

Exhibit brings taste of freedom to the Midlands

Written by Staff Writer

Thursday, 28 February 2013 15:14 -



During the first year of the Civil War, on November 7, 1861, Union forces consisting of approximately 60 ships and 20,000 men under the command of Union Navy Captain Samuel F. DuPont and Army General Thomas W. Sherman attacked Confederate forces commanded by Brig. Gen. Thomas F. Drayton (a local plantation owner) defending Hilton Head Island at Fort Walker and Fort Beauregard. By 3:00 p.m., the Confederate forces had retreated from the forts; when Union troops landed on Hilton Head Island, they encountered no resistance and discovered that the white inhabitants of the island had already fled to the mainland.

Hilton Head Island became the Union's southern headquarters for the war and a military supply depot. Fortifications (such as Fort Howell), a hospital, barracks, and other utilitarian structures were built for the military, which at times numbered 30,000 men. The island was used as a staging ground for the blockading of Savannah and Charleston.

Within two days of the Union capture of the island, approximately 150 escaped slaves (or those left behind by the Hilton Head Island planters when they fled the island) came to the Union army's encampment; by December 15, approximately 320 escaped slaves had sought refuge at the Union army's encampment.

One Union soldier stationed on Hilton Head at the time recounted, "Negro slaves came flocking into our camp by the hundreds, escaping their masters when they knew of the landing of "Linkum sojers" (sic), as they called us - many of them with no other clothing than gunnysacks."

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In February 1862, there were at least 600 escaped slaves living in Union encampments on Hilton Head Island. These escaped slaves were regarded as "contraband of war"; they were not yet technically free. In April 1862, a military order was issued freeing the blacks on the Sea Islands. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves in the rebellious/Confederate states, which included South Carolina.

Many Union officers complained that the ex-slaves "were becoming a burden and a nuisance." Some Union troops stole from the ex-slaves, and it is apparent from primary resources that the racial attitudes of some of the Union troops towards the blacks were negative. The solution, envisioned by the Commander of the Department of the South headquartered at Hilton Head, Maj. Gen. Ormsby M. Mitchel, was the creation of a town for the escaped slaves, eventually known as Mitchelville, in a cotton field on the former Drayton Plantation and in close proximity to the military camps.

"Good colored people, you have a great work to do, and you are in a position of responsibility. This experiment is to give you freedom, position, homes, your families, property, your own soil. It seems to me a better time is coming ... a better day is dawning."

With these words, Mitchel proclaimed that the land the people of Mitchelville, had once toiled under the chains of slavery was now their own. The town was established by late 1862, and contained about 1,500 residents by November 1865.

Mitchelville developed into a community of neatly arranged streets, quarter-acre lots, elected officials and a church. Its residents voted, owned homes, shopped in local stores and took the first steps toward full citizenship. A compulsory education law for children between the ages of six and fifteen was enforced—most likely the first such law in the South

The reports of the success of Mitchelville were so glowing, that the famous Underground Railroad freedom fighter, Harriet Tubman, was sent to Hilton Head to see this bustling town, so she could share the story of Mitchelville's self-governed success with future freedmen towns.

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Today the Gullah, direct decedents of those who settled on Mitchelville, still live and continue the traditions of their ancestors. In 2005, a diverse group of Hilton Head Island citizens joined forces to preserve, protect and promote the heritage of Mitchelville.

Today, the Mitchelville Preservation Project, Inc., is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization whose mission is to replicate, preserve, and sustain the historically significant site and to educate the public about the sacrifice, resilience and perseverance of the freedmen of Mitchelville and to share the story of how these brave men and women planted strong and enduring familial roots for generations of future African-Americans.

The vision of the Mitchelville Preservation Project is to preserve a portion of the historic site of what was once Mitchelville and to commemorate the former slaves' "experiment in freedom." The project will incorporate the use of state-of-the-art technological and media platforms that will present the story of Mitchelville, allowing visitors to envision the historic town as it existed in the 19th century. You can learn more about the project by visiting www.mitchelvillepreservationproject.com.

Here in Columbia, an exhibit "Dawn of Freedom: The Freedmen's Town of Mitchelville," depicting the story of its creation, is now open through June 1 at the University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum.

The premise for "Dawn of Freedom" began as a research project by public history graduate student JoAnn Zeise, who is now history curator for the S.C. State History Museum.

"I grew up on Hilton Head Island but had never learned the important history of the area and about the great number of formerly enslaved people who had escaped bondage to start their own community during the Civil War. Their story is important because it not only highlights one example of former slaves seizing freedom on their own and working to define that freedom, but it also examines issues that are at the heart of who we are as Americans, such as citizenship, freedom, the role of government, just to name a few," Zeise says.

On Tuesday, March 5, from 2:30 to 4:30, Emory Campbell, a historian of Mitchelville, will talk to students about his study of, and personal connection to, the town of Mitchelville.

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Mr. Campbell is a Hilton Head native and a descendant of Mitchelville residents. He served as Executive Director of the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, SC for 20 years. Emory Campbell is now a board member of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Foundation, and recently founded Gullah Heritage Consulting Services. He publishes widely and gives presentations that increase awareness about Gullah culture and the rich history of the Sea Islands.