

***Mitchelville:***  
**Experiment in Freedom**



Chicora Foundation, Inc.  
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On the cover: Artifacts of Slavery and Freedom. Upper left, annular ware bowl, frequently given to slaves by their masters. Upper right, a slate "pencil," for writing on slate tablets and used by the freedmen in school. Lower left, a Union button, perhaps lost by a soldier at Mitchelville. Lower right, a whiteware cup, probably purchased by a freedman from one of the stores operating in Mitchelville.

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The Civil War changed the lives of both planters and slaves on Hilton Head Island. Gradually a plan was formulated for the education, welfare, and employment of the blacks, combining both government and missionary efforts. The Department of the South, headquartered on Hilton Head Island, became a "Department of Experiments," conducting what a modern historian has called a "dress rehearsal for Reconstruction" and is often called the "Port Royal Experiment." The town of Mitchelville is the clearest expression of that experiment.

## *The Civil War, Hilton Head, and The Evolution of Mitchelville*

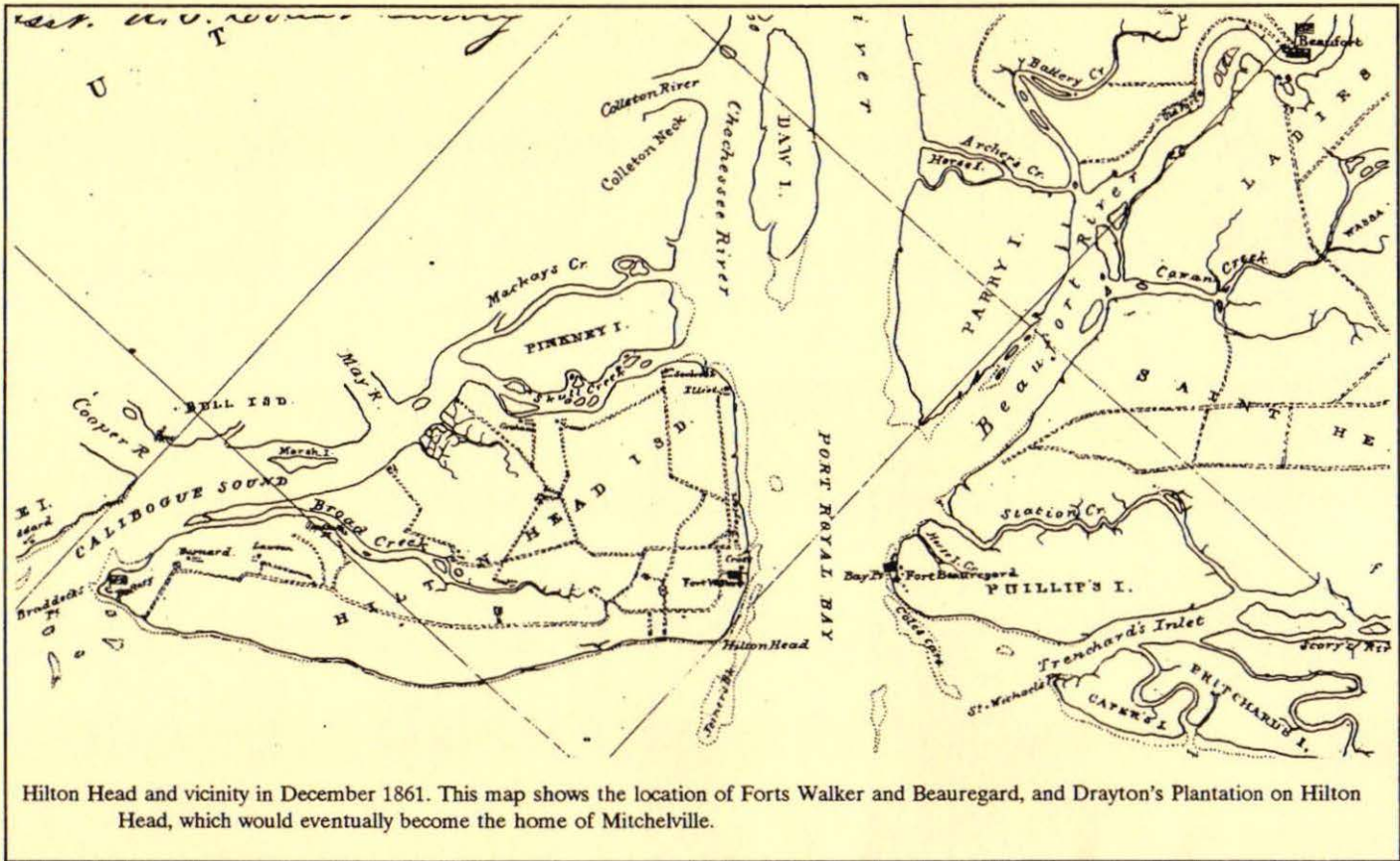
The choice having been made to attack the Confederacy in the deep South, a Union fleet of about 60 ships and 20,000 men sailed from Fortress Monroe at Hampton Roads, Virginia on October 29, 1861 and arrived off the coast of Beaufort, South Carolina on November 3rd through 5th. The naval forces were under the command of Admiral S.F. DuPont and the Expeditionary Corps troops were under the direction of General T.W. Sherman. The attack on the Confederate Forts Walker (on Hilton Head) and Beauregard (at Bay Point on St. Phillips Island) began about 10:00 a.m. on November 7. By 3:00 that afternoon the Union fleet had fired nearly 3,000 shots at the two forts and the Confederate forces had retreated, leaving the Beaufort area to Union forces.

This battle was the beginning step Sea Island blacks would take down the long road to freedom. Although no one realized it at the time, the fight for freedom and equality would eventually lead to places like Selma, Alabama and Little Rock, Arkansas. But to many slaves in the Port Royal area, the fall of Hilton Head was the single greatest event in their lives. Sam Mitchel, at the age of 87, remembered the event vividly:

Maussa had nine children, six boy been in Rebel army. Dat Wednesday in November w'en gun fust shoot to Bay Pin [Point] I t'ought it been t'under rolling, but day ain't no cloud. My mother say, "son, dat ain't no t'under, dat Yankee come to gib you Freedom." I been so glad, I jump up and down and run. My father been splitting rail and Maussa come from Beaufort in de carriage and tear by him yelling for de driver. He told de driver to git his eight-oar boat name Tarrify and carry him to Charleston. My father he run to his house and tell my mother what Maussa say. My mother say, "You ain't gonna row no boat to Charleston, you go out dat back door and keep a-going." So my father he did so.

Within two days of the Union victory on Hilton Head, Sea Island blacks began descending on the outpost. One Union soldier stationed on Hilton Head at the time recounted:

negro slaves came flocking into our camp by the hundreds, escaping from their masters when they knew of the landing of "Linkum sojers," as they called us . . . many of them with no other clothing than gunny-sacks.



Hilton Head and vicinity in December 1861. This map shows the location of Forts Walker and Beauregard, and Drayton's Plantation on Hilton Head, which would eventually become the home of Mitchelville.



An 1861 engraving shows blacks escaping from slavery to the Union fort at Hilton Head.

Although it is clear that the black slaves were convinced of the Union's role in securing their freedom, the Union Army was not nearly so sure. In fact, these former slaves were not yet free (or freedmen), but were considered by the Union Army to be "contraband of war." In some areas, Union generals even allowed Confederate owners to reclaim "their property" and take blacks back into slavery.

Hilton Head, however, was different. From the very beginning, General T.W. Sherman (no relationship to General William T. Sherman who marched through the South, ending the war) wrote to the War Department in Washington asking for humanitarian assistance. Many Union officers, however, complained that the blacks were a "burden and a nuisance." Some Union troops stole from the slaves and it is clear from the surviving records that the racial attitudes of some Union troops were no better than most Southerners of the period. General Ormsby M. Mitchel remarked that he found "a feeling prevailing among the officers and soldiers of prejudice against the blacks."

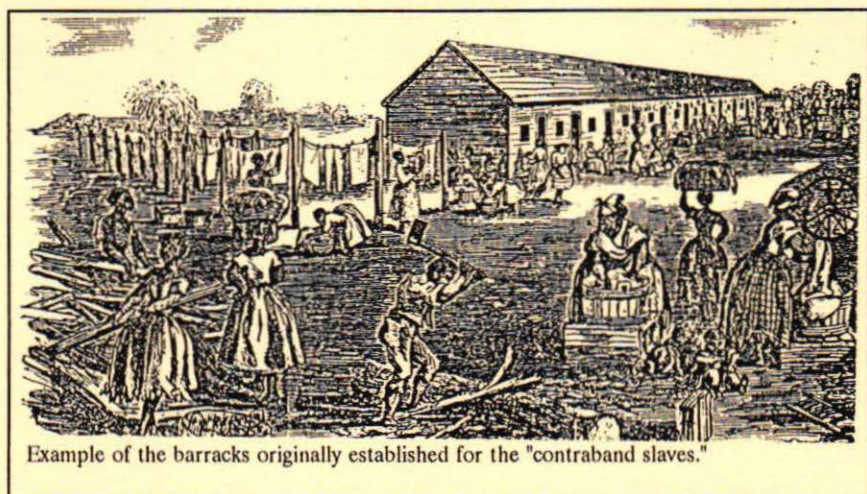
Regardless, the efforts by General Sherman opened the door for missionaries, known as Gideon's Band or Gideonites, to come to Hilton Head and begin teaching and helping the blacks. The Secretary of the Treasury Department, Salmon P. Chase, was a strong anti-slavery voice in the Lincoln cabinet and he sent Edward L. Pierce (an attorney and strong abolitionist) to Hilton Head to look into the "contraband negro" situation. Pierce, in February 1862, found 16 plantations on Hilton Head and at least 600 blacks on the island, many coming from other Sea Islands, including Pinckney, St. Helena, Port Royal, Spring, and Daufuskie.

As early as April 1862, a military order was issued freeing the blacks in the Sea Islands, and four months later Lincoln developed his own plan of emancipation — officially making the "contraband slaves" freedmen.

The housing for the freed slaves was a problem from the very beginning. At first the Union army tried to establish military-like camps for the blacks at places on Bay Point and Otter Island. But these were little more than "holding areas" and were later in the Civil War called, "Freedmen's Home Colonies," providing "temporary shelter and care." A similar approach was first used on Hilton Head, where "commodious barracks" were built. This approach, however, was seen to be a failure by October 1862, when they were described as a "sty." Perhaps more importantly, this approach did nothing to help the escaped slaves learn about their new freedom.

One of the first accounts of the decision to change the way the Union Army dealt with the blacks was reported by the local newspaper, *New South*, on October 4, 1862:

Some wholesome changes are contemplated by the new regime [General Ormsby Mitchel, who assumed command on September 17, 1862],

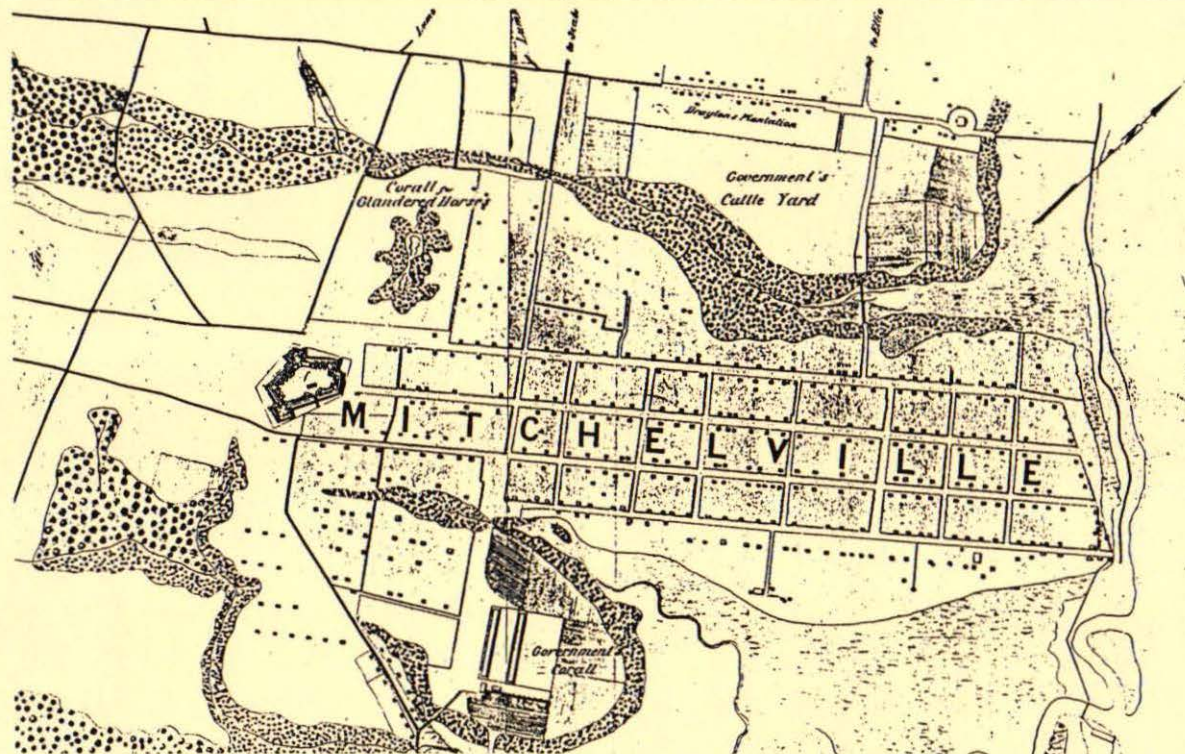


Example of the barracks originally established for the "contraband slaves."

not the least of which is the removal of the negro quarters beyond the stockade . . . where they can at once have more comfort and freedom for improvement. . . . Accordingly, a spot has been selected near the Drayton Plantation for a Negro village. They are able to build their own houses, and will probably be encouraged to establish their own police. . . . A teacher, Ashbell Landon, has been appointed.

By March of 1863 the town was built and named in honor of General Mitchel. The village was divided into districts for the election of councilmen, charged with establishing police and sanitary regulations. The government of the village consisted of a supervisor and treasurer appointed by the military, as well as the freely elected council, a marshal, and a recorder. This government was to:

establish schools for the education of children and other persons. To prevent and punish vagrancy, idleness and crime. To punish licentiousness, drunkenness, offenses against public decency and good order, and

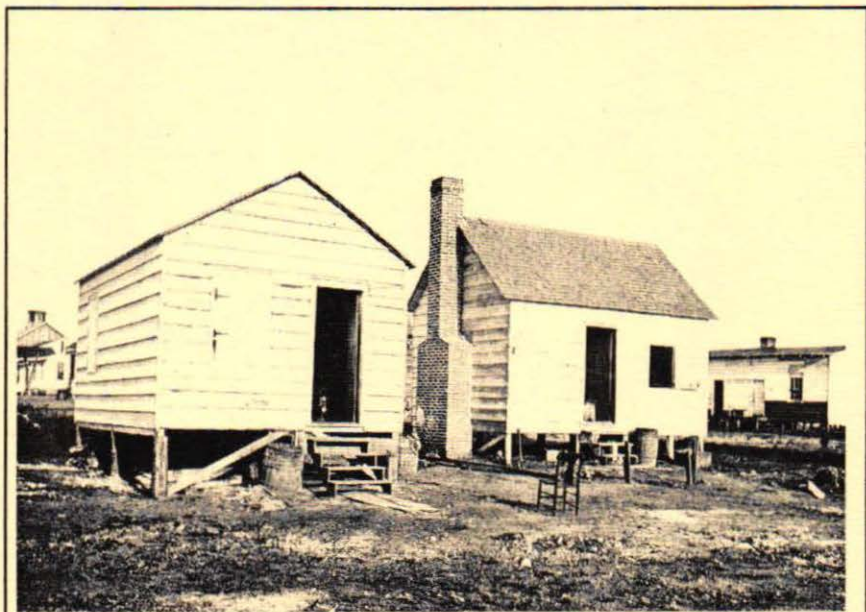


Map of the Village of Mitchelville. Fort Howell is shown at the southeast edge of the village. The road that runs south of the fort still exists today and is known as Beach City Road. The road shown at the top of the map, where the Drayton slave settlement is shown, is known today as Baygall Road. The chimneys of Drayton's slave houses are preserved on a county park.

petty violation of the rights of property and person. To require due observance of the Lord's Day. To collect fines and penalties. To punish offenses against village ordinances. To settle and determine disputes concerning claims for wages, personal property, and controversies between debtor and creditor. To levy and collect taxes to defray the expenses of government, and for the support of schools. To lay out, regulate and clean the streets. To establish wholesale sanitary regulations for the prevention of disease. To appoint officers, places and times for the holding of elections. To compensate municipal officers, and to regulate all other matters affecting the well-being of the citizens, and good order of society. . . .

In addition, "every child, between the ages of six and fifteen years, residing within" Mitchelville was required to attend school — the first compulsory education law in South Carolina! Early in the history of black freedom, the importance of education was recognized and the law made parents responsible for their children attending school.

By 1865 Mitchelville contained "about 1500 souls." The houses were often simply built (the blacks provided the labor, the military saw mills provided free lumber) and each had about a quarter of an acre for planting gardens. Photographs taken about this time also give us some idea of how these people were living. But, for the most part, historical records have left us with little information about their daily lives. Newspaper accounts suggest that religion was an important mainstay in their lives. One account tells that Abraham



Mitchelville about 1865, showing different kinds of houses and how the freedmen used the yard area for different activities.



Murchinson, "a colored man in the employ of the Chief Quartermaster," was selected to be a minister in Mitchelville. And another story announced the construction of a new church in the village.

At least four stores were opened in Mitchelville, although several quickly closed down, perhaps for cheating the residents. Two, however, were operated for several years and lists of the merchandise being offered are still preserved at the National Archives. Goods included coffee pots, buckets, tin pie plates, tableware, frying pans, shovels, brooms and brushes, fish seines, shirts, pants, suspenders, cloth, cologne, hair combs, belts, thimbles, buttons, bonnets, bead necklaces, condensed milk, dried peaches, tobacco, pipes, flour, grits, butter, lard, rice, and soap.

One observer noted in 1863 that the blacks in Mitchelville were anxious to both work and acquire goods:

there is a great demand for plates, knives, forks, tin ware, and better clothing, including even hoop skirts. Negro cloth . . . [is] very generally rejected. But there is no article of household furniture or wearing apparel, used by persons of moderate means among us, which they will not purchase when they are allowed the opportunity of labor and earning wages.

Many freedmen living in Mitchelville were working for the Union Army, while others were working, for wages, on the plantations they once worked as slaves. Most blacks earned between \$4 and \$12 a month.

Most of the teachers for Mitchelville were supplied by the American Missionary Association (AMA), a group that obtained its funds from Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches in the North. These teachers taught school for about 4½-hours a day. Attendance at the primary school might range from 52 to 108, while the high school typically had about 90 students.

"The Home" for these teachers in Mitchelville was at the edge of the shore and was described by one teacher as:

a little bit of a house with a single thickness of boards for sides and floors, not a bit of whitewash or plaster on the whole house and spaces between the boards on the sides wide enough so the birds fly through. Every house on the Island stands on posts so that the air can circulate under. . . . The garret [meaning here, the porch] is considered the coolest place. The houses here look like barns on stilts, but the teacher's home is so small and light that the slightest wind shakes it.

### *Mitchelville After the Civil War*

In 1865 the Civil War was over and Hilton Head had lost its strategic importance. When the military abandoned the island in January 1868, so too did the jobs. While a great deal of thought had gone into the establishment of Mitchelville, no one bothered to wonder how the village would survive without the wage labor of the military. It was probably

unthinkable to them that the land on which Mitchelville was situated would ever be returned to its white owners.

In spite of these changes, it appears that Mitchelville was still an active village. An AMA teacher described Mitchelville in 1867:

there are several large plantations upon which are small settlements, but the greater part of the colored population of the island are located a short distance from Hilton Head [meaning the old military base] at a place called Mitchelville. . . . It is an incorporated town, regularly laid out in streets and squares. About 1500 inhabitants, not a single white person. There are three churches — two Baptist, one Methodist, two schools which are taught by A.M.A. teachers.

There were no whites living in Mitchelville since "The Home," where AMA teachers had previously lived, had blown down during a storm in November 1867! What remained of the building, however, was still being used as a school.

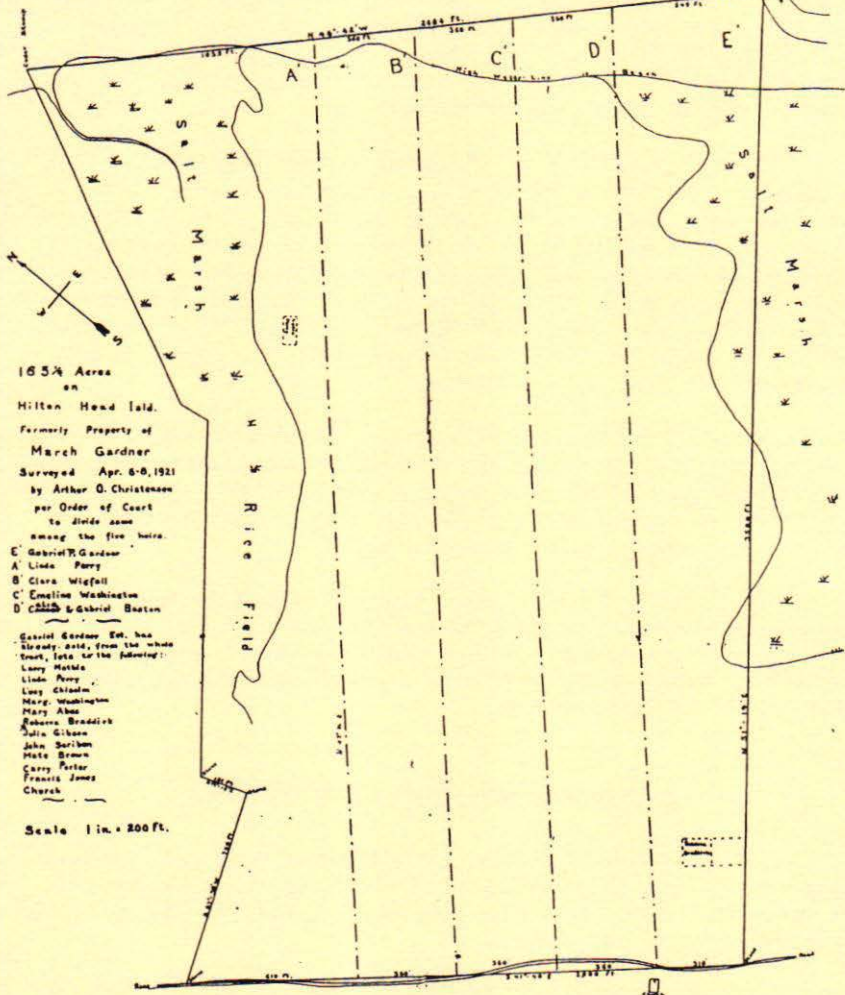
Although the military had left, taking jobs with them, many blacks turned to subsistence farming. Some formed "collectives," joining together to rent large plantations from the government. Many of the freedmen were able to save their wages until they had the money to purchase land. However, there was a gathering storm in Washington. Congress passed laws providing for the restoration of confiscated lands to Southern owners with the payment of taxes, costs, and interests. Many of the lands being planted by the freedmen were no longer available. Worse, many lands purchased by freedmen in good faith, were returned to their Southern owners, with the blacks divested of their interest.

The Drayton Plantation (on which Mitchelville was located) was returned to the heirs of its former owner in April 1875, with the federal government deed failing to provide any protection for Mitchelville. The Drayton heirs, however, were not interested in planting the lands and began to sell it off to anyone interested in making purchases — including many freedmen. It was during the last quarter of the nineteenth century that most, if not all, of Mitchelville was purchased by a black man, March Gardner. March, while illiterate, was very successful — and apparently well respected. He placed his son, Gabriel, in charge of Mitchelville, which at this time also included a store, cotton gin, and grist mill. March also trusted Gabriel to have a proper deed made out. Instead, Gabriel took advantage of his father, eventually obtaining a deed in his own name and then transferring the property to his wife and daughter.

In the early twentieth century, the heirs of March Gardner took the heirs of Gabriel Gardner's wife to court, claiming they owned what was left of Mitchelville and that Gabriel Gardner had stolen the property. Although this is a sad end to what was the birthplace of freedom for many Sea Island blacks, the court case does help us understand the village better during this period, since the court took extensive statements from people living in the village.

The daughter of March Gardner, Emmeline Washington, testified that a number of families were living at Mitchelville and farming three or four acre plots adjacent to their houses. The money that was collected for rent went to pay the taxes on the property. March Gardner, who was by trade a carpenter, had built a cotton gin, cotton house (for storing the

Port Royal Harbor



165 1/4 Acres  
on  
Hilton Head Isld.  
Formerly Property of  
March Gardner  
Surveyed Apr. 6-8, 1921  
by Arthur O. Christensen  
per Order of Court  
to divide same  
among the five heirs.

- E' Gabriel W. Gardner
- A' Lida Perry
- B' Clara Wigfall
- C' Emeline Washington
- D' ~~Charles~~ Gabriel Boston

Gabriel Gardner Est. has  
already sold from the whole  
tract, lots to the following:  
Lury Mattie  
Lida Perry  
Lucy Chisum  
Mary Washington  
Mary Abou  
Robena Braddock  
Julia Gibson  
John Scribner  
Mata Brown  
Cary Foster  
Francis Jones  
Church

Scale 1 in. = 200 ft.

See Judgement Roll  
Nt 2735

PLAT OF SURVEY NUMBER TWO  
NO SALE

This plat shows the modern boundaries of Mitchelville and how it was divided by the Beaufort County Court of Common Pleas in 1921. Only two houses are shown on the village by this date. The church at the southwestern edge of the property is still present today.

cotton), and steam powered grist mill on the property while it was still a village. He also built a shop on one of the Mitchelville roads, apparently near his own house, where he planted peas and cotton.

The court papers also name a number of the Mitchelville residents during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — John Nesbit, Bob Washington, Caesar White, Charles Robins, Charles Perry, Robert Wiley, Scapio Drayton, Jack Screven, Charles Pinckney, Billy Reed, Peter Flowers, Joe Williams, Hannah Williams, Stephen Singleton, Linda Perry, Renty Miller, and Clara Wigfall. One resident, Hannah Williams, explained how she had purchased a house in Mitchelville for \$5.

A number of individuals saw in Mitchelville an opportunity to make money. With the federal government leaving Hilton Head, and the blacks relatively illiterate, it was perhaps easy enough for Drayton's heirs to sell Mitchelville twice — first to March Gardner, and then, again, to his son, Gabriel Gardner. Mitchelville was not situated on prime agricultural land and the Draytons probably felt (correctly, it seems) that few planters would want to purchase a black town. March, and later his son Gabriel, however, began collecting rents on (and selling) property other blacks had been using for years. The town functioned, essentially, as a collective, tying all of the parties together. It is likely that many of those living in Mitchelville had done so for several decades.

The court directed that a survey be made and the property of Mitchelville be divided among the heirs upon each paying their share of the costs associated with the case. Eugenia Heyward redeemed her tract of 35 acres on June 7, 1923. Celia and Gabriel Boston obtain the adjacent tract on September 2, 1921. Linda Perry, Emmeline Washington, and Clara Wigfall also obtained their respective parcels in 1921.

By 1930 the 35-acre Eugenia Heyward tract was sold for \$31.00 by the Sheriff to pay a defaulted tax bill of \$15.00. The purchaser was Roy A. Rainey of New York, who was purchasing much of the island for exclusive hunting. As more and more of Hilton Head Island was sold, the black population was reduced from the nearly 3,000 on the island in 1890 to only about 300 in the late 1930s.

## *Archaeological Study of Mitchelville*

In 1986 the Hilton Head Museum funded Chicora Foundation archaeologists to examine a portion of the Mitchelville site that was in danger of being destroyed by development. That study provides the best archaeological account of the village we have and helps supplement the historical record.

The archaeologists explored four different houses on the property, finding not only evidence of fancy artifacts, probably looted from plantation houses, but also ample evidence of the consumer power of the freedmen. The blacks at Mitchelville turned their backs on many of the artifacts of slavery. They abandoned the use of annular ware bowls in favor of whiteware plates. The archaeologists also saw the increased use of decorative objects like blue beads and copper bracelets. At one level the Mitchelville blacks may have been mimicking the "master class," adopting and exaggerating traits they observed among plantation whites in the effort to distance themselves from slavery. But the use of these jewelry items also likely represents a retention of an earlier African tradition, similar to the survivals of basket making and naming practices.

Other differences between slavery and freedom were also found by the archaeologists. Medicine vials are not as common at Mitchelville as they are on plantations, suggesting that freedom brought better living conditions. And while tobacco pipes are very common at slave sites, they were rare at Mitchelville, suggesting again that freedom brought changes in the lifestyle of the Sea Island blacks.

Curiously, freedom was not equated with bigger houses. In fact, given the opportunity to build any size house they wanted (the wood was being provided free), Mitchelville's freedmen typically built houses substantially smaller than they had in slavery. This may also be related to their African roots and the importance of the yard area for family activities.

## *Can Mitchelville Be Preserved?*

Mitchelville is one of the most significant African-American archaeological sites in the Southeast. It is one of the few that is nearly intact and offers the potential to learn even more about the lives of the early freedmen. It provides another perspective to previous studies of the "Port Royal Experiment." The presence of Mitchelville also provides evidence of the ability of blacks to govern, educate, and care for themselves absent the bonds of slavery. A Freedman's Bureau officer in the South noted that the black people "love to congregate in families, in groups, in villages." This strong social bond, in part, may explain the cohesiveness of Mitchelville over its history as a town of nearly two decades. It may also help explain its continued existence into the twentieth century as a kin based community.

A portion of the site has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. A historical marker for the village has been approved by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History and funded by the Town of Hilton Head Island and Chicora Foundation.

But neither the significance of Mitchelville, nor the efforts taken to recognize that importance, ensure its survival. Mitchelville will be preserved only if the public believes that it is important to recognize — and save for future generations — the place where freedom began for South Carolina's plantation slaves during the Civil War.

## *For More Information*

If you would like more information about the history of the Civil War, Hilton Head, Mitchelville, African-American slavery, or the "Port Royal Experiment," look for these books and articles at your local library or ask your librarian to get them for you through Inter-library Loan.

Carse, Robert. 1981. *Department of the South: Hilton Head Island in the Civil War*. State Printing Company, Columbia.

Everett, Susanne. 1991. *History of Slavery*. Chartwell Books, Secaucus, New Jersey.

Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. 1984. *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. (with an introduction by Howard N. Meyer). W.W. Norton, New York.

- Holmgren, Virginia C. 1959. *Hilton Head Island: A Sea Island Chronicle*. Hilton Head Island Publishing Company, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.
- Hurmence, Belinda. 1989. *Before Freedom, When I Just Can Remember: Twenty-Seven Oral Histories of Former South Carolina Slaves*. John F. Blair, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
- Martin, Josephine W., editor. 1977. *"Dear Sister": Letters Written on Hilton Head Island, 1867*. Beaufort Book Company, Beaufort, South Carolina.
- Myers, Walter Dean. 1991. *Now Is Your Time!: The African-American Struggle for Freedom*. Harper Trophy, New York.
- Rose, Willie Lee. 1964. *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Trinkley, Michael, editor. 1986. *Indian and Freedman Occupation at the Fish Haul Site (38BU805), Beaufort County, South Carolina*. Research Series 7. Chicora Foundation, Inc., Columbia.

These books, about slavery and freedom, are especially good for younger readers:

- Hansen, Joyce. 1988. *Out From This Place*. Avon Books, New York.
- Lester, Julius. 1968. *To Be A Slave*. Scholastic, New York.
- McCurdy, Michael, editor. 1994. *Escape from Slavery: The Boyhood of Frederick Douglass in His Own Words*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.
- McKissack, Patricia C. and Frederick McKissack. 1992. *Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a Woman?* Scholastic, New York.

## What is Chicora Foundation?

Chicora began as a small, not-for-profit, public foundation more than a decade ago, with the lofty mission of preserving the archaeological, historical, and cultural resources of the Carolinas.

Today that means a wealth of innovative programs.

Like our school programs explaining Black and Native American history to children. "How-to" workshops for adults interested in preserving quilts, photos, and family Bibles. And our collaborative archaeology projects with leading business partners such as Kiawah Resort Associates, International Paper, and The Litchfield Company to explore both the history and prehistory of our region.

Chicora Foundation is the leader in showing that preservation is not only essential for us as a people, but good business as well. And we remain at the cutting edge of Southern studies with our monograph series, talks at professional meetings, and museum assistance programs.

*How can YOU help?* Please don't let our fragile heritage become extinct through gradual loss. Join with us in studying the past and teaching it to our future generations. Your generous financial gift to Chicora is a visible expression of your commitment to saving and preserving the important cultural heritage of the Carolinas.



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