Emancipation Day
The Freed People of Port Royal
EMANCIPATION DAY: THE FREED PEOPLE OF PORT ROYAL
On Emancipation Day—January 1, 1863—sea islanders of the Beaufort District realized what they must do to help defeat the Confederacy and keep their freedom.

GULLAH GEECHEE COMMISSION’S PLAN COMPLETED
A threatened culture makes a plan.

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ON THE COVER:
In 1866, Laura Towne, co-founder of the Penn School, posed with three young scholars. PHOTO/THE PENN CENTER COLLECTION AT THE UNC-CHAPEL HILL WILSON LIBRARY

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The Flora, a small steamer, paddled toward landfall where a grove of live oaks stood on a point overlooking the Beaufort River. It was January 1, 1863, a bright day, unseasonably warm.

“We enjoyed perfectly the exciting scene on board the Flora,” wrote Charlotte Forten, a missionary teacher, in an article for Atlantic Magazine. “There was an eager, wondering crowd of freed people in their holiday attire with the gayest of head-handkerchiefs, the whitest of aprons, and the happiest of faces. The band was playing, the flags streaming, everybody talking merrily.”

The little steamship was en route to the Smith plantation, which had been transformed into a U.S. Army camp. On that mild winter day nearly 150 years ago, thousands would gather to hear President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation read publicly for the first time in South Carolina.

The former slaves of Port Royal would officially become freed people once the president in Washington signed the proclamation that evening. Forten, in her diary, called it “the most glorious day this nation has yet seen.”

At age 25, Forten was the first black missionary to arrive in Port Royal after Union forces overwhelmed Confederate defenses in November 1861.

Cotton planters and their families fled to the mainland, but most of the slaves—nearly 10,000—stayed behind to welcome Union soldiers.

Port Royal was the U.S. government’s name for the sea islands of Beaufort District (Beaufort County), a remote place of salt marshes, tidal rivers and creeks, and low-elevation lands of deep woods and productive cotton plantations.

Having one of the deepest harbors between Virginia and Florida, Port Royal was an early target for Union invasion and occupation. During the war, U.S. ships refueled there to enforce the naval blockade of Confederate shipping, and Port Royal
Coastal Heritage

later became a staging area for assaults on Charleston’s defenses farther north.

Port Royal planters had owned two valuable assets: land and slaves. The region’s climate and soil were suitable for cultivating Sea Island cotton, a lucrative luxury commodity for international markets, and its captive workforce was worth millions of dollars. If the Confederacy managed to win the war, the planters would demand those assets returned.

By Emancipation Day, the freed people of Port Royal seemed to understand what must be done to defeat the Confederacy and keep their liberty. More able-bodied freedmen must become soldiers in the Union army. Freed people must prepare themselves for citizenship by learning to read and write, by sending their children to school, and by acquiring land so they could live self-sufficiently. They also needed churches and other institutions where they could meet and organize in safety.

Before the occupation, slaves in South Carolina could not carry guns, they could not own land, they were forbidden to read and write, and they were limited to attending white churches as dependents.

Now, a U.S. Army black regiment camped at Port Royal, and its soldiers would soon fight Confederates in Florida and up the Edisto River. Thousands of former slaves would acquire land parcels that would help sustain their families for generations. Beaufort District was already home to some of the first freed people’s schools in the South. Moreover, sea islanders were constructing new churches, the first institutions in the South ever fully controlled by black people.

In October 1862, Charlotte Forten arrived in Port Royal. Her wealthy Philadelphia family had been free for generations and active in liberation causes. As a girl, she was sent to Salem, Massachusetts, where she was educated in interracial schools attended by children of radical abolitionists. She found friends and mentors among poets and orators—black and white—and became a teacher herself.

Living with other missionaries in the abandoned mansion on the Oaks Plantation on St. Helena Island, Forten inadvertently offended her new servants who feared losing status by waiting on “dat brown girl.” Forten was light-skinned, and house servants tended to be conservative about hierarchies of color. They had served the white aristocracy. Now they hesitated to serve her—until they heard her play piano.

Her musical eloquence changed everything. She was “an educated lady” who had breached the color line, and soon they celebrated her as “the pet and belle of the island,” as she reported to a friend.

Forten became the third teacher in a new school later to be named after the Quaker William Penn. Two northern missionaries, Laura Towne and Ellen Murray, founded the Penn School on St. Helena Island, and they spent the rest of their lives—until the first decade of the 20th century—living among and educating sea islanders.

Laura Towne, in particular, had the right stuff for missionary service. Although small and plain, she was fierce, an implacable enemy of slavery, and more experienced at age 37 than most missionaries in Port Royal. She also had stamina and a tenacious will. Upon her arrival in the islands, she briskly took up any common task despite coming from privilege.

“She is housekeeper, physician, everything, here,” Forten noted.

Towne had studied at Philadelphia’s Women’s Medical College, though she did not receive a medical degree. “The most indispensable person on the place,” Forten wrote, “and the people are devoted to her.”

By the end of 1862, northern teachers had spread across at least four sea islands to instruct more than 2,100 black children who were taught reading, writing, spelling, history, and math. Teachers expressed surprise in the children’s rapid progress. “I never before saw children so eager to learn,” Forten wrote, “although I had had several years’ experience in New England schools. Coming to school is a constant and recreation for them.”

In 1740, South Carolina’s Slave Code prohibited the teaching of writing to slaves. In 1834, teaching slaves to read was outlawed. Abolitionist pamphlets, slaveholders believed, would infect minds with dangerous
Sea island freedmen were studying school primers, farming small homesteads, acquiring abandoned plantation lands, building new enterprises, and negotiating for better working conditions—all the while aided and encouraged by abolitionist allies such as Laura Towne and Ellen Murray.

“People were trying new things,” says Michael Allen, a community partnership specialist with the National Park Service. “The military didn't come down and say, 'This is how we’re going to handle the folks.' Instead, a lot was done on the fly. People needed to have safe refuges where their ideas could be presented but also where action could be taken. They felt confident at the Penn School and in the church because their voices were heard.”

The Penn School was the most lasting and influential institution to emerge from the “Port Royal Experiment” of 1862–1865 when northern abolitionists and local people collaborated to turn a slave society into a free one.

In 1948, the Penn School closed when philanthropic funds dried up, and its students were enrolled in local public schools. The Penn Community Services Center eventually emerged on the same site to provide social services to local people.

By the 1980s, it was renamed the Penn Center, and now it serves as a conference facility and a premier interpretive center for Gullah Geechee culture and history.

“Penn’s history and philosophy has always been that it does not discriminate,” says Walter Mack, executive director of the center. “Anybody could come here and discuss things.”

GULLAH GEECHEE—AND GIDEONITE

The Port Royal Experiment began with a humanitarian crisis. When Port Royal fell to the Union and cotton planters fled to the mainland, the Union became responsible for some 10,000 destitute, half-starved men, women, and children clothed in rags and living in hovels. Union officers, trained for war, were unprepared to help build a new civil society.

So the U.S. Army called for northern civilian charities to help. In February 1862, 17 Boston abolitionists—teachers, ministers, and businessmen—adopted a constitution, naming their group the Educational Commission, which sought the “industrial, social, intellectual, moral, and religious elevation of persons released from Slavery in the Course of the War for the Union.”

The commission raised funds to dispatch missionaries to Port Royal and pay some of their salaries. In April 1862, 53 men and women arrived in the first missionary wave, all from Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania, and all with strong antislavery backgrounds, a prerequisite for being chosen.

Many of the young men were college graduates of Harvard or Yale, hired as salaried agents of the U.S. Treasury Department to supervise abandoned plantations and former slaves there.

Other missionaries, primarily women, aided the superintendents and taught literacy, distributed clothes and other supplies, and ministered to ailments among sea islanders. Teachers and assistants were paid small salaries by the philanthropic associations that had financed and organized this effort.

In all, the missionaries of Port Royal were known as “Gideon’s Band” or “Gideonites” for their religious feeling and youthful idealism. But few were prepared for demanding roles in the remote, Africa-influenced Sea Islands.

For generations before the Civil War, the South Carolina Sea Islands had a black majority. In 1860, Beaufort District slaves outnumbered whites by more than four to one, and on large plantations the proportion was much higher.

It was African labor that had made Port Royal planters rich. West and Central Africans tended to be
immune to the relatively mild though still dangerous form of malaria, *Plasmodium vivax*, after their long history of exposure. Many Africans had also acquired or inherited resistance to the more virulent and deadly form, *Plasmodium falciparum*.

Whites were susceptible to both forms, which weakened or killed them. That’s why most planters left their estates during hot weather from June to November, which they called the “fever season,” and relocated to upland or beach retreats.

Within their isolation, Africans created a distinctive creole culture. Gullah Geechee people preserved more of their African heritage—music, food, land use, and spiritual practices—than any other black population in the United States. Their creole language was created from a mix of English words and African grammar, and it’s still spoken by some descendants in the lowcountry.

Gullah Geechee people called cotton the “slave crop” and destroyed many cotton gins and barns after planters fled. In the spring of 1862 they mostly ignored cotton planting and instead cultivated food staples—corn and potatoes—that could help them survive the following winter.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Treasury Department was broke. It needed money to pay for the war, and Treasury officials were counting on sales revenues from Port Royal cotton harvests and public auctions of plantations. The Union’s expenses in Port Royal continued to rise as slaves fled the mainland for hopes of freedom in the Sea Islands.

The cotton industry was a major power in Port Royal during the occupation. Northern cotton brokers, shippers, mill owners, and investors dispatched agents to purchase plantations and employ former slaves as wage laborers. Plantation superintendents similarly pressed former slaves back into cotton fields with promises of wages to be delivered once harvests were processed and sold.

A typical Port Royal superintendent, young and inexperienced, managed several large plantations and hundreds of former slaves at once. It was an exceptionally difficult job.
labor was exhausting, and workers had little time and energy left over to cultivate their subsistence gardens.

Local people resisted. They were accustomed to a task-labor system in which each slave completed a particular task each day. After tasks were completed, workers had flexibility to rest, hunt or fish, or work in their gardens to raise food.

“They do not see the use of cotton,” wrote Towne in her diary on April 28, 1862, “but they know that their corn has kept them from starvation, and they are anxious about next year’s crop.”

On a tour of a plantation that April, Towne watched Edward L. Pierce, a young lawyer and the U.S. Treasury’s top official in Port Royal, negotiate with local men, apparently over working conditions.

“Mr. Pierce,” she wrote, “in talking with the negroes, has to alter many a half-considered thing. It is very picturesque to see him in a negro village . . . talking, reasoning, and getting such shrewd answers too.”

Superintendents and former slaves finally agreed on a task system. Each worker would be paid according to the quantity of cotton he brought in, Towne recalled, and “they all went to work with a will, and each man did his task per day.” Women, too, had their own tasks in the fields.

Even so, wages were tardy. And when pay finally did arrive, it was less than workers expected. So local people stopped working again.

Furious superintendents threatened that if blacks didn’t do as they were told, there would be dire consequences. Towne wrote: “[T]hey do not even tell the slaves that they are free, and they lead them to suppose that if they do not do so and so, they may be returned to their masters.”

The line between slavery and freedom for a black person in Port Royal was not yet clear.

In mid-March 1862, Union General David Hunter was designated as military governor of the newly designated Department of the South, stretching from South Carolina to Florida, although only small portions of this region were fully under Union control.

Gen. Hunter needed more soldiers to patrol and engage the enemy, but he wasn’t getting them from Washington headquarters. So he issued a proclamation that emancipated all slaves under his jurisdiction and allowed black men to enlist in the military.

But President Abraham Lincoln sharply revoked this order. Anxious to hold Kentucky, Maryland, and other border slave states in the Union, Lincoln refused to say that any slaves were free—not even slaves in Union-occupied regions of the Confederacy. Lincoln’s goal at that time was to hold the Union together, not to emancipate slaves.

In Hampton, Virginia, however, Union Gen. Benjamin Butler found a tactical compromise between slavery and liberty. Slaves had escaped across Union lines to Fortress Monroe, which was under Butler’s command. Runaways, he declared, would not be returned to their masters who might use them to build fortifications for the Confederacy. He designated runaways as contraband of war as if they were guns or cannons. The northern press began calling former slaves “contrabands,” and the name stuck. Now, contrabands who found safety behind Union lines would not be sent back.

That spring, General Hunter began organizing an unofficial black regiment in the Sea Islands to establish security and raid rebel-held districts to destroy salt works. (Salt, used to preserve food, was crucial to any army before the age of refrigeration.)

But recruitment was plagued by errors from the start. To fill regimental ranks, Union recruiters snatched local men from their homes, marched them away, and held them in camps on Hilton Head Island for weeks. Angered by this treatment, many deserted.

**NATIONAL LANDMARK.** Located in the Penn Center Historic District on St. Helena Island, the Brick Church was one of the first sites to house the Penn School during the Civil War.

PHOTO/GRACE BEAHM
Finally, the regiment was dismissed without pay or explanation. By the fall of 1862, however, the northern public increasingly embraced emancipation and black military service, and another Union general under Hunter’s command began rebuilding the regiment of former slaves from scratch.

**SOLDIERING AND EMANCIPATION**

Laura Towne was not a pacifist. Like other “root-and-branch” abolitionists, she believed that war was necessary to destroy slavery, which had to be ripped out of southern soil forever. Former slaves, she argued, must join the fight against their enemies, the slaveholders, to gain lasting freedom.

She often dined with abolitionist officers at the Oaks plantation and expressed her hope that black men would someday have a chance to fight the Confederates and gain confidence.

She found an ally in Gen. Rufus Saxton, a career U.S. Army officer. The son of a Massachusetts abolitionist, he had been known at West Point for his outspoken anti-slavery views, a rarity at the time. Intense, idealistic, and charismatic, he had a feeling for dramatic moments and gestures, and he knew how to win people over and gain their confidence.

Perhaps that’s why Gen. Hunter chose him to establish the first official regiment of former slaves in U.S. history.

On November 5, 1862, Gen. Saxton wrote a letter to Capt. Thomas Wentworth Higginson of Massachusetts, a close friend, offering him command of the First South Carolina Volunteers being formed in Port Royal.

Higginson was an unusual choice. With little military experience—only a few months’ training a white company in Massachusetts—he was best known as a militant abolitionist writer, editor, orator, Unitarian minister, and activist.

Although a gentlemanly scholar, Higginson was nevertheless a full-throated advocate of virtually any violence necessary to destroy slavery. He was a member of the “Secret Six,” a group of abolitionists who supplied funds and arms for John Brown’s reckless attack on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, on October 16, 1859.

Brown and 21 white and black followers aimed to capture weapons and spark a slave revolt, gathering new recruits in a rebellion that would spread across the South. But he and his ragtag group were quickly captured and jailed.

After Brown was hanged, some New York newspapers called him a martyr, outraging slaveholders who believed that abolitionists would continue seeking to stir up slave revolts.

Decades after the Civil War, Higginson regretted Brown’s attack on Harper’s Ferry as foolhardy. But when Higginson received his letter of regimental appointment in South Carolina, he recalled Brown with affection.

“I had been an abolitionist too long, and had known and love John Brown too well, not to fill a thrill of joy at last on finding myself in the position where he only wished to be.”

**THE PROCLAMATION**

As the little steamer, Flora, approached landfall at Port Royal Island on Emancipation Day, Charlotte Forten and her fellow passengers could see the ruins of a colonial fort and the splendid oak grove where the celebration would take place.

*The New York Times* had sent a correspondent, who acknowledged that it “was an important day to the negroes here, and one of which they
reassured black families that if their sons enlisted they would never be mistreated by Col. Higginson, “that they might feel sure of meeting with no injustice of the leadership of such a man; that he w’ld see to it that they were not wronged in any way.”

For Emancipation Day, the U.S. Army had brought in great stores of molasses, hard bread, tobacco, and sweetened water, plus a barbeque of a dozen oxen, each standing whole and roasting in its pit.

A speakers’ platform had been erected, and companies of the First South Carolina Volunteers stood or sat in a circle around it. The platform was reserved for distinguished speakers, officers and other soldiers, a military band, and the lady missionaries in attendance.

The celebration began with prayers, recited poetry, hymns, and speeches. The crowd of several thousand, sprinkled with whites but the majority black, waited for a moment they had so long dreamed of.

Finally, President Lincoln’s proclamation was read aloud and “enthusiastically cheered,” Forten recalled. The proclamation called for black volunteers to join the U.S. Army or Navy. About 200,000 black men would serve in the Union military by the end of the war.

Next, Col. Higginson was presented with a silk regimental flag sent from friends in New York. Embroidered on the flag was the name of the regiment and the words, “The Year of the Jubilee has come!”

He gazed out at the audience. “I took & waved the flag,” Higginson recalled in his diary, and “there suddenly arose, close beside the platform, a strong but rather cracked & elderly male voice, into which two women’s voices immediately blended.” They sang, “My country ’tis of thee. Sweet land of Liberty.”

Harriet Ware, a missionary from Massachusetts, reported what happened next. The voices were “very sweet and low—gradually other voices about [them] joined in and [the song]
began to spread up to the platform, till Colonel Higginson turned and said, ‘Leave it to them,’ when the negroes sang it to the end. He stood with the flag in hand looking down at them, and when the song ceased, his own words flowed as musically, saying that he could give no answer so appropriate and touching as had just been made. In all the singing he had heard from them, that song he had never heard before—they never could have truly sung ‘my country’ till that day.”

**HOME AND HISTORY**

Laura Towne inexplicably missed the ferry to the celebration. When she finally arrived at Camp Saxton, she was too late to hear the reading of the president’s proclamation and Higginson’s address.

She didn’t complain. “It was a thousand pities,” she wrote laconically in her diary. “We sang the John Brown song with the people, were then asked up to the platform with the other ladies, and all was over.”

The night before, she had celebrated the proclamation with her friends, and there would be other important days in her life’s work. The fight for emancipation, she knew, had just begun.

In her journal a month later, Towne described a fateful moment when dining with Gen. Saxton and other Union officers at Oaks plantation.

“Gen. Saxton is much opposed to the sale of the land to speculators,” she wrote. Plantations, the general argued, should be “divided and sold [so] that the people can buy, and not be left as prey to greedy speculators and large landholders.”

Most of the Sea Island plantations in Beaufort District had been seized for nonpayment of taxes under the authority of the U.S. Direct Tax Act of 1862. In late January 1863, northern investors were prepared to purchase plantations at auctions. Some investors hoped to buy land at low wartime prices and later sell at high peacetime prices. Others planned to grow Sea Island cotton, employing former slaves as wage laborers.

Towne and Saxton worried that former slaves would be forced to work at exploitive wages and, if they resisted, they would be driven from homes where they had lived and worked all their lives.

Perhaps the U.S. Army could intervene in the plantation auctions, Towne suggested to Gen. Saxton.

“Saxton,” she recalled, “caught at the idea.”

The general knew how to operate levers of power. On February 24, 1863, Towne reported: “Hurrah! Jubilee! Lands are to set apart for the people so that they cannot be oppressed or driven to work for speculators, or ejected from their homesteads!”

Of the 101,930 acres seized for nonpayment of taxes in Beaufort District during the Civil War, about one-third of the total were eventually purchased on favorable terms by freedmen. The Beaufort area had become the leading edge of a revolutionary land-reform movement.

Yet for a famous reversal of fortune, Gullah Geechee people might have gained far more acreage.

In late 1864, Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman and his army had completed their march from Atlanta to the sea. They arrived at Savannah trailed by 17,000 black men, women, and children who would require shelter and food. Sherman knew that his army could not support a large population of dependents.

On January 15, 1865, Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton met with 20 freedmen—mostly ministers and church officers—in Savannah to discuss how freedmen could help the United States’ war effort and themselves.

An ordained Baptist minister named Garrison Frazier, 67 years old, was their spokesman. Land acquisition and soldiering, he said, should be linked for the good of freed people and the country.

“The way we can best take care of ourselves,” Frazier told Sherman, “is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women, and children, and old men—and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare; and to assist the Government the young men should enlist in the service of the Government, and serve in such manner as they be wanted.”

Four days later, Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15 in which he gave abandoned rice plantations for 30 miles inland and Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia to freedmen. The order provided each family with a land parcel of not more than 40 acres to cultivate. Later, Sherman called for distribution of excess Army mules to freedmen. These orders might have given rise to the slogan “Forty acres and a mule.”

Gen. Saxton was charged with overseeing implementation of Sherman’s order. He told a large group of lowcountry blacks “that they were to be put into possession of lands, upon which they might locate their families and work out for themselves a living
and respectability.”

By June 1865, more than 40,000 freedmen had begun tilling more than 400,000 acres of “Sherman land” in South Carolina and Georgia.

For generations, slaves had worked the land without compensation. The freed people knew and loved their homes, which they felt they had already purchased by their blood and sweat.

But, in a shocking reversal, President Andrew Johnson pardoned many former rebels and returned plantations to former owners. “Sherman land” would once again belong to the planter elite.

In October 1865, U.S. Army Gen. Oliver O. Howard informed a gathering of 2,000 freedmen on Edisto Island that land given to them by Sherman was no longer theirs. Gen. Howard asked them to “lay aside their bitter feelings, and to become reconciled to their old masters.”

A freedman called out, “Why General Howard, why do you take away our lands? . . . You give them to our all-time enemies. This is not right!”

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

Despite the demoralizing Sherman-land debacle, some lowcountry freedmen acquired land parcels in reward for their service in the Union army. Other former slaves purchased land with the assistance of the Freedmen’s Bureau, which was set up by the federal government in 1865 primarily for this effort.

In exchange for promised Sherman land, other freedmen were given the right to rent or own 20-acre plots of government land apart from plantations where they and their kin lived. Finally, many lowcountry freedmen worked for years to save money to purchase land for small homesteads on bankrupt plantations.

Land parcels were usually shared among family members and passed down through generations. Many Gullah Geechee people today have a strong connection to the family land, according to Marquetta Goodwine, an activist and author also known as Queen Quet, chiefess of the Gullah Geechee Nation. Her family owns several acres with relatives on St. Helena Island. After the war, her great-great-grandfathers on each side purchased parcels where they had been enslaved.

Across most of the South, however, postwar land reform was a disastrous failure, according to a leading historian of Reconstruction, Eric Foner of Columbia University. The great majority of rural black people became trapped in the disenfranchised status of dependent laborers, at the mercy of planters’ still considerable power.

In 1870, only 30,000 blacks in the South owned land; another four million were landless.

By contrast, blacks in postwar Beaufort County established a new class of independent yeomen, outnumbering whites by as much as eight to one. In 1868, South Carolina’s Reconstruction government passed a constitution that secured voting rights for African Americans. Robert Smalls, the celebrated war hero, and his allies dominated Beaufort County politics.

But after Reconstruction ended in 1877 and federal troops and agencies left the South, black-majority regions of the South became increasingly isolated politically and economically.

Planters tightened their grip on the rural workforce. Freedmen were arm-twisted into signing yearlong labor contracts that restricted their liberty. Blacks were prevented from leaving plantations until harvests were completed. Local law enforcement jailed or fined freed people under vagrancy charges if they did not sign onerous labor contracts.

One South Carolina writer noted that whites would “go as far as they dare in restricting colored liberty . . . without actually reestablishing personal servitude.”

Later in the 19th century, Jim Crow laws in South Carolina erased political and civil rights that blacks had gained during Reconstruction. In 1898, when the state constitution was rewritten again, South Carolina blacks were disenfranchised and legally separated from whites in public spaces. Racists spread terror against blacks in numerous South Carolina counties.

In the refuge of St. Helena Island, Marquetta Goodwine, also known as Queen Quet, stands in front of an Emancipation Oak on St. Helena Island, where local people celebrate their ancestors’ freedom on January 1st each year.

PHOTO/GRACE BEAHM
however, Laura Towne and Ellen Murray continued their work at the Penn School, which offered a classical education in arts and sciences. Towne died in 1901 and Murray in 1908.

The Penn School became the model for hundreds of privately funded, missionary, and Freedman’s Bureau schools throughout the South after the Civil War. Private schools for black children, in turn, paved the way for southern states’ public education, and Penn graduates taught in many segregated public schools.

Over generations, these schools, although underfunded, helped build an educated middle class of teachers, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, and ministers.

Penn Center remained an important meeting place for both races. In the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and executives of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, white and black, regularly came to the Penn Center for retreats and trainings.

During the summer of 1963, they met at the Penn Center—a few miles from the oak grove where the Emancipation Proclamation was read 100 years before—to make final preparations for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom when Dr. King would give his famous “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

“From the beginning, the Penn Center was seen as a safe haven” in a hostile social and political environment, says Walter Mack, the center’s executive director. It was a place where former slaves could organize and confer in peace with white friends despite a general climate of racial threats and intimidation.

“The two white teachers from the North [who established the Penn School] took risks when they came down here,” says Mack. And for the next century, whites and blacks took risks when they collaborated at the Penn Center. “At Penn,” he adds, “the freedmen and the people who came from New England would sit down and talk and strategize. The only way to solve a problem is to sit down and talk about it, and in our history we have provided the venue to do that.”

HISTORY LIVES. Walter Mack, executive director of the Penn Center, on the steps of the Gantt Cottage in the Penn Center Historic District. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., lived in that cottage when writing his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963.

PHOTO/GRACE BEAHM
The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission has submitted its management plan to the National Park Service for review. The plan lays the groundwork for the preservation and public recognition of a unique African American culture threatened by development from North Carolina to northern Florida.

The management plan identifies three goals:
• Increase understanding and awareness of Gullah Geechee people, history, and culture.
• Support heritage-related businesses and promote land preservation.
• Document and help preserve historic sites, data, artifacts, and objects for the benefit and education of the public.

There are six interpretive themes for partnership programs: origins and early development; the quest for freedom, equality, education, and recognition; global connections; connection with the land; cultural and spiritual expression; and Gullah Geechee language. The management plan is the product of six years of research and 21 public-input meetings in coastal communities in the Southeast.

A continuing challenge is to reach out to people of Gullah Geechee descent and help them understand the importance of their own history and culture.

“When I was growing up, calling someone Gullah or Geechee was a slur, even in our own communities,” says Ronald Daise, the commission’s executive director and vice-president for creative education at Brookgreen Gardens in Murrells Inlet. “Those were fighting words. No one wanted to be identified as Gullah or Geechee. We called ourselves sea islanders. But starting in the 1990s, there began to be a movement to accept the uniqueness of Gullah Geechee and its place in the American fabric. We became more aware that our ancestors were brought from Africa with skills, and we have learned how language, dietary practices, customs, and beliefs were maintained over the generations.”

The commission, though, can’t create Gullah Geechee programs from scratch.

Any funding for the corridor from the National Park Service will have to be matched by towns, cities, and counties along the corridor, whether in cash or in kind.

“We can only move forward with partnerships,” says Daise. “We need partners to come up with ideas about how to implement programs and fund them.”

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Reading and Websites


Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org


Penn Center. www.penncenter.com


Helping coastal communities prepare for climate change

How can coastal communities of South Carolina adapt to climate change, especially when projected levels of change in temperature, precipitation, and sea level in the region are so broad? The S.C. Sea Grant Consortium has received three grants totaling over $190,000 that will help coastal communities answer that question over the next two years.

For a grant competitively awarded by the National Sea Grant Office’s Community Climate Change Adaptation Initiative program, Jessica Whitehead, regional climate extension specialist, will lead partners from the Beaufort County Planning Department, the Social and Environmental Research Institute (SERI), and North Carolina Sea Grant to help Beaufort County prepare for a range of potential climate conditions. April Turner, coastal community specialist, will assist Whitehead with conducting background interviews and organizing public workshops and focus group meetings.

The partners will develop a plan to ensure that the county’s zoning—including new form-based codes—and subsequent development will be more resilient to sea-level rise, more variable rainfall, and temperature extremes.

SERI will lead another grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Coastal and Ocean Climate Applications program to investigate the risks a changing climate may pose to working waterfronts in Beaufort County.

In addition, with a grant from the National Sea Grant Office, S.C. Sea Grant extension staff will synthesize the results of the working-waterfronts investigation into workshops that include the role of climate variability and change among other threats to thriving working waterfronts.

To assist with these projects, the Consortium is hiring two College of Charleston graduate students who will work on implementing the grants.

For more information, contact Jessica Whitehead at (843) 953-2090 or Jessica.Whitehead@scseagrant.org. Additional programs are detailed on the Coastal Climate website at www.scseagrant.org/Content/?cid=251.

LID manual for coastal South Carolina to be developed

For years, scientists, regulators, innovative developers, engineers, and others have been calling on localities to encourage more eco-friendly development practices that can capture greater volumes of stormwater runoff and filter more contaminants than conventional practices do.

Conventional urban development tends to increase a site’s impervious surfaces—such as roads, parking lots, and buildings—and store stormwater runoff in ponds or other holding areas until it can be piped back into waterways.

These conventional practices can pollute waterways, place infrastructure at risk from flooding, and deplete natural storage areas of freshwater for private wells and municipal supplies.

By contrast, low-impact development (LID) practices mimic the natural hydrology and filtering capacities of pre-development sites. LID practices include rain gardens and bioswales that absorb stormwater flows and allow vegetation, soils, and microbes to filter pollutants, which reduce contamination of waterways.
To advance the use of LID practices in South Carolina, the S.C. Sea Grant Consortium has established partnerships with the ACE Basin and North Inlet–Winyah Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) Coastal Training Programs and the Center for Watershed Protection based in Maryland.

This partnership is receiving $329,943 from the NERR’s Science Collaborative over two years to develop an interdisciplinary, user-defined manual for LID practices, thereby removing a barrier to implementation on the community level, neighborhood scale, and site scale.

First, the grant will support a series of collaborative focus group meetings with applied-science researchers and engineers, planners and landscape architects, climate researchers, and others.

The grant will also support technical trainings for decision makers who face challenges of protecting water quality and habitats in a time of intense development pressure and climate change, which can cause more intense storms and rainfall.

Although decision makers might be aware of the benefits of using LID techniques, they often lack expertise, guidance, and resources to implement them.

Therefore, technical trainers will work with decision makers to create tools and resources that can help communities implement LID practices and reduce the impact of development on natural resources.

The LID guidance document will be vetted by end-users and debuted through end-user workshops. In the process of developing the manual, the team will create the following resources and tools to support LID implementation in coastal South Carolina:

- Modeling to support the integration of landscape and climate variables to guide research and using Best Management Practices in the design;
- A comprehensive, digital spreadsheet that will enable intended users to model how BMPs could impact stormwater runoff and to select techniques appropriate to their site;
- Support for updated urban planning and development regulations that will encourage the implementation of LID;
- The integration of climate change predictions into BMP design and guidance;
- Training on use of the manual for coastal communities.

S.C. Sea Grant Extension Program staff including April Turner, coastal community specialist, and Jessica Whitehead, regional climate extension specialist, are part of the project’s investigator team.

For more information, contact Leigh Wood, Coastal Training Program coordinator with the North Inlet–Winyah Bay NERR, at (843) 904-9034 or Leigh.Wood@belle.baruch.sc.edu.
Subscriptions are free upon request by contacting: Annette.Dunmeyer@scseagrant.org

ATTENTION SCHOOL TEACHERS! The S.C. Sea Grant Consortium has designed supplemental classroom resources for this and past issues of Coastal Heritage magazine. Coastal Heritage Curriculum Connection, written for K-12 educators and their students, is aligned with the South Carolina state standards for the appropriate grade levels. Includes standards-based inquiry questions to lead students through explorations of the topic discussed. Curriculum Connection is available on-line at www.scseagrant.org/education.