

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN



VOLUME 40
NUMBER 3
AUGUST 2018

STATE OF BLACK MUSEUMS: HISTORIOGRAPHY
COMMEMORATING THE FOUNDING AND EXISTENCE
OF BLACK MUSEUMS OVER FOUR DECADES

THE JOURNAL OF
THE NATIONAL COUNCIL
ON PUBLIC HISTORY

McLeod Plantation Historic Site

Sowing Truth and Change

Shawn Halifax

ABSTRACT: In 2015 the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission opened McLeod Plantation Historic Site. What remains of the former 1,693-acre Sea Island cotton plantation is 37 acres, 14 historic structures, and an African American cemetery. Interpretation of the former plantation is focused on the African American struggle to achieve freedom, justice, and equality from 1851 through 1990. The cultural history interpretation coordinator and co-author of the National Association for Interpretation award winning-site explores the development, implementation, and adjustments made to interpretation since the opening and comments on the current state of Black museums in America.

KEY WORDS: African American museum, McLeod Plantation Historic Site, historic plantations, interpretive planning, interpretive training, theme-based interpretation

As I waited in the southbound lane, the drawbridge over Wappoo Creek made its slow descent. The red lights flashed, the bells rang, and the barricades lifted. My stomach was full of butterflies. I was about to embark on a project for the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission (Charleston County Parks) as it planned, stabilized, and preserved McLeod Plantation Historic Site (MPHS). My role was to research, plan, develop, and deliver interpretation.

The site is only three miles away and within sight of the famously preserved historic downtown area of Charleston, South Carolina. It is located in the middle of suburban Charleston, on James Island, from where the first shots of the American Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter, and behind Folly and Morris Islands—*islands made famous by the movie Glory and the brave men of the Massachusetts 54th USCT Regiment.* As I crossed the bridge to this little known island whose history is so critical to understanding our nation's long and bloody struggle over racism, discrimination, and the tentacle-like reach of slavery's legacy into the twenty-first century, I was anxious.

I do not like plantations. I know what plantations were and are, and I know from firsthand experience. Of course I do not know them from the same perspective as an enslaved person, or someone descended from enslaved people. Rather, my

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 252–277 (August 2018). ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576. © 2018 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.3.252>.

perspective is that of someone who has worked at plantations, as an interpretation and volunteer coordinator when I moved to Charleston in 1998 and more recently at one since 2013. What I know is that they are places that often purposefully hide their ugliness behind carefully manicured landscapes. Places perfect for the weddings of mostly ignorant couples who for decades have been fed misrepresentations and lies. Places that have denied their violent history and what happened there. Places that, even today, struggle to speak truth. Places that are often at the root of twenty-first century white supremacist ideology. So why work at a plantation? Good question, I ask myself the same question every . . . single . . . day.

At my first introduction to McLeod Plantation around 2001, I attended a meeting of stakeholders gathered to discuss the future of the plantation. The estate had been gifted to the Historic Charleston Foundation by William Ellis McLeod in 1990 when he passed away at the age of 104. He was the third generation owner and last McLeod to live there. After years of ownership, the Historic Charleston Foundation began searching for an organization to purchase, preserve, and open the property to the public. I accompanied Tom O'Rourke, the new executive director of Charleston County Parks. Throughout the meeting I kept quiet, listening to the discussion about possible futures for the site. Following the meeting, Tom pulled me aside, quietly but with firm conviction, and said, "If it is the last thing I do before retiring, Charleston County Parks will own McLeod Plantation, and we will tell the whole truth about its history."

What did Tom O'Rourke mean, "Tell the whole truth?" Soon after this initial meeting at the site, I went for my first tour. I listened intently as I was told that the beautiful home, with its towering white columned porch and alley of live oak trees, had survived the "War of Northern Aggression" because a "loyal" slave defended it from being torched by Union troops. The place was remarkably intact. It included the main house, barns, and storage buildings, dairy, kitchen, a cemetery, and six little white buildings—houses for enslaved people. One of them had been a praise house where enslaved people worshipped during the week and between Sunday church services. This is what I observed and was told during the tour. And, I wondered was this the truth, much less the whole truth?

True to Tom's word, Charleston County Parks purchased McLeod Plantation and renamed it McLeod Plantation Historic Site. So here I was, driving over the Wappoo Creek bridge, pulling in front of the white columned house and staring down the oak alley. I realized the butterflies in my stomach were because I was about to embark on something few plantations opened to the public had ever done: Tell, to the best of our abilities, the whole truth about this slave labor camp and its legacy, the bad and the good, the shameful and the uplifting.

Plantations as African American Museums?

This issue of *The Public Historian* focuses on the state of Black museums. According to the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), founded in 1978, an



View of the McLeod house from the oak alley, 2018. (Photo courtesy of Sea Island Media)

African American museum is an institution whose purpose is to “protect, preserve and interpret African, African-derived and African American art, history and culture . . . [and serves] the needs and interests of persons of African ancestry and those who wish to know more about the art, history and culture of African-derived cultures.”¹ The idea that plantations could be considered African American museums may seem nonsensical on face value. The absence or faulty treatment of African American history and culture at plantation museums is long and well documented.² Beginning just five years after the end of slavery in the United States, at least one plantation was already opened to the public, crafting landscapes and stories that effectively veiled these prison farms for what they were, refashioning them to appear more aesthetically pleasing to white audiences.³ As more plantations opened their doors to the public during the twentieth century, they produced representations of

¹ “Mission and History,” Association of African American Museums, accessed May 30, 2018, <https://aaam.wildapricot.org/missionandhistory>.

² There are many sources to consult; these are two I have found helpful: Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002) and David Butler, “Whitewashing Plantations: The Commodification and Social Creation of a Slave-free Antebellum South,” *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, 2, No.3/4 (2001): 164–175.

³ Magnolia Plantation and Gardens in Charleston, South Carolina opened to visitors in 1870: “Charleston’s Most Visited Plantation,” Magnolia Plantation & Gardens, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://www.magnoliaplantation.com/>.

plantation nostalgia for white visitors that ignored the accurate and total history of the plantation, including the ongoing roles of many plantation owners in the exploitation, discrimination, marginalization, and oppression of African Americans. For over one hundred years, plantation-owning families and organizations sought to attract tourists with their sanitized version of the past. Based on this history, it is understandable why many may find the thought of a plantation museum being identified as an African American museum a ridiculous one.

Today, many if not most historic plantations acknowledge or interpret African diasporic histories and cultures that existed within these landscapes to varying degrees. Here in Charleston, the movement to be more inclusive was largely spearheaded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Drayton Hall under the leadership of George McDaniel in the 1990s.⁴ In Darrow, Louisiana, Kathy Hambrick opened the River Road African American Museum at Tezcuco Plantation in 1994, yet the focus of interpretation at the site continued to largely espouse the "lost cause" and "gone with the wind" sentimental narratives.⁵ A shift occurred in 2014 and 2015, when two sites opened within a few months of each other in the Deep South that invited visitors to experience what could be described as African American museums situated within the plantation landscape—Whitney Plantation in Louisiana and MPHS.⁶ These two sites are the only ones I have found that declare their primary purpose is to interpret African American history and culture.⁷

Neither site has a mission statement per se. In the case of Whitney, according to Ashley Rogers, Director of Operations, the institution is in the process of creating a mission statement and related governing documents.⁸ However, on their

4 George McDaniel, "Asking Big Questions of a Small Place," *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. by Max van Balgooy (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 130.

5 Tezcuco opened to the public in 1983, but burned in 2002. I never visited the site, but based on descriptions of the site on-line it does not appear to me to have made African American history and culture its primary purpose. The River Road African American Museum is now opened in a historic home in Donaldson, Louisiana. For more, see: "History," River Road African American Museum, accessed March 17, 2018, <https://africanamericanmuseum.org/history/>.

6 Whitney Plantation opened in December, 2014 and McLeod Plantation Historic Site opened in April, 2015. For more, see: Paul Rosenfeld, "Why America Needs a Slavery Museum," *The Atlantic* April 25, 2015, video, <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/402172/the-only-american-museum-about-slavery/>; "Opening Information and Background," Charleston County Parks, accessed March 17, 2018, <https://www.ccprc.com/DocumentCenter/View/10142>.

7 In 2008 the Association of African American Museums published their study, "Assessment of the Field: African American Cultural Organizations." In this study, 159 museums and organizations that responded to a survey and met criteria set by the AAAM were identified as African American cultural organizations. A review of the participating institutions responding to the survey revealed none that identified as a plantation museum based on the name of their organization. Only 20% of respondents said the topics and themes of their permanent exhibitions addressed "slavery/abolition/underground railroad." See: Jeff Hayward and Brian Werner, *Assessment of the Field: African American Cultural Organizations* (unpublished research report, Association of African American Museums, 2008), accessed March 29, 2018, https://aaam.wildapricot.org/Resources/Documents/AAAM_2008_Assessment_of_the_Field_Sept-08.pdf.

8 Ashley Rodgers, email message to Shawn Halifax, March 16, 2018.

webpage the site claims, “Through museum exhibits, memorial artwork and restored buildings and hundreds of first-person slave narratives, visitors to Whitney will gain a unique perspective on the lives of Louisiana’s enslaved people.”⁹

Because Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission owns MPHS, the site’s mission statement is broad and not specific to the historic plantation.¹⁰ However, the Interpretation Master Plan includes a vision statement that reads, “McLeod Plantation will be one of our nation’s foremost locations for interpreting the African American transition to freedom in Charleston, South Carolina, and the American South.” And, within the “Goals” section of the Master Plan, the site aspires to, “Express a unified narrative of African American history, culture, heritage, and art throughout the site.”¹¹

From an interpretive perspective, perhaps one of the greatest differences between these two sites is that at MPHS the focus on the experiences of African Americans does not end with the abolishment of slavery, as if the challenges raised by generations of slavery were somehow solved with the close of the American Civil War. Instead, MPHS continues to trace the unfinished story through Reconstruction, the reemergence of white political and social domination in the South through the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement in the late twentieth century. Furthermore, the interpretation at MPHS seeks to focus on specific individuals that occupied the site since the 1850s. It is not just limited to the enslaved, freedpeople, and their descendants, but also the complicated relationships they formed throughout the period with the white McLeod family and other white powerbrokers that shared the same spaces.

The Significance of the McLeod Plantation Historic Site

McLeod Plantation Historic Site is historically significant for at least three reasons. First, it is a Sea Island cotton plantation where between seventy-four and one hundred people were enslaved. Few Sea Island cotton plantations survive that are open to the public. Sea Island cotton was a cash crop of the coastal sea islands and barrier islands from Charleston, south to northern Florida. Men, women, and children like Pompey “Hardtimes” Dawson, his wife Judy, and their children, were forced to cultivate for William Wallace McLeod the finest cotton produced in the world at the time.¹²

9 “Whitney Plantation,” Whitney Plantation, accessed March 17, 2018 <http://whitneyplantation.com/index.html>.

10 The mission of The Charleston County Park & Recreation Commission is to “improve the quality of life in Charleston County by offering a diverse system of park facilities, programs, and services.” See: “About Us,” Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, accessed March 17, 2018, <https://www.cprc.com/3/About-Us>.

11 Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, *McLeod Plantation Master Interpretive Plan*, (Charleston, SC: Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, 2013), 15, 17.

12 “Annie Dawson,” *Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Widows and Other Dependents of Civil War and Later Navy Veterans, 1861–1910*, NWO# 17424, NARA Publication M1279, National

Second, it was occupied by the proto-insurrectionist state, otherwise known as the Confederacy, in its defense of Charleston. Artillery units rented the newly constructed main house from the McLeod's for their officers to live. It briefly served as headquarters for the commanding general of Confederate troops on James Island, the keystone of Charleston's defenses. The general's name—and this is not a nickname—was States Rights Gist.¹³

Third, and perhaps most significant, was the fact that it was occupied by the United States Army, including the Massachusetts 55th USCT Regiment.¹⁴ George Smothers, a private in the 55th, was born near Roanoke, Virginia. As a young boy, he, his mother, and brother emancipated themselves by crossing the Appalachian Mountains and down in to the Ohio River Valley, before finally settling in eastern Indiana.¹⁵ Smothers proudly left his signature on the third floor of the main house. Following Smothers and his fellow soldiers' reassignment elsewhere in April of 1865, the plantation became the James Island field office for the United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau) until about 1868.¹⁶

The McLeod family would eventually reoccupy the property in 1870, but that was after it had been divided into forty-four acre plots for freedpeople. Seventh on the list of freedpeople who held legal title to forty acres was the son of Hardtimes and Judy, William Dawson. William at twenty-one risked his life to secure his freedom by carefully maneuvering in and around thousands of Confederate troops to reach a United States naval gun boat patrolling in the mouth of the Stono River. His status changed from enslaved to contraband after successfully securing his safety behind United States lines. Less than a year later, his status changed again after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation when he joined the United States Navy as a Marine. And, in March 1865, William Dawson claimed his status as landowner.¹⁷

Most, if not all, of those forty-four title holders were unable to retain ownership in the face of President Andrew Johnson's orders for abandoned plantations to be

Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; Richard D. Porcher and Sarah Fick, *The Story of Sea Island Cotton*, (Charleston, SC: Wyrick & Company, 2005) 95–96.

13 *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1, vol. 14, ch.26 (Washington DC: Government Printing Press, 1885), 812.

14 Charles B. Fox, *Record of Service of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, (Cambridge, MA: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1868), 65–66; Richard M. Reid, *Practicing Medicine in a Black Regiment: The Civil War Diary of Burt G. Wilder, 55th Massachusetts*, (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 225.

15 "Isabell Smothers," *Case File of Approved Applications of Widows and other Dependents*, George Smothers Folder, McLeod Plantation Property Files, Margareta Childs Archives, (Charleston, SC: Historic Charleston Foundation).

16 Reid, *Practicing Medicine*, 257; Freedmen's Bureau, "Records of the Assistant Commissioner, 1865–1872, South Carolina," Roll 32, Register of Restoration Orders, Dec 1865-Feb 1866 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1969–1980), image 151.

17 Freedmen's Bureau, "Records of the Assistant Commissioner, 1865–1872, South Carolina," Roll 44, other records, 1865–1867 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1969–1980), images 15–24; United States, "Annie Dawson, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Widows and Other Dependents."

returned to the white owners who had deserted their properties during the war.¹⁸ Today, Dawson family tradition maintains that their family still owns the land obtained under Sherman's Special Order no. 15.¹⁹

Developing History Interpretation

Charleston County Parks has never owned a property with such significant and well-preserved resources as MPHS. The agency owns over eleven thousand acres of land and operates fishing piers, a marina, equestrian center, water theme parks, beaches, dog parks, a skate park, a climbing wall, wedding facilities, an archery course, recreation parks, and rural recreation leagues, and offers recreation classes like canoeing, kayaking, and stand-up paddle-boarding. Its primary purpose is to improve the quality of life in Charleston County, not to preserve and interpret history. Stewardship of natural, historical and cultural resources, however, is one of the agency's core values.²⁰

The facility most similar to MPHS that Charleston County Parks owns and operates is Caw Caw Interpretive Center (Caw Caw). This site houses the county parks' Interpretation and Stewardship department. The center is a wilderness preserve made up of parts of several historic plantations whose former rice fields are managed for wildlife. Caw Caw, however, is not just a wildlife preserve. It is a site once assailed by the Angolan Jemmy and the largest group of self-emancipating people in British North America, during what became known as the Stono Slave Rebellion, made famous by historian Peter Wood in his groundbreaking 1974 book *Black Majority*.

I first started working for Charleston County Parks in 1999, six months before Caw Caw opened, as the agency's first history specialist. Although we knew the site included quite intact former rice fields, we did not know at the time about the site's role in the Stono Rebellion in 1739.²¹ As the first cultural history specialist, I was

18 Freedmen's Bureau, "Records of the Assistant Commissioner, 1865-1872, South Carolina," Roll 32, Register of Letters A.P. Ketuchum, Endorsements Sent, Nov 1865-Mar 1866 (Washington DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1969-1980), image 64.

19 The author and others continue to research William Dawson and family. William Dawson's grandson (also a military veteran) is buried in the cemetery at MPHS. Many descendants of William live on James Island. The author has shared Annie Dawson's widow pension files and Freedman's Bureau Records related to William Dawson with them. Documentary evidence of the Dawson family holding title to land continuously since March of 1866 is inconclusive, but research is ongoing. Pompey "Hardtimes" Dawson, father of William Dawson, is listed in the 1870 census as a farmer, indicating that he was a landowner on James Island 5 years later. Charleston County Register of Mesne Conveyance records label land later owned by the Dawson family as "Negro Land." These lands are located along the border of McLeod Plantation as it was in 1878 when the plantation was inherited and divided between three children of William Wallace McLeod. This inconclusive documentary evidence does not contradict family tradition.

20 "About Us," Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission.

21 Charleston County Parks, in cooperation with the National Park Service, is currently engaged in amending the 1974 National Historic Landmark designation for the Stono Rebellion to include Caw Caw.



Rice trunk used for irrigating former rice fields at Caw Caw, ca. 2000. (Photo courtesy of the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission)

responsible for researching and interpreting the site's history. During planning it was decided that to effectively tell the story of its natural history, the history of its landscape needed to be told as well. As a young historian and interpreter, I learned the story of West Africans stolen and brought to South Carolina because of their knowledge and experience growing rice. This became paramount to telling the history of the place. Therefore, the focus of our interpretation became African and African American history and culture. It was because of this emphasis that I stumbled across evidence pointing to its role in the attempts by enslaved Africans to reach Spanish Florida and freedom in 1739.²²

The audience response to the public history program at Caw Caw was positive. People were astonished to learn of the knowledge and labor enslaved Africans and their descendants were forced to impart. More importantly, visitors began to understand the ability to persevere on the part of enslaved people, evidenced by the Gullah Geechee culture of African Americans in the rice growing coastal regions of the Carolinas, Georgia, and north Florida that continues to flourish in

²² Mark Smith, ed., *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 14; J. H. Easterby, ed., *The Colonial Records of South Carolina—The Journal of the Commons House Committee, September 12, 1739-March 26 1741*, (Columbia, SC: The Historical Commission of South Carolina, 1952) 63–66; Shawn Halifax, “The Colonial History of Caw Caw Interpretive Center,” (Charleston, SC: Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, 2005), 13–20.

the region today.²³ Cultural history interpretation at Charleston County Parks developed and grew and became instrumental for the interpretative lens of MPHS.

Because Charleston County Parks' primary purpose is not the preservation and interpretation of cultural history, my supervisor, Mark Madden, and fellow interpreters decided it was strategically important to demonstrate the value of interpretation to the agency. The department developed a strategic plan that included goals to professionalize our department. Subsequently, I obtained professional certifications from the National Association for Interpretation (NAI) that included tour guide, heritage interpreter, interpretive planner, and interpretation trainer.

Our successes in demonstrating the value of interpretation to the agency led to supervisor Mark Madden being included in every step of the planning process for MPHS. He was successful in convincing the organization that interpretive planning should go hand-in-hand with master planning. He and others within the organization were also effective in convincing the park system that the interpretation and visitor experience at MPHS should be different from what people experience at other historic plantations in the region.

Getting the Story Right

A primary question we needed to answer at MPHS was what would be interpreted. Charleston County Parks conducted public listening sessions and administered surveys to plot a course forward. The top three responses from surveys about what topics should be interpreted revealed 83 percent of respondents thought interpretation should be about life on a sea island; 72 percent wanted priority placed on American Civil War history; and 69 percent desired the lives and history of African Americans on James Island to be explored. It should be pointed out that for most of the history of James Island the majority of residents were Gullah Geechee, and most African Americans living on the island today are Gullah Geechee. The mandate seemed clear, until one looked at the rest of the responses. Respondents interested in history were least interested in learning about slavery, tenant farming, and the Freedman's Bureau, perhaps a contradiction that belies the complexity of our nation's history.²⁴

Charleston County Parks recognized that other historic plantations and sites in the Charleston region were already interpreting many important topics of Charleston's history. We took into careful consideration that only a few miles away were

²³ For more information on Gullah Geechee people and their culture, see: "Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor," National Parks Service, accessed May 30, 2018 <https://www.nps.gov/guge/index.htm>.

²⁴ Third most desired was a tie at 69% between "African American life" and "historic use of waterways." The least desired among history topics were "enslavement" (42%), "tenant farming" (39%), and "Freedmen's Bureau" (36%). "Suburban development" (17%) and "other" (4%) were the least desired overall. See: Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, appendix C to McLeod Plantation Master Plan, (Charleston, SC: Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, 2012), 3.

some of the most famous historic plantations in the United States. Middleton Place, the family seat of Arthur and Henry Middleton, signer of the Declaration of Independence and President of the Continental Congress, respectively, is home to the oldest formally landscaped gardens in the United States. Drayton Hall, built in the 1700s, is the nation's earliest and best example of Palladian architecture in America. Magnolia Plantation and Gardens has been open to the public since the 1870s. Over the Cooper River in Mount Pleasant is Boone Hall, a former brick-making plantation made famous in movies like *North and South*. Therefore, we asked ourselves where did McLeod Plantation Historic Site fit into Charleston's historic plantation landscape?

We concluded that because the most significant aspects of the site's history and most of the buildings on the site date from the middle part of the 1800s that we would begin telling our history when the McLeod family purchased the property in 1851. Coincidentally, the 1850s were also when the compromises over slavery that had held the nation together were beginning to unravel. We looked at the other historic plantations in the area and learned that nearly all of the sites that interpret Charleston's history effectively end in 1865, leading visitors to the historic city to perhaps think that history here froze with the closing of the Civil War.

But of course the story did not end with the war. What was this place like in the 1870s, the 1920s, the 1950s, or the 1980s? We knew William Ellis McLeod lived in the main house until 1990. We knew that he did not live alone on the former plantation. At least one descendant of the people his grandfather enslaved also lived on the property in 1990. His name was John Gathers. He lived in a home built by enslaved people for enslaved people—125 years after his ancestors were freed. He paid twenty-five dollars a month to live in a former slave home with electricity, but no water. His daughter, born in 1945 at McLeod, walked three miles to attend Cut Bridge School. The schoolhouse where her classes were held was built in 1868 as a segregated public school for Blacks.²⁵ Although she was not a famous civil rights leader, her story is similar to so many African American children living in the South at the time and provides a glimpse into what it was like to live during a period when the fight over desegregation of schools was raging and the State of South Carolina was doing all it could to fight desegregation.

So the period of interpretation was somewhat unique for a historic plantation. We ultimately decided on the necessity of spanning interpretation from 1851 to 1990. In contrast to other historic plantations, the twentieth century is not just an afterthought. The stories we tell are barely beginning when the first shots are fired on Fort Sumter and end with the beginning of the last decade of twentieth century.

We knew little of the plantation's history when we started, even less than what we thought we knew. The only comprehensive history of the site was a draft document with a bibliography, but no footnotes. Unfortunately, the master

25 R. Gathers, telephone conversation with author, April 21, 2014.



In 1990, John Gathers, a descendent of Hanna and Gable Gathers, both enslaved by the McLeod family, was living in this former slave dwelling. (Photo courtesy of the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission)

planners relied heavily on this document to create the contextual history, but failed to check the sources in the draft history's bibliography. The unreliability became apparent when while preparing text for the exhibit panels repeated instances of sources being misquoted were revealed. So we were forced to research the site's history while simultaneously developing interpretation. Notably, some things we learned during the course of this research countered what I heard on my first tour back in 2001.

Yes, the home survived the American Civil War, but it looks different today. The towering white columned porch and alley of live oak trees were built and planted in the 1910s and 1920s to reinvent the plantation into a destination for tourists to visit.²⁶ Additionally, although the house may have been saved by an enslaved person, it is unlikely that it was intentionally torched by "Yankee" troops. The house was perhaps the most protected and strategic house on James Island. It was largely out of reach of United States guns during the war and as soon as Confederate troops abandoned Charleston, US troops occupied the house and established regimental headquarters there.²⁷ The alleged praise house turned out to be a much more compelling building. It was a chapel for the Children of God Mission, which operated out of the homes of several formerly

²⁶ McLeod family, *McLeod Family Papers, 1873–1990*, (Charleston, SC: South Carolina Historical Society).

²⁷ Fox, *Record of Service of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, 67.

enslaved in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁸ Only now are we beginning to uncover a larger and more complete truth.²⁹

Thematic Interpretation

From the outset it was determined that the interpretive planning at MPHS would follow NAI's prescribed approach to interpretation. The firm Design Minds was contracted to assist in the creation of interpretation at the site. Requirements listed in the "Request for Proposals" included that the successfully selected firm must be NAI Certified Interpretive Planners.³⁰

The NAI approach and methodology to interpretation is theme-based interpretation, rather than topic-based. A theme conveys a message; a topic is the subject matter of the theme. For example, "the lives and history of African Americans on James Island" is a topic. However, "The story of African Americans at McLeod Plantation Historic Site represents the long struggle for personal and cultural freedom at this site, in this region, and throughout the South," is a theme. Themes serve several purposes. Themes address why the interpretation matters; themes help interpreters select and organize relevant information; themes make interpretation more memorable for the audience; themes link audiences to tangible resources with intangible concepts in meaningful ways.

As the corrective research on MPHS was being conducted, we crafted a primary theme and four sub-themes:

²⁸ R. Gathers, telephone conversation with author.

²⁹ The interpretation planning team relied almost exclusively on primary source documents to develop the interpretive themes and narratives for the site. The primary sources relied upon include: Eugene Frazier Sr., *James Island: Stories from Slave Descendants*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2006) and *James Island: Slave Descendants and Plantation Owners*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010); Charles B. Fox's *Record of Service of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, (Cambridge, MA: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1868); *McLeod Family Papers* (Charleston, SC: South Carolina Historical Society); *McLeod Plantation Property Files*, (Charleston, SC: Margareta Childs Archives at Historic Charleston Foundation); Richard Reid, *Practicing Medicine in a Black Regiment: The Civil War Diary of Burt G. Wilder, 55th Massachusetts* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010); *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Press, 1885); United States, *Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Record Group 105)*; United States, *Census Records*.

³⁰ Sources used for interpretive planning at MPHS include: Larry Beck and Ted T. Cable, *The Gifts of Interpretation: Fifteen Guiding Principles for Interpreting Nature and Culture*, 3rd ed., (Urbana, IL: Sagmore Publishing, 2011); Lisa Brochu, *Interpretation Planning: the Five M Model for Successful Planning*, 2nd ed., (Fort Collins, CO: Interp Press, 2013); Sam H. Ham, *Interpretation: Making A Difference on Purpose*, (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2013); Antoinette T. Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2012); William Lewis, *Interpreting for Park Visitors*, (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2011); Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4th ed., (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Primary Theme:

The Transition to Freedom: The story of African Americans at McLeod Plantation Historic Site represents the long struggle for personal and cultural freedom at this site, in this region, and throughout the South.

Sub-Themes

1. *The natural and cultural history at McLeod Plantation Historic Site influenced each another, and contributed to its evolving landscape and architecture and in the establishment of the Lowcountry's enduring Gullah culture.*
2. *Life at McLeod Plantation Historic Site was shaped by the dynamic relationships between people, place and values, illustrating the evolving social, political and economic tensions of American society that culminated in the Civil War.*
3. *McLeod Plantation Historic Site's strategic importance caused unusual and dramatic change to the plantation and for its residents during the Civil War and Reconstruction.*
4. *Following the Civil War and Reconstruction, McLeod Plantation Historic Site and its residents formed new relationships as American society continued to strive for social, political and economic freedom and justice for its citizens.³¹*

All of the interpretation developed around these themes at MPHS illustrated the ongoing struggle of African Americans at McLeod to obtain freedom and recognized that though their individual experiences were unique, their struggle was similar to African Americans across the South. Themes are crucial because every sentence, whether it was eventually included in the trailside exhibit signs, the brochure, the phone application, marketing (including social media), public tours and programs, or any other interpretive media being developed, or to be developed, should be subjected to the following questions:

1. How does this support the primary theme?
2. How does this support a secondary theme?
3. Is there a better story to share that illustrates the theme?
4. Will the audience understand why this is important?

Finally, we were ready to begin crafting the interpretation. For months, we labored over the exhibit copy to be used in the various types of interpretive media. We argued and critiqued our writing in an attempt to ultimately answer those four questions. We asked our team of consulting historians to review our interpretation and took it to public meetings on James Island for members of the local community

³¹ Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, *McLeod Plantation Master Interpretive Plan*, 50.



Interpreter Olivia Williams leads a tour at McLeod Plantation Historic Site, 2018. (Photo courtesy of Sea Island Media)

to respond. We wrote and rewrote the interpretation. Finally, the looming date for opening day on April 25, 2015, forced us to stop, ready or not.³²

Gatekeeping at Historic Plantations

It is worth taking a moment to note that the two primary authors of the interpretive media, including me, are middle-aged white males. This speaks to a much larger issue at historic plantations. We rightfully deserve critical skepticism. Our race, age, and gender make us examples of the old guard when it comes to the field of history. The fact of the matter is that there are very few people of color working in supervisory or decision-making levels at historic plantations. Many African Americans often do not visit historic sites because too frequently their history is not shared. I believe this is partially a result of traditional approaches to the gatekeeping of historical information. So how can the history being shared at plantation sites be more inclusive and reflective of our nation's racial and ethnic fabric while the gatekeepers of this history continue to be the old guard? Below is the approach we used and continue to use. I think of it as a bridge until there is more diversity among gatekeepers. I share it in case it is helpful to others.

³² McLeod Plantation Historic Site and Design Minds were awarded the 1st place Interpretive Media Award by the National Association for Interpretation in the category for wayside exhibits in 2015. The Interpretive Media Awards promote excellence in the delivery of natural, cultural, and historical non-personal interpretive services. See: "NAI Awards Programs," National Association for Interpretation, accessed March 26, 2018, http://www.interpnet.com/NAI/interp/Resources/Awards_Programs/Media_Awards/nai/_resources/Media_Awards.

First, in our role as “gatekeepers” we had to begin listening to people that are reflective of our nation’s fabric with an open mind. Stop talking and listen. I started with social media. I engaged in conversations with friends and colleagues, mostly listening and asking questions. I attended public forums to listen. I watched documentaries and listened to podcasts that were from African American perspectives. I found I had nothing to lose by closing my mouth and opening my mind. In fact, I only had the world to gain. I realized it was only after I started listening that I could begin to understand. This led me to effectively engage in meaningful interpretation.

Second, I had to develop empathy for the marginalized people of the past and the present. This required a level of self-awareness I had to develop and practice. It is deeply personal, and some people may not be able to understand what self-awareness means, much less develop and practice it. In my experience it took personal loss and a search for purpose before I was capable. I became not just aware of my biases and my prejudices, but able to understand their cause, and what to do about them. I had to examine my own fragility as a white male. It has made me better equipped to recognize when I am not practicing empathy and how to get myself back on course. Self-awareness is a tool I use every day.

Third, we decentralized the gate-keeping. The traditional model of a curator or historian is *part* of the problem, I think. My experience in historic plantation settings with limited staff is that interpretation can be more effective once the content experts adjust and serve more as resources and guides. In our experience, the benefits of entrusting interpreters with a large amount of responsibility far outweigh the risks. It demonstrates a desire for openness and transparency and builds trust; it provides interpreters with opportunities to develop critical skills of analysis; it creates opportunities for multiple perspectives to be considered; and helps check institutional biases.

Finally, we are patiently building trust with stakeholders. Historic plantations have made it abundantly clear through their actions over the years that not all people of color are desired as guests or employees, other than in maintenance, housekeeping, or landscaping roles. Until plantation sites change what they do and how they do it by listening and developing inclusive and empathetic interpretation and interactions, I believe trust will remain elusive. We will continue to have few people of color visiting and even fewer applying and interviewing for positions of leadership. Trust is earned, so we must earn it.

All of this is a suggested bridge until historic plantation museums become more diverse at the decision-making levels. Could our interpretive planning at MPHS have been better if the writers were more diverse? Absolutely.

Unveiling McLeod Plantation Historic Site

The best way to experience the site is by taking a guided tour or participating in one of our programs. For all of the careful and meticulous writing of labels, brochures,



The original team of interpreters at McLeod Plantation Historic Site, 2015. Left to Right: Christine Mitchell, Paul Garbarini, Amanda Roper, and Sara Daise. (Photo courtesy of the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission)

and smartphone apps, the most powerful and authentic way is to let one of the interpreters be the conduit for the former inhabitants. Let their passion paint a picture of the lives of the people who lived here. Although the authors of the written interpretation are part of the old guard of gatekeepers and susceptible to justified criticism from those of us that advocate for diversity in the gatekeeping of historic information, the site counters with its approach to tours and face-to-face interpretation.

In February 2015, we hired four individuals as the first cohort of interpreters. We could not have had a better group of committed and passionate individuals. To prepare for the unknown, we started with interpretive training. We prepared the interpreters using NAI's approach to interpretation, which requires individual interpreters to develop necessary research skills to become intimately familiar with history. It stresses the importance of knowing audiences and audience behaviors, as well as interpretive techniques and media that will most effectively impact those audiences. Finally, NAI's approach uses the theme as the foundation of all interpretation at the site. The goal is to impact how people think about and relate to history and provoke a change in their attitude or behavior toward the history. Each interpreter was given the contextual narrative for the site, linking the known primary sources and some secondary sources regarding the site's history. They learned about the theme based on the NAI's interpretation approach to history in a three-day workshop. They were given two months to craft their tours. The only requirements were that the tours had to be forty-five to sixty minutes, had to

support the primary theme and subthemes of the site, and had to follow the interpretive methodology spelled out in their training.

As part of the training, we discussed how people might respond to the interpretation and role played different scenarios. The only thing that I felt unsure about was how well prepared interpreters would be for visitors that resisted and disagreed with our interpretation, and how that could impact them. I vividly remember leaning on a table looking at the four faces in front of me—two white, two Black and saying, “We’ve never really done this before and I have an idea, but am not completely sure of what it will be like for you.” My gaze shifted, “but I truly have no idea what it will be like for you,” as I met the eyes of the two Black interpreters. I really did not, and could not know.

In the last week of April, 2015, we held a press conference before the opening ceremonies at MPHS later that week. I stood in front of the microphone and welcomed the twenty or so reporters. I shared with them how this site would be different in that we were looking at this plantation site from multiple perspectives, particularly the perspectives of the enslaved and their descendants. When I opened for questions, a reporter asked if I thought it was appropriate to share the horrific stories of slavery. I looked at him, paused, took a deep breath, and was just about to answer. Tom O’Rourke, still the executive director all these years later, nudged me aside, stepped up to the microphone and said, “At McLeod Plantation Historic Site, Charleston County Parks is committed to telling the whole truth of what happened here.” He went on to add that Charleston County Parks fully endorsed and supported the interpretation presented and if anyone had an issue with it they could talk with him. I could not have answered the reporter better. Without institutional support from the top, I do not believe that what we had set out to do would be remotely possible. That support would become imperative in the coming weeks, following the violence that rocked our city.

Charleston, June 17, 2015: Gunman kills Nine Worshippers in Charleston Church

The same week as our opening ceremonies which included the pouring of libations and an appeal to the ancestors who had once been enslaved here to bless the endeavor; the dramatic reading of “Freedom’s Plow” by Langston Hughes; and a powerful message from a descendent of Stephen and Harriet Forrest, a man and wife once enslaved on McLeod Plantation, a young man visited McLeod Plantation Historic Site. He took at least three photos of himself. One in front of a former dwelling for enslaved people, one in front of the McLeod house, and one in front of the African and African American Cemetery at the site. Two months later, on the night of Tuesday, June 17, 2017, that same man walked into Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church on Calhoun Street in downtown Charleston and ruthlessly murdered nine worshippers.

Within days it was realized that Dylann Roof had visited MPHS the week of our opening. For the interpreters, the newly opened site—dedicated as a sacred place of

memory to the enslaved and victims of racism and discrimination—had been desecrated. The violence at Mother Emanuel and Roof’s visit to our site had a profound impact on the psyche of interpreters. It made all of the interpreters hyperaware of the distinct danger we face because of the subject matter of our interpretation. Racism and its violent supporters have always been here, and are now re-emerging as a visible force within our country in what appears to be a regular cycle.³³

If I had been unsure of the response visitors may have had to our interpretation before we opened, I was now fully aware, at least of what it could be in its most violent form. I was angry, angry at Roof, but also angry at myself. I did not adequately fulfill the primary purpose of my job, which was to provide the interpreters the resources they needed to successfully and safely execute their jobs. I immediately set about making changes. I would not be satisfied until I had secured the resources they needed.

Adjustments to Interpretation

First, we created space for interpreters to safely vent their fears, anger, frustration, and hurt when visitors make racist comments or ask racist questions. We have observed that inappropriate comments and questions are disproportionately directed at interpreters on a scale based on age, gender, and race or ethnicity. The most egregious are directed at young women of color, followed by young white women. Older white male interpreters receive inappropriate comments and questions much less frequently. Interpreters of color have shared with me that it is difficult to not take racist comments, even the most ignorant ones, as a personal affront and attack. In response, we, together as a group, created a very supportive atmosphere, one where sympathy and compassion for one another is the rule. One of the most effective tools has been the introduction of a shared journal. Interpreters use the journal to record visitor questions and comments that demonstrate lack of understanding of issues related to slavery and its legacy, or that are offensive. We use the journal as a reference for one-on-one coaching following an incident and for group discussions during staff meetings. It is of great help to interpreters as they process experiences that impact them emotionally.

However, even with these efforts I was not satisfied that interpreters were as prepared as they needed. I continued searching for training resources to help interpret slavery and its legacy in a way that was sustainable. For a daily practitioner of interpretation, much of what has been available until recently failed to address the psychological and the pedagogical impediments experienced by both visitors and interpreters when talking about slavery and its legacy. Interpreters and their supervisors need *accessible, meaningful, and practical* suggestions and methodology for improving interpretation.

³³ Although it is out of the purview of this piece, a critical question is raised by Dylann Roof’s actions at the site: how do plantation sites inspire white supremacist fantasies, attitudes, and actions?

Perhaps serendipitously, during my search for appropriate training resources, the American Association of State and Local History's Interpreting History book series published three important books: Julia Rose's *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*; a book of essays edited by Max Van Balgooy, *Interpreting African American History at Museums and Historic Sites*; and a second book of essays edited by Kristin Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*.

Using these three books as well as the NAI's theme-based interpretation methodology, I created training that I have now given at various sites, that addresses and presents strategies for interpreting slavery and its legacy.³⁴ The workshop entitled the Ethical Interpretation of Slavery and its Legacy, explores pedagogical and psychological impediments for visitors learning difficult history; stresses the importance for interpreters to explore their own identities and their own thoughts and beliefs related to racism, slavery, and the legacy of slavery; provides methods for creating corrective narratives to the traditional narrative visitors expect to hear at historic plantations; instructs on how to recognize when corrective narratives are emotionally and cognitively disruptive to learners, including interpreters themselves as they learn new information while preparing their interpretations; and teaches how they can respond to the dissonance in a way that is respectful to the guest, but offers emotional protection for themselves. The training provides access to tools important to increasing confidence in interpreting corrective histories that challenge learners and encourages the development of empathy for the histories of traditionally marginalized people and learners challenged by the new corrective narratives.

Following the racial violence in Charleston, we made sure training at MPHS not only addressed emotional safety, but physical safety, too. We instituted mandatory active shooter training that goes beyond "Run, Hide, Fight," to include site specific mapping of escape routes in a landscape so open and easily accessible from many directions as McLeod Plantation Historic Site is. We developed training and procedures for interpreters to employ when they felt threatened by disruptive guests using silent alarms via two-way radios. Equally important, we made it a priority to help interpreters recognize symbols associated with white terror organizations in order to quickly identify potentially disruptive and violent visitors.

Although I recognize one cannot identify every scenario that could threaten emotional and physical safety, I am much more confident that interpreters are now better prepared to do their sensitive and difficult work at MPHS. All of the

³⁴ The workshop training is drawn from the personal experiences and those of my interpretive colleagues at MPHS and others in the field of interpretation. In addition, the training largely draws from Julia Rose's Commemorative Museum Pedagogy outlined in her book *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016). It is also drawn from chapters by Amanda G. Seymour, Kristin Gallas and James DeWolf Perry in *Interpreting African American History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2015) and chapters by Kristin Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, Patricia Brooks, and Nicole Moore in *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2015).



The 2018 National Museum of African American History and Culture Interpretation Workshop attendees and facilitators. (Photo courtesy of Sea Island Media)

interpreters are keenly aware of the importance of the work they do. There is a general feeling that revealing the meanings inherent in a resource like MPHS and telling research-verified truths is how we contribute to the national conversation on race and equality in a meaningful way. Mother Emanuel and Charlottesville, as well as the current state of politics are certainly accelerating that drive and creating a sense of urgency. Interpreters believe what they do is a calling, not just a job for a paycheck.

As these events and subsequent changes unfolded at MPHS, Charleston County Parks was approached by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) to partner in offering an interpretation workshop for members of the Association of African American Museums in interpreting African American history and culture. The goals of the workshop were to recognize museum professionals engaged in the interpretation of African American history and culture; provide professional development opportunities for museum professionals to make outstanding contributions to interpretation at their museum or historic site; and offer interpretive training that leads to individuals obtaining Certified Interpretive Guide status from the National Association for Interpretation. While planning for the NMAAHC workshop evolved, I was developing the Ethical Interpretation of Slavery and its Legacy training. As I continued work on both workshops, it became increasingly clear the two needed to be combined.

The workshop is an intense fifty-hour training over six days in the theory and practice of interpretation, combining the NAI Certified Interpretive Guide curriculum with the workshop Ethical Interpretation of Slavery and its Legacy. Sessions are a combination of activities, facilitated dialogue, and site visits to four distinctly different museums. The visits provide an opportunity for participants to analyze different approaches to interpretation through the lens of what they are learning in the workshop. The week culminates with participants completing an exam of interpretation literature and the delivery of a ten-minute interpretive presentation utilizing methodology taught in the workshop. The partnership has expanded and today it is presented with sponsorship by AAAM, NAI and the Southeastern Museum's Conference. We have conducted three of these workshops with thirty-seven participants from around the country and the Caribbean.

This workshop has been the most rewarding work of my career, to date. The tragedy at Mother Emanuel and the profound impact it had on me and my colleagues inspired me to change how we do what we do. I have learned that Charleston County Parks is not the only museum or historic site wanting to change how to interpret slavery and its legacy. Perhaps most importantly, it has impressed in me the importance of taking what we have learned about interpreting history at a plantation and sharing it with others who also want to change the narrative at plantation and antebellum house museums, but are not sure how to do it. The synchronicity of the NMAAHC partnership and the events at Mother Emanuel inspired me to dig deeper, and when I could not find what was needed, I created it. The workshop helped me understand that I could do more to help others who are struggling to make change happen.

Art Reveals Truths

One of the challenges at McLeod Plantation Historic Site is the stigma among many Black Americans around visiting a plantation. For some, it is based on an aversion to historic sites that have a poor track record of accurately sharing the history of such places. Because their history is not reflected there, or is marginalized and romanticized, they choose not to visit and have a poor assessment of these places. There are others from different racial and ethnic backgrounds that refuse to visit historic plantations, for the same reasons.

Anecdotally, I have been told that African Americans make up less than 1 percent of visitors to historic plantations. According to a 2016 survey conducted not long after it opened, 11 percent of visitors to MPHS were African Americans.³⁵ What explains this, I do not know. Perhaps, it is because we recently opened and therefore do not have a history of misrepresentations. We largely rely on word-of-mouth advertising, so maybe word is spreading that the site shares the experiences of

³⁵ D. Alderman, C. Bright, D. Butler, P. Carter, S. Hanna, A. Modlin, and A. Potter, "McLeod Plantation Exit Survey Results," (National Science Foundation [Grant Number 1359780], Unpublished Report, 2016).

enslaved people and their descendants, giving them priority in the interpretation. Whatever the reason, we are not satisfied with 11 percent. In Charleston County, African Americans made up nearly 28 percent of the population in 2016.³⁶

To help remove the stigma attached to the site, we know we must build trust and that over time, if we are creative in our approaches to interpreting the site's history, perhaps more African Americans will visit. Just one way we are working to achieve this is by initiating an arts program in which African American artists, poets, and musicians use art to interpret their history and culture. The program is in its infancy. And, if Charleston County Parks did not have much experience operating a historic site prior to MPHS, it has even less experience as an arts venue, but we are committed to the program, and are thinking about using space in creative ways to allow it to flourish. For example, for a variety of reasons, the main house is not furnished and is not included on walking tours of the site. Visitors are allowed to self-guide through the house. Originally, the open rooms were reserved in part for visitors to have a comfortable place, free from the elements, to contemplate their visit and engage in informal interpretation. But now, in order to support the art program, we are now utilizing a portion of the downstairs as exhibit space.

In our first two years of the program, three art exhibits have been on display in the house. Two explored Gullah Geechee culture and one profiled the Slave Dwelling Project.³⁷ There have been three concerts, a dance performance, and five poetry readings as part of a series featuring Cave Canem associated poets.³⁸ These exhibits and performances have been reliably the most highly attended public programs since MPHS's opening. According to program surveys, approximately 50 percent of attendees have been African American. Only the art programs we have sponsored have had such racial mix.

Not only do these programs attract a more diverse audience they have power—the power of healing. After reading poetry from her book *Mend*, written in the voice of three enslaved female victims of Dr. James Marion Sims's experimental gynecological surgeries in the 1840s, poet Kwoya Fagin Maples wrote:

My book is called *Mend*, and one of the intentions behind the title is the word as a means of healing. My experience reading poetry at McLeod was just that. I'd walked through the grounds of the plantation the day before, taking in the cotton field that stretched to the road, the lines of oak trees centuries old, and one-door slave cabins. As a Black South Carolinian woman, these images were painful to encounter. My husband was with me and he silently cried

36 "Quick Facts, Charleston, SC," United States Census Bureau, accessed March 17, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/charlestoncountysouthcarolina/PST045216>.

37 For information about the work of the Slave Dwelling Project see <http://slavedwellingproject.org/>.

38 According to its website, the Cave Canem Foundation is a home for the many voices of African American poetry and is committed to cultivating the artistic and professional growth of African American poets. See: "Mission and History," Cave Canem Foundation, accessed March 29, 2018, <http://cavecanempoets.org/mission-history/>.



A visitor to McLeod Plantation Historic Site uses the site's app to connect with history, 2018. (Photo courtesy of Sea Island Media)

next to me. I was overwhelmed too—the lump in my throat grown so big, but I refused to cry. The next day I looked out at the cotton fields to my right and dedicated the reading to the enslaved people who had lived on the plantation. Reading poems in a place where my ancestors had been disenfranchised, even after slavery, was a return. On behalf of my ancestors, I was a Black woman returning to this place with power. My ancestors are the ones who tended this land, lived on it, and made it profitable. It belongs to them. I would be a part of reclaiming it. Ultimately, I believe that this is the extraordinary power of this project. Reading at McLeod is a way of reclaiming. A way of mending.

Plowing and Sowing Seeds

So, if I do not like plantations, why do I work at one? I work at a plantation because Charleston County Parks is committed to transforming the traditional historic plantation experience by speaking truth. I work at a plantation because Charleston County Parks has demonstrated its commitment to supporting its frontline interpreters in that truth telling. I work at a plantation because I believe these places have potential to unleash a power greater than the awful and violent power once wielded here by the enslaver over the enslaved, greater than the power of any murdering Dylann Roof or terrorizing band of white supremacists brandishing their tiki-torches. As the poet Kwoya Maples so strongly articulated, these places have the incredible power to heal.

It is my sincere hope that in the near future other plantations will follow the lead of MPHS and will become places of healing. Since 2013, with the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the tragic event at Mother Emanuel, the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the election of Donald Trump with his tacit support of white supremacists, historic plantations seem to be taking note that it is time.

Evidence for this shift comes in the form of the requests I have received over the last three years to facilitate my Ethical Interpretation of Slavery and its Legacy training at other historic plantation sites. I have led workshops at a wide variety of sites including James Madison's Montpelier in anticipation of their new permanent exhibit on slavery, *A Mere Distinction of Colour*; in preparation for reinterpretation efforts at Oak Alley Plantation in Louisiana, the Owens-Thomas House in Savannah, Georgia; and as part of staff training for the National Park Service and Maryland State Parks' Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad site and the Historic Charleston Foundation house museums. Some sites are doing spectacular work. Others have a lot of work to do. I do not know if those that are adjusting their interpretation are doing it because of public pressure, or from a desire to be honest about our complicated past and help heal fractures in our society. If it is because of pressure and does not include a real commitment to social change, it will become evident soon enough. Commitment to this difficult work cannot be faked.

I do this work because I believe I am at the forefront of sowing the healing seeds of truth and change. Change for a type of historic site many believe to be hopelessly lost, the historic plantation. I recognize I am in this position, in part, because of my white male privilege. Therefore, I have a duty and responsibility to acknowledge my privilege, use it to help level the field, and sow the seeds. I am convinced that I have been invited to some historic places in their development of corrective narratives and reinterpretation of their sites, because I look like the directors inviting me. I have no doubt that some invitations would never have been extended to a person of color. I will unashamedly and unapologetically use my whiteness to convince others that look like me of the need to plant their institutions with the healing seeds of truth and change.

At the beginning of this article I consider whether plantations like MPHS could be considered African American museums. I posed that question to Brian Carter, President of the Association of African American Museums, in an email. He responded:

Regarding plantation sites overall being defined as African American museums, I really think that is a determination made by the institution itself. If an institution centers and prioritizes the history, art, and culture of African Americans in its work and sees itself as part of the dynamic and complex field of Black museums, then I would say yes. Categorizing an organization as

African American museum, where that organization is reluctant to embrace that designation, would be a good indicator that the title is wrong.³⁹

I don't have an answer to the question. I do not even know whether MPHS being identified as an African American museum is at all important. Although the interpretation and purpose of the site is to reveal an African American story as part of the larger American story, it was not founded, nor is it operated by African Americans. In my opinion, this is a huge distinction and a critical determining factor because many sites that have been founded and operated by African Americans have struggled, and some continue to struggle, in the face of all manner of challenging circumstances including institutional and structural racism. What is important is that MPHS is committed to telling an inclusive American history. It is committed to tell, to the best of its abilities, the whole truth about this former slave labor camp and its legacy, the bad and the good, the shameful and the uplifting. It is also important for Charleston County Parks to acknowledge that if it were not for the Black Museum Movement of the 1960s and 1970s MPHS would not exist as it does.

From my perspective the state of Black museums is improving. Museums like the Anacostia Community Museum, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, and the DeSable Museum of African American History, and so many more have kept their hand on the plow, preparing the soil, and sowing the seeds. Seeds knowingly dropped, and some seeds unknowingly dropped, are taking root in ways dreamed about, and maybe in ways not.

Expected, though long in coming—it took a hundred years—the first Black president opened the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016 on the Nation's Mall. It is a somber memorial and exciting celebration of African descended people's history and culture in the United States and the world. Perhaps unexpectedly, in 2015 a relatively unknown historic plantation dedicated to sharing the ongoing saga of African descended Americans striving for freedom, equality, and justice sprouted from seeds not even known to have been sowed. Although there are challenges for Black museums, the important work they do is a source of inspiration to so many other museums that are not African American museums, whether they know it or not—and that seems to me to be a good state to be in.

A long time ago,
An enslaved people heading toward freedom
Made up a song:
Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!
The plow plowed a new furrow
Across the field of history.
Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped.

³⁹ Brian Carter email to the author, March 14, 2018.

From that seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.
That tree is for everybody,
For all America, for all the world.
May its branches spread and shelter grow
Until all races and all peoples know its shade.
KEEP YOUR HAND ON THE PLOW! HOLD ON!

—from “Freedom’s Plough” by Langston Hughes

• • • • •

Shawn Halifax is the cultural history interpretation coordinator at Charleston County Parks, in Charleston, South Carolina where he supervises the public history program for County Parks including McLeod Plantation Historic Site. He was previously public programs director and interim director of the Casemate Museum for the Fort Monroe Authority in Hampton, Virginia. He is an interpretive planning and training consultant and holds certifications from the National Association for Interpretation as Interpretive Guide, Heritage Interpreter, Interpretive Planner, and Interpretive Trainer.