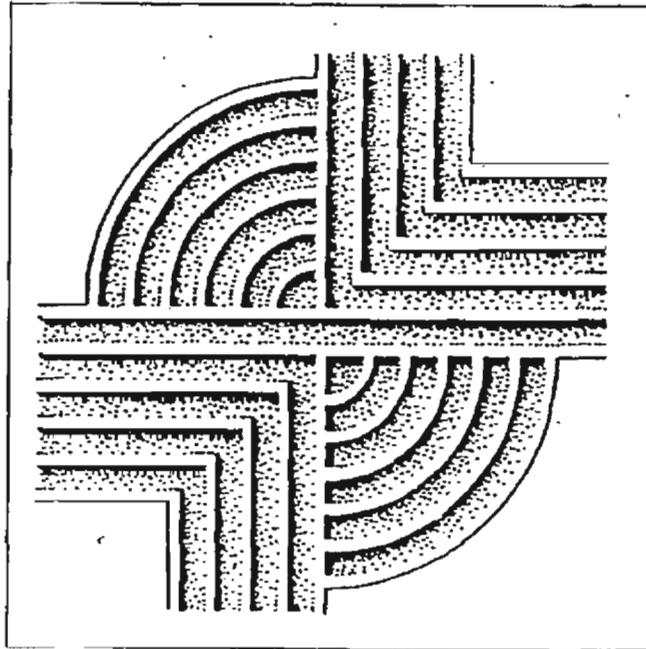


OF FREEDOM UNTO ALL: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF THE PORT ROYAL EXPERIMENT



RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 20

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Chicora Research Contribution 20

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I want to thank Emory Campbell for his invitation to participate in this celebration. It is a great honor for me, both as a person with strong feelings about the goals of the Penn Center and as a professional archaeologist, to be included in this event. I realize that archaeology is not normally associated with either the work of the Penn Center or with the Thirteenth Amendment, but I believe that understanding the past provides a key to understanding the present and the future. Just as importantly, history and archaeology ensure that a people's heritage and culture are remembered. As archaeologist Noel Hume has stated, if we allow this heritage to disappear, we will one

During the early nineteenth century South Carolina developed a greater economic and social stake in the "peculiar institution" of slavery than any other state. By the 1860 Census, only seven counties in all of the United States had a higher concentration of slaves than Beaufort, where blacks accounted for 82.8% of the population. Historian Kenneth Stampp notes that, "to understand the South is to feel the pathos in its history." This may be no truer than in the Port Royal region of South Carolina.

Many of the Confederacy's political leaders and minds were from the Beaufort area and it is little wonder that early in the Civil War a decision was made by the Union to strike at this heart of Succession. On November 7, 1862 the Union forces under the command of Commodore Samuel Francis Dupont and General T. W. Sherman masterfully attacked the Confederate forces at Forts Walker and Beauregard. The Confederate troops, which only weeks earlier had vowed never to surrender their homeland, were easily routed and the Union force landed on Hilton Head to discover that every white inhabitant had deserted the island. This event, known for over 60 years to local blacks as the "gun shoot on Bay Pint [Point]," marked not only a turning point in the Civil War, but also a turning point for Sea Island blacks.

Within two days of the Union victory 150 blacks descended on the Hilton Head post anticipating freedom and a new life. By

December 15, 38 days later, 320 former slaves had found their way to Hilton Head Island. The first Union Commander, General Sherman, periodically wrote Washington asking for material assistance, as well as guidance, since the blacks were not yet freedmen, but were simply regarded as "contraband of war," or "contrabands." In other occupied areas blacks were less well protected by the Federal troops and in many cases the chattel slave property was routinely returned to their previous owners. The Federal policy during most of the Civil War was confused and muddled.

By February 6, 1862 Sherman issued General Order 9, which requested outside assistance for the contrabands from the "highly favored and philanthropic people" of the North. Help for the Sea Island blacks arrived from two major sources: Secretary of the Treasury Solomon Chase, who sent Edward L. Pierce to Port Royal to examine and eventually oversee the government's efforts, and from the "humanitarians," such as the Reverend and Mrs. Mansfield French of the American Missionary Association. Pierce and French quickly devised a plan for the education, welfare, and employment of the blacks, forging an uneasy alliance between the secular and sacred interests. A number of philanthropic individuals in the North responded to the call and this is largely the "experiment" of Willie Lee Rose's masterful study, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*.

One of the boldest government experiments, formulated by General O.M. Mitchel, was the creation of a black town, eventually known as Mitchelville, in a cotton field on the Hilton Head Drayton Plantation. Unlike other contraband camps, Mitchelville was truly an "experiment in citizenship." It was developed as an actual town, with neatly arranged streets, 1/4-acre lots, a town supervisor and councilmen elected by the black residents, laws regulating sanitation and community behavior, and a compulsory education law -- perhaps the first in the South. The town, which was established by late 1862, contained about 1500 residents by November 1865.

There are few accounts in the historical documents of the daily activities at Mitchelville during the period from 1862 to 1867. We know, however, that the residents were largely supported by wage labor with the military. During this time the contrabands became acquainted with a consumer economy, stores and shops were established, and schools and churches were built. After 1867, when the military left the Hilton Head post, there is evidence that the village continued relatively unaltered and intact into the early 1870s. The economy of its inhabitants, however, turned away from the declining wage labor opportunities and returned to an agrarian base. Sometime in the early 1880s Mitchelville ceased being a true village and became a small, kinship-based community which was found into the 1920s. Our archaeological work, sponsored by The Environmental and

Historical Museum of Hilton Head Island, is beginning to bring alive this early experiment in freedom and self-government.

The historical record also contains information on the spiritual well-being of the Mitchelville blacks. For example, in 1862 the First Baptist Church was formed with 120 members and Abraham Murchison, a black, was selected as minister. By 1866 there were three churches in Mitchelville -- the Free Will Baptist, a Methodist, and another Baptist. But perhaps the other most profound effect of Mitchelville was the emphasis on education in the black community.

Although a number of missionary groups were active on Hilton Head during the war years, by 1866 all groups except the American Missionary Association had "abandoned the island." The Association was largely funded by the Wesleyan Methodists, Free Presbyterians, and Free Will Baptists during the war years, but was forced to rely on funds from the U.S. Tax Commission after 1866 as private interest in and funding for the Sea Island blacks by Northerners began to fail.

In 1866 Hilton Head was divided into five school districts-- Mitchelville, Marshland, Seabrook, Stoney, and Lawton. In the Mitchelville district, the AMA was offering primary, intermediate, and high school classes at various churches. Attendance ranged up to 238 pupils and classes met for 4-1/2 to 5

hours a day. Attendance was directly affected by agricultural needs, although the teachers also recognized that many students were traveling poor roads under harsh weather conditions for their education.

The teachers were poorly supplied, taught in churches lacking heat and school conveniences, poorly paid, and poorly housed. Their dedication, however, is clear. One teacher refused to charge her students the 25 cents per month tuition intended to pay for books, supplies, and so forth, claiming it was an unfair burden which would prevent many from obtaining the education they desired so strongly. Although the bulk of this educational activity was undertaken by white teachers, in 1869 the AMA teacher at Mitchelville had a black assistant teacher and when the AMA schools closed at the end of the 1870 term, there is evidence that local blacks continued Sunday School lessons.

Willie Lee Rose discusses the successes and failures of the political and social policies directed toward the contraband, but suggests that the revolution of the Sea Islands generally "went backwards" with the nation largely forgetting its promises to blacks and allowing the effective nullification of the Fifteenth Amendment. More recent historians have taken a more cautious approach, emphasizing that the "Port Royal Experiment" provided the unprecedented opportunity for blacks to join the land owning class.

Today we are seeing another unprecedented event on the Sea Islands -- the gradual, but frighteningly thorough, destruction of black culture by "progress." This progress includes the cavalier disruption of black communities by governmental projects such as roads and the taxation of agricultural plots at rates so high as to make it impossible for blacks to maintain the land they obtained over a hundred years ago. As William Shakespeare has told us, "there is history in all men's lives." It is our responsibility to find that history, and preserve it. We must be concerned with the ways of life of the ordinary people not found in history books, so that younger generations can see how their ancestors lived. And we must do these things quickly, before the fragile threads of history are destroyed by "progress." Thank you.