

# In Those Days

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African-American Life Near The Savannah River

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*Sharyn Kane & Richard Keeton*



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# Foreword

With the 1971 signing by President Richard Nixon of Executive Order 11593, *Protection and Enhancement of the Cultural Environment*, federal agencies were required to take the lead in establishing programs for the protection of significant historic resources “*for the inspiration and benefit of the people...*”. This landmark directive has been a central force in the development and ultimate success of cultural resource management programs that have required close cooperation between federal agencies.

With the Richard B. Russell Dam and Lake Cultural Resource Investigations Program, the National Park Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers combined forces to produce an outstanding result. This multi-million dollar, twenty-year program has yielded a vast array of invaluable information on the cultural history of the upper Savannah River in the central Piedmont of South Carolina and Georgia.

This book is an embodiment and tribute to the mostly unrecorded panorama of events and circumstances surrounding the lives and invaluable contributions to history of African Americans in the four county project area. The Park Service and the Corps, in consultation with our state governments, have collaborated in producing a volume that is both informative and entertaining. We applaud these efforts to inform the public of the rich cultural heritage shared by our states.



CARROLL A. CAMPBELL, JR.  
Governor  
State of South Carolina



ZELL MILLER  
Governor  
State of Georgia

# Preface

*Just as a tree without roots is dead, a people without history  
or culture also becomes a dead people.*

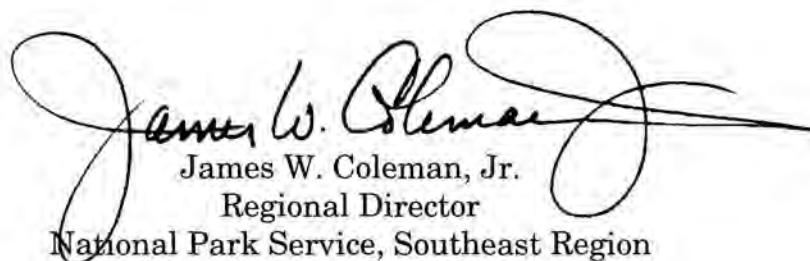
—Malcolm X

*To understand what is happening today or what will happen in the future, I look back.*

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

*In Those Days* is a presentation for a general audience of archival and oral history research conducted in the Richard B. Russell Multiple Resource Area in the early 1980's. The research preceded building of the Richard B. Russell Dam and Lake, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Project in the upper Savannah River Valley at the Georgia-South Carolina boundary. In guiding the preparation of this volume, the National Park Service has stressed the importance of producing a high quality, accurate, yet entertaining account of African-American history within the four counties surrounding the project area.

This volume represents the final chapter of an ambitious and internationally renowned research program carried out cooperatively by the National Park Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It follows the 1993 publication of the Richard B. Russell Dam and Lake popular volume entitled *Beneath These Waters*, an interpretation for a general audience of archeological and historical research conducted in the project area from 1969 through 1985. The authors of both volumes, Sharyn Kane and Richard Keeton, have done an admirable job, we believe, of maintaining the high standards of research and writing that have consistently characterized the Richard B. Russell Cultural Resources Investigations Program.



James W. Coleman, Jr.  
Regional Director  
National Park Service, Southeast Region

# Prologue

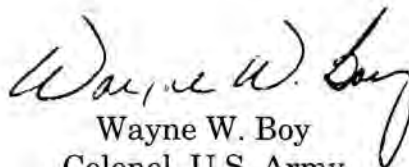
In 1978, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Savannah District, initiated a partnership with the Interagency Archeological Services Division of the National Park Service to identify, interpret, and preserve the cultural history of the Richard B. Russell Dam and Lake Project area. Funded by the Savannah District and administered jointly by the two agencies, this massive research effort is now drawing to a close.

From the beginning, then District Engineer Colonel Tilford Creel and the late Dr. Victor Carbone of the National Park Service made a firm commitment that this project would identify, interpret, and recognize the contributions of all ethnic and cultural groups. Archeological excavations were proving successful in documenting 11,000 years of American Indian culture, and when combined with archival research, were illuminating the contributions of those of Euro-American descent. It soon became clear, however, that the contributions of the African-American community could not be identified through traditional historical research methods.

Dr. Carbone and former Savannah District archeologist, Dr. James E. Cobb, identified ways to fill the gap in the historical and archeological record through the use of oral history. Their conversations with African Americans in the project area revealed that, although the written record of the community was absent from most archival repositories, there was a strong oral history tradition in the community and a large collection of documents preserved by individual African-American families.

Dr. Eleanor Ramsey, an anthropologist, and historians Shirley Moore and Patricia Turner first documented the oral history and private collections of long-term residents. Their residence in the project area and exceptional skills resulted in a unique connection with the local community as well as hours of taped interviews, records, and historic photographs. Following on the pioneering work of these three individuals, Sharyn Kane and Richard Keeton were selected to organize the research materials into the eloquent pictorial narrative that follows.

*In Those Days* serves in many ways. It is a scholarly effort reflecting years of careful and painstaking historical research. It is a tribute to all, either within or outside government, who stood by their commitment to complete this project. And finally, it is an enduring tribute to the African Americans who helped shape the history and culture of the Richard B. Russell Dam and Lake Project Area.



Wayne W. Boy  
Colonel, U.S. Army  
District Engineer

# Acknowledgements

This presentation of oral histories represents the efforts of many people. Foremost among them were the African Americans who generously gave their time and shared their memories, photographic collections, and personal papers. Their stories form the foundation of this work.

Investigations of the Richard B. Russell Dam area in Georgia and South Carolina, conducted during several decades, have been another important source of information. We would like to thank the authors of reports that resulted, particularly Marlessa Gray, Linda Worthy, Darlene Roth, Charles Orser, J.W. Joseph, and David Anderson.

Other researchers, led by Eleanor Mason Ramsey, conducted many of the interviews reflected in these pages. The tape recordings and transcripts they compiled form a rich resource of information. The Ramsey team included Patricia Turner, Shirley Moore, Vincent Fort, Crystal Rhodes, Sheena Bell, Githaiga Ramsey, Joe Moore, Nick Baines, and Nancy Yates.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Savannah District, and the National Park Service, Interagency Archeological Services Division (IASD) in Atlanta, have been indispensable in bringing this story to the public. The late Victor Carbone of the National Park Service was among the first to envision how this account and others based on research along the Savannah River fit together in an overall scheme. Paul Rubenstein, former senior archeologist for the Corps' Savannah District, also played an integral role, particularly in shaping how the findings about African-American life could best be organized.

John Ehrenhard, chief of IASD, and John Jameson, project manager, of the National Park Service have been especially helpful. Both have consistently recognized the importance of preserving and publishing the following oral histories and have worked tirelessly to ensure that the highest standards were followed. We are also grateful to Virginia Horak, a careful editor, and to Diane Mitchell, contracting officer.

David McCullough and Judy Wood of the Corps provided us with helpful information and access to records, including a videotape about basket weaver Tobe Wells, one of the subjects of this volume.

We would also like to thank our friends King Fogle and Linda Moorer for the loan of books on the African-American experience, and Carole Merritt, a distinguished scholar, who kindly read our outline and offered useful suggestions.

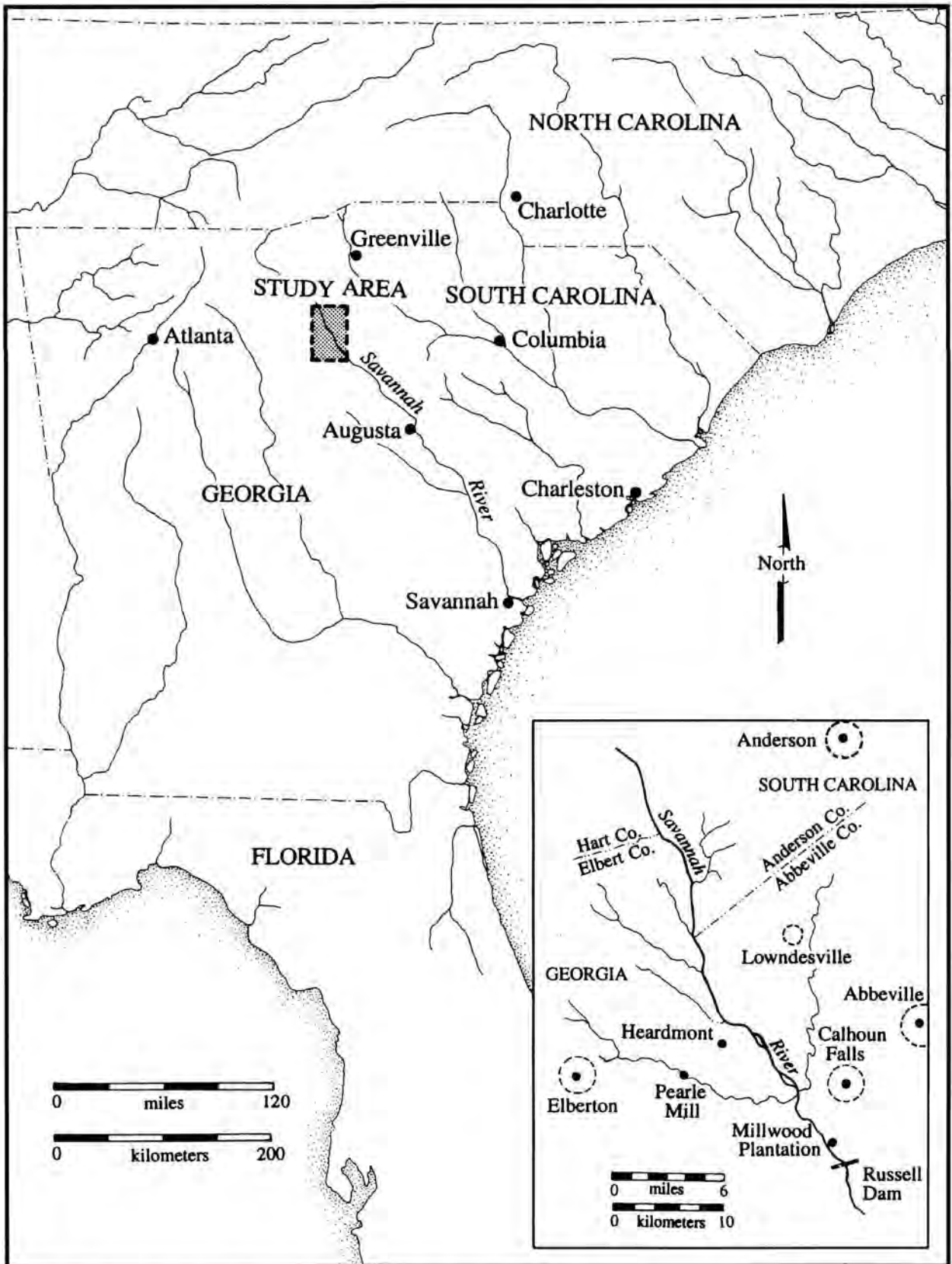


Sharyn Kane and Richard Keeton



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This map, showing Georgia and South Carolina in the Southeastern United States, illustrates where the historical investigations of the Richard B. Russell Project took place. Communities important to African Americans in the study area are highlighted in the box.



Figure 1: Researcher Eleanor Mason Ramsey (right) visited Millwood Plantation in the early 1980's with Minnie Walker (center) and Walker's daughter. The Walkers' relatives were slaves on the plantation and some stayed as tenant farmers after the Civil War. Minnie Walker lived at Millwood until 1925.

# Introduction

**I**n the summer of 1981, anthropologist Eleanor Mason Ramsey and her assistants set out to capture a neglected part of the past. Patiently, they interviewed dozens of elderly African Americans to learn about their lives and the lives of those they knew in Elbert County, Georgia, and Abbeville County, South Carolina. The backdrop for this research was a patchwork of piney woods and rolling, red clay hills, intermingled with small towns and hardscrabble farms on earth frequently scarred by erosion from the days when cotton was king. Sparsely populated and mostly rural, the region, even today, provides glimpses of a vanishing way of life in the South.

The oral historians selected residents of these two counties, which straddle the Savannah River and the borders of the two states, because they lived near the site of the new Richard B. Russell Dam. Construction of the dam, which began operation in 1984, and the body of water it created, Russell Lake, dramatically changed the landscape. Consequently, years before the dam began to take shape on the Savannah River, other researchers had arrived from many different disciplines to pore over the ground within a 52,000-acre radius. They studied and documented its features and cultural significance, dating as far back as twelve centuries ago. Their work was directed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Savannah District, which oversaw building of the dam, and the National Park Service's Southeast Regional Office in Atlanta, which administered the research contracts.

As a Federal project with significant regional impact, the dam fell under a Presidential Order and the Archeological and Historic Preservation Act, which require that a record of human life and the environment be made to preserve knowledge

that otherwise could be lost. Researchers from such diverse fields as archeology to architecture were involved, beginning nearly 20 years before the dam was finished. Their detailed findings are collected in the Russell Papers, some 20 publications that form an invaluable record of a place and its people.

The oral accounts collected from African Americans comprise one of the final steps in the investigations and were compiled in an unpublished draft report. Researchers prepared for the interviews by combing through newspaper archives and



Figure 2: The identities were lost over the years of many of the people in the old photographs researchers collected, including the name of this child, photographed around 1918 in Elberton, Georgia.



Figure 3: Historian Shirley Moore (left) studied old photographs with many of the people she interviewed in Elbert and Abbeville Counties in the early 1980's.

other documents to learn about significant events and noteworthy people of the region. Then, through talks at local churches and before civic groups, in newspaper interviews they gave, and through word-of-mouth, they invited the elderly African Americans in the area to meet with them to share their stories. The response was warm and generous. Dozens of individuals opened their homes and allowed their voices to be tape recorded as they looked back at their experiences. Many had old photographs, which researchers copied, then used in succeeding interviews to prompt more memories from others. In some instances, the residents accompanied investigators to the sites that had played important roles in their lives.

Investigators worked diligently to cross check what they heard, returning to newspaper archives to gather more details of some recollections, and studying census, tax, birth, marriage, and death records to verify or elaborate on aspects of other reminiscences. This task was impeded at times by the earlier neglect in recording facts about African

Americans in both official documents and newspapers. Nonetheless, investigators assembled a complex portrait of a people, place, and time. As Ramsey observed of the African Americans, "They are their own best historians."

Much of the material in these pages, including photographs, comes from the findings gathered in the early 1980's. Unfortunately, however, significant details about when and where many of the interviews occurred went unrecorded, as well as information about many of the subjects of photographs and when the photographs were taken. Where there is information available about photographs, it is included in the captions.

The authors of this volume have collected additional photographs, as well as more information from the original tape recordings and transcripts, and from other sources. Important material also derives from other Russell investigators who interviewed local African Americans, some of them the same individuals the Ramsey team met. These included archeologist Marlessa Gray and researchers from Loyola University of

Chicago, under the leadership of Charles Orser, who provided valuable insights about African-American relations with specific plantation owners. Marlessa Gray also helped document the story of landowner Gilbert Gray, while The Historic American Buildings Survey offered useful background about Jim White, one of the most successful early African-American farmers in the area.

The History Group, an Atlanta-based research team, recounted the defiant tale of the white planter George Washington Dye and his relationship with a slave woman, Lucinda. One of their descendants, Edward Brownlee, was a significant source of information. Credit also goes to archeologists David Anderson and J.W. Joseph whose summaries of the technical findings of the Russell research were invaluable.

The remembrances forming the basis of this volume deal mainly with life between 1880 and 1930, although some of the residents provided information gleaned from their conversations with parents and grandparents about the days before the Civil War. Other memories are more recent, recalling the Great Depression, World War II, and the decline of family farms. Taken together, these accounts sum up not only the history of a people in two rural counties, but mirror a broader story about the entire South. As a result, while the central focus here is always on the African Americans, it is sometimes impossible to separate their life stories from those of the white residents with whom they closely interacted.

The dominant themes of this narrative about human existence are universal: family, work, education, recreation, religion, and friendships. It is important to note, however, that while the people profiled shared many cultural ties, each was a distinct individual with unique experiences. Any generalizations are made cautiously.



Figure 4: The Morrison family of Elberton, Georgia, includes from left to right: George Morrison, his wife Venie, Minnie Wall, who is Venie's sister, and Hershhal Morrison, son of George and Venie.

If, however, there was an uncontested feature shared by everyone, it was an indomitable strength of spirit. Despite a legacy of enslavement and their own experiences of forced segregation, the African Americans did not consider themselves to be powerless victims. Rather, they returned again and again in their memories to the triumphs of their lives. They pointed proudly to the achievements of poor farm children who grew up to be doctors, ministers, teachers, and business leaders, and of the countless devoted parents who sacrificed their own ambitions to ensure that their children had better lives.

This, then, is the long overdue retelling of their stories.





Figure 5: Slavery brought thousands of Africans to the New World, beginning a life of extreme hardship for most. Farmers and plantation owners alike bought them to work on Georgia and South Carolina fields.

# Captured and Sold

## *“Carried Away From Home”*

**T**he story of African-American life in Georgia and South Carolina begins over 500 years ago with the ambitions of a Portuguese nobleman, Prince Henry the Navigator. Acknowledged as a leading force behind the age of exploration, Prince Henry dispatched many ships from the coasts of Portugal to distant seas to acquire goods. Among those sailing under his orders was a young Portuguese sea captain, Antonio Gonsalves. In 1441, Gonsalves, intending to acquire a cargo of animal skins and oils to sell in Europe, landed on the shores of West Africa. The ten Africans he abducted were almost an afterthought.

When he returned to Portugal, Gonsalves made a gift of the captives to Prince Henry, who in turn presented them to the Pope, then as much a powerful political figure as religious leader. The gesture so pleased the pontiff that he granted Prince Henry title to a broad chunk of West African territory. For a brief time thereafter, the Portuguese dominated European trade with the continent of Africa and the peddling of its inhabitants.

Long a part of history throughout much of the world, the practice of enslaving others now entered a new era, the so-called “Commercial Age.” Thousands of Africans during this period were herded into cramped, unsanitary quarters and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean for sale. Within two decades of Antonio Gonsalves’ voyage, the African slave trade had become a highly profitable venture for Europeans. And within 50 years, the biggest demand for the captives came from the New World. The flood of forced migration to the Western Hemisphere was well underway by 1540, when an estimated 10,000 slaves were annually reaching Spanish colonies. Gradually, more of the

great European powers of the day joined in the flesh trade, with the French, Dutch, British, and others participating in and encouraging the increasingly thriving business.

Slavery was not a new concept for Africans who found themselves sold into bondage by rival tribes. Like people of other cultures, Africans occasionally kept their own captives, whom they won in battle or enslaved as punishment for crimes or debts. But nothing could have prepared those kidnapped by Europeans for what they were to encounter.

They must have been terrified as they were violently forced from their homes and marched towards the coast to be lodged in prisons the size of warehouses until slave ships arrived. Once the vessels moored offshore, the Africans were rowed in small boats to the waiting ships. Crew members snapped whips at their backs to hurry them up swaying rope ladders. On deck, women were separated from the men, who were chained together in irons around their ankles to prevent escape.

Nightmarish quarters for the voyage, which lasted as long as two months or more, were small, nearly airless pockets below deck. Frequently, there was barely enough space to lie down or adequate room for movement of any kind without bumping into the other prisoners on all sides. Distance between the floor and ceiling was often so slight that sitting comfortably, much less standing upright, was impossible. Documents from the era reveal that slave quarters on some vessels were less than two feet high.

But not all the passage was spent down below. In good weather, captains sometimes allowed the Africans to climb on deck to eat. At other times, the captives were brought up to perform an exercise slave traders called “dancing the slaves.”



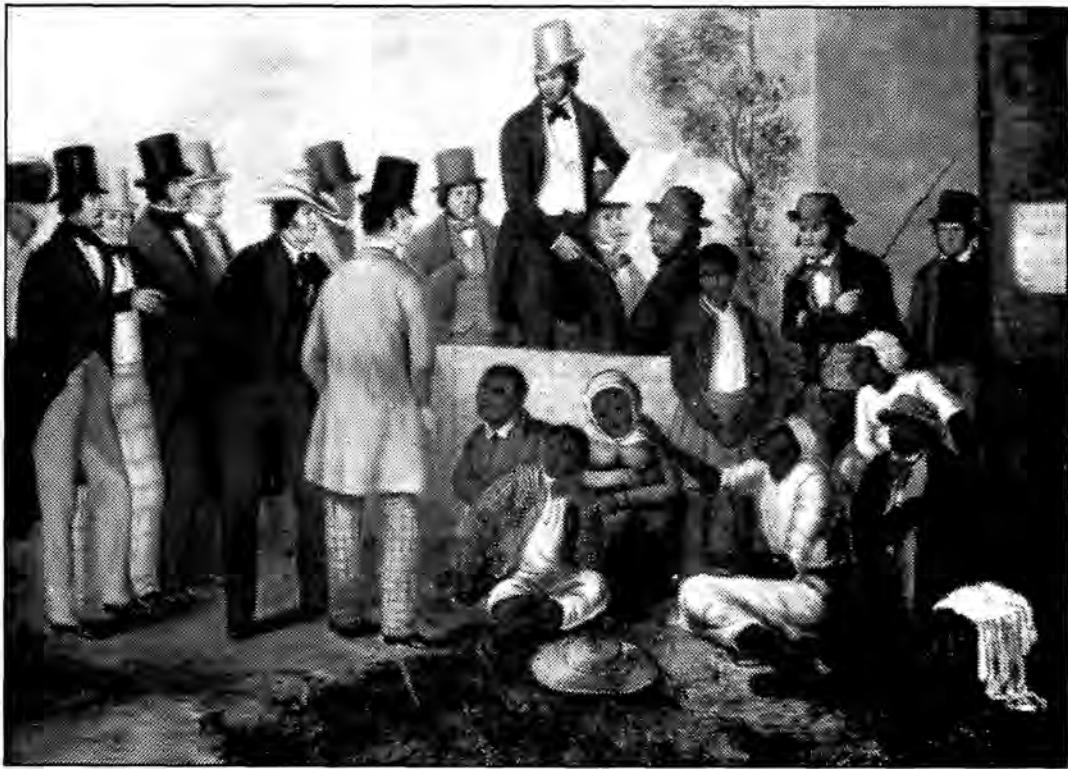


Figure 6: African captives were examined from head to toe, then sold to the highest bidder in auctions across the South.

In this coerced “dance,” the Africans were forced to jump up and down vigorously, with anyone whipped who didn’t show enough enthusiasm. The exercise was supposed to keep the captives healthy and to prevent them from slipping into listless depression, but the strategy often failed. Disease rampaged through many slave ships, with one in eight Africans perishing on board, by some accounts. Other reports cite losses on some ships of as many as two-thirds or more of the slaves. Half the human cargo dying was not unusual. In fact, any slave who became ill was in grave jeopardy, and not only from disease. Captains, intent on preserving as much of their payload as possible, were known to toss overboard any slave who became so sick that he or she might infect the others.

Other slaves perished when they were unchained for some reason, leaped overboard, and drowned. Whether intending to escape or to commit suicide, anyone who reached the water had first to jump clear of nets, which ringed the ships for the purpose of catching potential escapees. Others intent on suicide by starving themselves were kept alive only through the practiced brutality of their keepers. Slave traders intervened in

such hunger strikes by using a “mouth opener” containing live coals.

There were also other dangers. Food and water sometimes ran low, leading to rationing or no provisions at all for the weaker prisoners. Too, fierce storms could suddenly rise up and furiously rake the seas, at worst threatening the sometimes rickety ships with sinking, at best causing the Africans to be horribly nauseated. Slave mutinies were also a risk, with results precarious and unpredictable for all on board. Captains tried to prevent revolts through daily searches for any objects that could be used in a violent uprising and by closely guarding all weapons, but even with such precautions mutinies erupted. Indeed, rebellions occurred often enough so that most slave traders felt compelled to buy “revolt insurance.”

Africans who somehow survived the perils at sea found themselves facing a new set of trials when the ships docked in the New World. Displayed like livestock, they were forced to endure rough inspections from head to toe. Prospective buyers evaluated their teeth and bones, pawing over them as if they were less than human. A slave’s value was set according to age, sex, size,

and strength, with the individuals who looked strongest fetching the highest prices. In a language the Africans couldn't understand, their fates were decided by bidders who haggled with the traders to get the cheapest prices for the most able-bodied slaves.

These unfortunate captives were the ancestors of the elderly African Americans interviewed by oral historians in the 1980's. While centuries had passed since the abduction of men and women from African villages, the impact of their enslavement continued to reverberate through the lives of their descendants.

In Georgia and South Carolina, the principal settings for the life stories shared with researchers, slavery played an early and integral role. South Carolina was established first in 1670, when British settlers founded Charles Town on the Atlantic Coast. Later, the name for the waterfront community was shortened to Charleston. From this base, the white pioneers gradually moved into the interior of the country. Early colonial life was marked by hard, physical work as the new arrivals struggled to scratch out a civilization in an unfamiliar land. Most of those who could afford to bought slaves to shoulder the brunt of the burden.

*Slave traders forced slaves to eat by using a mouth opener of live coals.*

Slavery quickly became so widespread in the colony that by 1708 the official census in South Carolina showed that there was almost the equivalent of one slave for every white resident. Not all the slaves, however, were African. The census reported that among 9,500 people, 3,000 were black slaves and 1,400 were Indian slaves. Enslaving Indians, however, gradually diminished because the practice provoked wars with the natives and because the Indians repeatedly tried to escape and often succeeded. Unlike the Africans who were separated from their homeland by an ocean, the Indians were in their own territory and could more easily disappear into the wilderness.

Settling of the colony of Georgia followed in 1733 with the arrival of British settlers at



Figure 7: The Taylor Cotton Gin in Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, was a focal point of early industry.



Figure 8: Washing laundry by hand and carrying it some distance in baskets and bundles atop their heads were common chores for African-American women in sights reminiscent of Africa. Archeologists such as Leland Ferguson of the University of South Carolina have learned that African traditions influenced much of the early basketry, pottery, and housing styles in the South.

*Those who survived  
the perilous sea  
voyage faced a new  
set of trials.*

Yamacraw Bluff and the building of the town of Savannah. Georgia's founding father, James Oglethorpe, was an early opponent of slavery, but even a legal prohibition against the practice was soon swept aside as Georgia's coastal planters enviously watched the profits their neighboring planters in South Carolina were reaping.

In both colonies, expansion steadily pushed inland, with new settlers sometimes taking slaves with them. Initially, however, slavery was not as widespread in the interior as it was along the coast, where fortunes were being amassed from the forced labors of Africans working rice and indigo plantations.

The heavy dependence on slaves on coastal plantations resulted in black majorities in both Georgia and South Carolina by the end of the Revolutionary War. This alarmed some officials, including Georgia Governor James Habersham. He and others sought to diminish the seemingly unceasing demand for slaves by encouraging the development of small, inland farms. The effort, however, was doomed after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793. Now the tedious and time-consuming effort to separate cotton fibers from seeds would no longer have to be done by hand. The gin did the work in a fraction of the time, significantly boosting potential profits from cotton and luring more planters into raising the crop.

It was only a matter of time before the Piedmont region of rolling hills in Georgia and South Carolina would be transformed into cotton country. Only political events slowed the transformation. Uneasiness over French aggressions led by Napoleon Bonaparte in Europe, embargoes prior to the War of 1812 between the fledgling United States and Great Britain, and disruptions fostered by the war itself moderated demand for the cotton. In 1809, growers could get only eight to ten

cents a pound for their crop, but when peace seemed assured, the price skyrocketed to 19 cents a pound in the summer of 1815. And the figure just kept on rising. The seemingly unending demand caused the region called the Piedmont, including what is now Elbert and Abbeville Counties, to become the most productive cotton-growing section of the entire country by the early 1800's.

Despite the efficiency of cotton gins, planting, tending, and harvesting the plants remained extremely labor-intensive, fueling the demand for slaves. Statistics reveal how the slave population exploded. In 1790, in Abbeville County, the vast majority of residents were white. But by 1850, primarily because of slaves bought to work cotton fields, 60 percent of the population was black. Elbert County underwent a similar population change. In 1809, slightly more than half of the landowners in Elbert County owned slaves. By 1851, nearly 80 percent did.

The legacy of slavery was so deep in the two counties that even more than a century later recollections passed down through generations of African Americans about the "peculiar institution" remained vivid and plentiful. Contemporary residents of Georgia and South Carolina who shared their memories with oral historians recounted tales told to them as children by former slaves, usually relatives. Curled up in the laps of their parents, kneeling at the knees of grandparents, or walking beside a favorite uncle or aunt, they had heard about the dark days when freedom was denied to people because of their color.

Phoebe Turman remembered gaining insight into what slavery meant when she was crossing the Savannah River with her family. They were moving from a tenant farm in South Carolina to another tenant farm in Georgia on the other side of the water. During the boat ride, someone told Turman, a teenager at the time, to look at an overgrown place on the river bank. The spot, she was told, was where slaves were once sold. "Just a big open field on the Georgia side," she recalled. "They would go down there and the big shots order so many, and pay for 'em. It was a big field. They called it the quarter....They auctioned 'em off....They pay so much for a head."

W.T. Smith remembered sitting with his grandmother, Laura Fortson, as she told stories about



Figure 9: Cotton was the dominant crop in the South for many years. Planting, cultivating, and harvesting were extremely labor-intensive, fanning spiraling demand for slaves.

her life as a slave in Georgia. “Used to sell colored folk just like they do cars. Just sell ‘em and folks were carried away from home. In slavery time, you had to do what the white folks say.” Smith’s memories included talk about the “slave codes,” laws passed by Southern legislatures to prevent violent uprisings, laws which frequently included prohibitions against any slave leaving a master’s land without signed permission. Most regions of the South also had groups called “The Patrol,” armed men authorized to search blacks to find whether they carried stolen goods or firearms and determine whether they had written permission to travel.

Remembering his grandmother’s words, Smith said, “Yeah. [She talked] about how colored people couldn’t go nowhere in slavery time. She used to tell us, she’d say, ‘If we live here and some colored folk live over yonder somewhere, the whites used to say we couldn’t go by and visit unless we ask the white folks.’ Yeah...you had to ask ‘em.”

Conditions slaves endured varied, depending upon the financial circumstances and dispositions of their owners. Some slaveholders were inordinately cruel, meting out frequent punishments for the smallest infractions, while others were less harsh. Minnie Clark, a retired teacher whose grandmother had talked to her about her experi-

ences as a slave, told investigators: "They [the white owners] wasn't mean. No, they wasn't mean people. [You] just had to work."

Other accounts reveal that how a slave perceived his or her lot was significantly affected by the work the master required. On large plantations, slaves were grouped into three categories: field hands, house servants, and skilled craftsmen, such as blacksmiths, masons, and carpenters. Craftsmen and house servants sometimes lived a bit more comfortably than other slaves because their work was valued more. But the predominant theme in most slaves' lives was day-to-day drudgery in the fields, often in blistering heat.

Randolph Davis, 111 years of age and the oldest person interviewed, recalled what he had heard about pre-Civil War life. "They had somebody on a horse working the blacks for nothing. Had a man on a horse ridin' along and making the blacks work in the field. Call 'em [the man on the horse] the boss. Yeah, had a horse riding 'long behind the others in the fields chopping cotton."

Samuel Calhoun, 86 years old, talked about conversations he and his father once had about slavery: "Oh yeah, some of 'em [the slaves] had a pretty good time in slavery time. Some of 'em house maids...some of 'em were janitors around the house, kept all that clean." His father told him how he had worked as a stable boy. "My father catch the horses, cut 'em off, put the harnesses on, take 'em up to the buggy. They had a gate to open, [he would open it], and then he'd be there when they come back. Open the gate and let 'em back in. Then he'd go back to the house, take the harness off." Once his father tried to run away: "Well, my father, he said they had whipped him. He said they got on him one evening, whipped him, and he run off in the woods."

Hunger eventually forced the boy to return to the plantation where his masters fed him, but only after first humiliating him. "Next night, he went there. They told him to get up under the table and when they be eatin', he hollered like a cat and scratched their leg, you know. When he scratched their leg, they'd hand him a biscuit. They played around, you know," said Calhoun.

Slaveowners included struggling farmers with small land holdings and fewer than five slaves,

## *Worth was often set by the ability to bear children.*

as well as wealthy plantation owners with hundreds and even thousands of acres. These well-to-do planters sometimes owned more than 100 slaves. While the less prosperous farmers might work in the fields beside their slaves and even share meals with them, planters often delegated much of slave management to overseers.

One of the most prominent planters in either Elbert or Abbeville Counties was James Edward Calhoun, brother-in-law and cousin of John C. Calhoun, the influential United States senator who ultimately became vice president of the nation. James Edward Calhoun was among the wealthiest white men in the region and his actions shaped the lives of many blacks, even long after his death.

James Edward Calhoun's base of operations for most of his life was Millwood Plantation, approximately 10,000 acres stretching for about seven miles on both sides of the Savannah River. The plantation was home to more than 100 slaves, and later, after the Civil War, to dozens of black tenant farmers. Many of those interviewed for this volume either once lived at Millwood or knew someone who had.

While details about the ancestors of many of the African Americans were lost because of frequent involuntary separations of families and lack of written records, a good deal is known about Calhoun. He was born in the late 1700's into a family of pioneers who arrived early in the region when bloody skirmishes with Indians were common. Calhoun's maternal grandmother was killed in such a clash in the backcountry of South Carolina during an Indian raid. His father, John Ewing Calhoun, grew up not far from the Savannah River, amassed a fortune, and was elected to the U.S. Senate. When he died in 1802, he bequeathed large tracts of land and many slaves to James Edward, who steadily expanded his father's holdings.



Figure 10: Edward Brownlee (center), photographed around 1943, was an important source of early history.

James Edward Calhoun developed a life-long reputation as a daring innovator, experimenting with exotic crops and becoming an early advocate for using crop rotation and fertilizer. Calhoun was also in the vanguard of support for Southern industrialization and building of railroads. He devoted considerable energy and money to developing his own mills at Millwood Plantation.

He married Maria Simkins in 1839, and, from all accounts, the union was a happy one, but in 1844, Maria died, perhaps from complications suffered in childbirth. Her death reportedly devastated Calhoun, who, according to local oral tradition, lost his religious faith and became a social recluse, the “Hermit of Millwood.” From then on, the energy that others devoted to social activities, Calhoun applied to his plantation.

Controlling his slaves occupied a good deal of the planter’s time. Reportedly, he even took interest in how they spoke, requiring them to speak Gullah, a patois common among coastal slaves, but infrequently used in the Piedmont where Calhoun’s plantation was located. Gullah, which persists as a dialect today for an estimated 250,000 people in pockets of the Southern coast, is a mixture of English and 25 West African tongues, spoken in a lilting cadence.

As a child, Edward Brownlee listened closely to his father who talked about the unusual way blacks continued to speak at Millwood even after

Calhoun’s death: “My dad said he used to love to go there [to hear the people talk]. They never would use the past tense.” Brownlee, who received two master’s degrees from Columbia University and was a military veteran of World War II, was something of an unofficial historian for Elbert and Abbeville Counties because of his keen memory and curiosity. He remembered that relatives told his father that Calhoun once said, “The reason I do that [require my slaves to speak Gullah], is so if any of my slaves run off, I can always find ‘em by the way they talk.”

Brownlee recalled how he loved to hear his father talk with someone from Millwood, how a Millwood person’s words held a special inflection, and specifically how they used a word that sounded like “day” instead of “there.” “Miss Lizzie would come over to visit my dad. She’d say, ‘Cousin Ed, I went up to Buffalo. When I got up day....’ She didn’t ever say there, she said ‘day.’ See, he [Calhoun] taught ‘em to say ‘day’ instead of there.” Brownlee also related how black residents at Millwood said the word “one” instead of “want.” “They’d say, ‘I one me one rabbit’....They’d never say, ‘I want so and so,’ but, ‘I one me one rabbit.’”

Brownlee also shared a more sinister account about Calhoun. “The old man [James Edward Calhoun], they said never whipped, but he always carried this slave [with him], and he [the slave] whipped them and give them as many licks as he told him to give.”

Calhoun’s willingness to resort to the lash was also mentioned in one of his own letters: “Day before yesterday, one of the negroes lodged complaint against Abbeville William, who took himself off apprehensive of a flogging. Have a good lookout kept for the rascal and if you catch him, give him, in the first place, as soon as he can be tied, 100 lashes and then have him put in jail.” Calhoun added, however, that he wanted to reserve the option of punishing the runaway slave himself “as an example.” Such physical punishment of slaves was wide-spread and sometimes so harsh that blacks were permanently scarred or even died as a result.

As to what kind of slave master Calhoun was in comparison to others of the time, the evidence is sparse. Several descendants of his slaves, however, spoke favorably of Calhoun’s reputation as a master. Said Brownlee, “...it seems that most of



Figure 11: Millwood Plantation was home to many African Americans, some of whom remained after slavery ended. Many ultimately became tenant farmers. This 1875 photograph gives an overview of the plantation.





Figure 12: An unidentified Elberton, Georgia, woman was photographed around 1900.

those Negroes worshipped him, because I guess he wasn't mean like a lot of slave owners....He never called them his Negroes, he always called them his people....I never heard Dad say that he ever heard of any of them [that] ran away, but I imagine, like anywhere else, some did."

Calhoun's plantation became a safe haven for at least one slave who escaped from cruel treatment in Wilkes County, Georgia, in the closing days of the Civil War. Reverend Janie Hampton, who was raised at Millwood, told this story about the escapee, her grandmother: "During her 14 years in slavery, it was hard for her because she was a nice-looking person and was desired, and she ran from it all her life....She went out on her own and, of course, about that time was, you know, freedom. And I remember she had a short finger that she claimed was a result of her escape....I don't know whether he [her master] cut it off on purpose or accidental, but it was part of the brutality that she experienced that caused her to leave the farm. You see, they had overseers and all, and sometimes they were pretty brutal to you...and, of course, she was wanted for a house lady, is what they called it, and she refused and she escaped and ran away." Eventually, her grandmother made it across the Savannah River, married, and settled at Millwood.

Minnie Walker, born and raised at Millwood during the late 1800's, explained how she had talked frequently with her grandmother who was once a slave there. In recalling those conversations, Walker talked about how many slaves throughout the South received their last names. "Back there, in them days and times, when children were born, they went in the white man's name."

In the aftermath of the Civil War, many former slaves immediately left their previous owners. If, however, the masters had treated them with some measure of consideration, blacks were more inclined to continue working at the same plantations for pay. This was apparently the case at Millwood. As Minnie Walker put it, "My grandmother say blacks had the privilege to go somewhere else, but after freedom, they just stayed on there....That's why they called them Calhoun's people."





Figure13: An unknown resident of Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, in 1890.



Figure 14: After the Civil War, many faced terrible poverty. Government efforts were often inadequate to help.

# Gaining Freedom

## *“Worse Than Bondage Itself”*

**R**econstruction, the effort from 1865 to 1877 by the Federal Government to restore the conquered territory after the Civil War, nonetheless was a time of continued struggle for many in the South. Although no battles had been fought in Abbeville or Elbert Counties, residents still felt the hardships caused by the severe economic depression that gripped the region long after the gunfire had stopped. Despite their freedom, African Americans were worse off than before the war in some significant ways, even though a few managed to prosper financially. Some were even elected to state legislatures where they helped pass a flurry of laws seeking to right the wrongs resulting from slavery. Most, however, found themselves adrift and woefully unprepared to shape new lives. While as slaves they had enjoyed no rights at all, they had been housed, fed, and clothed by their masters, albeit often in substandard conditions. With slavery over, they were entirely on their own and usually penniless. Most were former field hands, trained only for menial work, and all but a few were illiterate. Indeed, teaching slaves to read and write was a crime in many places before the war.

In town after town, blacks clustered in shanty villages that sprung up on the outskirts of communities and near United States Army bases. The former slaves waited, usually in vain, for the fulfillment of the promised “40 acres and a mule” or some other allotment of land from the government. Officials did make attempts to help, but these efforts often failed because of a lack of money, poor planning, inadequate personnel, and virulent resistance from Southern whites.

Because their distrust of former masters, or any Southern white, for that matter, was so deep,

many African Americans refused to work for them. A severe labor shortage soon was the result. Captain C.R. Becker, sent by the Federal Government to guide Reconstruction efforts on the South Carolina side of the Savannah River, reported: “...there are none who need want employment, if they only choose to seek it, for in fact I have applications nearly every day from planters who are in want of hands and unable to obtain them.” Yet in another report, the captain’s own words explained why African Americans were reluctant to return to the fields. Some former slaveholders, he wrote, were still whipping black laborers. In another sign of how hard times were, Becker described increasing thefts of food by hungry former slaves.

Inevitably, deep-seated bitterness and hardships led to mounting violence, again chronicled in official reports of the time. The arm of the government charged with aiding impoverished blacks and whites was the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, also known as the Freedmen’s Bureau. The only Freedmen’s Bureau office with jurisdiction over Abbeville County, South Carolina, was some distance away in Anderson County, and it was the personnel of this office who compiled some of the documentation about the brutality that erupted during Reconstruction.

One report stated that the former slaves “in this section of the state (are) not freedmen and women...they are nominally such, but their condition indeed is worse than bondage itself and ever will be unless this subdistrict is flooded with...cavalry....The U.S. soldiers and the freedmen are alike threatened and despised, and a very little respected. The military authorities are seldom obeyed except when necessity compels,



Figure 15: Young children worked long hours to help raise money for their families, some peddling objects on the streets for pennies, like this boy photographed in South Carolina.

the garrison is limited, hence a majority of the guilty go unpunished.”

Violence against African Americans was a frequent topic of reports from the Freedmen’s Bureau. The head of the Anderson office had this to say in May 1866: “On Saturday, May 12, about ten o’clock, a freedman by name of Elbert MacAdams was taken from his house by an unknown man and shot three times and then had his throat cut and was dragged into the woods about 100 yards from his house, where he was found dead on Sunday morning. The freedman had come to see his wife on Basil Callahan’s plantation, about 16 miles from here....Freedmen report to the office every day that they are being driven off, and my time is entirely taken up looking into the reason and seeing that they get their rights.”

White resistance was especially strong against African Americans exercising their new right to vote. Captain Becker described a Ku Klux Klan rampage in November 1868, just prior to the national election. And in another account, he reported an episode involving an entire black community that had apparently fled to avoid election-related violence: “Innumerable persons have been lying out in the woods since sometime before the election to save being murdered in their beds, their houses having in the meantime been frequently visited at night for that purpose.”

Despite deep chasms between them, some blacks and whites eventually were forced to cooperate because of mutual need. Deciding not to leave the South for one reason or another, increasing numbers of field hands eventually returned to the only work they knew. For their part, no matter how much it must have rankled to have to pay former slaves, whites were desperate for laborers.

Owners of small farms and big plantations alike experimented with various ways of organizing workers, with more than a few managing to recreate the worst of antebellum slave conditions for a time. Harsh gang leaders were hired to enforce rigid rules and to ensure maximum production from the laborers, who moved back into the old slave cabins and once again ate rations dispensed by the farmers and planters. The only significant difference from slave times was that workers now received a small wage.

During at least part of Reconstruction, James Edward Calhoun hired laborers in a “squad

*Crew bosses paid  
Calhoun half of  
everything their  
workers grew.*

system,” signing contracts with seven African Americans who hired their own crews and enforced discipline. Among the rules were requirements that the workers could not leave the plantation or have visitors without Calhoun’s permission. Three of the seven crew bosses were named Calhoun, indicating they were likely his former slaves. The bosses paid Calhoun half of everything their crews grew and paid the workers from the other half. Gradually, however, at Millwood Plantation and throughout the South, laborers began renting land or sharecropping, usually paying landlords with crops because the region was still so strapped for cash. Landowners provided some land and a house to both sharecroppers and renters. Under sharecropping, landlords also supplied tools and livestock and were paid in return a percentage of the harvests. Renter systems required tenants to provide their own animals and equipment and to pay a set amount to landlords each year as rent.

Most of those interviewed in the Russell research were raised on tenant farms, and in their conversations returned repeatedly to talk of field work, the land, and their families’ experiences with tenant farming. A number either once farmed on Calhoun’s Millwood Plantation or had relatives or friends who had worked there. When Calhoun died in 1889, he had 95 tenant farmers on his land. His heirs continued to manage the tenant system, usually through overseers, for years after his death.

Minnie Walker, 88 years old, was one of the last tenants to leave Millwood, a departure in the

mid-1920's prompted by plunging cotton prices and the dreaded boll weevil invasion, which ravaged crops from Texas to the Atlantic Ocean. Walker was born April 7, 1892, on a Millwood tenant farm. She didn't remember her father because he abandoned his home when she was a small child and headed west to Mississippi, apparently because of financial troubles.

Walker lived as a young child with her grandmother and her great-grandmother, who was blind. One of her first vivid memories was of her great-grandmother's funeral. She recalled how the body was "laid out" for public viewing in their small farmhouse. "Her name was Susie," Walker explained, "but everybody called her Suckey." The minister who officiated at the services was the first the child ever saw. "He was black. We had all black preachers and had no white preachers. White people back in them days didn't mix with colored people," she explained.

Among her other childhood memories were conversations with her grandmother about when she was a slave, a time when a woman slave's

worth was often determined by her ability to bear children because every new child added to a slaveowner's wealth. Walker's grandmother explained that her own father was sold away from Millwood Plantation to breed more slaves. "My grandmama's father was sold. He, well the way she tell, he was a robust man. And this other white man bought him to raise children on his place. And Calhoun, the old man, didn't let her [Walker's grandmother] have to go out in the field like the rest, because he sold her father....I don't know [who bought him]....Just somebody who had come from somewhere and had a plantation....He [her great-grandfather] was used like a breeding horse. Yeah. That's the way it was back in them days."

Most of Minnie Walker's childhood was spent with a family she wasn't related to, although she came to consider the stepparents as her own mother and father. She talked about their tenant farm on Millwood property and her special fondness for the orchard: "My father's peach orchard was, I reckon, about three miles from the river. And he



Figure 16: Minnie Walker's relatives from her adopted family were photographed around 1875 at Millwood Plantation.



Figure 17: Houses at Millwood Plantation were simply built, but sturdy. They lasted for many years.

had, oh, all kind of cherries, and apples, and pears. And let me see, what else? Ah, peaches and apples, and corn....We had lots of them, lots of them old fashion peaches....He'd plant all seasons." Her stepfather paid a set annual rent of 400 pounds of baled cotton, processed by a gin in the nearby small town of Calhoun Falls, South Carolina. Going to the gin was an exciting excursion for the little girl. "[The] gin was out to Calhoun Falls. And...cotton buyers come in from somewhere and buy up the cotton. The gin man just have cotton stacked all around, all around. And this buyer come in and they put the cotton then on a freight train. Wasn't trucks and things to carry things like there is now," she said.

She married a tenant farmer, Mose Walker, on December 22, 1910, after an ardent proposal. "There was a gang of boys from Georgia around in the neighborhood and they all come to our house. And he [Mose Walker] spoke for me in front of all them boys. And I cursed him out. Just showing off in front of these boys."

Mose Walker later returned alone and "...he said, 'Well, I'm back here. You said I was just showing off because I was before them boys. Now I'm by myself and I ain't going to leave here until you tell me that I can come to see you on the thirteenth and I'll marry you.'" A lifetime later, she was still amazed at her young suitor's persistence. "You know how long he stayed there? Till the sun went down....I said, 'You ought to be shamed of yourself.' And he stayed right here till the sun went down. And I promised him that I would marry him."

Walker moved into her new husband's two-room house near a small spring on Millwood Plantation. A center chimney opened into a fireplace in each room, providing heat and a place for cooking. Each room also had a door to the outside. Floors were made of wood planks. Eventually, the young couple added paneling to divide one of the rooms into two bedrooms.

Tenant houses at Millwood and at other large farms were spaced farther apart than slave houses





Figure 18: Tenant farmers grew much of their own food and sometimes sold the surplus.

had been. "And the houses weren't piled up on one another," Walker explained, of the post-Civil War era. "It was 'bout a mile in between houses."

As a bride, Walker began raising two small children whose mother, her husband's sister, had recently died. "When I got married, married with a family. That was my husband, my niece and nephew, and myself. There was four of us. Children ain't had no mother. Couldn't do nothing for 'em from February up until I got married. And they was in need. I had to make clothes for 'em. And nine months [later], here come my baby....After the first one, every nine months, here's [another] baby. And farming too. I ain't had time. That's the truth. I spent all my time as a busy person."

Between 1910 and the mid-1920's, Walker bore eight children, four girls and four boys. "The niece child died. And the baby [boy] like to died....The daddy didn't know how to take care of it, and they got me to raise it....The child, when I got it, wasn't nothing but just skin and bone. I said, 'I believe me and the Lord going to raise this baby.' And I raised it up to be a grown man," she remembered.

World War I erupted about three years after Walker married and threatened her existence. "My husband didn't have to go and all. I know I got upset because I thought he was gonna go in. But he didn't go in and therefore my mind got settled. All I know about World War I, I know it was a whole heap of people come back home dead. They left here walking, but they came back in the casket."

Walker spent much of her early adulthood working in the fields alongside her husband and children. "Every one of 'em [the children] worked, the foster one, too. [The boys] mostly, they did the plowing. The girls, they didn't plow. My girls didn't plow. But I plowed. My husband plowed.... Up until all the children got married, I mostly did the planting with my hand. Dropped the corn and sowed the cotton seed, and things like that."

They were self-sufficient on their tenant farm in many ways. "We raised plenty food, just plenty food. [We bought] very little, very little. For a period of time, we didn't buy nothin' but canned goods or something like that. My husband raised wheat, plant potatoes, everything. My husband, he was born on the farm....Yes sir, we raised



Figure 19: An unidentified Elberton, Georgia resident was photographed around 1900.

everything, corn, cane (to make syrup), peanuts, just everything raised on the farm. Grewed [the peanuts] for the hogs and mule." Regardless of their hard work, however, the Walkers, like most tenant farmers, barely earned any profits.

In 1919, boll weevils swarmed into the Savannah River Valley after migrating through the South from Texas. Cotton growing was devastated and demand slackened, causing a panic. Minnie Walker remembered one particular year when hard times almost overcame her family, forcing them to move, to give up renting land, and to begin sharecropping.

Trouble started, she said, when her family bought a mule to help ease farm chores. "That was the year we ain't had nair a penny. Debt we owed, you see. We ain't had nair a penny. 'Cause we just had enough, you know, for to pay our rent. So the man come down from Abbeville and got our mule. You see, what we had [we used] to get food and things. That's when we got [on other land] and shared. And we worked there, oh, quite a few years."

*“He couldn’t raise  
nothing on it...  
too poor to even  
raise a fuss on.”*

Like many tenant farmers, her husband sometimes left home to find work elsewhere during the off-season. “He worked the farm and then when he’d get through with the farm, he’d go on to Calhoun Falls [to work in a mill] till he finished that....He stayed to the spring of the year and then he come back and have his farm.”

The need for money also pushed Minnie Walker into searching out work away from home. She took in laundry for families in Calhoun Falls. “I got hitched up with people who wanted me to work, wash and iron. I broke down a buggy hauling coal, washing and ironing, to buy clothes and things for my children....It was getting hard. It was already hard all along. You see, colored people didn’t have nothin’ to do except get out there and help themselves.”

She also cooked for two white women in Calhoun Falls. “The two women, [I went] from one to the other, when I could. I’d work for them. And then when I worked for them, they was so nice to me.” She also trained to be a midwife and helped with the births of many local children. Reflecting back on her many occupations, she described herself this way: “Miss Walker had the hardest family in Abbeville County of working people. Awful, awful way women work. We didn’t fool around.”

Hard work was a lifelong tradition among many of those interviewed. Laboring from dawn to dark was how they overcame the frequent obstacles put in their paths. At times, even the earth seemed determined to make their lives hard, some remembered. Soil fertility varied significantly from one tenant farm to the next, with many tenants having to force a living from soils sorely depleted by overuse and erosion. Charlotte Sweeny recalled

her father “always cussing” about the sorry state of his farm. “He couldn’t raise nothing on it...too poor to even raise a fuss on. Couldn’t even raise a good argument on it,” she said.

Phoebe Turman was 13 years old when her family abandoned a tenant farm in South Carolina because of unfertile “sandy land” and crossed the Savannah River in search of better ground. They found it in Georgia, not far from the river, in an area African Americans called Flatwoods. “Flatwoods was strong land, black land,” she explained.

The trip across the river was firmly etched in her memory. She made the journey with her mother and her mother’s brother and all of their possessions. Her parents had separated, with her father taking Phoebe’s brother West with him, possibly to Mississippi. Turman remembered that the ferry ride cost 50 cents per person. “But I guess when they put a team [of horses or mules] across there, it cost more.”

But her family had little in the way of possessions, she recalled. “They brought their households, their furniture, what they had. Didn’t have nothing....mattress, quilts, chairs, everything....Didn’t have a wood stove. We cooked on the fireplace, [had] skillet, pots.” They didn’t own a horse or wagon, so the owner of the land they were going to farm sent a wagon to the river to carry them to their new home.

The trip held the promise of a new life for the young girl, who, when she stepped off the boat, was touching Georgia soil for the first time. Farming, however, proved equally disappointing on both sides of the river. “We worked a third patch,” she explained. “You get a third of everything you make, potatoes, cotton, corn, everything.” The landlord got the rest.

Even the meager amount tenants earned wasn’t pure profit because to varying degrees, depending upon their arrangements with a landlord, farmers were required to buy their supplies, tools, and provisions from him. Tenants often could buy these goods on credit, then repay their debt from their share of the harvest. But the arrangement was rarely satisfactory, frequently resulting in little reward for months of hard work for the tenants. Turman remembered that after paying the landlord his share of the harvest, “Then you settle up and if there is anything left for



Figure 20: Farmers raised sweet potatoes, corn, and other vegetables.

you out of your third, then you gets that....You come out in debt every month.”

Although the boat ride to her new home was a first for Phoebe Turman, crossing from one side of the river to the other by ferry or flat boat, as the crafts were also called, was commonplace in the days before bridges spanned the water. Landowners along the river banks often ran ferries as money-making ventures and used their slaves to operate them and collect fees. Besides providing vital transportation links between Georgia and South Carolina, ferries continued after slavery ended as a source of employment for African Americans. Even after automobiles became important, ferries continued to flourish, only relinquishing their role in the area in 1927 with the opening of the Georgia-Carolina Memorial Bridge.

Joe Isom piloted a ferry for about seven years, starting when he was about ten years old. He was working on a farm at the time for a white man who also wanted him to manage the ferry. Isom remembered that the boat was about 30 feet long. “Well, I reckon it would be near about that. It’s long enough for two whole wagons to fit in there....I

was puttin’ folks across the river. Put the flats across, carrying people back and forth....A wagon cost 50 cents and a buggy cost a quarter. If he [a person] was walking, he wouldn’t pay so much. It would cost, if you walking, a nickel or dime, or something [like that].”

Born in 1874, Isom was raised by a grandparent because his own parents died when he was an infant. At 107 years of age, he could look back on a time before railroads were a significant economic factor along the upper Savannah River. Flat-bottomed keel boats were the dominant transportation for moving heavy goods—including cotton bales—up and down the river when he was a young boy.

As a child, he watched as crewmen, many of them black, used long poles to push the shallow boats across the water. “You know, folks got trucks now to carry the cotton to different states. But they didn’t have none when I was a boy. They had a boat that they carried the cotton in....The boat was long, long, long as this house here....They ship [the cotton] to Augusta [Georgia]. I ain’t never been to Augusta. They say it’s bad to go



Figure 21: James Edward Calhoun used roofs with unusual eaves, one of many innovations he tried at his Millwood Plantation.



Figure 22: Ferries provided vital links between the Georgia and South Carolina banks of the wide Savannah River.

down the river....They had poles, the boat didn't have no steam....Wasn't no trouble to go down there, but coming back they had to push it in the water using man power."

Traveling along the river evoked other memories, as well. For some, ferry boat trips were happy and exciting times. Louella Walker associated the Lindsey Bryant Ferry, which crossed the Savannah River near her tenant farm, with fun-filled excursions she made to Georgia as a teenager. "Our mother would be watching to see if the boys would be coming home with us from Georgia...he [Lindsey Bryant], ran the ferry from South Carolina to Georgia. He took people across and back in the flats....Big, old flats...you know, you could put two buggies or two automobiles in there and they had a cable and the cable would help carry [the ferry]."

Heavy rains could make crossing the river dangerous, and people on both the Georgia and South Carolina banks shared tales about those who had drowned or barely escaped drowning. Minnie Walker remembered an episode when the river had frightened her terribly. A young relative of her husband's had come to see them for a visit,

accompanied by his new bride. "I preferred them to spend the night with us. And the next morning when we got up, the river was up. Oh, it was up! That water was just jumping. And that young girl, she cried so. She'd never stayed away from home. My husband pleaded and pleaded with her [not to go across the flooded river]. And finally in the evening, they decided they would go. And I walked with 'em up there where I could see 'em when they got on the other side."

Walker's anxiety mounted as the couple launched the boat into the choppy water. She watched fearfully as they drifted quickly away from shore, then lost sight of them when they went behind an island. Long moments passed while she waited for them to reappear.

At last, they came back into view. "But they made it all right. What saved 'em, the boy had sense enough, this big oak tree was coming down [the river] and he turned the boat with the tree, until the tree got passed 'em. And that's what saved 'em. Hadn't been for them knowing to do that, why it would just have torn them all to pieces."





Figure 23: Minnie Clark grew up on a tenant farm and then became a teacher. She is shown here as a child with her mother.

# Tenant Farming

## *“A Lot of Work to Do”*

**G**aining financial independence was rarely accomplished without failed attempts for many of those interviewed, as well as for their older relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Yet African Americans, despite a legacy of subjugation during slavery and the prolonged and severe inequities enforced by a segregated society, were not powerless. Indeed, some managed to achieve a great deal, from owning their own farms and businesses to becoming physicians, teachers, and respected leaders. Various factors, however, often prevented or slowed many from escaping poverty.

One persistent stumbling block was placed in their paths by some white landowners and merchants who deliberately set out to cheat blacks by capitalizing on their lack of education.

Before the Civil War, a few masters taught their slaves how to read and write, but for the most part Southern society frowned on educating African Americans, an attitude that persisted for years after. “See, people in them days, we didn’t have no education, no nothing but go out there and work,” explained Minnie Walker. Their illiteracy made African Americans easy prey for dishonest merchants and landowners who inflated the amount of money black tenants owed them. The result was a never-ending spiral of obligation for the tenants who were forced to work the land year after year to repay debts that far exceeded what they actually owed.

Edward Brownlee explained: “...you’d go to the store and just get, and then at the end of the year, the white man just charge you. Half the time, people didn’t know what they was getting, that’s how they’d cheat ‘em.”

The experience of Randolph Davis demonstrates what could happen between a tenant and

a landlord. Davis, the oldest person interviewed, maintained a sharp sense of humor into his advanced age. At first, he evaded answering when asked when he was born. “Now, you got on down to it, didn’t you?” he laughed. “I’d been waitin’ for this...That ain’t been last year. That been years and years ago. I’m 111 years old.”

As newlyweds with little money, Davis, who was 17 or 18 years old, and his bride moved in temporarily with her mother. “I stayed with her till I got a house of my own, moved in. I was pretty old. I was old enough to marry,” he remembered.

Eventually, the young couple rented their own small, one-room house on land owned by an African American, Will Cade. “The ole land wasn’t no count, [not] much. Up the hill and down the hill. So I moved off that ole place ‘cause I couldn’t make nothing on it. I didn’t know the white man who [once] owned the place, but he sold it to Will Cade....Will Cade bought the land and never could pay for it, had to give it up.”

Davis and his wife remained on the Cade land for about a year before they moved to another tenant farm. Then, after a short while, they relocated to yet another farm. It was at this tenant farm that Davis experienced a stinging injustice at the hands of his white landlord.

He had harvested his cotton and was ready to reap his small profit for a season of hard work. But instead he was cheated from getting any payment at all by the landowner. As Davis remembered, the man “made everybody on that place bring their cotton up there, about ten or 15 bales, and he took every bit of it. I had ten bales of cotton. I didn’t get a dime and I left. Ten bales of cotton, [the owner] took every bale.”



*Moisture could  
secretly add five  
pounds of worth  
to a bale of cotton.*



Figure 24: A tenant house from Millwood Plantation was moved years later closer to Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, and was occupied as late as the early 1980's.

Some of the other tenants, Davis said, retaliated against the unscrupulous landlord. "Other people got money the best way they could. They commenced to make cotton, sell it by the basketful to somebody else...keep [him] from it."

Rufus Bullard recounted another method some African Americans used to extract a little extra money from the white cotton gin operators. "You could weigh a bale of cotton there today and lay it out at night and take it to town tomorrow and it might gain five pounds due to moisture," he said.

Born near Heardmont, Georgia in 1909, Bullard had farmed most of his life except for seven years he spent in Chicago and a time he served as a soldier fighting in World War II. He explained that work animals like mules and horses were crucial to farming in years past because the animals determined how much land a farmer could work. He described the place where he grew up in Elbert County, Georgia as "a one-horse farm." "We first started out with [a] horse of my grandmother's, just one horse, so after that, we

went to four horses, which would be 40, 50 acres [we could farm], I guess, back in them days."

Randolph Davis explained that not having horses or mules seriously hindered his own grandfather's efforts to farm. "Back in those days, you couldn't work much land....We didn't have nothing to work it with....Never had no horses, had to go out there and dig it up [by hand]." Despite their importance, however, the animals could also be a burden because they ate some of the precious harvests tenants needed to feed themselves and to pay their rent.

Helping one another in times of need was another way that African-American tenant farmers managed to cope with hardship. Louella Walker, whose father was renown for his fiddle playing at parties, recalled members of her extended family stepping in at various points to offer aid to her parents.

She lived as a child at Millwood Plantation, where tenants often paid a set rent, rather than a share or percentage of their crops to the landlord.

“My granddaddy paid the whole rent for us. And my father would plow [with] one of my granddaddy’s mules. And so my granddaddy, I think, had to pay about six bales for rent....When you gin that cotton, you had to give him [the overseer] so many bales.”

Minnie Clark, who eventually left the tenant farm of her childhood to become a teacher, spoke of the same sense of cooperation among African Americans. “We, in those days, like we have a neighbor. Now, his cotton might get a little grassy. Now, they [different families] worked together....Whole families got together and chopped his cotton out. And the next day, they’d go to another [farmer’s place]. That’s the way they worked.” Women, she remembered, worked beside the men in the fields. “But I have worked now....I have put it down. I’ve plowed...took my grandmammy’s plow to the shop. I couldn’t put a point on it, but I could sharpen it.”

The toll of years of hard physical labor on his father’s health was enormous, according to Edward Brownlee, who was 65 years old when he spoke to investigators. His father “ran all

kind of things in his lifetime, gin, sawmills, not for himself now, but for other folks. He didn’t own them. I bet if you knew the little bit that they paid him, it would tickle you to death. You see, our folk didn’t know any better. Well, I guess everybody was doing it though.”

About a year before Brownlee was born, his father worked on a tenant farm and as a blacksmith. But when his wife became pregnant, he decided to “quit blacksmithing. At least Momma decided that they weren’t getting anywhere, and the land was growing up and she kept on until he started farming [more]. My brother had been born. He [my father] said he just felt so tired because he was trying to do these two jobs, farming and blacksmith for this plantation. They had a lot of work to do. And about three months before I was born, he went [out in the field] and didn’t get back. Momma went out to see what had happened, and she found him, and he was just sliding in the front of the house, and she caught him, and led him to the house. And when she sat him down, it was two or three years before he walked again.”

*“Whole families got together and chopped his cotton out.”*



Figure 25: Tenant farmers used a mule-driven press to extract juice from sugar cane for syrup.



Figure 26: Carriages and bicycles passed on the dirt main street of early Abbeville, South Carolina. The town was an important center of commerce for farmers.

Despite his father's poor health, Brownlee's family continued to eke a living from the soil, and Edward Brownlee was able to go to college. Long interested in his family's history, he accumulated many stories about his relatives and the past of the region, information which proved a boon to researchers tracking African-American lifeways.

Brownlee's interest in genealogy was first sparked during World War II when he became good friends with a fellow soldier. "He [the friend] said, 'Your name ain't Brownlee.' He said, 'That name came up in Ireland. Your name is really Brownleigh.' So, I just went along, teasing him, and didn't think anything about it. Finally, I decided to have it traced, and it came back just as he said."

The young Brownlee was able to track his roots all the way back to Ireland. "The way they got their name [was] they had a famine up in this little meadow [in Ireland], and everything just burned up at one time there, and there was no

more food, so everyone had to leave. So, everybody who came out from there, they called them the Brown, which meant dry, and Leigh, which meant meadow. These were the folk who came out of the dry meadow in Ireland."

Brownlee's paternal great-grandfather was a white man whose family immigrated from Ireland to North Carolina. He married a woman named Mary Frost and "when times got hard" they moved to the small Georgia community of Heardmont, not far from the Savannah River, Brownlee explained. They raised several children, and one of them, Tom, eventually had a relationship with an African-American woman. Out of that union was born Brownlee's father, "the first black Brownlee." Brownlee vividly recalled his first meeting with his white grandfather, Tom Brownlee, whom he described as "very down to earth."

"The first time I saw him, I was a great big boy. He was the night watchman right down here at

*“That white clay, it was almost like lime, you just pull it back and it was so white.”*



Figure 27: Miss E.M. Henry of Elberton around 1918.

this little mill. My dad went over there to see him about borrowing a mule. He [my father] had a mule that had died. And they were talking, and after awhile, he [the grandfather] called me up there and pulled off his hat just as big, and he said, ‘Look at me good, so you’ll know me the next time.’ He said, ‘Boy, come here. What do you call me?’ ‘Well, suh, I never called you anything because I never knew you before.’ He just laughed and pulled his hat off again and said, ‘Look at me good.’ And he said, ‘You can call me anything you want to.... You can call me Mr. Tom Joe Brownlee, Old Man Tom Joe Brownlee, or Grandpapa, if you wanna.’ He said, ‘Now, I am frank. I don’t deny a damn thing that I’ve ever done.’”

Apart from raising crops and working other jobs when they could get them to make ends meet, African-American tenant farmers often exerted extra effort to keep their homes clean and neat. The Reverend Janie Hampton remembered her family cutting dogwood tree limbs and tying

them together to make a “brush broom.” She and the other children also helped collect white mud to whitewash their rented home.

“That white clay, it was almost like lime. You just pull it back and it was so white. And you take and mix it with water, and it looked almost like milk. And the more clay you put in, the thicker it got. And then you could take that, and if it didn’t rain too much, the house would be white. And if it rained, you just get some more.”

And, she remembered, they “...kept their yards clean, kept the grass cut back. [In reality] you didn’t cut the grass back, you scraped it down to the ground. You scraped it with a hoe. That’s what you call a clean yard. What I’m trying to say,” she continued, “that was extra work that black people did to make it look pretty. And yet we were labeled as lazy. And it’s no, no truth to that. People worked at night so that their place would be nice and presentable. Back in those days, they did that.”



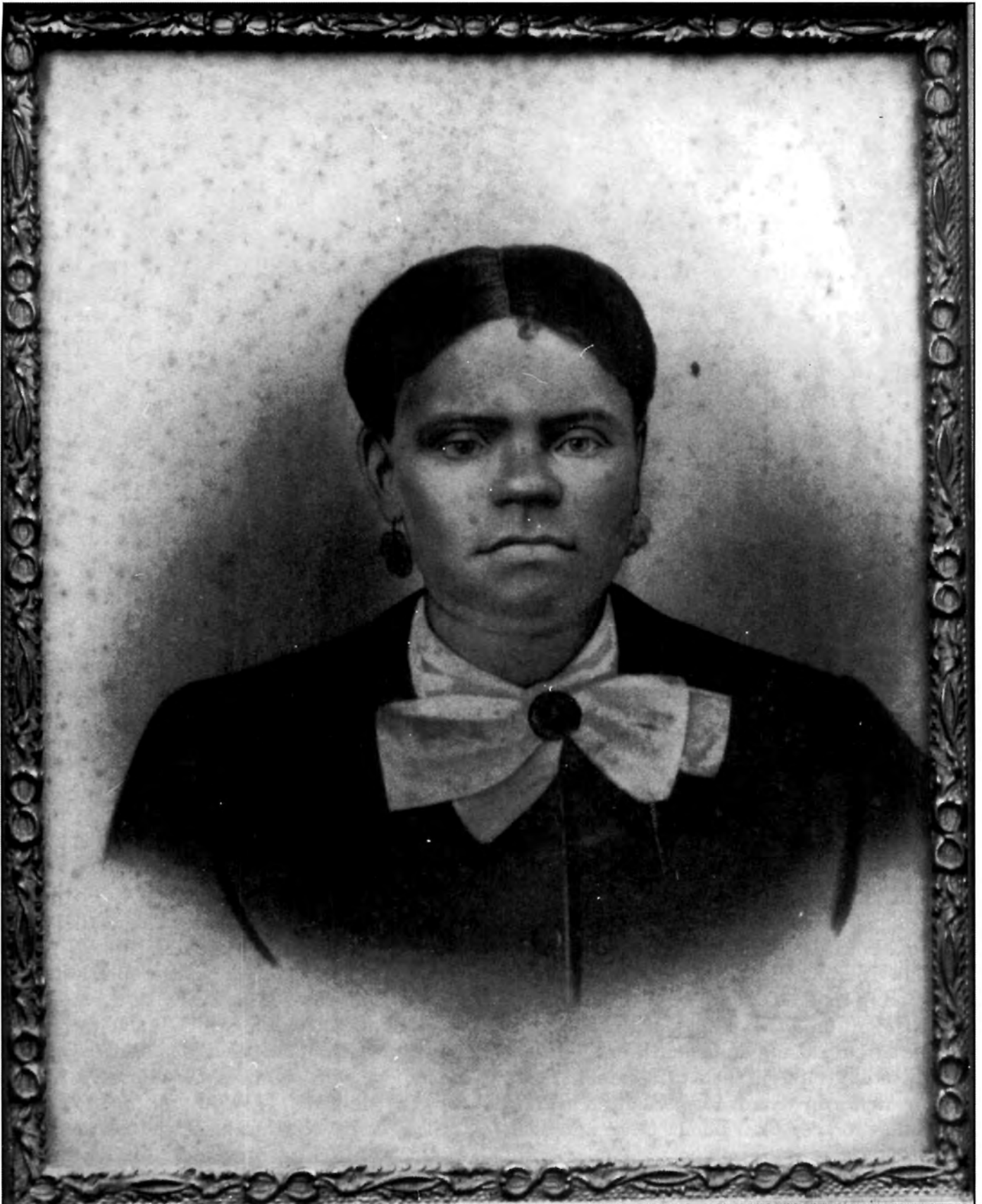


Figure 28: Minnie Clark of Abbeville County, South Carolina, shared this photograph of a relative whose name was among those lost over time.

# Buying Land

## *“One Hundred Dollars a Year”*

**S**truggling to move away from renting farmland to owning their own property was a dominant theme in the lives of many of the people interviewed and in the lives of those they knew. Through buying land, African Americans took another important step towards independence, and how some achieved the status of property owner was a lingering source of pride.

Acquiring land was all the more difficult because most African Americans in the late 1800's had little money. And there were other obstacles they had to overcome, roadblocks demonstrated through the story the Reverend Janie Hampton told about her father, a man of considerable ability who worked as a tenant farmer at Millwood Plantation in the late 1800's.

He was “a slow talker, but whenever he spoke, it had weight to it,” Hampton said of her father. His neighbors respected him as someone with knowledge and wisdom, she remembered, and sought his opinion and advice. “He used to go back and forth around to different people and doctor on animals....He knew when to plant certain things that grew underground, it was a certain moon that you plant those on. And [he had similar knowledge about] things that grow above the ground, things that you freed from the stalk....And there's certain times you kill [livestock] and the meat will be good and tender and everything and the fat will come from it. And then there is a lot in feeding an animal. When you get an animal ready for the table, the market, there is certain things you feed him,” she explained.

Hampton learned some of his methods through experimentation and gleaned others from combing through magazines. He taught himself to read and was avid in the pursuit of information,

according to his daughter. “[There] really wasn't anything around the farm he couldn't do. He used to get farmer's magazines....He was just apt at learning things....He had an orchard....He had different kinds of peaches. He had red peaches, then he had a real sweet, white peach. And then he had apricots, plums. He used to graft trees and make them grow, you know, mixed fruits.”

Her father's goal was to own his own farm, and he steadily saved to fulfill his dream. But when he was close to accumulating enough money, he delayed buying because he had promised his elderly parents that he wouldn't leave them. “He stayed and took care of them. He lived there [at Millwood] and buried his mother and father. And then he was somewhat stuck with us,” his daughter explained. “See, 14 children had been born. Twelve of them were living. The first two died. But 12 of us were living when Grandma died.”

Hampton eventually did buy land, but at an unexpected price. His daughter remembered that once overseers learned of his plans to become a property owner they made life more difficult for him. “People knew that he had bought. And they figured he was planning on building and they just wouldn't be but so nice to you, if they thought you was trying to help yourself....They took more rent from you than you was supposed to [pay].... Whatever they said you owed, you just had to pay it....You couldn't appeal to anybody.”

Such resistance from whites to African Americans owning land was common, researchers learned. W.T. Smith's father, William Smith, began buying property in the 1920's and had three farms in succession. When he died in 1949, Smith, who was 79 years old, had acquired 280 acres, but his son remembered that during his lifetime he

*“He had it all  
painted up. And kept  
that thing painted.”*

had faced resentment: “They [the whites] didn’t wanna see colored folk with nothing but a pair of patched-up, white overalls. Some of them don’t want to see you with a new pair of overalls on.”

Not all whites, however, were unsympathetic to the aspirations of African Americans, as exemplified by the story of Gilbert Gray, born a slave in September 1852. Son of a slave woman and white father, Gray’s own skin color was light, allowing him, perhaps, to pass for white in some situations. The post-bellum South, however, “still operated under the notion that children assumed the race of the mother,” as Eleanor Ramsey pointed out, so Gilbert Gray was considered black by those who knew his parentage. Not surprisingly, however, considering the privileges accorded to whites, Gray may have tried to be identified as white instead. According to one account, he required his black, common-law wife, Clarissa “Classie” Jones, to walk the last mile to church alone so that they would not be seen driving together.

Gray, who was apparently trained as a blacksmith, spent many years as a tenant farmer. Then, sometime between 1903 and 1909, the record is unclear, he gained title to about 140 acres formerly owned by a white family, the Verdels. Explained Edward Brownlee, “[Gray] bought that place for \$1,000. For ten years, he paid off \$100 a year.... Sometimes he couldn’t get no more than \$60.... The Verdels would just cancel the note [as] paid.”

A deed search by researcher Marlessa Gray indicated that title to the Verdel land actually passed through several hands in the first decade of the 1900’s before Gilbert Gray acquired it in 1909, although he apparently paid taxes on the property for years before then. Why he did this is

uncertain. What is clear is that Gray lost the farm sometime between 1912 and 1914.

Brownlee remembered that Gray was tremendously troubled by the loss, particularly of his house, which he had built himself. The single-story dwelling was moderate in size. There was a central hallway, two rooms on each side of the hallway, and an attached kitchen. “After he got his house built,” according to Brownlee, “he had it all painted up. And he kept that thing painted. When I was a child, it was just as white.” Gray also built another house nearby for the adult son of Clarissa Jones.

Gray blamed himself for losing the property, according to Brownlee, who recalled Gray’s words: “I was runnin’ round with other women, throwing it away.... And then [my] boys got up big enough and they started runnin’ around, making me borrow money, and that’s why I didn’t have nothing.”

He never bought land again, but despite his financial troubles, he remained a generous friend. “I was a little boy,” Brownlee recalled. “My dad had a stroke and couldn’t plow.... And he [Gray] would come down and I’d hear him tell dad many a time, ‘Say, Ed, I feel sorry for you. You can’t plow and got these little children and everything.... I’ll come up here and plow for you one day a week. I’m too old [so] I can’t hold out but one day a week.’ And he’d come there soon, before I’d get up [in the morning], and he wouldn’t work but that one day a week. But now, if something like stacking hay [needed to be done] or something like that where it wasn’t such a hard job, he’d work a day or two.”

As an old man, Gray was given to frequent reminiscing about his former prosperity and how he had once owned his own farm. Rufus Bullard remembered that after Gray lost his land he lived in a series of shacks, including one adjacent to the Seaboard Air Line railroad tracks. He died in 1921 or 1922, without leaving a will.

A further glimpse at what the rural existence was like came from Randolph Davis, who retained vivid memories of his childhood on the farm. He recalled “the old broken [pot belly] stove with a door” sitting in the yard and nearby the “old pot” where the chickens used to drink water. Particularly memorable was a time when he watched his father and his father’s brother plowing the fields. When they finished, they led the mule back to the shed where they were unhooking the animal from



Figure 29: Careless farming practices severely eroded the land and further depleted fertility, already sorely taxed by the heavy demands of growing cotton.

the plow, releasing it from the sweaty harness. Suddenly, “People were calling and shouting and saying a mad dog was coming in this direction,” Davis said. “Then they caught up with the dog on top of the hill and killed him.”

His father, Davis remembered, also aspired to own his own land and made regular payments on about 85 acres. But when he had paid nearly the full price, the owners abruptly announced that they didn’t want to sell to him, after all. “They took it [his money]. He didn’t get anything. You couldn’t argue, couldn’t say nothing.”

Despite such roadblocks, African Americans slowly managed to increase their land ownership in Abbeville and Elbert Counties. The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), which studied housing in the area, noted that between 1905 and 1945, African Americans owned from four to six percent of the available land in Elbert County. By 1950, that figure had edged upward to eight percent.

In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, most African Americans landowners had inherited their property from whites. For example, in Heardmont, Georgia, and surrounding areas, known then as the Ruckersville Militia District, African Americans in 1905 owned an unusually high 16 percent of the property for the time, largely because before the Civil War three white landowners had fathered children by slaves and bequeathed their property to these descendants.

George Washington Dye’s story is the best documented of these three instances of white landowners. As a young man, he proposed marriage to the daughter of a prominent family, but was spurned by the girl’s father who said Dye was too poor to marry her. Infuriated, Dye vowed that someday he would be richer than the father was and set out to fulfill his promise. According to Edward Brownlee, who was Dye’s great-grandson on his mother’s side of the family, and also according to other sources, Dye’s business dealings were shrewd, sometimes





Figure 30: Early photographers used elaborate backdrops for portraits.

bordering on unethical. He was quite a gambler and acquired considerable land through winning bets. He never married, but fathered eight children with one of his slaves. Ostracized by many of his white neighbors because of the relationship, Dye apparently cared little about what people thought of him. He reportedly flaunted his ties with the woman, who was named Lucinda and who probably came from the Virgin Islands.

"Yeah, she told some of their grandchildren that we were from the Virgin Islands and that we were not from Africa," Brownlee said, adding, "but in that day, most people with no school didn't know what the Virgin Islands were, so maybe she didn't. I don't know whether she was born here or whether it was her mother who came from the Virgin Islands." Lucinda also had a ninth child, fathered by another man before she lived with Dye. This child, who lived with Dye's children, was included in his will as well.

Historians learned that Dye did indeed accomplish his youthful vow to become rich. When

he died in 1865, he owned approximately 3,000 acres near Heardmont, Georgia and other parcels nearby. Much of his bequest to his children, however, was plucked from the heirs within two generations, sometimes apparently by "extralegal, if not illegal, means," according to researchers with The History Group.

Edward Brownlee's grandmother, Laura, for instance, who was Dye's daughter, was tricked into signing away all her land, Brownlee said. The swindle, Brownlee related, occurred not long after his grandfather died in a freak accident. "A cow hooked him up under the chin somewhere, and the doctor wanted to operate. He was scared for them to do it. And I understand that it [the infection] went down into the lungs and it developed into lung trouble. He wasn't but 40 years old when he died."

His grandmother, who remarried, didn't understand her rights to the property she had inherited and consequently lost it. "They weren't even able to get any of it because they had signed their [land] away....But I guess if you don't know, you don't know," Brownlee said. Some of Dye's children were stripped of their birthright "because the administrators met and thought that it was terrible for white people to give their land to Negroes," he continued. "So they took as much of it as they could. If they didn't take it all then, they took it later."

A few of Dye's heirs, however, successfully resisted. Brownlee said of Eugene, one of Lucinda's sons, "Now, old man Gene was smarter than any of them. Old man Gene wouldn't sign nothing...he wouldn't sign nothing one way or the other, and when he died, every bit of his [land] came back to his children." Dye's other children, however, or his grandchildren, found themselves ensnared in debt. They either lost large plots of land all at once or sold pieces off bit by bit.

Not all the Dye holdings, however, that were lost by his descendants remained in the hands of whites. Brownlee's parents eventually managed to buy back some of the property that his grandmother had owned, and another African American, Jim White, bought land in 1926 from Shelton Dye, grandson of George Washington Dye. Shelton Dye was forced to sell the property because he was unable to pay his taxes.

Jim White used the former Dye land and other property he bought nearby as the foundation for



Figure 31: Jim White lived in this house. He was among the most successful African-American farmers in the area. He grew many different crops and built a number of barns and other structures on his property.

a thriving farm with 37 buildings. By 1935, he had acquired 357 acres, the largest holdings belonging to any African American in the Heardmont vicinity. He had not inherited a single acre.

He worked about 17 years for a railroad company, then as a tenant farmer before he began buying property. The resistance that earlier African Americans met from whites in the aftermath of the Civil War when they tried to buy farms had softened somewhat by the time White began to acquire land. Nonetheless, he still achieved a noteworthy degree of success as a farmer in an era when many others were failing. White's industriousness and willingness to innovate were important factors in his accomplishment. Every few years, he built a new barn to accommodate his burgeoning enterprises. He consistently diversified the crops that he grew, cushioning the blow if one crop failed, either in the field or the marketplace. While he raised cotton

like most of his neighbors and was hurt along with them by falling prices, he was able to sustain the loss through selling meat and such produce as peas, corn, wheat, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and sugar cane.

Helped by his wife and their 11 children, he produced 70 to 80 gallons of syrup from the sugar cane, and raised hogs, cattle, chickens, geese, ducks, and turkeys. Three milk cows supplied all the family's dairy needs.

During the Great Depression in the 1930's, the family sold approximately one-third of their produce. They were especially successful with sales of peas and sweet potatoes, which they stored and marketed during the late winter and early spring when supplies in most markets were low.

Jim White died in 1956. His four daughters continued to farm the family land with mules after his passing, just as their father had taught them.



Figure 32: Children like this barefoot flower girl struggled along with nearly everyone else to make ends meet in a poor economy.

# Changing Places

## *“That’s All We Could Get”*

**M**igration was common for African Americans in the South. Most of the people interviewed and their relatives moved several times in their lives, sometimes over great distances, searching for a better life. Minnie Clark was among those who shifted from one place to another for economic reasons. She didn’t know her exact age, she said, because her birth was never registered, but she estimated she was at least 70 years old.

Clark also recalled that her parents never told her about the facts of life. Instead, the little girl learned, “The baby was in a stump...they brought you a lil’ sister or brother in the basket. Lil’ boy came in a basket in some flour sack clothes. I can remember them days.” Another memory from her youth was the time her family installed electric lights. “I didn’t have lights till one morning. I was going to school. I got up and was dressing. We were so used to being [in the dark]. I said, ‘Oh Lord, they done it [put in lights] and I didn’t know it.’”

Raised on her grandfather’s farm near Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, Clark fondly remembered childhood excursions to visit friends at Millwood Plantation and the wild plant foods she ate there. She and her playmates searched for the plants in and around the cotton patches, looking for tidbits like rabbit apple, “a little bush that grows little thorns on it and it’s got little apples on it...and the huckleberry tree. Inside were the little hard nuts and we’d crack ‘em. And ‘simmons, the persimmons....I’d beat a dog to the ‘simmon tree. And wild maypops. We don’t call ‘em maypops now. But we’d eat them like coming down to this time. They’d give you a chill.”

She also recalled that the tenant farmers beautified their yards. “They did have what you call sunflowers. They loved sunflowers. And wild lil-

ies, we’d get them off the branch. And you had pepper flowers, but they were beautiful. When you worked ‘em, they were pretty.” Also memorable was the old molasses mill, pulled “by the mule going round and around” as the machinery squeezed the sticky syrup from cane. “And they make that juice and they cook it in a vat. I call it syrup, homemade syrup.”

As an adult, Clark moved to a big city and later back home again. This “in-out” pattern of migration—as Eleanor Ramsey and associates termed the pattern—was a means for African Americans to increase their earnings and assert more control over their lives.

Clark couldn’t earn enough as a teacher to pay the mortgage on her South Carolina home, which she owned with her mother. At the time, most elementary and secondary schools for African Americans were limited to just three months a year and Clark’s salary was only \$35 a month during those three months. Even so, Clark observed, “You could take that \$35, \$40 and do more with it than you can with \$500 [now]. I’d cash my ‘lil check [and] I’d buy shoes, I’d buy a dress, I’d buy a hat.”

Nonetheless, her salary was still insufficient to meet all her needs, and there weren’t many other jobs she could find in the rural area where she lived, so Clark and her mother moved to Atlanta where she became a housekeeper and cook for a white family. She always intended, however, to return someday to South Carolina, where she left many of her belongings. She used part of her salary to continue payments on her house.

The family she worked for rented apartments near the State Capitol in Atlanta. They paid her three dollars a week. “That’s all we could get and sometimes car fare. We lived in their house.”

*“Everything was  
turned over to me.  
Whatever I wanted to  
cook, I’d cook it.”*

There were good and bad aspects to the job. “Got them big white aprons on...and talked half of the time,” Clark recalled. “Now, them white people were nice. Everything was turned over to me. Whatever I wanted to cook, I’d cook it. But I didn’t know too much about [cooking]....I had my cook book from school. I’d make Mammie’s Minute Rolls, anything. I got tired one time. I said, ‘I ain’t going to make no more rolls. I’m going home.’”

She worked in Atlanta for five years, discovering in her free time that the city offered interesting entertainments, including a chance to see the famous black performers of the day. “...we seen Bessie Smith singing....Yeah, and another Smith. Betty somebody...Betty Smith. Yeah, [she sang] ‘I hate to see the evening sun go down.’ And ‘The Saint Louis Blues,’ and I don’t know what all. And I’d put on my clothes and split getting there. ‘I hate to see the evening sun go down. It makes me look like I’m on my last go round.’ Ah, they could sing them blues. They called [it] ‘Our Show.’ We went to ‘Our Show.’ Ole Bessie Smith would be singing and just be picking up more money. ‘I hate to see the evening sun go....’ And that boy be playing that piano. She [Bessie Smith] was a dark, great woman. But she could sing....And Ma Rainey, yeah. And ole Cab Calloway.”

African Americans in Elbert and Abbeville Counties also exhibited a great deal of mobility within their own counties. They moved from farm to farm, from farming to other jobs, from rural areas to small towns, and from town to town. When times became especially hard, some sneaked

away from their rented farms. Lillie Pressley recalled, “Some of ‘em run away from [their contracts]. They wasn’t able to come up to it [the contract]. They didn’t make what they were supposed to make to meet their contract at the end of the year, you see, and they just left. There was nothing they [the white landowners] could do, ‘cause if they find ‘em, ain’t nothin’ they could do about it.”

But Randolph Davis, who also remembered that some African Americans broke their tenant contracts, stated that white response could be violent. “Something went wrong with the, ah, tenants, they ran, slipped away. You know, or go North, or go someplace [else] at night time. And course, the Cracker [sometimes] would take ‘em out and beat ‘em.”

Nonetheless, the Russell studies documented that during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s many tenant farmers moved fairly freely from one landowner’s property to another, seemingly indicating relatively smooth relations between most white landlords and their tenants. Several investigators, however, located sources who told of two wealthy white families who used extensive prison labor. One of the families used women prisoners to dig a millrace a mile long. Regarding the other family, there were reports of cruelty reminiscent of slavery.

Sources related that the family would pay bail for African-American prisoners who had no money to get out of jail. Often, their crimes were no more serious than drunkenness or gambling. The freed prisoners, and sometimes their families, were required to work off their bail debt by toiling on the land belonging to the white family. They also were obligated to buy all their food and supplies from the family on credit. Most of the African Americans soon found themselves helplessly mired in debt, with escape almost impossible because of guard dogs and armed men watching them. “Somebody told me that one fella got away, but before he left there at night he wiped the bottom of his shoes with turpentine [so pursuing dogs couldn’t smell them]. And he got away. He swam the river and kept going,” related one source.

Many other African Americans participated in another pattern when they moved North that researchers termed “out migration.” This departure peaked in the 1890’s and again in the



Figure 33: As people abandoned the land, buildings that once were the center of activity fell into ruin.

1920's and dramatically changed the local population. The biggest exodus came as a result of the invasion of the boll weevil, which began about 1919.

Rufus Bullard was about 12 years old and living on his parents' tenant farm when the insects ate their way into Georgia. "And it was '19, I think, '21 or '23. It was close to that, anyway. I tell you, the weevils hit this country....Well, they hit this country and everybody made a shorter crop....And the people went broke, all the merchants. And the farmers picked up squares and burned 'em...the crop squares. [You] burn the grubs, keep the weevil from hatchin'."

Farmers also used arsenic poison. "It was already mixed. You just put it into a machine. You dry it and blow it out on the cotton," Bullard

explained. But the boll weevils kept swarming and the price of cotton kept plunging. He remembered the price dropping from 50 cents a pound to five cents. "They sold that cotton for five cents, and they were pretty well broke, stranded....See, people, they just left the farm, 'cause wasn't nothin' to do. Lot of 'em was broke up from farming, a lot of 'em just quit." Exasperated, Bullard's own father abandoned the South and headed North, along with thousands of others. "Well, that's the thing. Depression hits, and all the farmers quit...and then went North," Bullard explained.

The massive flight alarmed many in the South and provided a measure of greater economic power to the African Americans who remained. In discussing the migration, Phoebe Turman said, "After they left, things got a little better back in those



Figure 34: The early schools for African Americans were often one or two rooms, like this one in Heardmont, Georgia.

places where they came from....Think about it. That made it better for those that were left.”

Looking back over the years, Ursula Mae Haddon said, “And as I have lived here, so many other people have migrated, you know....The people who had always lived around us, none of them are around. None that’s in this area. They are gone....They left to go elsewhere, better conditions.”

Many whites expressed concern about the population loss, while the sentiments of others’ were mixed. The editor of *The Elberton Star* newspaper wrote December 15, 1922: “The fact that a great many colored laborers have left Elbert County is a serious problem. They have gone north, east, and west. Many of them are worthy and have the respect of both races....It may be that the landowner could not or would not furnish the rations. If he could furnish rations, it seems short-sighted not to do so, for if the exodus continues where can the landowner expect to get laborers....But if enough white labor can be secured to take their place then the county will be better off, for the negro cannot be used as profitably in diversified farming as the white man.”

With his wife and four children, Rufus Bullard’s father settled into a Chicago home on Prairie Avenue about 90 feet from the shop where he worked repairing railway cars and steam-powered locomotives for the Illinois Central Railroad. “It

was what they call South Side of the city, in the Black Belt. Mostly colored was in that neighborhood.” But his father found that the bustling city had its drawbacks, too. “He never did like the city too well and he just came back....My daddy was a country boy. He never did like the city.”

In fact, as Edward Brownlee pointed out, many of those who moved away became disenchanting and eventually returned. “The boll weevils broke down the farming situation....When the boll weevil came, that’s what run a lot of people off the farm. That’s when New York, Chicago, and all those places filled up...and a lot of them got discouraged and they thought they’d go to some of these places where the booms hit. They would go and for awhile...they make lots of money. But when the boom got over, they had to come back.”

For some, the North offered a welcome measure of respect that they had never experienced in the South. Minnie Walker, visiting one of her eight grown children in 1946, experienced such a pivotal moment in New York City that changed her perception of herself and life in general. “I went in the shoe shop. A white man called me ‘Miss.’ And from then on, I wanted to get out [of the South]. In New York, everything was so different.” She decided to live in Harlem, joined a union, and went to work as a hotel housekeeper. “I was the only black woman on the job....They called me ‘Miss Walker,’ they called me ‘Miss Walker’ all the

time." Despite the new respect she enjoyed, however, she, too, grew unhappy with the city.

She loved her job, but encountered racism in other places she went and was also concerned about crime. "Wimmens couldn't go out hardly by themselves. My bag was snatched from me two different times. I wasn't hurt, they just snatched my bag and ran. And so, I got scared. Getting old and nervous, too, you know." She kept in touch with friends and family in the South and returned regularly for vacations, then, when she retired in 1968, moved back to Calhoun Falls permanently.

Researchers concluded that African Americans who left, then returned to the area, as well as those who remained, "made informed choices," eventually realizing "that no place was genuinely a mecca for Southern blacks." Perhaps another reason that blacks moved back South was that they missed the clubs, schools, and churches—the cherished institutions that fostered a sense of belonging. Both those who stayed and those who returned continued to improve and enjoy these organizations.

When Rufus Bullard returned to Georgia in 1928 after about seven years away, he discovered a great many people he had known earlier were gone. "Other people were moving out at the time we [first] moved out. And they ain't come back, they ain't been back yet. Sent some of them back dead, some of them. There wasn't nobody here...hardly....They all had done gone."

Bullard and his father resumed life as farmers, continuing to hang on to the land even during the Great Depression, when the young man saw many people "walking the railroads, looking for jobs. They come by asking for a biscuit. It was rough." There was little organized relief for the poor in rural Georgia, Bullard said. "In the cities, they had soup lines. And here in the country they'd give you a little old bag of rough, unbleached flour." He also remembered watching the "hobos" hitch rides on freight trains. "They [would] just haul off and grab and get up on there....See, ordinarily they [the police] didn't allow hobos [on the trains], but in them days, they'd just be ridin'. So many, they didn't

*"In the cities, they had soup lines. And here in the country they'd give you a little old bag of rough, unbleached flour."*

bother 'em [much]. They scare 'em from one place to another."

In the early 1940's, another type of migration began when thousands of young men, including Bullard, left to fight World War II. He joined the military, trained in Texas, and served in Oregon, Hawaii, and Guadacanal, guarding planes and other equipment. Near the final stages of the war, he was shipped to Okinawa. "They were throwing shells and battlin'," he said. Although he survived the fighting without a scratch, he caught a fever that lasted for months. "It wasn't long, they dropped that bomb over there on Hiroshima. Our squadron dropped it, the Seventh Air Force....One of our comrades [was] flyin' the plane that dropped it, that bad bomb."

He returned to tenant farming in Georgia after the war and persisted, year after year, even though other farmers on small plots were abandoning the land all around him. Bullard blamed the post-war decline of many of the remaining tenant farms on the Federal Government, which paid landowners to plant fewer crops. "Yeah, the tenant farmer, he didn't have anything to go on....We had a lots of people that hung around in old houses for a long time. But, you know, they finally had to get out and find something....That's why we got these towns. You run people off the farm that really was likin' it, making a livin', and now they up there on welfare."







Figure 35: African-American men often held down two jobs. Many of them farmed and also worked in town. Here, workers in the Elberton granite industry loaded the heavy stone products for shipment across the country.

# Developing New Skills

## *“I Learned by Experience”*

**L**ong before the Civil War, a tradition of skilled craftsmanship developed among certain African Americans. Often, slaves performed tasks that few others knew how to do. On plantation after plantation, they were the blacksmiths, carpenters, and masons. By handing down such knowledge from one generation to the next, African Americans helped set the stage for the industrial revolution in the South.

On Millwood Plantation, for example, slaves were often the only people performing many jobs requiring various sorts of expertise, according to Edward Brownlee, who recalled his father's tales of how Edward Calhoun operated the estate. “Everything seemed to have been done by blacks,” Brownlee said, adding: “Now, the whites administered out the goods, things like that. It seems as though the carpenters, ginners, millers, people like that [were blacks]. Negroes were carpenters, plasterers, and all them kind of things. You didn't see many whites.”

In the years following the Civil War, some African Americans continued to work as blacksmiths and carpenters, but others found the doors to employment closed. Many whites apparently forgot or deliberately ignored the abilities and work experiences of African Americans. Instead, white business owners developed a tacit agreement among themselves to limit blacks to the lowest-rung jobs, and even then risked stirring the ire of white employees, some of whom refused to work beside former slaves.

The working conditions experienced at Pearle Mill by a relative of Rufus Bullard are representative of the era. The Elbert County, Georgia facility spun out various cotton products in the first decade of the twentieth century and was a

major employer for a time. Bullard recalled that many of the white mill hands and their families lived in the company village called Beverly. By 1908, there were 38 houses in the village, all painted white with blue trim.

Beverly also had a post office, company store, and Methodist church where the minister believed he had the ability to heal diseases, according to one report. African Americans, for the most part, didn't live in the village, according to Bullard, who visited the area as a boy of nine years of age. One African American did serve as cook for the mill superintendent, and other African Americans lived not far from the mill, according to other sources.

Following the wide-spread custom of the day, mill managers restricted the work African Americans were allowed to do, according to Bullard. “It was just rough work that the colored people got, you know, for the blacks. Probably haulin' in the cotton, carrying it in, tear it up, something like that....But now, see, we go and do more things [today]. There's a big difference now, is what I'm trying to say. Wasn't no jobs available for you in them days.”

Henry McIntire worked for many years as a tenant farmer at Millwood Plantation where he grew 15 acres of cotton and ten acres of corn. He also held a job at a cotton mill in nearby Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, where he did everything from loading trucks to making mops. Having the additional work provided McIntire with a little security, he said, in case his fortunes at the farm soured. “If we didn't pay our bill, they weren't going to claim me, you see, I worked the mill.”

Racial segregation, enforced by laws and custom, was a common aspect of Southern life and



Figure 36: Henry McIntire was a farmer and a millworker, while his wife, Annie, was a midwife. For many years, African-American women delivered most babies, black and white, in the South.

the bitter memory of unfair treatment at his mill job was still vivid for McIntire. “We couldn’t go up there to that drinking fountain and drink no water. We had to first get a bottle and go downstairs. We couldn’t even go to the bathroom up there,” he said.

But McIntire, who retired at age 65, also reflected a deep pride in his work. Year after year, he said, the mill managers would “hunt” him up whenever he left to look after his farm or to seek some other job. They wanted him to return to the mill, he explained. However, they never paid him much, despite his value as an employee. “Was getting six dollars and fifteen cents a week, but they raised mine to seven dollars and somethin’,” he remembered.

Born in 1900, McIntire was raised on a tenant farm. Like many of his contemporaries, he didn’t attend school regularly. “I never made much grade. At that time, people kept us in the field. I think I got up to third grade. I had to sow grain, so forth, when the rain come. Didn’t get to school much, mighty little.”

He and his wife, Annie, who worked as a midwife, raised seven children. Holding down two jobs most of his life didn’t leave much time for leisure, but McIntire did have favorite moments spent watching African Americans play baseball. Sometimes, he said, people took ferries and other small boats across the Savannah River to watch the local Calhoun Falls team play. “Sometimes they used to have a game every Saturday. Teams playin’ other fellas. Come from other towns....I don’t know what the name of them was. I didn’t play none then. I just looked....They kept me workin’ all the time at the mill.”

Disintegration of the farming tradition was often the cause for African Americans to take jobs in mills and other locations. Randolph Davis talked about his uncle Luther Bell, who moved to the small Georgia town of Heardmont where he worked for the U.S. Postal Service. “He didn’t make any [money] so he quit farming....He done any kind of work to be done in town....[Then] he carried mail out in the country. They [the mail carriers] used to come down here on horses.”

Jim Pressley, 88 years old, recalled his early days on a tenant farm when he also helped out at a local store and post-office. "I used to go there sometimes, hang the mail for her [the store owner]. There was a train down there. You had to hang the mail and the train would come pick it up. The men would grab as it go by. Then I left there and moved to town and went to work in cotton....I stacked cotton and, you know, help weigh cotton. Then the man [the owner] ran the lumber place. I worked up there when we wasn't working with cotton, unloading sheet rock, brick, cement, and lumber."

Pressley's brother, Joe, also found employment in the same Georgia town of Elberton. He worked for many years as a mechanic at the local Chevrolet dealership, and his wife, Lillie, recalled that his job was considered a good one. Her husband learned on his own how to be a good mechanic by watching the other men fix cars. "It was a big place. The biggest majority [of employees] was whites, you know. It was right around five or six white. You know, they always goin' give the whites the big jobs," she said. "Joe was workin' there and his cousin was workin' there, Willard and him. But Willard left and went to Ohio. And after he left, then they had somebody else work there and soon he left. And then O.D., he started

to workin' there. They didn't work but two colored at a time."

Some African Americans found that to earn money they had to accept jobs with some risk. Minnie Clark remembered that her uncle, John Wiley, built and repaired bridges for the Seaboard Railroad, work she considered dangerous. "I wouldn't get out there, and I didn't want John to get out there, but he did."

From time to time, the workers, called "the bridge gang," found themselves isolated on a high trestle above a river with a train bearing down on them. If they didn't hear the train's whistle soon enough or receive some other type of early warning, the workers had to leap from the tracks into barrels dangling from the bridge. There they waited for the train to roar by and for the noise and shaking to subside. "The [barrels] were good size," Clark said, adding, "They [the men] had warning [sometimes that the trains were coming]. They didn't get in them [the barrels] that much because they warned them." Clark remembered how all the rail company's "bossmen" were white and that the workers, including her uncle, were black. Still, there were advantages to working for the railroad. "Just like you didn't have no wood or kindling, he'd give us [the railroad workers] those [used] ties,



Figure 37: Pearle Mill offered only low-paying jobs to African Americans.



Figure 38: An Elberton tire factory provided a chance to get a town job when farming work was finished for the season.

if you could get them to your home.” Too, the pay was better than tenant farming and most other available jobs. Her aunt, she said, didn’t have to work outside her home because she was married to a railroad man. “They made plenty of money. [But] her house got burned and burned up all of her [things]. She had nice things.”

Over time, African Americans slowly worked their way into more jobs once reserved exclusively for whites. Tobe Wells was among those who moved beyond earlier imposed limitations. He was born in the first decade of the 1900’s in Lincoln County, Georgia, to a family of struggling tenant farmers. His mother, Naiomi, died when he was eight or nine years old, and the boy was raised by his father, Abner. The two remained close throughout his father’s life. “My father raised me on up till I got large enough to marry, then after I married, he stayed with me. Came on up here with me [to Elbert County] till he died,” said Wells.

As a boy, Tobe Wells sat at his father’s knees, watching and learning as the man’s nimble fingers wound narrow strips of white oak into baskets. The grown son continued to practice the skill many years later that he had learned from his father.

Wells described himself as a shy child, perhaps because he never had much formal education. He

went to school only through the fifth grade. He also never learned to dance, though he would sometimes attend dances as a teenager. He stood on the sidelines, he recalled, tapping his feet and holding the others’ coats while they swirled to the music.

He decided early that farming wasn’t for him. “You barely could make a livin’. Didn’t care if you was workin’ a half [receiving half the harvest], no matter how much more you made, the shorter you come out.” When he was about 16 years old, he went to work at a sawmill in Lincoln County, Georgia. The job didn’t pay much and at first involved little more than carting water back and forth to the workers. But Wells had his eyes on what others were doing and he learned. “They had an ole white man. He was sawin’. He was lazy. I’d go bring him water, and while he’s drinking, I’d be trying to saw, and finally learned it. I learned it so well, and he was lazy, he was drawing the money and I was doing the sawing. I wasn’t getting but 50 cents a day.”

The opportunity that led him to become his own boss came in the 1940’s when the white owner of a lumber company in Washington, Georgia sent him to operate a small sawmill in Elbert County. After two weeks, Wells returned to the owner to get his pay. But the man gave him a check for less than the amount of work Wells had

performed. "I said to him [the owner], 'This ain't enough.' He said, 'Well, that's all the lumber you sawed.' I said, 'No sir, it ain't. I got 80 or 90,000 feet of lumber up there.'"

The owner didn't believe that Wells could have possibly cut so much wood. Wells remembered the man's words: "If you want any [extra] money, you don't have to lie to git it. Let me tell you this one thing. Two things I hate. Don't lie to me, don't steal from me. [Then] me and you get along.' And I said, 'Well, I got it [the lumber].' And he said, 'I ain't never had a mill cut that much.'"

The man finally gave him another check for \$1,000, but he also issued a warning: "I'm gonna give it to you and I'm going up there. If that lumber ain't up there and you done lied to me, I'm through with you, and you can just have that check I give you and go on back where you come [from]."

The following Monday Wells arrived at the mill in Elbert County to find the owner already there. "He's setting up on all of that lumber. [I] had it stacked all around everywhere, didn't have nowhere to put it. He said, 'Tobe, my.' He got up and shook my hand. 'My God almighty! Where did all this lumber come from? Tobe, I forgot that you were the best sawer that there was in Georgia. I just done forgot.'"

The man at first insisted that Wells could have accomplished so much only by sawing "day and night." But Wells told him he had worked only during the day and at his regular pace. "I was a sawer," he recalled. "I knew what I could do. See, I could saw 10,000 feet a day, that was \$300 a day, back there then."

The owner was so pleased that he gave Wells the sawmill outright and then lent him about \$1,200 to buy approximately 120 acres of nearby land. He told Wells, "Go ahead....You can move it [the sawmill] anywhere you want. It's all yours....Do anything you want to do with it."

Wells named his business Tobe Wells Sawmill and had no trouble finding work. He moved the portable mill to various locations in Elbert, Wilkes, and other Georgia counties and sometimes into South Carolina, anywhere there was wood to cut. He hired all African Americans as his crew. Mostly, they were military veterans just returned from World War II. Sometimes as many as 22 men worked for Wells, who paid 50 cents an hour,

*"Ten cents an hour  
more than what you  
could get anywhere."*

which was, he explained, "ten cents an hour more than what you could get anywhere."

Many of his workers were men he had known since childhood in Lincoln County, but he also hired employees from Elbert County and other counties nearby. He remembered one case in particular. "And so I hired a boy. I said, 'You cook for us now, just cook for us [and] I'm gonna give you the same thing I give the rest of 'em.' This boy, he stayed up here in Elbert County. He said, 'Will you let my brother work, too?' I said, 'Yeah, I'll let your brother work, too.' So he and his brother, he cooked, and his brother worked for me."

Because his business required moving from place to place, Wells recalled that his crews and their families were scattered among various locations around Elbert County. Some lived in the small town of Ruckersville, Georgia, and a few boarded in Wells' home. His wife, Juanita, whom Wells called "Neeta" or "Nit," cooked for the employees, subtracting the cost from their pay. At times, she also prepared sandwiches for them to take to work.

Tobe and Juanita Wells were married in a South Carolina church on August 31, 1929, Tobe Wells told researchers, adding, "Now, don't find out how long I've been married 'cause a man ain't supposed to stay with one woman that long...52 years!" They raised six children, two girls and four boys.

Wells was matter of fact about the reasons for his business success. "I learned by experience, workin', talkin' to different people, goin' here. I go some of everywhere. Anything goin' on, I go." He also pointed out another reason why his business flourished. He had a monopoly. For years, there were no competing sawmills in the area. As he put it, "[I] had a gravy."



Figure 39: The Association of Black Educators meeting in Athens, Georgia, was one of many professional and social organizations founded early in the 1900's. Such groups fostered leadership and were important forums for exchanging ideas about speeding progress.

# Nurturing Leaders

## *“She Made Many Sacrifices”*

**A**s African Americans moved from farms into towns, a leadership class began to emerge. Entrepreneurs, physicians, ministers, writers, and teachers became the figures others looked to for cues on how to deal with life's struggles. While these leaders were usually unheralded beyond the boundaries of Elbert and Abbeville Counties, their influence among their communities was strong. Even years after their passing, these early urban figures continued to be topics for conversation.

A number of the influential leaders arose in Elberton, which became the magnet for many African Americans on the Georgia side of the Savannah River. Even those who didn't live in the town often visited there, if only to sell their cotton. Edward Brownlee described the importance of the place in the early 1900's. "At that time, [many] had to sell it [cotton] at Elberton. They ginned it there....They [tenant farmers] would put three or four bales on this one wagon and they would go up and sell it. Then they would bring back supplies and pay debts and things."

The visiting farmers, as well as the African Americans who lived in Elberton, bought many of their supplies and services from businesses owned by black entrepreneurs. The first such business that anyone could remember was called Dooley or Dooley's Corner. Both a commercial center and a meeting place for civic groups, such as the Odd Fellows, Dooley's Corner consisted of a big assembly hall, a grocery store, and a taxi service. According to Jim Pressley, "Bill Dooley, he run a store up here on Edwards Street. He just called it 'Dooley.' He'd sell groceries and he ran the taxi." Janesta McKinney added, "That corner was completely owned by Dooley, and he used to run a,

what do you call it, a taxi, but it was a horse and a hack [a buggy]."

Lillie Pressley also recalled another Elberton store that was owned by an African American. "Sam Phelps...had a shoe shop up on the [town] square....They'd repair shoes, just like I'd take these shoes, and [he or his employees would] repair them." Both white and African-American customers patronized the shop.

One of the most financially successful early entrepreneurs was the Reverend Addison Reynolds McKinney. Researchers were unable to discover much about his early life, but they did learn that he once labored in the granite quarries that became Elberton's economic backbone. Sometime around 1900, when he was in his forties, McKinney founded a Baptist church in Elberton for African Americans where he preached most Sundays for the rest of his life.

Around 1910, McKinney opened his own business, the first funeral home for African Americans in Elberton. His partner was John Rucker, his brother-in-law, who was also the local blacksmith. Racial discrimination was a strong factor in motivating them to start the venture, according to McKinney's daughter-in-law, Janesta McKinney. "He started it because of the white people who were carrying it out [funerals for blacks] because they were poorly burying Negroes. Sometimes they [white funeral directors] buried you at night, you had no preference. That's why they opened it up [the new funeral home], for convenience for the black people. And I think they were very reasonable 'cause long time ago people didn't have any money."

The rituals surrounding death were extremely important to African Americans and perhaps





Figure 40: Janesta McKinney was among the professional and social leaders to emerge.

represented a link to elaborate West African funeral ceremonies, according to Eleanor Ramsey and her researchers.

McKinney and Rucker bought property in downtown Elberton where they erected a brick building to house the funeral parlor. They also bought a hearse that was pulled by a horse from Rucker's blacksmith business. But they didn't use the hearse for every funeral. "On bad roads, they used to use wagons. You know, where it was so extremely bad," explained Janesta McKinney. Like other funeral directors of the period, the two men didn't routinely embalm bodies, especially if the corpses were taken directly to the cemetery. McKinney recalled that eventually the government mandated embalming, an edict she associated with a major outbreak of flu that killed many people during her childhood. "I guess [the government required embalming] when they had all these doctors come into the locality. They were thinking about health reasons and how diseases are spread. I imagine it happened long about 1918, 1919," she said.

*"All the choirs come together and we could see who could out sing the other."*

Addison McKinney also operated other businesses. He opened a grocery store and a restaurant, apparently as a hedge against tough times. As Janesta McKinney put it, "Really wasn't too much you could make doing one thing, you know."

Addison McKinney apparently enjoyed wide-spread respect in both the African-American community and among whites because of his business success and his ministry. He was one of a handful of leaders important enough to sign an invitation in November 1922 to the whites of Elberton. The invitation, which appeared in the local newspaper, read: "Noted Negroes To Speak Here Soon. Dr. R.R. Morton, principal of Tuskegee Institute, with a party of 25 leading Negro businessmen, physicians, ministers, and educators, will speak in Elberton on Monday, November 27, on 'Racial Good Will in The South'...On his tour through other Southern states, he was heard by large crowds of white and colored, and we are sure Elbert and adjoining counties will turn out in large numbers to hear him....We extend a very cordial invitation to hear these Negroes speak." Signing the invitation with McKinney were J.L. Thornton, L.H.A. Bell, James Sims, and Paul J. Blackwell.

Addison McKinney died in his seventies in 1929. His leadership mantle passed to his son, who also was a minister and had a varied background. In 1924, he went to school to learn embalming and for at least several years was chief embalmer for the family business. After his father's death, he and his wife continued to own and manage the funeral home along with John Rucker, who lived until 1942.

The younger McKinney and his wife were instrumental in bringing more than one dramatic



Figure 41: Janesta McKinney's father-in-law, Addison Reynolds McKinney, worked in the granite quarries before he founded his own, successful businesses.

change to the Elberton area, including introducing choirs to the local Baptist churches. Janesta McKinney spoke about how her husband developed the idea. "He would go back and forth to the Baptist Convention. That's the only thing that I know he clamored to go to. And he went to that every year in September. He'd be gone a week, and he'd come back talking bout all these choirs....Like he would go to Chicago or Birmingham. Wherever it was, they would have music."

When McKinney's church formed its first choir, Janesta played the accompanying music. As her husband traveled to various Baptist conventions, he would hear "thousands of songs. And he'd come back and we'd learn 'em. 'Course, we couldn't sing 'em like they could, but we tried." After their church began choir singing, the idea "spread like wildfire all over town," she said. "I mean in the county, too. And finally we began to have a special time to have 'choir versus.' They still have it. All the choirs come together and we could see who could out sing the other. Raised a lot of money."

The McKinneys also demonstrated leadership in other ways. They started the town's first African-American newspaper in the 1940's out of frustration with the policies of the white-owned paper. "The local newspaper, they wouldn't print any of our news. And we started, my husband

started, printing a local newspaper around 1941. We used a mimeograph, and we sent it all over Elberton and sold it everywhere. Just 50 cents a month. Yeah, that was the first printing among Negroes in Elberton. And we would put obituaries in there, and every time somebody would have something special at the church we'd write it up, you know. And we didn't know they were reading it. But they were reading it, everybody."

They published the newspaper for several years. "And we [had] made real good and then *The Elberton Star* took over and started accepting Negro news. And when they took that over, they raised the price of that paper. That paper was 35 cents; they raised that paper to 50 cents. And naturally, professional printing was better than ours. [We published the paper] for about three years, maybe five years...and we discontinued that paper." Many years later, Janesta McKinney remained gratified that she and her husband had helped push the white newspaper to print their community's news.

On the South Carolina side of the Savannah River in the small town of Calhoun Falls, African Americans also established businesses early in the century, including a cafe, two blacksmith sheds, and two barbershops. One of the barbershops belonged to the Reverend Spearman Edwards



Figure 42: McKinney's Mortuary, photographed in the early 1980's, could be traced back 70 years when an African American sought to better the treatment his neighbors received in their times of grief.

Reynolds, who owned several businesses. His story and the story of his family spotlight not only an intense drive for a better existence but also a respect for education that spanned generations.

Grace Wear, the woman Reynolds married, was born February 7, 1888. She spent her early life on a farm, but when she reached the age of 15 years old in 1903 she was sent away by her parents to school in Calhoun Falls because she had learned everything she could in the school close to home and her parents wanted more education for her. Then, too, the local elementary school, following the custom of the day, was in session for only three months of the year. Her new school was operated by Presbyterians and stayed open approximately eight months, during which she boarded with a family just outside Calhoun Falls. She helped pay her tuition by teaching her fellow students mathematics.

Wear later attended another school in Abbeville, South Carolina, then settled into a teaching career full-time. Her students ranged from first grade through seventh and numbered 30 to 40 at a time, all of them gathered in a one-room school house. When she met Reynolds, called "S.P." by his friends, he was a teacher as well, but he also had other strong interests. In his spare time, he cut hair in a barbershop he owned and

ironed shirts and pants for white customers in his "pressing club."

"When he first come to Calhoun Falls, he taught at Brown Oak School," Grace Wear Reynolds recalled of her late husband, whom she married in 1914. "It was a country school. He had from the first [grade] to seventh and eighth. He would go in the evening to the barbershop [to cut hair and press clothes]." Reynolds opened the barbershop/pressing club in about 1909 and operated both businesses in the same building, separated by a partition.

Eventually, Reynolds worked full-time at the shop, cutting hair late into the evening. When there was a lull, he went next door to press clothes. His identical twin, Irving, worked by his side as a second barber. They had a strict policy of cutting only white people's hair. "You couldn't cut for white and colored [people] both," according to Grace Reynolds. "So he decided not to cut for colored people because...I guess he thought he could make more. He couldn't cut colored's hair. He wouldn't even cut his children's hair." Instead, Reynolds sent his children to the other barber in town, Oliver McIntire, who cut hair only for African Americans. (Oliver McIntire was brother to Henry McIntire, the farmer and mill worker mentioned in the previous chapter.)

Despite society's prohibition against the same barber grooming hair of both blacks and whites, neither of Reynolds' daughters, nor his wife, recalled him ever encountering "racial problems." As one daughter put it, "You would be surprised how many men, fellows on the street, now say, 'Your Daddy used to cut my hair when I was a child'....Yeah, people loved him."

To many, the Reynolds family must have seemed tireless. The elder Reynolds worked six days a week at his businesses, then preached on Sundays. As the years passed, he added a shoe shine shop to his other ventures and enlisted his children to help polish the shoes. His wife, when she could, worked mornings at the shop pressing clothes. "I had a steam iron and a table," she remembered. But she always left by noon because that was when the white men started arriving for hair cuts. Some of them talked in "common language," she explained.

With the profits from their many interests, the Reynolds bought their own home in Calhoun Falls. They also rented land outside of town where Grace Reynolds farmed with help from the children. They grew cotton to pay the rent and often had a little money left over for extra spending cash. Primarily, however, they grew food to feed the family. The goal of all their hard work was to be able to afford the best education possible for their children. Explained one of the

*She had learned  
everything she could  
in the school close  
to home.*

daughters, "My mother decided that going away to school [was preferable]. The terms were longer, and she wanted the best for us. She wanted all of us to graduate and get out....All of us did. She worked very hard and made many sacrifices." Her father also appreciated the value of learning, she said. "Well, he was so proud of me. He used to call me his bookworm."

Indeed, education was often the key to higher stature for African Americans. In Elberton, for example, one of the earliest prominent blacks was a dentist, William D. Burney, who earned his license on December 15, 1887. Later, another Elberton citizen, Williams Miles Brewer, distinguished himself with a doctoral degree and as editor of the prestigious *Journal of Negro History*. African-American physicians in Elberton were also important and sometimes controversial. The



Figure 43: African-American women found careers in nursing after training at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.



Figure 44: Ministers in the community were influential in many ways and active in professional societies like this group, the Georgia Colored Methodist Episcopalians.

killing of one physician early in the century remained an emotionally-charged subject among some African Americans questioned about the death in the 1980's.

Samuel Pitt was among the first African-American doctors in Elberton. Pitt "just drifted in here," remembered Rufus Bullard. Edward Brownlee, as a child, also heard talk about Pitt from adults who discussed the doctor with a tinge of awe, particularly his rousing Emancipation Day speeches. "I can remember they talked about Dr. Pitt, the great speaker there," Brownlee said.

Another Elberton physician, Rembert Crispus Jones, studied at Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia, then Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he received his medical degree in 1930. Jones served both whites and African Americans, according to Brownlee. "Whites have some trouble...they run and get Doctor Jones." Even in the 1930's when automobiles had become commonplace, Jones walked on his round of house calls. He specialized in helping with

childbirth and treating skin diseases. "Any kind of itch, he could cure it," according to Brownlee.

But most renown of all the physicians was James Thompson, perhaps the first African-American doctor in Elberton, whose career ended violently in its prime. In 1915, at the age of 42, Thompson was shot dead. Some elderly African Americans questioned by investigators still doubted that justice had been served concerning his killer.

Aspects of Thompson's early life are unclear, but researchers determined that he was born in 1873 and apparently grew up in the Flatwoods section of Elbert County, not far from the Savannah River. His father was an ex-slave named Lloyd Thompson who had a twin brother, George. The brothers were almost inseparable. Randolph Davis, grandson of George Thompson, shared tales that he had heard as a child about the twins. "One named Lloyd and the other one named George. And them two stuck together," he said. Born into slavery, apparently in Virginia, the twins were taken as young boys to Dublin,

Georgia, where they were auctioned to the highest bidder. "They sold 'em on a block....They had a round table and a bell hanging right in the middle of it. Every time they sold anybody, they rang that bell....Dr. Baker bought 'em off that string....Old Dr. Baker, he raised 'em. He raised 'em from two little boys," explained Davis.

The twins apparently continued to live together even after they were freed. Said Davis, "They were livin' in a log house. They couldn't find no livin' nowhere else in them days. They built a log house....In them days, that's the only kinda house you could live in. They came up the hard way. They came up a way that we wouldn't think about now, how they came up in those days."

Eventually, the brothers went looking for mates. "They courted two sisters, one name Emeline and the other one named Betsy," Davis said. "So, they married when they were two young boys. One named Lloyd and the other one named George." The twins built one of the earliest African-American churches in the area. "Never had no church there....They the ones started that church....They the ones [who] went in the woods and cut down trees and built that church. They had to build that church out of logs. And they named that church Saint Paul."

Lloyd Thompson, father of Dr. James Thompson, managed to buy about 50 acres of land, Davis said. "He paid for it with a little bit of a mule. It was a little, small, yellow mule. Well, they took that mule and paid for them 50 acres, him and his wife, one named Betsy." The other twin, George, likely continued tenant farming.

Little else is known definitively about James Thompson's upbringing. However, stories about him show that even as a teenager he rebelled against what he considered to be unjust. According to Edward Brownlee, some whites were using an examination of some sort to impede the progress of young African Americans. Thompson somehow managed to obtain the answer sheet to the test and distributed it to those about to take the examination. Said Brownlee, "Thompson thought it [the test] was terrible. So, he stole the thing and just gave it to everybody....See, if they could have proved it, they'd put him in jail, but they couldn't really prove it. And all these Negroes [were] making high scores."

Soon after, Thompson left the state for further study, but Elberton had not heard the last of him. He grew to adulthood in a time of great debate among African Americans about how best to gain equal rights with whites. Booker T. Washington, advocate for a measured, conciliatory approach, and W.E.B. Du Bois, proponent for more assertive behavior from African Americans, led the clash of ideas. As Eleanor Ramsey reported, Thompson seemed at times to veer towards the Du Bois stance, but he was far from radical in his behavior. Thompson involved himself in the business of his community and consistently exerted effort to help others achieve better lives.

He studied at Brown University, then Shaw Medical School, where he earned his medical degree. After he returned to Elberton, he married Lula Brewer, daughter of another of the town's prominent citizens, William Miles Brewer, Ph.D. Before long, the young physician developed a thriving practice, serving both black and white patients. Once again, however, he also courted controversy.



Figure 45: Dr. Samuel Pitt was a widely-respected physician.



Figure 46: Bishop William Alfred Fountain of Elberton was a leader in the African American Methodist Episcopal Church.

Insurance payments were at the heart of the matter. Local landowners were naming themselves beneficiaries of insurance policies they bought on their workers and tenant farmers, policies that paid the landowners if the workers become incapacitated or died. Other local doctors routinely signed the insurance forms required to authorize payments, but Thompson refused. He considered the procedure akin to slavery because the policies set a dollar value on the lives of African Americans, treating them as the property of their employers, not free individuals. Because of his resistance, the practice eventually stopped.

Thompson perhaps further provoked resentment by helping other African Americans find lawyers when they had disputes with whites. He may have also stirred ill will by starting local Emancipation Day celebrations. These were popular events where African-American leaders delivered inspirational speeches, praising the end of slavery and advising listeners how to make the future better.

“And I don’t think they [some whites] liked it ‘cause Thompson started that [the Emancipation Day celebration]. They used to have it at this K.P. [Knights of Pythias] building,” said Edward Brownlee, who remembered his family attending the events. “I can’t remember [exactly when African Americans first held the celebrations]. Only thing I remember, they used to go to it when I was a small child. My Mama’s brother was a great one and loved to go to them things, and he would talk about ‘em.... Paul Blackwell was a great speaker. He didn’t have a great education but he had the gift.... Oh, Paul could really speak. The people who owned the fields didn’t like this [the celebration] either. They thought your place was out there in the fields.”

Considering Thompson’s active involvement in trying to end racial inequities, lingering suspicions among African Americans about his death are understandable. As Ramsey pointed out, Thompson was “no humble voice for the status quo.” Certainly, his actions ran counter to the perception that the black professional class in the South followed a path of least resistance. There were also hints that some white physicians may have resented Thompson’s successful medical practice. Whether the white doctor who killed him, A.S. Oliver, shared such resentment, is unknown, but the killing was suspicious enough to lead police to charge Oliver with murder.

The death occurred February 19, 1915, when Oliver shot Thompson in the chest. Oliver, claiming the shooting was accidental, was arrested. The Elberton newspaper reported that Oliver appeared to have been drinking the day of the killing. The paper also printed what appeared to be Oliver’s version of the event: “Oliver was preparing to discontinue the practice of medicine in Elberton. He was selling out his office equipment and such other personal effects as he did not wish to take with him. Dr. Thompson already bought and removed some of these things. He was in Dr. Oliver’s office last Friday afternoon on the same business. Dr. Oliver was trying to sell him the pistol. Dr. Thompson was examining it. He did not know how to work it and in showing him how, the pistol fired.”

There were no witnesses, and the trial, held March 11, 1915, was swift. The newspaper reported: “The jury was selected and the evidence



Figure 47: Elberton's first hospital for African Americans, photographed in the early 1980's, eventually became a private residence.

all in by twelve o'clock. The speeches of Judge Worley and Solicitor Brown were less than two hours in length. Judge Meadow completing a fair and impartial charge at two o'clock. Court adjourned for dinner at three o'clock and in less than an hour later the verdict of accident was returned." Oliver was exonerated of any wrongdoing by the jury.

The newspaper called Thompson's death tragic, describing him "...as one of the most prominent men of his race in Elbert County. He was generally regarded as a leader...and was accumulating money. He owned considerable property...."

There were also details in the article about Thompson's funeral. More than 1,000 people attended the services honoring the slain physician. "The funeral over the body was one of the biggest ever seen in Elberton," the paper reported. "It was preached at St. Mary's C.M.E. Church by Rev. W.A. Fountain, president of Morris Brown College, Atlanta. Rev. Fountain is an Elberton negro. He is president of a college that has an endowment larger than that of all the white colleges in Georgia, and is a brainy negro. Dr. Watkins, former partner of Dr. Thompson, spoke of the deceased as a doctor and P.J. Blackwell spoke of him as a citizen."







Figure 48: Courtship and marriage were happy memories as residents recalled proposals and festivities. An unidentified Elberton wedding party posed in the 1940's.

# Hot Suppers and Good Times

## *“You Swing Your Partner, I Swing Mine”*

**T**he rich African-American cultural tradition has deep roots, some tracing back to the mother continent of Africa hundreds of years ago. Although many aspects of their existence were controlled by whites, African Americans molded their own culture, combining traditions from the past and new experiences.

One way to preserve their cultural identity was to give their own names—names different from those designated by the whites—to places they considered important. Even before there were street signs, black residents were coining their own titles for the roads in their neighborhoods, often honoring local heroes or prominent citizens.

Edward Brownlee talked about some of Elberton's streets: “They had a Thompson Street there, named for Dr. Thompson....They had another one named for him. James Street was named for Jim Thompson. But James Street is no more.... Martin Street was named for, I think they named it for Georgia Martin because she taught there way back....I imagine that [another] street was named for Reverend McKinney....Well, they had no signs before they put in this thoroughfare; people just remembered.” The African-American section of Calhoun Falls came to be known as Buck Nellie. No one interviewed knew exactly why, but Henry McIntire thought the name stuck because of a street by the same name.

African Americans lived throughout Elbert and Abbeville Counties in small rural enclaves, places with names that sometimes never appeared on maps, but were nonetheless part of the local culture. W.T. Smith talked about the location of his father's last farm: “...right down here on Jones Ferry Road...place they called Sweet City...I don't know why they ever called it Sweet City. Used to

be some little stores, houses out there and I think a gin house...on the Avenue Highway.”

Driving through rural Elbert County with researchers, Randolph Davis pointed out an area called Rose Hill where residents used to gather to swap both conversation and goods. “This is, ah, Rose Hill. I'm fixing to show you that well. They called [it] the Rabbit Well. They had a rabbit on top of that thing. We used to go and meet together and have a store or something like that down in here. Public wells they had there. That's where they get water from.”

Davis remembered that the well was associated with a legend involving Abraham Lincoln. According to the story, the president once visited the well, perhaps even drank its cool waters. On his journey, according to the tale, Lincoln gathered “all his information [about] how whites were treating the black [slaves].”

Although African Americans, when reminiscing for investigators, often emphasized their jobs and accomplishments, they also relived moments of laughter and fun. Especially memorable from the late 1800's and early 1900's were dances, sometimes called “hot suppers.” W.T. Smith remembered: “I used to hear my daddy tell about hot suppers....He used to talk about it. Every day, he'd talk about hot suppers....Colored folks used to go down, nice time they had and talk about folks....” Phoebe Turman said that her relatives also went to the dances, which were usually held in the fall. “Didn't have 'em in the summertime...revival was in the summertime. The hot supper was when the weather get cold. That's when they [the men] had a little money, you know, when they started to sell their cotton, had a little money to treat the girls.”



Figure 49: Louella Walker holds her father's fiddle, one of her most treasured heirlooms.

The hot suppers could last all night, especially if they were held during the weekend and if everyone had finished the farm chores. Men often paid for the privilege of dancing with the ladies of their choice at the gatherings. "Boys paid the girls to dance with 'em," Phoebe Turman explained. "Hot supper where he get him a partner, and he would pay that partner to dance with him, maybe a quarter or something like that. Enough to buy a custard, pie, or cake."

As time passed, Turman explained, the gatherings became known by different names. "Some folks called 'em hot suppers and some called 'em plays. Later on, they went to calling them plays, cause they played at night....Coming on down, they wouldn't say hot suppers. One lady went to a hot supper and said, "That was the coldest hot supper I ever had."

The food was what Jim Pressley remembered when he thought of hot suppers. "Saturday night, they had all kinds of things cooking, beef, fried

fish, things like that." Often, the festivities were held in a tenant farm house, according to Minnie Walker, who fondly remembered the dances. "My husband's baby sister, before she died, used to have suppers. Me and my sister be down there dancing. Sometime Mama went to [the] store and bought us some shoes. Went right round there and danced. Went back home with holes in 'em. Lawd, if Mama didn't get us. We used to dance, and everybody want to dance with me and my sister."

Walker remembered that sponsors at the hot suppers sold food to the men for their dancing partners. "He dance with me. All right, when the dance was over, I go over to that table and pick out what I want, and he pay for it."

Both Walker and Turman recalled the same musician providing the toe-tapping music at the dances. Said Walker, "Louella Walker's daddy....He could play that fiddle!" About 80 years old when she was interviewed, Louella Walker still had one of her father's fiddles, a prized possession

from the past. She said she had to hide it from her grandchildren who couldn't resist touching and plucking the strings. She had wrapped the aging instrument in a web of string to help hold it together, but that didn't lessen its sentimental value. For her, the fiddle represented her childhood and time she spent surrounded by her father's music. "He learned to play himself....He always said he made his first fiddle out of a sardine box," she said. "He just made his fiddle out of a sardine box and took his thread and made him a bow."

Her father started playing the fiddle as a boy, but his family didn't make it easy to practice. "They run him out of the house and he learned to play his self....Had to get outside. Gramma Julie wouldn't let him, didn't want him to learn," his daughter explained. "But when I knowed anything, he had 'em, violins. They used to call 'em violins. He'd have two. I used to play on one. I learned to play a little bit, but I put it down after I got up good size and started to school and things. If I'd of kept on, I probably would have made a good little stock player. When I knowed

*"That was the coldest hot supper I ever had."*

anything, my daddy was playing it [the fiddle]. And he'd play 'Fox in the Wall' for me. And [he would play] 'Billy in the Low Ground' and all like that. Aw, he could play anything. [He'd] play, 'Are you from Dixie?' Used to play all that for me when I was a girl.

"Now, he could play those things, like he'd go to funerals. He could play for church, too. But when he'd go to hot suppers [he'd play a song with words like] 'But a man'...Let me see how he played it. 'But a man, ain't nothing but a man. Before I let the steel drill beat me down, I'd die with my hammer in my hand.'"



Figure 50: Eleanor Mason Ramsey interviewed Randolph Davis, 111 years old, and his son, grandson, and great-grandson, a rare opportunity in oral history research.



Figure 51: The fiddle Louella Walker's father played at many a hot supper dance was more than 100 years old.

As a child, Louella Walker lived on a tenant farm on the Millwood Plantation. She recalled that for a long time her father wouldn't let her go with him to hot suppers because he thought the people would, "You know, cuss and things like that. He [my father] never did cuss. He had a word [when he got angry]. He'd say, 'By grabby,' if you made him mad. Well, honey, he never would let me go to the hot supper with 'em, not much. When he'd go to play for white people, he'd let me go. And we'd just set and look. And the white people, they didn't mostly dance. They'd be at their homes."

She vividly recalled a Christmas Eve when her parents finally relented and said she could attend a hot supper. Still, her mother fretted about letting her go with her father. She thought that the child might fall asleep. "He was gonna play all night long! Gonna play till 12 and then he gonna rest awhile. And [then at] daylight, he'd be playing again for them to dance. And so I went on over there [to the hot supper] and I stood up there and they [her father with his fiddle and another man with a guitar] played. And they [the dancers] were just catching one another like you see 'em do

*“They played cards,  
cards like there is now.  
Yes, and shoot  
dice too.”*

on television, you know. ‘You swing your partner. I swing mine. You swing your partner, I swing mine.’ That’s the way they would do, you know.

“So, that was my first time at being at a dance. He’d play them songs and they’d dance by ‘em. But I never did. I never could dance.”

Dances were not the only occasions when her father performed, she recalled. White men would ride to the Walker house in wagons, she explained, on their way to cock fights down by the river. (The fights were often staged not far from where the Richard B. Russell Dam is today.) “White people come from different places, and they would go down there to fight these chickens. [They] have roosters fight, and they’d bet on what rooster gonna win. People would bring their roosters from other places, and they’d bet on ‘em, you know, and make money. They used to stop at my daddy’s house and make my father play for ‘em....Some of ‘em would know him well and go hear him play.”

Phoebe Turman said that African-American men also attended the cock fights, but usually remained on the edges of the crowd. According to her, the whites were the ones who brought the roosters and gambled the most. “The blacks would go there and if a rooster got killed, they [the whites] would throw him out and they [the blacks] would take ‘em.”

The African Americans did gamble, Turman recalled, but she associated gambling more with hot suppers, when a few individuals sometimes slipped away from the dancing to wager. “They played cards, cards like there is now. Yes, and shoot dice too.”

Early in the twentieth century, the hot suppers began to decline in popularity as other types of social activities gained ground. Randolph Davis

remembered church-sponsored box suppers: “[the women] would fill those boxes with chicken and things like that....They bid on those boxes....The one that the box belong to [would] eat with that person....They had fruits and candies and stuff like that.”

By the mid-twentieth century, Janesta McKinney was participating in “Bar-B-Ques” and “Fish Fries.” “[If] we needed something that wasn’t provided by the board of education. We would just decide what we were gonna have [at school]. We’d call it selling hot dogs or fish fries. And every Halloween we did real well. We did everything that you see in a country store. [And] we had fortune tellers. Had cake walks and bobbing the apple with your mouth. You bite it; you get a prize.”

In the 1920’s, bootleggers provided another form of entertainment for some, according to Rufus Bullard. “They used to make good whiskey back in those days. It wasn’t poison. See, right after the Prohibition days [began], people started makin’ whiskey, makin’ what we call moonshine. I used to drink, I don’t now, but what I’m gonna say [is] as long as people got a taste for it, somebody’s gonna make some somewhere. And [during Prohibition] they couldn’t buy it [legally], couldn’t ship it. And they had quite a bit of it in this county.”

Bullard said that finding a bootlegger used to be fairly easy. “Well, you can’t be a bootlegger and be private. Somebody gotta know you’re sellin’ whiskey before you can sell any. You’d go to his house and ask him for a quart or jar, whatever you want, and he’d go to the woods and bring it. You don’t go with him. He wouldn’t let you see where he got it hid. People would steal it if they find it. That’s why they wouldn’t let them see it.”

Bootleggers also faced losing their products to authorities, the “revenueurs,” Bullard called them. “Yes, yes, [the revenueurs] catch a few, miss a few. Catch a man today, and next week he’s back in business again.” After Prohibition, the better-quality bootleg whiskey became harder to find. About the time that World War II ended, the bootleggers often sold poor quality moonshine, which Bullard likened to poison. “They started makin’ it outta any-and-everything.”

Colorful traveling salesmen provided another form of entertainment. The “drummers,” as they



Figure 52: Roving photographers visited towns periodically beginning in the late 1800's. They made formal portraits similar to paintings of the time such as this photograph of an unidentified Abbeville County woman.



Figure 53: Edward Brownlee remembered riding across the new Georgia-Carolina Memorial Bridge in his family's Model T Ford.

were called, were mostly white men peddling pretty knickknacks, recalled Edward Brownlee, who remembered them from his childhood. “Way back when I come along, they come on them railroads. And they carry these two big suitcases. And they used to sell things like beautiful little handkerchiefs. Little neckties for little boys, little necklaces for little girls, little rings and all kind of little trinkets. In my day, I remember they used to come around, and my mother used to buy little scarfs and little things like that from ‘em, and handkerchiefs. And Mommy was a great one for fancy handkerchiefs.

“They were sort of like carpetbaggers. Get as many pennies as they could out of the Negroes. They [the suppliers] probably give ‘em [the drummers] these things. ‘Cause, you know, things were cheap in them days. They probably give ‘em these handkerchiefs five for a nickel in them days, and they sell ‘em a nickel apiece.”

The salesmen managed to pack a great deal into their oversized bags, sometimes even saucers, cups, and flower vases, all of which were for sale. Often, they also had cameras and set up makeshift studios from one small town to the next

where posing for pictures was a major event for the townspeople.

Born in 1916, Edward Brownlee recalled that his own parents eventually bought their own camera and frequently took photographs of their family.

“I guess I got ‘bout as old [a camera] as anybody [around] here. I got an old one. My dad used to take pictures of us when we were very tiny. The pictures, if you could see ‘em, it would tickle you to death. Mother took [some pictures]. I used to laugh at ‘em. [I’d] say, ‘These old, ugly, country children. I am gonna burn these things up.’ [I’d] say, ‘I didn’t look nothing like this. Old, ugly, dumb-looking, country children.’”

Brownlee also recalled his first ride in an automobile at age 11. His family drove across the new Georgia-Carolina Memorial Bridge, the first major bridge to span the upper Savannah River. The bridge was christened with ginger ale on Armistice Day 1927, in honor of soldiers killed in World War I.

“It took them two years to finish it [the bridge]. They had to carry us down on Sunday to see the bridge. And we would ride down to Millwood [Plantation], you know, in this ole Model T.”







Figure 54: The graduation portrait for an 1890's class of Harbison College students marked a significant milestone. Parents, teachers, and church leaders shared in the achievements of successive generations.

# Gaining Strength Together

*“People Served the Lord in Those Days”*

**W**hile there were many pleasant memories culled from the past by the elderly residents who shared their life stories, the daily struggles they had faced for most of their existences also colored their recollections. Money, in particular, was almost always scarce and a source of lifelong worry for many. But sometimes, by banding together, individuals had accomplished collectively what was all but impossible on their own.

In the late 1800's, African Americans began forming burial societies to relieve their families of the final financial burdens their deaths would bring. Elbert County and Abbeville County residents who joined the societies paid from 25 to 35 cents a month to belong, with some paying the fees for most of their adults lives.

Members, Janesta McKinney explained, “...were entitled to about the poorest burial you could get. Usually the family would add a little more to make it [the burial and funeral] more presentable.” Not everyone joined a burial society, however. Henry McIntire's mother preferred to put aside money on her own. “She saved just enough to bury herself. She didn't want us cryin' two ways, cryin' with she gone, and cryin' with the way she got put away,” he remembered. Over time, funeral homes, social clubs, or churches offered similar burial insurance plans to the ones offered by burial societies.

There were also other reasons for joining together. As early as 1899, African Americans in the area formed the Farmer's Institute, which numbered 54 members, who gathered to talk about common problems. Later, in 1925, Elbert County leaders cooperated to encourage young African-Americans farmers. In March of that year, *The Elberton Star* carried an article about the

effort: “A farm worker's club is being organized in different districts of Elbert County among the negro boys by a committee of prominent colored men composed of L.H. A. Bell, Jake Thornton, Rev. A.R. McKinney, and Paul Blackwell.

“The movement is endorsed heartily by W.P. Huie, county farm agent, as well as receiving the moral support of all classes of our citizenship....The negroes of the county, who constitute a considerable portion of the farming population, are making progress in the conduct of farm work along improved scientific and business methods.”

Perhaps the most wide-spread cooperative efforts for African Americans concerned religion. Many of those interviewed talked about how important church was in their lives. Besides providing sites for worship, churches were also the social, political, and educational focal points for communities.

Churches and schools played integral roles in fostering a collective identity that was distinctly African American. Rufus Bullard remembered just how important the two institutions could be: “We didn't go to no movies. The school and the church were about the center of that community....See, we used to have a school there.... And the neighborhood. We thought we had a pretty nice neighborhood. We always had a pretty nice congregation of people. We had intelligent preachers.”

Some remembered hearing from their parents and grandparents about a time before African Americans had church buildings of their own. According to Phoebe Turman, “They didn't have no church on it. I used to hear the older heads say they would have a place to go to serve the Lord... sing and pray....It was a big, old oak tree. Big, old,



Figure 55: This African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) was established in Elbert County in the late 19th century.

nice, shady oak tree, and that was their church.” Samuel Calhoun remembered hearing about services conducted in grass arbors, hut-like structures formed with a frame of cut pine trees.

Until the Civil War, Southern church congregations frequently included both whites and African Americans, normally with segregated seating. The end of slavery, however, was likely the primary cause for congregations to split apart. Randolph Davis recalled when Elbert County whites and African Americans worshiped together. “In them days, we didn’t know no better. In them days, we all used to go together. Then they divided the church that was named Bethlehem, and the whites built them a church of their own, and [the] coloreds built their own church. And the whites had their white preacher and the colored had their colored preacher.”

In Elbert County and Abbeville County, African Americans built some of their early churches on land donated by whites, including the log church Davis’ grandfather, George Thompson, and his twin brother Lloyd, built when Davis was a young boy. About a century later, Davis recounted the events which led him to join the church. “I was about 13 years old when I joined the church. I got to the edge of the woods and something told me to

kneel down by that stump and commence to whooping and hollering. I went on to church and the man, old Wade Dye, he took me in. And I cried two days and two nights before I quit. So, I’ve been a member of the church ever since.”

Not everyone shared the same unqualified enthusiasm for religion, however. Rufus Bullard said, “I reckon I was a member [of a church] in my time....You know, I ain’t been goin’ that often. We got [some] ignorance in our church now. You know, shouting, slapping, hollerin’ goin’ on. We used to didn’t have that. People would sit there. [Now] preacher say two words, they holler, and it’s kind of boring to me. I mean, I never used to just hear ‘em holler every minute, every minute. And we had some good preachers here, tell you the truth. Old man McKinney was a good ole man, I thought. Nobody never did see nothin’ wrong with him, but his son a little bit feisty, fresher. But you know what I mean. He was intelligent. We didn’t have no ignorance like we ‘bout to get hold of now.”

In contrast, church continued to be a vital part of life for Lillie Pressley. Researchers interviewed her on a Friday in her kitchen where she was about to prepare a feast for a charity fund raiser for one of several churches she attended.

"I'm goin' to get my hair washed tonight," she said. "[Also] I'm gonna do my cookin' tonight. I've got all my chicken. I'm gonna put on a roast. I'm gonna cook some peas, and make macaroni, and make some cornbread, and some biscuits, and cook some corn....That's exactly what I'm gonna fix for tomorrow. And furthermore, I'm gonna get up in the mornin' [Saturday] and eat what I feel like I want to eat, and go right on. I don't have time to cook on Sunday 'cause I gotta go to church all day on Sunday. Now, that's my day. When you look for me, you look for me on Sunday in church. Folks tell me, 'Lillie, you do so much charity work,' [and] I tell 'em I enjoy it. I always enjoyed it, doing something for somebody, makin' somebody happy. That's what I like to do."

Pressley was born around 1912 and grew up on a tenant farm where her family raised cotton, corn, peas, potatoes, wheat, oats, and cane for syrup. As a young girl, she did her share of the work, including pushing the plow. School began for her at the age of four because her brother needed a companion on the long walk from their farm. "We stayed about six miles from school and he didn't have anyone to walk with him to school every morning. I had to go with him to school. At that time, they didn't have any certain age for children to go to school," she explained. She was a good student and sped through the seven grades that the two-room school had to offer, then went to work full time on the family farm.

Just as religion continued to be a dominant factor in her adult life, so it was for Lillie Pressley as a child. She fondly remembered riding as a youngster in a lantern-lit wagon to church services at night. "Well, if this wagon [the one her family rode in] was full, it'd be two wagon loads goin' from right in here in this community. All right on up the road, the other wagons join them wagons. And that's the way we went to church. We had to go about five miles. Well, it was fun in them days, you enjoyed it. It'd be so many of 'em [wagons] in the road, you'd just enjoy it."

A similar caravan of wagons also took her family to day-time services on Sunday. Pressley remembered how the wagons were "...hitched to mules. Wagon and carriage, that's the way you used to go, you know. Just like the white people in them days, they would ride in a carriage and buggy. Now, the rich folk, they'd be ridin' in the



Figure 56: Lillie Pressley spent many hours working for her various churches.

*They paid the  
minister with milk  
and butter and ham  
and chicken.*

fine carriage and they had the black man to drive the carriage, two-seat carriage. Now, we take them mules and hitch 'em to the wagon, put child in the wagon, and go to church that way."

Short of money, church members paid the minister with "...milk and butter, and ham and chicken, and things. And give them to the pastor. You see, they wouldn't take nothin' like that now." As a little girl, Pressley looked forward with wide-eyed excitement to Children's Day at the church. This was held the second Sunday in June and was special because the children presented a program for the congregation.

"In them days, we used to have Children's Days. You go to church in the wagons and they have a trunk full of food. [Then] we, all the children, have a speak and sing. And they just had a

## *“They’d march from here to Mount Calvary.”*

big program all day....All the children be dressed in their little new suits an’ things. And it was real innocent. We don’t have things like that now.”

Edward Brownlee talked about his father’s recollections of similar festivities: “I remember my dad saying that when he was a boy, they would go to Glover’s [church] about once a year for what they called Children’s Day. They would go in one-horse wagons and most times they would pull oxen or they would ride on the oxen’s back. They’d cook trunks of food so that the kids would just have all kinds of food. This was always held in July. This ole lady used to ride this oxen and carry this trunk of food. She’d throw this blanket up across this oxen. She’d have this ole trunk in front of her, holding it, goin’ to Children’s Day.”

During Pressley’s childhood, another big church event was Anniversary Day. “We didn’t hardly feed on a church anniversary. We just invite different churches. But that was back when people were wearing frills and frocks. You know, the long dresses, with big skirts ‘n little bit tied up here on the waist. The blouse [had] the puff of sleeves up here. I sure wish I could find some of them [dresses]. Honey, them some days. People served the Lord in them days, I’m telling you the truth. Then, like I told you, the church was full of people in them days. But nowadays and time, people got nothin’ to do but get in their car and go to church. They don’t even have time.”

At 16 years old, Lillie Pressley sneaked away from home and secretly married a young mechanic, Joseph Pressley, who worked at the local Chevrolet dealership. They were wed at the Elberton courthouse by a justice of the peace at eight o’clock at night in 1928. No one knew about the marriage until the couple finally broke their silence a month later. “Would have been married for [about] 50 years, 50 years, if he had been livin’,” she said. Her husband died in 1963.

Even in the 1980’s, some African Americans who once lived in rural areas still maintained ties to their childhood churches, despite living many miles away from them. Occasionally, these members revisited the old churches, especially on Homecoming or Anniversary Day. “My sister in Ohio,” explained Pressley, “she’s a member of Dove’s Creek [church]. It’s just only a few miles out in the country. But for 60 years, I’ve been in town, right at Mount Calvary [church]. But I don’t forget my home church [Dove’s Creek]. When things goin’ on at home church, I remember them, too.”

The railroad played an important role in the church of Rufus Bullard’s youth in the small town of Heardmont, Georgia. The train brought both the minister and worshipers to the church from some distance away. “Our preacher used to ride it [the morning train], Reverend McKinney. And then, see, time you go back at night, the service would be over with. He’d catch this train goin’ back home where they had people gettin’ off at Pearle and Milton, two stops between here and Elberton.”

Some of those interviewed were almost as devoted to social organizations they belonged to as they were to their churches. The Masons, Odd Fellows, Eastern Star, and other groups, many of which promoted charitable acts in the community, provided opportunities for members to gather with friends. Significantly, within these fraternal organizations, African Americans could assume positions of leadership where they wielded the kind of authority often denied them elsewhere by whites.

Many of the fraternal organizations insisted on secrecy and involved mysterious and elaborate rituals that added to their appeal for members. The Good Samaritans, for example, were supposed to meet on the top floor in whatever building they gathered, according to Lillie Pressley. A member for 40 years, Pressley actually had an association with the Samaritans for longer than that. As a child, she had seen her mother leaving for Good Samaritan meetings and marching in the organization’s parades.

“They had big turnouts, you know. Just like they’re going to have a turnout at Mount Calvary [church]. They’d march from here to Mount Calvary. All will be dressed in black suits and white shirts and white gloves,” she said. Pressley, like others interviewed, joined more than one group and was also a member of the Eastern Star.



Figure 57: The New Era Baptist Church, built in the early 1900's in Elberton, was one of the important staging grounds for African American leaders and progress.

Louella Walker participated in both the Eastern Star and the Women's Home Aid Society, which she had belonged to for about 35 years. The Women's Home Aid Society provided burial insurance and a ceremony for members when they died. Individual lodges met during the year in private homes, then, once a year, all the lodges in the area converged for the anniversary celebration, held at a different church every year, always on Sunday. The members and their guests participated in a regular morning church service. "Then [when the service] is over, we have the program....We'd sing....All the different lodges are there. Some [of them] might sing. Somebody read a piece and like that...We have dinner, too."

At some point in the celebration, "They will ask if anybody want to join, you see. You have to get up and say you want to join and they'd take your name. They take you aside and read to you and ask you different questions. 'Are you willing to abide by it [the rules]?' And all that. [Then] they will set the time to join. You have to go through a ceremony. You have to meet 'em at a house. [You]

have your Bible. Tell who you are, how old you are, who your husband is, all like that."

Despite the loyalty of many members, importance of the fraternal orders gradually declined, in part because of improved conditions for many African Americans and because of dwindling populations as people moved away to cities. Remembering times past, Pressley said, "...they help people when they're sick and things like that. But just like I'm saying, it's not as strong as it once had been....Back yonder, when times were hard, they were a lot stronger."

Education was another significant component of life for African Americans interviewed, many of whom had sacrificed to attend school or whose parents had sacrificed for them to get an education. Randolph Davis, as a young man sometime around the turn of the century, rented a tenant farm from Albert Dye, descendant of George Washington Dye and his slave Lucinda. Davis recalled that Dye insisted that his son Willie obtain an education. He "...sent that boy to school [so he could] tend to his business like he wanted. Old man Albert, he never had no learning, so he

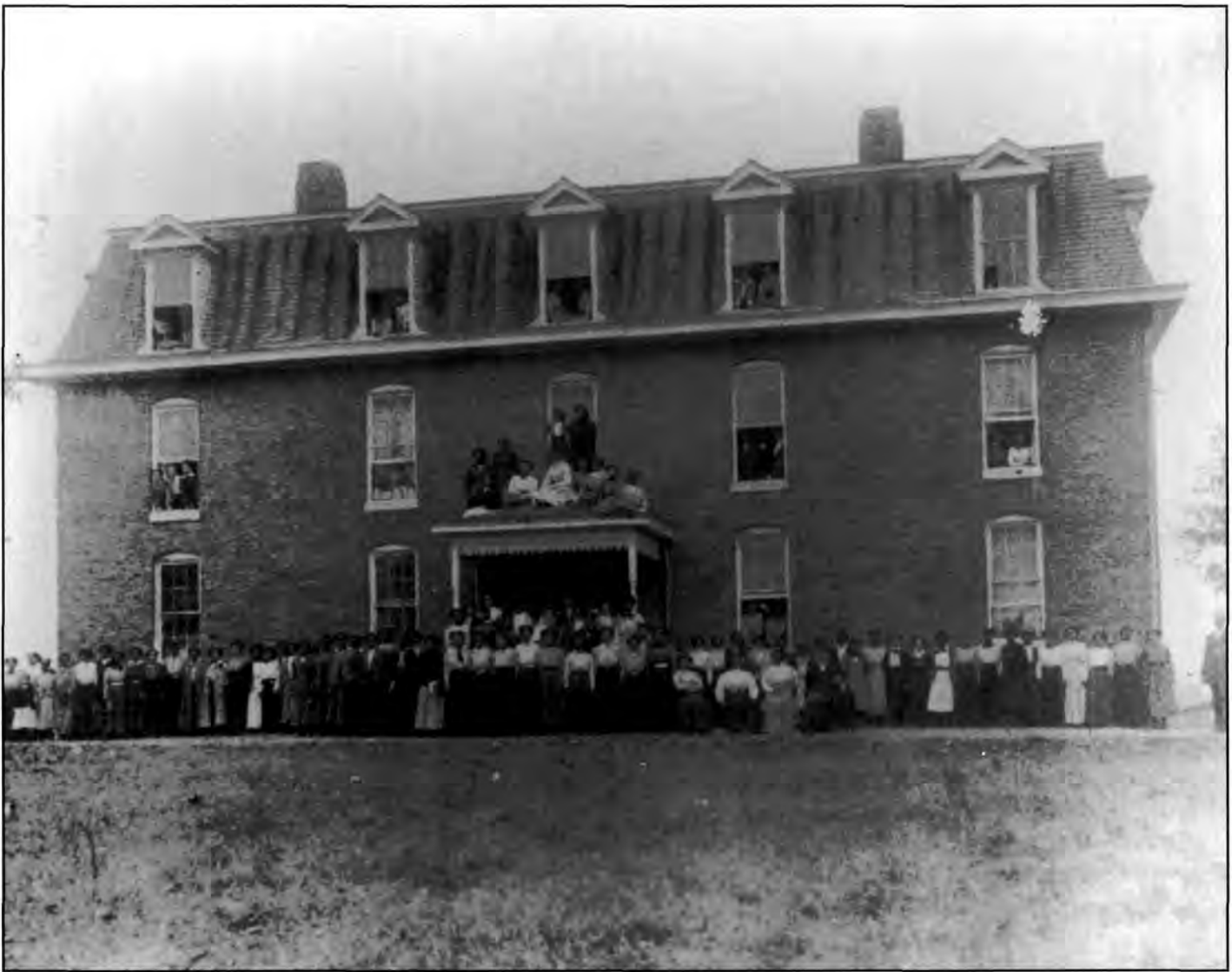


Figure 58: Harbison College at its peak had 200 boarding and 150 day students. After tragedy struck, the school moved away from Abbeville. Faculty and students gathered in front of one of the original dormitories in happier times.

sent that boy to school. And [later], he told Willie to figure for him. Willie had good learning.”

But getting a good education proved to be a serious struggle for some, a struggle that in Abbeville County ended in violence and tragedy. Schools were racially segregated and unequal for African Americans in many ways, from the length of the school year to the classroom supplies they received, compared to white students. Where most local schools for African Americans remained in session for only three months, similar schools for whites held classes up to nine months. Parents who could afford to sought better conditions for their children. Charlotte Sweeney remembered, “Miss Lucille Martin, she was a school teacher. We were only getting three months of schooling.

And she told my mother [who] got kind of aggravated over the situation.”

Several African Americans remembered their parents paying for tutors or extra instruction after the usual term ended. Most schools were affiliated with local churches, but in some instances Northern church groups provided schools that offered longer terms. Grace Reynolds and Louella Walker both attended Mr. Lee’s School, supported by Northern Presbyterians. The Calhoun Falls school offered longer terms and students could reach a higher grade level than in most local schools. To attend, Grace Reynolds had to leave her home and board with another family, a not untypical arrangement for the time.

Minnie Clark moved to Abbeville as a teenager to take advantage of one of the better schools, Harbison College, which provided ten months of instruction in both primary and secondary grades. Clark boarded with a local undertaker's family and paid her rent by working in the general store they owned. At the time, she had no way of knowing the danger she would be facing as controversy engulfed the school.

Founded by Northern Presbyterians in 1885, the school was originally called Ferguson-Williams Academy, in honor of key supporters, the Reverend and Mrs. Emory A. Williams and the Reverend James A. Ferguson. In 1892, the Presbyterian Board of Education appointed Dr. Thomas H. Amos in charge of day-to-day operations. Amos, a distinguished minister and teacher, was born in Africa in Monrovia, Liberia in 1866. His parents were the first black missionaries from the United States sent to Africa by the Presbyterian church. When his father died, Amos and his mother returned to the United States where he completed his education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

When Amos took charge of Ferguson-Williams Academy, the school was foundering and in debt by some \$2,000. He restored the school to financial stability by appealing to philanthropists such as Samuel Harbison, for whom the school was eventually renamed. Harbison, who was white,

*Moving was  
necessary sometimes  
to study with  
a good teacher.*

donated 20 acres of land on the outskirts of Abbeville where the school was moved from town sometime around the turn of the century. Before long, the school was prospering. "Negroes from everywhere were going there," remembered Edward Brownlee.

During his tenure, Amos was able to raise more than \$45,000 for the school. He lectured around the country, using these appearances as a platform for soliciting funds and for attracting new students and faculty. So successful were his efforts that students had to pay only a little more than three dollars a month for instruction and boarding, according to one report of the time. Still, for many, even three dollars was an enormous sum. As Ursula Mae Haddon, a former student, recalled, the school accommodated those unable



Figure 59: The Georgia State Medical Association, photographed in 1918, counted the elite of African-American society among its ranks.



*“We were proud of it;  
we were glad to  
get to school.”*

to pay the full amount. For those who didn't board at the school, "...say you chipped in a dollar...it was in your reach....We all who attended the school liked it. We were proud of it; we were glad to get to school. Maybe our parents didn't have the opportunity. I'm sure mine didn't. I had the opportunity. I tried to avail myself.”

Many students paid their tuition through laboring on the school grounds, instead of with money. Minnie Clark remembered classmates working on the school's farm. “If you wanted to pick cotton in the afternoon, pick some cane or something, you could do that,” she said. Clark, who played the organ at school performances, remembered the nickname the older students used for her and her fellow students when she first attended the school in the fifth grade. “They call us ‘prep’ for preparatory. We were preps, so low down under them.”

Despite the fond reminiscences of Clark, Haddon, and others, an ugly undertow was pulling at the school's tranquility. Under Amos, the school apparently operated fairly smoothly for about ten years. Then, for reasons not altogether clear, Amos and his African-American faculty, which included his wife, became caught up in the fears and hatreds some whites harbored towards blacks.

Rumors in Abbeville cited Amos as the instigator of black labor resistance. Another whispered charge was that his students were armed. In an article in *The Abbeville Press and Banner*, Amos strongly denied the accusations and added, “I have positively done nothing to merit the ill will of the white people and I would not be able today to name a single white man in the town or in the country to whom I could feel justified in feeling unkindly.” He blamed the rumors on jealous friends of his predecessor.

Nonetheless, Amos was eventually forced to resign. In a 1980 letter to the Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina, one of Amos' children, Fannie Amos Stewart, provided additional details of what her parents had told her about the coerced departure.

“Dr. and Mrs. Amos worked diligently and conscientiously at the school until the fall of 1906,” according to Stewart. “They loved their



Figure 60: An old postcard depicts the Elberton Colored High School.



Figure 61: Reverend C.M. Young (seated in the center) was president of Harbison College. He taught music and Bible studies. The faculty also included his wife, who was the school matron and his assistant, and Robert W. Boulware, who taught mathematics and Latin.

work, students, and faculty....My mother used to speak of how pretty she thought the campus was and how beautiful the students looked strolling on the campus. Their [her parents] reason for leaving was due to racial prejudice. The white people in town were jealous of the school, its progress, etc.”

Stewart added that her parents had also told her that her three older brothers and her father were graphically threatened with lynching, and that the family had to flee Abbeville for their own safety. A local physician, a white man, had overheard Ku Klux Klan plans to murder Amos and helped the principal and his family escape town just before the intended assault. The doctor drove the Amos family by wagon to Greenville, South Carolina, and saw them safely on a train bound for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Wrote Stewart: “I don’t think Dr. Amos ever got over the tragic ending to his successful work in Abbeville.”

The school closed for several months after Amos’ resignation. The local newspaper trumpeted the appointment of the next school leader, C.M. Young: “The agitation of the race question has awakened and intensified the race prejudice which seemed dormant or which had not until recently come to

the surface in a pronounced form. The president of the Harbison College is a native born negro, and one who seems to be acceptable to a majority of our people....His predecessor was a Northern negro, who was objectionable to some of our people.”

The controversy surrounding the school, however, persisted. In January 1907, fire destroyed one of the school buildings, prompting rumors about the blaze’s origin, speculation that the fire was deliberately set. The atmosphere in the community became so highly charged on the topic that Young felt compelled to write an article for the local newspaper to calm the situation. He wrote that the fire was caused by a defective flue and wood stove.

But another fire on March 17, 1910, was indisputably arson. Three boys died in the blaze and several other students and a teacher were injured. Minnie Clark witnessed the tragedy: “I was there when the building caught fire...it’s a good thing I had my pack on...I like to got burned up.”

The day after the fire, Abbeville citizens staged a mass rally in support of the school. They condemned the arsonist and raised a reward of \$300 to help catch the culprit. Prominent white citizens also circulated a petition urging that the school



Figure 62: School children learned how to produce a newspaper, from writing stories to designing the pages.



Figure 63: Leading a Brownie Troop was another way that volunteers gave of themselves to help the next generation.

remain in the town. All these efforts proved futile, however. With the arsonist at large, the board of directors decided to move the school to Irmo, South Carolina.

Elbert County also experienced its share of the racial tension that stirred throughout much of the South. Elberton's newspaper carried advertisements for Ku Klux Klan marches, Klan movies, and Klan rallies in the early 1920's. One of the advertisements for a Klan rally mentioned that the Elberton Municipal Band would perform. The paper also printed an article detailing 70 hangings of African Americans in various places in the South. Those hanged were murdered for such offenses as "trying to act like a white man" and "not knowing his place."

Nonetheless, African Americans continued to make social progress. Minnie Clark looked back proudly on her "30, 40 years" of teaching a new generation of African Americans the joy of learning. She also talked about how things had changed since the days when a short school year was imposed on her and other dedicated black teachers.

"You see, at that time, they didn't give us justice. They give the whites nine months [of school] and they give the blacks three and four.

So, now we can get nine months as well as the whites, so that justice did come down. Justice come in....It was slow."

While many argue that still more needs to be done to improve school opportunities for African Americans, researchers observed that some families made steady educational advancements from one generation to the next because of their own efforts. According to Ramsey, "This is the pattern that emerges over and over again in the family stories. Grandparents who went to local, poorly funded, segregated schools pave a path for their children so that they can go to better endowed schools and receive respected degrees; the children in turn help their offspring to maximize the education available to them."

Former Harbison College students and faculty are examples of that observation. Sons of the principal, C.M. Young, became medical doctors. Ursula Mae Haddon, a former student, eventually went back to school in middle age and earned a bachelor's degree in 1942. One of her sons became a dentist and her grandchildren became highly trained professionals, including a lawyer. As Haddon expressed it, "I can be sort of proud that there have been some Harbisonians who have benefitted by the school."





Figure 64: A love of learning and appreciation for the arts are part of the invaluable legacy left by the elderly of Elbert and Abbeville counties to their descendants.

# Final Thoughts

## *“I Call That My Beloved River”*

**A** poignant observation underlying many of the stories from the elderly African Americans was the realization of the speed of time’s passage and how the years had erased so many of the treasured traditions and landmarks of their lives. Minnie Walker, for example, recalled visiting Millwood Plantation and finding that nearly everything she and others had built there was gone.

“In 1926, when my last baby was born, we went down there. I hadn’t been down there for a long time and...everything was torn down, and the well was down. This white lady and her husband was fishing down there, and they were staying down there in this little old ‘pleasure house.’....Everything was torn down, even the top of the well...and the white lady and I lifted a big, old plank and put it over the well so our children couldn’t fall in.”

Many also mourned the dwindling strength of social ties that had bound people together. Joining with their neighbors in happy and sad times, helping one another endure and even prosper in a sometimes hostile atmosphere, provided some of their fondest memories. Their recollections reveal again and again how African Americans, despite immense hardships and disadvantages, consistently overcame these obstacles to enjoy full and productive lives. As one researcher observed, “...they told us what they did, not what they could not do.” By drawing on the strengths of their families and communities, they became educated and used their knowledge to advance their own lot and often the circumstances of others around them.

However, despite lamenting much of what had passed from the scene, no one was nostalgic for a return to a time when government-sanctioned segregation relegated them to unequal treatment in so many arenas. Memories still stung of being forced to attend sub-standard schools, drink from separate water fountains, and work at the most menial jobs, regardless of individual skills or qualifications.

Indeed, residents had witnessed a watershed of social change in their lives, victories slowly won over many years through the determination and sacrifices of African Americans across the nation.

While many had kind words for individual white people in their lives, all African Americans in this study had experienced the pain of discrimination. Unfairness still persisted around them, but in many ways, they thought life was better for their grandchildren than what they had known.

Yet, few wanted to live anywhere else. Charlotte Sweeney explained why she had photographed a railroad bridge: “I took [a picture of] that bridge ‘cause I was always so crazy about the Savannah River. I love [that river]. I call that my beloved river,” she said.

Mostly the sons and daughters of farmers and once farmers themselves, the African Americans shared a deep regard for the world around them, a world they had helped build through their hard work. This was their home, and while some had left at some point for various reasons, this was where they returned and where they intended to spend the rest of their days.



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## A Father's Legacy

Many years ago, Louella Walker's father played the fiddle she holds for the entertainment of his friends and family. He taught himself to play on an old, wooden sardine box, and practiced until he could perform the popular songs of the day at festive dances called hot suppers. His story and that of his daughter are among the many true accounts of African-American life presented in the pages of *In Those Days*. Historic photographs accompany the reflections of these descendants of slaves, reflections that encompass the best and worst of the human experience. Vanishing traditions and customs are preserved through their words, particularly the aspects of African-American life once found throughout Georgia and South Carolina.