topics otherwise inaccessible might include how the land was used, what it meant to its owners, the ways in which communities formed around Land Commission purchases, and memory—or lack of memory—of the Land Commission.
- **Research white land ownership connected to the Land Commission.** Exploring the impact of the Land Commission on white residents of Lower Richland County would offer an excellent comparison and allow greater understanding of the ways in which race affected purchasing ability and retention. Such a comparison might also shed light on the interracial relationships within Lower Richland County during and after Reconstruction.

- **Explore tenant farming in connection to Land Commission lands.** Although this report focuses on land ownership, further research could explore the Land Commission's impact on tenant farmers. Such research could answer questions pertaining to the relationship between African-American land ownership and tenant farmers' ability to secure more equitable farming contracts.
- **Collaborate with the Public History Program.** The University of South Carolina offers a graduate Public History Program in which students specialize in museums and historic sites, archives, and historic preservation. Students developed this report while taking the Historic Preservation Practicum, a course offered every two years within the Public History Program. Through both courses and student-led projects, public history students can expand upon this report through more comprehensive research. Internships could provide students with opportunities to conduct further research, produce exhibits, organize archival materials, and develop public programming.