



Five Generations on Smith's Plantation,
Beaufort, South Carolina
LOC Image / LC-DIG-ppmsc-00057

The Reconstruction era, 1861-1898, was the historic period in which the United States grappled with the question of how to integrate millions of newly freed African Americans into social, political, economic and labor systems. The historical events that transpired in Beaufort County, South Carolina, make it an ideal place to tell stories of experimentation, transformation, hope, accomplishment, and disappointment.

The Rise of Reconstruction in South Carolina

In November 1861 the Sea Islands or “Lowcountry” of southeastern South Carolina came under Union control. Wealthy plantation owners fled as Federal forces came ashore. More than 10,000 African Americans — about one-third of the enslaved population — refused to flee the area with their former owners.

Beaufort County became one of the first places in the United States where formerly enslaved

people could begin integrating themselves into free society. Many enlisted into the army, and the government began early efforts to redistribute land to former slaves. Missionaries and other groups established schools, and some of the Reconstruction era’s most significant African American politicians, including Robert Smalls, came to prominence here.

The Port Royal Experiment

With Federal forces in charge of the Sea Islands, the military occupation was remodeled into a novel social venture. The effort to help formerly enslaved people become self-sufficient became known as the Port Royal Experiment.

The US Government partnered with antislavery and religious societies in the North to raise resources and recruit volunteers for the effort.

Freed people hungered for education, as South Carolina had long forbidden teaching enslaved people to read and write. In 1862, Laura M.

Towne and Ellen Murray from Pennsylvania were among the first northern teachers to arrive in Beaufort County. They soon moved their school into the Brick Church, a Baptist church near the center of St. Helena Island.

Murray and Towne established a partnership as educators at the Penn School on St. Helena Island. In 1864, school supporters in Philadelphia purchased school buildings and construction of Penn School began across the field from Brick Church, on 50 acres of land donated by African American landowner Hastings Gantt.

The Legacy of Penn Center, Darrah Hall and the Brick Church

Penn School helped many African Americans gain self-respect and self-reliance and integrate into free society. The faculty also provided other support, including medical care, social services, and employment assistance. Penn School would evolve into the Penn Center in the 20th century and remain a crucial place for education, community, and political organizing for decades to come.

As a meeting place in the 1950s and 1960s for civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, this historic place links the democratic aspirations of Reconstruction to those of the modern civil rights movement. Darrah Hall is the oldest standing structure on

the site of the Penn School grounds. Students and community members built it around 1903, during the transition in the South from the Reconstruction era to an era of racial segregation and political disenfranchisement.

The Brick Church, where Towne and Murray held classes, is today the oldest surviving church on St. Helena Island. Built in 1855 by enslaved people for white planters, the Brick Church became a place of worship and gathering by newly freed African Americans. It continues to serve the spiritual needs of the community to this day.

Camp Saxton

Camp Saxton is where the First South Carolina Regiment Volunteers mustered into the US Army. US Brigadier General Rufus Saxton recruited five thousand African Americans, mostly former slaves, into the Union Army. An important ally in this work was Harriet Tubman, the famed conductor on the Underground Railroad, who operated around Beaufort in an effort to liberate and recruit African Americans into the ranks.

An elaborate and historic ceremony was held on January 1, 1863, to announce and celebrate

the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves in states then “in rebellion” against the United States. This celebration was particularly significant because it occurred in Union-occupied territory in the South, where the provisions of the Proclamation would take effect before the end of the war.

Portions of the former Camp Saxton Site are located on the grounds of the Naval Support Facility Beaufort in Port Royal; currently this facility is not open to the public.

Old Beaufort Firehouse and the Legacy of Robert Smalls

The town of Beaufort was the center of the county’s social, political, cultural and economic life during the Reconstruction era. The Old Beaufort Firehouse, built around 1912, stands near the heart of Reconstruction era Beaufort.

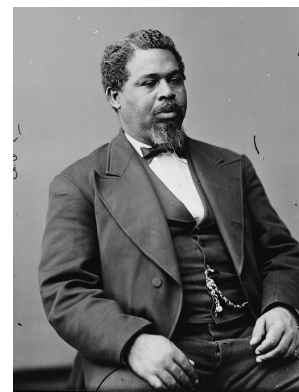
Several historic Beaufort properties within walking distance of the Firehouse are associated with Robert Smalls, the most influential African American politician in South Carolina during the Reconstruction era.

Robert Smalls was born in Beaufort in 1839, the son of slaves of the Henry McKee family. In May 1862, Smalls navigated the *CSS Planter*, a Confederate ship, through Charleston harbor, past the guns of Fort Sumter, and turned it over to Federal forces. This courageous escape made him an instant hero for the Union. Smalls and his family used prize money awarded for the

Planter to purchase the house in Beaufort once owned by the family that had owned him.

Robert Smalls was elected to the South Carolina General Assembly from 1868-1874. In 1874 Smalls was elected to the US House of Representatives where he served five terms.

The success of Smalls and other African American lawmakers who had been enslaved only a handful of years before infuriated South Carolina’s Democrats. Some of them turned to violence, carried out by the Ku Klux Klan and others.



Robert Smalls
LOC Image / LC-BH826-825

End of the Reconstruction Era

As a result of contested elections in 1876, federal troops withdrew from South Carolina, ending political and military Reconstruction in the state in 1877. In 1895 South Carolina voters ratified a new constitution that effectively eliminated African Americans from electoral politics and established racial segregation in law for decades to come. By the 1900s, many of the Reconstruction era gains made by African Americans were gone, and in their place stood systematic racism and segregation.

Even as Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation, and limited political participation and access to public

accommodations, African Americans maintained visions of freedom and built strong community institutions. Ownership of land, access to education, and churches and civic organizations that took root during the Reconstruction era laid the foundation for the modern civil rights movement.

Reconstruction prompted Americans to debate profound questions: What did freedom mean? What kind of country would this be? What kind of political system should govern it? What were the rights of citizenship and who could be a citizen? Americans struggled earnestly — if not always successfully — to build a nation of free and equal citizens.

Visiting Reconstruction Era National Monument

Established on January 12, 2017, Reconstruction Era National Monument is part of the National Park System. The national monument will continue to take shape in the coming years. Please visit the following park partner sites for visitor information:

The Welcome Center at Penn Center
16 Penn Center Circle West
St. Helena Island, South Carolina 29920

Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce
Visitor Center
713 Craven Street
Beaufort, SC 29902

When visiting the national monument, please be aware that:

- Some areas are not paved for foot traffic
- Visitors should be mindful of traffic when walking and crossing streets.
- The Camp Saxton Site is currently closed to the public.
- The Brick Church is privately owned and supports an active congregation.

Stay informed of future developments by visiting the park’s website and social media accounts.

www.nps.gov/reer

 www.facebook.com/ReconstructionNPS

 [@ReconstructNM](https://twitter.com/ReconstructNM)